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Theatre performance during the Ming dynasty

Shen, Guangren Grant, Ph.D.

University of Hawaii, 1994

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THEATRE PERFORMANCE DURING THE MING DYNASTY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF

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By

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ABSTRACT

This is the first systematic introduction of theatre performance during the Ming era (1368-1644), when theatre flourished throughout the whole of Chinese society. People in all levels of life, from emperors, literati, and officials to peasants, eunuchs, and courtesans, participated in theatrical presentations. In circumstances like religious ceremonies, court rituals, social gatherings, and dinner parties, plays were routinely staged. Theatrical activities also provided aesthetical, psychological, sensual, or spiritual satisfaction to many spectators. The Ming dramaturgy was greatly improved through the collective efforts of many professionals and enthusiasts.

All three theatre worlds during the Ming dynasty—court theatre, private theatre, and public theatre, each generally separated one from the other—are covered in this dissertation. Some aspects, such as troupe organization, actor background, actor training, performance circumstance, and acting, are described for each of the three theatre milieus. Other aspects, such as singing, dancing, directing, costuming, lighting, music, props,
scenery, and theatre buildings, are discussed only where sufficient data have been collected.

As a result of eight years of effort, this study presents much original material heretofore unavailable to modern scholars. Some of these discoveries reveal information collected from nearly 1,700 volumes of ancient books; records found in hand-written play scripts; and data obtained during recent field research in China.

In the dissertation, academic conclusions are based on historical records rather on scholarly reports. Those records which constitute primary sources are commentaries by play-goers, articles by critics at the performances, accounts by contemporary literati and troupe-owners, information drawn from ancient paintings, and data collected from extant Ming theatre buildings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract........... iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Photos..... vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Diagrams... ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Reproduction of Figures... x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface........... xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PART ONE  COURT THEATRE PERFORMANCE........... 1
Chapter 1  Laws and Policies................. 5
Chapter 2  Monarchic Support............... 14
Chapter 3  Royal Participation............. 24
Chapter 4  Troupe Organization........... 33
Chapter 5  Actor Background............... 45
Chapter 6  Performance Circumstance...... 57
Chapter 7  Zaju Productions............... 68
Chapter 8  Variety of Productions......... 81
Chapter 9  Costume......................... 91
Chapter 10  Props......................... 106
Chapter 11  Animal Display............... 116

PART TWO  PRIVATE THEATRE PERFORMANCE........ 126
Chapter 12  Literati Owners............... 130
Chapter 13  Owner-Performer Relation..... 139
Chapter 14  Actor Background............... 148
Chapter 15  Actor Training................ 158
Chapter 16  Performance Space............. 168
Chapter 17  Directing and Staging......... 181
Chapter 18  Singing and Dancing........... 192
Chapter 19  Acting......................... 201
Chapter 20  Communication................ 210

PART THREE  PUBLIC THEATRE PERFORMANCE.... 226
Chapter 21  Troupe Organization........... 231
Chapter 22  Actor Background............. 240
Chapter 23  Actor Training............... 252
Chapter 24  Temple Stages................ 266
Chapter 25  Development of Temple Stages.. 301
Chapter 26  Temporary Stages............... 334
Chapter 27  Parade Performance............ 353
Chapter 28  Parade Contingents............ 366
Chapter 29  Courtesan Performance......... 376
Chapter 30  Acting......................... 390

Conclusion......................... 401
Works Cited......................... 417
## LIST OF PHOTOS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Determining the Date of an Ancient Theatre</td>
<td>xxii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Qing Stone Tablet in Jingxin Temple</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Ming Stone Tablet in Jingxin Temple</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Front View of Jingxin Temple</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Juanpeng and Its Supporting Dougong System</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Angled Walls on Jingxin Temple Stage</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Inscription on a Beam Above Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dougong Above Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Facade of Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Datai Temple Stage</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Dougong and Beams Above Datai Temple Stage</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Da Temple Stage</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>A Ming Stone Tablet Laid into Xiangdeng Stage</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Xiangdeng Temple Stage</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Front View of a Southern Qing Stage</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Back View of a Southern Qing Stage</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Guangsheng Temple Stage</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Wei Temple Stage</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Stage-Left Stone Pillar on Wei Temple Stage</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Stage-Right Stone Pillar on Wei Temple Stage</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Dongyang Temple Stage</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Photo 22  Wubian Temple Stage............................324
Photo 23  Hujia Temple Stage............................326
Photo 24  A Side Wall on Hujia Temple Stage...........328
Photo 25  Dougong System Above Wei Temple Stage......330
Photo 26  Jilongding..................................331
Photo 27  Dougong and Beams Above Qiangxia Temple Stage.333
Photo 28  A Modern Temporary Stage.......................349
Photo 29  Dressing Room on a Modern Temporary Stage....350
Photo 30  Orchestra on a Modern Temporary Stage.........351
Photo 31  Audience of a Modern Temporary Stage.........352
LIST OF DIAGRAMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagram</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Front View of Jingxin Temple Stage</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Jingxin Temple Stage</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Facade of Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reconstruction of Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Peijie Temple Stage</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A Set of Dougong Above Datai Temple Stage</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reconstruction of Datai Temple Stage</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Datai Temple Stage</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Da Temple Stage</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ground Plan of the Front Stage of Xiangdeng Temple Stage</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Wei Temple Stage</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ground Plan of Dongyang Temple Stage</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Front View and Ground Plan of Wubian Temple Stage</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Front View and Ground Plan of Hujia Temple Stage</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Three Models for Front Stages and Audience Areas</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Reconstruction and Ground Plan of Qiangxia Temple Stage</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES (REPRODUCTIONS)

Figure 1 Residential Hall Performance..................178
Figure 2 Residential Hall Performance..................179
Figure 3 Women Watching Theatre Through a Screen........180
Figure 4 Qingming Shanghe Tu by Qing Academy of Arts...345
Figure 5 Qingming Shanghe Tu in Yun's Collection........346
Figure 6 Nanzhong Fanhui Tu............................347
Figure 7 Nandu Fanhui Tu...............................348
The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) immediately followed the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). During the Yuan, theatrical performing style was relatively simple, with many vestiges of story-telling and other narrative entertainments. The Ming stage, on the other hand, exhibited a sophisticated performing art with a variety of styles. The theatrical performance of the Ming dynasty, including singing, dancing, acting, music, dialogue, combat, costume, makeup, and stage technique, had a huge impact on the theatre in centuries to come. For instance, although traditional forms of Chinese theatre, both past and present, draw their costumes from as early as the Sui dynasty (581-618), most costumes since the Ming have retained a Ming style, regardless of a given character's actual historical period. Other influences have been even more significant, such as some of the techniques in Beijing opera's singing, dancing, and acting, which are more or less derived from kunju, which first appeared during the Ming dynasty. Recent superstars of Beijing opera, such as Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) and Yu Zhenfei (1902-1993), were trained and performed in kunju.
The purpose of this study is to collect and analyze original data explicating theatrical practices in the Ming dynasty. Most of the materials presented in this dissertation have been analyzed and translated into English for the first time; some have never been used in any other studies in this field. Among these new sources are:

1) Records of court performances found in *Mingshi* (Ming History);

2) Most of Pan Zhiheng's theatrical notes and criticism; and

3) Much of the information about extant temple stages.

All these sources are important in the study of Ming theatre. *Mingshi*, the official version of the history of the Ming dynasty, provides facts and statistics about the court theatre not to be found anywhere else.\(^1\) Pan Zhiheng, considered the most objective and capable theatre historian of his time by his contemporaries (Zhou Lianggong: *Yinshuwu shuying*, qtd. in Pan Z. 260), provided his data and criticisms based on first-hand observation and life-long experience.\(^2\) And surviving temple stages are the only

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\(^1\) The reason why so much information about theatre in *Mingshi* was missed by previous scholars probably lies in the fact that such information is scattered throughout its numerous original volumes—332.

\(^2\) The reason why Pan's writings have been ignored so often, or misinterpreted in theatre studies, might be that he always wrote in a level of classical Chinese which served
known permanent structures built for theatre performances during the Ming era.³

In English language publications, the Ming theatre is more than likely the subject least written about. This holds true whether compared to theatres during Yuan and Qing dynasties, or to other major Asian theatres during the same period, such as Japanese theatre.⁴ Previous scholarly reports in English on Ming drama and theatre are found in four categories:

1) Comprehensive studies in the history of Chinese theatre, such as William Dolby's History of Chinese Drama, so far the most detailed work of its kind, with its strength in the Yuan and Southern drama (nanxi) rather than in the Ming theatre;

2) Introductory articles for collections of theses, such as John Hu's "Ming Dynasty Drama" in Chinese Theatre (ed. Mackerras);

3) Chapters about certain aspects of Chinese theatre in comparative studies, usually with very little information about the theatre during Ming era, such as Chapters 35 through 44 in Hsü Tao-Ching's The Chinese Conception of the Theatre; and

almost exclusively for the high caste elite. Even Pan's contemporaries would have needed advanced classical education to fully understand his works.

³ The extant Ming temple stages are often found in remote rural areas. In 1992, I conducted field research to collect original data on Ming temple stages. Some of these temple stages were out of reach by modern means of transportation. In such cases, I had to hike to the sites.

⁴ As a matter of fact, in English publications, any one of the three major genres of Japanese theatre—Noh, Kabuki, or Bunraku—has been much more written about than have all the Chinese theatre genres combined.
4) Ming Drama by Hung Josephine, a pocket-sized introduction of 288 pages to the dramatic literature and playwrights of the Ming, but not to theatre performance as such.5

In the Chinese language, theses on Ming dramatic literature are numerous, but major contributions to the study of Ming theatrical performance come from two comprehensive works: Lu Eting's Kunju yanchu shigao (A draft history of kunju performance) and Wang Anqi's Mingdai chuanguzhi juchang jiqi yishu (The playhouses and arts of Ming dynasty chuanqi plays). Lu's book, the first of its kind, focuses on performances of kunju, a major theatre genre which emerged during the latter half of the Ming era. Wang's study concentrates on performances of chuanqi, a primary play style developed from the nanxi during the mid Ming. Some studies on regional theatres also shed light on the whole picture of Ming theatre, such as Qinxiang shigao (A draft history of the Qinxiang opera) by Jiao Wenbin and his colleagues, and Fujian xiwen lu (Historical

5 So far, this is the only book focusing on Ming drama. Unfortunately, it contains considerable factual misinformation.
This dissertation is the first systematic account of theatrical performances throughout the Ming dynasty, including its several different theatre genres and play styles. It brings to light much original material. All of its 31 photos and 15 diagrams are firsthand works. For ease of comparison, diagrams of ancient theatre buildings are consistently drawn to the scale of 1:100. All translations in the dissertation are mine, except for the dramatic verses quoted from The Peony Pavilion.

This study also strives for reliability in the translation. Whenever the definition of Chinese terms is in doubt, their origins and histories will be studied and their contexts reviewed. The ambiguities often found in classical Chinese are resolved as much as possible.

6 The first comprehensive work written on drama and theatre of the Ming and Qing dynasties was in Japanese: Aoki Masaru's *The pre-modern history of Chinese theatre*. It was translated into Chinese by Wang Gulu, who, in his translation, annotated and commented on the text in detail, and thus remarkably enriched the book. It possesses a wealth of data about the dramatic literature, but contains only with limited information about theatrical performance.

7 The purpose of using another scholar's translation is to demonstrate that my analysis of a performance theory is based on an unbiased interpretation of *The Peony Pavilion*. However, that "unbiased" translation probably misses some of the rich content of Tang Xianzu's dramatic verses, as one may find in Chapter 20 of this dissertation.
through cross references, evidence from circumstances related to the theatre, and other relevant sources.

The three areas covered in this study are:
1) court theatre performance;
2) private theatre performance; and
3) public theatre performance.

Because theatrical performances in these three settings differed widely in most aspects of the theatre arts, they will be discussed separately in the study.

The perspective of this dissertation is theatrical rather than literary. Thus, for instance, plays are rarely discussed as dramatic literature, but rather as sources of information about their staging. Historic figures are not studied as playwrights or dramatic poets, but often are shown as producers, troupe owners, or grand masters.

The data for the dissertation are collected from a wide range of sources. Ming Chinese, like their forbears, generally regarded theatrical performance as unworthy of serious consideration or academic evaluation. Relatively little documentation about performance practices is found in the "formal" works of Ming scholars. Often the evidence pertaining to performance practices is collected from notes, letters, and diaries, as well as in some literary sketches and novels.
The organization of the dissertation is very much content-oriented. Only a fraction of the whole story is written because sufficient data have been collected only for that part of the whole. No attempt has been made to create a parallel structure. Each part of the dissertation has its own strength, with some dimensions not found in the other two; for instance costumes are discussed in the court theatre in Part One, the role of literati in private troupes is covered in Part Two, and theatre buildings for public performances are explored in Part Three.

This dissertation is a result of studies done over a period of 13 years, from 1981 to 1993, including an interval of five years, from 1986 through 1991, when I attended the Asian Theatre Program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. However, this work does not pretend to be an exhaustive source of information about its subject. First of all, the original materials proved to be so extensive and so complex that I cannot possibly have read all the available material without missing some valuable information. Second, the way the dissertation is organized determined that insufficient data and its related topics should be eliminated, such as the possible Chinese
influence on Japanese theatre. Third, the style and scope of the writing has caused some aspects of the Ming theatre, such as its musical systems, to be reserved for a later major study rather than to be hastily summed up in one or two chapters of this one.

This dissertation follows the style prescribed by the MLA manual, but with a little modification in its in-text references for academic and practical reasons.

1) Many original works from Chinese resources are cited, and many Chinese authors have the same surname. To avoid confusion, therefore, citations include both the author's surname and the initial of his given name.

2) Important historical books often appear in numerous versions. Merely listing the page numbers of the version I have consulted will not be practical when a reader wants to check the originals, since more than likely he or she will not be using the same version. Therefore, both the page numbers of the version I have used and the volume numbers of the original are listed. Ancient Chinese books have relatively short volumes (juan).

3) While all other materials in the Chinese language are listed in pinyin, the official romanization system

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Some data about possible Chinese influence on Japanese theatre can be found in the footnote for "Conclusion."
of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese plays are named according to their English translation, followed by pinyin, when they first appear, but only in English titles thereafter. This system is intended to suggest the plays' content through their titles, as well as to serve as better reminders of plays which have been discussed.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the people who assisted in the preparation of this dissertation. Those who served on my dissertation committee, Professors James Brandon, Lo Chin-t'ang, Juli Burk, and Daniel Kwok, provided guidance. And most particularly, Professor Elizabeth Wichmann, the chair of the committee and an expert in Chinese theatre, offered substantial support and detailed advice from the very beginning; and Professor David McCraw, a specialist in Chinese classics, provided criticism and analyses until the last moment. Wichmann and McCraw's helpful ideas are found in many places of this dissertation.

Two friends of mine from the University of Hawaii undertook the painstaking task of reading the first draft of the manuscript and offered editorial help. Daniel Cole, of the Center for Chinese Studies, read Part Two. And especially, O. A. Bushnell, Emeritus Professor of Medical History, read all three parts with his insight into Asian
culture and into the felicities and intricacies of the English language.

During my field research in China, dozens of individuals provided information and suggestions about possible sites of Ming theatre structures. I may never learn the names of many of them. Some of those whose names I do know are: Huang Zhusan, Wang Fucai, and their colleagues at the Theatre Research Institute at the Shanxi Normal University; Wu Xiufeng of the Commission on the Taigu County Annals, Shanxi Province; and Xie Yongtao of the Art Research Institute of Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. When I had difficulty in obtaining the date written on a beam in an ancient theatre building in Qiangxia Village of Xia County, Shanxi Province, three local children, Zhang Junfeng and his two playmates, helped me. Before I even noticed them, they climbed up to the beam and started to copy the complex characters inscribed there, which they had not yet learned, drawing one stroke after another on a piece of cardboard passed up to them (Photo 1). Xie Jing, one of my former students at Shanghai Normal University, provided secretarial assistance in recording, copying, and filing the massive volume of data collected in my field research.

I would also like to thank the Organization of Chinese Americans (Hawaii Chapter) and Mrs. Jessie Cheng for awarding me the scholarship named after her. The major
financial support for my dissertation writing and field research comes from Xiaping, my wife, who works overtime and spends her income most frugally, in order to help me make this dissertation a reality.
PHOTO 1

DETERMINING THE DATE OF AN ANCIENT THEATRE

Local children climb up to a major beam to copy the date inscribed there.
One of the boys has drawn several characters in red ink on a piece of cardboard.
PART ONE

COURT THEATRE PERFORMANCE

In this first part of the dissertation, the court theatre and court policies governing the theatre will be studied. Court theatre performances were offered by two entities largely separated from each other: the troupes of the Imperial Academy of Music ("Jiaofang Si") and those of the Department of Bells and Drums ("Zhonggu Si"). These two systems had little in common in troupe organization, actor background, performance circumstance, acting style, and repertoire. They will often be separately discussed in the text.

On the one hand, because of the low social status accorded theatrical activities, official records on court theatrical activities are scarce. This study has made use of some "negative records," including laws that forbid plays, persons who punished actors, and criticism which condemned theatre. On the other hand, the 100 hand-written costume lists of a court troupe are the richest resource for the Ming theatre costume so far.
Generally speaking, throughout history, theatre was discouraged in the imperial courts of China, as well as in society in general. Some of the major concerns were:

"Uselessness": the founder of the dynasty looked upon agriculture as being the foundation of the country. Agricultural productivity was his major concern. Theatre and other forms of entertainment could produce no material goods but rather cost energy and money. Thus theatre was considered a waste to the country.

"Immorality": the conservative Confucian scholar-officials who usually oversaw the moral standards of the country, also criticized theatre for introducing audiences to licentious conduct through its romantic plots and suggestive performance, and regarded it as especially harmful to women and youngsters. They also criticized theatre for creating laziness in the population by distracting people's attention and effort away from productivity (Ning Huanzhang "Jinyou yi," qtd. in Guo S. 766).

"Dangers": many in the government also warned that theatre was destructive to the empire in general, and to the emperor in particular. The well-known downfalls of emperors Xuanzong (Li Longji, also known as Tang Minghuang)

9 The detailed quotation can be found in Chapter 16.
and Emperor Zhuangzong (Li Cunxu) in history were readily served as basis for their argument.

Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty was considered wise and powerful until his late years. Xuanzong's reign encompassed the Kaiyuan (713-741) and the Tianbao (742-755) periods, considered to be two of the most prosperous periods in China's history. However with An Lushan Rebellion ("An-Shi zhi luan," literally "the Chaos of An and Shi"), he lost his throne. His interest in and promotion of various performing arts along with his creation of the first court performance school, "The Pear Garden," were seen as being among the reasons for his undoing.

The other example was Zhuangzong, emperor of the Later Tang dynasty (923-936) in the Five Dynasties period (907-960). Zhuangzong was enthusiastic about theatre and even performed with his court troupe. He was killed in a rebellion headed by one of his favorite actors.

Despite the fact that conservative Ming officials repeated such historic lessons, or the fact that the imperial court often issued anti-theatre laws and regulations, the Ming theatre, inside and outside the court and off, thrived throughout the era. On the one hand, those criticisms, laws, and regulations created an adverse political atmosphere for theatre lovers. But on the other
hand, they also indicated that theatre was so powerful and vigorous it became a threat orthodox interests.

Ming emperors exerted enormous influence on the court theatre. However, their attitudes and policies toward theatre differed greatly. While some of them issued decrees to condemn theatrical activities, others associated with stage performances at the risk of gaining undesirable reputations. Therefore, the situation of the Ming court theatre might well change from period to period and from emperor to emperor.

While the court policies shaped the practice of the court theatre, their effects were not limited in the court. As could be determined by extant historic data, court policies largely controlled theatrical activities at large, constantly affected the lives of theatre practitioners, and strongly influenced people's attitudes toward theatre. Some of these extra-court influences will be discussed in Parts Two and Three.
CHAPTER 1
LAWS AND POLICIES

The Ming theatre was constantly influenced, controlled, and sometimes shaped by laws and policies issued by the imperial court, particularly by that of Zhu Yuanzhang (reigned 1368-1398), the founder of the dynasty, who was personally involved in making many laws and policies. In this chapter, the laws and policies which affected theatrical activities will be discussed as they were originally established and enforced at the beginning of the dynasty. The development and application of them during later periods of the dynasty will be studied separately in other chapters.

Zhu Yuanzhang was an emperor in China's history to rule the country without a prime minister, and thus collected all power directly to himself. His policy was to eliminate all dangers, real or imaginary, in the present or in the future, that threatened his throne. He killed tens of thousands of his supporters, who had just helped him to ascend the Dragon Throne, in the fear that the same ability and power they had exercised during the war might
be turned against his inexperienced heir (Zhang T: 15-33, vol. 2-3). Zhu Yuanzhang's laws and policies on theatre and other kinds of entertainment invoked the same stern discipline that served his political ends.

In order to examine the laws and policies of the Ming dynasty governing theatre from a historical perspective, I shall compare them with those of the preceding Yuan dynasty, when theatre laws first appeared in China. On the one hand, some theatre laws of the Ming followed those of the Yuan. For example, Yuan laws forbade actors and their family members from taking the Imperial Examinations, and so did Ming laws (Wang X. 11). Yuan rulers banned people other than professionals from performing in plays, and Zhu Yuanzhang did the same (Wang X. 4). And both Yuan and Ming rulers imposed bans on certain theatre productions and other entertainments which were considered immoral or offensive from the governments' point of view (Wang X. 6-9). On the other hand, Zhu Yuanzhang created new laws and policies as well. In general, the laws and policies of the Ming were much more severe than those of the Yuan. This is demonstrated in the scope and purpose of the bans, and in the practices for enforcing them.

1) The Scope of Bans on Theatre

The Yuan's bans were limited to specific subjects or performance styles. For instance, a document dated
in the 18th year of the Zhiyuan period (1280) was found in the records of the Ministry of Punishment:

Bage, who is [authorized] by Tulie, and Tulie, who is [authorized] by the imperial edict, [says]:
"Tell Little Li that from now on, whoever you are, do not sing *Sixteen Heavenly Monsters*, do not enact it in *zaju* plays, and do not play it on the wind and string instruments; do not play *Four Great Heavenly Kings*, do not put on skeletons. There will be a punishment for those who violate [these bans]. This [decree] is from the Emperor" (Wang X. 5).

So far only a few such bans have been found in Yuan records, and the punishment for them was not specified.

During the Ming dynasty, bans on theatre were established according to several categories, and the punishment for infringements was severe:

For entertainers who perform *zaju* [a northern theatre genre which dominated the Yuan stage] and *xiwen* [a southern theatre genre which developed into *chuangyi* during the Ming]: it is forbidden to play roles of emperors, empresses, loyal officials, saints, and sages. The punishment for such a violation is flogging of 100 strokes. Officials or commoners who allow this to take place in their residences (will be considered to) commit the same crime. Those who play the roles of gods, priests, men of good morals, women of high virtues, and worthy progeny in order to teach people moral lessons, will not be affected by this ban (Wang X. 10).

2) The Purpose of the Laws

Often enough, for the Yuan government the purpose of imposing bans was security. Many Yuan interdicts "against theatrical gathering" were actually not directed at theatrical activities as such, but were "bans on big gatherings," which were specified in the content of the laws. In such decrees, "evening gatherings" were considered
especially unpredictable and dangerous for the community (Yuan dianzhang vol. 57, qtd. in Wang X. 6-9).

One of Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang's reasons for his bans on theatre was economic, which was unheard of in the Yuan or any other dynasty. According to Li Guangdi, a Qing scholar, playing music, drinking, and gambling were all punishable by death during Zhu Yuanzhang's reign because they were considered to be "unproductive" (Rongchun yulu vol. 22, qtd. in Wang X. 12). Jiang Nan, a Ming scholar, pointed out that during Zhu Yuanzhang's reign, three of the 22 categories of criminals who were punishable by exile were unproductive: "idle officers," "non-producers," and "vagrants" (Moyu Qianpu, qtd. in Wang X. 13).

The dress code designed for theatre performers by Zhu Yuanzhang's court served hardly any purpose but humiliation. According to Mingshi, the official Ming history, such dress code was written into the laws as early as the third year of Zhu Yuanzhang's reign (1370):

An actress ["yueji," literally, music woman or music prostitute] from the Imperial Academy of Music dresses in a horned hat of bright colors and a black vest. She is not allowed to dress as a commoner's wife.... An actor from the Imperial Academy of Music dresses in common clothing, but wears a green headdress in order to distinguish himself from gentlemen and commoners (Zhang T. 707, vol. 67).

The green headdress was the dressing code for the husband of a prostitute or that of an actress (Ci yuan 2448). The actresses were further "banned from wearing hats or cloaks." The reason for such a ban was not clear, but could be his great status anxieties. Once an outcast himself, Zhu Yuanzhang became extremely sensitive about social status when he ascended the throne. He probably hated to see an actress dressed like a member of the social elite.
3) The Practice of Law Enforcement

In order for us to see real life pictures of the laws applied against theatre during the Yuan and the Ming dynasties, not only the letter of the laws themselves must be studied, but also the records of law enforcement. Few records about actual punishment for forbidden theatrical activities are found in Yuan materials. This leads to some doubts about whether the laws and regulations concerning "illegal" theatre were ever effectively put into practice. It is true that the Yuan government had much difficulty in governing civilian life in its enormous new territory, because of its lack of knowledge, experience, and means; the Mongols were nomads before they conquered China. There were also probable cultural and language barriers between the officers of the Mongolian government and the producers of theatrical activities, because the plays were written and performed in Chinese. It is known that a few Mongolian officials of high status had mastered the Chinese language, but that seemed not to be the case for most Mongolian officers who were responsible for local enforcement of the laws. As a matter of fact, interpreters were employed for these Mongols in the official business that involved Han Chinese.
The situation was totally different during the Ming dynasty, when severe punishments are documented. One of Zhu Yuanzhang's imperial edicts in 1389 reads:

For military officers and soldiers in the capital: whoever is practicing singing, cut off their tongues; whoever is playing checkers, cut off their hands; whoever is playing football (yuan), cut off their feet; whoever is doing business, banish them to distant places (qtd. in Wang X. 11; see also Shen D. 881, "Addendum" vol. 3).

According to Gu Qiyuan, a Ming scholar, Yu Duan's upperlip and the end of his nose were cut off as the result of playing a xiao (a vertical bamboo flute) and singing songs. In Yu's case, not he, but his father, was an military officer. He was supposed to inherit his father's career, according to Ming laws. Fu Yong and Yao Anbao's right feet were cut off and all members of their families were banished to Yunnan Province, as punishment for their playing soccer (yuan) (Kezuo zuiyu, vol. 10, qtd. in Wang X. 11).

Zhu Yuanzhang's laws, policies, and practices were important in the history of Ming theatre, because they had an immediate and lasting impact on performers, characters, subject matter, and many other aspects of the theatre.

During most of the Ming dynasty, discrimination against theatre performers was intensified. Under the laws, actors and actresses were born social outcasts and could never change their status. Acting and entertaining were their
life-long and inherited careers. They had to comply with a specified code of dress which was intended to humiliate them. Such a situation in turn caused people from other backgrounds to experience great difficulty if they wanted to participate in theatre productions. Often they had to assume some form of disguise in order to take part in limited theatrical activities.

Because the laws forbade actors and actresses "to play the roles of emperors, empresses, loyal officials, saints and sages," such characters are scarcely seen in plays dating from the early Ming, and not many are found in those of the late Ming theatre. The laws also affected the staging with which the court troupe presented plays such as All Foreign Countries Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday (Zhu shengshou wanguo lai chao). The plot of the play is that foreign countries pay tribute to Emperor Liu Bang (reigned 206 B.C.-195 B.C.) of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) on his birthday. In the court production of the play, Emperor Liu Bang never appears on stage. Actors representing foreigners actually kowtowed toward and cheered the incumbent Ming emperor, who was

10 For details, see Chapter 5.
11 For details, see Chapter 5.
12 For details, see Chapter 12.
sitting in the audience (Guben: vol. 230). By that time, such a custom was observed for all court productions involving characters of emperors or empress-dowagers.

Zhu Yuanzhang's policies also influenced the subject matter and content of Ming era plays in general. Theatrical productions about "gods, priests, men of morals, women of virtue, and worthy progeny," as encouraged in the laws, were often staged.\footnote{For details, see Chapter 10.} The government policy of "teaching people moral lessons" through theatre became the practice of dramatists such as Qiu Jun (1418-1495) and Kang Hai (1475-1540).\footnote{Such facts can be found in Fulfill the Five Moral Principles (Wulun quanbei) by Qiu Jun (Zhuang Y.: 94) and Wang Lănging Takes Arsenic to Show Her Chastity (Wang Lănging fuxin ming zhen zhuan) by Kang Hai (Guben: vol. 207).} Very few plays offensive to the government's point of view could have been written throughout the Ming dynasty.

During his reign, Zhu Yuanzhang consistently promulgated severe laws to control theatrical activities. At the same time, he promoted and encouraged theatrical and musical entertainments for his offspring, possibly with the single exception of the crown prince. According to Li Kaixian (1502-1568), a Ming dramatist, when a prince
left the capital to govern his princedom, Zhu Yuanzhang "always gave him 1,700 volumes of plays and songs" (Li K.: 370). Probably Zhu Yuanzhang did so as a part of his effort to divert the princes' attention from the absolute power of the throne, which he wanted to leave to his crown prince. Zhu Di, his fourth son, negated this effort by overthrowing the central government only four years after Zhu Yuanzhang's death. However, Zhu Yuanzhang's favoring of theatre among members of the royal family probably helped to produce two talented dramatists, Zhu Quan (1378-1448), his sixteenth son, and Zhu Youdun (1379-1439), one of his grandsons, and encouraged enthusiasm for the theatre among Ming emperors for generations to come.
CHAPTER 2
MONARCHIC SUPPORT

The Ming monarchs probably resembled the people of the country in the enthusiasm for the theatre they shared. Their love for theatre being both sincere and lasting. Although not fully documented, frequent mention of the theatrical activities of members of the imperial house can be found in contemporary notes, poems, reminiscences, and other private and official sources.

Theatre performances were a major entertainment in the Ming inner-court. Generations of emperors and their families enjoyed watching performances which were presented on a regular basis. Being the primary spectators of court theatre, their active interest created a constant demand that helped court troupes and court theatre to flourish. Because of his absolute power, an emperor's involvement in theatrical activities had huge and far-reaching impact on both the court theatre and the theatre at large. Examples of emperors' influence can be found in Zhu Yuanzhang's requesting northern music to

15. See Chapter 6 for specifics.
accompany *The Lute*, Zhu Di's replacing orthodox dynastic hymns with theatrical performances, Zhu Zhanji's opening his court theatre to high officials, Zhu Jianshen's adding southern theatre to his entertainments, and Zhu Houzhao's viewing productions in the provinces.

Despite the severe laws and harsh punishments he applied to theatrical activities, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang himself enjoyed theatre. His favorite play was *The Lute* (*Pipa ji*), a master-piece by Gao Ming, a contemporary playwright. Zhu Yuanzhang "has been amazed by this play since he was a nobody" (Xu F.: 233). More than likely he came to know the play through a stage presentation rather than from a script, because he was illiterate then.

After Zhu Yuanzhang became emperor, "he ordered actors [from the court troupe] to perform *The Lute* for him daily" (Xu W. 240). *The Lute* was composed to tunes of southern music. But Zhu Yuanzhang preferred that it be performed with northern music, and the accompaniment of a string orchestra, in a manner similar to that of a Yuan *zaju* presentation:

Soon he was troubled by the fact that the production [of *The Lute*] was not able to be accompanied by stringed instruments. He ordered Shi Zhong, Fengluan [the head official] of the Imperial Academy of Music ["Jiaofang"], to solve the problem. Then an actor-manager ["sezhang"] named Liu Gao composed the music [for *The Lute*] and submitted it [to the emperor] (Xu W. 240).
The marriage of southern drama and northern music was not quite a harmonious one, according to Xu Wei (1521-1593), a Ming dramatist:

However, [the new music] is soft, slow, loose, and does not fit [the play] well. It is unlike the [original] northern music which is sonorous, forceful, and [thus] pleasant to the ear (Xu W. 240).

But because of the emperor's love for The Lute, this southern drama "now has a northern music score, and can be performed to the accompaniment of zheng [a zither-like instrument with 21-25 strings that are plucked] and lute" (Xu W. 240).

Court routines set by the founding emperor could easily become established tradition, which was expected to be honored during the entire dynasty, unless a daring successor determined to change it. Zhu Di (also known as Chengzu or Emperor Wen, reigned 1403-1424), a daring monarch, was willing to change many routines, including greatly expanding the court's theatrical service.

During much of Zhu Yuanzhang's reign, zaju performances were presented for the emperor's entertainment during meals, but not for formal court ceremonies and gatherings. Zhu Di, a theatre fan, greatly changed the situation. Evidently he added zaju music to court banquets ("xiaoyan") soon after he ascended the throne. According to the official Ming history, fifteen zaju melodies are found in the program for court banquets during the Yongle period.

During the early years of his rule, approximately from 1370 through 1381, Zhu Yuanzhang introduced some popular melodies for the imperial grand banquets ("yanxiang"). However, this practice was brought to an end in the 15th year of Hongwu (1382); therefore, only orthodox dynastic hymns ("yayue") were played for the imperial grand banquets (Zhang T. 672-3, vol. 63). When once again Zhu Di determined to change the music, he again selected a theatrical approach. In the eighteenth year of Yongle (1420), theatrical music for the imperial grand banquets became official. Then almost all the pieces heard at imperial banquets were zaju melodies, such as "Sibian jing," "Xiao jiangjun," "Guo menzi," "Xin shuiling," "Shui xianzi," "Qing taiping," "Gun xiuqiu," "Desheng hui," "Xiao Liangzhou," and "Qing Xuanhe" (Zhang T. 674-6, vol. 63).

Zhu Di's innovations in court ceremonies and entertainments sometimes evoked disapproval from conservative historians. For instance, the ceremonial performance upon the completion of the imperial temple in Beijing, which included singing and dancing, was
criticized as "unrefined and vulgar" (Zhang T. 651, vol. 61). However, Zhu Di's decisions to employ more theatrical and even popular performances in court events were retained for many generations of emperors to come (Zhang T. 651, vol. 61; 673-680, vol. 63).

Despite the fact that theatre-going was still considered a "useless" activity by many people, for which an emperor might gain an undesirable reputation, Emperor Zhu Zhanji (also known as Xuanzong, reigned 1426-1435) openly invited others to join him in the auditorium:

During the reign of Xuanzong, Sir Huang Zhongxuan [also known as Huang Fu; Zhongxuan, Huang's shi, an imperial honorable title after one's death] was ordered [by the emperor] to watch theatre. [He] replied: "I do not like theatre by my nature." [Then he] was ordered to play checkers. [He] replied: "I do not know how to play." [The emperor] asked why. [Huang] answered: "When I was little, my father and teachers were strict. [They] taught me only to read, but not to learn useless things. Therefore I do not know how to play (Renpu lei ji vol. 6, qtd. in Wang A. 122).

Huang's answer was a skillful indirect remonstration to the emperor, known as wanjian in China. The Chinese character for theatre is xi, which also means "joke." An emperor, by the "nature" of his duty, was supposed to be serious, and not to joke. Huang was advising the emperor to stop the "xi," such as theatre and checkers, because they were "useless," if not worse.

Huang was well-known for his "righteous" and "serious manner" (Zhang T. 1872-3, vol. 154). His encounter with
Xuanzong indicates that, first of all, the emperor likely had invited others, who were more easygoing and enjoyed theatre more than Huang did, to attend court theatre presentations; and second, the emperor's theatrical enthusiasm was such that at least this one of his conservative officials felt that he had to remonstrate with him. The fact that Zhu Zhanji opened the court theatre to his subjects no doubt encouraged theatrical enthusiasm among many of those officials, whether invited or not, and probably encouraged artistic exchanges between court theatre and private theatre.

Emperor Zhu Jianshen (also known as Xianzong, reigned 1465-1487), was addicted to theatre. He requested daily theatre presentations. He loved the southern theatre genre and collected play scripts from all over the country. The fashionable entertainment of the southern theatre was not readily available at the court in his time. Yet "because the emperor loves the new theatre genre, the Imperial Academy of Music daily submits plays [of the southern theatre], preferably [with] new stories," (Zhenze jiwen vol. 1, qtd. in Wang A. 123). Although the imperial court held thousands of volumes of theatre scripts, Zhu Jianshen wanted even more to enrich his collection, and to meet the needs of his daily attendance at the theatre. Li Kaixian (1502-1568), a Ming dramatist, wrote: "People
said that Emperor Xianzong liked to listen to *za ju* theatre and songs. He searched for and collected almost all such works available in the country" (370). As a result of the emperor's enthusiasm, the composition of new plays and productions of southern theatre plays were stimulated in the court theatre, and probably in the theatre at large.

Emperor Zhu Houzhao (also known as Wuzong, reigned 1506-1521) was a fan who attended court theatre daily, before he was attracted to outside entertainments (Zhang T. 3413, vol. 304). During his monarchic inspection tours ("xunxing"), theatre was his favorite pastime. He watched theatre at Xuanfu when he traveled to the north (Xu Fuzuo: Huadangge congtan vol. 1, qtd. in Wang A. 124). He enjoyed a new production of *The Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*) in the house of one of his officials when he traveled to the south (Shen D. 31, vol. 1).

Zhu Houzhao's tour also provided chances for southern theatre professionals to learn from their northern colleagues:

Dun Ren, a member of the Southern Imperial Academy of Music, followed Wuzong to Beijing. He learned all the classical music of the North. He became the unmatched master in the South-East [when he returned from Beijing] (Shen D. 641, vol. 25).

Fifty years later, Dun Ren, as a singing master, taught what he had learned in Beijing to the actresses of a private
troupe. Then the northern music nearly became a lost art (He L. 9). 16

Zhu Houzhao's monarchic inspection tours, often negatively criticized by his contemporary subjects and later generations, were fruitful from a theatrical perspective. During his tour, artistic exchanges took place both between the northern and southern theatres, and between the court theatre and private and public theatres. Also during the tours, this ingenious emperor created a new kind of music, and taught it to the professionals in the Southern Imperial Academy of Music. (This will be discussed in the next chapter.)

The Ming monarchs also rewarded their favorite playwrights. Such rewards, being different from case to case, were not necessarily appreciated by all playwrights.

Zhu Yuanzhang's reward to Gao Ming, the playwright of The Lute, was a position in his government. Because he thought that he could use Gao's talent in a better way.

Then someone submitted [the script of] The Lute [to Zhu Yuanzhang]. The emperor said with a smile: "Confucian Scriptures, like cottons, silks, beans and millets, are in every household. Gao Ming's The Lute, like dainties of every kind, must not be absent in the dwellings of the rich and the nobles." Having said that, he added: "What a pity! It is [like] making shoes with palace-style brocade (Xu W. 240)."

16. Details of Dun Ren's training of actresses in He Liangjun's private troupe are available in Part Two, Chapter 15.
Zhu Yuanzhang believed that Gao Ming's talent ("palace-style brocade") was wasted in writing plays ("making shoes") and he wanted to put it to better use in serving his government. Thus he sent an envoy to the playwright to offer him a post (Xu W. 240; also Xu F. 233). However, Gao Ming thought differently. When the imperial envoy came to him, he feigned insanity to avoid this "reward." Zhu Yuanzhang "did not force him any more and Gao Ming died not long after," probably from natural causes (Xu W. 240).

Zhu Di's reward to playwrights was sponsorship, which was more than welcomed. According to The Sequel of The Record of Ghosts (Luguibu xubian), the Prince of Yan, who later usurped the throne, was very fond of dramatists. When still a prince, Zhu Di often associated with them:

Tang Shunming, known as Juzhuang, was a Xiangshan native. He first took a position as a local county officer [during the Yuan]. It was not his goal. He then wandered around in the country. He was humorous. He kept a lasting and warm friendship with me. When Emperor Wen was in the Mansion of Prince Yan, he treated Tang very munificently. During the years of Yongle (1403-1424), the emperor often bestowed bounties upon him. In fine and skillful language, Tang wrote an extremely large number of songs, suites, and short songs, which spread far and wide among the masses (Jia Z. 283).

Tang's experience was not unique. Yang Na, another dramatist, had a similar story. Yang was a Mongolian native, who took his Chinese surname from his sister's husband. "He found favor with the emperor, as had (Tang)
Shunming in the early years of the Yongle period" (Jia Z. 284).

Jia Zhongming, a very productive playwright, was in the same group of dramatists who were sponsored by Zhu Di:

He [Jia Zhongming] once served Emperor Wen in his Mansion of Yang. He was in the emperor's great favor. His occasional works [as presented at] parties were always praised [by the emperor] (Jia Z. 292).

Zhu Houzhao's rewards for his favorite dramatists were appointments in the Imperial Academy of Music. But such offerings were considered humiliating for literati playwrights by their contemporaries and themselves. 17

The monarchic support for theatre practitioners and activities was a complicated phenomenon. On the one hand, it glorified certain playwrights and performers. It encouraged the Ming theatre to flourish. And it certainly contributed to many accomplishments in the court theatre. On the other hand, this support also enabled the Ming monarchs to exercise artistic influence and control over the contents, forms, and taste of theatre in the court circle and sometimes beyond.

17 Details of such events can be found in Chapter 17.
CHAPTER 3
ROYAL PARTICIPATION

Some Ming emperors and members of the Imperial House attended theatrical activities not only as spectators but also as participants. Both Prince Zhu Quan and Prince Zhu Youtun were famed playwrights. Prince Zhu Quan was also known as a scholar of theatre arts. Emperor Zhu Houzhao proved himself as a capable composer of theatre music. And Emperor Zhu Youcheng performed on court stage as an amateur actor.

Prince Zhu Quan (1378-1448), the seventeenth son of Zhu Yuanzhang, and Prince Zhu Youtun (1379-1439), the eldest son and successor to Prince Zhu Su (who was the fifth son of Zhu Yuanzhang), were two of the most important playwrights in the early Ming period. Many of their plays, popular among their contemporaries, have been keenly appreciated by the literati of many later generations, as well (Qian Q. 7-8, vol. 1).

Zhu Quan wrote twelve plays, of which two are extant: Zhuo Wenjun Eloping with Xiangru (Zhuo Wenjun Siben Xiangru) and Chongmozi Walking in the Highest Heaven (Chongmozi
Zhuo Wenjun Eloping with Xiangru is a romantic play with subject matter drawn from history. Zhuo Wenjun, the heroine, is a widow from an unusually rich family. One evening Sima Xiangru, a young scholar invited by her father as an overnight guest, plays the zither in their home. She soon realizes that the music expresses his love for her. She then elopes with him. In the distant town of Linqiong, they open a public house in which both of them personally serve wine, until Sima Xiangru is offered a high government position by the emperor (Guben vol. 94).

Judged on the playwright's life experience and the dramatic story, the plot of Chongmozi Walks in the Highest Heaven (Chongmozi Dubu Daluotian) is more than likely drawn from Zhu Quan's own imagination. The story tells about Huangfu Shou's search for immortality. Huangfu Shou, who styles himself Chongmozi, is probably the embodiment of the princely playwright. The play revolves around Taoist approaches to attaining eternal life, such as the control of human ego, the search for "the elixir of life," the practice of certain physical exercises, and the conquest of temptations from alcohol, sex, wealth, and vanity. The spiritual and contented life style of Taoism is dramatized with grand scenes of dancing and singing (Guben vol. 93).
Zhu Youtun wrote 31 plays, and all of them are extant. During the Ming dynasty, the names of 110 zaju playwrights were recorded. The vast majority of them wrote only a few plays known to others. Yang Na, with 18 plays, and Jia Zhongming, with 14 plays, were exceptions. But only a few plays by Yang and Jia still exist. Zhu Youtun was probably the most productive and fortunate zaju playwright in the entire Ming dynasty (Zhuang Y. 401-417).

Two obvious features of Zhu Youtun's plays are their religious subject matter and their elaborate singing and dancing scenes. Of Zhu Youtun's 31 plays, fifteen are based on religious subjects, twelve on Taoism and three on Buddhism. All kinds of characters search for religious enlightenment and eternal life in his plays. In *A Knowledgeable Friend Repents on the Sea of Bitterness* (Shanzhishi kuhai huitou), the hero Hu Zhongyuan is a Confucian scholar (Guben vol. 125). In *Hui the Master Monk Enlightens Xiao Taohong for Three Times*, (Hui Chanshi san du Xiao Taohong), Xiao Taohong is a prostitute (Guben vol. 115). The Tree of Heaven in *Immortal Ziyang Enlightens the Tree of Heaven for Three Times* (Ziyang xian san du Chang Chunshou) (Guben vol. 122) and the Flowering Crabapple in *The Star of South Pole Enlightens the Spirit of the Flowering Crabapple* (Nanjixing dutuo Haitang xian) represent the spirits of these plants. As the playwright relates in the preface to the play, the heroine of *The Star of
the South Pole Enlightens the Spirit of the Flowering Crabapple actually grows in the garden of the prince's mansion:

I ordered dozens of my men to go with spades to the Range of Crabapples. More than thirty crabapples were transplanted into my garden. Around the seasonal festival of Qingming, the delicate and beautiful blossoms present all their charms. And the red and purple colors are dazzling to the eyes.

The play was written for court entertainment:

In the play The Spirit of the Flowering Crabapples, the subject matter and the idea of the poem "Crabapples" are employed, and a plot concerning immortals is used. The play is composed to cheer up a party or to enhance people's interests when admiring the flowers (qtd. in Cai Y. 840-1)

Probably because he was most interested in entertaining his court, many of Zhu Youtun's plays employ song and dance, while dramatic plots are not always the major concern. In Peonies in the Tianxiang Nursery (Tianxiang pu mudan pin), for example, nothing dramatic happens but peony flowers are described at length. The major characters are a court singing master and his student singing girls, who primarily perform singing and dancing. In Ten Beauties Admire the Peony Garden (Shi meiren qingshang mudan yuan), each of ten actresses plays the spirit of one of as many famous peony types, namely, Yaohuang, Weizi, Shouanhong, Suluan, Fen'ejiao, Yinghong, Baoloutai, Ziyunfang, Yutianxian, and Zuichunrong. The plot of the play offers little more than an account of how Jinmu, an immortal, invited the flower-spirits to a party, during which four
maids make some jokes, and the spirits of the ten peonies discuss the arts of playing the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting. Scenes of singing and dancing are presented in Act Four of the play (Guben vol. 124).

On at least one occasion, singing and dancing are declared to be the purpose of a play. In the preface to The Peony Spirits in the Booming City of Luoyang (Luoyang fengyue mudan xian), another of Zhu Youtun's peony plays, he wrote:

After attending to affairs of my princedom, I grew several hundred peonies in my leisure time.... I have composed a play to admire the peonies, in which the bright voice [of the actresses] in this colorful spring will be encouraged, and the beauties of the Tianxiang Nursery will be presented (qtd. in Cai Y. 838).

Some of the scenes devoted to singing and dancing are presented on such a large scale that people unfamiliar with court theatres would doubt if they were feasible. Qi Biaojia (1602-1645), a dramatist of the late Ming period, believed that Zhu Youtun's Flowers of Four Seasons Compete with Each Other's Beauty (Sishi huayue sai jiaorong) "was unstageable, because it requires 15-16 dan role actresses" (176). Such a number of actresses was certainly not available in an average private or commercial troupe. But they could well be presented in a court troupe. Judging by their scripts, all of Zhu Youtun's plays were composed for, and presented on, the stage in his palace.
Zhu Quan, who involved himself in the study of theatre, was also the author of *Taihe zhengyin pu* (*Great harmony manual of prosody for dramatic songs*). It was the first and one of the most important books ever written about rules, forms, and criticisms of the northern theatre and its distinctive melodies (11-231). This book includes the following contents:

1. Introduction of fifteen literary styles of songs and dramatic verses, and nine forms of couplets;
2. Criticism of the literary styles of authors of songs and plays, of whom 187 came from the Yuan period, and 16 from the early Ming;
3. List of twelve subjects found in *zaju* plays;
4. List of playwrights and their *zaju* plays, with 535 written by Yuan playwrights, 33 by early Ming playwrights, 110 by anonymous playwrights, and four by professional actors;
5. Biographical notes on 36 amateur singers (professionals were excluded, because the prince discriminated against their social status);
6. List of musical concepts and terminology, including the five-tone scale, six yang pitches, six yin pitches, and the 18 modes;
7. "Common-sense in songs and the theatre" ("Cilin xuzhi") which comprises materials on different subjects, including ancient monarchs who contributed to music; ancient singers
and their three schools; singing techniques; styles of instrumental and vocal music; and studies on 14 theatrical terms including the nine role types;
(8) Rules, forms, and literary examples for each of the 335 northern lyric songs (sanqu) and dramatic melodies (zaju).

This book is not balanced in its contents or concentrated in its subject matter. But it might well serve as an encyclopaedia of northern theatre music.

Not all the Ming monarchs possessed an interest in scholarly studies of theatre arts. Emperor Zhu Houzhao (also known as Wuzong) demonstrated his great enthusiasm in theatre performance, but not in theatre research. He also loved travel and music (Zhang T. 2170, vol. 186). During one of his grand tours, he desired a new kind of instrumental music:

During Wuzong's inspection tour of the South, he created a music called "Pacify the Frontier" ["Jingbian yue"] which employed sheng [a reed pipe wind instrument], bamboo flute, drum, and other miscellaneous wind and percussion instruments. He gave the music to the Southern Imperial Academy of Music (Shen D. 650, vol. 25).

This approach to music, involving many instruments comprising a large orchestra, maybe considered an ancient symphony of sort. A hundred years after the emperor composed this music, Shen Defu found that it was an enduring success among the people:
A music called "Shiyang jin" [literally, "brocade of ten patterns"] has gained popularity in recent years. All of its instruments—drums, bamboo flutes, clappers, cymbals, and zheng [a bell-shaped percussion instrument often used in the army] of big and small sizes—are played together in a single melody. It is extremely popular among the people of Wu, but they do not realize that the [new] music comes from an old one dating from the years of Zhengde [when Wuzong reigned].... Today's kids of Wu just learned that music and then developed it. Truly: "today's music is just like the ancient one" (650, vol. 25).

Emperor Zhu Youjiao (also known as Xizong, reigned 1621-1627) was a great fan of the theatre. In the winter, he built a heatable bed ("dikang") in the Maoqin (literally, "Hard-working") Hall (Chen Zong Gongci, qtd. in Wang A. 125) to watch martial plays:

The later emperor [Zhu Youjiao] loved martial plays the most. When he presented himself in Maoqin Hall, he often ordered plays about Yue Wumu ["Wumu" is the imperial title of honor given to Yue Fei after his death] to be enacted (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

One summer he went to Liujiào (literally, "Hexagon") Pavilion to play a part in a civil play. A palace poem reads:

Roads are cleared around Liujiào Pavilion and Huilong [literally, "Returning-dragon"] Convent, Singing is heard under crabapple flowers. A yellow sunflower and a red braid in stylish clouds: The Son of the Heaven [the emperor] dresses for walking on the snow.

An original annotation to the poem explains the situation in detail, a theatre performance in which the emperor participated:
In the old days, many crabapples grew around the Huilong Convent. The Liujiao Pavilion was next to the convent. Every year when the crabapples blossomed, the emperor came [to admire the flowers]. Once he dressed up as Emperor Taizu [also known as Zhao Kuangyin, reigned 960-975] of the Song dynasty, and put on the play Visiting Zhao Pu in the Evening Snow (Xueye fang Pu) with Gao Yongshou and his like.

The emperor probably had personally selected his costumes, which including a hat shade and a flat braid:

A folk hat shade, called "clouds-like cape" in the court, was a tribute-gift from a foreign country. The hat shade, made of unknown materials, was bright yellow. When it was placed on a regular hat and seen from far, the hat shade looked just like an autumn sunflower. It was the emperor's favorite. The flat braid was actually a ribbon made of floss. In snowy weather, eunuchs used such ribbons to bind up their clothes, which would thus be kept away from the ground and the dirt.

The emperor's costumes are quite appropriate for the theatrical situation in the play, but not for the season of performance:

The production took place in the early summer. Both of these two pieces of costume [the hat shade and the flat braid] were not fit [for the season]. The emperor wanted his costume to resemble that for a snowy night. Therefore he put on the costume despite the hot weather (Chen Zong Gongci, qtd. in Wang A. 126).

In trying to achieve life-like costuming, this Ming emperor sacrificed some of his comfort for the sake of art.
CHAPTER 4
TROUPE ORGANIZATION

Three kinds of troupes are found in the Ming court theatre complex: those of the imperial the Imperial Academy of Music ("Jiaofang Si"); those of the Department of Bells and Drums ("Zhonggu Si"); and the two troupes of the southern theatre. The first two kinds of troupes, established at the very beginning of the dynasty, were considered formal court troupes by many people. The two southern theatre troupes, formed on a smaller scale during the Wanli period (1573-1619) of the later Ming dynasty, were organized much like the emperor's private troupe. They were not recorded in the official Ming history, and were relatively unknown to the outside world.

1) The Troupes of the Imperial Academy of Music

The troupes of the Imperial Academy of Music ("Jiaofang Si") offered inner-court zaju performances,\textsuperscript{18} and

\textsuperscript{18} The details for court zaju productions are in Chapter 7.
outer-court ceremonies and entertainments. The Imperial Academy of Music was subordinate to the Ministry of Rites. Its organization and functions are briefly described in Ming shi, the official version of Ming history:

The Imperial Academy of Music [involves]: conductor [Fengluan], one; left and right shao dancers, one each; left and right musicians. one each. [Their] duties are: to offer music and dance services. [The Academy is] served by the musical families [yuehu], and subordinated to the Minister of Rites (Zhang T. 778, vol. 74).

The Imperial Academy of Music was the governing body of the so-called musical families which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. The Academy selected actors from the musical families to form a court troupe. It summoned members of musical families to perform at various court rituals and ceremonies. And it collected fees from, instead of paid salaries to, the musical families. As a result of this, it had a rich account, which was also available for its supervisory body, the office of the Minister of Rites:

The account of the Imperial Academy of Music has become a resource for the administrative expenses for the Minister of Rites, such as the expenses for officials reporting for duty, being promoted, or being transferred. This practice seems unbecoming [for the Minister of Rites] (Shen D. 354, vol. 13).

19. The circumstances surrounding performance of a ceremonious nature and those for entertainment purpose are described in Chapter 6; but the historic development of such performances is introduced in Chapter 2.
It seemed "unbecoming" from the viewpoint of a Ming literatus, the author of this comment, probably because the funds in the treasury of the Imperial Academy of Music were collected from musical families, who often earned their income by entertaining paying customers with private performances and prostitution. Therefore, he maintained, it was disgraceful for the Minister of Rites, the official who represented the formality and dignity of the state, to money exacted from prostitutes.

In the Imperial Academy of Music, the conductor, first called the "Heshenglang" and then the "Fengluan," was the official in charge. He had four direct subordinates, two responsible for the presentation of dance, and two for that of music. The ordinary troupe members of the Imperial Academy of Music, however, came from the Yuehu, or the musical families.

The musical families were obliged to provide regular services to the imperial court. As Shen Defu (1578-1642), a Ming literati who was knowledgeable about the mid and late Ming courts, observed: during a birthday celebration, which was considered "a small thing" in the overall business of a musical family, all the adults of the household went to the imperial court "to carry out their duties." During "a grand event," every member of the family, even such lowly members as children, had to serve the court. As a young girl herself told Shen:
When there is a "grand event" of court ceremony, I have to lead my colleagues to rush on horseback to the imperial court before dawn. We help and take part in the great rituals. I always wait on His Majesty, within a few feet of him (Shen D. 677, vol. 26).

Although this little actress childishly described her "imperial duty" in an overly serious way, the fact is clear that when the need arose, even a child member of a Musical Family had to serve the court.

Some imperial kinsmen or high government officials were also entitled to service from musical families. Kong Shangzhong, a duke and heir of Confucius, often called for such free service:

He even signs his card to summon prostitutes from the Imperial Academy of Music to serve his parties, just as those powerful imperial kinsmen do. What is more, he ill-treats those girls unnaturally. The man who takes Kong's card to the Entertainment Quarter always announces: "Saint Kong is calling singers." And all the prostitutes rush to hide themselves. Some of them bribe [the man] heavily to avoid [this service] (Shen D. 673, vol. 26).

2) The Troupes of the Department of Bells and Drums

The troupes of the Department of Bells and Drums ("Zhonggu Si") served inner-court presentations of educational, comic, and water-puppet theatre. The presentations of educational, comic, and water-puppet plays are discussed in Chapter 8.
organization and functions were briefly described in the official Ming history:

Department of Bells and Drums: Eunuch in charge, one; Manager [Qianshu], Secretary [Sifang], and Training Officials, indefinite numbers. Responsibilities: [to sound] bells and drums for the imperial audiences; [to perform] inner-court music, chuangi plays, Passing Brocade Play [Guojin], Rice-Threshing Plays (Dadao), and other miscellaneous theatrical presentations (Zhang T.: 778, vol. 74).

All members of the Department of Bells and Drums, officials and performers alike, were eunuchs. Unlike the actors from the Imperial Academy of Music, who lived their own lives when they were off duty from the court, the eunuch actors from the Department of Bells and Drums lived most of the time in the imperial palace and had few connections with the outside world. Such a lifestyle must have had some influence on their performance style, which was often considered old fashioned: "They all learn those inherited play scripts of yuanben, following the traditions of the Jin and Yuan dynasties" (Shen D. 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

The organization of a water-puppet production was quite complicated. Five eunuch offices were involved in presenting the show, in which only the stage performance remained the sole responsibility of the Department of Bells and Drums, while the supplies for this sophisticated court entertainment were provided by four of the other eunuch offices. The percussion of gongs and drums was prepared by the Department of Weaponry ("Bingzhang Ju"). The puppets were manufactured in the Department of Furniture ("Yuyong
Jian"). The pool and its contents, such as fish and shrimps, were provided by the Department of Construction ("Neigong Jian"). And the screens and curtains were made in the Department of Decoration ("Sishe Jian") (Liu R. 14, vol. 2).

Just as members of the Imperial Academy of Music were discriminated against in general society, those who served in the Department of Bells and Drums were discriminated against in the world of eunuchs:

The most despicable office for a eunuch is that in the Department of Bells and Drums. People of the inner-court do not want to mention it by name, but call it "the Eastern Office." I was told that, as a routine, once a eunuch had served in this office, he would not be promoted to any other positions" (Shen D. 814, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Despite the fact that performers in court theatre were discriminated against even by their eunuch colleagues, "routine" processes for promotions in the Department of Bells and Drums allowed some significant exceptions, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3) The Troupes of Southern Theatre

Probably because productions by the court troupes were often old-fashioned repetitions of antiquated plays, Emperor Zhu Houzhao enjoyed watching outside theatre
presentations in his monarchic inspection tours. But Emperor Zhu Yijun (also known as Shenzong, reigned 1573-1619) created two new troupes in order to enjoy the outside novelties of the fashionable southern theatre. One of the troupes was for himself:

The emperor started to put on plays in the Yuxi Palace. [Eunuch actors] rehearsed the outside theatre there, which include such theatre genres as yiyang[giang], haiyan[giang], and kunshan[giang] (Shen D. 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

These three genres were all from the southern theatre. They gained their popularity during the mid-Ming years, when genres of the northern theatre, which were still in the regular programs of court troupes, had gradually died out on stages outside the imperial court.

The new troupe offered the emperor not only novel forms, but also fresh information:

[The actors in the troupe] freely adapted rumors and gossip from the outside world as part of comic relief in their presentations, much like what A Chou did during the Chenghua period [1465-1487] (Shen D. 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

A Chou, a court comedian of the mid-Ming era, related many of his jokes with contemporary politics as his way of positively influencing the emperor. As social outcasts,

21 For details, see Chapter 2.

22 Two examples of A Chou's comic presentations can be found in Chapter 8.
A Chou and his kind otherwise had no chance to communicate with the emperor in matters of politics.

The new court troupe was organized on a moderate scale, compared with the old troupes, and was independent from the existing court theatre system. Its actors became the emperor's favorite performers, and because of that they had considerable influence:

[The troupe] has up to 300 members. It is not under the control of the Department of Bells and Drums any more.... Relying on the emperor's favor, [the actors] often interfered with business outside the court (Shen D.: 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Shen Defu believed that the emperor understood the situation and did not like to be influenced by the actors:

Recently, His Majesty is quite aware of what's happening. [The number of] theatrical performances during his mealtime is suddenly reduced. Since [this setback], actors of that kind have pulled in their horns a little bit (798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Also, as a result of improperly using their influence, more than 40 actors from the southern theatre troupe were put into jail because "their illegal deeds relied on [the emperor's] fondness" (Liu R. 14, vol. 2).

Emperor Zhu Yijun also assigned more than 200 eunuchs to form another troupe to entertain his mother. This troupe was trained in "both court theatre and outside theatre." However, the primary purpose in establishing this troupe seemed to be offering plays in the style of the southern theatre, instead of in the out-of-date manner of the
northern theatre, which until then had been readily available in the court:

When Ci-Sheng, the empress dowager, presented herself, [the troupe] frequently served Her Majesty the newly-written southern plays [xiwen] from the outside, such as Bestow a Jade-ring in the Hua Mountain (Huayue cihuan ji) (Liu R. 14, vol. 2).

As has been mentioned, the performers in the two troupes of southern theatre numbered about 300 and 200. But not enough figures are available today to determine the number of court performers in the troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music or in that of the Department of Bells and Drums. Probably the members of the Imperial Academy of Music numbered in the hundreds during the early Ming era, and in the thousands during the mid Ming.

In 1368, the first year of the Ming dynasty, the performers for the ceremony of jiaogiu, or "the heaven worship," were 62 musicians, twelve singers, one conductor, 64 martial dancers, 64 civil dancers, and two master dancers. They brought the total number to at least 205 "on stage" performers, excluding substitutes, if any, and the stage crew. In 1374, ten more musicians were added to the ceremony of jiaogiu (Zhang T. 650, vol. 61). We do not know if the same performers who served in jiaogiu appeared in other court ceremonies, or if the troupe included other sets of performers.
While no data exist to determine how rapidly the size of court troupes was enlarged, the data relating to the size of the Imperial Kitchens might shed some light on this matter. In 1368, when the Ming dynasty was established, 800 cooks served the court, but in 1435, 9,700 cooks, or 12 times as many, were hired to work in the Imperial Kitchens (Zhang T. 3969). The court theatre troupe could well have grown in size at a rate comparable to that of the Imperial Kitchens.

In the second month of the same lunar year of 1435, the new Emperor Zhu Qizhen (reigned 1435-1449 and 1457-1464) released 3,800 performers from the Imperial Academy of Music (Zhang T. 3969). If Zhu Qizhen reduced the number of his performers at the same rate that he reduced the quantity of his cooks in the Imperial Kitchens in the same year (from 9,700 to 5,000, or a reduction of 48%), he would still have 4,100 performers in his court troupe. And his predecessor, Emperor Zhu Zhanji, would have had a court troupe of up to 7,900 members.

Zhu Qizhen need not have released performers because he did not like theatre and other kinds of entertainment. More probably he was just adopting a pose of allowing political innovation when he ascended the throne. Such poses were common in China's history, and Zhu Qizhen adopted them more than once. In the same month in which he released the court performers, Zhu Qizhen also released 17,000
vassals from laboring on the Imperial Mausoleum, and 2,640 vassals from state projects for construction storage buildings. In the eighth month of the same year, Zhu Qizhen cut 4,700 cooks from the Imperial Kitchens (Zhang T. 3969).

The number of actors serving folk songs, music, and miscellaneous performances in the court troupe is not specified in the official Ming history. But the number of those performers seemed to expand very rapidly.

In the third year of Zhengde (1508), for example, an imperial edict for improving court music was issued and soon enforced. In consequence, many "outstanding" provincial performers went to the capital at the government's expense. Although little was done then to improve court music, "the miscellaneous performances since [that time] have flourished in the inner-court." As those new performers in turn introduced their provincial peers to the emperor and were accepted, "hundreds more came. The influence of actors was greatly expanded" (Zhang T. 652, vol. 61).

While "improving court music" was a legitimate reason for the emperor to search for fresh talent for his troupe, it was quite questionable to recruit such performers from the provinces. The court was considered by many people to be the last refuge for the orthodox ceremonial music, which might have vanished long since outside the court. Thus, improving court music was more than likely an excuse
for the emperor to search for new and more fashionable entertainment, which he had enjoyed since his childhood (Zhang T. 3413, vol. 304). The "flourishing miscellaneous performances" that ensued should not have surprised or disappointed the emperor. Rather, they were expected, even predicted.

In the official records of the Ming, often enough, the court theatre is seen only as a branch of the imperial government. Nothing but its levels, its functions, and sometimes its head officials were mentioned. Ming court performers, as in reality, were regularly ignored, or in the best cases were noted only as statistics. However, behind the magnificent scenes of court productions, actors and actresses had thousands and thousands of sad stories about their personal lives and family histories. The vast majority of those stories remained untold. In the following chapter, the study of actor background is primarily based on the experiences of groups rather than individuals.
CHAPTER 5
ACTOR BACKGROUND

Court theatre performers regularly came from musical families and from eunuchs. Yet, under imperial edicts, people from other backgrounds, such as actors, musicians, and miscellaneous performers from commercial troupes, might be summoned to the capital to serve in the court troupes.

1) Performers of the Imperial Academy of Music

The performers who served the Imperial Academy of Music were members of so-called yuehu, or musical families. Other such "professional families" were junhu, or military families; mahu, or horse-raisin families; and chuanhu, or water-transportation families, to name only a few. All people born into these "professional families" were bound by the System of the Household Register. Under Ming laws, those people had to continue in the government-assigned professions for all their lives, and for generation after generation.

Members of musical families came from many different social origins. However, the great majority of musical
families were composed of people from these four categories: (1) existing entertainers; (2) offspring of Mongols; (3) children from other households; and (4) female family members of emperors' political enemies.

(1) Existing Entertainers

The existing entertainers usually registered as members of a functioning musical family. Soon after the Ming dynasty was established, Zhu Yuanzhang "built 16 entertainment quarters to attract merchants" to his new capital of Nanjing (Zhou H. 17, book 2), and "singing girls readily took nests in these buildings" (Shen D. 900, "Addendum" vol. 3). Those singing girls, also known as guanji (literally, official prostitutes), were members of musical families of the early Ming.

As a part of the emperor's economic plan, guanji in his entertainment quarters were meant to serve businessmen. But with their performing skills and sexual attractions, guanji had appeal to many more men, including literati and government officials. "Literati and officials were not banned from enjoying the service of guanji until the second year of Xuande [1427]" (Zhou H. 17, book 2). Eventually, they were banned from seeking such entertainments because they enjoyed them too much: "a large number of officials were accused of getting drunk in those indecent places on a daily basis and ignoring their office duties" (Shen D. 900, "Addendum" vol. 3).
(2) Offspring of Mongols

Some Mongolian adherents did not leave China with their army retreating toward the North during the last days of the former dynasty of Yuan. Many of them made up another portion of musical families:

When the Yuan dynasty was replaced by the Ming dynasty, some descendants of Mongolian tribes still wandered about destitute in China. [The emperor] ordered local government bodies to list them in the Household Register. [Then] those [Mongolian offspring] who lived in the capital were called yuehu [musical families]. But those who lived in provinces were called gaihu [beggar families] (Sanfeng shigian ji, qtd. in Wang A. 93).

Some musical family members of Mongolian origins are easy to identify by their surnames. For example, Dun Ren, of the Southern Imperial Academy of Music (He L. 11), can be readily recognized as a Mongolian descendant from his surname, "Dun."

(3) Children from Other Households

In certain cases, children from other households were sold into musical families. During the mid Ming period, many water-transportation, military, and horse-raising families suffered poverty, as the system gradually decayed (Zhou H. 59-61, 55-57, book 2). Probably as a result of poverty, a military officer sold his daughter into a musical family:

Wu Neng, a Qianhu [a military rank; literally, the Lord of One-thousand Households], gave up his daughter Mancangr to a match-maker to be sold to Zhang, a woman of musical family, but lied to Mancangr that (she would be sent) to the household of Zhou, an imperial kinsman. (Mancangr) was later resold to the house
of Yuan Lin, who was a man of musical family (Zhang T. vol. 18).
Mancangr came from a Military Family, but was sold to Musical Families.

(4) Female Family Members of Emperors' Political Enemies

A unique source for Musical Families was female family members of political enemies of Ming emperors. As a man who grew up in poverty, Zhu Yuanzhang hated to waste any of his resources. For example, he ordered worn-out army flags to be sent to the Imperial Kitchens to be used as rags by the cooks (Zhou H. vol. 4). After he had executed tens of thousands of his former supporters and their male relatives, he bestowed their wives and daughters upon those who had rendered meritorious services to him (Shen D. 456, vol. 18). He spared the women's lives, but not their honor. Like father, like son: Zhu Di, his fourth son, followed this practice, but went a step further. He sent such women to the Imperial Academy of Music, the Department of Laundry, and military camps:

In the early years of Yongle period [1403-24] the majority of those who were abandoned to the Imperial Academy of Music and the Department of Laundry, who were mated to elephant slaves, and who were sent to military camps to be raped and to sleep [with soldiers], were the relatives of Huang Zicheng, Lian Zining, Fang Xiaoru, Qi Tai, and Zhuo Jing (Shen D. 456, vol. 18).

Huang Zicheng, Lian Zining, Fang Xiaoru, Qi Tai, and Zhuo Jing were all loyal to Zhu Yunwen (reigned 1399-1402), the emperor overthrown by Zhu Di.
The court troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music was regularly composed of members of musical families. But a Ming emperor might choose whoever he wanted, from a musical family or not, to serve him. Zhu Qizhen, for example, sent a group of actors from the Wu region to his court troupe against their wishes:

Some actors of Wu origin came to the capital performing plays of the southern theatre. Men Da, a member of secret police [jinyi, literally, brocade uniform], reported that those actors impersonated women, thus offended public decency. Emperor Yingzong [also known as Zhu Qizhen] personally interrogated them. The actors described in detail how they actually had improved public morals. The emperor ordered them to be untied and to perform before him. An actor came out to deliver lines such as:

The state being upright, heaven will bless it.
The officials being honest, people will behave.

The emperor was greatly delighted. He ruled: "This is a maxim. Why should they be punished?" He thus had them all registered in the Imperial Academy of Music (Dugong tanzuan, qtd. in Wang A. 80-81)

The fact that Zhu Qizhen had those Wu actors registered in the Imperial Academy of Music indicates that they were not from musical families. Otherwise they would have been registered before they arrived in the capital.

Ironically, Zhu Qizhen's ruling, which he probably thought was doing a favor for those provincial actors, was indeed a humiliation and punishment from their point of view. They suffered from this until the death of the emperor:

The actors were ashamed of being sent to the Imperial Academy of Music. When the emperor passed away,
they escaped [from the capital] and returned to Wu (Dugong tanzuan, qtd. in Wang A. 80-81)

Those actors truly valued their freedom as members of a commercial troupe, but were disgusted by the low status of members of musical families.

Ming emperors might also recruit performers through government channels. In 1508, following Emperor Zhu Houzhao's instructions, the Ministry of Rites requested that the departments of the central government and offices of the provincial government choose outstanding performers and send them to the capital. As a result of this imperial edict, hundreds of miscellaneous performers came to serve the court troupe, as mentioned in Chapter 4 (Zhang T.: 652, vol. 61).

2) Performers in the Department of Bells and Drums

Actors who served in the Department of Bells and Drums were eunuchs, who usually came from poor families. During the Ming dynasty, three major sources of eunuchs were: (1) boys castrated by their parents; (2) men who castrated themselves; and (3) boys castrated by generals and officials of the Ming government.

(1) Boys Castrated by Their Parents

According to the late-Ming novel Jingshi yinyang meng, in certain regions of the country parents would arrange to castrate one of their sons to serve the court in order
to gain a tax-free status for the family (Guo Q.: 38). But castrating one's son without approval of an imperial decree was a major crime punishable by death during the Ming. In the fifth lunar month of the sixth year of Hongzhi (1493):

A woman, maiden-named Luo, was the wife of Ma Ying, a serviceman. She castrated her little son Ma Wu [literally, the fifth boy of Ma's family]. The plot was exposed. Under the law, Luo, as the person who carried out the crime, would be beheaded. Wang Jiaqing, Vice-Minister of Justice, and his two colleagues, change the punishment to stick flogging. The emperor was enraged. He banished Jiaqing from the court and put Luo to death as the law prescribed (Shen D.: 816, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Misled parents sometimes castrated their male children in the hope of gaining rewards from the court:

At that time [the ninth lunar month of 1507], Chong Sheng, an eunuch official, fooled people into castrating all their [male] children and grandchildren, in order to gain wealth and rank. In a village, the number of children being castrated could run up to several hundreds. Even the [government] ban couldn't stop such a practice (Shen D.: 816, "Addendum" vol. 1).

(2) Men Who Castrated Themselves

During the Ming, men sometimes castrated themselves in the hopes of escaping poverty and other hardships. Such hopes were often unfulfilled, as a result of law enforcement and competition. In the year 1424, a man from Changsha Prefecture castrated himself and asked to be employed in the inner-court as a eunuch. Emperor Zhu Gaochi (also known as Renzong, reigned 1425) exiled him to the frontier guards. In the year 1425, several servicemen
and commoners castrated themselves in the hope of working in the inner-court. But instead they were banished to the frontier guards stationed in Jiaozhi. In such cases, being transported to distant frontier guards, or chongjun, was the punishment described in the laws (Shen D. 816, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Some people tried to find excuses for their self-castration:

In the 13th year of Zhengtong (1435), Fan Kan of Poyang, Jiangxi Province, and Li Huihan of Diezhi, Shaanxi Province, castrated themselves. But they declared that [the castration] was the result of, respectively, infantile malnutrition, and failing off a horse (Shen D. 816, "Addendum" vol. 1). Their excuses were not accepted. And both castrated men were exiled to Tieling of East Liaoning Province.

Illegal self-castration was never completely stopped throughout the Ming era. In the seventh lunar month of 1452, Emperor Zhu Qiyu (also known as Jingdi, reigned 1450-1457) was told that a very large number of men had castrated themselves in the nation. He subsequently instructed Hu Ying, the Minister of Rites:

Post notices to instruct people:
Whoever dare to violate the law [forbidding self-castration], and whoever [castrate themselves and] then serve in the palaces of princes or the mansions of powerful officials, will be condemned as ones acting counter to filial piety (Shen D. 816, "Addendum" vol. 1).

During the Ming dynasty, unfilial conduct of any kind was a major crime punishable by death.
A few self-castrated men did achieve their dreams of wealth and rank. Wei Zhongxian, for example, an illiterate all his life, became the most powerful man in the country during Emperor Zhu Youjiao's reign. He was a self-castrated eunuch:

Wei Zhongxian, a rascal when he was young, failed in gambling games among a group of young ruffians, who gave him a hard time. Wei was so frustrated that he castrated himself and changed his name to Li Jinzhong. [In his later years,] he resumed his family name Wei and [the given name] Zhongxian was bestowed in him [by the emperor] (Zhang T. 3433, vol. 305).

(3) Boys Castrated by the Government

Despite the frequent ineffectiveness of law enforcement, self-castration was officially banned by Ming government. But in the meantime, government imposed "legal" castration continued. Often such castration was administered to a great number of male children in rebellious minority nationalities:

During the Battle of Muchuan in the 14th year of Zhengtong [1449], Wang Ji, the Earl of Jingyuan, and Gong Ju, the governor-commander, went on a punitive expedition against Si Jifa. They administered the corporal punishment of castration without authorization. They [castrated the boys] with the excuse serving the emperor, but actually kept [the castrated boys] to serve themselves. [Their conduct] was reported by Zhan Ying, a school administrator of the military area of Sichuan. The emperor excused Wang Ji because of his meritorious services (Shen D. 820, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Such large-scale castration administered by government generals and officials could cause many casualties among those innocent children of conquered tribes:
In the fourth year of Tianshun [1460], Ruan Rang, the eunuch in charge of the Provinces of Hunan, Hubei, and Guizhou, castrated 1,565 little boys captured from the Eastern Miao nationality. 329 of the boys died as the result of sickness.

Even as the death toll rose, Ruan's report reached the emperor. What concerned Ruan most was keeping his report accurate: "He then bought more boys to make up the number [of 1,565]. He castrated them all." When the emperor learned about that, he only "severely criticized [Ruan] Rang." Such mass castration was part of the government policy of "destroying roots and branches of bad species [of rebels]" (Shen D. 820, "Addendum" vol. 1).

However, government administered castration was not limited to the offspring of rebels. They were not a regular and reliable resource of eunuchs. Provincial officials often castrated boys from common families and sent them to the imperial palace, much in the way that they paid tribute to the emperor:

During the years of Zhengtong [1436-1449], Chen Mao, the Marquis of Mingyang and Commander in Chief [Zongbing] of Fujian Province, presented 108 castrated little boys to the emperor, who accepted them [as eunuchs] (Shen D. 820, "Addendum" vol. 1).

After the mid Ming, eunuch officials often acted on the emperor's behalf in the provinces. They had the authority to castrate boys for the inner-court:

During the years of Jingtai [1450-1456], Dai Xibao, the Deputy Director [Jiancheng] of the Right Division of Eunuchs ["Youjian Jiancheng"], who was in charge of Fujian Province, presented Chen Shisun and his
group of 59 castrated little boys [to the emperor]. They were sent to the Eunuch Department of Rites in compliance with the emperor's instruction (Shen D. 820, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Because actor training during the Ming dynasty was started as early as the age of five, and the members of the troupe of the Department of Bells were titled "Xueyiguan" (literally, officials in arts training) (Liu R. 12, vol. 2), the eunuch actors, or the great majority of them, probably were selected from among those castrated little boys.

Actors from non-eunuch backgrounds too were sometimes castrated to serve the troupe of the Department of Bells and Drums. During the Zhengde period [1506-1521], Emperor Zhu Houzhao "loved several child-actors" from the Imperial Academy of Music:

He gave instruction that they should be castrated, and kept in the Department of Bells and Drums. Soon afterwards, robes embroidered with pythons and belts made of jade [as symbols of rank and honor] were bestowed upon them for their satisfactory service to the emperor (Shen D. 531, vol. 20).

When the emperor visited Xuanfu, he favored another actor. Given the possibility of his serving the inner-court, the actor was castrated by head eunuchs:

23 For details, see Chapter 15.
The emperor asked for [the actor's] name. Those who waited on the emperor answered "Toushang Bai" [literally, "White Head"]. The head eunuch in charge of local affairs borrowed this actor from the court troupe of the Prince of Dai to serve the event [and thus no one knew the actor's real name]. Therefore the actor was given a nickname. The emperor laughed and said: "His head is white all right. I wonder if his private parts are also white." When the emperor left, those head eunuchs castrated the performer. They reasoned that since the emperor asked such a question, he might want to summon the performer to serve in the inner-court. The actor was never summoned (Shen D. 891, "Addendum" vol. 3).

"Bai" (literally, white), was a slang used in the Tang dynasty (618-907) for castration. The Ming emperor "must have learned the term from historical volumes," as Shen Defu speculated.

Artistically speaking, the actor backgrounds in the Imperial Academy of Music and that in the Department of Bells and Drums shared little in common. Actors and actresses of the Academy came from a family tradition rich in theatre arts. But actors of the eunuch department could come from families alien to performance. Actor backgrounds inevitably affected the styles of court troupes. In Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, as we shall see, troupes of the Imperial Academy of Music usually presented a higher level of skills and complexity in their productions than productions of the eunuch department. Another element which affected the styles of court productions was, inevitably, the circumstances of performance.
Originally the productions of the court theatre were presented either as entertainment or as rituals. However, sometimes the entertainment became ritualistic after years of repetition. On the other hand, the ritual performances could be entertaining when certain elements, such as contemporary events, or humorous materials, were introduced.

The entertainment-oriented performances included mealtime presentations on a daily basis, festival observances in seasonal occasions, birthday celebrations as annual events, and different banquet productions irregularly enacted whenever the emperor demanded them. The ritual-oriented performances included religious ceremonies and some shows planned to inform the emperor about affairs outside the imperial palace.

Starting with Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the dynasty, Ming emperors enjoyed mealtime entertainments, which were primarily performances of zaju plays and folk songs. According to Ming shi (The Ming history):

The "Melodies of the Twelve Months" were played according to each month (probably as a prelude or
as background music]. Short ballads, folk songs, and zaju plays were presented for mealtime and pre-meal entertainments, which were popular but vulgar, loud but noisy, rich but confused, and in poor taste. Taizu [also known as Zhu Yuanzhang] wanted to banish such performances. But isn't it strange that they were placed right there in his [dining] halls and on his [palace] terraces? (Zhang T. 651, vol. 61).

It was strange, but understandable. Having driven the previous Mongol rulers back to their northern grassland, Zhu Yuanzhang claimed to restore the ancient music and to rebuild the classical dynastic hymns (yayue) (Zhang T. 648, vol. 61). But such political statements were applied only to open ceremonies. His daily (and supposedly private) entertainments were determined by his personal preferences, which evidently were on the side of popular, but not "classical;" and contemporary, but not "ancient," styles.

Zhu Yuanzhang's practice of holding mealtime performances was kept in the Ming court by the emperors for generations to come. When chuangqi, the Southern theatre genre, became popular, Emperor Zhu Yijun (also known as Shenzong, reigned 1573-1619) established a new troupe to provide the fashionable chuangqi productions for his mealtime entertainment (Shen D. 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).24

24 This troupe is introduced in Chapter 4, Section 3: "The troupes of the Southern Theatre."
Major seasonal festivals were regularly observed in the Ming court with theatrical productions, often supported by fireworks, lights, lantern exhibitions, and other offerings of music and decorations. Judged by the titles and contents of extant Ming court plays, certain festivals were celebrated with performances of plays suitable to the events, not by just any plays. For instance:

Zhong Kui Fights Five Ghosts in the Celebration of the New Year of Bumper Harvest (Qing fengnian wu gui nao Zhong Kui) was enacted during the Spring Festival, on the first day of a lunar year (Guben: vol. 232). According to an eyewitness, the occasion was marked by much noise and excitement. Music had been played since the previous night, the new year's eve. And fireworks started early in the morning on the lunar new year's day. Members of the audience wore traditional ornaments for this occasion:

They all wear naoe [literally, flying moths], which were [usually] made of painted and cut-out golden-colored paper, in their hair. But there were also people who wore real butterflies and other real insects on their heads. Such [personal] adornments were proper for the festival occasion (Liu R. 1, vol. 5).

Guns were shot off in the ceremony daily from the 24th day of the last month in the preceding lunar year through the 17th day of the first month in the new year. Fireworks and bright lights were presented at all times during this important festival season (Liu R. 6, vol. 5).
Gods and Saints Celebrate the Lantern Festival (Zhongshensheng qinghe Yuanxiao jie) was in the program of the Lantern Festival, the 15th day of first lunar month (Guben vol. 229). Lantern exhibitions started as early as the ninth, peaked on the 16th, and ended on the 17th, 18th, or the 19th. The clothing of spectators was meant to enhance the atmosphere of the festival: "Eunuch officials and court ladies all wear python robes with lantern patterns on buzī" (Liu R. 1-2, vol. 5). Buzī are two fully embroidered squares, one on the front and one on the back of an official robe.

Render Outstanding Service and Celebrate the Dragon-Boat Festival (Li gongxun qingshang Duanyang) was staged on the fifth day of fifth lunar month to celebrate the Dragon-Boat Festival (Guben vol. 160). "Court ladies and eunuch officials all wear python robes with figures of wudu and mugwort tiger on buzī." Wudu, literally "five poisonous [creatures]," are scorpion, viper, centipede, house lizard, and toad, which were considered harmful to human beings. However, their effects could be neutralized by a mugwort tiger, according to the folk legend. Other court performances during the festival were dragon-boat racing, horse racing, and feats of horsemanship:

His Majesty presented himself in the West Imperial Park to watch Dragon-boat racing, or went to the Hill of Longevity ["Wanshui Shan"] to plant willows [as a ritual], or watched warriors racing horses and galloping and trotting on horseback (Liu R. 3, vol. 5).
On the ninth day of ninth lunar month, **Tao Yuanming** Appreciates Chrysanthemums at the Eastern Fence **(Tao Yuanming dongli shang ju)** was enacted to observe the Double Ninth Festival **(Guben vol. 158)**. Among the audience were:

Court ladies and eunuch officials changed to silk clothes since the 4th day [of the month], with scenes of the Double Yang Festival [i.e. Double Ninth Festival, as nine is considered the maximum of yang numbers in China] and patterns of chrysanthemum flowers on their buzi" (Liu R. 4, vol. 5).

Around December 22, which was in the eleventh lunar month, the court troupe presented the play **Celebrate the Winter Solstice and Enjoy the Banquet of Peace Together** **(Qing dongzhi gongxiang taiping yan)** **(Guben vol. 237)**.

Theatre presentations also played an important part in the grand celebrations for the birthdays of the emperor and the queen-dowager. Many plays were specifically composed, rehearsed, and enacted for such events. Among the 100 extant Ming court plays, seven were "composed and presented by the troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music" for the celebration of the emperor's birthday; and five for the queen-dowager's.

The seven extant zaju plays that were performed for the emperor's birthdays are:

1) **Heavenly Immortals Congratulate the Emperor, Wishing-him a Long Life of Ten-Thousand Years in the Baoguang Hall** **(Baoguang dian tianzhen zhu wanshou)** **(Guben vol. 225)**;
2) Jinmu Presents the Peach of Immortality to Celebrate the Emperor's Birthday (Zhu shengshou Jinmu xian pantao) (Guben vol. 227);

3) Three Saints Descend the Red Stairs to Celebrate the Longevity (Jiang danchi sansheng qing changsheng) (Guben vol. 228);

4) All Foreign Countries Pay Respects on the Emperor's Birthday (Zhu shengshou Wanguo lai chao) (Guben vol. 230);

5) Five Dragons Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday (He wanshou wulong chao sheng) (Guben vol. 235);

6) Immortals Pay Respects to His Majesty, with Responses from Heaven and Earth (Gan Tiandi qunxian chao sheng) (Guben vol. 242);

7) Guangchengzi Celebrates the Endless Longevity (Guangchengzi zhuhe qitian shou) (Guben vol. 240).

The six zaju plays performed for the queen-dowager's birthday are:

1) Heavenly Immortals Celebrate in the Banquet of Longevity (Zhong tianxian qinghe changsheng hui) (Guben vol. 236);

2) Jinmu Congratulates Her Majesty on Her Birthday and Longevity (Qing qianqiu jinmu he yannian) (Guben vol. 239);

3) The Old Man with Yellow-Eyebrows Bestows Happiness and Longevity (Huangmeiweng cifu shang yannian) (Guben vol. 241);

4) Immortals Celebrate and Enjoy the Banquet of the Peaches of Immortality (Zhong qunxian qingshang pantao hui) (Guben vol. 226);

5) Celebrating the Young-forever Festival in the Ziwei Palace (Ziwei gong qinghe changchun jie) (Guben vol. 234).

6) A Group of Immortals Celebrate Longevity and Peace (He shengping qunxian zhushou) (Guben vol. 238);
All these plays can be found in *Mowang quan chaojiao gujin zaju* (Ancient and modern zaju plays copied and collated in the Mowang House), discovered in 1938.

In the outer-court, the occasions calling for theatre performances were various banquets and certain ceremonies. At the beginning of the Ming, theatrical performances were rarely presented during official banquets, when Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang ordered the dynastic music to be played for such events (Zhang T. 648, vol. 61). But soon after his death, Emperor Zhu Di (reigned 1403-1424) replaced the orthodox music with *zaju* theatre music and suitable songs, sometimes dances as well, for court banquets (*xiaoyan*) and the imperial grand banquets (*xiangyan*), as mentioned in Chapter 2. Zhu Di's practice was kept by all Ming emperors after him (Zhang T. 670-680, vol. 63).

The emperor might offer his troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music for specific outer-court performances as well. One such occasion was the state banquet in honor of foreign diplomats, when high civil and military officials were also invited. The productions were meant to impress the foreigners, as a part of the political strategy of "conquering the faraway people by gentle means" which had been practiced in several previous dynasties, such as the Han, Tang, and Song (Shen D. 272, vol. 10).
The troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music also served the grand court banquet arranged to honor jinshi, the successful candidates in the highest Imperial Examinations. Such a grand banquet was a most special honor for those successful literati and was not offered to anyone else (Shen D. 272, vol. 10).

Hanlin, the scholar-officials of the Imperial Academy, and the prime minister could enjoy the honor of being officially served by the emperor's troupe. A hanlin official would be served when he reported for duty, while the prime minister would be served when he successfully finished a term in office (Shen D. 272, vol. 10).

Finally, theatre presentations were extended to sacred ceremonies, and as such sometimes caused an uproar. Emperor Zhu Youcheng (reigned 1488-1505) was to perform a ceremonial tilling of the soil during the first year of his reign, while "the Imperial Academy of Music presented a zaju theatre performance." Ma Wensheng, the head of the Supervisory Committee ("Ducha Yuan"), declaring that the ceremony was "to make the new emperor aware of the hardship of farming," shouted for the actors to go away (Zhang T. 651, vol. 61).

A cause for controversy in the Ming court was the inescapable fact that the ritual performances were presented by members from the Imperial Academy of Music, social
outcasts by law, some of whom made a living in part by offering sexual services. Hu Rui, a Supervisory Deputy ("Jishizhong"), condemned the practice that shaoyue, or dynastic hymns, were played by musicians from the Imperial Academy of Music during "the extremely grand" court audience rituals. Other officials, observing from the aesthetic perspective, maintained that all too often those musicians did not know how to play shaoyue correctly (Zhang T. 651, vol. 61).

The troupe of the eunuch Department of Bells and Drums was responsible for productions of educational theatre and comic theatre, and also for the acting part of water-puppet plays.25 Those shows varied greatly in quality and style, from ritualistic performances where attendance was required, to spectacular seasonal attractions.

Educational theatre was regularly enacted at court. Enforced by the earlier emperors' instructions and by tradition, some of those performances were close to being rituals, when an emperor's attendance was necessary. For instance, Rice Threshing Plays (Dadao zhi xi) were always performed after the fall harvest. "The emperor presented

25 The details of such productions are found in Chapter 8.
himself on Millstone Terrace (Xuanmo Tai), Idle-Not Hall (Wuyi Dian), and other places [in order to watch the presentation]." In *Rice Threshing Plays*, the life of peasants was represented, which was considered essential to an emperor's range of knowledge:

The royal forefathers therefore designed such programs, which would enable [their offspring] to gain information and ideas, to become bright and clever, to conform to the Heaven, and to care for the suffering of people (Liu R. 12, vol. 2).

Sometime between 1584 to 1585, Idle-Not Hall was burned down. Court officials, headed by Shen Shixing, then the prime minister (Zhang T. 1380, vol. 110), immediately suggested the reconstruction of the Hall to the emperor:

The royal forefathers built this hall in order to inform their offspring about the hardships of farming. They were careful and farsighted. [Thus] this building is different from other structures of recreation. It should be rebuilt in a timely manner.

"The emperor fully agreed with them." And the "huge and magnificent" hall was soon rebuilt and "well maintained as new" for many years to come (Shen D. 49, vol. 2).

Townspeople's life was also represented, but in "zaju-like story dramatizations." Humorous performances were often presented, such as in *The Brocade Play* (Guojin zhi xi). Such performances, probably not presented on a regular basis, were also considered to have educational value (Liu R. 12, vol. 2).

Water-puppet plays, the most spectacular performances of the Ming court, were attractions the emperor enjoyed
regardless of season. They were presented in the cold weather of the new-year festival, as well as in "the hot days of summer." The emperor, sitting to the north of the stage of a water-pool, watched the shows produced under the cooperation of five of his eunuch offices (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

In the Ming court, performance circumstance almost always determined scale, style, and skill of a production. Under certain conditions, a specific genre of theatre and a specific kind of play would be presented. Those theatre genres and their stage productions indeed differed greatly from one another, as described in the two following chapters.
CHAPTER 7

ZAJU PRODUCTIONS

The repertoire of Ming court troupes included classical zaju plays, "educational" ritual plays, comic serial plays, and water-puppet plays. In this chapter, only some aspects of zaju productions will be considered, while all other genres of the court theatre will be studied in the next chapter. Certain aspects of the zaju performance, such as costumes, props, and animal displays, will be discussed in Chapters 9, 10, and 11, respectively.

Zaju, a northern theatre genre flourishing since the preceding Yuan dynasty, was presented as a popular entertainment in early Ming courts, but was preserved as a tradition in later Ming courts. Judging by neiben (literally, inner-[court] copies) found in extant Yuan and Ming plays, court zaju productions were based on three sources of scripts:

1) Plays written by literati playwrights;
2) Plays composed by members of court troupes; and
3) Literati plays reworked by members of court troupes.

For example, Ma Danyang Three Times Persuades Crazy Ren to Accept Taoism (Ma Danyang san du Ren Fengzi), found
in a collection of Ming court plays, was written by Ma Zhiyuan, a well known Yuan dramatist (Guben vol. 2). *Five Dragons Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday*, signed "Composed and performed by the Imperial Academy of Music of this dynasty [of Ming]," was a play composed by member(s) of the court troupe (Guben: vol. 235). *Zhong qunxian gingshang pantao hui* (Guben: vol. 226), also signed "Imperial Academy of Music," actually was a reworking of *Qunxian qingshou pantao hui* (Guben: vol. 113), a play originally written by Imperial Prince Zhu Youtun (1379-1439), a dramatist of the early Ming.

The theatre practitioners from the Imperial Academy of Music had to write or rewrite plays to satisfy the demands of the Ming court. For example, frequently *zaju* plays were composed as devices for presenting certain items to the emperor. According to a Ming account:

Whenever it comes to the time for presenting flowers and items in season [to the emperor], the Imperial Academy of Music will compose four acts of dramatic verses and send them to official historians for proofreading and correcting. Then [the actors and actresses] present their [dramatic] verses and [performing] arts in front of His Majesty. Several days after, another play is enacted to present [other items]. And the old play will never be performed again (Song M. 218).

It was probably more artistic for an emperor to accept gifts during a theatre presentation than in a formal court audience. But more than likely the real purpose behind this practice was the emperor's wish to receive gifts from
"celestial characters" so that he might associate symbolically with immortals and therefore gain religious merit from the event. This situation becomes quite obvious in the way that these gifts-props are presented in the productions, which will be discussed in Chapter 10.

Often referred to as "inner-court service plays" ("neiting gongfeng ju") (Wang Jilie 52-56), the zaju scripts composed by members of the Imperial Academy of Music, who had very limited formal education, are quite different from the original versions of literati plays. And the productions based on "court service plays" are quite different from those presented by private or public theatre troupes. Some of the noteworthy features of these "service plays" can be found in their subject matter, scale of production, and props for martial arts.

1) Subject Matter

An obvious concentration of intention is evident in subjects chosen for "inner-court service plays." The great majority of court scripts are for martial plays, religious plays, and birthday plays.

Qian Zun (1629-1701), a well-known collector of books, divided 115 Ming scripts by anonymous authors into seven categories according to their plots:
(1) Historic stories: 56;
(2) Miscellaneous stories: 15;
(3) Buddhist stories: 2;
(4) Taoist stories 17;
(5) Stories drawn from The Water Margin: 6;
(6) Ming dynasty story 1; and
(7) Stories made up by the Imperial Academy of Music: 18 (Guben 1-11).

Judged by the scripts and their chuanguan, the costume lists, probably all of the plays, excluding those 15 in category 2, were plays originally composed and performed in the Ming court.

The historic plays (Category 1) cover a period of about 2000 years in China's history, namely:

- Spring and Autumn Era (770-476 B.C.) and Warring States Era (475-221 B.C.) 6 plays;
- West Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.) 5 plays;
- East Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.) 6 plays;
- Three Kingdoms Era (220-280 A.D.) 13 plays;
- Six Dynasties Era (222-589) 1 play;
- Tang Dynasty (618-907) 12 plays;
- Five Dynasties Era (907-960) 3 plays;
- Song Dynasty (960-1279) 10 plays.

42 out of the 56 historic plays are martial plays, as are all six of The Water Margin plays (Category 5), and the one play called "the Ming dynasty story" (Category 6). Thus, a total of 49 out of the 100 court plays, are martial plays.
Seventeen plays (Category 3) are related to Taoism, and two plays (Category 4), to Buddhism. Thus, a total of 19% of court plays are religious plays.

All the plays of "made-up plots" (Category 7) are ceremonial. Of those 18 plays, four are written for seasonal festivals, and 14 for birthday celebrations. Thus 14% of the 100 court plays are birthday plays.

Altogether 82% of the known court plays concentrate on only three subjects. This fact inevitably affects —directly or indirectly— the costumes, props, staging, and other aspects of the Ming court theatre.

2) Production Scales

In a zaju performance, the Ming court frequently employed a huge crew of on-stage actors, the number of which often ranged from dozens to about a hundred, compared to the usual number of performers (generally less than 10) in a production offered by any theatre troupe during the Yuan dynasty, or by any private or commercial troupe during the Ming dynasty. However, one hundred actors were only a small part in the organization of the court theatre. Anytime after the mid Ming period, several thousand performers were available in the court, as is discussed in Chapter 4.
In Act Three of *Zhang Yude Breaks Through Xinlin Village* (*Zhang Yude dapo Xinlin Zhuang*), three different military forces fight on stage. First a rebellious group comes on: "Enter Zhang Jiao leading Zhang Biao, Zhang Bao, and underlings." The number of underlings is not specified, but probably would have been no less than four, because in the traditional Chinese theatre, the number of soldiers (or "underlings") usually is not less than that of their leading generals, and never counted in odd numbers. In this case, three generals with four soldiers make seven on-stage characters.

Second, an independent force appears on the stage: "Enter Zhengmo [the hero of the play, i.e., Zhang Fei, also known as Zhang Yude], Liu [Bei], Guan [Yu], Jian Yong, Mi Zhu, and Mi Fang, riding on horseback and leading soldiers [on foot]." Six generals and at least six soldiers make twelve or more on-stage characters.

Third, a government force shows up: "Huangfu Song and his many generals, riding on horseback, lead soldiers to come on the stage. They besiege [the rebels] from four sides." To besiege the rebels from four sides, Huangfu Song and "his many generals" must be four or more. Suppose four generals and four soldiers were in this group, then eight characters appeared on stage. Also in the scene is Cao Cao, and at least two longtao, or utility men, which makes three more on-stage actors (*Guben* vol. 157).
Altogether the on-stage actors number at least 30; but can be 42, if each general leads two soldiers; or more than 42, if Huangfu Song leads more than three generals, or if a general leads more than two soldiers.

In *Song Gongming Sets Up the Formation of Nine Constellations and Eight Diagrams* (*Song Gongming bai jiugong bagua zhen*), 23 characters appear on the stage in the prelude (*xiezi*) alone, and 22 in Act Two. Most of these characters are generals. With their soldiers and longtao, each of these two scenes would have 40-50, if not more, on-stage characters (*Guben* vol. 222).

In Act Two of *Yang Liulang Deploys Troops to Break Through the Heavenly Formation* (*Yang Liulang diaobing po Tianzhen*), 24 generals come on stage. And the "three groups of Han Chinese soldiers" and "two groups of barbarian soldiers" would add the total number of on-stage actors to 50 or more (*Guben* vol. 176).

In Act Four of *All Foreign Countries Pay Respects on the Emperor's Birthday* (*Zhu shengshou wanguo laichao*), 75 characters are listed in the stage instructions. With the men playing necessary longtao parts in the grand diplomat scene, the number of on-stage performers could well exceed 100 (*Guben* vol. 230).

While all these numbers are calculated according to the minimums requested by the scripts, the actual number of performers in the grand scenes could be much greater.
No direct records about such numbers in zaju productions have yet been found. But a contemporary record on southern theatre productions suggests the possibility of numbers in thousands:

Southern theatre ["nan jiugong," literally, the nine modes of southern music] is also presented in the inner-court. In the battle scenes, two armies, with several thousands of flags and weapons, fight against each other. Also [in the court troupe] are several thousands of actresses, headed by eunuchs assigned for the purpose (Song M. 218).

3) Combat Props

About half (49%, to be more precise) of the extant Ming court plays are martial plays, which strongly suggests their popularity among the members of the imperial house. As a result of this, a great variety of combat props, or "weaponry," was exhibited on the court stage.

The sword (jian) is the weapon most frequently seen. It appears in all martial plays, as well as in all the martial scenes in civil plays, because the vast majority of military personnel carry swords. Many of them, although they may actually use other weapons, carry swords under their belts as a part of their costume. As a matter of fact, swords are always listed in the costume lists (chuanguan) of the court troupe.

Quite a few different weapons are considered dao in China, all of which have curved or concave blades. The
common dao was a curved-edge weapon with a leather sheath, normally carried in a barbarian soldier's belt, such as is seen in Yue Fei The Royal Senior General of the Song Dynasty (Guben vol. 178) and Yang Liulang Deploys Troops to Break Up the Heaven Formation (Guben vol. 176).

Fei-dao, literally "flying-knife," a dart-like weapon, is used in surprise attack. Gai Suwem uses it in the wedge (xiezi) of The Genius Lives in Seclusion at the Dragon-Gate (Longmen yinxiu) (Guben vol. 161).

Sanjian-liangren-dao, "a knife of three points and two edges," is vividly described by its name as a kind of halberd. The weapon, required in Act Three of Twenty-Eight Generals Gather at Yuntai Terrace (Guben vol. 140), is rarely seen in Ming drama.

Shuang-yanling-dao, literally "a pair of knives in the shape of a goose-feather," are carried in Deng Yu's belt in Act Three of Twenty-Eight Generals Gather at Yuntai Terrace (Guben vol. 140).

Yue Fei, a national hero of the Song dynasty, defeated a cavalry unit led by Wushu of the Jin dynasty. In that decisive battle, Yue Fei ordered his infantrymen to cut off the feet of the enemy's horses with specialized dao (Tuotuo 11,389, Book 17). The important weapon employed in the battle was mazha-dao, or "grass-hopper knife," which can be found in Act Three of Yue Fei The Royal Senior General of the Song Dynasty (Guben vol. 178).
Guan Yu (also known as Guan Yunchang), the well-known hero of the Three Kingdom era (220-265 A.D.), carried a "black-dragon chopper," or qinglong-dao with a long shaft. It appears in all Ming court plays in which Guan Yu appears, such as Guan Yunchang Cuts Off Four Bandits' Heads with His Chopper (Guan Yunchang dandao pi sikou) (Guben vol. 152) and The Duke of Shouting Wants to Kill Guan Ping in a Great Rage (Shouting Hou nuzhan Guan Ping) (Guben vol. 153).

The spear (qiang or chang-qiang) was a common weapon in ancient China, as well as on the Ming court stage. It appears as Li Yanbiao's weapon in Wang Aihu Turns Dongping Prefecture Upside-Down (Wang Aihu danao Dongpingfu) (Guben vol. 221), and as Yang Jing's weapon in The Senior Eighth Prince Opens the Imperial Edict to Save the Loyalists (Ba Dawang kaizhao jiu zhongchen) (Guben vol. 175), among many other plays.

The javelin (qiang or biao-qiang) was a weapon less commonly seen. One example is found in Act Three of Yao Qi of the Han Dynasty Fiercely Fights Against Pi Tong (Han Yao Qi dazhan Pi Tong) (Guben vol. 141).

Two kinds of staffs are employed in "inner-court service plays." Huyan Zan uses a bamboo-like staff (zhujie-bian) in Act One of The Senior Eighth Prince Opens the Imperial Edict to Save the Loyalists (Guben vol. 175). And Guan Yu uses a steel staff (gang-bian) in Act Three.
of *Guan Yunchang Totally Defeats Chiyou* (*Guan Yunchang dapo Chiyou*) (Guben vol. 154).

Le Bu is a well-known general of the Three Kingdom era. His favorite weapon is a halberd (*ji*), which is seen in the battle scenes of *Zhang Yude Three times Leaves Xiaopei* (*Zhang Yude sanchu Xiaopei*) (Guben vol. 156) and *Zhang Yude Fights Le Bu on His Own* (Guben vol. 150). Pi Tong, a general of the Han dynasty, and his halberd, are seen in Act Three of *Kou Ziyu Captures the Enemy General Within the Allotted Time* (*Kou Ziyu dingshi zhuo jiang*) (Guben vol. 143).

Two kinds of axes are used in ancient battles, as well as on the Ming court stage. One of them is a short-handled axe carried by infantrymen and referred to simply as *fu*, an axe. The other, with a longer shaft, carried by cavalrymen, is called *zhan-fu*, or a battle-axe. These weapons are often reserved for oversized characters with fierce demeanors. Li Kui carries a pair of short-handled axes in Act One of the *Wang Aihu Turns Dongping Prefecture Upside-Down* (Guben vol. 221). Cheng Yaojin carries a pair of short-handled copper-inlaid axes in Act Three of *Wei Zheng Falsifies the Imperial Edict and the Heroes Meet* (*Wei Zheng gai zhao fengyun hui*) (Guben: vol. 164). Chiyou carries a battle axe in Act Three of *Guan Yunchang Totally Defeats Chiyou* (Guben vol. 154).
The Chinese weapons called *jian* and *bang* are similar to the Medieval European mace. However, *jian* is a mace with a flanged metal head; while *bang*, with a spiked metal head, is usually referred to as "the wolf-tooth mace" (*langya-bang*). Ma Wu and Tiao Qi, respectively, use flanged maces in Acts Three of *Yao Qi of the Han Dynasty Fiercely Fights Against Pi Tong* (Guben vol. 141) and *Kou Ziyu Captures the Enemy General Within the Allotted Time* (Guben vol. 143). Chiyou uses a wolf-tooth mace in Act Three of *Guan Yunchang Totally Defeats Chiyou* (Guben vol. 154).

*Fei-guo*, or "the flying-dart," is one of the several weapons used in surprise attacks. In Act Two of *Twenty-Eight Generals Gather at Yuntai Terrace*, Ma Yuan employs a flying-dart to break the enemy general's magic board which controls wild beasts (Guben vol. 140). And in Act Two of *Five Generals Named Ma Defeat Cao Cao at Yangping Pass*, Ma Chao employs a flying-dart (Guben vol. 147).

The curved hook (*nao-gou*), with a long-shaft, is a weapon designed to capture enemies alive. Han Chinese soldiers capture two enemy generals by using curved hooks in Act Two of *Han the Supreme Commander secretly Crosses on the Chencang Ferry* (Han Yuanshuai an du Chencang) (Guben vol. 137).

As stage properties, the bow (*gong*) and arrow (*jian*, also with the fourth tone) are sometimes carried under
warriors' belts, but rarely are used in battle scenes. Two examples of the use of bows and arrows can be found in Acts Two of *Di Qing Recovers Clothing Carts* (Di Qing fuduo yiao che) (Guben: vol. 77) and *Molizhi Throws Darts to Fight Against Enemy's Arrows* (Molizhi fei dao dui jian) (Guben vol. 78). However, in the latter case, some moments of action seem to be replaced by narration.

The fire gourd (*huo-hulu*), containing saltpeter and powder, was used as a weapon against enemy personnel and installations in ancient China. *Di Yun* carries a fire calabash in Act Three of *Twenty-Eight Generals Gather at Yuntai Terrace* (Guben vol. 140).

*Zaju* is by far the best documented genre of the Ming court theatre. *Zaju* flourished throughout the Yuan dynasty and was considered a classical genre by many during the Ming era. The efforts devoted to the documentation of *zaju* were probably associated with the respect Ming literati often paid to the classics. However, *zaju*, as a stage art, gradually lost its audience. By the late Ming, evidently *zaju* plays were still enacted on court stage, but probably more as a tradition than as an attraction.
Other than zaju plays enacted by troupes of the Imperial Academy of Music, a variety of productions, which included educational plays, comic plays, and water-puppet plays, were presented by troupes of the eunuch Department of Bells and Drums. Or, to be more precise, the *Rice Threshing Plays* and the water-puppet productions were staged with the cooperation of several eunuch offices.

1) Educational Plays

In this study, the plays termed "educational" are those primarily composed and enacted for the purpose of providing Ming emperors with knowledge about the outside world without requiring them physically to leave the palace. According to Liu Ruoyu, a eunuch official who served the Ming inner-court during the reigns of four emperors:

The founding fathers [of the Ming dynasty] reasoned that their royal children and grandchildren would be born in the palace and brought up by nurses, [and thus know little about the outside world]. Therefore they designed such [theatre] programs (12, vol. 2).
Because of these practical reasons, the lives of commoners are represented rather close-to-life in educational plays, which belong to two categories: the lives of peasants, represented in the Rice Threshing Plays, and those of townsmen, in "zaju-like story [dramatizations]" (Liu R. 12, vol. 2).

In the Rice Threshing Plays, "the appropriate props were prepared and provided by the eunuch Department of Construction and other [eunuch] departments," but the acting was carried out by people from the Department of Bells and Drums. According to Liu Ruoyu:

[Actors from] the Department of Bells and Drums played the parts of farmers, [their] meal-delivering wives, agricultural administrators ("tianjun"), and other government officials. The plots included collecting rents, paying taxes, lawsuits, and other events (12, vol. 2).

As mentioned above, because the purpose for the Rice Threshing Plays was "the forefathers' kindness in making [their descendants] aware of the hardships of farming" (Liu R.: 12, vol. 2), the performance of the plays was rather a serious event. Even the performance space was considered somewhat sacred in the eyes of the emperor and his courtiers.²⁶

²⁶ See Chapter 6 for details.
The "zaju-like story [dramatizations]" have more varieties in characters and plots than do Rice Threshing Plays:

In zaju-like story [dramatizations], each story is introduced by a pair of leading flags, accompanied by the percussion of gongs and drums. All kinds of frauds in the world are enacted on the stage. Also presented are dull women and awkward men in boudoirs, vulgar merchants and low artisans in marketplaces, and cunning and wily legal pettifoggers in lawsuits.

These shows seem to have been more lighthearted than the Rice Threshing Plays, because miscellaneous performances, such as "vaudevilles, acrobatics and their sort were all presented before the emperor" during such offerings (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

2) Comic Plays

Presentations of comic nature were traditional in court theatre. With jokes, mimes, and short sketches, clowns provided comic relief for monarchs. In the Ming court, two kinds of productions were comic-oriented: Passing Brocade Play (Guojin zhi xi) and yuanben (literally, scripts from [entertainment] quarters).

27 The concept of yuanben changed with times and circumstances. It meant short plays of a northern theatre genre when it was originated in the Jin dynasty (1115-1234). It often meant Yuan zaju plays during the Ming (Kezuo zuiyu, qtd. in Jiao X.: 90, vol. 1), but comic sketches in the Ming court.
Passing Brocade Play is a series, with about 100 episodes. "Both elegant and vulgar [contents] are presented," while "the rich and gaudy [style] is mixed with the simple and quiet [style]." The plays are also of smaller scale "with some ten characters in each of its scenes," compared to productions with often 20-50, and sometimes up to 100 or more, on-stage characters in a scene, that were presented by the Imperial Academy of Music. The key to a successful performance of Passing Brocade Play was "a funny ending, such as a joke or something of that kind" (Liu R. 13, vol. 2; Shen D. 798, "Addendum" vol. 1).

The so-called yuanben plays are actually comic sketches. Throughout China's history, the most brilliant comedians often tried to convey "sensitive" information or to make political suggestions to emperors through their arts of allegory and satire in comic sketches (Jiao X. 99-102, vol. 1).

A Chou, a eunuch comedian, continued the tradition of "smart remonstrations" with the emperor when he served Zhu Jianshen (reigned 1465-1487). In order to inform the emperor that his favorite head eunuch might have gained too much power from him, A Chou put on a telling performance:

28 See Chapter 10 for details.
[Head eunuch] Wang Zhi, having been in his post for a long time, had power over both domestic and foreign affairs. People all over the country were afraid of him. A Chou, a very humorous eunuch official, often played yuanben for His Majesty. He very much kept the practice of smart remonstrations [as a comedian with the emperor]. One day, Chou played a drunkard who created a disturbance. A man [actor], whom A Chou assigned to the role, said that a certain government official was coming. [The drunkard] was as drunk, and as verbally abusing, as before. Then the man informed [the drunkard] that the emperor was coming. [The drunkard] was as crazy as before. Then the man said: "Eunuch Wang is coming!" The drunkard was so scared that he immediately became quiet. Another man said to him: "You were not afraid of even the emperor. But you were afraid of Eunuch Wang. Why?" Answer: "I know [the power of] Eunuch Wang, but not that of the emperor" (Ming shi jishi benmo, qtd. in Jiao X. 102, vol. 1).

A Chou also exposed the corruption of an aristocrat in another performance:

Zhu Yong, the Duke of Baoguo, used many military men to build his private mansion without permission. One day, Chou arranged two men [actors] in front of His Majesty. One man recited a [well known] poem as: "Six thousand soldiers fled in the Chu songs..." The other man hit him [on the head]: "Why do you say six thousand instead of eight thousand?" The first one answered: "Because two thousand [soldiers] are building a mansion for the Duke of Baoguo." His Majesty doubted [this information] and secretly ordered an investigation. It turned out to be true. The Duke of Baoguo was scared. He stopped the project the same day [of the investigation] (Dugong tanzuan, qtd. in Wang A. 129).

Not all court comedians took such a moral stand in their shows. Some of them, such as Wang Jinchao, just praised the supposed achievements of the court establishment. According to Liu Ruoyu:

Since the 6th year of Tianqi (1626), Wang Jinchao, nicknamed Tumor Wang, who was the secretary of the Department of Bells and Drums, cracked jokes and played comic sketches for the emperor. In his comic shows,
Wang undisguisedly praised how much the [eunuch] Department of Fuels ["Xixin Si"] cared about merchants; how the Inner-Court Storehouses ["Neifu Ku"] were bursting with rice; how the East Mansion ["Dong Chang," the secret police] discovered evil deeds; and how the Imperial Store ["Baohe Dian"] made the country rich and business flourishing, and how its profit helped to pay for palace construction and military expenses.

Such praises sharply contradicted the common judgment of his contemporaries (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

Wang Jinchao also praised whoever was in power. By that time, Wei Zhongxian, a head eunuch, held great power over both court and government. Thus, this comedian praised "how good Grandpa Wei is," or "how great Eunuch Wei is." He was actually encouraged to do so: "That Evil Xian [Wei Zhongxian] took [the praise] as a matter of fact. And the later emperor [Zhu Youjiao] was also happy about [such praises]" (Liu R. 13, vol. 2). Soon after the new emperor succeeded to the throne, Wei Zhongxian committed suicide when he was placed under investigation and prosecution (Zhang T. 3437, vol. 305).

Liu Ruoyu believed that the comedians' performances were greatly influenced by the political environments of their times. A power of counter-balance was effective in A Chou's time:

During the Xianzong's [also known as Zhu Jianshen] reign when Wang Zhi exceeded his power, Huai'en and his like still took posts close to the emperor. Therefore A Chou dared to practice smart remonstrations with the emperor (13, vol. 2).
But that power of counter-balance was gone in Wang Jinchao's days:

Now, Wang Tiqian [another head-eunuch] is crafty, soft, concubine-like, and obsequious. Tumor Wang, being nobody but an actor and base servant [in the court], naturally adapts himself to the circumstances. How sad it is (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

3) Water-Puppet Plays

In the Ming inner-court, the most spectacular theatre performances probably were water-puppet plays. Because of the unique features of this genre, the cooperation of five eunuch departments was required, as is mentioned in Section 4 of this Chapter. Such features include, but are not limited to: the puppets, the stage, the curtain, the setting, the orchestra, and the dialogue.

(1) The Puppets

The wooden footless puppets were carved, painted, and connected to a length of bamboo, according to Liu Ruoyu, who witnessed this theatre art:

The [puppet] figures are carved out of lightweight wood, and include the kings of foreign countries in the four directions, barbarian chiefs, immortals, saints, generals, and soldiers. The figures are some two feet tall, both males and females. [Puppets] have only arms and upper bodies, but no legs and feet. They are painted like living [persons] with colorful paints. Each figure has a flat bottom with a jumao [control mortise] in it. The control mortise is connected to a piece of bamboo which is about three feet in length (13, vol. 2).
(2) The Stage

The stage for the water-puppet theatre was a leak-proof wooden pool. It was raised above the ground and supported on benches:

A rectangular wooden pool is employed. It is more than ten feet in length [stage length], ten feet in width [stage depth], and about one foot deep. It is inlaid with tin to make it leak-proof. Water is poured into the pool to seven tenths of its capacity. It was lifted up and placed on benches (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

(3) The Screen

A gauze screen functioned as the backdrop, but not as the front curtain of a conventional modern theatre. It separated the puppeteers from the puppets on a water stage: "The officials [puppeteers] from the Department of Bells and Drums are separated to the south by a gauze screen."

The screen also separated the puppeteers from the spectators: "His Majesty takes the throne and faces the south," thus the emperor was to the north of the screen; while "those officials of the Department of Bells and Drums position themselves to the south of the screen" (Liu R. 13, vol. 2). In order for the puppeteers to see the movement of the puppets, the gauze screen probably was semitransparent.
(4) The Setting

The setting for a water-puppet production was designed to achieve life-like effects. To accompany the wooden figures, live creatures were introduced:

In the water, live fish, shrimps, crabs, snails, frogs, loaches, and eels are employed. On the surface, [real] duckweeds, algae, and their kind are floating (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

(5) The Movements

A water puppet was moved by means of a length of bamboo, which "was run and turned under the screen" by the puppeteers to simulate dramatic actions:

The officials of the Department of Bells and Drums [puppeteers]...use bamboo boards to hold up the characters on the water surface in the order [of the plot]. [The puppets] are wandering, fighting, and playing around. [The movements] are accompanied by crescendi of music and drumbeats (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

Because of the contemporary level of skills in the manufacture of puppets, and the fact that each puppet was equipped with a controlling mortise, such a water puppet probably had one or more movable parts. But it is still not clear what parts of a water puppet might be moved, or how they were moved.

(6) The Talking

One of the interesting features about the water puppet theatre was that one person did all the talking—for everybody involved. He talked for the announcer, the characters, the critics, and even for the spectators:
Another person, holding a gong, stands aside. He announces the title of the plays, introduces the puppet [characters], explains [the plots], praises [the virtues], and cheers for [the performance] (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).

(7) the Repertoire

The repertoire of the water-puppet theatre includes a variety of plays, all of which seem to be full of actions which suggest the performance style of the theatre. Some of the plays are: The Duke of Ying Captures the Chief of Li Three Times (Yingguo Gong san shou Li Wang), Kongming Captures and Releases His Enemy Seven Times (Kongming qi qin qi zong), Eunuch Sanbao Goes to the Western Ocean (Sanbao Taijian xia xiyang), Eight Immortals Cross the Sea (Baxian guo hai), and The Monkey King Turns the Dragon Palace Upside-Down (Sunxingzhe da'nao longgong) (Liu R. 13, vol. 2).
A hundred chuanguan (literally, the key to costume), lists of costumes and some hand-props, are found in extant scripts of Ming court plays. These first-hand written records are probably the most valuable source of information about costuming in Ming court theatre. Following a single format, chuanguan are identical in their composition. In this chapter, the chuanguan for Zhang Yude on His Own Fights Lü Bu (Zhang Yude dan zhan Lü Bu) will be used to illustrate three major features of these costume lists.

First, in chuanguan, characters are listed according to each act in which they play a part, and in the order of their appearance on stage. In Act One of this play, for instance, Yuan Shao, the Prince of Ji, and his soldiers are the first to come on stage. Thus they were listed first in the chuanguan, although they have relatively little dramatic significance in the play.

Second, the costumes and certain hand-props are listed under the name of each character. When a character re-appears on stage, only the change(s), if any, in his costume and props is mentioned in the chuanguan. And
usually "tongqian" (literally, "as before") is written to indicate that the character is dressed and equipped as he is in the previous act. For example, Zhang Fei (also known as Zhang Yude), the zhengmo (primary male role), appears in all four acts. His nine pieces of costume and one prop are listed only under Act One in chuanguan. Under Act Two, only the words "as before" are written; under Act Three, "as before" and "riding a horse"; and under Act Four, "as before." Thus Zhang Fei has the same costume in all four acts, but uses one more prop, which represents a horse, in Acts Three and Four. But when a character is in disguise, such as Guanyin in Buddha Guanyin and Her Fish-Basket (Guanyin Pusa yulan ji) (Guben: vol. 200); or a character changes his career, such as Xu Xun the Taoist Priest and His Household Become Immortals (Xu Zhenren bazhai feisheng), they will then change their costume as much as is required by the plots (Guben: vol. 201).

Third, characters who wear the same costume and use the same props are listed together, and their costumes and props are named only once thereafter. In Act One of the play, ten characters—Han Sheng, Kong Rong, Wang Kuang, Zhao Zhuang, Pao Xin, Zhang Xiu, Qiao Mei, Wu Shen, Tian Ke, and Liu Yu—all have the identical costume and props. So, following their names, eight pieces of costume and one prop are listed, which mean that each one of them needs a set of all these nine items.
The costumes worn in the Ming court theatre can be divided into categories, which are determined by the characters' careers and nationalities. Some of the costumes most frequently seen are those for military personnel, civil officials, Taoist priests, and exotic foreigners. Variations are found in each of the categories.

1) Uniforms for Military Personnel

Martial plays were very popular in the Ming court. Hundreds of military costumes were recorded in chuanquan. Actors appearing in these costumes are characters of generals and soldiers.

The costumes for generals are often similar. 28 generals, all of whom were historical, are presented in the play named for them: Twenty-Eight Generals Gather at Yuntai Terrace (Yuntai men ju ershiba jiang). Wu Han, one among the 28, comes on stage in this spectacular costume and prop:


After him, five groups of generals appear on stage in the same costume:
Group 1, with two: Feng Yi and Zhu Hu;
Group 2, with six: Ji Zun, Jing Dan, Gai Yan, Jian Tan, Geng Chun, and Zang Gong;
Group 3, with five: Liu Long, Ma Cheng, Wang Liang, Chen Jun, and Fu Jun;
Group 4, with four: Wang Ba, Ren Guang, Li Zhong, and Wan Xiu;
Group 5, with one: Liu Zhi (Guben 11-12, vol. 140).

Altogether, 19 of the 28 generals dress in exactly the same items with costume.

Three of the 28 generals wear essentially the same costume, although each of the three has different colors on two items. Jia Fu's knee-long dress with full back, and his robe, are jade green. Geng Yan's robe is red, but his whiskers are yellow. And Pi Tong's robe and whiskers are both red.

The costume of one of the generals, Du Mao, uses the tiger as its motif: a tiger [shaped] helmet ("hu kenao kui"), tiger fur robe ("hup! pao"), and tiger [decorated] belt-head ("suo hu kou"). Otherwise his costume is the same as that of the others.

For two of the generals, Deng Yu and Ma Yuan, their costumes are marked "tongqian," indicating that they first appear in the previous act, and can be found in the list for that. In the chuanguan for Act Three, each of these two characters wears three items different from those of the majority: Deng Yu has a loose-hair helmet with forehead-protector ("safa kui mo'e"), a python gown with
full back, and a pair of goose-wing-shaped "choppers"\(^{29}\) ("shuang yanling dao"). And Ma Yuan has a python gown with full back, darts ("feiguo"), and a prop symbolizing him "riding a horse."

Each of the last three generals has several items in his costume list that are different from those of the majority. Cen Peng has two: a python gown with full back, and a spear. Pi Tong has three: a python gown with full back, a red robe, and red whiskers. And Ma Wu has four: a lion [shaped] helmet ("shi kenao kui"), a python gown with full back, red whiskers, and a "summary slip" ("jian").\(^{30}\)

Soldiers dress almost "uniformly," in the true sense. Unlike a general who wears costume and props made up about ten pieces, a soldier appears in only five pieces or so. In all four acts of Tian Nangju Attacks Jin to Help Qi (Tian Nangju fa Jin xing Qi), a soldier dresses in a bowl-shaped red helmet ("hong wanzi kui"), riveted armor over dark-blue cloth ("qing bu dingr jia"), an upper-arm

\(^{29}\) The shape of a Chinese chopper is similar to that of a Mid-East scimitar.

\(^{30}\) A summary slip is a device, often made of ivory or jade, on which a courtier could write notes about what he plans to say during an audience with the emperor.
[armor] patch ("dabo"), a belt ("dai"), and a sword with cord hanger ("dai jian").

2) Apparel for Civil Officials

Civil officials wear similar apparel in the Ming court theatre. In Act Four of *Jinmu Congratulates Her Majesty's Birthday and Longevity*, three court officials, Chen Ping, Zhou Bo, and the court speaker, all dress in soft hats with cross-flaps ("tur jiao putou"), round-collar robes with *buzi* ("buzi yuanling"), belts, and three-strand whiskers ("san zi ran") (*Guben*: 7-8, vol. 239). Both the prefect in Act Two of *Immortals Pay Respects to His Majesty with the Response from Heaven and Earth* (*Guben* 11, vol. 242), and the county magistrate in Act One of *Zhong Kui Fights Five Demons in the Celebration of the Bumper Harvest* (*Guben* 12, vol. 232), wear the same civil clothing except for the hats. They wear soft hats with open-flaps ("yi zi jin"), instead of with cross-flaps.

Judged by *chuanguan* and their corresponding scripts, little concern was paid to historic authenticity for costumes, civil and military alike, being employed for the Ming court stage. In *Jinmu Presents Peaches of Immortality to Celebrate the Emperor's Birthday* (*Guben* 9, vol. 227), Dongfang Shuo, an official of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), dresses in the same costume as did
officials of the Ming dynasty. Buzi, the embroidered decoration on the front and back of an official robe, with patterns to identify the official's level in the government, did not come into existence until the Ming dynasty. But it was widely used on the costume of the Ming court theatre for civil officials of all historical eras.

However, special attention was paid to the costumes of some of the characters who had already established themselves in fiction or in folklore. Those characters were dressed with much individuality, that is, as they were described in the literature. Zhuge Liang (also known as Kongming), active during the era of the Three Kingdoms (220-265), was a legendary figure. As the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Shu, he is always dressed in a cloud-shaped hat ("juanyun guan"), a Taoist-style gown embroidered with a red crane amid clouds ("hong yun he daopao"), three-strand whiskers, and carried a feather fan ("yu shan"), this distinctive garb, instead of the Ming style ensemble with buzı on it, practically identifies him on sight. He is seen dressed in this manner in all the court plays in which he has a part, such as Pang the Young Phoenix Leaves to Conquer Four Prefectures (Zou fengchu Pang lue sijun) (Guben vol. 148), Five Generals Named Ma Attack and Destroy Cao and His Army at Yangping Pass (Yangpingguan wuma po Cao) (Guben vol. 147), and
Liu Xuande Escapes Drunk From Huanghe Tower (Liu Xuande zui zou Huanghe lou) (Guben vol. 72).

3) Clothing for Taoist Priests

Probably because several emperors were devoted to Taoism, Ming court productions often referred to Taoist subjects. Judging by the style of writing, all by anonymous playwrights, seventeen of the Taoist plays probably were composed by members of the court troupe (Guben 1-11, vol. 1).

An actor playing the part of an average Taoist priest usually wears a simple costume of five pieces or less. Unlike military personnel and government officials who appear in almost identical costumes, Taoist priests usually dress a little different from one another. However, an average Taoist priest does not wear an individualized costume. Instead, his or her costume is selected from a "pool" of Taoist clothes, often combined with a few common clothes. The "pool" for such a Taoist costume includes, but is not limited to, the following items:

(1) loose cloth-headdress ("san jin");
(2) Qin cloth-headdress ("Qin jin");
(3) Taoist hat ("Quanzhen guan" or "dao guan");
(4) Taoist gown ("bianlan daopao" or "daopao");
(5) girdle ("taor").

(6) never-getting-old cloak ("bulao ye")

In *Sun the Taoist Priest Becomes an Immortal in Nanji's Party in His Honor*, Sun's costume includes items 1, 4, 5, and three-strand whiskers; Lu Zhaolin's costume includes items 2, 4, and 5; and Lu's servant boy ("daotong"), wears items 4 and 5 (*Guben* 13, vol. 202).

In *Heavenly Immortals Celebrate in the Banquet of Longevity*, Jintong dresses in items 2, 4, and 5; Mr. Knotweed-flower (also known as Mr. Liaohua) and Lay-Taoist Empty-head (also known as Xutou Jushi), items 3, 4, and 5; Hu Gao, Ji Min, Li Zhen, and Zheng Ju, items 2, 4, 5, 6, and black and white whiskers; Lu Zhen, and Zhang Hui, items 3, 4, 5, 6, black and white whiskers, and a palm fan; and Li Yuanshang, items 1, 4, 5, 6, three-strand whiskers, and a palm fan (*Guben* 12, vol. 236).

Some of the well-known celestial beings in Taoist legends do have individualized costumes. Usually these are much more complicated than is that of a common Taoist priest, and often include one or two items which serve to identify them. The "eight immortals" ("baxian"), the most popular celestial group in the Ming court theatre, all appear in individualized costume. Zhongli Han's costume is a set of 13 pieces, with the double hair-buns and a gown in Taoist style embroidered with a red crane among clouds ("hong yunhe daopao") as his marks; Lu Dongbin (also
known as Le Chenyang) wears 14 pieces, with a gown in Taoist style embroidered with a dark-brown crane among clouds ("chahe yunhe daopao") and a nine-yang cloth headdress ("jiu-yang jin"); Iron-Crutch Li (also known as Tiegua Li) wears 13 pieces, with a black patchwork vestment ("zao bu na") and an iron-crutch ("tiegua") as his distinctive prop; Han Xiangzi wears six pieces, with a basket of flowers as his mark; Zhang Silang wears six pieces, and a flute is his identification; Zhang Guolao wears eight pieces, with white hair, white whiskers, and a donkey fan ("lll1 shan") as his marks; Cao, the emperor's brother-in-law (also known as Cao Guojiu), wears six pieces, with a golden board strainer ("jinpai zhaoli") as his name plate; and Lan Caihe wears four pieces, each of which is special: a fashionable cloth headdress ("shao jin"), a green gown ("l11 lan"), a slanted belt, and a set of clappers ("ban"). These "eight immortals" and their costumes can be observed in A Group of Immortals Congratulate Longevity and Peace (Guben vol. 238), Le Chenyang Enlightens and Makes Hong Long a Immortal (Le Chenyang dianhua du Hong Long) (Guben vol. 204), Fighting for the Jade Boards, the Eight Immortals Cross the Ocean (Zheng yuban baxian guo hai) (Guben vol. 231), and several other plays relating to Taoist subject matter.
4) Costumes for Foreigners

In Ming court plays, foreigners are seen either as barbarian enemies on battle fields, or as kings and officials on diplomatic missions. In martial plays about border wars, foreigners are portrayed as northern barbarians invading China. Often their costumes are decorated with furs, to indicate their primitive life style. In Yue Fei the Loyal General of the Song Dynasty (Song dajiang Yue Fei jingzhong), Wushu is the supreme commander of the Kingdom of Jin. His costume and props include seven pieces: a fox-fur hat ("humao"), a python robe with full back, a fur jacket ("maoao"), a small bag with jewelry-decorated draw strings ("naozhuang jiadai"), a chopper with a cord hanger ("dai dao"), a bow and arrows in a quiver ("sadai gong jian"), and three-strand whiskers. Wushu's two generals dress alike: fox-fur hats with drooping silk ribbons ("lian chui humao"), fur jackets, battle skirts ("zhanqun"), small bags with leather draw strings ("pitiao jiadai"), and choppers ("dao"). Wushu's soldiers also dress uniformly: hats with drooping silk ribbons ("lian chui mao"), tiger-fur cuff linings ("hurban diuxiu tieli"), small bags with leather draw strings ("pitiao jiadai"), and choppers (Guben 14, vol. 178). A similar costume is chosen for the barbarian soldiers in The Eighth Prince
Opens the Imperial Edict to Save Loyal Officers (Badawang kai zhao jiu zhongchen) as well (Guben 22, vol. 175).

In the civil plays employing plots about diplomatic missions, foreigners are portrayed either as kings and officials visited by Ming diplomats in their native lands, or as diplomats attending an imperial audience at the Ming court. In Sanbao Sails to the Western Ocean in Compliance with the Imperial Edict (Zun tianming Sanbao xia xiyang), some of Sanbao's (also known as Zheng He) experiences are dramatized. He gained these during his seven voyages to more than thirty countries in southeast Asia and east Africa during the Yongle era (1403-1424). The settings are island countries, sea journeys, and audiences at the Ming court. In All Foreign Countries Pay Respects on the Emperor's Birthday, foreign diplomats come to the imperial palace to offer tribute. Here, too, the scenes are foreign countries and the Ming court.

Judging by the chuanguan, the foreign costumes employed on the court stage are flowery and spectacular. In Sanbao Sails to the Western Ocean in Compliance with the Imperial Edict, the costume chosen for a foreign character is unusually rich in colors and decorations, and sometimes with multiplications. Such a situation becomes even more obvious when the costume for a foreign character is compared with that for a Han Chinese. For instance, the play's
major foreign character, the King of the Western Ocean, has nine pieces of costume and a prop: a hat of rhinoceros horn ("xijiao guan"), a white handkerchief ("bai shoujin"), a python gown with full back ("mangyi yesa"), a waistcoat ("bijia"), a sea-silk neck-kerchief ("haijiao xiangpa"), a brocade handkerchief ("jin shoujin"), jewelry decorated ribbons ("naozhuang"), three-strand whiskers, and a sword with string ("daijian"). The king's costume is flowery because of its colorful decorations and its three kerchieves. On the other hand, Sanbao, a Chinese character and the hero of the play, has a simple costume of only three pieces: an official hat ("guan mao"), a round-collar robe with buzi ("yuanling buzi"), and a belt (Guben: 22, vol. 224).

Ornate costumes are often preferred for foreign characters in the Ming court theatre. Richness is applied generously and simultaneously to several characters. In the production of Sanbao Sails to the Western Ocean in Compliance with the Imperial Edict, several kinds of flowery costume are shared by the 15 foreign characters. Big brocade hats ("jin da mao") are worn by two foreign

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This sea-silk is supposedly made by jiaoren, or mermaids, legendary creatures who make fine fabrics. According to an account from the Jin dynasty (265-420):

In the water of the South Sea, mermaids live as fish. They never stop spinning and weaving. Their eyes shed pearls [as their tears] (Zhang Hua: Bowu zhi, qtd. in Ciyuan: 3510).
characters; jewel-decorated ribbons, by four characters; print handkerchieves ("hua shoujin"), by five characters; brocade handkerchieves, by eight characters; and sea-silk neck-kerchieves, by nine characters.

On the other hand, the costumes worn by foreign characters show less concern for variety. Not much variation can be found in the costumes which represent the four foreign countries visited in the play. Even the kings of the three countries Sulu, Pengheng, and Chuanxin dress alike (Guben 22-23, vol. 224).

In the Ming court theatre, spectacular visual effects rather than realistic representation were probably the major reason for at least some of the items in those foreign colorful costumes. In Sanbao Sails to the Western Ocean in Compliance with the Imperial Edict, for example, some of the hairdresses would have been as exotic to the supposed natives as they were to the spectators in the Ming court:

Gold hair-band on fluffed-up hair with shaven crown ("pengfa jingu tuotou") for Bosi;
Loose hair at sides with shaven crown ("safa tuotou") for Jilabu and Dazhuiji (literally, big cone hair-bun);
Loose hair-bun with shaven crown ("saji tuotou") for Xiaozhuiji (literally, small cone hair-bun);
Colorful hair with shaven crown ("zafa tuotou") for Daimaotou (literally, hawksbill-turtle head).
Another hairdress in the play, the gauze hair wrap ("sha
baotou"), might have been a realistic piece of apparel among the people of India and possibly of other tropical countries which Sanbao and his fleet had visited during the early 15th century. But the fact that this piece of costuming is worn by the characters Jiladu and Nianyuzui (literally, catfish mouth) suggests that the possibility should not be taken too seriously. Because Nianyuzui literally means "catfish mouth." As a high government official, he would never have been named "Catfish Mouth."
CHAPTER 10
PROPS

In many "court-service plays," hand-mops are often mentioned in the chuanguan and sometimes also in the corresponding scripts. Judged by the chuanguan, the props employed in court civil plays can be assigned to three categories:

1) those of religious significance;
2) those deemed auspicious; and
3) those of great value.

1) Props of Religious Significance

On the court stage, many props were used because of their symbolic importance, derived from religious beliefs or based on legends and folklore. Among these props are pan peaches, gold-cinnabar, Taoist scriptures, and glossy ganoderma.

Pan peach (pantao), or a peach of immortality, was a prop often seen in plays offered at birthday celebrations, and served as the key prop in plays such as Jinmu Celebrates Her Majesty's Birthday and Longevity (Qing qianqiu jinmu
he yannian) (Guben vol. 239), Immortals Celebrate and Enjoy the Party of the Peaches of Immortality (Zhong qunxian qing shang Pantao Hui) (Guben vol. 226), and Jinmu Presents Peaches of Immortality to Celebrates the Emperor's Birthday (Zhu shengshou Jinmu xian pantao) (Guben vol. 227). According to Taoist belief, pan peaches, growing in the heavens, are owned by Xiwangmu (also known as Jinmu or Queen Mother of the West) (Wudi nei zhuan, qtd. in Cihai 2585), who, although an immortal in contemporary Taoism and folklore, was described as something like a monster in The Story of King Mu, the earliest writing about her:

Xiwangmu looks like a human being. But she has the teeth of a tiger. Her disheveled hair is decorated with jade headdress. She likes to whistle (Mu Tianzi zhuan, qtd. in Cihai 2642).

However, information about pan peaches presented by plays at the Ming court was probably based rather on contemporary believes than on ancient records. Pan peaches were said to be efficacious in prolonging a person's life, as is repeatedly declaimed in "court service plays:"

The Great God of Longevity: "...The pan peach tree takes three thousand years to bloom, and another three thousand years to bear fruit. If a mortal eats a fruit, he will live as long as the heaven and the earth. It is perfect for a birthday gift" (Guben 9-10, vol. 242).

Gold-cinnabar (jindan), or the pill of immortality, is also a prop often seen in plays for birthday celebrations, and served as one of the key props in plays
such as *Immortals Pay Respect to His Majesty with Responses from Heaven and Earth* (Gan tiandi qunxian chao sheng) (Guben vol. 242), and *Heavenly Immortals Celebrate at the Banquet of Longevity* (Zhong tianxian qinghe Changsheng Hui) (Guben vol. 236). The pill of immortality was produced by a very complex Taoist practice, somewhat similar to alchemists' prescriptions in medieval Europe. According to Ge Hong (?281–341), an early Taoist practitioner, gold-cinnabar was recommended by Laozi, the founder of Taoism:

Laozi's secret formula says: "If you do not have huandan [literally, returned cinnabar] and jinye [literally, liquid gold], you are doing no good, but making troubles for yourself [in carrying out Taoist practice]" (*Baopu zi*, qtd. in Cihai 2941).

The "returned cinnabar" was probably the residue from a smelting process, as Ge explained:

If you burn plants, they become ash. But cinnabar becomes mercury in the fire. After many changes [in the process of smelting], it returns to cinnabar. It is much superior to plants. Therefore people [who eat plants would die eventually, but those] who take this ["returned cinnabar"] will have eternal life.

The author of *Baopu zi* further explains:

The nature of cinnabar is that the longer it is smelted, the better it becomes. And the gold, cannot be burnt out by smelting. Taking these two things into the human body will refine it. Therefore they let human beings keep everlasting youth and gain eternal life (qtd. in Cihai 2941).

Based on such a religious belief, the gold-cinnabar became a regular prop in productions for birthday celebrations in the Ming court. It was also believed to have other magic powers. In *The Eight Immortals Fight*
for Their Jade Boards Over the Sea (Zheng yuban baxian guo hai), Zhongli Quan's gold-cinnabar functions like a magic telescope, through which he sees what is happening in the depths of the sea (Guben 6, vol. 231).

Ironically, cinnabar is a deadly poison. The promised benefit of "returned cinnabar" or "gold-cinnabar" has no scientific support.

Taoist scriptures (Baolu), probably because of their teachings about eternal life, were also considered desirable props. They can be found in productions such as Three Saints Descend Red Stairs to Celebrate Longevity (Jiang danchi san sheng qing changsheng) (Guben 6, vol. 228), Immortals Pay Respects to His Majesty with Responses from Heaven and Earth (Guben vol. 242), and others.

Glossy ganoderma (lingzhi), a fungus used in Chinese medicine, gained immediate importance in the Ming court after the mid-Jiajing period (1522-1566), when the emperor devoted himself to Taoism and wanted to use glossy ganoderma to produce pills of immortality according to a Taoist recipe:

Since mid Jiajing period, many subjects [of the emperor] paid their tributes of white deer, white hares, and white wild geese to His Majesty. But glossy ganoderma soon gained in importance. Even commoners competed to present it to the emperor. In the 37th year [of the Jiajing period, 1558], a man named Wang Jin of Hu County, Shaanxi Province, presented a glossy ganoderma arrangement, with a total number of 181
"plants", to the emperor. He named the arrangement "Xian ying wannian zhi" [literally, "the glossy ganoderma offering a life span of ten thousand years"], and presented it to congratulate the emperor on his birthday. The arrangement used several glossy ganoderma with diameters of about 16 inches. The emperor was delighted and rewarded him with money and silk. The same year, the Ministry of Rites reported a total of 1,802 glossy ganoderma being contributed from all over the country. The emperor complained that the number of [glossy ganoderma with] diameters of 9 inches or more were still too few. He ordered a wider search for them. At the same time, he ordered Yan Song, the Prime Minister, Li Ben, and others to make pills [of immortality] from glossy ganoderma. He also instructed Xu Jie, the Deputy Prime Minister, saying: "You are taking care of important state affairs. Thus [I] did not bother you with this thing [i.e. making pills of immortality]." [Xu] Jie was frightened. He promised to make pills [for the emperor] as did the other two officials. Until then the emperor was not pleased (Shen D. 732-3, vol. 29).

In such a religious environment, glossy ganoderma were widely used as props in court plays, such as Immortals Pay Respects to His Majesty with the Responses from Heaven and Earth (Guben: vol. 242) and Jinmu Presents Peaches of Immortality to Celebrate the Emperor's Birthday (Guben vol. 227).

2) Props Deemed Auspicious

Some frequently employed key props with little or no religious significance are found in "court service plays." Instead they refer to auspicious characteristics in the culture. Such props are classified in three groups:
certain evergreen plants, animals having long lives, and extraordinary specimens of crop plants.

Evergreens, or chang-qing, have a symbolic importance in China's culture. The character qing has the double meanings of "green" and "youth." Thus evergreen implies "always young." Evergreen plants, which remain green even in winter, symbolize people who keep a youthful appearance in old age, which corresponds to winter in human life. Thus, characters in "court service plays" often present certain species of evergreen plants and deliver appropriate lines as they introduce themselves:

Guili: [I am] a Taoist priest who presents a never-getting-old pine....

Zhang Silang: [I am] a Taoist priest who presents an evergreen bamboo....

Cao Guojiu: [I am] a Taoist priest who presents a strong juniper and a cypress (Guben 7, vol. 228).

Animals which live for a long time were also considered auspicious. Therefore, they were presented on the theatre stage during birthday celebrations. In Three Saints descend Red Stairs to Celebrate Longevity, for instance, two of the immortals present a tortoise and a crane as gifts to the emperor:

Caihe: [I am] a Taoist priest who has an immortal tortoise of ten thousand years for you.

Zhang Guolao: [I am] a Taoist priest who has an immortal crane of one thousand years for you (Guben 7, vol. 228).
Certain rare specimens of crop plants were traditionally treasured, such as rice and wheat plants with double ears. They were believed to correspond to a rich harvest, a peaceful country, or a wise emperor. In Act Two of Immortals Pay Their Respects to His Majesty with Responses from Heaven and Earth, countrymen found double-eared variations of grains in their field:

Prefect: ...take these double-eared rice and double-eared wheat from this harvest and present them to the emperor.

Zhengmo [Zhang Ziyang]: Sir Prefect, the emperor would be truly delighted if you present these plants [of double ears] to him.

Prefect: Sir Immortals, heaven blesses our emperor's great fortune. Countries from all directions pay their tributes. These [plants of double ears] are signs of a peaceful life and a good harvest (Guben 6, vol. 242).

3) Props of Great Value

Ming court troupes often displayed props of great value on stage. In Five Dragons Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday, three golden boards, two golden glossy ganoderma in a golden vase one foot in height, and a golden incense burner are employed. The golden boards are of good sizes, as a dragon character describes:

(Enter The Golden-Back Dragon King, being played by a wai role actor, and leading yaksha [malevolent spirits, as the guards to the Dragon King]): ...During the year before last year, three longpai [literally, "dragon boards"] suddenly arose in my ocean area. One of them is about 5½ feet high and more than 2½
feet wide, on which eight kinds of treasures are inlaid and the four characters "Long live the Emperor" are written. The other two are about 2½ feet in height and more than 1 foot in width, on which eight characters are written: "All People Enjoy Work" ["Wan-ming-le-ye"], and "Whole Country Enjoys Peace" ["Tian-xia-tai-ping"] (Guben 11-12, vol. 235).

"This [large] Board of Longevity needed five dragons [actors] to carry," because "it was made of pure gold" (Guben 9, vol. 235).

Some of those valuable props were the birthday gifts being presented in a theatrical way. The play A Group of Immortals Celebrate Longevity and Peace was composed for the queen-dowager's birthday celebration. In Act Four, immortal characters literally present their gifts of great value to the queen, and go down on their knees to congratulate her:

Zhongli: Head Immortal, [I am] a Taoist priest who would like to present a Golden-Vase Lotus....

Cao Guojiu: Head Immortal, [I am] a Taoist priest who would like to present a [magic] strainer with a golden board....

Haichan: [I am] a Taoist priest who brings a golden toad and a string of golden coins as his gifts....

Immortal of the South Pole [the Head Immortal]: Good, you have all presented your birthday gifts. Put them away. Now you immortals all kneel.

(All kneel)
(Immortal of the South Pole reads congratulatory message)....

Zhengmo: Kowtow.
(All kowtow) (Guben 10-11, vol. 238).
Some of the key props employed by Ming court troupes were probably designed and made for a single production. For example, Lan Caihe's eight jade boards, which serve as his boat to cross the ocean, are seen only in *The Eight Immortals Fight for Their Jade Boards Over the Ocean* (Zheng yuban baxian guo hai). The glazed pagoda, which "makes bright music and releases colorful clouds," is found only in *Heavenly Immortals Wish the Emperor a Long Life of Ten Thousand Years in the Baoguang Hall* (Baoguang dian tianzhen zhu wanshou) (Guben 13, vol. 225). These props were so specialized that they had very little chance of being used in other productions.

But it was also possible that certain plays were composed for the purpose of exhibiting existing items of great value. For instance, the features and the value of the golden boards of longevity are repeatedly stressed in the *Five Dragons Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday*, and the plots of the play are so arranged that the golden boards become the constant focus of the production. First, the boards were sought by the dragons as their most valuable gifts for the emperor's birthday. Then the boards were stolen by some tricky sea monsters. And finally the boards were recovered by the dragons in a battle against the monsters. It seemed that the playwright already had the actual golden boards in mind and all their detailed measurements with him when he
composed the play. This speculation is supported by a contemporary account which indicates that zaju plays were composed for the events of presenting "flowers and items in season" to the emperor. After that, neither the props, nor the plays were presented on stage any more (Song M.: 218).

Spectacular props provided much visual pleasure to the court audience and always found welcome throughout the dynasty. But Ming emperors and their imperial troupes sought more theatrical novelties and excitements. Finally, they even introduced animals, including rare species and beasts of prey, to the court theatre.

32 The complete version of this account is quoted in Chapter 7.
CHAPTER 11

ANIMAL DISPLAY

On the theatre stage of the Ming court, the most astonishing display was probably a variety of living animals, including beasts of prey. In the plot of All Foreign Countries Pay Respects to the Emperor on his Birthday (Zhu shengshou wanguo laichao), many species of rare animals are the first choice for the tributes that foreign countries offer to the emperor of imperial China.

In Act One, a lion is caught during a hunting game in an Islamic country. The lion is well fed and sent to China by an envoy (Guben vol. 230).

In Act Two, the king of Annam (modern central Vietnam) chooses elephants as his gifts. The chief of Shatuo, a tribe of Turks, collects camels and horses for his tributes. A Korean general lures a white eagle for his king, who presents the unusual bird of prey, as well as a white deer, to the Ming emperor. The king of Hexi decides to give the Ming court a "kylin." And fine horses were selected in the Kingdom of Nuzhen as "special gifts to the Great Emperor" of China.
In Act Three, a general of the kingdom of Tufan sends in "two cats." They turn out to be big ones: a leopard and a tiger.

In Act Four, all the animals mentioned in the previous acts are displayed on stage: a lion, an elephant, a camel, three horses, a white deer, a white eagle, a "kylin," and two "cats." Also presented are several martens in a cage. The term kylin is interpreted as meaning the Chinese unicorn, a legendary animal. But in the play it is described as an actual living creature: "Kylin, a strange animal that grows very tall, is a native in our land [the Kingdom of Hexi]." It was probably a giraffe being presented as a kylin.

Judging by the description in the play, the animals being presented on stage were real and alive. Such a display was possible because of:

1) many possible sources of such animals;
2) the ready means of raising those and other animals in captivity; and
3) proven methods for taming beasts of prey.

1) Sources of Animals

During the Ming dynasty, provincial officials or rulers of foreign countries usually paid tribute to the emperor
of China. Steeds and wild animals were popular offerings to the imperial court. "During the 4th year of Hongwu [1371], Mingsheng, the King of Xia, paid his tribute of steeds" (Shen D.: 349, vol. 13). "During the 12th year of Jiajing [1533], Wu Shan, the Imperial Inspector [Xunfu] of Henan Province, presented a white deer [to the emperor]" (Shen D.: 733, vol. 29). Records like these can be found in many Ming documents.

Sometimes, wild animals from foreign countries came to the Ming court as part of diplomatic missions:

Li Da, a eunuch official, Chen Cheng, the Deputy Minister of Official Personal Affairs and others, returned from a diplomatic mission to the countries of the Western Regions [Xiyu, the area including what is now Xinjiang and parts of Central Asia]. Many countries in the Western Regions, including Halie, Samarhan, Huozhou, Tulufan, Shicisi, Yanduhuai, and others, sent diplomats, and paid tribute with their local products, such as leopards, and horses of Western breeds, [to the Ming, as a result of the Ming's diplomatic missions]. [Chen] Cheng's book A Diplomatic Mission to the Western Regions [Shi Xiyu ji] gives detailed information about the geography, customs, and products of 17 countries (Shen D. 771, vol. 30).

2) The Means of Raising Captive Animals

In order to show such amazing creatures in a court presentation, the means of raising them in the capital, or close to it had to be developed, because the animals had to be delivered to the theatre whenever they were needed. During the Ming dynasty, the means was provided by a complete system of a national park, a court zoo, and
an imperial stable, where wild animals and horses were raised.

Shanglin Yuan, or the National Park, occupied a huge area just outside the capital city of Beijing:

The park land: the Bai [literally, white or clear] River was its east boundary; the West Mountain, the west boundary; [the County of] Wuging, the south boundary; Juyong Pass, the north boundary; and the Hun [literally, muddy] River, the south-west boundary. Hunting or chasing [wild lives] is forbidden [in the park] (Zhang T. 776, vol. 74).

In the park, many kinds of common domestic and as well as wild animals could be found, some of which were listed as those of offered as sacrifices in a report of the Ministry of Rites:

To offer sacrifices in the Ancestral Temple [of the ruling house] and to provide the just-in-season taste [to the royal ancestors] in the Fengxian Hall, a few species [from the park] were required according to Hui dian (Completed records of ceremonies), such as deer, wild geese, hares, swine, geese, ducks, and chickens (Shen D. 899, "Addendum" vol. 3).

Shengkou Fang (literally the Animal House), was the Court Zoo. Although not well-known in the outside world, the zoo was huge in scale, rich in the kinds of animals it sheltered, and luxurious in style, according to available eyewitnesses and court documents.

Unlike the situation in the great park, where common animals were raised at large, "rare birds and animals were collected and raised" in confined areas in the court zoo (Zhang T.: 779, vol. 74). According to a contemporary eyewitness:
I recently had a chance to visit the inner-court park [where the zoo located]. I saw countless cages for tigers and leopards. I also saw countless male and female residents who, with white foreheads, lived in the City of Tigers (Shen D. 899, "Addendum" vol. 3).

"Residents with white foreheads" are a metaphor for tigers.

In the zoo, specialized buildings were designed and constructed for different families of animals:

The structures [in the zoo] represent the majority of styles and functions [among palace buildings], such as the Eagle House, the Leopard House, the Bird House, the Insect House, and the like. On a daily basis, such projects get more and more complicated (Shen D. 812, "Addendum" vol. 1).

Many of the creatures housed in the Court Zoo were introduced from foreign countries:

Rare animals such as tigers and leopards are raised in the Great Inner-Court. All kinds of rare birds from abroad are also collected in the Bird House. It was a truly startling and surprising experience [to visit the zoo] (Shen D. 812, "Addendum" vol. 1).

The Ming court probably had the most luxurious, and no doubt the most extravagant, zoo of its time. According to a report submitted to the emperor by the Ministry of War in the 10th year of Jiajing (1531), a buzzard was "served by 240 warriors." And "about 700 ounces of silver were paid annually in rent alone" for its playground (Shen D. 899, "Addendum" vol. 3). Like many other projects headed by eunuchs, "the cost always goes higher and higher. And there is no way to audit the expenses" (Shen D. 812, "Addendum" vol. 1).
Because of the size of the zoo and the way it was managed, the painful financial burden was felt by Emperor Xiaozong and his cabinet:

In the Animal House of the inner-court, a great number of birds and beasts of many species were kept and raised. They were the tributes paid by [people from] everywhere. When the new court of Hongzhi [1488-1505] assumed power, the proposal of releasing the animals to reduce the unnecessary cost was put forward for the first time [during the dynasty]. White tigers, white leopards, and the like [in the zoo], were a problem that puzzled the court officials. The beasts would hurt others [men and domestic animals] if they were released. But people's feelings about mourning the old emperor and celebrating the new court would be hurt if the beasts were killed. The [new] emperor instructed: "Just stop feeding them. Let them die themselves" (Chen H. 1, vol. 1).

"Yuma Jian," or the Imperial Stable, was one of the twelve sections in the Department of Eunuchs. The Imperial Stable was responsible for raising court horses, including the emperor's favorites, and the rare foreign breeds. The Elephant House was also subordinate to the Imperial Stable (Zhang T. 779, vol. 74).

During the Ming era, many of the most famous steeds in the Imperial Stable were presented by foreign countries:

In the 7th lunar month of the 4th year of Xuande [1432], the Kingdom of Samarhan paid tribute with a fine horse named Cang-long [literally, Black Dragon]. According to the [horse] category, horses of eight feet [tall] are called "dragons." [Cang-long] was the one from the [dragon] breed (Shen D. 350, vol. 13).

In the 6th lunar month of the 4th year of Zhengtong [1509]:

The Kingdom of Samarhan again sent diplomats to pay its tribute of a steed. The horse was all black but for its forehead and feet, which were white. [The

3) Methods for Taming Beasts of Prey

Displaying live animals on the court stage was made possible by domestic and foreign sources of those animals, and by the easy delivery of the animals to the stage from the National Park, Court Zoo, and Imperial Stable. But among the animals, beasts of prey had to be tamed before putting them on stage. Judging by historical records, methods for taming the wild creatures were known to the Ming people and regularly employed at the court. Tamers of the beasts of prey included, but were not limited to, hunters who hand-fed the beasts in their native haunts, actors who handled the beasts on the palace stage, and at least one emperor who personally tamed beasts in the Court Zoo.

When the beasts of prey arrived at the Ming capital, some of them had already been tamed by natives of their homelands. According to Chen Cheng, a Ming official who had served in a diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Halie and wrote about it:

[Halie] produces animals such as lions, leopards, steeds, oxen, sheep, chickens, and dogs. Lions are born in the reeds along the Amu River. Their eyes are closed at birth, and will not open until the seventh day. The natives take lions in only when their eyes are still closed, and tame and train them. It is said that as soon as [the lions] grow up a very
little bit, they can no longer be tamed (*Shi Xiyu ji*, qtd. in Shen D. 772, vol. 30).

A tamer sometimes traveled with his captive beast to the Ming capital in order to reduce the risks that the animal might cause during the journey. Chen Hongmo (1474-1555), a Deputy Minister of War, wrote about such an event:

In the year of Yiyou (1489), [the Kingdom of] Xifan paid its tribute with a lion, which was powerful and dangerous. In order to calm and to tame the beast, a man from Xifan always kept the lion company, even during the nights, when he slept with it in a wooden cage. He could not leave the lion even for a little moment, or the expression in the beast's eyes would have strangely changed, and it would have started to flare up (4, vol. 1).

By traveling to the Ming capital, the tamer from Xifan probably brought in to the Ming people not only a beast of prey, but also his skills for taming the animal.

The actors who presented beasts of prey on stage had to be tamers themselves. In Act Four of *All Foreign Countries Pay Respects to the Emperor on His Birthday*, two actor-tamers lead a lion on stage (*Guben*: vol. 230). In Acts Two and Four of the same play, five actor-tamers play the parts of a diplomatic embassy: "Enter jing actors playing five Tufan people. Two of them lead a white tiger; and two, a leopard."

Some of the actor-tamers probably worked with their beasts of prey for a long time before making their debut. A chief actor-tamer announced as much, while in character: "I have reared and tamed these two 'cats' for quite a while."
[I know well that] they eat nothing but meat." This knowledge could come from his experience.

On stage, special caution was taken with those "tamed" beasts of prey. When a chief tamer moves only a few steps away as the plot requests, he reminds his fellow tamers in the following lines: "Closely watch these cats. I'll go over there." And at no time was each beast handled by less than two tamers.

Zhu Houzhao was a Ming emperor who spent much of his time in the Court Zoo. The Leopard House was probably his favorite place in the Forbidden City. The emperor often used it as his imperial office (Chen H. 98, Jishi vol. 5), or as a living chamber for some of his mistresses from undesirable backgrounds (Shen D. 545, vol. 21). And, finally, he "passed away in the Leopard House" (Zhang T. 115, vol. 16). Zhu Houzhao was an admirer of wild creatures. He personally tamed beasts of prey and was even injured in a mishap. According to the official Ming history, one day during the ninth lunar month of the ninth year of Zhengde (1514), "the Emperor was injured when taming a tiger. [As a result of it], he did not attend court audiences [for a period of time]" (Zhang T. 113, vol. 16).

In the eyes of a monarch, human performers and stage animals shared many common features. They all indicated a high level of luxury, which was the pride of imperial
family. They all provided excitement and novelty to court life. Even their statuses seemed similar; both actors and animals were presented to Ming emperors as tributes. Much like animals locked in cages, court performers were confined to the capital area.

An emperor could be criticized for his activities in theatre-going or animal-raising. Contemporaries or later generations often objected that he paid excessive attention to trivia which sapped his will or wasted his time. There was no argument between the critics and the emperor that both wild animals and court performers were Ming monarchs' personal playthings. The money that a Ming emperor spent on animal displays did not always prove his love toward wildlife. The huge troupes which the Ming court kept did not necessarily indicate its support of theatre arts.

Animal display was only found on court stage. The level of luxury in costumes and props was never reached in private theatre and public theatre, with the possible exception of parade performance. On the other hand, private and public troupes, with limited resources, provided theatre entertainment to a much larger population. Their performing arts proved so appealing that even emperors attended their productions.
PART TWO

PRIVATE THEATRE PERFORMANCE

An enthusiasm for theatre on the part of the general populace was a nationwide phenomenon during the Ming dynasty. Theatre was an important part of the life of the social elite. Theatrical performances were customary in formal gatherings and for different rituals and ceremonies. Owning a private troupe was fashionable in wealthy upper-class society.

Private troupes were more flexible than court troupes, because they did not have to fulfill ceremonial duties or follow demanding precedents. Without concerns for profit, private troupes (or, to be more precise, their owners) enjoyed more artistic freedom than did commercial troupes. Unlike commercial troupes, private troupes did not have to go along with every fashionable trend or pander to low tastes. Therefore, private troupes had more chances to pursue the goals of achieving artistic perfection and sustaining classical traditions, and were free to carry out acting experiments and staging innovations.
Although many wealthy households maintained private troupes, those owned by literati won the highest reputations in the theatre world. To a great extent, this was due to the literati-owners' enthusiasm, efforts, and especially expertise in training and directing the troupe.

Literati-owners, with their mastery of dramatic literature, were probably the only elite group who had the leisure and enthusiasm to work within theatre troupes. Many of them personally trained and directed their actors for sophisticated performance. According to Li Yu (1611-1679), the late Ming-early Qing dramatist and theatre practitioner, the understanding of dramatic literature is the deciding factor in determining whether an actor is ever able to offer a first-class performance. Literati participation in training actors and directing productions was essential to the success of a private troupe and its performers. As Li Yu observed:

I find that theatre students nowadays start with reciting, and continue with singing. After singing, the [training] process is over. Without exception, the word "explanation" has been abandoned. There are acting students who, even though they may sing one song all day long, all year long, even all throughout their lives, still do not understand what or who the song is about. They sing from their mouths, but not from their hearts. Theatrical elements emerge only from their voices, but not from their faces or

33 Detailed historical facts and the social reasons behind these facts will be discussed in Chapter 12.
bodies. This is so-called "heartless singing" (Li Y. 98, vol. 5).

Li Yu further declared that such a song was empty, because it had no content. "Without content, the performance would be artificial, not natural." Such actors "only offered some second or third class performances," despite the fact that they excelled technically with the most accurate melody and rhythm and the clearest enunciation.

"The key word is understanding," Li Yu concluded, "it is the understanding [of dramatic verses] that changes a dead voice into living theatre, and that transforms a singer into an intellectual."

Li Yu argued that the only solution to this common problem was finding someone to teach actors dramatic literature:

If you want to sing well, you have to ask a bright singing master first to teach the meaning of the drama. Sometimes the singing master does not understand the meaning either, and you should turn to a member of the literati. Place the understanding first and the singing second. Carry the spirit [of a dramatic verse] through and keep the spirit accurate whenever you sing....You will then distinguish yourself from the contemporary actors (Li Y. 98, vol. 5).

Li Yu recommended both "bright" singing masters and literati as drama teachers, probably because he knew all too well that finding "bright" singing masters was much easier said than done. As he frankly admitted in the same book: "there are few singing masters who know well the rudiments of writing" (Li Y. 75, vol. 4).
Because of the contributions of the Ming literati, a number of well-regarded troupes and productions, as well as star actors and other brilliant theatre artists, were found in the milieu of the private theatre.
CHAPTER 12
LITERATI OWNERS

For many Ming literati, theatre was not only a sophisticated performing art to which they were ardently devoted, but also an escape from reality, a refuge from politics, a dreamland of poetry, and an outlet for ego and desire. Such a complicated attitude toward theatre was demonstrated in the writings of Ming literati.

Chen Jiru (1558-1639), who had rejected offers to assume government positions, was a much-respected member of the national social elite (Zhang T. 3346-7). His poem "Qinglian shanfang" ("Qinglian mountain house"), about Bao Hansuo's vacation house, reads:

...Entrust the grievance to performers,
Deposit [his capability of] managing the country in the mountain woodland (qtd. in Zhang D. 30, Xihu vol. 2).

Bao Hansuo, a high official, became the owner of a private troupe after he retreated from politics. As Chen Jiru understood, the mountain woodland was Bao's refuge from politics, and Bao's grievance against reality was comforted by actors and actresses in the theatre world.
Li Kaixian (1502-1568) was the Imperial Vice-minister of Rites. He was also a passionate dramatist and owner of a private troupe:

I have fun with my plays. Sometimes I order my young servants to enact the plays. I use them as a hundred-foot broom to sweep away my gloomy mood, or as a fishhook with a thousand-yard-line to angle poems (Li K. 857).

Li Kaixian found in theatre not only a refuge for his psyche, but also a dreamland of poetry. He further claimed that if talented individuals had no chance to contribute their effort to the state, they must be distracted from political reality:

The gifted intellectuals of all times would either conform to the times and power, or confine their hearts to joyful hobbies. They would otherwise go mad or fall ill and die. My purpose in having these [joyful hobbies] is to kill time, as an old hero fades away quietly (Qian Q. 377).

Thus Li considered theatre capable of rescuing those who suffered from discontented egos and unfulfilled desire.

The functions that theatre played in high society became even more important during the late Ming, when rebellions involved larger areas, the threat of foreign invasion seemed to be more immediate, the government was further corrupted, and the country fell deeper into chaos. Then the literati turned even more often to the illusive world of theatre to comfort themselves. Qi Biaojia (1602-1645), a high official who eventually committed suicide at the fall of the Ming, recorded in his diary...
hundreds of theatrical presentations which he personally attended during the last years of the dynasty. Whether taking high offices in the capital or retiring in his hometown, theatre-going was sometimes a daily activity for Qi and many of his literati friends:

The eighth [lunar] month [of 1638]...
14th, ...Had a little drink at the Miaoshang pavilion and listened to the actors who were brought there by Jiezi....
15th, ...Went to watch theatre at the West Marsh....
16th, ...Went to watch theatre at the Temple of the God of the Land....
19th, Mother's birthday...a theatre presentation [home] in the afternoon. Chen Changyao, Jiang Anran and I went out to watch a girl-troupe's performance...
20th, ...Watched actors present several scenes from Filial Piety and Fraternal Duty (Xiaoti ji)....(Qi B. 25-6, "Zijian lu").

Owning a private troupe was also fashionable in the lifestyle of the Ming upper-classes. Bao Hansuo, maintaining a troupe and many actresses in his household, became a role-model in his circle. Some literati of later generations even tried to imitate him, but were not quite as successful (Zhang D. 30, Xihu vol. 2).

The wealthy Ming theatre buffs often bought children from poor families to start their own troupes. Such troupes were used to enact the owners' plays or plays of their choice. Thus troupe owners were able to indulge their tastes not only by viewing theatre performances, but also by becoming playwrights and producers themselves.
The extant historical materials indicate that owners of private troupes were often literati and theatre experts. Some of them, such as Zhang Dai (1597-c.1666) and Hou Chaozong (1618-1654), were from literati families which had owned troupes for generations (Zhang D. 37-8, Taoan vol. 4; Hou C.: 5).

While private troupes offered some of the best performances during the Ming dynasty, the troupes owed much of their success to the owners' expertise. Many of the literati owners were playwrights, musicians and performing artists. According to Shen Defu (1578-1642), the knowledgeable author of Wanli yehuo bian (An edition of materials from commoners during the Wanli period [1573-1619]), so many literati were immersing themselves in theatre arts that some of them attained a professional level of skill or, as connoisseurs, became eminent theatre critics:

When I was a child, I saw Wu Guolun, a vice-prefect [Canzheng], who was skillful in beating drums. His drumbeats had the flavor of metal and stone musical instruments....[Nowadays] the literati in the Wu area pay much attention to rules and forms [of music], such as Zhang Xin, a native of Taicang and an official of the Ministry of Works [Gongbu]; Shen Jing, a native of Wujiang and an official of the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs [Libu]; and Wu Cheng, a native of Wuxi and a successful candidate in the Highest Imperial Examinations [Jinshi]—all are experts in composing music. Whenever a performance is called at a gathering [by one of them], all the performers, including experienced actors and famous singers, get into a panic [because of the likely criticism of any mistakes in their performance]. They [Zhang, Shen and Wu]
are no less sharp [in music] than Gongjin [also known as Zhou Yu, a famous general and military strategist in the Three Kingdoms period (220-265), who was well known for his great musical attainments] of Jiangdong [the area where Zhou Yu's kingdom was situated] (Shen D. 627, vol. 24).

Ming theatre professionals, especially those experienced and famous ones, did not easily become nervous in front of an audience. If they believed a criticism was not justified or the critic was not qualified, they would more likely challenge the criticism. Chen Duo (c.1468-c.1521), a dramatist and performing artist, had an illustrative experience:

Chen Dasheng [Duo] once served in the military and went to the capital with the duty of shipping goods and materials. One of his friends held a party in his honor, at which performers from the Imperial Academy of Music were called to serve by singing. Dasheng criticized [the performance] freely, but a performer totally rejected [his criticism], as though he did not know that Dasheng excelled in music. Dasheng took over his lute. He then plucked the lute and sang a song in fast tempo and rhythm. All the performers exclaimed with admiration. They fell on their knees and kowtowed [to Chen]: "We have never heard or seen something like this." [they have since] called [Chen] "the King of Music" (Jiao X. 210).

Chen Duo would have embarrassed himself, had he not been superior in singing and music.

The artistic attainments of Ming literati were a result of their enthusiasm for the theatre and long-term pursuit of the art. Many literati, whether troupe owners or not, studied dramatic literature and theatre arts wholeheartedly. Wang Jiusi (1468-1551), a former member of the Imperial
Academy (Hanlin), learned his theatre art from a professional:

Wang Jingfu (Jiusi) was going to compose [dramatic] verses. [Before doing so,] he first paid good money to hire a grand master. He then closed his doors to visitors [in order to concentrate on] learning to play the lute and the sanxian and to sing melodies. He did not let the grand master leave until he had mastered all of his skills (Wang S. 39).

This process took Wang three years, according to He Liangjun (1506-1590), a contemporary musicologist and private troupe owner (He L. 9).

Feng Guan, the prefect of Hengzhou, had taken the Imperial Examinations five times. Each time he went "without taking any books but the play script of The Lute (Pipa ji) with him" (Xu F. 243).

While Ming literati needed theatre as an important part of their daily life, the Ming theatre also needed literati to improve the quality of play scripts, actor training, and the overall theatrical effect in productions, which literati did during the preceding Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). However, literati were not found in either the court or the commercial troupes during the Ming dynasty, because of a change in their social status.

During the Yuan dynasty, literati were social outcasts, their status being even lower than that of actors and
prostitutes. Some of them made their living in theatre troupes as company playwrights and actors (Zang M.: 439). After the establishment of the Ming dynasty, however, literati regained their status and became the social elite, while actors remained social outcasts. As a matter of fact, the relative and absolute social status of actors was much lower during the Ming than it had been during the Yuan. This phenomenon is well demonstrated in the structure of the ranking of certain officials. The head of the Imperial Academy of Music in the Ming was placed on the ninth official rank, or the lowest possible grade for an official in the government bureaucracy, while his counterpart in the Yuan dynasty was included in the third rank (Shen D. 546, vol. 21).

During the Ming dynasty, serving within a theatre troupe, even a court troupe, would be disastrous to the reputation of a man of status. This situation is well illustrated by Yang Xunji's experience.

Yang Xunji was a scholar who lived in seclusion, and for many years enjoyed fame by keeping himself aloof from politics and material pursuits. His plays were much

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34 Both Dieshan Ji and Zhengsuonian Ji recorded ten ranks of occupations in the Yuan dynasty. Dieshan Ji reads: "First, government officials; second, government employees; third, Buddhist monks; fourth, Taoist priests; fifth, medical doctors; sixth, craftsmen; seventh, artisans; eighth, prostitutes; ninth, Confucian scholars; and tenth, beggars" (qtd. in Yu Q. 165).
appreciated by Emperor Zhu Houzhao (reigned 1506-1521), who appointed him to a position in the Imperial Academy of Music, the agency in charge of the court troupe. Of this Yang was very much ashamed. He begged the emperor to release him from the position, but without success. He was not able to escape from the post until his friend Zang Xian, a head eunuch who had the emperor's favor, interceded on his behalf. Contemporaries of Yang believed that "he was humiliated by the emperor's offer," and that "he was treated like a prostitute or an actor" (Shen D. 545-6, vol. 21; Zhang T. 3218, vol. 286). Xu Lin (1462-1538), another dramatist, had a similar but less embarrassing experience (Wang S. 41-2).

Since it was virtually impossible for the Ming literati to serve with the court or commercial troupes, private troupes became the only places in the theatre world where literati, as owners of troupes, could work with actors and actresses. To them it was no longer a means of working for a living, but a fashionable and acceptable hobby.

Because of their understanding of dramatic literature, the Ming literati-owners of private troupes were able to play important roles in training actors and directing plays. Details on actor-training and play-directing will be discussed in later chapters.
Literati-owners of the Ming period played other important roles in the theatre world as well. They wrote a number of well-received plays, some of which entered the canon of China's Classics. They provided the sole financial resource of private troupes. However, data on Ming literati-owners as playwrights and sponsors will not be fully covered in this study, which concentrates on the performance aspect of the Ming theatre.
The relationship between owners and actors in private troupes reflected much of the owners' enthusiasm for theatre and their psychological needs. Often actors and actresses became the physical bearers of such enthusiasm and needs. In some private troupes, relations between the owner and his performers were anything but those commonly seen between masters and servants. The owner and his performers sometimes ended up as friends, or as sexual partners, and, in one case at least, as spouses.

Zhang Dai and a few of his leading actors and actresses developed a comforting friendship. Their shared enthusiasm for theatrical arts led them to spend much time together. They gathered not only on the stage, but also for other cultural activities. Zhang Dai once brought five members of his troupe to Dragon Mountain to admire the snow:

The snow fell some three feet four inches in the twelfth lunar month of the sixth year of Tianqi [1626]. The weather cleared up in the evening. I climbed up Dragon Mountain, sitting at the gate of the town god's temple. Li Jiesheng, Gao Meisheng, Wang Wansheng, Ma Xiaoqing, and Pan Xiaofei waited upon me. The snow covered the entire range of mountains. The bright moon shone on the snow but failed to illuminate it brightly. The snow was dull white....Ma Xiaoqing sang, and Li Jiesheng accompanied him on
the xiao [a vertical bamboo flute]. The power of
the cold awed the sound and choked it. [We] did not
go back to sleep until midnight. Ma Xiaoqing and
Pan Xiaofei hugged together and rolled down the
Hundred-Steps Avenue, until they reached the foot
of the mountain. They stood there covered with snow,
as though they had just taken a snow bath... (Zhang
D. 65, Taoan vol. 7).

Li Jiesheng, Gao Meisheng, Wang Wansheng, Ma Xiaoqing,
and Pan Xiaofei were all star actors and actresses. The
relationship between the owner Zhang Dai and his performers
was relaxed and friendly. Such social activity not only
enhanced personal relations in the troupe, but might also
have benefited the performers' artistic attainments.

Sex often was a prominent aspect of the relationship
between owner and performers. In the Ming private troupes,
it was commonplace that the actresses, and often the actors,
were "sexual objects" both on stage and off, accommodating
the troupes' owners with both performances and sexual
services.

"At the refined age of fourteen or fifteen," as theatre
theorist Pan Zhiheng (1556-1622) put it in his commentary
on Wu Yongxian's actresses, "[they] were just right for
putting into private rooms." Pan agreed that such
actresses, when properly costumed, made up, and trained,
"were able to excite the very spirits and gods above" (Pan
Z. 61, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Actresses serving in private troupes enjoyed greatly
differing amounts of liberty, depending on the owners'
attitudes. Some actresses, such as those in Zhu Yunlai's troupe (Zhang D. 13, Taoan vol. 2), were locked up as virtual prisoners. Some others, however, enjoyed more liberty in social life, sport events and entertainments. Bao Hansuo, for example, followed the pre-Ming tradition of "distinguishing one's actresses from one's concubines" in that he gave his actresses permission to socialize with the guests in his circle. The actresses enjoyed other activities as well:

[They] often rode horses in beautiful makeup, crossing the bushes and passing the willows. They laughed and enjoyed it. They trilled songs under brightly [painted] balustrades and gorgeous windows. It sounded like nightingales when they played yu [a wind instrument] and zheng [a plucked instrument similar to a zither] (Zhang D. Xihu 66, vol. 4).

Although the owner and his actresses often became very intimate on and off stage, only one instance has been found of an owner actually marrying an actress as his formal wife. Kang Hai (1475-1540), a famous member of the Ming literati, placed first in the highest Imperial Examinations. He married an actress from a Musical Family after he left office. The woman was famous for her theatre performances and helped Kang Hai to train and manage their private troupe (Jiao W. 290).

In some instances boys also served both as performers and sexual partners in private troupes, and this practice became increasingly common as the dynasty continued.
Usually it was not kept secret, for homosexuality became more and more popular:

It has become a fashion. For example, there are "little singers (xiaochang)" in the capital, and "close little brothers (qidi)" in Fujian Province. Other than that, [male homosexuality] is also in vogue south of the lower reaches of the Changjiang River. Many intellectuals with successful careers obtain charming boys as their servants. The overly emotional young people are inappropriately intimate with beautiful boys as their friends (Shen D. vol. 24).

Such charming and beautiful boys frequently found their way into private troupes and worked under much the same circumstances as did their female counterparts. They served the owner as both theatrical performers and male concubines. Huang Ang, a Qing scholar, wrote in his Cijin shixiao lu that "many rich and famous local families in the previous dynasty, the Ming, kept boy actors:"

Imperial Inspector [Guanchashi] Feng Longquan's boy was called Peach-Blossom Rain [Taohuayu]; County Magistrate [Zhixian] Miao Sheng'an's boy, Heavenly Flower [Tianpa]; Staff Officer [Canjun] Chen's boy, Jade Friend [Yujiao]; Cao Meichun's boys, Big Gentle [Dawenrou] and Little Gentle [Xiaowenrou]; Wan Jiumin's boys, Big Girl [Dagugu] and Little Girl [Xiaogugu]; and Zhu Yuzhong's love slave was called Sixth Sister [Luijie]. [These boys] can be considered evildoers and their masters extremely dissolute (qtd. in Wang A. 104).

Whatever their personal relations were, the social and legal status of master and servants was still in place in private troupes. Loyalty of performers to their owner was the ethic usually practiced by troupe members and praised in society.
Li was an actor in the private troupe of Ruan Dacheng (c.1587-c.1646), a dramatist and producer. Li joined another private troupe after Ruan's death, as his peers did:

Whenever the spectators requested Ruan's plays to be enacted, [Li] always used the excuse of inability. He also told his peers not to perform [Ruan's plays] any more. When he was asked why, he said: "People already criticize the master [Ruan] without any provocation. Whenever his plays are enacted, he is laughed at and cursed in hundreds of ways. It makes me upset all day. It is better just to decline the request by claiming inability (Jiao X. 201-2).

Li demonstrated his loyalty even after his master's death. He was praised by his contemporaries, despite his master Ruan Dacheng's unsavory political reputation as a treacherous court official.

Some actors developed a sense of loyalty toward their masters comparable to that of a contemporary woman toward her husband. Jiang, an actor who served several masters, bitterly told one of his patrons:

Life is a journey [in this world]. I have been unfortunate in having to serve people by my singing. I wish I could serve only one master. However [I serve] Zhanghua Mansion in the morning and Chiqi Palace in the evening. That is not my ideal, but my previous master couldn't sustain me (Hou C. 9, vol. 1).

Abao, Qi Zhixiang's actor-lover, kept his loyalty not only in everyday life but also through disasters. He was shy, or "pretended to be shy," and refused to touch any other men. During the fall of Nanjing (in 1645), when Qi Zhixiang was nearly killed while escaping, Abao stayed
with his master throughout all the dangers. During the rebellion of Taizhou (in 1646), when Qi Zhixiang lost his luggage and all his money, Abao sang to earn money to feed his master all the way back home (Zhang D. 39, Taoan vol. 4).

However, not all actor-lovers were this loyal to their masters:

There was an actor called Jin Feng in Haiyan. He was sexually favored by Yan Donglou [Shifan]. Without Jin's presence, [Yan] would neither eat during the day, nor sleep at night. When Yan failed in politics, Jin was old and poor. Then there was a play called Phoenix Cries (Mingfengji), in which Jin put on the makeup and costumes to play the role of Yan Shifan (Jiao X. 201, vol. 6).

Phoenix Cries is a political chuangqi play portraying Yan Shifan and his father Yan Song as treacherous court officials who cause much suffering in the country, instigating the torture and killing of officials who dare to speak out (Mao J. vol. 3, Book 2). Jin Feng, in his poverty, accepted the offer of playing the role of his dead master as a villain in the production.

Some performers escaped from their masters. In an elegiac address to a deceased actor, Zhang Dai recalled:

Four years ago, I called [my] actors together and wrote short poems for the ten best of my choice....Now among your group of ten, some escaped [from me], and some rebelled [against me]. More than half are not here any more. You unfortunately died young. However, that makes you truly a loyal person to the last minute...(Zhang D. Langxuan vol. 6, qtd. in Wang A. 103).
Even so, Zhang Dai seemed to be not quite sure that the dead young actor would have stayed in the troupe had he lived long enough.

Of course, the owner-performer relationship would not normally end with the performer escaping from his master. Instead, four standard circumstances were stipulated, under which the owner-performer relationship could be terminated.

One of the circumstances was the transfer of the troupe's ownership. The owner might treat his troupe like other properties and present the actors and actresses as a gift to whomever he saw fit:

Now Fan has expanded his troupe to two, and one of them came from Guangling. The Guangling troupe was trained by my friend [Wang] Jixuan. He suddenly presented the troupe to [Fan] Changbai as a gift. Changbai was happy about it and took good care of the troupe (Pan Z. Luanxiao 56, vol. 2).

Eunuch Xu, who was in charge of collecting taxes in Yangzhou, presented a private troupe of four actresses as a gift to the court official Qian Dai. Qian, however, did not appreciate it (qtd. in Wang A. 216-7).

Another circumstance under which the owner-performer relationship might be terminated was a reduction in the troupe's size. Such a decision was usually determined by the owner's attitude or financial conditions.
When Zhou Diguang "was getting old," he "wanted to cut his troupe to one-half of its size." His friend Pan Zhiheng, however, thought that it was a pity to dismiss the performers, as they "were as valuable as fifty bushels of shining pearls." Pan persuaded him to restore the troupe to its original state (Pan Z. *Yiyoucao* 228, vol. 3).

Li Kaixian maintained a group of actresses when he left office (Qian Q. 377, vol. 4). However, his private troupe was reduced to "old family servants who did not sing quite correctly" in his later years (qtd. in Wang A. 104).

Still another circumstance to end the owner-performer relationship would be the dismissal of the troupe, which was often caused by the death of the owner. Thus: Bao Hansuo's troupe was dismissed when he died (Pan Z. 142, *Genshi* "Waiji" vol. 34). And Ruan Dacheng's actors "were dispersed in other households after his death" (Jiao X. 201, vol. 6).

Zhou Diguang dismissed his two troupes after a philosophical or religious awakening during a theatre performance. This was, though, a rare case:

While watching a production of *The Epiphyllums* (*Tanhuaji*) [a *chuangi* play by contemporary playwright Tu Long], I reached enlightenment. I immediately dismissed my two troupes. I will devote myself to Buddhism (*Tiaoxiang'an gao* vol. 21; qtd. in Wang A. 95).
The simple aging of members in a private troupe was a common reason for the owner to cut performers' bondage to him. In this case, performers were allowed to leave simply because they reached physical maturity. During the Ming, owners of private troupes most appreciated actors and actresses who were in their teens. An actor's stage life in a private troupe, unlike that in a court troupe or commercial troupe, was usually very short. The personnel of private troupes changed very quickly. Zhang Dai oversaw the assembling and disbanding of five of his family troupes (Wuling, Tixian, Wujun, Suxiaoxiao, and Maoyuan) during his lifetime:

I have lived for fifty years [while] those little servants [actors] changed from young to old, and from old to young again [the family troupe regenerated with a new group of new child performers], and from young to old again, five times in all (Zhang D.: Taoan 38, vol. 7).

The average stage life for an actor was only ten years. When Zhang Dai wrote about actors, "young" meant about ten years of age, and "old," around twenty.

Troupe owners and their performers frequently enjoyed intimate relationships, but they rarely lasted longer than ten years. And these relationships had never been equal from the very beginning, because troupe owners and performers came from distant social backgrounds.
A private troupe usually consisted of ten or more performers. "Guo, the Changzhou Prefect, brought Jiang and his dozen or so fellow actors back home" (Hou C. 9, vol. 1). "Wu Yueshi presented thirteen actors in his Shuixi Jingshe [Refined house on the west bank] productions" (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2). "Wang Jixuan hired a singing master to train dozen Wu boys" (Pan Z. 211, Luanxiao vol. 3).

While performers in a troupe usually were about the same age, they might come from different backgrounds. The three major sources of actors in private troupes were existing family servants, children from poor families, and students from training programs for the performing arts. Generally, however, children from poor families were the ultimate source, because inevitably both family servants and graduates of training programs came from poor families.
1) Existing Family Servants

Existing family servants were a ready source for actors in private troupes. It was easier for an owner to start his troupe from family servants, and they cost him less. However, most servants did not possess the talents desired in actors, and some of them were too old to be trained to the standard required in the Ming. During the Ming, training of actors started when they were as young as five years of age.

The practice of training family servants to perform did not originate in the Ming, and its influence on the theatre world was not limited to the private troupes, but it was certainly most evident there.

Theatre artist He Liangjun's (1506-1573) family had a tradition of keeping private troupes. He started training his servants when he was middle aged and had fallen ill. The servant boys "learned the tunes and were able to follow the beats" (He Liangjun Siyouzhai, qtd. in Wang A. 101).

Haiyan qiang (lit., the musical system of the Haiyan region) was one of the four major theatre genres of the South. The development of Haiyan qiang can be traced to a group of trained family servants during the Yuan dynasty. The Yuan dynasty playwright Yang Zi (?-1327) learned the arts of composing ballads and of singing from his good
friend Guan Yunshi. Yang, in turn, trained his one hundred or so servants to sing. The servants "became good in singing Southern and Northern tunes." Haiyan County, where Yang Zi's hometown Ganpu was situated, "thereafter became famous in the art of singing throughout western Zhejiang Province" (Yao Tongshou Lejiaoshiyu, qtd. in Li T. 46).

Not all family servants performed well. Although his family servants were able to present theatre performance, Qi Biaojia's diary records that he usually went out to see plays enacted by commercial troupes or by his friends' private troupes (Qi B. 3, "Ganmulu"). When Wang Shizhen visited Li Kaixian, Li gave a party in his honor. "The actors who showed up were all old servants. They did not sing correctly" (He Liangjun Siyouzhai, qtd. in Wang A. 104).

2) Children From Poor Families

Many owners of private troupes were more particular. They traveled afar to select gifted children to form their private troupes. Wang Jixuan, a friend of theatre critic Pan Zhiheng, "hired singing masters to train more than ten Wu area children." Wang himself also did his utmost in the training process (Pan Z. 211, Luanxiao vol. 3). Shen Jing (1533-1610), a playwright and one of the most influential theatre theorists during the Ming, bought
singing girls to start his private troupe after leaving his office in the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs (Wang J. 164). Gu Dadian (1540-1596), a playwright and former official in the Nanjing Ministry of War, bought singing girls and "did all the actress training himself" (Wang J. 164).

3) Children Enrolled in Performing Arts Training Programs

Training programs in the performing arts for young children were also a ready source of actors and actresses for private troupes. With a great variety, training programs were run by individuals who were performing experts or enthusiasts, as business or as charity. More facts about such programs will be discussed in Chapter 27. Training programs recruited children as young as five years of age and graduated them when they were about ten. By graduation, the children were expected to have learned basic techniques and to have developed an aesthetic sense in theatre arts. At that point, they were ready for further training and could be expected to reach the pinnacle of their acting career by ages twelve to fifteen. Actress Yixi's experience is illustrative:

A phoenix [the title for star actresses in Yixi's troupe], styled Yixi, was born in Wu. She was engaged [bought] and placed in jade-decorated rooms [a luxurious environment] by the Wangs when she was five. She was taken care of by a woman named Cui, [who] sent her to listen to [and learn] songs in the Yantiao
Conservatory. At ten, she followed her mistress to Heyang where her mistress was married. The mistress excelled in singing, and [her husband from] Heyang was sharp in music. [The husband from] Yan [where Heyang was situated] sang and [the wife from] Wu joined in. That was [Yixi's] daily environment. [Yixi] was unconsciously influenced and changed by the lingering charm of [the singing arts]. She came to [lit. flew in] the West Garden at thirteen. She was then directed by a reputable master for six months. With flying sleeves and dancing eyebrows, she made her debut in perfection (Pan Z. 60, Luanxiao Vol. 3).

The training programs were considered by some contemporary critics as the best sources for actors and actresses for private troupes. In ten years, Wu Yongxian, the retired Minister of War, recruited his actresses exclusively from reputable training programs:

The girls were ten years of age when they were chosen. However, it was easy to see from what they had learned that they were all chosen from [programs which had] reputable names. He [Wu Yongxian] certainly had high taste. He did not regret bushels of pearls and gold [spent on the actresses] (Pan Z. 60, Luanxiao Vol. 3).

The cost was tremendous. Even a rich man such as Wu had to "turn out all his boxes and suitcases," as his friend Pan Zhiheng put it, to pay the cost. Kang Hai, who was not that rich, ended bankrupt. He died with no cash, but with 300 sets of theatre drums left in his possession (Li K. 596).

During the late Ming, there was a huge price gap between the cost of a regular servant girl and a trained actress. A servant girl might cost only five ounces of silver (Xiaoxiaosheng 174, vol. 24), while a beautiful
trained actress could cost as much as 400 ounces of silver (Daowu xianping 13, vol. 16). On his deathbed, private troupe actor Xia Rukai sold his younger sister to his master Zhang Dai for 40 ounces of silver (Zhang Dai Langxuan vol. 6, qtd. in Wang A. 103). But it is not clear if Xia's sister really performed well, or even if she knew performance at all.

A man's concubines provided still another source from which actresses could be recruited and trained for his own troupe. This was not a common practice during the Ming, and might lead to criticism. All Zhu Yunlai's performers, for example, were his concubines. He trained them seriously as actresses, but as they were also his concubines, he kept a close guard on their chastity:

I heard that old Yunlai was very suspicious. His concubines [were placed] in a labyrinth, which was well guarded and locked. [He] patrolled [the house] himself nightly, which disgusted his concubines. The one who was on duty [to serve him] often escaped and hid from him. [She] was still in the labyrinth, but could not be found [by Zhu]. [Zhu] always rebuked her loudly and gave up (Zhang D. 13, Taoan vol. 2).

It was legal for the owner to lock up his concubine-actresses during the Ming era. However, Zhu's practice was criticized:

[Zhu] guarded [his concubines] carefully, toiling [himself] day and night. This stupid old villain was just asking for trouble. It should be a good
A troupe owner's search for the best possible performers could well extend nationwide. In Wu Yongxian's troupe, the five actresses styled "Phoenix" were bought from different areas in the country: "two from Wu; two from Weiyang [Yangzhou]; and the last one, a Jinling [Nanjing] girl" (Pan Z. 60, Luanxiao Vol. 3). All three of these areas were famous for producing accomplished singing girls. Suzhou, a city in the Wu region, was believed to be the best place to find the highest quality actors and actresses. Hou Chaozong, Wang Jixuan and many others bought their performers in Suzhou or Wu (Hou C. 5; Pan Z. 211, Luanxiao vol. 3).

The selection of potential actors was affected not only by geographical areas, but also by the sexual interests of the owners. While the youth, charm, and physical beauty of the performers were universal criteria in the Ming theatre world, they certainly weighed heavier for some private owners than for others.

Zhang San was a boy actor playing xiaodan (secondary young female roles) in Prime Minister Shen Shixing's troupe. "His gorgeous beauty was superb on stage." When he was "taken away" by an admiring official named Liu Tianyu, "the people of Wu missed him." When Zhang San returned to Suzhou, Pan Zhiheng found him "a big mature man." Pan
was extremely disappointed: "I hated that I did not meet
him three years ago." What Pan missed was Zhang San's
youthful beauty. Zhang San, however, kept his feminine
beauty on stage (Pan Z. 136, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Abao, a capable actor and singer, is described more
as a homosexual object than as a theatre artist in dramatist
Zhang Dai's firsthand observation:

Abao was pretty and coquettish like a little girl,
a spoiled and cunning one, though. He would pretend
to be shy and refuse to come to you. It was like
eating an olive of which the taste was puckery but
the aftertaste superb. It was like smoking and
drinking which clogged and choked you but satisfied
your craving. Though one might quickly get fed up
[with Abao], one would miss him right away.

To his master, the Imperial Military Inspector Qi Zhixiang,
Abao was "an addiction." According to his close friend
Zhang Dai, "Zhixiang valued his boy lover as his own life,
while regarding his wife and son as though they were a
pair of shoes which he had taken off" (Zhang D. 39, Taoan
vol. 4).

Not all the private troupes and their owners gave
first priority to the physical beauty and charm of actors
and actress. Many owners placed character interpretation
and acting first in their training and rating of actors.

Quan and Lan were two actors in Wu Yueshi's troupe.
While "Lan was stronger and more handsome than Quan, Quan
was a little more intelligent than Lan." Lan's beauty
was stunning:
Among those immaculately dressed people,
He is the one who shines.
Among those shining beauties,
He is the one who wins people's hearts.

But Quan's acting in The Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting) clearly demonstrated his real grasp of the essence of the character of Liu Mengmei. While "in all the other aspects [of theatre arts], they were very close," Quan's intelligence overcame Lan's physical beauty in Wu Yueshi's troupe. Quan, not Lan, became the leading actor in their troupe. "Had [one of them] played in another troupe [lit., on another stage]," Pan Zhiheng suggested, "they would have each dominated a stage" (Pan Z. 202, Luanxiao vol. 2).

The actors and actresses in private troupe came mostly, if not entirely, from poor families. Selling a child to a private troupe served as an economic relief or even rescue to those families. In another part of the elegiac address quoted earlier in this study, Zhang Dai told much of the sad story of an actor's family:

You have been in Yue [Zhejiang] for four years. You thought that I was dependable, and brought your parents and younger brother and sister here, five people in all. Your father died in six months. You came to me weeping and I pawned a suit to bury your father. In another year, when I came back from Shandong, you were critically ill, sleeping in the outside chamber. You did not see me and died in seven days. You were a native of Su [Wu]. Both your father and you died in no more than a year in this land [of Yue]. Both of you were put into coffins by me, and buried

35 For details, see Chapter 19.
by me. It was unusual. It was miserable.... Before your death, you sold your younger sister to me for 40 ounces of silver. After your death, I thought of you, and excused all your debt. Furthermore, I prepared food and a boat to send your mother, younger brother and sister back to your hometown (Zhang Dai Langxuan vol. 6, qtd. in Wang A. 103)

Xia Rukai and his family seemed to have little money or property. The only things worthy of selling were, first, Xia Rukai himself; and then, his younger sister.

The economic status of Xia Rukai probably represented that of his fellow performers. The key to the successful transformation of poor children to star actors and actresses was actor training.
Some actors and actresses received years of training before they joined private troupes. Such training and training programs have been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will concentrate on the in-troupe training of performers.

The actor-training in private troupes was carried out by singing masters (yueshi), or owners, or both. Although many troupe owners apparently enjoyed training their actors, they were not always able to do so. Troupe owners were often too busy, or they might not know the theatre as stage art well enough to teach. In such cases they "had to depend on their hangers-on and singing masters." The hangers-on, however, most likely would just follow the singing masters, for they might not be experts in theatre arts either (Li Y. 75, vol. 4).

During the Ming period, hiring singing masters to train performers was a common practice in private troupes and other rich households. "Wang Jixuan hired singing masters to train ten or so children from Wu" (Pan Z. 136, Luanxiao vol. 3). Qian Dai, who had a private troupe of
thirteen actresses, hired two female singing masters to train his actresses. One of his singing masters, a woman named Shen, had been "a former actress in Prime Minister Shen's troupe when she was young." At the age of 60, she still "sang sonorously and acted wonderfully" (Bimengxu, qtd. in Wang A. 115). He Liangjun's family, which had kept troupes for generations, hired two singing masters to train their actors (Siyouzhai, qtd. Wang A. 105). This practice was also described in some Ming novels. A contemporary novel Jingshi yinyang meng (Warning dreams of yin and yang), describes how two eunuch officials get excited about sharing a capable singing master to train boy-eunuchs in their household to sing, while other officials were disappointed by the fact that therefore the singing master was not available to them (Guoqing 52-5, vol. 11). In another Ming novel Jin ping mei (The golden lotus), Ximen Qing, the master of a household, hires Li Ming, a professional musician, to train his servant-girls for about five ounces of silver a month (Xiaoxiaosheng: 144, vol. 20).

Sometimes singing masters were hired for their special knowledge and skills. Dun Ren, a former member of the Southern Imperial Academy of Music, was invited to teach Northern theatre in He Liangjun's troupe. Dun was touched, saying:
I, Dun Ren, went to Beijing following the Emperor during the years of Grandpa Zhengde [Emperor Zhu Houzhao, r. 1506-1521]. I learned it [the Northern theatre] in the Imperial Academy of Music and kept it to myself for fifty years. The songs sung during the banquets are all contemporary ones [from the Southern theatre] now. Nobody has even asked for these verses [of the Northern theatre]. I never dreamed that in the last years of my life I would meet an expert [He Liangjun] who keenly appreciated my art (He L. 9).

By He Liangjun's time, Southern theatre had replaced Northern theatre on stage. Northern theatre was no longer fashionable and few singing masters were able to teach it.

Although singing masters were widely used, contemporary theatre critics strongly advised qualified literati-owners to train their own troupes (Li Y. 75, vol. 4; 98, vol. 5), and many owners did. Gu Daoxing "did all the [actor] training himself" after he bought singing girls to start his troupe (Wang J. 164). Some of the best private troupes of Ming times were trained by their owners. Their success was highly acclaimed by experts and had quite an influence on the theatre world.

The performers trained by He Liangjun "kept the tradition of the Jin and Yuan dynasties." Even "professional actors all yielded to them" because of their expertise. The several actresses whom He Liangjun trained "were appreciated by Dun Ren of the Southern Imperial Academy of Music" (Shen D. 641, vol. 25).
Ruan Dacheng was such an infamous official that his biography was placed in the volume concerned with "Treacherous Court Officials" in the official Ming history (Zhang T. 3494-8, vol. 308). His private troupe, however, was considered one of best of its time even by his political enemies. Its success was by no means merely fortuitous. It was the result of serious artistic work done by the troupe and especially by its owner. Ruan's superb actors and scripts were keys to that perfection. Ruan wrote the scripts and trained the actors himself (Zhang D. 73-4, Taoan vol. 8).

Ruan, a successful candidate in the Highest Imperial Examinations, was barred from office for political reasons for more than seventeen years (Zhang T. 3495-6, vol. 308). Thus he had plenty of time to study theatre and train his private troupe to perfection. His efforts were not in vain. The actors in his troupe were well trained, and that made a real difference on stage (Zhang D. 73, Taoan vol. 8).

More often than not, an owner would join his singing master in actor-training. Such a practice greatly benefited the troupe and thus was strongly recommended by contemporary critics.

In the private troupes, singing masters taught almost everything in theatre arts, from singing, dancing, movement
and role-playing, to costumes, makeup and musical accompaniment. The only field in which most of them were not competent to teach was the literature of the plays. Not being well-educated, the vast majority of singing masters were unable to master the meaning of the elaborate dramatic verse, complicated development of plots and subtle psyches of the characters, which were frequent elements in plays written by Ming literati. Dun Ren, the singing master in He Liangjun's (1506-1573) troupe, was an example:

The Old Dun always keeps his Zhongyuan yinyun and Qionglin yayun [two authoritarian phonology books] at hand. He is thus correct eighty to ninety percent in [his teaching of singing], from open mouth and closed mouth, to four tones and yin and yang sounds. However, he does not understand the meaning of literature well, and often makes mistakes (He L. 10-11).

Although Dun Ren was a hard working singing master and a former member of the Southern Imperial Academy of Music (Nan Jiaofang), he still had trouble with literature. As Li Yu saw it:

There are few singing masters who know well the rudiments of writing. They always try to avoid [teaching] the plays by literati, because the plays and singing masters are not suitable for each other (Li Y. 75, vol. 4).

Without a full understanding of the content of the plays written by literati, due either to illiteracy or to lack of ability in the sophisticated language of dramatic literature, the average singing masters and their student-actors were limited to performing "country bumpkin plays" (so-called by Wang Jide [?-1623], a contemporary
dramatist and theatre theorist), which could be learned by illiterate people through oral transmission. Such plays were viewed as superficial and vulgar by literati such as Wang Jide (Wang J. 154, vol. 39).

The participation by literati-owners in the training of their actors made a significant difference. They were the ones who understood plays well, being in some cases actual authors of plays. Thus they were able to train their actors to present meaningful performances.

Singing masters, usually experienced musicians or actors, were experts in theatre arts. Owners, often literati, were experts in language and literature as has been discussed above. They sometimes disagreed with one another because of their different backgrounds. But in working together they also were able to learn from each other.

Dun Ren, the singing master in He Liangjun's troupe, once taught actresses to sing the character "zhan" (felt) with "open mouths." He Liangjun, however, believed it should be sung with a closed mouth. Dun accepted He's argument only after He realized that "zhan" in the theatrical script was not written in the standard way, a difference that proved to be the cause of the wrong pronunciation (He L. 10-11).
In another case He Liangjun "instructed Old Dun to teach one or two songs from The Lute (Pipa ji)." Dun Ren took a while to explain to He Liangjun why it was not a good idea to teach songs from The Lute to actresses, even though Dun was able to sing the whole play. Dun's reasons were:

First, The Lute did not have an original music score to follow. "The scores available were transcribed from certain performances and then fixed to the words [of the play script] by later generations." Therefore those music scores were only versions of performances, which, in fact, "did not follow the rules and should not become rules [for others]."

Second, unlike the rules described in northern music, there were no strict conventions regarding tempo and rhythm in southern music, in which The Lute was performed. Inexact singing could easily fit that kind of music. Thus it was not appropriate in the training of singers.

Third, musicians were used to playing the music of The Lute "freely." Without a standard version to rely on, it was hard to tell students what was right and what was wrong. At that point, He Liangjun accepted Dun's argument and changed his mind (He L. 11).

When an owner joined his singing master in training performers, the owner often set the principles he wanted to be followed, and the singing master carried them out.
Zhou Diguang was a person "serious in character, harmonious in mood, and spotless in conduct." He seemed to apply some of his personality to his troupe's training:

The principle [of training] he authorized his singing master [to carry out] was the precision in music and movement. The singing master marked the floor to direct [actors'] movements, and counted millet seeds to time [actors'] singing. Those on the stage were constantly alarmed. They worried about not infringing the rules. Within such bounds, free [acting] was eliminated. [The actors] tried hard to interact, but they were stiff and constrained. Their singing was highbrow, but without a relaxed manner (Pan Z. 23, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Pan Zhiheng criticized Zhou Diguang for his overcautiousness, which Zhou denied. Zhou argued that a vague training objective would never produce a sharp troupe. Zhou predicted that as "muddy water will gradually settle when still," the troupe would settle down in a consistent training program. His singing master named Wang was also a believer in thorough training in basic skills. While discussing the "colorful," but "empty" and "low-spirited" acting of two local amateur actors, Wang pointed out:

The reason [that those amateur-actors have] little improvement in their [acting] techniques is that [they] are not yet proficient in music. As soon as they are proficient in music, all their techniques will improve immediately (Pan Z. 23, Luanxiao vol. 2).
Zhou Diguang and Wang's painstaking training finally paid off. After the performers mastered basic skills, they soon gained freedom on stage. Those being trained under restraints eventually moved on to unrestrained acting. Pan Zhiheng, one-time critic of the troupe, was eyewitness to the later presentations:

I passed by Liangxi [where Zhou Diguang lived]. I stayed there two nights for the performances. The master choose groups [of actors and actresses] from the troupe to take turns performing in the courtyard. Like turtle-doves singing in the mountain basin, their sound was far-reaching and illusory, and their dance fitted [the standard of the classic] Mulberry Field Dance. [The performance was] sharp in appearance and precise in details, but [the actors] were carefree. They were at liberty to enjoy and express themselves. It seemed that they had no regard for rules, and that the master had liberated them from discipline (Pan Z. 23, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Finally, Zhou Diguang's actors performed naturally and expressed themselves freely, because they had mastered basic skills. After rigid training, the rules were no more burdens, but became second nature to the actors whenever they were on stage. Thus the actors were able to concentrate on the "spirit" and the insights needed for a praiseworthy performance.

The actor-training programs in some private troupes were so comprehensive that actors and actresses were trained virtually in every aspect of theatre arts before ever they performed on stage. Zhu Yunlai's program consisted of music accompaniment, singing, dancing and role playing
As a result of Zhang Dai's actor-training, "all the family servants and slaves were able to play drums, wind instruments, and string instruments" (Zhang D. 36, Taoan vol. 4). Sometimes the actor-training went beyond the usual scope of theatre arts. Zhang Dai took his leading actors to Dragon Mountain to admire the snow, as was mentioned in Chapter 13. Tan Gongliang's actors "examined and corrected [theatrical] music," and "studied and admired the model calligraphy" (Meihua caotang bitan, qtd. in Lu E. 81). Such activities, although not directly related to theatre, would broaden the actors' overall experience, and positively affect their artistic accomplishments on stage.

Many troupe owners were richly rewarded for their rigid and comprehensive training. Their actors and actresses gained such a freedom in the theatre art that they could successfully perform under all the rules and in almost all the space.
During the Ming period, private troupes performed almost anywhere their owners wished them to. Halls in residential mansions provided the most usual performance space, as private residences seldom had a raised stage. In effect, the performance area in a residence was merely a bare stage, with the acting area defined by a red rug laid at the center of the hall. The terms "red rug" (hong gushu), or "rug" (gushu), thus became synonyms for the stage or theatre during the Ming. Pan Zhiheng, a theatre critic, wrote in one of his "Guanju" ("Watching theatre") poems: "a garland of flowers [actresses] moves with a graceful demeanor on the rug" (Pan Z. 218, Luanxiao vol. 2). Pan's comments on a certain painted-face (jing) actor named He Meidu (stage name) read: "[He performs] like Gongsun [a famed Tang dynasty dancer] performing his Huntuo dance on a rug" (Pan Z. 215, Luanxiao vol. 3). To walk or dance on a rug simply referred to actors or actresses performing on stage. Zhang Dai wrote:

Had Emperor Minghuang of the Tang dynasty [also known as Li Longji] seen the performance of Liu Huiji's female-troupe, he would have been struck dumb with surprise. He would have said: "How can there be
such bizarre and motley things in the place of rugs"  
(Zhang D. 49, Taoan vol. 5)?

The term "place of rugs" refers to a theatre.

In a residence hall, people in the audience were positioned on from one to three sides of the rug, or acting area: at the back of the hall, and at the left and right sides, leaving the front side of the hall open. The orchestra was placed at either the left or the right corner of the front side. Illustrations from Ming period publications indicate that such an arrangement was identical in residence hall performances. In the Ming zaju play collection Sheng Ming zaju (The zaju plays in the golden Ming) and many other books, examples can be found for plays such as The Loyal Dog of the Yuan Family (Yuanshi yiquan) (Reproduction of Figure 1. Shen T. vol. 11, Book 1), and The Gathering of People of the Same Age) (Tongjia hui) (Reproduction of Figure 2. Shen T. vol. 10, Book 2).

Female members of an audience were separated from the acting and other audience areas by a gauzy screen curtain. Thus they were able to watch the production without being seen by the males on stage or in the audience. The practice of separating women from men in public with a curtain goes far back in China's history. Wu Zhao (624-705, also known as Wu Zetian), an empress in the Tang dynasty, attended court audiences behind a curtain (Liu
X. 10, vol. 5). This tradition was kept well in the Ming private theatre. Marchioness Song sat behind a screen curtain when she watched Tu Long (1542-1605), a dramatist and official, perform on stage:

Tu was also able to sing the most recent [theatre] melodies and liked to show off. He often joined actors to perform in theatres. The wife of Marquis Song would view him through a screen curtain and sometimes presented him with a cup of tea [in token of her favor] (Shen D. 645, vol. 25).

"Watching theatre through a screen" is also demonstrated in an illustration in the Ming version of "Ximen Qing Becomes Very Sad Watching Theatre" in the novel *Jin Ping Mei* (Reproduction of Figure 3. Xiaoxiaosheng np). The performance took place in a merchant's residence. *Jin Ping Mei* is believed to have been written during the years of Jiajing (1522-1566) (Shen D. 652, vol 25).

The practice of using a curtain to separate female members in an audience from the rest of the people during a performance was in keeping with the moral standards of the time. However, some contemporary Confucian scholars did not believe that such a separation alone would prevent the kinds of misconduct that could occur in private theatres:

The contemporary plays are much alike at one point: the plots of illicit love affairs. They are disgusting. However, people often put such plays on a residential stage. They call themselves, fathers, sons and brothers together, and put their women behind a curtain, to watch the plays. They have no sense of shame when they watch dirty presentations of lascivious and licentious affairs (Tao Shiling *Nannan lu* vol. 1, qtd. in Wang X. 179).
Liu Zongzhou (1587-1645) warned that such performances "would easily transform humans into beasts" (Renpu leiji vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 181-2).

Ruan Dacheng's troupe rehearsed and performed in the Yonghuai Hall of his residential mansion. That performance space was described by Ruan's friend, Yang Wencong, in the early Qing play Peach-Blossom Fan (Taohua shan):

I am free today. I have come over to watch his new production of The Swallow Letter (Yanzi jian). Let me just come inside....This is Shichao Garden....And Yonghuai Hall....A red rug is spread on the floor. This is the place for theatre performances. I feel as though I am in a painting of Caotang Hall [of the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu]. Wearing a high black hat, [Ruan] directs the silver zithers and red clappers [zither and clappers are synonyms for Ruan's troupe] (Kong S. 30-31, vol. 1).

The performing space in residential mansions was usually placed in one of the household's ordinary halls. Yet some wealthy individuals built halls specifically designed for performing purposes. When Bao Hansuo built his luxurious villa in Hangzhou, he had the hall so structured that there was "plenty of room even for group dances [duiwu] and lion dances." "The hall was built with dou-gong\(^{36}\) to support the roof-beams. The [usual] four

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36 Dou-gong is an arrangement of brackets inserted between the top of a column and a crossbeam. Each bracket is formed of a double bow-shaped arm, called gong, which supports a block of wood, called dou, on each side.
center pillars were thus eliminated" (Zhang D. 66, Xihu vol. 4).

Although the majority of performances by private troupes took place in residential halls, many other locations were used as well. These included gardens, courtyards, ships, pavilions, temples and government buildings.

Private gardens were popular for theatre performances because of their natural settings and poetic ambience. Tian Kanghou's garden was "winding, curving, gorgeous, and neat." One evening Qi Biaojia and his friends went to Tian's garden and "watched a theatre performance while having a drink in a pavilion on a hill" (Qi B. 24, "Qibei longyan"). The pavilion served as an auditorium. Qi Biaojia's diary describes many gardens where he watched theatre performances, such as Lu's Garden and Lu's Garden (Qi B.: 2, 8, "Yunan suoji"). His father-in-law's garden, however, he described as "surpassing other gardens:"

We went to Xishi Hill [named after the ancient beauty Xishi] where my father-in-law had built his new garden. The new pavilion is exquisite and spacious....A single enormous rock, looking like it has been polished by waves, covers several acres. Huxi and I drank [in the beauty of] the scenery. Then we drank wine and saw the play Cloud Watching [Wangyunji] (Qi B. 29, "Guinan kuailu").

Residential courtyards were also sometimes used for private troupe performances. Zhou Diguang's troupe "often
played in a courtyard" (Pan Z. 23, Luanxiao vol. 2). Pan Zhiheng and Wang Wenbing watched a theatre performance in a courtyard at night under artificial illumination. The performance did not finish until "the light from the god [sunlight] slowly rose to shine upon the courtyard" (Pan Z. 218, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Wang Shuji set theatre performances in his pavilion. To Wang it was an ideal stage, for there was a clear stream nearby and "a bridge to lock up the charming flowers" (Pan Z.: 235, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Private troupes occasionally performed on ships. Such events were considered spectacles during the Ming, and sometimes attracted huge crowds. For instance, Zhang Dai's family built a multi-storied ship on which a theatre performance was presented to the public as an inauguration ceremony for it:

Several layers of lumber were used to build a raised stage for theatre performance. People came from the city and villages on more than a thousand boats, big ones and small ones, to see the production. A storm started in the afternoon. Huge waves were breaking. Heavy rain was pouring. The multi-storied ship was in danger of being overturned by the hurricane. Several thousand cables were used [to stabilize it]. . . . The storm stopped after a while. The production was carried on to the end, and then the spectators left (Zhang D. 73, Taoan vol. 7).

That grand performance survived the challenge of the weather.
Bao Hansuo was the first one to introduce multi-storied ships to Xihu Lake in Hangzhou. His multi-storied ships were of three sizes, the biggest ones being the venues for theatrical performances:

Banquets with performances and singing boys were placed on large ships; books and paintings were stored on middle-sized ships; and beautiful girls were kept on small ships (Zhang D. 66, Xihu vol. 4).

Temple stages, frequent settings for performances by commercial troupes, were sometimes used by private troupes as well. Zhang Dai's troupe presented The Iceberg (Bingshan ji) on a raised stage in a town god's temple. The temple compound proved to be too small for the event when tens of thousands of spectators showed up. It was so crowded that many members of the audience had to "stand outside the temple entrance." When a character introduced himself, the audience members inside the temple "would whisper to pass on the words to those outside. [The words being passed on] sounded like the flowing of a tide" (Zhang D. 70, Taoan vol. 7).

Troupe owners could even go to such an extreme as to order their groups to perform in extraordinary places. On the night of the 16th day of the 8th lunar month in 1629, Zhang Dai led his private troupe past Jinshan Temple:

I called my young servants to bring in stage properties and set up magnificent lights in the great temple hall. [My troupe] sang Prince Qi on Jinshan Hill
(Qiwang Qinshan), The Great Battle on Yangzi River (Changjiang dazhan), and other plays. The gongs and drums were noisy. All the people in the temple came out to watch. The plays were finished just before dawn. We untied the boat cables and crossed the Changjiang. The monks all followed us to the foot of the hill and remained there long after we had sailed off, not knowing if we were humans, demons, or ghosts (Zhang D. 4, Taoan vol. 1).

It was a daring exercise to present such secular plays not on the usual open-air stage attached to the temple building, but in the sacred temple hall itself, where even the most religious productions were not allowed.

Some productions went on tour. These tours, like productions at home, usually were not carried out for economic gain. Zhang Dai once brought a successful production of The Iceberg (Bingshan ji) from Zhejiang Province to Shandong Province, by way of Jiangsu Province, as "a birthday gift to His Excellency." This production was presented in a prefectural commissioner's office in Shandong Province (Zhang D. Taoan 70, vol. 7; 4, vol. 1).

Most of the time, a troupe owner would accompany his troupe wherever they gave performances. However, when an owner's troupe was invited to perform for a gathering hosted by other people, such as the owner's relatives, peers, or friends, normally he would not accompany the troupe.
Guo Xun (?-1550), Marquis of Wuding, had a reputable private troupe which was invited by a family of the emperor's relatives (waiqi) to present farces (yuanben). The actors played an improvisation ridiculing contemporary court politics, which scared away all the spectators. Guo Xun flew into a rage when he heard this. His actors had not only ridiculed his political views, but had also put him in danger of incurring the court's wrath. Guo punished the actors severely, and some of them died as a result (Shen D. 664-5, vol. 26).

Ruan Dacheng sent his troupe to accept an unlikely invitation, one from a political enemy. Ruan was trying hard to be reinstated in his position after having been fired, and was expecting some help from Hou Chaozong, who requested his troupe. Hou and his friends enjoyed the performances by Ruan's troupe, but did not excuse Ruan's political misconduct.

Dacheng had a private troupe famous for its singing and acting. The troupe could sing the opera The Swallow Letter (Yanzijian) written by him. When the celebrities gathered in Jinling [Nanjing] to take the Imperial Examinations, [Hou] Chaozong set up a grand feast [to entertain them] and invited Ruan's troupe to come. Dacheng considered himself lucky [to have Hou's friendship] and sent the actors immediately. He also sent other servants to observe [the performance]. As long as the performance was going on, everyone praised [the performance], which [Ruan's] servants ran back to report. This made Dacheng even more pleased. Then [the celebrities] discussed state affairs loudly....Whenever Dacheng was mentioned, everyone of them pointed fingers and cursed [Ruan Dacheng] unceasingly (Xi pi leigao, qtd. in Jiao X. 199).
When Ruan Dacheng learned of his humiliation in a performance space beyone his reach, he "burned with anger. His hatred toward the three [Hou Chaozong and his close friends Wu Yingji and Chen Zhenhui] penetrated his bones" (Xipi leigao, qtd. in Jiao X. 199).

However Ruan's enemies might criticize him, the fact that they invited his troupe proved the troupe's excellence. Ruan's troupe, and many other private troupes, owed much of their excellence to the owners' directing and staging.
ARRANGEMENT OF RESIDENTIAL HALL PERFORMANCE
As Seen in Ming Dynasty Publications
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 2

ARRANGEMENT OF RESIDENTIAL HALL PERFORMANCE
As Seen in Ming Dynasty Publications
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 3

WOMEN WATCHING THEATRE THROUGH A SCREEN
As Seen in Ming Dynasty Publications
CHAPTER 17
DIRECTING AND STAGING

With their expertise in theatre arts and dramatic literature, a few literati-owners even assumed functions similar to those played by modern directors. To start with, owners searched for gifted children who might be potential actors. Then they hired the best possible singing masters from all sources, including the Ming court, public troupes, and other private troupes, to train their actors. They themselves often participated in the training process. And finally, with their understanding of plots, interpretation of characters, and overall control of theatre effects, they directed the productions.

Under Ruan Dacheng’s direction, Ruan’s troupe became famous for its acting, and extremely popular among literati. Theatre critic Zhang Dai praised Ruan’s troupe for its flawless performances: "every production [of theirs is] splendid, every role splendid, every scene splendid,

37 For details, see Chapter 14.
38 For details, see Chapter 15.
every verse splendid, and every word splendid" (73, Taoan vol. 8).

Such prowess was by no means incidental. Ruan Dacheng "explained everything in detail to his actors," such as "the way the play was organized, the hints foreshadowing later developments, the point of humorous performance, the meaning of facial expressions, and the use of eyes" (Zhang D. 73, Taoan vol. 8).

Ruan's meticulous directing was essential to the quality of his troupe's productions. First, his detailed explanations overcame the problems arising from the illiteracy of the actors, and enabled them to fully comprehend the scripts and thus perform with understanding. Second, Ruan's overall production concepts enhanced coordinated acting and eliminated possible conflicts caused by giving free rein to actors in making character interpretations and staging decisions. While being disgusted by Ruan's political and moral misconduct, Zhang Dai nevertheless recognized Ruan as a genius in the theatre.

Ruan's directing style was "to be particular about the plot, mood, logic and structure." To avoid using crude scripts which lacked what he felt to be the requisite qualities but which, nonetheless, were "widely used in many other troupes," he "took great pains to write plays for his troupe" (Zhang D. 73, Taoan vol. 8).
Under Wu Yueshi's direction, Wu's troupe produced star performers such as Heng and Quan. Their acting in the production of *The Peony Pavilion* was acclaimed as imbued with spirit, and was considered an unforgettable experience for audiences. Pan Zhiheng records that he attended the troupe's *The Peony Pavilion* production five times in a single winter despite his ill health, and claimed that the performances had miraculously eased his suffering (73, *Luanxiao* vol. 3).

Unlike Ruan Dacheng, who assumed all the directing himself, Wu Yueshi selected experts from relevant disciplines to carry out much of the directing of his troupe: "He invited literary scholars to teach the meaning [of the play], music scholars to compose the melodies, and theatre scholars to direct the movements [for his actors and actresses]." All members of his troupe, thirteen in number, were encouraged to develop their individual performing styles and techniques, which they did. What concerned Wu most seemed to be using his "profound knowledge and refined taste" to control overall theatrical effects in productions (Pan Z. 72-3, *Luanxiao* vol. 3; 199-202 vol. 2).

39 For details on their performing arts, see Chapter 19.
The success of Zhang Dai's directing became evident in both his troupe's public debut and its tour with the chuangqi play The Iceberg. The play took its subject matter from contemporary political events. Zhang Dai first revised the play when he found it inconsistent with the facts. He then directed his private troupe in the production, and presented it on the stage of a town god's temple, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The production evoked a strong response in an audience of tens of thousands. When an upright official was tortured, or an imperial concubine was hounded to death, "the audience members flew into a rage or fell silent out of fear." When the hero killed the secret police officers sent by an evil head eunuch to arrest his political enemies, "the audience members whistled, shouted, jumped, and stamped." "The atmosphere was so wild that it seemed like the structure would be brought down."

The Iceberg company then went on tour from Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province, Zhang Dai's hometown, to Nianzhou in Shandong Province, where Zhang Dai and his troupe faced the challenge of reworking the production on short notice.

While entertaining the prefectural commissioner Liu Banfang that day, I [Zhang Dai] heard Banfang's comments: "This play [The Iceberg] has eighty to ninety percent of the facts in its plot. I hate to say it, but it still misses several events [which should have been included in the plot] such as the inner-court maneuver, the chrysanthemum banquet, the forcing-out of the Rhinoceros Horn, and the collecting of the bags." When the party was over that night, I wrote the [Gramatic] verses, and supervised and
urged my little boys [actors] to memorize them. The next day the play was put on in the prefectural commissioner's office with seven more scenes added, just as Banfang had suggested. Banfang was greatly surprised.

Zhang Dai's overnight accomplishment included writing seven scenes, directing them, and putting them on stage. Zhang's miraculous effectiveness as a playwright and a director immediately won Liu's respect. He also won "His Excellency's lasting friendship upon Liu's recommendation" soon afterwards (Zhang D. 70, Taoan vol. 7).

Directors of the time were usually not satisfied merely by excellence in technique, such as accurate melody, clear enunciation, and "beautified" acting. They strove to improve the troupes until their productions were "lifelike both in appearance and spirit." To reach such a state of art, they turned to life itself as their ultimate resource.

According to Tian Lanfang, author of a biographical sketch of Hou Chaozong, Hou Xun (Hou Chaozong's father) "paid much attention" to his private troupe. "He wanted to make sure [that his troupe's performances were] true to life and in keeping with [theatrical] rules." Hou Xun made a daring move:

He was so bold as to order his little servants [i.e. his young actors] to follow him to the imperial court, ostensibly to serve him, but actually their mission was to observe all those courtiers. [The actors] then imitated the appearances of courtiers, virtuous
or wicked, royal or crafty, in their productions (Hou C. 5).

During Ming times, the staging of private troupes was characterized by individuality and creativity. Some of the major developments and characteristics were found in scenery, stage crafts, special effects, sophisticated properties, artificial illumination, troupe specialization and the presentation of complete productions.

A troupe owner's creativity and imagination sometimes led to innovations in stage technique and to the production of original special effects. Liu Huiji was one of the troupe owners who "wanted to address the weaknesses of theatre all through the ages" by pioneering in sophisticated scenery and stagecraft on the traditional bare stage. His dream was materialized in his female troupe.

Female troupes traditionally were characterized as "being merely pretty and coquettish, slow and smooth, or mannerly and stylish." Liu's female-troupe, however, performed wonders on stage. The performance of the play *Emperor Tang Minghuang Visits the Palace in the Moon* (Tang Minghuang you yuegong) was a good example:

The stage was pitch dark. A sword wielded by a deft hand and a thunderbolt was heard. A black curtain was suddenly withdrawn and the moon was revealed, which was as round as [if it had been drawn by] a pair of compasses. Colorful clouds made of
[semi-transparent] goat horns\textsuperscript{40} were applied under and around the moon. In the moon appeared Shang Yi, Wu Gang, the osmanthus tree, and the White Hare pounding medical herbs [in a mortar]. Several "Brighter Moons" (Saiyueming) shone through a thin gauze curtain. The whitish radiance looked like [the light of] a gray dawn. A piece of cloth was spread and turned into a bridge. Then [the emperor] mounted the moon. The scenery was so miraculous that [the spectators] forgot that it was only theatre (Zhang D. 49, \textit{Taoan} vol. 5).

The "Lantern Dance" scene was another example. About ten dancers, each holding a lantern, appeared and disappeared suddenly. "Numerous scenes of weird illusions" were "quite fantastic," according to an eyewitness (Zhang D. 49, \textit{Taoan} vol. 5).

The contemporary performing artist and theatre expert Peng Tianxi, "who had hardly praised anyone, felt heartfelt admiration toward the young women from Liu Huiji's private troupe." He was convinced that Liu Huiji had so perfected the performing arts of his female-troupe that "men are no longer necessary, and the Big Peng [himself] is no longer necessary" in the theatre world (Zhang D. 49, \textit{Taoan} vol. 5).

\textsuperscript{40} Apparently goat horns were used in this case for their semi-transparent quality. They were used for lantern covers for the same reason.

\textsuperscript{41} According to Chinese folklore, Shang Yi, Wu Gang, the osmanthus tree, and the White Hare are all legendary figures in the moon.

\textsuperscript{42} Zhang Dai did not define the "Brighter Moon." In the context, however, the "Brighter Moon" could be a kind of candle or light to illuminate the stage.
Stage properties became more and more sophisticated toward the end of the Ming dynasty. The stage properties employed in Ruan Dacheng's plays were fancy and detailed, including such things as dragon lanterns and a statue of Zigu (the goddess of toilets in Chinese folklore) in Ten Mis-identifications (Shi cuoren), and the flying swallows and dancing elephants in The Swallow Letter (Yanzi jian) (Zhang D. 74, Taoan vol. 8).

During the Late Ming, artificial illumination was a common practice in the theatre world. Theatre performances often lasted late into the night. Descriptions of night performances are numerous in many sources, including Qi Biaojia's diary. On the 6th of the sixth lunar month in 1632, for instance, Qi watched The Purple Hairpin (Zichaiji) until midnight (Qi B. 24, "Qibei longyan"). On the 14th of the tenth lunar month in 1639, he went to Qian Deyu's party:

Deyu presented all the members of his private troupe to his audience and had them play the "Picking Lotus Seedpods" scene from Washing Silk (Huansha ji, sometimes read as Wansha ji). I parted from him and came back on a boat. The night had passed by the time I arrived home (Qi B. 27, "Qilu").

In a similar instance, Zhang Dai's troupe set up magnificent lights in a temple hall for a theatre performance on the night of the 16th of the eighth lunar month in 1629 (Zhang D. 4, Taoan vol. 1).
Artificial illumination eventually became so loved that people started to use it in the daytime while keeping daylight away from the stage. "Ruan Dacheng held theatre performances all day long" in a huge hall, where he "set up layers of curtains outside and lighted decorated torches inside" (Jiao X. 199, vol. 6).

Illumination was not the only purpose of Ming stage lighting. Zhang Dai once directed his actors in the performance of 40 to 50 Yuan plays at in a venue where many "extremely extravagant and luxurious lanterns" were set up. This, no doubt, served to create a theatrical atmosphere. However, Zhang also believed that "without the theatre performance, the lanterns would not have their full potential" (Zhang D. 36-7, Taoan vol. 4).

A troupe owner's individual preference and effort might eventually evolve into the troupe's specialty. Zhu Yunlai, who had a troupe of actresses, loved instrumental music, singing and dancing. Therefore he concentrated his female troupe's efforts in these fields. He first of all trained his actresses to play musical instruments, such as the zither, lute, xianzi (a three-stringed plucked instrument), drum, xiao (a vertical bamboo flute), and other wind instruments. Then he trained them to sing and dance before he ever taught them anything else in the theatre arts. His troupe ended up excelling in music,
singing and dancing. "Theatre thus became an excuse for his exhibit [of music, singing and dancing]." The troupe's singing so overshadowed the dialogue that "spectators felt the dialogue unnecessary." The troupe's dancing was so delicate and spectacular that it often won acclaim from the audience. Zhu Yunlai took much pride in the praise. "Whenever he heard a word of praise, he would rush to the dressing room to tell his actresses." Because performers were inevitably showered with praise, "he was in [the dressing room] one moment and out the next. He certainly exhausted himself" (Zhang D. 13, Taoan vol. 2).

While commercial troupes often cut details or scenes in order to make their presentations more compact for various reasons (Li Y. 77, vol. 4), private troupes still enacted the relatively complete productions of plays upon request to preserve their original versions:

The actor-manager [of Prime Minister Shen Shixing's troupe] was then Big-Eyes Wu. He knew that I was a theatre expert who especially liked The Bright Pears (Mingzhu ji) but disliked it being cut too much by [commercial] troupes. He gathered his troupe for ten days to perform the whole play for me (Pan Z. 136, Luanxiao vol. 3).

From the historical point of view, Ming people greatly contributed to the dramaturgy. For example, Ming theatre practitioners started to employ lighting for special effects rather than for stage illumination only. They created
elaborate scenery and scenery changes. Ming dramatists in the private theatre also developed traditional forms of performing arts, such as singing and dancing, and employed them in theatrical presentations.
Singing and dancing have always been important basic techniques in traditional Chinese theatre. During the Ming, one could find private troupes which specialized in singing, in dancing, or in both. This phenomenon arose due to theatrical, historical, and contemporary factors.

Theatrical factors, such as performing space and related circumstances, served to emphasize the use of singing and dancing in private troupes. The sophisticated arts of singing and dancing were especially suitable for private performances, most of which were presented on red rugs in residence halls for small audiences.

Historical factors contributed to the aesthetic and artistic preference of troupe owners for singing and dancing. China's elite families had long histories of owning private female singers (nányue). Wei Jiang, for example, was awarded eight female singers in 562 B.C. This is the first recorded mention of privately-owned female singers in China (Zuo Q.: 229, "The 11th year of Xiang Gong's reign"). During the following some two millennia (or 1,930 years, to be more precise) leading
to the Ming, owning female singers became a tradition among social celebrities. These privately-owned female singers presented primarily singing, dancing and instrumental music. Theatre was performed only regionally during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), and did not flourish nationwide until the Yuan dynasty (1206-1368). It was natural for Ming literati to emphasize singing, dancing, and instrumental music in their private troupes, because they were the ones who understood tradition best and respected it most.

Competition and fashion in singing were contemporary elements which encouraged the owners to improve their troupes' singing art. Singing competitions, which were common during the Ming dynasty, contributed much to the perfection of the art. Every year, for example, during the evening of the Mid-Autumn Festival (the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month), people from all walks of life in Suzhou gathered on Tiger Hill (Huqiu) to witness or participate in an annual singing contest. One contemporary account describes an evening which started with more than one hundred performances of singing and instrumental music as the moon rose. The crowd was so noisy that "people could not even hear themselves yelling." As the competition continued, fewer performers chose to appear. Well after midnight, the competition ended with just one man on a
rock singing without any instrumental accompaniment (Zhang D. 46-7, Taoan vol. 5).

It was highly fashionable among literati to be considered expert in singing and music, and many spent much time and effort to improve their skills in those arts. For instance, Qin Silin, a student of the Imperial College [Boshi Dizi], loved to sing. He would start singing in the midst of a party, or alone by himself, or whenever "he felt that he had the desire to sing." Singing was his first interest even on the eve of examinations:

When the Education Inspector came from the Ministry [to preside over the examinations], all Qin brought with him in a travel trunk were libretti of The Lute (Pipa ji) and The West Chamber (Xixiang ji). People reminded him: "You don't worry about the examinations, do you?" He answered with a smile: "I do worry. I worry about my singing being imperfect, but not about my composition being bad" (Xu F. 243).

Hou Chaozong was able to identify a single mistake in singing or in instrumental music, even in the midst of a noisy party "when he and others were drinking, yelling, arguing and joking," or at a social gathering "when he was wielding his brush to compose a poem or a few lines of prose, or while writing a stanza in reply." Tian Lanfang, Hou's biographer, wrote with great respect for Hou's theatrical attainments and his manner (Hou C. 5).

Ming literati were proud of their great attainments in theatre arts. In his later years, Zhang Dai recalled with much pride that actors remembered his expertise so
well that they "would not dare to perform carelessly" whenever he was present (Zhang D. 69-70, Taoan vol. 7).

Most literati-owners of private troupes were very conscious of their performers' singing skills and would delight for them to show off whenever they had a chance to do so (Zhang D. 39, Taoan vol. 4; 13, vol. 2).

The art of singing was so well developed in the Ming private troupes that many of the groups had several singing stars, each with her or his individual characteristics. Contemporary theatre experts delighted in differentiating their singing abilities and commending them in specific ways. The comments, however, were often written in a symbolic or metaphorical style, similar to the ways in which Ming literati commented on poetry.

The singing styles of actors Zhong and Xiao, as theatre critic Pan Zhiheng pointed out, were orthodox. "Their practices strictly followed the standard of the school of Wei Liangfu and Liang Chunyu" (Pan Z. 202, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Huixing Lian's (stage name) voice had a quality of roundness. It sounded like "a jade bracelet turning," or "a luan" and phoenix singing" (Pan Z. 213, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Both the luan and the phoenix are mythical birds.
The singing of Zhu Yunlai's actresses was subtle, delicate, and had depth, whether it was with string and wind instrument accompaniment, or with clappers [to mark the tempo and rhythm] only" (Zhang D. 13, *Taoan* vol. 2).

Both Zhang Xiangfeng and Zhao Bingyu (stage names) were capable of very high pitches: the former's "could pierce the clouds," while the latter's "would stop the clouds" (Pan Z. 213, *Luanxiao* vol. 3).

Ping, Bi, and Hui all sang in lengthened sounds. Ping's sound was straight, as though "half of it ran down the river, and the other half went to the clouds." Bi's sound was described as being circular: "it moves around the roof beams." Hui's sound was rich in content. "The lengthened sounds conveyed such intimate and heart-to-heart feelings, [it was] as if [she was singing] to each spectator [alone]." Thus she was able to communicate a very personal way with each person in an audience (Pan Z. 200-1, *Luanxiao* vol. 2).

Interestingly, the loudness of a performer's voice was often neglected in contemporary comments. Volume was an important quality in commercial troupes, but not in private troupes. For actors in the later, who performed primarily in residence halls and for small audiences, volume was not necessarily highly valued.
Theatrical dances, especially solo dances, were often components of plot, characterization, or emotional expression. Dance for dance's sake was discouraged. Therefore, in order to present a specific piece of dance, the right play had to be found, so that "the excuse of the plot might be used." Zhu Yunlai did so in presenting his troupe's instrumental music, singing and dancing in theatre performances, as mentioned in Chapter 17.

Nevertheless, theatrical dance was judged primarily by its form, not by its content. In his criticism of Wang Jixuan's twelve actors and actresses, Pan Zhiheng wrote almost exclusively about the technique of their dances, such as Guo Qiongzi's (stage name) postures, Man Xiurong's (stage name) steps, Xi Shuyue's (stage name) carriage, Zhao Bingyu's (stage name) gestures, and Zhang Xiangfeng's waist movements. Nothing was said of the dramatic content of the dances (Pan Z. 211-5, Luanxiao vol. 3).

To certain spectators and critics, other kinds of interests including sexual ones were important in theatrical dances. Zhao Bingyu's dance was graceful, with a romantic touch of the South. To a critic's eyes, "she exuded her tenderness and love both dynamically and statically." "Wearing a palace ribbon and a string of pearls, she showed her gorgeous demeanour and skill in
the Wu style of 'fast-and-small-step walking' in a breeze."
She could also, when the play required, jump high in group
dances (Pan Z. 214-5, Luanxiao vol. 3).

To one male's gaze, Pan Yingran's solo dance was
suggestive and full of feminine charm:

I love her boundless winding and turning. I am always
enchanted, whether it is by her sleeves flying or
her feet kicking. Then as though [she] suddenly ceases
her enchantments, I regain control of my mind" (Pan
Z. 231, Luanxiao vol. 3).

It is not clear how she stopped this man, and perhaps
others, from being overwhelmed by her "enchantments.".
Possibly they survived the testing because "she looked
pure and lustrous."

The actresses Heng and Ping (Pan named them Jiangru
and Nanru in his commentary) performed in two romantic
plays, demonstrating a frail beauty in their dance. The
fact that they were still recovering from an illness seemed
to enhance the delicate beauty of their dance. Spectators
"were touched and fell into deep thought" (Pan Z. 208,
Luanxiao vol. 2).

Only a small number of chuanqi plays during the Ming
provided the music that served group dances. According
to Pan Zhiheng, the most spectacular group dance was that
in the "Five Scouts" scene of The West Garden (Xiyuan ji):

The dance includes the techniques of "Five Umbrellas"
and "Five Flags." This "Scouts" scene used the "Flags"
[technique]: Five beauties jumped up together, more
than a foot from the ground. The jade-like lustrous
flesh around their waists was exposed (Pan Z. 90, Luanxiao vol. 3).

To some spectators, this group dance offered a voyeuristic attraction.

Zhao Bingyu was one of the five actresses who performed the "Scouts" dance, for a poem dedicated to her reads:

...You must have seen the Jades lining up in the air, but will the Fairy of Xiang River [synonym for Zhao Bingyu] stay after the music (Pan Z. 214-5, Luanxiao vol. 3)?

"The Jades lining up in the air" is a clear reference to the "Scouts" dance scene.

The most beautiful group dances of their day were said to be the "Six Actresses Dance" and "Eight Actresses Dance" performed by Zhou Diguang's troupe. The dances presented many different formations and variations on them:

[The actresses] spread out on stage at one moment and formed a pyramid the next. [The formations] moved forward and backward, opened up and closed down, exhausting all possible variations (Pan Z. 90, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Zhu Yunlai's female troupe in its production of Xishi offered still another kind of group dance, which was sumptuous and gorgeous. The Xishi dance presented five actresses as main dancers. They "waved long sleeves and soft streamers into coils to circle their bodies." They "touched the ground and turned around, waving and leaning
like fragile peonies." In addition, more than twenty accompanying dancers were dressed as maids of honor and eunuchs. They held assorted properties, such as decorated canopies, lotus-shaped torches, round silk fans, and palace lanterns. "The scene was ablaze with lights, and rich and colorful as brocade. The spectators were surprised and amazed" (Zhang D. 13, Taoan vol. 2).

There were dances full of masculine beauty as well. He Meidu's (stage name) dance was both spectacular and powerful. He Meidu was less than five feet tall, but "he had a boldness of vision." He danced as if "the rainbow encircled his body." "The spectators were startled at the frightening anger he expressed" in his masculine dance. Pan Zhiheng believed that the spirit informing He Meidu's dance was an essential component in the making of a hero (Pan Z. 215, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Singing and dancing were highly valued performing arts in private troupes of the period. A superior level of skill in these arts was not, however, the ultimate criterion by which most owners, performers, and spectators evaluated a performance. Singing and dancing were meant to be organic components in a certain acting style.
In a Ming private troupe, ideal acting followed three inter-related principles. The first principle involves that harmonizes all the acting elements, such as singing, dancing, speaking, and moving. The second principle involves a style that conforms to role type. And the third principle involves an individual style.

Heng, the leading actress in Wu Yueshi's troupe, possessed a touch of underlying melancholy in her singing, as a poem dedicated to her indicates:

A chosen nightingale of the palace  
Flies out of the Imperial Shanglin Park,  
Her songs linger in the air  
Above the lonely and sad river.

This quality fit Heng's style, which was subtle and suggestive, with a sorrowful tone (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2).

In the same troupe, Zhong and Xiao's singing was so disciplined that they "followed only the most authentic principles of the school of Wei Liangfu and Liang Chenyu." Their singing served well their "controlled, confident,
purposeful and powerful" performing styles (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Ming actors and actresses usually specialized in one of the role types. Characters of the same role type shared many essential stage identities, such as sex, age, language, and often social status. Thus the acting styles of actors and actresses were pretty much defined by their role types.

Heng's subtle style worked out remarkably well with her role type of dan (the primary young female). The dan is the heroine character in a Ming chuangi play, the plots of which usually mingle joys and sorrows, partings and reunions—most of the vicissitudes of life.

Quan, Heng's fellow actor, specialized in sheng (the primary young male) characters. While Quan shared some characteristics in physical and vocal beauty with Heng, such as "sweet and mellow songs and a graceful fairy-like figure," which were fashionable on stage (Pan Z. 72-3, Luanxiao vol. 3), he still kept some masculine elements in his refined acting style. As Pan Zhiheng observed: "Quan was vehement. His natural grace and elegance could be sensed [by the spectators]. He, free of femininity, was self-possessed with dignity" (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2).
While performing styles were restricted by role types, actually there were many possible performing styles for playing any of the role types. Gifted Ming actors and actresses could always distinguish themselves with their unique performing styles.

He Qinhua from Zhou Diguang's troupe was another sheng role actor. "He often played separation and reunion" as the plots required. As Pan Zhiheng observed, his acting went far beyond the simple presentation of the corresponding emotions in separation and reunion:

Looking high and far, walking trippingly,
As if he has renounced the world.
His true self is revealed
Once in a while on the stage.
He does not raise his arm to wave farewell
Until the parting road can no more bear the anxiety.
The reunion is full of happiness,
Which nevertheless reflects the sorrowful past.
(Pan Z. 230, Luanxiao vol. 3).

He Qinhua sometimes introduced a little of his own personality when playing sheng characters. In doing so, he "possessed a leisurely and carefree mood," and "took an attitude of standing aloof from worldly affairs." He sometimes seemed to distance himself from characters in order to take a new perspective. The spectators then "believed that the actor on the stage was only one of his incarnations." His elegant, reserved, and somewhat philosophical performing style was powerful on stage, because it challenged the spectators' intelligence and imagination. He Qinhua appealed to members of the
audience, not only those who were sentimental, but also those who were hardhearted and already "knew the ways of the world," and moved them to tears. Some spectators "become sick at heart without even seeing the scenes" in the theatre atmosphere created by He (Pan Z. 230, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Pan Yingran, another dan role actress, was a beautiful young woman with "gold-like spirit and jade-like body." She was also a charming dancer whose audience "was enchanted with her turns and kicks." Unlike her fellow actor He Qinhua, Pan Yingran had a performing style with "a pure, lustrous, and natural delight." Her acting "was much based on her true feelings." She might change her ways of presentation from one performance to another, or, when she "had a second thought," would alter a part of a movement while doing it. "Those who were bound to the rules and forms could never learn anything like her art," a contemporary critic declared (Pan Z. 231, Luanxiao vol. 3).

There were also actors and actresses who excelled in supporting roles with their distinctive styles, such as Zhang San and He Wenqian in xiaodan (secondary young female) roles (Pan Z. 232, Luanxiao vol. 3), Zhong and Xiao in wai (old male) roles, and Hemeidu, Huanwufang (stage names) and Bing in jing (painted face) roles.
Zhang San, an actor playing xiaodan roles, served in Prime Minister Shen's troupe. He won great favor in Wu, where people keenly appreciated theatre arts. When "he was taken away" by "the extremely admiring" official Liu Tianyu, "the Wu people missed him." When he passed by Wu three years later, "the Wu people implored him to stay."

Zhang San is said to have performed best when under the influence of alcohol:

He was addicted to drink. When he was drunk on the stage, his gorgeous beauty was superb. He could not give full play to his skill until he was drunk...He was a big man. One night I drank with him and he got drunk. Then I watched him play Hongniang [the maid in The West Chamber (Xixiang ji)]. Every detail of his voice and movements, to my surprise, represented that of a delicate girl. I felt transported (Pan Z. 136, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Although Zhang San played xiaodan (secondary young female roles) as his specialty, he was also able to play dan (heroine roles), and to play them well. When Zhang San returned to Shen's troupe after his three-year absence in Yue (Guangdong) in southern China, he played the heroine Liu Wushuang in a production of The Bright Pearls (Mingzhu ji):

He [the actor-manager] assigned Zhang San to play Wushuang. The performance satisfied me. I felt ashamed that I could not reward Zhang San with ten-thousand ounces of silver. Zhang San died of sickness less than a year later. My memories of his performances, which live in my heart, have not yet vanished (Pan Z. 136, Luanxiao vol. 3).
Zhong and Xiao were wai role actors in Wu Yue-shi's troupe. Characters in the wai role type were old men, often with a respectable social status. Zhong and Xiao thus developed a performing style with strength as well as grace. They presented dignified deportment on the stage, with Zhong playing officials and Xiao commoners. Their movements were "controlled, confident, purposeful and powerful." Their demeanor "was replete with formalities." Their characterized yet balanced acting style placed Zhong and Xiao among the stars of their day (Pan Z. 202, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Jing (painted face) was a role type for male characters with a special personality, often strong as well. Jing roles were either bigger or smaller than real life and often produced humorous or grotesque scenes, which were much liked by a typical audience. Many theatre critics considered jing roles to add an exotic, somewhat foreign flavor to the stage, "like garlic and strong cheese." Hemei Du and Huan Wufang were jing actors in Fan Yunlin's troupe. Hemei Du's performance was powerful and grotesque. He was bold and energetic, "having the breadth of spirit to swallow an elephant." "The anger which he expressed startled the audience members." His spiritual and exaggerated acting style was much like that of "the head shaman who had a boldness of vision on stage" (Pan Z. 215,
Huan Wufang’s style was light and humorous. "He had a glib tongue." As soon as he put on his makeup, "he would spontaneously satirize whatever arose." He moved fast, actually jumping around on stage. He also could change his attitude so fast that "he is cold as an iceberg one minute, and hot as the sun the next" (Pan Z. 215, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Actor Bing of Wu Yueshi's troupe specialized in portraying wicked characters. "He was just like a treacherous high court official, and satisfied himself by harming others" on stage. His characters "do not care about wisely consulting the lord, but concentrate on holding immediate power over the life and death of others." A poem describing his performing art reads:

Even when he ceases to be angry,  
He looks like a vulture or falcon,  
Speaking in an indistinct voice.  
While stroking his beard,  
A trick is played  
In the turning of his hand.  
The auditorium is stilled with silence,  
Happiness is replaced with sadness.  
Who would say that he is not controlling  
The knitting brows  
And the smiling faces (Pan Z. 201, Luanxiao vol. 2)!

The performing style of an individual actor or actress might be adjusted or altered in any given production. As has been discussed in this Section, on stage He Qinhua had different "incarnations;" and Zhang San played both
dan and xiaodan roles. Such facts suggest that both of them used their flexible performing styles intelligently.

Certain elements of a performing style might be exaggerated or moderated, concentrated or avoided for the sake of character interpretation. Wu Yishi of Wu Taiyi's troupe successfully portrayed Liu Mengmei, the hero of The Peony Pavilion. One account describes his performance in an entertainment district in Nanjing. Among the actors:

Only Yishi had the knack of performing Liu Mengmei, who is secure in the knowledge that he has the strong backing of his talent and his status as [Du Bao's] son-in-law. He therefore refused to yield to the violence (Pan Z. 210, Luanxiao vol. 3). Wu Yishi made "infatuation" the key element in his acting, which was based on a correct understanding of the character, according to theatre critic Pan Zhiheng. Wu Yishi's performance took place soon after Tang Xianzu's The Peony Pavilion became available to the public. Yishi was then only thirteen years old. "The later actors did their utmost to imitate [Yishi], but never attained [his achievements]."

Ten years after the production, Wu's attitude of infatuation was still alive in the memory of audience members (Pan Z. 72-3, Luanxiao vol. 3).

All performers who wanted to relate to their audience on a Ming stage strove for a harmonious, suitable, and distinctive acting style. This acting was the most
efficient vehicle to convey their message on a conventional stage. Communication between performers and spectators, after all, was what theatre was all about.
CHAPTER 20
COMMUNICATION

In the private theatre during Ming times, communication between performers and spectators was carried out at many levels. On the basis of analysis, these levels have been condensed into three stages in this study by the author:

Stage 1, "the stage of convention," or "the beautiful stage;"

Stage 2, "the stage of plots," or "the meaningful stage;" and

Stage 3, "the stage of enlightenment," or "the spiritual stage."

In the reality of a Ming theatre performance, levels of communication were much more subtle and complicated than what have been indicated above. There were many layers of communication within a single stage. Stage 1 and 2 were usually co-existent. Stage 3 was often non-existent; and when it did exist, it occurred only between a select few of the performers and of their spectators.

In stage 1, an actor was expected to be in command of the conventional performing techniques, including, but
not limited to, accurate singing, clear enunciation, skillful dancing, and beautified acting. These abilities were considered basic and minimal for all performers. Contemporary accounts indicate that the rigid process of selecting and training had prepared the majority of actors and actresses to achieve the techniques for performing correctly and beautifully.\textsuperscript{44} Living as they did in an environment of great enthusiasm for theatre culture and, especially, for theatre performance, audience members at a Ming private theatre usually were able to appreciate sophisticated performing arts and sometimes to criticize sensitively even minor mistakes.\textsuperscript{45}

While the first stage of communication did not necessarily indicate a low level of artistic achievement on the part of performers, the physical aspects of the performance, rather than the dramatic contents of the play, were perceived as the major interests by the audience. This stage of communication was especially overwhelming during a performance presented by a troupe that specialized in singing, dancing, or instrumental music. In Zhu Yunlai's female troupe, for example, theatrical plots served only

\textsuperscript{44} Many such examples can be found in Chapters 14 and 18 above.

\textsuperscript{45} Such facts have been mentioned in stories about Zhang Xin, Shen Jing, and Chen Duo in Chapter 12; Hou Chaozong and Zhang Dai in Chapter 18.
as "an excuse" for exhibiting the group’s singing, dancing, and instrumental music. Spectators frequently praised these outstanding points of the troupe’s performance, and just as frequently the owner rushed to the dressing room to report the words of praise to his actresses (Zhang D. 13, Taoan vol. 2). None of them seemed to worry a bit that doing so might interrupt the show on stage. That was because the presentation was perceived as a spectacle of performing arts, rather than as the dramatization of a story.

Communication between performers and spectators at "the beautiful first stage" was not limited to theatrical arts. Because actresses and actors often became "sex objects" on stage, many times sexual interests were the message, whether intended or not on the performers' part. A poem dedicated to actress Man Xiurong (stage name) of Wang Jixuan's troupe reads:

Sweet singing and fresh charm,
You are the incarnation of love-birds.
Already [spectators] feel transformed under your petticoat,
Don't tantalize them with any more words in the songs (Pan Z. 212, Luanxiao vol. 3).

The means of such communication sometimes included stylistic and beautified body language, such as Man Xiurong's non-verbal expression:

46 For detailed descriptions of Zhu Yunlai's troupe and the phenomena of its performance, see Chapters 17 and 18.
She walks slowly but looks as though [she is] running. She sits there being relaxed but also straight and dignified. Her [graceful] disposition is comparable to that of an orchid plant. She speaks with her body and passes messages with her [facial] expression. [Man Xiurong] is the one said to be "exhibiting a hundred charms at once" (Pan Z. 212, Luanxiao vol. 3).

At the second stage of communication between performers and members of an audience, theatrical plots were the message. Actors and actresses were perceived as characters in a play. They were expected to understand the dramatic literature and to perform intelligently. Merely presenting excellent techniques without understanding the plots was condemned as "heartless singing," "dead voice," and "artificial performance" by a contemporary critic. In this "meaningful stage" of communication, the actors and actresses who attained the highest reputations were those who portrayed their characters in a "lifelike" manner.

Heng and Quan, both capable singers with distinctive performing styles, were stars in Wu Yueshi's troupe. Their reputations, however, were mainly built on their portrayal of, respectively, Du Liniang, the heroine, and Liu Mengmei, the hero, in The Peony Pavilion (Mudan tingle).

47 Li Yu's detailed criticism and reasoning can be found in the Introduction to Part Two.

48 For details, see Chapter 19.
Heng, for instance, based her acting on an intelligent and creative interpretation of the character she played. Du Liniang, daughter to Prefect Du Bao, has been raised under strict Confucian precepts. She scarcely emerges from her boudoir and does not have a chance to see even a garden until one day her father leaves town on business. She has never seen a man other than her father and an old pedantic tutor. However, right after the visit to the garden, she has a dream in which she meets a young scholar in the garden and falls in love with him. Du Liniang subsequently dies of lovesickness, but even in the other world she never gives up her love.

Heng realized what the illusions created around the romantic dream and its aftermath meant to Du Liniang. First, "the illusions are introduced to Du at a time when she is extremely stirred by her dawning perception of love;" then the illusions "led her to have a romantic dream;" and finally her revival from the tomb is a result of her spirit searching for love, thus "her leaving the illusions is a result of illusions," but not an awakening from the illusions. While the reality is for others to enjoy, illusions are hers to keep. Only in the illusions does Du Liniang find her true self and make her spiritual life meaningful. That is why "Du takes the dream as reality;" and why "although none of the others, including her parents, believes in the illusions, the two [Du and her lover Liu
Mengmei] come to believe even more firmly in the illusions." Based on such an understanding of her character, Heng dared "to play every word [in order to stress Du Liniang's] search for illusions" on stage (Pan Z. 72, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Correct understanding, accordingly, opens the door to the lifelike portrayal of a character. But the second stage of communication also requires that such an understanding be materialized, i.e., that the character be vividly enacted on stage.

Using herself as the substance from which to produce the character she wanted to portray, an actress had to investigate, analyze, and develop the desired qualities inside her to achieve the fullest purpose. The character Du Liniang, for example, needs a great passion to sustain her illusion. And, according to a contemporary theory about performance: "Only those capable of being crazy are capable of having passion. Only those capable of having passion are capable of portraying the passion" (Pan Z. 72, Luanxiao vol. 3). Thus the actress had to find and cultivate in herself "both the passion and the craziness," two of the desired qualities, in order to play the character, as Heng did so admirably.

As a result, Heng's communication in "the stage of plots" was effective. Because she "placed her own passion in the illusions," she was able to act "as if she did not know how and why the illusions and the passion happened
to her" (Pan Z. 73, Luanxiao vol. 3). To a certain extent, Heng was not only playing the character, but also was "becoming" the character.

However, the communication between Heng and her spectators in Stage 2 did not violate the principles and aesthetics applied in Stage 1. While portraying the vague and uncertain illusions, "Heng did not miss even a single word" from the play script, and "she excelled in all the details" of the conventional acting (Pan Z. 72, Luanxiao vol. 3). Heng did not indulge herself in the illusions which she helped to create on stage. She never let her "craziness" and passion get out of control. Heng understood why her passion and illusions were created and knew how they should be used. What she presented on stage was not a naturalistic performance in the sense of Western theatre, but was a performance that drew on the mastery of theatre techniques and the creativity of acting "between the lines" of the script.

The phenomena of communication in the third stage differed greatly from those in the first and second stages. First of all, performers presented merely signs, instead of direct and clear messages to an audience, whether in words, music, or conventional body language. Second, members of an audience were invited to participate in the communication as active players, instead of sharing in
the performance as merely passive receivers. Third, such a communication was not a constant phenomenon in the theatre world, but a rare yet enlightening happening which could take place only when a presentation bought together all three of the prerequisites: capable actors, intelligent spectators, and an inspiring script.

In the third stage of communication, an actor or actress often "acted less" or "delayed" the acting. Also, the signs which he or she presented conveyed much more than the expected literary or conventional meanings.

Thus, He Qinhua from Zhou Diguang's troupe, as has been mentioned in Chapter 19, delayed his acting in this manner:

He does not raise his arm to wave farewell
Until the parting road can no more bear the anxiety.

And his signs suggested quite unconventional sentiments:

The reunion is full of happiness
Which nevertheless reflects the sorrowful past.

During "the spiritual stage" of communication, which was not strictly bound to the verbal and visual images, some of He Qinhua's spectators "become sick at heart without even seeing the scenes" (Pan Z. 230, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Actress Pan Yinran, also from Zhou Diguang's troupe, was "an intelligent person." Her acting involved many unpredictable elements which surprised spectators. But those elements were meant to be signs leading to intellectual communication:
While leisurely walking, she would raise her arms but suddenly stop. While entering [a place], she returned at the halfway point with a second thought.

The effects of this kind of communication seemed to be spontaneous but actually were often carefully planned: "Her sentiments are presented before she performs. The message goes beyond [the words of] her song" (Pan Z. 231, Luanxiao vol. 3). Sometimes a performer based his or her choice of the means of communication on the interpretation of the character being presented. As has been mentioned above, Heng of Wu Yueshi's troupe played the part of Du Liniang in the production of The Peony Pavilion. Because "Du [Liniang] has a passion for illusions which is irrational" (Pan Z. 73, Luanxiao vol. 3), a rational and descriptive style of acting would not have been able to portray the essence of Du Liniang. As Pan Zhile observed: "It has been most difficult to find anyone who understands Du Liniang's passion" (Pan Z. 72, Luanxiao vol. 3). Heng took another approach. "She did not want to tell her [character's] feelings and thoughts. An understanding spectator [viewing her performance] perceived the feelings and thoughts beyond the means [of words]" (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2).

While the purpose in the first and second stages of communication was to pass the message of the performance
to the spectators and thereby to arouse their emotions, the primary goal in the third stage of communication was to challenge a spectators' intelligence and thereby to encourage him to interpret the performer's repertory of signs with delight.

During Heng's performance in *The Peony Pavilion*, she used an acting technique of "avoiding saying" (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2). This "avoiding saying" was not "non-acting," that is, just saying nothing, but was, rather, acting out the unsaid, that is, providing an audience with signs, which in their turn led sensitive and intelligent spectators to discover their significance. In this case, "avoiding" was the sign, and "the unsaid" implied the significance.

The delicate charm of Heng's performance lay not only in her intentional hesitation in expressing herself in the character, but also in her deliberate covering-up of thoughts and feelings, in other words, by her skillful use of "avoiding saying." In searching for the significance of the signs from Heng's acting, such as hesitation and covering-up, some spectators "reached a sudden and unexpected recognition" of the essence of the character. Such a recognition made "a spectator's spirit and soul fly over" (Pan Z. 199, Luanxiao vol. 2) the gap between Heng's "sweet and mellow songs and graceful fairy-like figure" on stage and "the sorrow and sadness which she
placed beyond the words and music" (Pan Z. 72-3, Luanxiao vol. 3). Heng's performance would then become not only an experience in theatrical entertainment, but also one of transcendent enlightenment for the spectator.

The third stage of communication could not take place until the performer's message was transmitted beyond the usual verbal and visual bounds. And this communication could not have any theatrical significance until it succeeded in transmitting plot-related messages. This rising above the ordinary was necessary because some non-theatrical messages, such as sexual fantasies, could also be transmitted by means beyond verbal and visual bounds. For example, Zhang Xiangfeng (stage name) from Wang Jixuan's troupe was a capable actress. Her admirers "were enchanted before she tells her message." Some of them even had fantasies of "flying over the Wu Mountain and the Luo River" with her while watching her perform (Pan Z. 213, Luanxiao vol. 3). Both the Wu Mountain and the Luo River are allusions to having sex (with a fairy woman).

From the perspective of theatre, only some of the most inspiring plays offered real opportunities for performers and spectators to communicate in "the intelligent stage." Tang Xianzu's The Peony Pavilion, as Pan Zhiheng correctly pointed out, "opens a way leading to the spiritual
and intelligent realm" (Pan Z. 72, Luanxiao vol. 3). Heng saw the opportunity and successfully communicated with members of her audience in achieving "the spiritual stage" in the production of The Peony Pavilion. The extant historical material does not explain exactly how Heng applied her techniques in the performance in order to act out "the unsaid." It is possible, however, to find passages from The Peony Pavilion which do suggest "unsaid contents." These three brief scenes, selected from Cyril Birch's translation of "Episode Ten: The Interrupted Dream" in the play, illustrate what kinds of opportunities an inspiring play might offer for an actress to communicate with her audience in attaining "the spiritual stage."

The Mirror Scene takes place when Du Liniang, having finished applying her makeup, actually looks in the mirror. But she complains that the mirror is peeping at her:

Pausing to straighten
the flower heads of hair ornaments,
perplexed to find that my mirror
stealing its half-glance at my hair
has thrown these "gleaming clouds"
into alarmed disarray.
(She takes a few steps)
Walking here in my chamber
how should I dare let others see my form! (Tang X. 43).

Du Liniang's singing verse indicates a beautiful, playful, and somewhat humorous dance scene. However, its dramatic potential can be fully realized only through intelligent and imaginative acting. Such acting would transform the mirror (which usually was not physically present on the
Ming stage) into Du Liniang's imagined lover and his male gaze, thus signifying the content of the unsaid: Du's lack of romantic love and her passionate longing for it. It would also foreshadow her further experiences in self-made illusions.

The Court Scene takes place after Du Liniang leaves her boudoir but before she enters the garden.

The spring a rippling thread of gossamer gleaming sinuous in the sun borne idly across the court (Tang X. 43).

The words literally mean little more than the actual scenery in a courtyard in the spring. However, the text provides several examples of word-games, such as have always been popular in Chinese literature, especially in drama and poetry, and which have often been praised in criticism (Wang J. 136, vol. 3). Thus, "spring" is a pun upon "lust" or "love;" and "gossamer in the sun" ("qingsi") is a homonym of "stirrings of love." The acting expressed in "avoiding saying" would help reveal to spectators the other dimensions of the dramatic verse.

The Admiring-flowers Scene takes place during Du Liniang's visit to the garden:

The green hillside bleeds with the cuckoo's tears of red azalea, shreds of mist lazy as wine fumes thread thesweetbriar.
However fine the peony, how can she rank as queen coming to bloom when spring has said farewell (Tang X. 45)!

Ostensibly, the Garden Scene seems to name little more than a number of kinds of flowers. However, a "joyful acting" here would be superficial and misleading. "Azalea" and "sweetbriar," easily grown bushes, are metaphors for girls from average families; "peony," with tender blossoms and delicate leaves, is a metaphor for young ladies, like Du herself, who come from rich and powerful families. Mention of these flowers in bloom is a symbol for girls starting their married life; and "spring" is an allusion to "youth." Therefore, the real meaning of the scene is not that Du Liniang admires the plantings or enjoys herself in the garden, but that she complains about her lack of romantic love and a timely marriage. In comparison with the girls from average families, who fully enjoy their earthy lives, the contrast intensifies Du's hidden bitterness. In a performance, only an actress' correct signs would lead intelligent spectators to appreciate the significance of the scene.

From the perspective of drama, communication in the level of the third stage gives some sophisticated plays a good chance to reach their full potential when they are performed. For instance, as a young lady having been raised under strictest Confucian precepts, Du Liniang does not talk easily about the awakening of her love, or complain about the lack of a lover. Communication in "the spiritual stage" provided Du the channel to gracefully and naturally
express herself (considering her background), and was therefore essential in the portrayal of the heroin in The Peony Pavilion. Heng proved that memorably in her performances.

Finally, the phenomenon of communication in the third stage indicates an influence from the aesthetics of Chinese poetry. "Reserve," or "hanxu," is a desirable style in poetry, according to Sikong Tu (837-908 A.D.), a scholar and critic of the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). In his influential 24 shipin (24 Modes of poetry), Sikong Tu wrote:

Without attaching a single word ("Bu zhao yizi"),
Fully capture the "wind-flow" ("Jinde fengliu").
Words that do not touch distress ("Yu bu she ji"),
Already carry unbearable grief ("Ruo bu sheng you")

(Mei Yaocheng (1002-1060 A.D., also known as Mei Shengyu), a poet of the Song dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), agreed:

The best [poems] are those which bring hard-to-describe scenes to [readers] in a lifelike manner, and those which present profound ideas without employing direct language (qtd. in Ouyang Xiu Liuyi shihua 267. Another translation for this passage can be found in Owen S. 375).

Many Chinese classical poets demonstrated an admirable facility for poetic reservation. Ming literati, with their cultural and educational backgrounds, were familiar with those classics. When they had the chance to create a theatre of their own, they readily encouraged a classical cachet and keenly appreciated implicit acting on stage. As we have seen above, such acting provided an intellectual
communication quite different from that in poetry but equally laudable for private theatre goers.
PART THREE

PUBLIC THEATRE PERFORMANCE

In the world of Ming public theatre, three forms of performances took place on a regular base. Commercial troupes provided professionally trained theatre. Courtesan actresses, also professionally trained, acted in amateur productions. And people who participated in their community's parade, more or less trained for an occasion, merrily presented their kind of amateur performances.

Commercial troupes dominated the public theatre because of their numbers and productivity. An account estimated that toward the end the Ming dynasty, about one thousand commercial troupes were active in the city of Suzhou alone (Jiao X. 199). They appeared before audiences ranging from peasants, townsmen, and mountain dwellers, to literati, noblemen, and imperial kinsmen (Jiao X. 209). Their service was essential in many religious and secular ceremonies, including weddings and funerals (Jiao W. 329-33). In certain circumstances, their business related with that of others in a very cooperative way. For instance, more
than twenty theatre presentations took place daily in each
one of the large hotels in the Tai Mountain area:

More than twenty suites [in the hotel] were taken
by actors.... Three levels of rates for feasts were
made available [to hotel guests]: The first-rate
feast was served on an individual table with sugar
cakes, five fruits, ten courses, preserved fruits,
and theatre performance. The second-rate feast was
served on a table shared by two persons with sugar
cakes, some courses, preserved fruits, and theatre
performance. The third-rate feast was served on a
table shared by three to four persons, also with sugar
cakes, some courses, and preserved fruits, but without
theatre performance; instead, singing and music were
presented. Altogether more than twenty theatre
performances, and countless singing and music
performances, took place in the one hotel.... There
were five to six hotels like that in the Prefecture
of Taian (Zhang D. 39-40, Taoan vol. 4).

The most common space in which commercial troupes
performed would have been temple stages. Some areas had
at least one such stage in each village. A few of those
Ming structures, often located in the remote central areas
of Mainland China, still exist today. During my recent
field research, 21 theatre structures built in Yuan, Ming,
and Early Qing dynasties, were studied. Those surviving
buildings provide first hand data about the physical
structure of Ming theatres. Photographs and diagrams are
provided for some of those theatre buildings, and will
be discussed in some detail in Chapters 24, 25, and 26.
A few of the Ming structures have been adapted for
non-theatre uses, and walls or other parts have been built
into them by people of later generations. In such cases,
the diagrams will also help in imagining the original stages.

In addition to the Ming era stages, a number of stages from Yuan and Qing periods are also studied in this chapter. Reasons for including them are:

First, some of the surviving Yuan stages were documented as having been rebuilt during the Ming dynasty. Hence, the architecture and techniques of Yuan theatre had some influence on architects, carpenters, painters, and other people who took part in the project during Ming times. On the other hand, the Ming builders also left their aesthetic and technical imprint on the Yuan structures. Finally, those rebuilt stages are known to have provided performance space for troupes during the Ming dynasty.

Second, the physical theatre of the Early Qing resembles that of the Ming. Much evidence shows that some of the theatre buildings attributed to the Early Qing are in fact reconstructions of Ming structures.

Third, the evolution of Ming theatre stages can be fully traced only by studying the Yuan, Ming, and Early Qing stages.

The theatre that employed courtesans was highly acclaimed during the Ming dynasty. Their performances were public in the sense that they were open to interested
clients, not only to troupe owners and their guests. However, theatre performances by these special actresses, as was the rule with the other services they offered, were limited to select paying clientele, instead of being available to the general public.

These courtesan actresses provided much more than performance of a theatrical sort. They, and their counterparts from commercial troupes (as well as attractive males), were subject to their patrons' sexual demands. Such sexual services were charged separately from the acting performances and were levied on individual accounts:

Xu, father of Pianpian, is well known for his acting in dan roles. Possessing such seductive skills, the price he charges for an overnight sleep is twice as much as that charged by Jijiang [also known as Jiang Binzhu, a courtesan who was active around the mid-16th Century] (Pan Z. 51, Luanxiao vol. 2).

A Ming courtesan, comparable in many respects to a hetaera of ancient Greece, often had the right to decline a patron's request for sexual favors or even a proposal of marriage. An actress in a commercial troupe, on the other hand, seemed to have few rights in this respect. Sometimes she had to run away from unwanted attention, instead of just saying "no" to the man. Li Rihua, a member of the Ming literati, wrote in his diary:

Eleventh of the eleventh lunar month [in 1611]: Miss Fu, a dan actress from a commercial troupe, is 17 years old now. She has an elegant demeanor. A rich man from Jintan spent 500 ounces of silver in order to marry her as his concubine. Miss Fu despised his conduct and escaped during the night. She is such an adorable girl (qtd. in Lu E. 79-80).
Parade performance was usually a community-based amateur presentation in the world of public theatre. Large numbers of people from a community often participated in these events, bringing to them genuine enthusiasm and resources of great value. During the Ming dynasty, parade performances were the only kind of theatre that focused attention on costumes, makeup, and properties, rather than on acting.
The macro-system of commercial troupes was organized on many levels, such as village troupes, city troupes, leading city troupes, and leading capital troupes, to name but a few. Often actors and actresses won advancements when they moved to another troupe of higher status, they did not necessarily attain it within the troupe in which they began their career.

Thus, actress E from the Qi region advanced up the progression of steps in the troupe-ladder from village troupe through city troupe, and then to leading city troupe, until she reached the top: a leading capital troupe registered in the Imperial Academy of Music. E recalled her debut in a village troupe:

When I stepped on stage for the first time, only old country folks gathered to watch my performance. I was red in the face as if all my blood had rushed up. My heart was as heavy as if several rocks had been piled up there. I stammered and could not finish a single scene.

E then moved up to a city troupe:

Later on I toured through all those three streets and six lanes [in the city] and made intimate friends with young men there, and I turned a blind eye to those old country folks who once had been my audience.
E probably soon afterward served in a leading city troupe, being able to associate with the social elite, who regularly watched only leading troupe productions:

I passed by the residences of those rich and powerful men. I drank and had dinner with them. We were joking and having unrestrained fun all day long. When I came back, I saw those city boys as my slaves.

Finally E performed as a member of a capital troupe and appeared before the imperial family:

I went to the capital and registered in the Imperial Academy of Music. I went in and out of the imperial palace and made my name in the capital. Sons of princes and dukes competed to carry my musical instruments. I then looked upon those rich and powerful [provincial] men as no more than pond ducks and garden birds.

According to Yuan Hongdao (1570-1623), a prime member of the mid Ming literati and the owner of a private troupe, E told this story to her apprentices in order to illustrate the changing attitudes that performers developed toward their successive audiences (Jiao X. 209). E's account is illustrative in miniature of the arrangements affecting commercial troupes during the Ming.

The system of commercial troupes did not guarantee the success of a gifted actor hoping to climb higher on the ladder, but, on the other hand, did not require an actor to take only one step at a time:

Actor Chen Mingzhi, a native of Luzhi Town of Changzhou County, Wu Prefecture, served a village troupe as the jing role actor. He was the only one who excelled in acting in his troupe. Often performing in villages, Chen had no chance to serve the elite. Therefore
few people in the provincial capital knew him (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199).

When Chen was finally "discovered" by chance, he was immediately invited to join a leading troupe. Later, Chen again was selected as the first choice for an "all star" troupe which was created to serve the imperial family during the Early Qing dynasty (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 201). The details about Chen Mingzhi's being discovered and his costume will be introduced soon after in this section. Some of other aspects of his performing arts will be discussed in related sections of this chapter.

The micro structure of a commercial troupe was regularly based on economic and competitive principles. For economic reasons, only a minimum number of performers was hired. For reasons of competition, only the best applicants were accepted. Often enough, a new member would be hired to replace an older one, but rarely were new members simply added to the company's payroll.

A commercial troupe was formed either by a number of compatible actors who organized themselves into a group, or by a merchant who engaged such a group of actors to form a troupe.

In a troupe organized by actors, the leading actor often became the actor-manager—in effect, the head of the group. "In Hao Kecheng troupe, there are three
outstanding actors, but Kecheng is the most charming one." Thus Hao Kecheng became the actor manager (Pan Z.: 51, Luanxiao vol. 2). Chen Er, a capable actor-manager, was also the leading actor of his troupe (Pan Z. 36, Luanxiao vol. 3).

However, an actress rarely if ever became actor-manager or head of her troupe, unless it was an all-female group. Chen Yeshu, Chen Er's younger sister, was never known as an actor-manager despite her artistry and fame. After her death, the Hao Kecheng Troupe outshone the Chen Er Troupe in presenting a rival show, a feat which never happened in Yeshu's days. That made people realize how much Chen Er and his troupe had owed their success to Yeshu (Pan Z. 36, Luanxiao vol. 3).

In a troupe organized by actors, all members seemed to have a say in troupe affairs and decision making. In Hanxiang troupe, all nine actors criticized the property manager when he hired a seemingly unqualified actor as a substitute in a production. And when this actor proved to have brilliant acting skills, the whole troupe persuaded him to join the group (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 200).49

A merchant might organize a commercial troupe by engaging actors who could play the required role types,

49 This actor was actually Chen Mingzhi as mentioned above.
as the Late Ming novel *Bian er chai* describes. The merchant paid each actor an engagement deposit of some 40 ounces of silver, which would be paid back when the actor left the troupe (qtd. in Wang A. 78).

Until the very end of the dynasty, a Ming commercial troupe regularly consisted of eight actors. Each of the actors specialized in one of the eight role types. Hu Yinglin, a Ming scholar, wrote in his *Shaoshi shanfang bicong*: "Today's actors often organize themselves into a groups of eight [role-types]: sheng, dan, jing and mo, and a secondary set of such role-types" (qtd. in Li T. 39).

This composition of eight actors in a commercial troupe changed during the period of late Ming and early Qing. Li Tiaoyuan, a scholar knowledgeable in matters of theatre, wrote in *Juhua* (published in 1784): "A troupe being composed of eight actors was true in the days when Tang Xianzu wrote his *The Peony Pavilion*. [The number of actors] was recently increased to ten [in a troupe]" (Li T. 39). The ten role types were sheng (primary male), xiaosheng (secondary sheng), wai (old male), mo (middle-aged male), jing (painted face), fu (secondary painted face), chou (clown or villain), dan (primary female), tie (secondary female), and laodan (old female) (Lu E. 98).
The ten role players, according to an Early Qing account, were supplemented by a group of musicians and a stage property manager ("Sisi," literally, one in charge of trunks). The musicians played clappers, drums, zheng (a bell-shaped percussion instrument), and string and wind instruments (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 200).

In general, a commercial troupe consisted of the minimum number of standing members with no allowance for substitute actors. According to an Early Qing account:

If one of the role-type [actors] cannot join the troupe for a production because of sickness, or being occupied by other events, it is the sole responsibility of the property manager to hire a substitute, which is termed "chexi [sharing a production]" (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199).

Chexi was not always a pleasant duty for the property manager, because troupe members were very critical of substitutes:

Actors commit themselves to reputations. When a leading troupe has a cast problem, the substitute must be invited from other leading troupes. Nobody wants to share a production with an incompetent substitute.

Such an attitude could easily cause crises. For instance, when Hanxiang, one of the four leading troupes in the city of Suzhou, needed a substitute for its jing role actor:

It happened that the jing role actors from other leading troupes were all too busy to be shared, as were those in the second-class troupes. The property-manager, streaming with sweat, rushed back
and forth in the area of Wugu, telling everyone he knew of his problem. When finally a jing actor from a village troupe was introduced to him, he "did not even have time to ask the substitute any questions [about his qualifications]" before hiring him as a substitute. Fortunately for the property manager, in this case the substitute happened to be the much-talented jing role actor Chen Mingzhi as mentioned above (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199).

In some commercial troupes, actors were responsible for their personal costumes and makeup, while the property manager was in charge of the troupe's stage properties. Chen Mingzhi brought his costume bag with him when he was hired as a substitute. When he arrived at the mansion where the performance was going to take place, he found that other actors had brought their costumes as well:

All the costume boxes had been carried into the house and lined up along the two side-chambers [which often served as dressing-rooms in a residential performance]: actors of the other nine role-types were already there (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 200).

Actors prepared personal costumes to best meet their individual needs. "Chen Mingzhi has a tiny body." But he played jing role characters, which were "messy and tall according to the category." When Chen opened his costume bag:
There came out a waist wrapping of silk padded with wadding. When Chen bound it around his belly, he was increased [in girth] by an arm span around. Then there came out a pair of boots with soles about three inches [literally, "more than two cun," which equals 2.62 inches] high. When Chen put on his boots, he grew taller [in front of everyone's eyes] (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 200).

In some troupes, members made their own individual daily life arrangements and assembled only for performances and other group activities. In the Late Ming novel *Bian er chai*, an inn-owner explains to a potential actor the way of living in a commercial *kunqiang* troupe, in order to ease his fear of sexual harassment:

"In *yiyangqiang* [troupes], there are cases of sexual harassment. But in a *kunqiang* [troupe], one must first accept the rules [not to sexually harass others], and then is allowed to join the troupe. Anyway, you go [to the troupe] only when there is a performance and come back to live in my inn when there is none" (qtd. in Wang A. 78).

Actors from Hanxiang and many other troupes gathered at the performance place just before the show began:

For actors, it was a routine: whenever a performance was arranged and money paid, the actors of the ten role-types went [to the performance place] themselves (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199).

Actors might appear together more often in certain troupes than in others. Performers in Hao Kecheng Troupe were younger in age. They often studied and rehearsed together. They "sometimes refused invitations from outside in order to concentrate on their arts" (Pan Z. 51, *Luanxiao* vol. 2).
From the facts discussed in this chapter, it is easy to determine that members of commercial troupes enjoyed much greater personal freedom than their counterparts in court and private troupes. Such a freedom was directly derived from the rules organizing commercial troupes. However, the rules themselves were determined by the background and social status of the members of commercial troupes.
CHAPTER 22
ACTOR BACKGROUND

During the Ming dynasty, public theatre performances were regularly provided by professional commercial troupes and sometimes by amateur courtesan actresses. The backgrounds of these two categories of theatre practitioners differed greatly.

Commercial troupes, which probably presented the greatest number of Ming theatre productions, and entertained the greatest number of people, recruited their performers from four major sources: (1) troupe apprentices; (2) graduates of training programs; (3) other commercial troupes; and (4) private troupes.

(1) Troupe Apprentices

Apprentices were youngsters who joined the troupe to learn theatre performance from master actors. They, or their guardians, usually signed contracts of a sort, promising to give certain kinds of services to the troupe in exchange for this training. According to Fan Lian, a Ming scholar: "Quite a number of Suzhou natives sell
themselves to learn theatre" (Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Lu E 79).

Sometimes, one might be forced by economic pressures to join a commercial troupe as an apprentice. If he or she was truly gifted—and had good luck—this big gamble would soon pay off. Wu Weiye (1609-1671), a late Ming-early Qing dramatist, tells the story of a Suzhou boy in his poem "Lindun Er." The boy joins a troupe to learn the arts of performance, not because of his enthusiasm for theatre, but because "his father owes tax to the government." In three years, the boy proves his success:

His unique skill charms princes and dukes,
Whose favors bring fortune to him.
Under beautifully decorated lanterns,
He performs on red rugs in mansion halls
for the magnificent feasts.
Dressed in clothes of brocade,
matched with a headdress of pearls,
He is accompanied by clappers of red sandalwood,
and flutes of fine jade (qtd. in Lu E. 144).

(2) Graduates of Training Programs

Actor training programs, a ready source of actors, were often sponsored by wealthy families, and sometimes operated as charity projects. According to the General Records of Yongji County, Shanxi Province:

Among the wealthy households in the community, quite a few spend several thousand ounces of silver without hesitation on the training of actors. They gather and train dozens of poor children to be actors. They are doing that for fame and compliments (Ning Huanzhang "Jinyou yi," qtd. in Guo S. 766).
Actor training programs also attracted many theatre students in the south. Zhang Han (1512-1595), Minister of Official Personnel Affairs, wrote about his hometown after his retirement:

Those who idle about and never take any decent job love to be actors. In the past 20-30 years, wealthy families spend good money on costumes, properties, and wind and percussion instruments. Ten or more people are invited as a group to enact chuāngjǐ plays. The busybodies write decadent [dramatic] verses, which are learned and sung. In this provincial capital [Hangzhou] alone, several thousand people make a living out of such activities (139, vol. 7).

While some graduates from actor training programs would join private troupes (as is discussed in Chapter 14), most ended up in commercial troupes.

(3) Other Commercial Troupes

Sometimes actors were hired from other commercial troupes for their desired abilities. Jin Feng was an actor in a commercial troupe. He left that troupe to serve Yan Shifan, a powerful official, as mentioned in Chapter 13. When Yan was executed, Jin was invited by another commercial troupe to play the part of Yan in the production of *The Phoenix Cries* (Mingfēng jì) (Jiao X. 201). Jin was probably an ideal candidate for the troupe, because of his familiarity with Yan, one of the play's major characters.

Another example comes from Chen Mingzhi, a star actor who has been discussed in the last section. Chen used to serve in a village troupe. When his powerful performance
in a **jing** role won very high respect from all the members of the Hanxiang Troupe, one of the four leading troupes in Wu, he was invited to join the leading troupe (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199-201).

When the demand for performers of Suzhou origin became great in Songjiang Prefecture, many Suzhou actresses moved in to replace the locals:

There are also [Suzhou] **dan** role actresses, as well as **sheng** role actresses who join troupes for economic gains. [As a result of this,] local [Songjiang] performers now make up only 20% to 30% or less [of the membership in an average troupe] (Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Lu E 79).

(4) Private Troupes

Recruiting actors with private troupe backgrounds was a common practice in commercial troupes, for those actors had established performance records in the Ming theatre. The Big Xinghua Troupe, for example, recruited Ma Xiaoqing and Lu Ziyun, who had previously served in Zhang Dai's private troupe (Zhang D. 70, Taoan vol. 7). They added significantly to the Xinghua Troupe, as both Ma and Lu had been leading actors in that reputable private troupe (Zhang D. 37, Taoan vol. 4). Additionally, when he was only twelve, Ma Xiaoqing had played successfully against a high ranking commercial troupe in a rival show (Zhang D. 34, Taoan vol. 4).

The backgrounds and characteristics of actors in a Ming commercial troupe were quite different from those
in a Yuan theatre troupe, a Ming court troupe, or a Ming private troupe.

Unlike the Yuan theatre troupes, which often consisted of family members, the Ming commercial troupes, especially the ones with high reputations, were largely composed of individuals who were well-trained, self-disciplined, and theatrically gifted.

Members of the Hao Kecheng Small Troupe "performed seriously and carefully." They "concentrated on their arts by keeping themselves from sexual passions which would harm their arts at young ages" (Pan Z. 51, Luanxiao vol. 2). While this kind of sexual self-discipline was probably rare, artistic self-discipline was common among Ming commercial troupes.

A commercial troupe sometimes had an established standard in selecting actors. Thus, Zhu Chusheng, with an unusually graceful bearing, was the leading actress in a female troupe. The criterion for selecting a new actress for the troupe was her ability to be a supporting actresses, but not her potentials as a star:

Only those actresses who are truly capable of backing Chusheng are allowed to stay in the troupe as role players. As a result, the composition of the troupe becomes better and better (Zhang D. 50, Taoan vol. 5).

Expectation concerning an actor's theatre background were high in an above-average commercial troupe, because actors with inadequate skills had little chance of success
in the increasingly competitive theatre world of the Ming. As mentioned above, about a thousand commercial troupes performed in the city of Suzhou toward the end of the Ming dynasty. Of those, only four leading troupes had the chance to appear regularly before the social elite (qtd. in Jiao X. 199). During the annual religious ceremony in Yan Zhu's Temple of Shanyin (also known as Shaoxing Prefecture), "only troupes among the highest three ranks in Yue [Zhejiang Province] were invited." And indeed, troupes from Hangzhou, the provincial capital, would sometimes be hired for the purpose, instead (Zhang D. 34, Taoan vol. 4).

Unlike many of the members of the Ming court troupes, who regularly came from the classes of social outcasts—the Musical Families and eunuchs—members of commercial troupes sometimes came from "good" families. They became professional actors by choice, rather than yield to pressures exerted by law enforcement officials at the any of the several levels of government.

Some people joined the troupes because of their love for theatre arts. "Yan Rong, of Dantu County of Zhenjiang Prefecture, Jiangsu Province, is from a good family. He loves to act in theatre because of his nature" (Li K. 994)

In certain southern areas with long histories of theatrical activities, prejudices against acting as a career and "actor" as a social status were reduced as the public
enthusiasm for theatre and the actors' incomes increased. According to Lu Rong, a Ming scholar:

There are people who are accustomed to being actors in areas such as Haiyan of Jiaxing; Yuyao of Shaoxing; Cixi of Ningbo; Huangyan of Taizhou; and Yongjia of Wenzhou. They are called "the theatre kids." Even sons from good families are not ashamed of being actors (Shuyuan zaji vol. 10, qtd. in Jiao X. 85).

An usual member of a Ming commercial troupe was a free man or woman. Their status was different from that of their counterparts in private troupes, whose owners literally bought and owned them. An average actor or actress in a Ming commercial troupe might choose to leave the troupe at his or her will.

Ma was the leading actor in the Xinghua troupe. In a rival show against the Hualin troupe, he failed to gain the audience's approval. He immediately left the troupe for the Capital, intending to improve his art. He later rejoined the Xinghua troupe after a period of three years (Hou C. 12, vol. 5).

An actor was free to choose his troupe, and vice versa. Chen Mingzhi, who has been discussed above, was again a good example in this case. Chen was hired as a jing role actor in the famed Hanxiang troupe, the previous jing role actor of the troupe was discharged as a result (Wang Zaiyang "Shu Chenyou shi," qtd. in Jiao X. 199-201).
Courtesans, many of whom provided amateur theatrical presentations to their patrons, had an ambiguous and subtle status in Ming society. Sometimes a courtesan was referred to as a mingji with "ji" in the first tone (literally, "a well-known courtesan," or "a concubine with status"). At other times she was referred to as a mingji with "ji" in the fourth tone (literally "a famous prostitute," or "a prostitute with status"). In certain circumstances, a literati patron called a courtesan nu jiaoshu (which means "female editor"), to indicate her skills in literature. While such modes of address were used quite liberally, they nevertheless suggest the social status and functions of courtesans.

Often born into families of theatre professionals and other types of entertainers, courtesans were practically social outcasts at birth. Kou Wenhua "was registered for residency in Zhushi," an entertainment quarter in Nanjing (Pan Z. 113, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19). Zhu Wuxia, of whom little is known other than that she was born at Taoyedu, "assumed the surname from Zhu Changqing," the owner of her training program (Pan Z. 116, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 20). Gu Yunqing was "a daughter of Xi, the musician" (Pan Z. 120, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 20). Xu Pianpian and Xu Tingting were daughters of a dan role actor from a commercial troupe (Pan Z. 51, Luanxiao vol. 2).
Through extensive education and training in literature and arts, courtesans were prepared to serve the elite. A close or intimate relation often developed between a courtesan and her patrons. Gu Lanfang (also known as Shanshan) was a very popular courtesan. "Celebrities all wanted to become her bosom friends" (Pan Z. 150, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 35). After an argument with one of her admirers, Xu Pianpian met Tu Long, a well known celebrity. Xu and Tu "communicated with poems and immediately became intimate friends" (Pan Z. 110-1, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19).

Courtesans were often present in a social gathering of the elite during the Ming dynasty. An intellectual courtesan usually interested and intrigued guests, and consequently won honor for her host. Wang Yue, a courtesan from Shanghai, demonstrated her skill in classical poetry:

In ten days, she read one thousand poems from the Tang dynasty and profoundly understood them. At parties, she expressively sang poems which fit the circumstances, as if she composed the poems impromptu. All the guests were deeply touched (Pan Z. 138, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 23).

Gu Lanfang's charm was such that "those people feel 'no Lanfang, no fun' at a party" (Pan Z. 138, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 35).

Such education and training are studied in Chapter 23.
Sex was not necessarily a part of the relations between a courtesan and her patrons. The poet Zhang, a native of Runing (also known as Runan, in Henan Province), whom Kou Wenhua admired, declared: "To adore Miss Kou, there is no need to sleep with her. To sleep with her, there is no need to have sex with her." However, Zhang's argument was challenged by a contemporary critic, who found that this courtesan often became sexual partners of rich and powerful patrons:

I am afraid that Zhang's theory is the theory of the people who have little means. Those young men who are infatuated with Kou have to sleep and have sex [with her] in order to keep their long-term relations. That is a fact (Pan Z. 114, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19).

Many courtesans capitalized on their appeal to win patrons, especially sex partners, from among the elite. Finding a rich or famous patron was not the primary concern for all courtesans, though. Wang Jie, "admired by her fellow courtesans ever since her puberty," had "an unconstrained character and refined tastes:"

She falls in love wholeheartedly with the one whom she likes, even if he is of humble origin or of low station. She never forces herself to serve anyone she feels a little uncomfortable with, even if he comes from a rich and powerful family or is himself a celebrity. She often says: "You just enjoy yours [money or fame]. I would rather be myself." She gladly endures her economic hardships and never changes her principles (Pan Z. 118, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 20).

Keeping to one's principles in selecting patrons was not always easy in the world of courtesans. Wang Yue, with many gifts in literature and arts, "is held in high
repute." But because "she prefers a simple lifestyle and fawns on nobody, she lives in poverty. She has been taken hostage by her creditors [for debts]. At one point she was unable to maintain appropriate bedding" (Pan Z. 138, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 23). Kou Wenhua, mentioned above, enjoyed fame because of her beauty and especially her literacy. She had many womanizers around her. She tried to keep her dignity by rejecting undesirable invitations, but not always successfully. She was able to cleverly "resist intimacies" from a celebrity. But "she cannot resist the seduction of 'Mr. Gold' ['Jinfu']." As a result of it, Kou was still "subject to frequent harassments" (Pan Z. 113, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19).

According to Yu Huai (1616-1696), the selection of a courtesan's patron was sometimes affected by her "manager," who was either the girl's natural mother, or the madam of the house that managed her:

Many of the girls in the entertainment quarter are [the managers'] natural daughters. Thus to them much love and care are given [by their mothers]. A fine patron is allowed to stay as long as he wishes. Little concern is paid to his money. [A mother] will not get mad if [her daughter] refuses to entertain a rich but vulgar merchant.... A proverb reads: "Mothers admire handsome [patrons], Madams adore rich [patrons]" (7).

When and if a courtesan "married" one of her patrons, usually to become his concubine, she became "a lady of the boudoir." And men "will no longer look at her as they do at those in the sex business." When and if such a
marriage was terminated, the concubine might again resume her profession. Li Jifen (also known as Li Renzhi), a beautiful singer from Piling, "was married as a concubine for five years.... She was then out [of marriage] for the same length of time" and served as a courtesan singer again (Pan Z. 133, Luanxiao vol. 3). Xu Pianpian returned to her profession after marriage to a betrayer:

Pianpian was seduced by a playboy from Guangling [also known as Yangzhou], who promised her marriage but changed his mind and left.... For more than one year, Pianpian kept her chastity, waiting [for him] often in cold and hunger.... She did not return [to the entertainment quarter in Nanjing] until that Guangling man [directly] rejected her (Pan Z. 110, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19).
CHAPTER 23
ACTOR TRAINING

Actor training was controlled by a very complex arrangement in the world of the Ming public theatre. First of all, grand masters of the theatre arts attracted many disciples, either chosen or self-styled. Selected disciples were trained by the grand masters themselves. But self-styled disciples were usually limited to imitating their idols, without the privilege of being instructed or corrected. As a result of this situation, selected and trained disciples received quite a different kind of theatrical education from those self-styled and imitated disciples.

Second, actors in a commercial troupe received their training from a variety of possible sources. One or a combination of two or more of these four sources might provide an actor's primary training: family members, actor managers, singing masters, and training programs.

Third, a number of courtesans were also professionally trained in theatre arts. Sometimes only careful study could distinguish an amateur courtesan performer from an actress in a commercial troupe. A training program for
courtesans, usually sophisticated, often included many subjects other than those of the theatre arts. Only the theatre aspects of such training will be discussed in this section.

1) Training by Grand Masters

The grand master might be a highly respected founder of a school, a widely acknowledged authority on performance, an idolized popular dramatist, or a richly gifted theatre artist. The training conducted by a grand master was not only highly professional, but sometimes was rather academic as well. In certain circumstances, new schools of theatre arts were created. Admission to any program was often restricted and personal interviews were conducted. Among the students or disciples being accepted by grand masters, many were already successful professionals in theatre.

Wei Liangfu, commonly acknowledged as the founder of the kunshangqiang musical system, prepared students for careers and wrote a famous training manual. Being one of Wei's students was an honor and thus disciples competed for a place in this school. According to Zhang Dafu, a Ming scholar:

Wei Liangfu, who styles himself Shangquan, lives near the southern city gate of Taicang. He is knowledgeable in music and its rules. He sings with a flawless artistry. Zhang Xiaoquan, Ji Jingbo, Dai Meichuan,
Bao Langlang, and the like competed to become his students (Zhang Dafu *Meihua caotang bitan*, qtd. in Wei L. 5-3).

Wei's students, selected and self-styled, could be many. Or many claimed to be his students. It seemed not unusual at all to come across a student of Wei Liangfu's. Feng Mengzhen, a Ming intellectual, met two of them in a small private gathering by chance. In his diary on the first day of the fourth lunar month in the year of Wanli Renyin (1613), Feng wrote:

I entertained Gu Zuhan, who styled himself Hanling. He introduced Chen Mengxuan, his fellow provincial, to me. Chen, trained by Wei Liangfu, is good in singing. Pan Shaojing, who was present attending Zhou Yugu, was also a student of Wei's (*Huaixue tang ji* vol. 59, qtd. Pan Z. 18).

Wei Liangfu's training manual "Qulâ" ("Music rules"), often referred to as a "book," consists of only a few more than a thousand characters. However, during the Ming dynasty, it was an irrefutable authority for selecting and training actors (Wei L. 5-13).

Deng Quanzhuo, a native of Suzhou, contributed much to the Ming theatre by founding a new school and training several influential disciples. He developed a variety of *kunshangqiang* known as *wugiang*, according to a contemporary account:

Deng Quanzhuo established himself about the same time that Wei Liangfu established *kungu* [also known as *kunshangqiang*] as the dominant musical system in [southern] theatre. [Deng's style] is a somewhat compromised version of Wei's. Following the principle
of harmony, Deng simplified and modified Wei's system. Thus [his style] is known as wuqiang in the locality (Pan Z. 17, Luanxiao vol. 4).

According to extant Ming materials, Deng's chosen disciples were all gifted theatre artists, some of whom in turn became grand masters themselves and founded their own schools:

Deng personally trained seven disciples, all of whom were able to alter a little [their master's style] and establish themselves. Deng's disciples, such as Huang Wenqin and Zhang Huaixian, and then Gao Jingting and Feng Sanfeng, and then Wang Weitai, successively became the leading masters [of their schools] (Pan Z. 17, Luanxiao vol. 4).

Deng and his disciples, both self-styled and personally chosen, had a lasting impact on Ming theatre. Zhu Zijian, He Jinquan, and Gu Xiaoquan, all followers of Deng, became influential theatre artists and grand masters themselves. Huang Wenqin and other selected disciples had much influence over theatre in other provinces. In Xin'an [also known as She County] of Anhui Province, people learned from Deng's disciples and greatly improved their arts: "Although they do not speak the dialect of Wu as well [as Deng's disciples can], they do come close in the music of Wu [to Deng's disciples]." Wang Weitai, with many gifts in theatre arts, was open-minded and knowledgeable in the theory and history of southern music. "He was the only one [among Deng's disciples] who was capable of composing music for a written play." He pointed out that "the three branches [the theatre schools of Wuxi, Kunshan, and Suzhou] all come from common roots, and do not need to scorn each other." He believed
that each school had its strong points, and that the ideal combination in singing would be "Wuxi's head, Kunshan's tail, and Suzhou's body" (Pan Z. 17, Luanxiao vol. 4).

Liang Chenyu (c.1521 – c.1594), the first kunqu playwright and one of the finest kunqu composers, was idolized in the contemporary theatre world. His appearance, manner, and achievements in performance all helped to build such an image that he was all but worshiped by theatre enthusiasts and professionals alike:

Liang Bolong [Chenyu] enjoyed his unconventional lifestyle. He was handsome, about six feet tall, with a long beard. Contemporary dramatists follow his model in their works. His romantic songs and elegant verses were popular in the rich and famous communities. Gifts were continuously sent to him, such as silver, silk, rare incense, famous breeds of horses, and ingenious handcrafts. Singing boys and dancing girls would consider themselves unfortunate if they had not met him in person (Woting Zading, qtd. in Jiao X. 117, vol. 2).

Occasionally, Liang offered ceremonious training to professionals in a grand setting.

When he taught people to compose songs, Bolong set up a huge desk and sat himself at it facing the west. [His students or worshippers] lined up on the left and right sides [of the desk], passing on [his teachings] and joining in the singing (Woting Zading, qtd. in Jiao X. 117, vol. 2).

Considering Liang Chenyu's expertise and authority, such a formal event was probably intended to be more symbolic ritual than practical instruction. If that was true, then his ceremonious training had served its purpose, which was meant to meet professionals' psychological needs instead
of solve their technical problems. As a matter of fact, the average actor in a commercial troupe received his training from a variety of sources, of which the least likely was a grand master.

2) Training by Family Members

Judging from available data, actor training was most frequently carried out by the performer's own family members, by actor managers, or by singing masters. Or, more often than not, they were trained through any combination of people in these three categories.

Before joining a commercial troupe, an actor usually acquired more or less professional training from his family members, because acting was often an hereditary career in the Ming. Fu Yu, "extremely beautiful when he was young," was himself a successful commercial troupe actor. His children inherited both his looks and his career.

He married a women from the Chen family and had a son and a daughter. The son was named Mao, and the daughter Shou. Both of them were unusually pretty and charming. At twelve or thirteen years of age, they looked like a pair of shining lotus blossoms.

When these two child actors made their debut, "all the members of the audience went crazy. It was somewhat like [Zheng] Jiaofu meeting beauties along the Han River, not even realizing that his jade pendants had been lost" (Pan Z. 126, Luanxiao vol. 8). According to Lie xian zhuan
(Stories of immortals), the beauties whom Zheng Jiaofu had met earlier were the goddesses of the river, who gave Zheng their jade pendants which he lost unwittingly. Theatre critic Pan Zhiheng used this metaphor to illustrate the enchanting power of those child performers. Such power was attained not only through their youthful beauty, but also through their arts in performing, which had deep roots in their family traditions:

By that time melodies of the northern theatre [beiqu] were almost lost, but Pu Yu personally taught them to his children. The melodies, accompanied on stringed instruments, resembled the sounds of precious stones and metals (Pan Z. 126, Luanxiao vol. 8).

In families of performing professionals, the fact that children inherited their parents' careers and acting styles was common rather than exceptional:

He Shaoying twitters out a strange sound [as his specialty], which is loved by gentlemen and ladies. His son, also playing dan roles, enjoys a fame which equals that of Hao Kecheng (Pan Z. 126, Luanxiao vol. 8).

One of the advantages in family training was that a child had full access to all of his or her parents' acting techniques, including those unique to them. Parents would not withhold any secret skills from their own children, as they might withhold from other people's offspring, in the very competitive theatre world of Ming. Fu Yu's daughter Shou learned all his skills. As a result, "Fu Shou's performances in the northern theatre style soon became so famous that she was considered the best in both
Nanjing and Beijing, the two capitals of the Ming" (Pan Z. 130, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Fu Shou did not surprise her contemporaries when she "swore not to teach anyone else the Northern Theatre style she had learned from her own father." People started to worry that "after Fu Shou's marriage [when most likely she would withdraw from the stage], the Northern Theatre will become a lost art" (Shen D.: 646, vol. 25). Fu Shou, for unknown reasons, eventually changed her mind. She taught her art to Zhu Ziqing, a student actress. When Pan Zhiheng heard Zhu Ziqing's singing, he wondered: "It is strange! Where is Lingxiu [another name for Fu Shou]? Why did I hear her singing?" (Pan Z. 130, Luanxiao vol. 3).

Zhang Yetang, a musician of the northern theatre, helped Wei Liangfu to revolutionize the kunshangqiang music system, which thereafter dominated the theatre for the next 250 years or so. Zhang Yetang's family produced master musicians for three generations in a row:

Grandfather Yetang made his name with the lute; father Xiaotang won his reputation with the tiquin [a two-stringed instrument]; now Pinfu [son to Xiaotang and grandson to Yetang], is famous with the sanxian [a three-stringed plucked instrument] (Pan Z. 80, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Family training and family tradition must have played an important role in such a phenomenon.
3) Training by Actor Managers

An actor manager (lingban), typically the head of a Ming commercial troupe, was often the best performing artist in his troupe. He sometimes also assumed the responsibility for training actors.

Chen Er, a native of Jingjiang, was an actor manager who headed his troupe (Pan Z. 36, Luanxiao vol. 3). He was also an excellent actor in the sheng [primary young male] roles. Chen trained his actresses himself and was considered superior to two other singing masters, Jiang and Shen (Pan Z. 9, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Hao Kecheng was the actor manager of a troupe named after him. He was not only an outstanding actor, but also a strict actor manager. His discipline guaranteed the troupe's success in actor training and productions:

The troupe had a burning hot reputation in the [southern] Capital [of Nanjing]. The actors and actresses were all very young. They had sweet voices, charming looks, and gorgeous costumes and ornaments. Concentrating [on their performing arts], they did not indulge in their sexual passions (Pan Z. 51, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Ma Sinian was the owner of a troupe comprised of fifteen to sixteen girls. She trained and brought her girls to "enact the full length northern theatre play The West Chamber (Xixiang ji) in Wu," the birthplace of Kunqu.
Qiaosun was the actress who performed the best because she learned the most from Ma Siniang's training:

The actress called Qiaosun is Ma's maidservant. She looks grotesque but sings beautifully. In the essential and subtle points of northern theatre singing, she has learned all the secrets passed down [by Ma Siniang]. She comes out first on the contemporary theatre stage. Other girls [in the troupe] have not yet gained one-tenth of her achievements (Shen D. 646, vol. 25).

4) Training by Singing Masters

During the Ming dynasty, singing masters regularly trained actors. Some of them worked independently, while others worked for a certain troupe:

Zhou Quan, of Xuzhou, was excellent in singing southern and northern [dramatic] verses. He had a loud and bright voice and a wide range of pitches.... He had two apprentices who mastered his singing skills. One of them was named Xu Suo, the other Wang Ming. They were both natives of Nianzhou (Li K. 994).

Because of Zhou Quan's fame, people often came to him to learn singing. His teaching methods were unique. Zhou first asked applicants to sing one or two songs in order to find out their voice quality, and consequently to determine the proper key note for their training. Zhou always taught in the evenings:

The master and apprentice sat facing each other. A burning joss stick was held by the master, who raised it to call for a louder voice, rested it for a pause, and lowered it to ask for a soft voice. The essence of singing is the modulation in tones. If the singing master gave oral instructions instead of [visual signals with] the burning joss stick, [the apprentice] would have to listen to instructions and to sing songs simultaneously. [One of the tasks] would distract him from the other task. But by watching the burning joss stick, [the apprentice] could concentrate on his singing (Li K. 994).
Sometimes singing masters in commercial troupes were experienced actors or musicians. Jiang, a native of Hukou, was the singing master for a girls' troupe. He was a wai role actor (old male) and a skillful drum player. Shen, the singing master for a girls' troupe, was a dan role actor (primary young female) (Pan Z. 9, Luanxiao vol. 2). Fu Yu, with his lifelong stage experience, was neither assigned nor hired, but "was elected by his fellow troupe members as the singing master" (Pan Z. 126, Luanxiao vol. 8).

A variety of individuals might be involved as singing masters in training actors. Zhu Yangxin, a hanger-on of literati, once worked as an independent singing master:

Zhu Yangxin, a free gentleman [a euphemism for a hanger-on without a proper claim to a career], with a bright and pure voice, was the best received vocalist [in Piling].... He later taught [singing] at several places in the prefecture. Then he was bound to the regulations [controlling the job] and unable to leave freely.

In his late years, Zhu, fearing that his singing arts would be lost, trained a gifted actress:

I again met him in the year of Bingwu [1606], when he was close to sixty years of age. I asked if he had found one to inherit his singing art. He proudly claimed that he had found a girl student, but did not tell me her name. Twelve years later, in the year of Wuwu [1618] I heard someone singing in Xiusu Pavilion. The singer came out from behind the screen curtain and introduced herself as Li Caifen, a student of Zhu Yangxin. I was pleasantly surprised (Pan Z. 131, Luanxiao vol. 3).
Many theatre artists seized every chance to improve their arts. Continual training helped to advance their careers. Jiang Dounu, a famous actress, was criticized somewhat impolitely for her acting in *The West Chamber* by a man from Jiangxi Province. Qi Yaxiu, Dounu's mother, soon found out that the critic was a prince's singing master, who was truly superior to Dounu in acting. Accordingly, she invited the singing master to come and stay with them until Dounu learned all his skills. Thus Dounu had an unexpected period of training for ten days (*Jianfang Eshutang xianbi*, qtd. in Jiao X. 197-8, vol. 6).

5) Training Programs

Female graduates of training programs for performing arts did not necessarily become professional actresses. A good number of such programs were designed to train courtesans, for whom acting was a highly appreciated skill. The courses offered by such programs often combined subjects in performing arts with those in liberal arts. Zhu Changqing's program evidently offered training in more areas than just singing and dancing:

Changqing has a gentleman's reputation. He is given to chivalrous conduct in Qinhuai [Nanjing] area. He was fed up with singing and dancing. His unusually beautiful girls sometimes leave singing and dancing as well, in order to learn dramatic verses, then the *ci* songs, and finally the ballad poems.
Those female students initially wanting to acquire skills in singing and dancing eventually learned much more as a result of the influence of Zhu Changqing's attitude. "Wuxia, a girl from Peach-leaf Ferry, came as a child to Zhu Changqing's home to learn singing and dancing." However, she progressed so well that she composed a volume of her own poems, and learned other skills than those of singing and dancing. Two of Wuxia's classmates in singing and dance, named Tuo and Mei, also learned some arts of poetry in Zhu's house (Pan Z. 116, *Luanxiao* vol. 8).

In most of these programs, promising girls were trained in several courses simultaneously. Thus, Su Huan was trained in calligraphy, reading, and poetry from the ages of eleven through twelve. She was trained in singing and dance at thirteen through fourteen years of age (Pan Z. 173, *Genshi "Neiji"* vol. 12). Sponsored by one of her admirers, Xu Pian learned all her skills from famous artists and scholars, so she could obtain the best training possible:

Everyday she went to four masters to learn her arts. She learned calligraphy from Zhou Gongxia, *qin* [a seven-stringed instrument similar to the zither] from Xu Taichu, poetry from Lu Chengshu, and singing from Zhu Zijian (Pan Z. 110, *Genshi "Waiji"* vol. 19).

For these girls, the performing arts were not their only skills, and not necessarily their best skills. While Su Huan was best in singing (Pan Z. 173, *Genshi "Neiji"* vol. 12), Xu Pian excelled in poetry and calligraphy.
Her poetry teacher admitted that he was not as good as Xu Pian in composing poems. Several volumes of Xu's poems were circulated among her contemporaries (Pan Z. 110, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 19).
Stages built in temples, permanent structures intended to serve as theatres for productions associated with religious ceremonies, provided the most important spaces for performances by commercial troupes. Because the people of Ming times must have considered theatre as their most loved entertainment, they usually built the temple stage facing the main hall and frequently regaled their gods (and themselves) with theatre performances.

Wang Jiusi wrote in the general records for Hu County, Shaanxi Province: "They love to entertain the gods. They do not care if that means emptying their money bags" (Huxian zhi, qtd. in Jiao W. 253). The same impulse happened in Yaozhou, Shaanxi Province:

During the years of Chenghua [1465-1487], local people built temples and entertained gods. They spared no effort in meeting the expenses, because [the contribution] was [considered to be] a noble obligation (Yaozhou zhi vol. 4, qtd. in Jiao W. 253).

While many temple stages existed during the Ming, only a few of them were mentioned in records. An account of temple stages in Shaanxi Province is provided in Qinjiang
shigao (*A draft on the history of Qinqiang theatre*). Even in this incomplete account, 94 temple stages in 28 counties have been found in local general records (*fangzhi*). Evidently, 42 of the temple stages were built in the Ming or pre-Ming dynasties, while others were built either during the Qing dynasty or at dates unknown (Jiao W. 334-42). However, the great majority of temple stages were not mentioned in local general records. During recent field research conducted in Taigu County of Shanxi Province, for example, none of the three extant theatre stages which have been studied—a Ming stage in Jingxin Temple in Yangyi Village, a Qing stage in Wubian Temple in the county seat, and another stage in Hujia Village—was mentioned in the local general record, *Taigu xianzhi*.

Because of the frequency of theatre performances in religious ceremonies, a stage became a regular component of temple architecture. In Shaanxi Province, a town god's temple, or any other temple of some significance, was likely to have a stage built in its compound. Since the town god's temples were spread throughout the province, so also were the built-in temple stages.

In Sanyuan County "a singing [theatre] tower was built in the Town God's Temple to enact *zaju* plays [during the Ming]" (*Sanyuan xianzhi* vol. 4, qtd. in Jiao W. 338).
In Chunhua County "a three-bay theatre tower was built in the Town God's Temple during the Ming" (Chunhua xianzhi vol. 9, qtd. in Jiao W. 338).

In Hancheng County "the Town God's Temple has a theatre tower built in the year of Longqing Xinwei [1571]" (Hancheng xianzhi vol. 13, qtd. in Jiao W. 339).

A temple stage in Hu County was built only three years after the establishment of the Ming dynasty: "In front of the platform of the Town God's Temple, there is a theatre, which was built in the fourth year of Hongwu [1371]" (Hu xianzhi, qtd. in Jiao W. 336).

A temple hall and stage in Pucheng County were constructed simultaneously: "In the second year of Wanli [1574], the great Hall and a stage were completed" ("Chongxiu Chenghuang miao beiji," qtd. in Jiao W. 335).

The people in Chengcheng County already had two theatres in their Town God's Temple, but they wanted still another one, a bigger one:

The [Town God's] Temple had two [theatre] towers in front of it previously. In the early fall of the Year of Renwu [1582], a big [theatre] tower was newly completed....It now has three [theatre] towers ("Zengxiu chenghuangmiao xilou ji," qtd. in Jiao W. 335).

The three stages in the Town God's Temple of Xingping County were magnificent. They were several-storied structures, with pavilions on the middle floors:

The Town God's Temple, located at East Avenue, is broad in scope. It has three stages. The great pavilions on the middle floors are extremely tall
and magnificent. They are said to have been the property of Liu Jin [a powerful head eunuch in the early years of Zhengde (1506-1521)] (Jiaoding Xingping xianzhi vol. 3, qtd. in Jiao W. 335).

Temple stages can also be found in Guan Yu's temples. Guan Yu (also known as Guan Di or Guan Gong), a general in the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), was later deified, and as a god enjoyed his temples. In Tongguan County:

There is a three-bay theatre tower in front of Guandi's Temple. It was built in the eighteenth year of Jiajing [1539] in the Ming dynasty (Tongguan xianzhi, qtd. in Jiao W. 336).

In Jingyang County, a temple stage can be found in Xizhu village: "Guandi's Temple in Xizhu Village was established in the Ming. A theatre tower was built in [its compound]" (Jingyang xianzhi vol. 1, qtd. in Jiao W. 336).

Theatre stages were built in temples for a variety of other gods. For instance, Chunhua County had a mountain god's temple: "In the Dai-Mountain Temple, a performance hall was built in the year of Chongzhen Dingchou [1637]" ("Chongxiu Daiyuemiao ji," qtd. in Jiao W. 338). Hua County had a medical god's temple: "Yaowang Temple, established in the seventh year of Chenghua [1471] in the Ming dynasty, has a theatre stage" (Chongjian Hua xianzhi, qtd. in Jiao W. 339). And Jingyang County even had a stage within a cat god's nunnery: "The Fairy Cat's Nunnery was established
in the Ming, with a theatre tower built in [its compound]." (Jingyang xianzhi vol. 1, qtd. in Jiao W. 336). It was not clear why those people believed that a cat god would enjoy theatre.

A memorial temple for two high officials in Jingyang County had a stage. Was it supposed to entertain the spirits of those august deceased?

The theatre tower in the Two Heroic Official's Memorial Temple was destroyed during the Jin-Shaan earthquake in the thirty-fourth year of Jiajing [1555]. Workers were gathered to rebuild the theatre tower and the actors' dressing room(s) in the year of Wuwu [1558] ("Chongxiu ergongcheng siji," qtd. in Jiao W. 337).

Theatre stages were built in many other Buddhist and Taoist temples. In Jingyang county, "The temple and its theatre tower were built in the nineteenth year of Jiajing [1540]." "During the years of Jiajing [1522-1566] in the Ming, two theatre towers were built in Xianwang Temple" (Chongxiu Luqiao zhenzhi vol. 1, qtd. in Jiao W. 336). In Hancheng County: "Zhichuan Temple was built in the fourth year of Chenghua [1468]. It has a theatre stage" ("Yuanjun shengmu pailou ji," qtd. in Jiao W. 339).

During the 600 years since the establishment of the Ming dynasty in 1368, thousands of Ming temple stages have been destroyed in consequence of numerous wars, natural decay and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 through 1976.
According to the 1886 edition of *General records of Taigu County* in Shanxi Province:

Guangfan Temple, located in Shixiang Village which is three miles east of the county seat, was built in the fourth year of the Zhiping period [1067] in the Song dynasty [960-1279].

Ciji Temple, located in Xinlin Village which is four miles east of the county seat, was built in the second year of the Dading period [1162] in the Jin dynasty [1115-1234].

Jingxin Temple, located in Yangyi Village, which is six miles east of the county seat, was built in the first year of the Kaiyuan period [713] in the Tang dynasty [618-709] (*Taigu xianzhi* "Chapter 15 Temples," vol. 2).

Following these leads, all three villages were investigated during my recent field research. On the sites, I learned that two of the temples, those at Guangfan and at Ciji, had with their stages been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Only Jingxin Temple and its Ming stage survived.

Even though the great majority of Ming temple stages have been destroyed, the surviving ones still provide a relatively clear picture of those once-flourishing theatre structures. Among those studied during my recent field research, three from the North and two from the South have been chosen for discussion in detail in this dissertation. The three stages to the north of the Changjiang river have been selected because of the certainty of their dates, the significance of their styles, and the completeness of data about them.
1) The Theatre Stage of Jingxin Temple in Yangyi Town

Jingxin Temple, located in Yangyi Town, is about six miles east of the county seat Taigu of Shanxi Province. The temple was founded in 713, during the Tang dynasty. The history of the temple was engraved on many stone tablets, of which the majority are still preserved today (Photo 2. A stone tablet established in the year of Kangxi Dingmao [1687]). According to these tablets, the temple was rebuilt during the Dading period (1161-1189) in the Jin dynasty. The theatre structure, however, was first built in the temple compound during the years of Zhengde (1506-1521), in the Ming dynasty. The theatre structure was torn down during a temple reconstruction between Wanli Bingchen [1616] and Wanli Siwei [1619] (Yao Yong "Puxiu Yangyizhen Jingxin bubei ji"), after having served the community for about 100 years. Such a move was criticized and the construction of a new stage was justified based on the religious necessity:

Hui Spring benefits the community [in irrigation]. Dashi [also known as Guanyin, a Bodhisattva, in China; or Avalokitesvara in the West] prospers the whole country. Ceremonies are held on the 15th and 25th of the third [lunar] month every year. Are those ceremonies unnecessary or improper?

The lack of a permanent theatre building for religious ceremonies was immediately felt, and a new stage was built in 1623, according to a stone tablet established in the
third year of the Tianqi period (1623) in the Ming dynasty (Photo 3. Du Jinlei "Yangyishi xinjian shanting yueting bing zhuan Tianwangdian qiang ji"). During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the theatre structure was rebuilt at least three times, according to a stone tablet prepared in the sixth year of the Daoguang period (1826) (Dong Xin "Chongxiu Jingxinshi beiji").

The theatre stage in Jingxin Temple, with painted pillars and carved beams, is broad in scale. Photo 4 shows the front of the stage, and Diagram 1 is drawn to the scale of 1:100. The shapes of the front stage and the back stage are irregular. Diagram 2 shows the ground plan of the theatre building. Here too the scale is 1:100, and the measurements are made in centimeters. The front stage measures 32.15 feet (980 cm) in length, and 27.65 feet (660 cm) in depth; and the backstage measures 36.75 feet (1120 cm) in length and 15.42 feet (470 cm) in depth.

The roof style of the front stage is called juanpeng (rolling awning); it is supported by the dougong system, which allows the performance space to be free of pillars (Photo 5). On two sides of the acting area, angled walls were built to improve the reflection of sound waves toward the auditorium (Photo 6).

51 For literal description of the dougong system, see the note for Chapter 16.
2) The Theatre Stage of Guandi's Temple in Peijie Town

Peijie Town is midway between Yuncheng Prefecture and the county seat of Xia in southern Shanxi Province. A storehouse now being used in the town was found to be actually a Ming theatre building.

No published material or stone tablets have been found to determine the date of this building. However, during my field research, an inscription was found on the beam above the theatre stage (Photo 7), which reads:

Rebuilt at the auspicious time of the seventh day of the twelfth [lunar] month of the sixteenth year, or the year of Kuwei [1643], in the Chongzhen period of the Ming dynasty.

Such an inscription is irrefutable evidence for this Ming theatre structure. Although the structure had to be rebuilt during the Qing dynasty, its major parts and features from the Ming period were kept. Photo 8 shows some original parts, dougong, of the structure, which remain in the typical Ming style: big and strong.

Two important features, and an unusual third one, distinguish this theatre structure. First, the facade of the temple also served as the back wall of the stage. Photo 9 shows the facade of this Guandi's Temple. The three former entrances, now bricked in, are still recognizable in the photo. Diagram 3 shows the measurements of the facade of the temple compound. The scale is 1:100
and the measurements are in centimeters. Second, the stage center was one of three passageways that served as entrances to the temple. It was covered as performance space only during a theatre presentation. The unusual feature of this structure is that four pillars stand in front of the stage at ground level. Such off-stage front pillars have never been found in any other Ming theatre buildings in this area. Diagram 4 shows a reconstruction of the Ming theatre building. Walls and other parts added by later generations, for the purpose of converting the theatre to a storehouse, are not indicated. The scale is 1:100.

The stage, 32.81 feet (1000 cm) in length and 23.06 feet (703 cm) in depth, is raised 5.25 feet (160 cm) from the ground. The stage opening is 10.17 feet (310 cm) in height. Diagram 5 shows the ground plan of the theatre building. The scale is 1:100 and the measurements are in centimeters.

3) The Theatre Stage of Guandi's Temple in Datai Village

Datai Village is located in Xia County, southern Shanxi Province. Guandi's temple and its theatre building (Photo 10) in the village have been neglected for years. The stage now serves for storing hay.

The year in which the theatre was built is unknown. However, an inscription on the beam over the main hall
of the temple indicates that the temple was built in the eighth year of the Wanli period (1580) during the Ming dynasty. The theatre structure possibly was built in the same year, or soon after. Also, the style of the theatre building strongly suggests a Ming structure. The dougong and beams, all very large, as seen in Photo 11, are typical of Ming style. Diagram 6 shows the measurements of the dougong. The scale is 1:20 and the measurements are in centimeters.

As a theatre structure, this raised Ming stage has an important feature: a passageway 8 feet (245 cm) in width passes through the center of the stage at ground level. The passageway served as an entrance to the temple. It was covered only during a theatre presentation to serve as a part of the performance space.

The stage, 30.77 feet (938 cm) in length and 20.93 feet (638 cm) in depth, is raised 2.46 feet (75 cm) from the ground. The stage opening is 7.38 feet (225 cm) in height. Diagram 7 shows a reconstruction of this Ming theatre building. The scale is 1:100. Diagram 8 shows the ground plan of the structure. The scale is 1:100 and the measurements are in centimeters.

Each of the three northern stages mentioned above is divided into acting and backstage areas by screen doors, partition boards, partial walls, or a combination thereof.
However, the fragile elements of these dividing devices must have been replaced many times by later generations since the Ming dynasty. For all three, entrance is on stage right, and exit stage left.

Two temple stages in places south of the Changjiang River have been chosen for discussion. In fact, not many southern stages from the Ming era are preserved well enough to be discussed. Some elements of the extant stages prove to be problematic as well, in that they raise questions about certainty of dates, or authenticity of styles.

4) The Theatre Structure of Da Temple in Fengqiao Town

Da Temple is located in Fengqiao Town, about thirty miles southeast of Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang. During my field research, no first hand evidence, such as historic records, stone tablets, or beam inscriptions, were found that dated the stage. However, accounts about the temple and its stage were found in two recent publications. The Zhuji xian diming zhi (Gazetteer of Zhuji County) reads:

[The original structure of Da Temple] was that of the Memorial Temple of the Ding Clan during the period of late Yuan and early Ming. Right after the Jiajing period (1522-1566) of the Ming dynasty, the Duke of Ziwei's Temple was built [in the place of Ding's Memorial Temple] under an imperial edict to serve as a memorial temple for late Prime Minister Yang. This temple [compound] had been enlarged several times
since. It was not called "Da miao" [literally, "Big Temple"] until the Qing dynasty, when the temple was further enlarged....The temple stage is on the center [line of the temple] (Commission on Gazetteer of Zhuji County: 159).

Zhejiang sheng mingzhen zhi (Famous towns in Zhejiang Province) reads:

The Da Temple of Fengqiao was built during the Ming dynasty. It originally served as a memorial temple for late Prime minister Yang only. The temple was rebuilt during the Qing dynasty....The compound consists of a bell tower, drum tower, gate hall, theatre stage, center hall, back hall, and wing-rooms (Wei Q.: 231).

But both accounts fail to indicate the sources for the information they present.

The theatre stage of Da Temple is a splendid building, with painted pillars and carved beams (Photo 12). It is well maintained and ready to be put into use. The front stage, independently roofed and structured, serves as the acting area. The backstage, actually within another building, is also independently roofed and structured, joining the front stage only by passageways.

The acting area is defined and decorated by curved and upturned railings called meiren kao, literally, "a beauty's armrest" on three sides (excluding the rear), leaving an opening of only 4.72 feet in the front side. The front stage, 17.65 feet (538 cm) in length and 19.95 feet (608 cm) in depth, is approximately square shaped, and raised by poles to 6.73 feet (205 cm) from the ground. The stage opening is 7.38 feet (225 cm) in height. Diagram
9 shows the ground plan of the front stage. The scale is 1:100 and the measurements are in centimeters.

In this part of China, the particular *dougong* system used to support a theatre roof is called *jilong ding*, literally "roof of a chicken cage." Such a structure, seen only in southern theatre buildings, will be discussed further in the next section.

5) The Theatre Structure Facing Xiangdeng Temple in Keqiao Town

Keqiao Town is about 5 miles south of the city of Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. But Xiangdeng Temple is located in Binshe Village of the township, which is farther away in the countryside, about a 20 minute-walk through cultivated fields.

The theatre stage facing Xiangdeng Temple is located next to a bridge. Inscriptions on stone tablets, which record events at the temple, the bridge, and the stage, were heavily painted over with lime during the Cultural Revolution. In order to read the tablets without further damaging them, I used a brush, a towel, and a basin of river water to try to wash away some of the lime from the tablets. But only a few more words were recognizable after prolonged effort. One stone tablet, headed "Records about Xiangdeng," was found in the temple hall. A phrase was recognizable on the upper-left corner of the tablet:
"...The 45th year of the Wanli period [1617]." It probably indicates that the temple was built in 1617, and therefore during the Ming dynasty. Another stone tablet (Photo 13), laid into the stage right wall of the theatre building, reads:

...During the religious ceremonies and theatre performances in the spring and in the fall, audience members all around the bridge will read the names and praise the people [who have contributed to the bridge and the stage]...

This inscription indicates that theatre performances took place on the stage regularly. But during what historic period were they offered? The upper-left corner of the tablet, where the date of an inscription is often found, was heavily covered with lime. A local man, Qian Dexin, 81 years of age, remembered having seen the date before it was covered with lime: "Tianqi," it read. "Tianqi" was a period of seven years, 1621-1627, during the Ming dynasty. In other words, the Xiangdeng stage was a Ming theatre structure, providing Qian remembered correctly.

The theatre stage of Xiangdeng Temple is a simple structure (Photo 14). Its front stage, 16.54 feet (504 cm) in length and 16.40 feet (500 cm) in depth, is almost square, and is raised only 4.27 feet (130 cm) from the ground. The stage opening is 8.53 feet (260 cm) in height. Diagram 10 shows the ground plan of the front stage. The scale is 1:100 and the measurements are in centimeters. The roof over the front stage is supported by a system
of dougong and beams. The backstage is an enclosed simple dressing room under a flat roof.

This theatre structure, without any elaborate elements and florid ornaments often seen on late Ming and Qing stages, might have lost some of its identifying Ming features in the course of later rebuilding and reconstruction.
PHOTO 2

A QING STONE TABLET IN JINGXIN TEMPLE

Established in 1687
Briefly describes the history of the temple
PHOTO 3

A MING STONE TABLET IN JINGXIN TEMPLE

Established in 1623
Justifies and records the
construction of a new theatre stage
in the temple
PHOTO 4

FRONT VIEW OF JINGXIN TEMPLE STAGE
DIAGRAM 1

FRONT VIEW OF JINGXIN TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
DIAGRAM 2

GROUND PLAN OF JINGXIN TEMPLE STAGE
Scale 1:100
PHOTO 5

JUANPENG AND ITS SUPPORTING DOUGONG SYSTEM
ABOVE JINGXIN TEMPLE STAGE

Allowing performance space
to be free of pillars
PHOTO 6

ANGLED WALL ON JINGXIN TEMPLE STAGE

Built on each side of the acting area to improve reflection of sound waves
PHOTO 7

INSCRIPTION ON A BEAM ABOVE PEIJIE TEMPLE STAGE

Dates the building to 1643
PHOTO 8

DOUGONG ABOVE PEIJIE TEMPLE STAGE

Big and strong, in the Ming style
PHOTO 9

FACADE OF PEIJIE TEMPLE STAGE

With three entrances, now bricked in
Diagram 3

Facade of Peijie Temple Stage

Scale 1:100
DIAGRAM 4

RECONSTRUCTION OF PEIJIE TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
DIAGRAM 5

GROUND PLAN OF PEIJIE TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
PHOTO 10

DATAI TEMPLE STAGE

Now used for storing hay
PHOTO 11

DOUGONG AND BEAMS ABOVE DATAI TEMPLE STAGE

DIAGRAM 6

A SET OF DOUGONG ABOVE DATAI TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:20
DIAGRAM 7

RECONSTRUCTION OF DATAI TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100

DIAGRAM 8

GROUND PLAN OF DATAI TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
PHOTO 12

DA TEMPLE STAGE

Front stage and backstage, independently roofed and structured

DIAGRAM 9

GROUND PLAN OF THE FRONT STAGE OF DA TEMPLE

Scale 1:100
PHOTO 13

A MING STONE TABLET LAID INTO THE STAGE RIGHT WALL
OF XIANGDENG TEMPLE

Established during 1621-1627 (?)
Heavily painted over with lime
During the Cultural Revolution
PHOTO 14

XIANGDENG TEMPLE STAGE

DIAGRAM 10

GROUND PLAN OF THE FRONT STAGE
OF XIANGDENG TEMPLE

Scale 1:100
CHAPTER 25
DEVELOPMENT OF TEMPLE STAGES

The origins and influences of Ming temple stages were demonstrated in the assorted objects of the Yuan and Early Qing dynasties, which I was able to study during field research. Together with the data collected on the actual Ming theatre structures, traces of the gradual development of temple stages become recognizable. Because this comparative study is based on data from a limited number of stages, my results are suggestive rather than definitive.

1) The Position

All temple stages studied during my field research face the main temple hall. Chinese temples traditionally are built with their entrances facing the south. Thus, the theatre stages face the north. Usually a theatre structure was the south-most major building in a temple compound. The positioning of Chinese temple stages did not change during the nearly 700 years (1234-1911) of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.
2) The Platform

An average Yuan stage was built at the center of a platform of raised earth, generally leaving equal space on all four sides. Such a stage exists in the Ox God's Temple of Wei Village, of which Diagram 11 shows the ground plan; and in the East Mountain God's Temple in Dongyang Village, of which Diagram 12 shows the ground plan. Both villages are located in Linfen Prefecture, southern Shanxi Province.

A Ming stage, on the other hand, was built to the edges of the platform. A northern Ming platform, like those of the Yuan era, was made of raised and rammed earth, enclosed by brick walls. But a southern Ming platform was raised upon poles and often enclosed by stone or brick walls, making it look solid, when it was actually hollow. Photos 15 and 16 were taken during the process of rebuilding a southern Qing stage in Fushan Park of Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province. Photo 15 shows the front of the stage with its stone walls already in place. Photo 16 shows the back and the inside of the platform, before a joined backstage was constructed. The usual Qing stage platform follows the Ming style.

Among the known theatre buildings, the height of the platforms varies considerably. The northern stage platforms
are anywhere from 2.46 feet in Datai Village, through 7.55 feet in the Guangsheng Temple of Hongdong County, Shanxi Province (Photo 17). The southern ones range from 4.27 feet in Xiangdeng Temple, to 6.73 feet in Da Temple.

3) The Stage

A temple theatre from the Yuan era usually has a square stage, which is so divided that the acting area takes the front, about two thirds of the space, and the backstage takes the rest. Temporary devices, such as hanging curtains, were used to separate these two areas. On Yuan stages in the Ox God's Temple and the East Mountain God's Temple, iron nails and rings, which would have been used to hang curtains, are still in place high up on two side walls.

A northern Ming temple theatre usually has a rectangular stage, with its length greater than its depth. The stage is divided into acting area and backstage. Permanent means, such as doors, boards, or walls, were used to divide a Ming stage.

A southern Ming temple theatre looks a little like a Yuan stage in photos, because it also has a square stage. But in reality, it looks and functions quite differently from a Yuan stage. First, it is smaller in scale. Second, it is built to the edges of its platform, rather than in
the center. And third, the southern Ming temple stage is not divided into acting and backstage areas as in a Yuan theatre, but serves only for acting. Its backstage area is either situated within another structure, as in the Da Temple; or resembles a storage room incidentally attached to the stage, as in the Xiangdeng Temple. A Qing temple stage follows the respective Ming models both in the north and in the south.

The stage space was increased sometime between the Yuan and the Ming dynasties. In Yuan theatres, the stage measures 503 square feet in the Wei Village Temple, and 380 square feet in the Dongyong Village Temple. In Ming theatres, the stage space is 666 square feet in the Datai Village Temple, 664 square feet in the Peijie Town Temple, and 1240 square feet in the Jingxin Temple, as found in my field research.

4) The Side Walls

An important development in northern temple stages is seen in the introduction of side walls. Side walls to the backstage did not change much in that they had always existed, fully enclosing the backstage with the help of the back wall and the dividing partition setting off the front stage. The side walls to the front stage,
on the other hand, changed significantly during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

Around the mid Yuan dynasty, side walls for the front stage were added. Consequently, theatre stages seemed to "close in" from the audience point of view, that is, from having three sides open, to showing only one open side. Ming stages followed that trend. But toward the end of the Ming dynasty, or in the Early Qing dynasty, stages started to "open up" again.

The stage of the Ox God's Temple in Wei Village, with side walls enclosing only its backstage, has on its front stage three sides open to the audience (Photo 18). Evidently this stage was built during the Early Yuan, and rebuilt during the Middle Yuan, for inscriptions on its two stone pillars read:

Established in the late spring month of the 20th year of Zhiyuan period [1283] of the Great Yuan dynasty of the Mongols, or the year of Ruiwei [Photo 19].
Established on the 26th of the early autumn month in the first year of Zhizhi period [1321] of the Great Yuan dynasty, or the year of Xinyou [Photo 20].

The stage of the East Mountain God's Temple in Dongyang Village was built with three walls, leaving only one side open to an audience (Photo 21). It is a stage of the Late Yuan dynasty, as the inscriptions on the stone stele date it to the fifth year of Zhizheng period (1345). Theatre stages "closed in" as the dynasty progressed.

This "three-wall stage" style was generally kept during most of the Ming dynasty. Two out of the three northern
Ming temple stages discussed above, namely, those in Peijie Town and Datai Village, are "three-wall style" stages. The third, in Jingxin Temple, has "partial side walls" presenting some features often seen on stages built during the Qing dynasty. The side walls of the Jingxin stage are not extended out full-length to the front-line of the acting area but stop short, enclosing only one-third of the front stage. And the side walls were not parallel ones, but angled in a way that opened the stage to the audience.

These two features of later side walls, short and angled, are separately seen on northern Qing stages studied during my field research. The "short side walls" of the Qing stage in Wubian Temple of Taigu County, Shanxi Province are extended to only one-third of the length of front stage (Photo 22), similar to those of the Jingxin stage. Diagram 13 shows the proportional front view and ground plan of Wubian Temple stage. Such "angled side walls" were also seen in a stage in Hujia Village of Taigu County (Photo 23). Diagram 14 shows the front view and ground plan of the Hujia Village stage. The date of the original Hujia stage was not recorded in available accounts. It was known to have been rebuilt in the seventh year of the Jiaqing period (1802) during the Qing dynasty. However, the date of its angled walls can be determined by other evidence. A huge character "fu" ("happiness") was carved into each
of those angled side walls (Photo 24). The character, with little doubt, is an imitation of the calligraphy of the Qing Emperor Hongli (also better known, perhaps, as Qianlong or Chien Lung; reigned 1736-1795). Therefore, the angled walls were erected during the Qing dynasty, probably at the time when this theatre was rebuilt in 1802. That was close to 1827, the year when the Jingxin stage was rebuilt. Evidently, the "three-wall stage" style had been changed in this way during the Qing, if not during the late Ming.

Each of these three stages, in Jingxin Temple, Wubian Temple, and Hujia Village, moved away from the closed look of the earlier "three-wall" style, and opened up. However, that new openness was not a return to the simplicity of the early Yuan stages (which did not even have side walls on the front stages). The sophistication of the new designs suggests that much attention was paid to the architectural acoustics, as mentioned above; moreover, the designs are so individualized that each of the three stages has its own kind of side walls, as can be seen in their ground plans.

These changes in the side walls also suggest a change in the probable shape of the audience space for a northern temple stage during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The shape of the audience space can only be guessed, because no physical structure is known to have defined such an
area. An early or middle Yuan stage with no side walls in the acting area suggests a semicircular audience space. A Late Yuan, or an average northern Ming stage, with three full length side walls, suggests a rectangular audience space. And a Late Ming, or a Qing stage with short side walls, suggests a fan-shaped audience space. Diagram 15 illustrates these three models for stages and audience areas.

However, temple stages in southern China seem to have changed very little in this respect. During my field research, not even vestiges of side walls were found on the front stages of the five southern temple theatres which I investigated. They probably continued to have three sides open to audience as they had since the Yuan dynasty, or earlier.

5) The Roof

The temple stage roof style and its supporting dougong system changed significantly during the Yuan and the Ming dynasties. A square Yuan stage is usually covered by a single roof with upturned eaves, which is supported by an intricate dougong system. Photo 25 shows the dougong, and square frames which function as beams, under the stage roof in the Ox God's Temple of Wei Village. The system was constructed so that each level of dougong supports
a higher level, until the entire single-pitch hip roof is held up, thereby allowing the stage area to be free of pillars.

Both the roof style and its dougong system were changed during the Ming. Many Ming temple stages, like Yuan stages, are under a single-pitch hip roof, such as those seen in Peijie Town and Datai Village. Some Ming stages, however, are under two roofs. One, usually called a "rolling roof" (juanpeng), covers the front stage. And the other roof, usually a hip one, covers the back stage. Such a two-roof stage can be found in Jingxin Temple (Photo 4, p.284). Some of the Qing stages, such as the one in Wubian Temple, followed this same plan.

All southern Ming temple stages studied during my field research have two roofs. The one covering the front stage is a single-pitch hip roof with upturned eaves, which looks much like that which covers a whole Yuan stage, only smaller. The roof covering the backstage varies greatly. Sometimes it is actually the roof of another structure, in which the backstage is situated, such the one found at the Da Temple (Photo 12, p.298). Sometimes it is just a cover for the backstage, with little stylistic or organic relationship to the front stage, such as the roof found at the Xiangdeng Temple (Photo 14, p.300).
6) The Dougong

The dougong system observed in northern Ming theatres during recent field research includes two styles: a single-layer dougong, such as that found in Dat'ai Village (Photo 11, p.296), or a multiple-layer dougong, such as that found in Jingxin Temple (Photo 5, p.287). Instead of making a dougong only supporting another dougong, the Ming practice often made a dougong supporting a beam. Qing temple architecture continued the Ming tradition. Two such examples can be found in the Qing theatre constructions in Wubian Temple and Hujia Village.

A southern Ming stage of some significance employs a magnificent dougong system, which was called, rather demeaningly, jilongding ("the top of a chicken-cage"). Jilongding, made of hundreds of tiny dougong, are so constructed that a semi-spherical arrangement supports the roof (Photo 26), thereby allowing the acting area

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52 A jilongding looks complicated, and is actually even more complicated than it looks. In an interview with Luo Ligun, of the Department of City Planning and Managing of Shaoxing Prefecture, he recalled:

During the Cultural Revolution, a magnificent Qing stage with jilongding was disassembled and hidden away [from Mao's Red Guards] in order to preserve it. The stage was reassembled recently under the supervision of my Department. With all the parts ready, our architects and carpenters were unable to figure out a way to assemble the jilongding. Finally
to be free of pillars, and also eliminating overhead frames or beams. The performance space it created is really a work of art. Jilong ding are also seen in southern Qing stages, such as those in the Town God's Temple of Ningbo and at Fushan Park of Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, and at Yuyuan Park in Shanghai.

The dougong and beams found in an average northern Ming temple stage are often bigger than those of a Yuan stage. The reason at first seems to be a practical one: Ming temple stages are bigger than those of the Yuan, and therefore building parts of bigger sizes are required. But stylistic considerations also play a contributing role, because Ming stages often display bigger dougong and beams than do Qing stages of comparable scale. For instance, in the same geographic area, Xia County of Shanxi Province, dougong and beams in the 664 square feet (29.49' x 22.52') Ming stage of Peijie Town are larger than those in the 618 square feet (30.16' x 20.48') Early Qing stage at Qiangxia Village.\(^{53}\) Photo 8 (p.284) shows the dougong

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53 The theatre structure in Qiangxia Village is dated from the Early Qing dynasty. The inscription on a beam reads: "In the Mid-Autumn [Festival] of the thirtieth year of the Kangxi period [1691], or the year of Xinwei, of the great Qing dynasty." Diagrams 16 shows a reconstruction and the ground plan of the stage. Another important feature of the theatre building is that it has a storied stage.
beams of the Ming stage, while Photo 27 shows those of the Qing stage. This situation holds true among other Ming and Qing stages studied during my field research, which suggests that the sizes of dougong and beams in northern temple stages were reduced during the Qing dynasty.

Datali Village, also of Xia County, with a theatre stage of similar size (666 square feet, or 30.48' x 21.84'), displays a much heavier set of dougong and beams (Photo 11 and diagram 6, p.296). Along with other stylistic evidences, it can be safely dated to the Ming.

7) The Pillar

One of the stylistic characteristics seen in temple stages dated to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties is their pillars. A Yuan stage often used pillars of large size. In cross section, the front octagonal stone pillars at stage right and left of the Yuan stage in Wei Village are about 320 square inches and 260 square inches respectively. The pillars in Dongyang Village are about 350 square inches. The cross section of each of two wooden pillars at the back of Wei Village stage is about 580 square inches.

A Ming temple stage usually uses wooden pillars which are very thin by the Yuan standard. For example, the cross section of temple stage pillars in Datali Village is 75 square inches; that in Peijie Town, 94 square inches;
that in Yangyi Town (Jingxin Temple), 87 square inches; and that in Fengqiao Town (Da Temple), 146 square inches.

A Qing stage uses pillars of the Ming sizes. The cross section of the wood pillars on the stage in Wubian Temple is 75 square inches; that in Qiangxia Village, 100 square inches; and that in Hujia Village, 107 square inches.

While Yuan stage pillars are larger than those of the Ming and Qing, Ming and Qing stage pillars outnumber those of Yuan. A Yuan stage has only four pillars. A Ming stage can have as many as 18 pillars, such as the stage in Jingxin Temple.

8) The Passageway

Many northern temple stages built during the Ming also served as an entrance and passageway to their respective temples, but those located in the south or built during the Yuan did not. Some Qing stages followed Ming examples, such as the one in Wubian Temple of Taigu, Shanxi Province (Photo 22).

Those stage-passageways, seen only in the northern temple theatres of the Ming and Qing, are of two varieties: trenches and tunnels. The stage-passageways in Peijie Town Temple and Datai Village Temple are trenches which pass through the stage centers, covered only during a performance with removable floors. The trenches are 8.20
feet in width in Peijie Town, and 8 feet in width in Datai Village. The stage-passageways in Wubian and Guangsheng temples are tunnels which pass through under the central stages. The tunnel in Guangsheng Temple is 6.56 feet in height, and 6.14 feet in width (Photo 17). The tunnel in Wubian Temple is 7.45 feet in height and 6.07 feet in width (Photo 22 and diagram 13).
DIAGRAM 11

GROUND PLAN OF WEI TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
DIAGRAM 12

GROUND PLAN OF DONGYANG TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
PHOTO 15

FRONT VIEW OF A SOUTHERN QING STAGE

During the process of rebuilding
PHOTO 16

BACK VIEW OF A SOUTHERN QING STAGE

During the process of rebuilding
PHOTO 17

GUANGSHENG TEMPLE STAGE

A Qing structure
PHOTO 18

WEI TEMPLE STAGE

A Yuan structure
PHOTO 19

STAGE-LEFT STONE PILLAR ON WEI TEMPLE STAGE

Inscription on the pillar reads:
Established in the late spring month of
the 20th year of Zhiyuan period [1283] of
the Great Yuan dynasty of the Mongols, or
the year of Kuiwei
PHOTO 20

STAGE-RIGHT STONE PILLAR ON WEI TEMPLE STAGE

Inscription on the pillar reads:
Established on the 26th of the early autumn month in the first year of Zhizhi period [1321] of the Great Yuan dynasty, or the year of Xinyou
PHOTO 21

DONGYANG TEMPLE STAGE

A Yuan structure
PHOTO 22

WUBIAN TEMPLE STAGE

A Qing structure
DIAGRAM 13

FRONT VIEW AND GROUND PLAN OF WUBIAN TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
PHOTO 23

HUJIA TEMPLE STAGE

A Qing structure (?)
DIAGRAM 14

FRONT VIEW AND GROUND PLAN OF HUJIA TEMPLE STAGE

Scale 1:100
A huge character "fu" carved into the side wall, which helps to date the structure.
DIAGRAM 15

THREE MODELS FOR FRONT STAGES AND AUDIENCE AREAS

Early or Middle Yuan stage:
No side walls,
Semicircular audience area

Late Yuan or Average stage in Ming era
Full length side walls,
Rectangular audience area

Late Ming or Qing stage:
Short & angled side walls,
Fan-shaped audience area
PHOTO 25

DOUGONG SYSTEM ON WEI TEMPLE STAGE
PHOTO 26

JILONGDING

The *douqong* system employed on southern temple stages
PHOTO 27

DOUGONG AND BEAM SYSTEM ON QIANGXIA TEMPLE STAGE

Showing sizes reduced during the Qing
CHAPTER 26
TEMPORARY STAGES

Temporary stages, often set up for commercial troupes, were mobile structures built to serve theatrical performance in religious ceremonies, community entertainments, or seasonal festivals.

During the Ming dynasty, people "set up canopies and built awnings for theatre performances to entertain gods" in religious ceremonies, according to the annals of Baishui county, Shaanxi Province (Baishui xianzhi, qtd. in Jiao W. 316).

When for some reason a temple did not have a permanent stage for theatre performance, a temporary stage would be set up to serve the purpose. During 1616-1619, a group of Confucian scholars who headed a major project for reconstructing the Jingxin Temple tore down the temple stage, as mentioned in Chapter 24. But theatre activities in the temple were not halted. According to the record inscribed on a temple tablet: "There is a lack of a theatre stage. Colorful cloth was used to make one when it was needed. That is very troublesome." Troublesome or not, a temporary stage was always erected "on the 15th and the 25th [days] of the third [lunar] month every year" when
religious ceremonies were in process, until a permanent stage was constructed four years later (Du Jinlei "Yangyishi xinjian shanting yueting bing zhuan Tianwangdian qiangji." Photo 3, p.277).

Temporary stages often served as the performing space for community entertainments. Sometimes a religious subject was adapted for a theatre presentation, but the play was not always bound to religion. Secular interests could overshadow or actually deny the religious significance in certain circumstances.

Zhang Dai's uncle Yun once set up a huge temporary stage in a military training base. One of the antithetical couplets Yun wrote on the structure read:

Dressing up to perform gods and demons which scare those foolish ones to death, who are afraid that whatever is on the stage is Reality;
Cultivating oneself to become Buddha or a sage, to whom those clever ones don't pay any attention, what can they do anyway when everything [in this world] is finished? (Zhang D. 52, Taoan vol. 6).

Certainly such couplets would deny rather than promote religious beliefs.

The production Yun sponsored took place in Zhejiang Province, but the actors were chosen from Jinyang of Anhui Province for their reputation in martial arts. While the play Mulian Saves His Mother does have a religious subject, much of the performance was made up of acrobatics, which "had little or nothing to do with the plot, sentiment, and logic" of the play (Zhang D. 52-3, Taoan vol. 6).
Temporary stages also served theatre activities during seasonal festivals. Scenes of these performances were represented in contemporary scroll paintings, as:

(1) "Qingming shanghe tu" (Painting of the scenes along the Capital River in the seasonal festival of Qingming) by the artists from the Qing Academy of Arts (Qing Huayuan), of which Reproduction of Figure 4 shows the portion presenting theatre activities (reproduced from Na Z. 73);

(2) "Qingming shanghe tu" in Yun Gongfu's collection, of which Reproduction of Figure 5 shows the portion depicting theatre entertainments (reproduced from Zhou Y. Zhongguo);

(3) "Nanzhong fanhui tu" (Painting of the prosperous south), of which Reproduction of Figure 6 shows the portion about theatre performance (reproduced from Wang A. 13); and

(4) "Nandu fanhui tu" (Painting of the prosperous Southern Capital), of which Reproduction of Figure 6 shows the portion about theatre presentation (reproduced from Zhang G.).

All these paintings are characterized by their realistic details of city and suburban life, a tradition started in the original "Qingming shanghe tu," which is one of the most famous paintings in China's history. The painter, Zhang Zeduan of the Song dynasty (960-1279),
captured vivid scenes in Bianliang, capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), on the day of Qingming ("Pure Brightness," the 5th solar term). Zhang's painting soon became a model. Many artists imitated Zhang's masterpiece, or created their own variants while keeping the essential style. In the many imitations of Zhang Zeduan's "Qingming shanghe tu," Ming and Qing versions are unique in depicting scenes of theatre presentations, which are absent from the versions produced during the Song dynasty (Na 2). The fact that Ming and Qing artists introduced such scenes to their imitations indicates that they saw the importance of theatre performance in their contemporary life, and that they added scenes of Ming and Qing theatres, rather than scenes of a Song theatre, if in fact there was one.

Because of their fragile nature, the physical Ming temporary stages are non-existent today. Much of the knowledge about them is drawn from literature, painting, and its modern day versions.

From realistic contemporary paintings, much can be learned about Ming temporary stages. In the following analysis, measurements of the movable theatre structures are solely based on visual sources, that is, on Ming and early Qing paintings mentioned above, since no written data on stage measurements are available. The calculations can only be estimated, because they are based on comparisons
of the height of an average spectator or actor with estimated measurements of the structure in question. In these comparisons an average spectator or actor is assumed to be 5'6" in height. For example, if the length of a temporary stage is estimated to be three times the height of a spectator standing next to it, then the length of the stage is assumed to be 16'6" (5'6" \times 3 = 16'6").

Temporary stages during the Ming and early Qing periods shared many identical features. All were raised on upright log supports. The stages in "Nanzhong fanhui tu" (Figure 6) and "Qingming Shanghe tu" (Yun Gongfu's collection; Figure 5) are about four feet above the level of the ground. The one in "Qingming Shanghe tu" (the painting by the Qing Academy of Arts; Figure 4) is about seven feet above the ground. The height of a stage seems to have been determined by the size of an expected audience: the larger the audience, the higher the stage was raised. In the paintings mentioned above, the stage at the seven feet level shows an audience several times larger than that shown around the stages at the four feet level.

The stages probably were square. The dimensions shown in "Nanzhong fanhui tu," Yun's "Qingming Shanghe tu," and the painting by the Qing Academy of Arts are about 20, 19.5, and 23 feet, respectively. The stages were further defined by balustrades. The dimensions within the balustrades are about 16.5, 18.5, and 21 feet,
respectively. The balustrades are closed in the Qing Academy of Arts' painting, but have wide openings on the front sides in the other two paintings. In all three paintings, a rug is laid on the front half of the stage, which further defines the primary acting area. A rectangular table is placed on the back half of the stage, parallel to the backdrop. Two musicians sit at either end of the table, on which several instruments are placed.

The backstage is separated from the main stage by screens or curtains. Dressing rooms are located backstage.

All the stages are covered. A flat awning covers the front half of the stage, while a hip roof covers the back half and the backstage. The level awnings appear to be made of canvas in "Nanzhong fanhui tu" and in Yun's "Qingming Shanghe tu", but are made of reed mats in the "Qingming Shanghe tu" by the Qing Academy of Arts. All the hip roofs seem to be covered by reed mats.

More often than not, temporary stages were erected in open spaces in countryside and suburban areas, where a large audience could be accommodated. The arrangement of the audience around the temporary stage is identical in the three paintings. Spectators arrange themselves freely around three sides of the stage, but not at the rear. The majority of the audience stands close to the front, where they can see and hear the actors most clearly.
When these preferred positions are not available, or the spectators are too tired or too close together, they find other ways to enjoy the performance.

Many examples of such alternative audience arrangement can be found in the "Qingming Shanghe tu" by the Qing Academy of Arts. In general, they fall into four categories.

(1) High Position

In order to watch a theatre performance clearly, some spectators arrange to take higher positions. They can do so only behind the crowds standing closer to the stage, so as not to break those people's sight lines. In the painting:

A man stands on a stool;
A couple stands on a bench;
A farmer stands on the bottom of his overturned bucket;
Two men climb up in trees;
One man sits, and another stands, on the awning of a middle-sized boat in a river nearby;
A child is carried on his elder's back;
A young woman stands on a raised temporary structure to watch the performance over her garden wall;
A man clutches a pole that raises him high.

(2) Seating

Some spectators preferred to sit while watching a performance, probably because it lasts a very long time.
They may do so by staying far from the stage or by taking a high position. In the painting:

An elderly couple sits far from the stage, while a youngster pounds the old man's back as if massaging him;
A man sits in a tree;
A man sits on the awning of a nearby boat;
A man sits on his carrying pole, which rests across two buckets;
Two men sit on their horses.

(3) Means of Providing Shading

In the painting, eight parasols are being used by spectators. They indicate that the performance takes place in bright sunlight. Using parasols is the privilege of spectators who take positions behind the crowd, for parasols used closer to the stage will certainly break others' sight lines. Most spectators hold their own parasols. Only one man has a servant boy to hold his for him.

(4) Nōtai

In the Ming dynasty, a structure called nōtai (low platform) was often erected around a temporary stage to accommodate a few privileged spectators. In function, but not in appearance, it was similar to a box in a Western theatre.

The nōtai shown in the "Qingming Shanghe tu" by the Qing Academy of Arts is a makeshift thing built in the garden of an adjacent residence, and makes use of one
of the garden walls. The spectators stand on the canvas-covered structure, and observe the performance from a distance.

The nütaï in "Nanzhong fanhui tu" and in Yun's "Qingming Shanghe tu" are identical, and seem to be conventional. They are supported by upright logs, and are canvas-covered independent structures, set not far from the stage. The nütaï floor seems to be square, about 10 feet on a side. Four or five spectators, most of them female, sit on the nütaï to watch the performance. Thus they separate themselves from the general public.

Although only one nütaï is found in each of the paintings, more could be set up in some circumstances. When Zhang Dai's uncle Yun constructed a huge temporary stage in a military training field as mentioned before, "about one hundred nütaï were erected around it" (Zhang D. 52, Taoan vol. 6).

Temporary stages are still in use today and they are surprisingly similar to those represented in the Ming and early Qing paintings. During recent field research, I observed a production on a temporary stage at Yuling, a suburb of Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province.

54 Yuling is the site of the Mausoleum of Yu, the reputed founder of the Xia dynasty (c. 21-16 century B.C.).
The modern temporary stage is a simple structure raised on poles and covered with mats and a canvas canopy. Photo 28 shows the stage erected in Yuling, on which a theatre production is taking place. The stage is divided into the acting area and the backstage by a hanging curtain. The front stage is open on three sides to the audience. Up on the front pole at stage right, a bulletin board reads:

**Day Shows**

*Baogong Beats the Emperor (Baogong da luanjia)*

*Beating the Imperial Robe (Da Longpao).*

The play is presented by a local Shaoju troupe; Shaoju is a genre of regional theatre indigenous to the Shaoxing region; Shaoju emerged during the late Ming dynasty.

A single dressing room is located backstage, shared by all actors and actresses. Photo 29 shows six performers crowded into the dressing room, waiting or preparing for their entrances.

The orchestra was placed on a lower level at stage left. In this case, the orchestra platform was the only part of the theatre structure that was supported by modern means: four empty petroleum drums. Photo 30 shows the musicians orchestra platform from a spectator's perspective.

The arrangement of the audience around this modern-day temporary stage was a little different from that depicted in the Ming and early Qing paintings, but not by very much. Most of the audience sat in front of the stage, instead
of standing, while others stood behind the sitting spectators. People still watch the presentation from three sides. Photo 31 shows some audience members from the rear.

The stage was set in an open space. No admission fee was charged to individual spectators. Local people call such a temporary stage presentation caotaixi, literally, "theatre performance on a grass stage."
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 4

QINGMING SHANGHE TU

"Painting of the Scenes Along the Capital River in the Seasonal Festival of Qingming"

By Qing Academy of Arts
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 5

QINGMING SHANGHE TU

"Painting of the Scenes Along the Capital River in the Seasonal Festival of Qingming"
In Yun Gongfu's Collection
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 6

NANZHONG FANHUI TU

"Painting of the Prosperous South"
REPRODUCTION OF FIGURE 7

NANDU FANHUI TU

"Painting of the Prosperous Southern Capital"
PHOTO 28

A MODERN TEMPORARY STAGE

Bulletin board
up on the front pole at stage right reads:
Day Shows
Baogong Beats the Emperor (Baogong da luanjia)
Beating the Imperial Robe (Da Longpao).
PHOTO 29

DRESSING ROOM ON A MODERN TEMPORARY STAGE

Six performers crowded into the dressing room
Waiting or preparing for their entrances
PHOTO 30

ORCHESTRA ON A MODERN TEMPORARY STAGE

Orchestra platform
supported by petroleum drums
on a lower level at stage left
PHOTO 31

AUDIENCE OF A MODERN TEMPORARY STAGE

Watching performance from three sides
CHAPTER 27
PARADE PERFORMANCE

A parade performance, a community-based presentation by amateurs that used no fixed stage, was quite different from other public performances in many major aspects of theatre art from circumstance, space, actor-selection, costume, and properties, to organizing, financing, acting, and staging. All these aspects of parade performance will be discussed in this section, except the last two, which will be covered in Chapter 28: Parade Contingents.

1) Circumstances

A parade performance was usually related to a religious festival, a seasonal ceremony, or a community prayer. Unless the parade was a prayer for an urgent public need such as rain, it could be presented as a routine activity in any given calendar year.

In the ninth lunar month of every year, a three-day parade was presented by the Yang God's Temple in Fengqiao

55 The Yang God's temple, called Da Temple since the Qing
Between the second and third lunar months each year, a four- or five-day parade performance was held in the towns of Songjiang Prefecture, Jiangsu Province, until it was banned in 1592 by a local official (Fan Lian Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335).

According to the "general records" of Shanghang County, all birthdays of gods were celebrated in parade performances in this county of Fujian Province (Shanghang xianzhi vol. 23, qtd. in Lin Q. 102). And "no place has more religious theatre performances than Quanzhou Prefecture" of Fujian Province, declared a Ming scholar, "those idlers [have parade performances] for the birthday of every god and saint" (Chen Maoren Quannan zazhi, qtd. in Lin Q. 48).

Parade theatre performance was routine during the spring festival ceremonies in Fuzhou, the provincial capital (Wang Shimao Minbu shu, qtd. in Lin Q. 48), Putian County (Chen Hong Pujing xiaoji, qtd. in Lin Q. 90), and Changting County, among other places in Fujian Province. It usually took place in the "Seeing in the Spring" ceremony ("Yinchun"), on the eve of the lunar new year.

dynasty, and its theatre stage, are still extant, and were studied in my recent field research. Descriptions and discussions about the temple, and especially its theatre stage can be found in Chapter 24 and 25.
When signs of drought were seen in the seventh lunar month of 1632 in Shaoxing Prefecture, Zhejiang Province:
Every village prayed for rain. Everyday [people] played the roles of the spirits of tide and sea, who were spit on and cursed, [because they were believed to be responsible for the water supply, and failed to perform their duty]. [People in] my neighborhood also paraded *The Water Margin* (Shuihu) (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

2) Space

Spaces for parade performance included city streets, government buildings, country roads, temple grounds, public squares, and assorted rural areas.

In the city of Fuzhou, the crowd attending a "Seeing in Spring" parade "packed into city streets and blocked residential lanes" (Wang Shimao Minbu shu, qtd. in Lin Q. 48).

In Pinghe County of Fujian Province, the "Seeing in Spring" parade first went to the County Hall. Such a practice was called "Showing the Spring up" (Chengchun) (Pinghe xianzhi vol. 10, qtd. in Lin Q. 100).

In the Fengqiao area, the contingents of people in the parade covered almost 2.5 miles on country roads. The procession started at the Yang God's Temple, where many paraders picked up their little banners. The parade passed by a commercial square next to a bridge, where a
big crowd of spectators gathered. It went on to farmland, woodland, and valleys (Zhang D. 33, Taoan vol. 4).

In most cases, the parade space was a public road, which was occasionally covered for such an event. For instance, the parade in Songjiang County employed all kinds of refined, exquisite, and extremely expensive costumes and properties. The streets and bridges along which the procession would pass "were all covered with cotton canopies in case of rain" (Fan Lian Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335).

3) Selecting Actors

For an average parade, professional actors or other members of commercial troupes were not invited to participate. The parade was a community activity, presented mainly by members of the community. Virtually no differentiation was involved in enlisting the average paraders. But very strict criteria were established to choose those who played theatrical roles. Selection of actors was rarely based on the individuals' acting skills, training potentials, or physical beauty, as it was for private or commercial troupes. Instead, selection was generally based on the physical resemblance between the persons chosen and the characters they were suppose to represent. Such criteria in selecting actors held true
in all parade theatre performances, with the exception of pageant presentations on platforms, in which physical beauty was much emphasized.

The search for performers resembling the characters to be portrayed was a very serious process, involving a group of committed people. In the parade of the Yang God's Temple, "only the one who exactly resembles a character [as described] in the chuanqi play would be appointed to the role." The process of selecting actors started long before the day of the parade, and the good fortune of being chosen might last an actor's entire life:

The selection was done before anyone had a chance to put on any makeup. When one person was mentioned because of his resemblance to a certain character [in the play], everyone else [present] should be convinced immediately, with [expressions of] spontaneous laughter [because of the resemblance], or this person would not get the assignment. After the parade, however, the person who played, say the character Hu Lian, would be called Hu Lian by everyone thereafter. And this guy would actually lose his own name (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

The painstaking selection process alone could be long and costly. In selecting actors for the parade production of The Water Margin (Shuihu), presented by a neighborhood in Shaoxing Prefecture as mentioned above, a search committee was formed and the guidelines were set:

No one is better than Shi Naian [author of the novel The Water Margin] in painting [describing] the characters. It will be the right person eight to nine times out of ten if you find someone: Whose face looks like the character's, without the help of makeup; Whose mustache looks like the character's but does not [unnaturally] stick out;
Who wears the character's armor without showing that it is made of paper;
Who holds the character's weapon without showing that it is made of wood;
Who follows the original plots without making up his own version; and
Who does not sing in YiYangqiang style (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

Following these guidelines, members of the search committee "went about the work separately in all directions" to look for people who had distinguishing physical features that fit the descriptions of the 36 heroic characters in Shi Naian's novel:

They were looking for a short and dark man; a tall and slim man; a mendicant Buddhist monk; a fat and big monk; a healthy and strong woman; a pretty and tall woman; and men with a blue birth mark on the face, with a slanting head, with a red beard, or with handsome whiskers; and also a huge man with dark complexion, and a man with a red face and long beard (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

It was not easy to find the ideal persons for all the roles, but the committee would not settle for second best. The actor hunt became big in scale and in expense:

The committee first searched all over the city: the request was not fulfilled. They then went on to the suburb, to the villages, to the deserted mountain areas, and to the neighboring counties and prefectures [until they found the right persons]. The hired ones were paid with good money.

Yiyangqiang theatre was often looked down upon, especially in the South, and specifically among the literati, ever since kunshangqiang (also known as kunqiang or kunqu) theatre began to dominate the nation's stage presentations during the Ming dynasty.
Finally all performers for the 36 required characters were found, and "everyone was a living hero called out from the novel" of The Water Margin (Zhang D. 63, Taoan vol. 7).

4) Costumes and Properties

Much attention was also paid to the beauty, novelty, and "authenticity" of costumes and properties. "Authenticity" in Ming parade performances did not necessarily mean "true to the historic facts," or "true to the characterization," as in a Western realistic performance; rather, it emphasized the display of costumes and properties of genuine materials, such as headdresses, robes, and ornaments made of precious stones, noble metals, and exquisite fabrics.

People in the towns of Songjiang Prefecture presented extremely beautiful costumes in their parades:

Those who performed in the plays all dressed up in colorful robes which were embroidered with python designs, and wore leather boots. Their headdresses and hats were decorated with pearls mounted on gold and flowers made of jade.

Women were not often seen in such parades, but when they did appear, they certainly brought novelty and beauty into the event:

They added 30-40 prostitutes to play roles in the plays such as Widows Conquer the West Regions (Guafu zhengxi) and Shaojun Departs Her Country (Shaojun
chuzai). They were extremely gorgeously dressed (Fan Lian Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335-6).

Props showing in parades also aimed at beauty and novelty:

Those decorated pavilions, flags, drums, and weapons, were every one and each one exquisite and unique, and there were more kinds than I can list here (Fan Lian Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335-6).

The artistic and economic levels of a parade, however, might vary greatly from place to place, and from time to time. The yearly parade of the Yang God's Temple in Fengqiao Town had been an ordinary one. When the Luo brothers took over the parade, however, "they were determined to make it ideal and logical." Such an attitude immediately affected the "authenticity" of parade costumes:

All the costumes were made of silk materials. If a character needed a certain silk fabric in a certain color and with a certain pattern, then even if the fabric happened to cost tens of ounces of silver a bolt, they would still buy it without hesitation. Even a single hat or a pair of shoes [for the costume] might draw their full attention (Zhang D. 33, Taoan vol. 4).

In the parades held by the towns of Songjiang Prefecture, "the costumes and properties employed in parade theatre performances used to be imitations of those used by professional actors," which were mostly theatrical pretenses. However, "authentic" costumes and properties largely replaced make-believe articles beginning in the year of Wanli Gengyin (1590). Authentic items were usually very expensive:
In the scene of "The Number One Scholar (Zhuangyuan)'s Parade," three pearl-decorated whips were used, which alone were worth more than 100 ounces of silver (Fan Lian Yunjian jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335-6). A contemporary critic "could not explain such a phenomenon at all." Thus he termed it "fanaticism." Genuine gold, pearls, and gems were also employed in the parade presented by the Yang God's Temple (Zhang D. 33, Taoan vol. 4).

5) Organizing and Financing

Most of the parade theatre performances were based on community joint effort, supervised by individuals, and financed by neighborhood associations. A manager, or sometimes a committee, was selected to oversee the matters of organization and financing.

Local "young ruffians" and "busybodies" in Songjiang Prefecture organized their town-based parades, a critic scolded (Wang X. 335). The parade of the Yang God's Temple was managed by the Luo brothers and a committee (Zhang D. 32-33). Quanzhou's parades were organized by a group of "young idlers" (Lin Q. 48).

While the appointee manager did oversee a parade and greatly influence the outcome of the production, the parade was still a community activity. And if they so desired, many people were able to contribute their efforts and ideas to the enterprises.
In Fengqiao community, everyone on the parade committee had a say in selecting the performers. "After the performers were selected, how to make them up was discussed" among those concerned. And finally, a hundred or more people attended a sort of dress-rehearsal, at which they might accept or reject the whole production or parts of it. Even outsiders might be invited to give their expert opinions. Their artistic decisions as well as creative ideas were well respected:

Any friend they knew of who was creative and skillful in makeup was invited with courtesy and salary one month ahead of time. [Such an expert] might work on instinct or imagination. Nevertheless, all his instructions would be carried out (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

The efforts of the Luo brothers as managers of the parade, joined by local people and outside experts, is said to have brought great success to the performance. According to a contemporary account, "several hundred thousand spectators from all directions came to watch the parade" (Zhang D. 33, Taoan vol. 4).

Producing a parade was usually expensive in terms of daily expenses as well as costume, props, and salaries for experts. In many towns of Songjiang Prefecture, an average parade lasted four to five days and cost 1,000 ounces of silver each day (Wang X. 336). Money for paying for the parade was regularly collected from the people in the community, including the poor:
Whenever there are gods' birthdays, every neighborhood [fang] sets up a pageant platform to enact stories, and lines up a guard of honor and an orchestra to invite gods in a parade. Even poor families have to do their best to pay the expenses (Shanghang xianzhi, qtd. in Lin Q. 102).

The rich sometimes contributed more than their expected share to meet the expenses, a generosity which was always welcomed.

Those frivolous young men [who made the costumes] said: "let us stop being modest in [using] his [the donor's] materials [of brocades and satin]. Let us get the best of everything for the finest results" (Zhang D. 64, Taoan vol. 7).

This contemporary account indicates that the tailors acknowledged the donor of materials for costume, which were one of the biggest expenses of a parade. The tailors' attitude toward the donor suggests his generosity. The same account identifies the donor as a member of a rich family (actually, he was Zhang Dai's fifth uncle). The fact that the donor brought large quantities of fabrics of the highest quality from the city of Yangzhou also confirms his wealth.

The managers, paraders, and the many actors, all were volunteers. The biggest expenses usually paid for luxurious costumes and authentic properties. As mentioned above, a parade might use a bolt of brocade that cost dozens of ounces of silver (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4), or three genuine pearl-studded whips that cost 100 ounces of silver. When streets and bridges were covered with cloth canopies
for protecting a parade (Wang X. 336), much more money would have been spent.

Sometimes the local government assigned production of a parade to the head of a neighborhood group (Chen Hong Pujing xiaoji qtd. in Lin Q. 90), or required him to supply funds for a parade. In Changting County, for instance, government officers of lower ranks were responsible for "renting ghost masks to play thunder gods," but the heads of neighborhoods were responsible for the financing (Changting xianzhi vol. 23, qtd. in Lin Q. 102).

Government officials did not always specify details about the parades they assigned to communities. Then the participants would decide the scale, composition, design, and the degree of luxury of the parade, all of which were much dependent on the people's enthusiasm for the activity. The one that was organized for the lunar new year's celebration in the year of Wanli Gengzi (1600) in Xin'an (also known as She County) of Anhui Province was described as "the most splendid 'Seeing in the Spring' ceremony in the country, the best in the history of Xin'an:"

Then the officials heading the Prefecture and the County were all Zhejiang Province natives, who announced ahead of time that the "Seeing in the Spring" ceremony would take place in the east suburb. All the professionals [involved] were delighted. They made everything [in the parade] extremely ingenious and exquisite without administrative requests. They built 36 pageant platforms and employed 48 horses to enact the drama. All the performers were chosen from youthful and beautiful prostitutes, actors, and actresses. Dressed in special marten furs, brocades, and damasks, they were colorful and splendid.
Decorated with gold, emerald, pearls, and jade, they looked perfect and natural (Pan Z. 147, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 35).

This splendid and unprecedented parade was not quite typical in several aspects. It was a government assigned parade, but the assignees seemed to have waited with enthusiasm for that event. It was a community-based parade, but the community happened to be that of professionals. The paraders were community members, but they were also charming performers selected from entertainers.
CHAPTER 28
PARADE CONTINGENTS

The parade procession might include any one, two, or all three kinds of contingents: paraders on foot, paraders on horseback, and paraders either on, or carrying, pageant platforms.

1) Contingent of Paraders on Foot

A contingent of walking paraders was common in Ming parades, for such a group was easy to prepare and it usually allowed a greater number of people in a community to participate. The great majority of participants in the parade of the Yang God's Temple simply held three to four short rods in their hands. To each of the rods, three or four small white flags were bound. This simple plan allowed so many people to participate that the parade covered a length of about 2.5 miles. It produced a magnificent scene as well. The great number of white flags "looked as if several millions of white butterflies were spiraling, gliding, and wheeling in the mountain vales and among the trees" (Zhang D. 33, Taoan vol. 4).
Simplicity was not always the characteristic of walking paraders. Some might exhibit fancy properties and present unique scenes. He Qiaoyuan, a Ming scholar, quoted General Records of Zhangzhou Prefecture as saying that in the evenings from the 10th through the 16th day of the first lunar month, three kinds of lantern parades, all on a small scale, took place in the city of Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, as a part of the Lantern Festival celebration. The "umbrella lantern parade" was formed by singers who made lanterns like those in the canopy above an imperial carriage. Some people, at other time, made dragon-boat lanterns and carp lanterns for their parades (qtd. in Lin Q. 45-6).

While paraders carrying flags and lanterns created spectacular effects by themselves, they did not offer much dramatic content. Paraders in Fuzhou of Fujian Province, on the other hand, presented a zaju play Picking Tea (Caicha) in their walking contingent. Chen Shi, an intellectual in the late Ming period, wrote in his poem "Impressions from Watching the Zaju Plays Picking Tea and Zhaojun Departing Her Country on [the Night of] the Lantern Festival:"

Hundreds of flowers brilliantly burst open in the evening, [fireworks]
All the [candle] flames shining through lovely cut mica sheets. [street lanterns]
Dazzling stars move in a rapid succession like a string of pearls, [parade lanterns]
These colorful clouds will not cover up the bright moon. [parade costumes]
People gather at the crossroads and line themselves up in the procession; [walking contingent]
High speed from metal and stone; high pitch from string and bamboo. [musical accompaniment from percussion, string, and wind instruments]
Colorful mist and clouds set off floral bowls, [costumes and tea-bowls as properties]
Picking, plucking, rolling, and dropping: tea leaves overflow baskets. [movements]
Painted in a new fashion with broad black and light yellow, [makeup]
Air is heavy with the tea fragrance from silk sleeves.... [atmosphere and costumes]
(Chen Shi Daoshantang shiji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lin Q. 60).

Not all the parade performances made good sense from an intellectual or logical perspective. The Water Margin, enacted in a parade procession, served as a prayer for rain, as is mentioned under the subject of parade circumstances in the last section. Nanhua, Zhang Dai's granduncle, was puzzled:

Does The Water Margin have anything to do with prayer for rain? We already have bandits in [the nearby] She Mountain. Why do we need to invite the bandits [from The Water Margin]? And for what?

Nanhua asked because all the heroes and heroines in The Water Margin are bandits and other outlaws from an official point of view. Upon being questioned, Zhang Dai immediately realized the absurdity of the proposed parade. But instead of criticizing the mistakes and dampening community spirits, Zhang worked out a remedy:

I used six big sign-boards. "Imperial Amnesty" was written on two sign-boards; "Favorable Weather," on one; and "Bandits Stopped and Public Reassured," on one. And "Timely Rain" was written in huge characters on two sign-boards, which were placed at the front of the procession.
Seeking, rejecting, and finally accepting "Imperial Amnesty" on the rebels' part, and offering and then reneging on "Imperial Amnesty" on the government's part are some of the major plots in The Water Margin. "Favorable Weather" and "Bandits Stopped and Public Reassured" are reasons for the parade. "Timely Rain" is an ingenious pun in that it is both the purpose of the procession, and also the nickname of Song Jiang, the leader of the rebels in The Water Margin.

Zhang Dai's specious slogans on the parade's sign-boards greatly pleased the general public: "the spectators were delighted. They gasped in admiration" upon seeing the sign-boards. While all seemed to be satisfied, not everyone was fooled. "My granduncle left the scene laughing up his sleeve," Zhang Dai recalled (Zhang D. 64, Taoan vol. 7).

2) Contingent of Paraders on Horseback

The contingent of people on horseback was a major attraction in Ming parade performances. It was both spectacular and dramatic. Horses, as part of the ancient war-machine, were often mentioned in the plots of martial plays. They were not employed on regular stages, where properties, such as whips or bamboo effigies, were used as substitutes. But in parade theatre performances real
horses could be used, often in desirable numbers. This practice, whether employed in martial plays or civil plays, proved to be very popular among spectators. And a lot of effort was devoted to preparing each horse and its rider.

The parade of the Yang God's Temple "enacted horseback plays [warfare plays] which employed 20-30 horses:"

The idea and logic of every detail in [the makeup and acting] of the character and his horse were examined. It is just like examining antiques or famous paintings, in which nothing is overlooked (Zhang D. 32, Taoan vol. 4).

These paraders on horseback, along with other spectacles in the procession, attracted an audience of several hundred thousand people for this event.

As many as 200 to 300 horses were rented by towns in Songjiang Prefecture, Jiangsu Province, for the purpose of parade productions such as The Young Prince of Qin Jumps Over the Ravine (Xiao Qinwang tiaojian), Widows Conquer the West Regions (Guafu zhengxi), and Shaojun Departs Her Country (Shaojun chuzai):

People from all walks of life in the prefecture brought their family members with them to watch the parade. Even the rivers were blocked up by pleasure-boats and speed-boats. It was true that the whole city became fanatic (Fan Lian Yunjiai jumu chao vol. 2, qtd. in Wang X. 335-6).

Such extravagant parades lasted from four to five days each year, as mentioned above.

Zhaojun Departs Her Country (Zhaojun chuzai), a civil play, was among the most popular horseback parade productions. It offered the leading actress a wonderful
chance to demonstrate her gifts in many ways while riding a spirited horse. A parade presented in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, offered these affecting scenes:

Ming Fei [also known as Zhaojun] is leaving the palace of the Han dynasty, she plays the string [instrument] and little drums with tears in her eyes. Who can understand her resentment and unhappiness revealed in her music? She is annoyed by the fact that a rug is set in the [barbarian's] tent [waiting for her performance], suddenly she turns around [the horse with] silver saddles and jade [decorated] reins: A sword dance and a ball dance are performed on the now prancing [horse]... (Chen Shi: Daoshantang shiji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lin Q.: 60).

3) Contingent of Pageant Platforms

The contingent of pageant platforms was a popular attraction in parades. Pageant platforms, called taige (literally, platform pavilion) or taian (literally, lifted table), were actually portable mini-stages on which scenes from plays were presented. Such stages were carried on men's shoulders, but were not moved on wheels. Pageant wagons on wheels, popular in medieval Europe, are not mentioned in available accounts from the Ming dynasty.

The most simple pageant platforms might be those found in Putian County, Fujian Province, according to Chen Hong, a scholar in the early Qing:

In the "Seeing in the Spring" ceremonies in the Ming dynasty, stories were enacted on more than 100 [pageant] platforms to celebrate the spring season.
It was Lizheng's [head of a neighborhood] duty. The platform was made of a table with a screen set at the back of it and lifted by two people on their shoulders.

Those two-man pageant platforms were not replaced in the region by specialized four-man platforms until the early Qing dynasty (Pujing xiaoji, qtd. in Lin Q. 90).

Also in Fujian Province, the pageant platforms built in Quanzhou Prefecture were gorgeous and luxurious, as Chen Maoren, a Ming scholar, observed:

The pageant platforms [taian] are made of some boards 10 feet in length. Ropes and painted silk covers decorate the railings around [the platform]. A small decorated table is put in the center and a canopy is set at the top [of the platform] (Quannan zazhi, qtd. in Lin Q. 48).

The Quanzhou parade was managed by local "idlers" who worked with enthusiasm for such theatre performances, instead of by a head of a neighborhood, who usually performed his duty in a perfunctory manner.

Ordinarily only children performed on pageant platforms, probably because children, light in weight, were easier to carry during a parade. In Quanzhou Prefecture, "charming boys take roles in the plays" (Quannan zazhi, qtd. in Lin Q. 48). In Putian County, "small children were made up as men and women sitting on tables [which were used as pageant platforms]." In an early Qing account, women were found on pageant platforms: "three to four beautiful women and children were invited to play
out lively and exciting stories in bright-colored costumes" (Pujing xiaoji, qtd. in Lin Q. 90).

Acting was not the major aesthetic concern, and certainly not the focus, of such pageant presentations. That was probably because:

1) Relatively limited movement was possible on such a small platform;
2) Usually the children chosen as performers were inexperienced in acting; and
3) A spectator, from his fixed position, would see almost static scenes anyway.

Instead, stunning beauty and conspicuous luxury would draw spectators' immediate attention; while creative design and gorgeous spectacle would give them memorable satisfaction. Thus, costumes and properties, as visual attractions and elements of spectacle, played key roles in shows borne on platforms. Ming pageant artists ingeniously devoted their major efforts to costumes and properties.

A Ming scholar quoted the General records of Qingyuan as saying that in central Quanzhou Prefecture:

Several days after the Lantern Festival is Guansheng [also known as Guangong or Guandi]'s ceremony, during which a great exhibition of pictures of gods took place. Dramatic stories were enacted with rich decoration of pearls and gems, and noisy accompaniment with bells and drums. The whole city was in a frenzy (He Qiaoyuan Min shu vol. 38, qtd. in Lin Q. 49).
Another Ming scholar wrote about his experience in southern Quanzhou Prefecture:

Charming boys are chosen to act out [dramatic] stories. They are dressed in thin silk, and use antiques [as properties]. In scenes such as "Guanyin [Avalokitesvara] Holding the Basket," all [of the properties] are made of gold and pearls. Various flags and drums are presented [in the performance]. Both aristocrats and outcasts watch [the parade] together (Chen Maoren Quannan zazhi, qtd. in Lin Q. 48).

Quanzhou paraders were winning competitions, at least in part because of their gorgeous costumes and properties, while those in Putian County were criticized because their child performers "did not have good costumes" (Chen Hong Pujing xiaoji, qtd. in Lin Q. 90).

Artistic design and consistency of contents were also highly valued. Zhang Dai believed that a pageant presentation in Shaoxing Prefecture surpassed all its current and previous rivals:

Xue, my fifth uncle, came back from Guangling [also known as Yangzhou], where he had bought a lot of brocade of famous brands and satin of the palace style, which were used for eight taige [pageant platforms]: six of thunder gods, one for Guanyin [Avalokitesvara], and one for a dragon palace. They were gorgeous, grand, beautiful, and magnificent. Spectators were at a loss not only for a word, but also for a thought. Taige had never been so since they were first created. There had been gorgeous ones, but none that grand; there had been beautiful ones, but none that magnificent. Even if there had been gorgeous, grand, beautiful, and magnificent ones, they had certainly never been that artistically

57 Xue donated his fabrics to the community parade, as mentioned in the previous chapter.
designed and intelligently composed (Zhang D. 64, Taoan vol. 7).

While much of the pageant's success was attributed to its luxurious costumes, the artistic and intelligent aspects of its taige were emphasized by this contemporary critic.

In the realm of public theatre, parade performances involved the largest number of participants, without limitation to the community members and without charge to spectators. On the other hand, courtesan productions represented the most exclusive public theatre, in which only the chosen patrons were accepted.
CHAPTER 29
COURTESAN PERFORMANCE

In the world of Ming amateur theatre, courtesan actresses were often professionally trained to perform. Acting was among the most valuable skills that courtesans could acquire. And during the theatre-crazed Ming period, a courtesan's beauty and charm were enhanced when she acted the part of a heroine on stage. Her good taste and refinement were subtly demonstrated to her patrons when she presented her art as an amateur actress. Acting was a courtesan's accomplishments, and often enough her acting was raised to the professional level.

A courtesan's performance was usually a privately-arranged presentation of entertainment drawn from the repertory of the public theatre. The circumstances associated with a courtesan's performance were quite different from those governing other Ming theatres. As Yu Huai (1616-1696) pointed out, courtesans "performed only for their patrons and only in intimate settings" (Bangiao zaji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lu E. 158). Therefore courtesan presentations were a form of "public theatre"
offered to selected elite members of society, but not to common folk on the street.

An average courtesan looked up to the art of acting, according to Zhang Dai: "they took it as a matter of life and death" (Zhang D. 69, Taoan vol. 7); but they looked down at the career of actress, as Yu Huai observed: "those famed courtesan actresses and fairy beauties considered that acting on a theatre's stage was a shame" (Bangqiao zaji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lu E. 158). A courtesan actress wanted to make everybody aware that she was an acting artist in the amateur theatre, not a professional actress in the commercial theatre.

A Ming courtesan always differentiated herself from a professional actress, probably because of her higher social status and more extensive education. Although an outcast by law, a courtesan associated only with the social elite, sometimes with men she herself chose to recognize; but an actress, also an outcast, served almost anyone who paid the prescribed fee. Often an accomplished courtesan studied subjects other than acting, ranging from the classical arts of poetry, calligraphy, and painting to the popular arts of singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments, whereas an actress usually learned only acting.

Before courtesans would appear on stage, an almost ritualistic process of invitation was required of their patrons:
First they must be praised and encouraged several times. Then they must be forced to accept [the invitation]. And finally they will agree to perform (Yu Huai Bangqiao zaji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lu E. 158).

Such a process probably served to identify a courtesan as one who was involved in a cultural or social event, but not in a commercial theatre activity. Rather than simply acknowledging her good manners and modesty, the fact that she was being "forced" to perform seemed to have a ritual significance, helping perhaps to "purify" her as an amateur.

This ceremonial procedure of forceful invitation took place before each courtesan presentation. And each ceremony had to be carried out sincerely. An empty ritual, without feeling on the part of the patron, would certainly offend a courtesan actress:

Those admirers do not truly admire [their arts], and those spectators do not earnestly beg for [their performance]. They embarrass the courtesans who have performed for them, and cause other courtesans to conceal their talents (Pan Z. 33, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Not being a professional actress, a courtesan was not obliged to perform for her patrons. She would not perform when she did not feel like doing so. Courtesans declined invitations to perform in numerous ways, with or without excuses:

They may conceal their [acting] talents if they do not want to present their arts. They may avoid parties as if they are escaping from pursuers. They may even complain tearfully. Or they may agitatedly blush and fly from the scene (Pan Z. 33, Luanxiao vol. 2).
Usually, however, courtesan productions attracted many keen admirers, and courtesan-actresses competed in performance. In the Southern Amusement Quarter of Nanjing ("Nanqu"):

The courtesans divided themselves into family-based factions. They contended in beauty and charm. They competed in wealth and rank... In the evenings, they performed on musical instruments, such as flutes and zheng. Plays, which resounded through the nine skies, were enacted. [Such theatre presentations were] headed by Li and Bian; and followed by Sha and Gu, and still followed by Zheng, Dun, Cui, and Ma (Yu Huai Bangqiao zaji, vol. 1, qtd. in Lu E. 159).

A courtesan's attitude toward theatre arts usually was very serious:

In the Southern Amusement Quarter of Nanjing ["Nanqu"], prostitutes [many of whom in Nanqu were in the class of courtesans] considered that accepting a role in a play as an amateur actress was an artistic pursuit (Zhang D. 69, Taoan vol. 7).

Yang Mei, one of the finest courtesan actresses during the Wanli period (1573-1619), played a role with such devotion that she disregarded her health, and easily forgot the cold while she was in character:

In playing the scene of "Stealing the Tally" [in the play of the same title, or Qiefu ji, by Zhang Fengyu (1527-1613)], she ran [in stage steps] as if she flew [from the scene after stealing the tally]. In playing the scene of "Torturing," she sank prostrate when the snow was falling and the ground was freezing. Some of the spectators advised her to stand up during the interrogation segment in order to reduce the cold, which she did not heed. She lay there singing through the whole scene, without even shivering [with cold] (Pan Z. 32, Luanxiao vol. 2).
Yu Si, another courtesan, even dared to violate her family's ban in order to learn from Yang Mei's performance:

Yu Si's family had very strict rules [on curfew]. She waited until midnight when her father and mother soundly slept. She then opened the door and went to the performance. Having stolen a glance at [Yang Mei's] excellence [in acting], she sneaked back [home] (Pan Z. 32, Luanxiao vol. 2).

An over-serious attitude could become a disadvantage to a courtesan's performance. Zhang Dai recalled some courtesans from the Southern Amusement Quarter who invited him to view their performance:

Yang Yuan, Yang Neng, Gu Meisheng, Li Shi, and Dong Bai were famous for their acting. They asked Yao Jianshu to invite me to watch theatre performances there. Boys [from a commercial troupe] would play in the afternoon. They would perform as amateurs in the evening (Zhang D. 69-70, Taoan vol. 7).

Those courtesans were unaware of Zhang Dai's expertise in theatre until Ma Xiaoqing, an actor from the commercial troupe, who was also a former member of Zhang's private troupe, told Yang Yuan about him. Ma further said that the honored man [Zhang Dai] was such a strict theatre critic that student actors considered going to his house for theatre training as "passing through a gate of swords" (as mentioned in Chapter 12). Ma was ignorant of what kind of effects his words might have upon the psyche of a courtesan actress, but Zhang Dai soon found out:

In the scene of "Teaching Her Son," Gu Meisheng played Zhou Yu; Yang Yuan, Zhou's wife; Yang Neng, Zhou Ruilong [the son]. Yang Yuan, nervous and afraid, was unable to produce a sound, but could only look
at me. And I looked at her. She tried to please me but could not. I wanted to flatter her but did not have an opportunity. Not until after quite a while did I find chances to cheer for her once or twice. She then gained confidence in herself, and the production was soon in full blossom (Zhang D. 69-70, Taoan vol. 7).

The majority of courtesan actresses developed one or two specialties. Wang Saiyu and Luo Guilin were "famous for their singing." Yang Qiuji (also known as Xinyun) and Xu Jinghong (also known as Pian or Pianpian) won grand prizes for their dancing. Jiang Liu gained popularity through her large repertoire and excellent acting:

She was skillful in presenting more than twenty chuangqi plays. She never hesitated or refused to play any of the some 100 scenes [from her repertoire]. Everybody liked her. When she was to be present, no one would turn down an invitation [to a social gathering] (Pan Z. 32, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Wang Yue also had a large repertoire, and was quick to put on new plays:

She sings wonderfully in Wu dialect, with the sounds lingering in the air. Taking dan roles in dozens of chuangqi plays, she demonstrates her excellence in each one of them. She has a very retentive memory for scripts and a sweet voice in singing. She also performs with high accuracy in newly learned melodies.

With all her conventional skills, Wang Yue's acting was touching:

During her opera presentation, audience members were excited with pleasure seeing happy events, and broke into sobs watching sad moments. People consider her to be the female incarnations of Shi and Meng [two actors from ancient times] (Pan Z. 139, Genshi "Waiji" vol. 23).
Expectations concerning a courtesan's acting were very high. She was judged by the same standard as that applied to a professional actress, if not actually at higher levels. Because a courtesan's overall theatrical achievements were judged according to the criteria of skill, intelligence, and style, Pan Zhiheng criticized some prominent courtesan actresses in these terms:

Skill is the strong point of Jiang Liu and Wang Jie, but intelligence is their weak point. Yu Si and Gu Yun have intelligence, but lack style. Gu San and Chen Qi excel in style, but come short in skill. The only one who claims all three of these credits is Yang Mei (Pan Z. 44, Luanxiao vol. 2).

When a courtesan's acting was judged by even higher criteria, some of the basic skills were no longer of concern. Instead, the critic's attention was drawn to those subtle and often ignored techniques, such as leading acting (du), psychology of characters (si), stage steps (bu), method of address (hu), and use of sighs in dialogue (tan).

According to Pan Zhiheng, du, or "conducting," was an ability mastered by very few of the courtesan actresses he knew. Yang Mei, who on stage was skillful, intelligent, and stylish, "has not yet gained complete control of leading acting." Du was what Pan hoped for in an ideal actress:

Those who have this quality of perfection lead others [on stage] ('du ren'). Those who do not have this quality of perfection follow [the leading actress] ('zi du') (Pan Z.: 44, Luanxiao vol. 2).
The only example he found for the perfect leading actress was in a production of *Series of Stratagems* (*Lianhuan ji*), when Gu Yun played Diaochan, the heroine:

She never missed or delayed or mistook her leads. Thus people [i.e. actors and actresses on stage] were able to contribute their best to the production, and the gods to best lend their power. She called upon the bleak autumn wind [a metaphor for desolation and sadness in Chinese classics] and changed [the spectators'] facial expressions. She played as well as Xiandu [also known as Yang Chaochao], so that [the spectators] were stirred to their very souls (Pan Z. 124, *Luanxiao* vol. 3).

To my knowledge, Pan Zhiheng was the only theatre critic who used *du* as a technical term in acting, but he did not define this word. However, *du* is often used as "transform" in religious settings. A layman can be transformed into a priest or a sinner into a sage by a celestial being or a priest with spiritual power. Thus in Pan's writing, *du* probably stands for the ability that the leading actress transforms her fellow actresses to her level of acting in a production. The fact that *du* is found in Pan's comments on his favorite courtesan actress "Miss Yang," and that he named her as "Xiandu," which means "celestial conductor" (Pan Z. 42, *Luanxiao* vol. 2) help us to determine *du* in more concrete terms of acting. Essentially, *du* is the ideal acting of a leading actress which enables her to:

1. become the cynosure of audience attention;
2. control the flow of the performance;
(3) demonstrate a distinctive personal style; and
(4) mark the performance as a whole.

Si, or character psychology, serves as the ground for some kinds of behavior in a character which are easy to see but hard to imitate. For example, Xishi, an historic and legendary beauty, had a trade-mark gesture of pressing against her heart. Pan Zhiheng explains that, contrary to the usual expectation, this gesture was not performed because Xishi suffered from heart disease, but because she was being touched by a deep thought. Yang Xiandu, probably the best courtesan actress of her time, expressed the si of her character, instead of merely performing a gesture:

Xiandu understands [Xishi's psyche]. She bases her every word [on stage] on such a psyche. Even those actresses who excel in playing sickness cannot play nearly as charmingly as Xiandu does when pressing above her heart (Pan Z. 44, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Simply imitating the outward appearance, without revealing a character's inner psyche, would have resulted in superficial or misleading acting.

Bu, or stage steps, is "of great importance in acting." Without fine judgment, relying only on rough imitation, one may "miss both the strong points of others and of self, just like that man [in Zhuangzi's tale] who goes to Handan to learn the walking style [but finally looks like he's crawling on his way home]." Two problems in stage steps
were common among contemporary performance of dan roles, as Pan Zhiheng noticed:

Those famous dan role players of the Wu area walk at a brisk pace, which is proper for male [characters], but not good enough for female [characters]. [Others] try to present [female characters'] reserved manner by constrained walking, which simply keeps [the characters] in low spirits.

The desirable stage steps for a female character are firm but gentle, swift but effortless, such as was seen in Yang Xiandu's performances:

Xiandu's toes are powerful and her steps swift. She walks like a flying goose; turns like a looping swallow; and pauses like a standing swan. She always moves with precision and timing in tempo and rhythm. Her striking of poses is especially superior on stage (Pan Z. 44, Luanxiao vol. 2).

The quality of a female character's steps is much like that of a bird's movements. A spectator sees only the outside feathers of a bird, which are extraordinarily soft, but he does not see the muscles inside, which are very powerful. The feathers are supported by muscles so that the bird acts swiftly. The muscles are covered by feathers so that the bird moves gracefully. In Xiandu's performance, her trained muscles supported her swift actions, while her bird-like steps and related stage movements softened and beautified her actions.

Hu, or method of address, "originated from [a character's] psyche." Thus it differs from case to case:

Hu has been used since Zhao Wuniang addressed "Cai Bojie." Others, such as Wushuang addressing "Brother from the Wangs," and Xishi addressing "Senior Official
Fan," all have a tone of sadness (Pan Z. 44, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Zhao Wuniang, the heroine in The Lute, addresses her husband by his style, "Cai Bojie," instead of in a more intimate way, in Scene 34 of the play (Mao J. 1/136, vol. 1). The circumstance is that, only 60 days after their marriage, her husband had left home to take the Imperial Examinations. He then vanished without a trace, and three years passed. When Zhao goes to the capital, however, she learns that her husband has placed first in the Imperial Examinations. The way Zhao addresses her husband suggests uncertainty about the situation, her worry about their relationship, and her feeling of alienation, among other emotions.

Liu Wushuang, heroine in The Shining Pearls (Mingzhu ji), addresses her fiance, Wang Xianke, as "Brother from the Wangs" in Scene 26 of the play (Mao J. 3/82, vol. 3). The circumstance is that Wushuang has been forced into service in the Imperial Palace as a maid of honor, and is therefore not supposed to have any unauthorized contact with the outside world. However, Wang Xianke manages to see her when she is being transported from the Forbidden City to the Imperial Tombs for cleaning up duties. Such an action puts both his life and hers into immediate danger. When Liu Wushuang talks to her former fiance in public, addressing him as "Brother from the Wangs," this salutation is very rich in dramatic content, including: her being
deeply touched by his true love, for he risks his life in seeing her; her efforts in covering up their true relationship in front of others; and her despair of ever seeing him again.

Xishi, the heroine in *Washing Silk* (*Huansha ji*, but *Wansha ji* in another version), addresses Fan Li, the man who once proposed marriage to her, as "Senior Official Fan" in Scene 23 of the play (Mao J. 4/79, vol. 1). The situation is that Fan Li comes back after being away for three years, only to try to persuade her in the name of patriotism to serve as erotic bait for a trap. Addressing Fan Li by his official title indicates that Xishi realizes he is now talking to her about a matter of business; that he has both a political goal and power over her; that once again she is a helpless village girl, but not the partner in the love relationship for which she hopes; and that her romance is ending before it can start.

From a playwright's perspective, the change of a character's address was based on dramatic content. But from an actress' point of view, her challenge was to signify and to reveal the substantial content to the audience by *hu*, the method of address. With a genuine understanding of changes in address and a mastery of methods of address, an insightful actress could create a truly dramatic scene when she applied *hu*. 
Tan, or the use of sighs in dialogue, "can draw audience's immediate attention." A new acting technique in Pan Zhiheng's time, tan originated in the Wu area, where kunqu emerged. Tan served kunqu well:

[Tan] is a powerful spirit in the slow pace of words [in a kunqu presentation]. Tan has a detached [or distant] quality. It works as if the [character's] grievances or other innermost feelings are being revealed.

Little Guan, the actor-manager of Shen Shixing's private troupe, and Pan Yingran, an actress in Zhou Diguang's private troupe, "were both skillful in sighs during their singing." Nevertheless, "they do not sigh as naturally as Xiandu does" (Pan Z. 45, Luanxia vol. 2).

The courtesans being evaluated with regard to the higher criteria were all-star performers. Yang Xiandu, with literati writing monographs on her theatre performance, was the ultra-star among courtesan actresses. A few other courtesans also claimed artistic attainments in certain aspects of the higher criteria of control of situations, psychology of characters, stage steps, method of address, and use of sighs in dialogue. However, Pan Zhiheng believed that of all the actresses he knew, no one equaled Yang Xiandu in displaying all talents. For instance, Zhu Zhiqing attained Yang Xiandu's level of performance in many techniques, but came short in two aspects:

Zhu Ziqing equals Xiandu [in certain skills]: she sings with Xiandu's voice quality, she talks the way
Xiandu does, she walks in Xiandu's steps, she sighs as well as Xiandu. However, Ziqing is still inferior to Xiandu in the mastery of character psyche and the control of theatrical situations.

Gu Yun and Fu Shou, both senior to Yang Xiandu, were probably only a little superior to Zhu Ziqing in acting. As performing artists, they were considered at Zhu's level, instead of at Yang's. Some actresses had even surpassed Yang Xiandu in certain fields: "[Chu] Xilai has the best singing quality." And "Zhou Liansheng has a great control over theatrical situations." However, "[Chu] Xilai's acting is poor." And "Zhou Liansheng's voice quality is low." Therefore, no one had yet exceeded Yang Xiandu in the overall art of theatrical performance during her time (Pan Z. 45, Luanxiao vol. 2).

While members of the elite class enjoyed the refined and sophisticated acting skills of courtesan actresses in entertainment quarters, the general public experienced a variety of acting styles in open air. These are the acting styles of commercial troupes. Commercial troupes continually developed and changed acting skills, demonstrating their vigorous vitality in a very competitive theatre market.
CHAPTER 30
ACTING IN COMMERCIAL TRoupES

During the Ming period, theatre troupes shared many aesthetic, stylistic, and technical elements in acting because of their common historical background. However, court, private, and commercial troupes also demonstrated differences in role-playing, many of which are related to their social and cultural environment. In comparison with court and private troupes, acting in commercial troupes is characterized by maturity, variety, and competitiveness.

1) Maturity

Maturity in acting is defined as the fullness of an actor's role-playing ability, the fineness of his performing style, and the powerfulness of his communicating skills. It has little or nothing to do with an actor's natural age.

Maturity in acting is an artistic achievement, but is not a measure of the time or effort an actor devotes to his art. A prolonged stage life does not guarantee
his maturity in acting, but does offer the opportunity and experience he needs to mature his art.

Maturity in acting is apparent when an actor overcomes the age barrier and creates lasting beauty on stage, instead of depending solely on his youthful beauty. Ding Jizhi, a star actor, "played [the character] Red Hair Demon [Liu Tang's nickname] in The Water Margin when he was already 80." Gu Huanggong, the man being honored by the presentation, composed an impromptu poem expressing surprise at his extremely youthful appearance:

You look a juvenile from all perspectives:  
Black hair, red sleeves, with flowers,  
Singing all the brothel songs,  
Using the fast gambling money.  
Often a supervisor fines you for your drunkenness,  
When experts love you for your dancer's waist.  
Few court officials of Zhenyuan [785-804] are seen today,  
But here we find an immortal among commoners (Jiao X. 216).

A number of actors in commercial troupes were vigorous on stage even in old age. Zhou Tie'dun is "eighty years of age this year, but is stronger than a young man" (Jin Zhijun Xizhai ji, vol. 5, qtd. in Lu E. 145). Wu Yixi and Ding Yantang "keep their acting ability until their old age, without weakening or decaying" (Pan Z. 54, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Actors in a private troupe relied more on their youthful beauty, probably because they were still teenagers. As actors, they left the stage before they lost their youthful beauty.
Maturity in acting is demonstrated when an actor or actress not only overcomes the sex barrier, but also creates evidences of charm not often seen in the opposite sex. Cross-gender acting was common in the Ming theatre. According to Lu Rong, a Ming scholar, male actors in certain Southern areas used to play female roles:

In the chuanqi plays they enacted, woman [characters] are involved in every plot, and tears in every scene, which easily make people sad. Probably those are the arts from the decayed dynasty of the Southern Song. [The male actors] who play woman roles are called zhuangdan [literally, false female role-types]. They have soft voices and gentle steps. The way they greet and bow is often true to life (Shuyuan zaji, qtd. in Wang X. 171).

Women also played male roles. In female troupes, all characters, including male roles, were played by actresses.

Simply imitating the opposite sex in realizing a role was not the ideal way to act. An actor or actress of judgement knew "obscenity was not to be presented in public, lasciviousness was not to be acted to please the host, and a local dialect was not to be used in faraway places" (Pan Z. 54, Luanxiao vol. 2). Shen Er, a dan role actor, "was good at lifting himself" above reliance on reality:

He walks lightly but not frivolously. He is charming but not obsequious. While the goddess of frost and snow would like him, those beautiful women would most likely envy him (Pan Z. 49, Luanxiao vol. 2).

The maturity of cross-gender acting was judged by its artistic perfection, rather than merely by sexual or homosexual attraction. Mature acting, such as Shen Er's, initially imitated life but had been beautified and
purified. Therefore it might have spiritual value, or, as Pan put it, "a goddess would like it." Or it might have aesthetic value, as Pan suggested also in saying that beautiful women would envy it for the beauty of artistry that nature had not granted them.

Maturity in acting becomes evident when a troupe can truly draw its audience into the circumstances of a play, and especially when a few spectators are so involved that they temporarily take theatrical illusions as reality. In a Ming theatre, extremely powerful acting was needed to overcome the conventional elements of the theatre, which constantly reminded spectators of the fact that illusions, instead of reality, were being presented on stage.

Liu Huai, a famed chou actor of the Wanli period (1573-1619), once performed in The Embroidered Coat (Xiuru ji):

An illiterate nobleman of the highest class, who was not very bright, had a dinner party at home, in which the play about Zheng Yuanhe's story was enacted. The chou actor Liu Huai, who was good in setting people to laughing, was able to deeply touch his spectators as well. In the scene about killing a piebald steed and selling servant Lai Xingbao, Lai [played by Liu] wept, because he still felt attached to his master. The nobleman called Lai to his table and awarded him a gold cup full of wine. He comforted Lai, saying: "Since your master wants to sell you, you don't have to keep your loyalty toward him." Lai Xingbao could do nothing but keep on saying "yes" (Zhou H. 236, vol. 4).

Liu Huai's lifelike acting truly touched that nobleman, who in turn produced an unexpected comic scene. But such powerful acting could create tragic results in other
circumstances. During the annual religious theatre presentations in Fengjing Town:

One day, the story of Qin Gui killing Yue Wumu [also known as Yue Fei] and his son was enacted on stage. All the details [of the story] were played in lifelike manner. Suddenly a man jumped from the crowd onto the stage. He struck [the actor playing] Qin Gui with a sharp weapon. The victim bled heavily. When the man was arrested and questioned, he answered: "I never knew this actor. My anger suddenly overtook me so that I was just willing to die with Qin Gui. I did not have time to figure out the reality and the illusions" (Dong Han Chunxiang zhuibi, qtd. in Jiao X. 203).

This incident was by no means unique, inasmuch as four like it were cited in Jiao Xun's Jushuo alone. Such incidents were not limited to uneducated spectators, either. When Zhou Liaozhou, a well known member of Ming literati, took office for the first time, local people held a celebration party in his honor:

The play selected for the party presents Yue Wumu's story. As the production goes on, the treacherous prime minister plots a frame-up under the "east window." Zhou was so mad that he beat the actor off the stage. Everyone was shocked and wondered if he was offended. The next day a friend of his was assigned to find out the cause of the incident. He said: "It just happened that I got so mad at Qin Gui that I beat him up" (Jiao X. 203).

2) Variety

Facing different demands from members of their society, commercial troupes developed a variety of acting techniques and styles. Acrobatics and martial arts, for example, rare in private troupes, were popular in commercial troupes.
Mulian Saves His Mother (Mulian jiumu), a martial play with as many as a hundred scenes (chu), was very well received during the Ming dynasty. In the production that Zhang Dai witnessed, it took three days and three nights to complete and drew a crowd of more than 10,000 people at a time (Zhang D. 52, Taoan vol. 6).

Many of the acting techniques presented in martial plays required special training. The actors in the production of Mulian Saves His Mother were invited from Jinyang in Anhui Province, where many actors enjoyed the reputation of being experts in martial arts. "They, 30-40 in number, were agile, brave, pithy, and poignant. They were good in wrestling and fighting" (Zhang D. 52, Taoan vol. 6).

Some of the acting skills presented by commercial troupes were quite spectacular and unheard of in private theatres:

Actors demonstrated their arts on the stage, such as wire-walking and wire-dancing; acrobatics with table and on the table; somersaults and handstands; juggling jar and mortar with the feet; ring-skipping and rope-skipping; and plunging through hoops of fire or swords (Zhang D. 52, Taoan vol. 6).

While one critic denounced such acrobatics as unrelated to the play's content, at the very least they served the purpose of displaying spectacles to delighted audiences.

Some commercial troupes also presented actors who satisfied literati's tastes. The highest criteria for actors of the sheng and dan role types, according to Pan
Zhiheng, were: first, being "natural and unrestrained" rather than "neat and formal;" second, being "plain and simplified" rather than "complicated and detailed." Such a standard was "met only by the Xinghua Little Troupe once in a while." "Zhou Dan is the best in the troupe, while Zhu Lin and Gao Zhan have similar reputations." Pan admired their acting because it presented "literati-like long-drawn-out thought and lasting taste" (Pan Z. 54, Luanxiao vol. 2).

The highest criteria for actors of jing role type was being "bright and simplified." But according to Pan it as yet had not been reached. The three actors who came closest to it were Ding Yantang, Wu Yixi, and Chen Shihuan (Pan Z. 54, Luanxiao vol. 2).

In Ming commercial troupes, acting was a permanent profession. While actors from both private troupes and commercial troupes started their training programs when they were about five years of age, their careers would end at about 20 years of age in a private troupe, but could last a lifetime in a commercial troupe. As a result, actors in a private troupe aimed at blooming on stage in their early teens, but those in a commercial troupe would plan their careers and perfect their arts for a life-long profession. Simply because he had more time, an actor from a commercial troupe might have a better chance to develop his acting ability in a variety of skills.
Fu Yu, for example, was an actor who succeeded in three role types:

Old actor Fu Yu, when young, was unusually beautiful. He enjoyed great fame. He played dan [primary young female] roles before he was 20, sheng [primary young male] roles when 30, and wai [old male] roles when 40 (Pan Z. 126, Luanxiao vol. 8).

Fu Yu did not quit the stage when he reached his majority. Losing his youthful beauty encouraged him to develop to the fullest his other gifts: "He looks dignified, with a resounding voice. He still keeps his poise in his old age, and never loses it" (Pan Z. 51, Luanxiao vol. 2).

Zhang San, a gifted actor in a private troupe, was known for playing both xiaodan (secondary young female) roles and dan roles successfully, as was mentioned in Chapter 12. However, from an artistic point of view, xiaodan and dan roles resemble each other closely, while dan, sheng, and wai roles are quite distinct from each other.

Zhou Tiedun, also an actor in another commercial troupe, played both jing and laosheng (old male) roles (Jin Zhijun Xizhai ji, vol. 5, qtd. in Lu E. 145).

3) Competitiveness

Often rival shows (duitai xi) were arranged for commercial troupes. Organizers of such performances would invite two or more troupes to present the same play, at the same location, at the same time. The success or failure
of a troupe's acting would be decided by the audience, who "voted" for a certain troupe by watching its performance, instead of watching that of its rival. The winning troupe was the one which attracted and held the largest number of spectators.

Rival shows were often performed on temporary stages. During a religious ceremony, several commercial troupes were invited to perform in Fengjing Town, which is located between Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces, where temporary stages were built to serve the presentations (Dong Han Chunxiang zhuibi, qtd. in Jiao X. 203).

In areas where rival shows were regular events, permanent theatres were structured in several arrangements: namely, two adjacent stages (erlian tai), or three adjacent stages (sanlian tai), or three stages in a triangle (pinzi tai), or two stages facing each other (dui tai). A troupe's performances had to be competitive enough to survive in such a world. A contemporary account described two rival shows in Nanjing, the Southern Capital of the Ming dynasty:

Dozens of theatre troupes made their names in acting, of which two were most famous: the Xinghua Troupe and the Hualin Troupe. One day, merchants of Xin'an [Anhui Province] hired two troupes to have a great show. All people of status in Jinling [also known as Nanjing] were invited. Men of letters, seductive concubines, and shy girls, all gathered [to watch the show]. The Xinghua troupe was placed in the east of the market, and the Hualin troupe the west. Both troupes were playing The Phoenix Cries.... Until the halfway point, spectators praised both troupes. Then when [the scene in which] the two prime ministers discuss the situation in Hetao area [was enacted], Actor Li played Prime Minister Yan Song on the west
stage, and Actor Ma on the east stage. The sitting spectators started to turn to the west. Some of them cheered. Some of them moved their seats toward the west. They never turned to the east again. Not long afterward, they moved even further [toward the west]. Then the performance on the east stage was unable to continue, because Actor Ma changed his clothes and fled from the theatre out of shame for being thought inferior to Actor Li (Hou C. 12, vol. 5). After that defeat, Actor Ma went to the Northern Capital. He served as a doorkeeper for three years for "today's Prime Minister Gu Bingqian. He and Prime Minister Yan Song [of the play] are birds of a feather." Ma daily "served the Prime Minister in court, watching his bearing and listening to his talking." Learning from life, Ma returned to Nanjing and won the next rival show against Li (Hou C. 12-3, vol. 5).

Not all the rival shows ended up in total victory for one troupe and absolute defeat for others. One day during the summer of 1619, both Chen Er's and Hao Kecheng's troupes were summoned by Mao Yuanyi, a member of the Ming literati, to his residential mansion. In the inevitable competition that followed, Chen Er and Hao Kecheng both played the leading roles in their respective productions and both did very successfully. Despite the intense heat of summer, none of the spectators left, "as if the shows were cooling them down." The result of the competition, indicated only by the fact that "more people gave Hao tips," might imply the degree of their success, but surely does
not suggest a total victory for one and a sad defeat for the other (Pan Z. 36, Luanxiao vol. 3).
CONCLUSION

The Ming theatre co-existed with both the flourishing Elizabethan theatre and Jacobean theatre in Europe and the booming Japanese theatre in Asia. Still the least studied major theatre of its era, the Ming theatre exhibits some striking features that deserve scholars' attention.

First of all, the Ming theatre constituted a prominent part of its society and culture. Ming people devoted much of their time, energy, money, and affection to the performing arts. A theatre production became an event that was shared and loved by people who came from different social classes and who otherwise had little in common.

Second, to my knowledge, the Ming theatre possessed an enormous scale unprecedented in the history of theatre. A single production could employ one thousand performers to present grand scenes. Ten-thousand spectators might attend a single performance. Hundreds of commercial troupes competed in a city. And thousands of temple stages were structured throughout the country to accommodate productions.

Third, the Ming theatre attained great artistic success. Ming theatre practitioners improved every aspect
of the performing art, often to a level unthinkable before. Refined singing, dancing, and acting provided audience members with sensual, aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual entertainment. To some spectators, theatre going could be an enlightening experience. Although the performance space remained primarily a bare stage throughout the era, Ming theatre artists also developed sophisticated scenery, props, and lighting for certain productions. As a stage art, the Ming theatre was one of the greatest in the world.

The Ming theatre is often regarded as a whole. But during the Ming dynasty, the court, private, and public theatres were effectively separate from each other. Historical records about formal communications among these different kinds of theatre are virtually non-existent. Their mutual influences were probably the result of personal observation, as when members of court and private troupes watched public theatre shows, commercial troupes recruited performers from private troupes, private troupes hired former members of court troupes as their singing masters, and when rival shows were arranged between private and commercial troupes. Sometimes it has been difficult for me to determine whether or not a certain aesthetic, stylistic, or technical element found in one kind of theatre would also have been present in the others. And even when a method of presentation was clearly shared by two (or
three) of those theatre worlds, that does not allow me to conclude that one theatre adopted or imitated the technique of another; concurrent practices could simply be a consequence of the common historical background shared by the three theatre worlds of the Ming.

In the proceeding chapters, six important aspects of all three theatre worlds have been described and discussed: troupe organization, actor background, actor training, performance space, costume, and acting. Because the unique relationship between the theatre worlds, some of the points discussed in this concluding section of the dissertation are not so much "conclusions" as they are speculations, suggestions, and even questions. And because parade performances and water-puppet productions are so distinctively different from all other theatrical performances, aspects of these two genres often are excluded in the following discussion.

1) Troupe Organization

Little was found in common in troupe organization among the three kinds of theatre. Even within a single theatre world, organization of troupes might not have been the same. In the court theatre, temporary troupes were organized differently from regular ones. Moreover, the two types of regular troupes, those of the Imperial Academy
of Music and those of the Department of Bells and Drums, were organized differently from each other. These differences in organization were not merely accidental; the roots of these different organizational systems are found in the social and cultural backgrounds of the different types of troupes. In other words, the particular way in which a theatre troupe was composed usually reflected its functions, finances, and traditions.

Thus, in order to function properly, a court troupe might have good reason to keep thousands of members. During certain periods of the Ming dynasty, the troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music had to present new plays daily. To do so, at any given time, the troupe had to employ many crews to work on a number of plays at the same time. On some occasions, the troupe presented grand spectacles, involving thousands of performers in a single scene. And finally, this troupe had to cope with the inefficiency of a huge court bureaucracy. In such circumstances, an enormous troupe became reasonable, in order to meet the demands of the imperial court. But in the other theatre worlds, no such reasons required them to assemble huge troupes.

The way of organizing a troupe was defined also by the means of its financing. With limited funds provided by an individual, a private troupe usually managed to function with a minimum number of performers. On the other
hand, being much concerned with making money, a commercial troupe always strove against having surplus members. A huge theatre troupe could be realized only in the imperial court because of its power to commandeer hordes of people and to collect taxes that provided almost unlimited funds.

Tradition also had much to do with the ways in which Ming troupes were formed. The Imperial Academy of Music, established as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907), headed the court troupes and professional entertainers. This tradition was kept by the Ming court. The people of Ming times must have accepted as natural the belief that the owner of a private troupe legally owned his performers as well, because, in the long history of China, that was the way that any master looked upon his family bondservants. Commercial troupes in the Ming era were operated on the same competitive and economic principles as they were in previous dynasties. Some of the effects on their organization included small troupes and versatile performers.

2) Actor Background

The great majority of professional performers in the Ming theatre, as well as other entertainers, came from society's outcasts. As extant historical materials determine, their low social status was artificially imposed,
and their career was officially discriminated against. Toward the end of the dynasty, however, this situation seemed to improve a little for those who worked in commercial troupes. The reasons for the change probably were based upon the fact that more and more people from ordinary backgrounds were joining commercial troupes, and that the income for those performers in public theatre was increased.

Actors and actresses in private theatre often encountered special circumstances that could alter social status. They were family bond-slaves by law. But at the same time, they became embodiments of theatre, on which their master bestowed much of his affection, as we discussed in Chapter 13. The productions actors co-created offered their master consoling comforts and wish-fulfillments unavailable in reality, as we learned in Chapter 12. They sometimes represented a bridge through which the master might reach spiritual enlightenment, as we discovered in Chapter 20. By participating in the performing arts, actors and actresses in a private troupe often transcended slaves-status to the owner's partners in theatrical activities. Xun Kuang (313 B.C.-238 B.C., also known as Xunzi), a classic philosopher of China, described such a phenomenon as "the ethical code places people in different status, but the music brings them together" ("Li yi fen zhi, yue yi he zhi").
Much of the unfortunate reputation of Ming actors and actresses was associated with the fact that they provided sexual services to their patrons. This was not necessarily a lifestyle chosen by theatre professionals, because most of them never had the right to decide for themselves. Under imperial law, they were born to provide such entertainments, theatrical or sexual, and they were not allowed to change careers. While for political and ideological reasons the Ming government imposed chastity on common women, it set apart another group of women and men to provide theatrical and sexual entertainment in exchange for economic and other practical gains. Thus, actresses and actors were actually forced into professional-related prostitution by the government.

3) Actor Training

Contemporary accounts suggest that actor training in the Ming theatre worlds was carried out at two levels. The courses taught at the first level, with trainees of approximately five through ten years of age, concentrated on basic musical and physical preparation. This was probably also the period in which the students' gifts were discovered and their future training was planned. The program designed for the second level, with actors and actresses in their early teens or a bit younger, was devoted
to their specialties. During this period, training in technique was often combined with stage presentations. Some young actors and actresses already made their reputations as star performers during this early practical training. This rapid rise was especially common in the world of the private theatre.

Actor training occupied different places in troupes. The Imperial Academy of Music took little to concern in actor training because it summoned only successful professionals to serve in its court troupe. Some owners of private troupes, on the other hand, devoted much of their time and money to training performers to the degree of perfection which they wanted. Eunuch actors probably had to be taught the very basics, since most of them came from backgrounds alien to stage life. But almost all children from Musical Families had already learned about the performing arts long before they joined theatre troupes. And students from training programs usually were ready to make their debuts when they graduated.

Training programs provided systematic education for three categories of entertainers, namely concubines, theatre performers, and courtesans. Courses were individually adapted for at least the most promising ones, but could be offered for all students. By and large, courtesans came from among those trainees who received the best and most education, while concubines received the least. Often
run as family businesses, but occasionally as charities, training programs became an increasingly important source of actors and actresses for both private and commercial troupes during the second half of the Ming dynasty.

4) Performance Space

In general, a private troupe performed wherever the owner wished. A commercial troupe performed in any place where putting on a show could possibly attract a paying audience. And a court troupe presented its productions in several locations within the palace area. Such flexibility in choosing a performance space indicates that the Ming theatre had not yet been bound to scenery, lighting, sound, and other stage effects. This freedom would last for many more years. The fact that troupes moved in search of spectators suggests that the Ming theatre was much an audience-oriented performing art.

The typical performance space for a court troupe was a hall in the palace. It was probably a relatively ordinary kind of hall, for no stage machinery or any other theatre devices were ever indicated in even detailed court records. The often photographed multi-storied theatre stages equipped with machinery in the Imperial Palace and the Summer Palace in Beijing were built during the late Qing, not during the Ming. Probably the only specialized court stage during
the Ming period was that needed for water-puppets, not for human actors or actresses.

The typical performance space for a private troupe was a hall in a private residence. Places adjacent to the hall sometimes were used as dressing-rooms. Occasionally a troupe owner built his house with some consideration of theatre performances. Having dance scenes in mind, Bao Hansuo built a huge hall free of central pillars in his villa. But no special building to be used as a theatre is known to have been constructed for a private troupe during the Ming era.

Among the three kinds of theatres, only the public theatre enjoyed the convenience of certain permanent structures, which were built to serve dramatic presentations: the temple stages. The usual temple stage was a raised and covered building with an enclosed area as a backstage and an acting area walled on two sides.

5) Costume

Conventional costuming was employed in the Ming theatre. Each item of costume was a stereotyped, simplified, or beautified piece, designed to identify a character's role category rather than to signify his or her personality or historical context, as is so often the case in Western realistic theatre.
A character's occupation and nationality were the most important factors that determined his or her category in costuming categories, such as: Confucian scholars, Taoist priests, female celestials, Han Chinese generals, northern barbarian soldiers, and island-country kings. Characters in the same category shared many common elements in their clothing, and dressed distinctly differently from other categories.

Many important factual elements which affected clothing in real life, such as historic periods, geographic areas, economic backgrounds, and cultural identities, were often ignored in costuming for the Ming theatre. Thus, most Chinese characters who lived in previous dynasties would all appear on stage in contemporary Ming clothes, with or without alterations. Only legendary figures were dressed as they were described in literature or folklore.

As can be determined by literary descriptions, most costumes were colorful in materials and rich in ornaments. Characters were often gorgeously dressed in order to please the eyes of the audience. Contemporary aesthetics respecting theatre costume obviously favored genuine materials rather than historic authenticity. Such a preference contributed much to the high cost of costuming during the Ming. In some commercial troupes, a role-player was responsible for furnishing his or her own costume.
6) Acting

During the Ming, successful acting was achieved on two levels. For the first level, conventional skills, such as singing, dancing, conversing, and moving, were mastered. For the second level, lifelike characterization was sought within these beautified and symbolized conventions. Without the skills of the first level, one would not be considered an actor. Without the talents of the second level, one would not be considered a good actor. The soul in this acting was "lifelikeness in spirit," or "shensi;" but not necessarily "lifelikeness in appearance," or "xingsi." A theatre performer imitated a character's psychological or emotional state, but not usually physical actions. Acting that conveyed true feeling won praises from Ming critics. But acting that merely duplicated a character's emotional reactions in daily life won no accolades in Ming theatre.

In the three worlds of the Ming theatre, stylistic differences were exhibited in acting. Each kind of troupe also had its distinctive skills which were not readily available in the other theatre worlds. In grand scenes, for example, the court troupe of the Imperial Academy of Music demonstrated its cooperation and unified intentions by putting thousands of performers on stage, a scale unbelievable to outsiders. With intelligent spectators,
some private troupes presented spiritual performances through suggestive acting, a phenomenon unknown in the two other theatre worlds. Often serving big audiences in the open air, actors from commercial troupes developed such large voices that they could make themselves heard by an audience of ten thousand, while in another show, spectators had to pass on the words of actors from a private troupe to those who stood far from the stage.

The aesthetics of acting were probably shared among the three theatre worlds. Actors who succeeded in one theatre world would most likely do well in another. Actresses from different backgrounds were judged according to similar criteria by their contemporaries. Grand masters and their schools gained respect nationwide.

For today's students of theatre, gender-reversal in performance often provides evidence of homosexual interests and practices in an audience and its society. On the one hand, that holds true for Ming theatre, which offers an abundance of such evidence. On the other hand, cross-gender acting could also encourage the understanding and communication between the sexes. When Ming actors and actresses interpreted cross-gender characters, they made an effort to understand the opposite sex. When they imitated those characters, they also made an effort to communicate with their audience by reversing gender. Through such efforts, theatre practitioners tried to
surmount the sex barrier and enter the world of the other
gender in acting.

This study has painted only a part of the whole picture
of the Ming theatre. Some aspects of China's most important
performing art 350 years ago remain unknown or little
written about. For instance, the musical system, which
defines theatre genres, determines singing techniques,
and affects acting style and play writing, still needs
a major study. Of costuming, which furnished probably
the richest data for a theatre of that age, we see only
the tip of the iceberg in this dissertation. And Chinese
influence on Japanese theatre performance, which has been
long suspected by experts, was touched upon in this study.
Judged on the circumstantial evidence I have collected,
such an influence more than likely existed. But it was
not yet a decisive conclusion. In the field of Ming theatre
performance, much has been done in this study, but more
can be done in future studies. It is still a field rich
of unanswered questions.

58 Circumstances indicate such an influence. It was
ture that under the threat from Japanese pirates, and the
Chinese rebels who cooperated with them, the Ming government
established a policy prohibiting its citizens from having
any contact with foreigners from overseas (Zhang T.: 3694,
vol. 322; Yingzong shilu vol. 93, qtd. in Wang Xiangrong.: 55-56;). But the policy failed and Chinese-Japanese contact
took place on a large scale throughout the Ming era. On the one hand, Japanese pirates constantly invaded the shores of China's provinces, when they often "were entertained and tipped off" by Chinese rebels (Zhang T.: 3691, vol. 322). And the most popular entertainment then would have been theatrical performances. On the other hand, Chinese nationals went to Japan under three sets of conditions:

(1) Chinese rebels sailed to the islands of Japan for military and commercial purposes, such were Wang Zhi, Wang Ao, Ye Zongman, and their followers (Zhang T.: 3692-3, vol. 322). Others went to avoid heavy taxes, such as Zhou Laibao and Zhong Kefu (Zhang T.: 3689, vol. 322).

(2) Chinese citizens were captured by Japanese pirates, such as those 78 Chinese who were returned to China in the fifth year of Hongwu (1372) after their captivity in Japan (Taizu shilu, vol. 66, qtd. in Wang X.: 18), or those whom Emperor Zhu Di in the fifteenth year of Yongle (1417) requested the Japanese government to send back (Zhang T.: 3688-9, vol. 322).

(3) Chinese children were sold to Japan, such as the three people who served in the Japanese diplomatic mission in the fourth year of the Chenghua (1468). Natives of Ningbo, they were sold as Chinese-Japanese interpreters when they were young (Xianzong shilu vol. 54, qtd. in Wang Xiangrong: 62).

In these frequent contacts, theatrical influences may very likely have taken place. Song Suqing, the head of a Japanese diplomatic mission in the fifth year of the Zhengde period (1510), was sold to Japan as an indemnity: Suqing was a son of the Zhu family of Jin County, [Zhejiang Province]. Gao was his [original] first name. He learned singing when he was a child. A Japanese envoy saw him and liked him. Gao's uncle owed this Japanese a payment for his goods. Thus [Gao's uncle] paid the reparation with Gao (Zhang T.: 3690, vol. 322).

According to another account, that "Japanese envoy" was actually a merchant in the Japanese diplomatic mission. Gao's father spent his prepayment for lacquerware but could not deliver the goods. Eventually he paid the debt with his son. Still another account indicated that Gao's uncle was the man who arranged the transaction (qtd. in Wang Xiangrong: 70).

Despite the differences found in the three sources, the fact that the Japanese accepted Zhu Gao as the indemnity in international trade suggests two possible explanations:

(1) This Japanese "envoy" truly liked Gao, as is mentioned in the official Ming history; and

(2) Gao was worth the amount of the debt, since a good performer's price could be as much as 400 ounces of
silver as discussed in Chapter 14 of this dissertation.

Either of these explanation is based on the assumption that Gao was a trained actor. When in Japan, Gao was valued as a performer as well. A Japanese source confirmed the popularity of Gao among Japanese aristocrats:

Song Suqing is a man from the great country [of China]. Our Prince loves him. And Suqing is on intimate terms with the trusted officials of the Prince (qtd. in Wang Xiangrong: 70).

In these Chinese and Japanese sources, even the terms used to describe the relations between Japanese masters and Gao, such as "liked him" ("yue zhi"), "loved him" ("ai zhi"), are unmistakably those often used for the relations between theatre patrons and actors.
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