

## **Official Life: Homoerotic Self-Representation and Theatre in Li Ciming's**

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Abstract:

As many have noted, homoerotic play was central to the recreational culture of theatregoing from the mid-Qing to the beginning of twentieth century, especially in Beijing. Theatregoing literati in particular played an important role in the production and reproduction of an elite, theatre-based, homoerotic sub-culture, heavily investing themselves in the pursuit of social distinction. While it is important not to underestimate the importance of lower-status audiences in the popularisation of *jingju*, the literati doubtlessly considered themselves the aesthetic vanguard in terms of both the judgment of staged drama and the literary promotion of romances between themselves and the boy-actors offstage.

Unlike “flower-guides” that circulated between friends, diaries from the period record private thoughts on the scene that would not, and could not, be expressed in public. Drawing on the diary of the influential late-Qing scholar-official Li Ciming (1830-1894), I focus on the question of how an understanding of public participation entered Li's diaries, as well as examining what his self-representations have to say about Qing literati ownership of homoerotic sensibilities and spaces, which is to say, how he saw himself as presenting to others and how that self-presentation is (re-)presented in his writing.

Keywords:

Li Ciming (1830-1894), diaries, homoeroticism, theatre, Beijing, late Qing dynasty,  
boy-actors.

The extensive minor (i.e. informal or casual) literature produced by the literati class in late imperial China (1550-1911) is infused with an autobiographical sensibility. Through collections of casual poetic writing, or in their miscellany observations, or even in literary criticism, the scholar-gentlemen of the period communicate habitually through personal experience and observation. To some degree the major works of fiction of this period also reflect the same trend, although not so directly. But in their belletristic writing the literati reveal an approach to writing closely related to conversation. In writing they are completely confident that there are others who will share their tastes and interests; there is a clear sense that they are partaking in a form of conversational exchange, and that there may be a *zhiyin* 知音, an appreciative friend, who is listening. Given the emergence of the individual in late-Ming philosophy, these might all be said to be things we should expect. That many of these writings also contain references to homoerotic pleasures and relationships is perhaps a little more surprising, although, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the history of homoerotic desire in China demonstrates that the emergence of such a sensibility should not be unexpected.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wu Cuncun. "Historical Origins of Qing Homoerotic Sensibilities," *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-56.

I trace its emergence to the post-Wang Yangming libertinism that was influential in Jiangsu and Zhejiang in the late Ming, but also point out that sexual desire and behaviour in China have a very different history to the post-Judeo-Christian West. I

With the entry of gender and queer studies into the Asian studies arena over the past decade we have witnessed an increasing interest in the study of male homoeroticism in late imperial China. A number of monographs and papers have proven that such approaches are productive in raising new questions of social power and representation.<sup>2</sup> What many of these studies often sidestep, or fail to adequately

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also point out in an earlier chapter that the “problem” of homosexuality and the need to *explain* “it” is constructed in a Euro-American cultural context.

<sup>2</sup> Keith McMahon and Giovanni Vitiello have focused on homoerotic literature in the context of wider studies of Ming and Qing literature. See Keith McMahon, “Eroticism in Late Ming, Early Qing Fiction: The Beauteous Realm and the Sexual Battlefield,” *T’oung Pao* 78 (1987): 217-264; and, “Sublime Love and the Ethics of Equality in a Homoerotic Novel of the Nineteenth Century: Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses,” *Nan Nü* 4 no. 1 (2002): 70-109. See also Giovanni Vitiello, “The Dragon’s Whim: Ming and Qing Homoerotic Tales from *The Cut Sleeve*,” *T’oung Pao* 77 (1992): 341-372; and his recent book, *The Libertine’s Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Bret Hinsch introduced Western readers to the depth of homoerotic tradition in a general survey of Chinese male homosexuality in history, see *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). More recently Sophie Volpp and Chloe Starr have developed post-structuralist responses to the problem of the nature of traditional Chinese male homosexuality, both questioning the

recognize, is the important role the literati play in the production and reproduction of homoerotic discourse and their investment in the maintenance of a homoerotic culture associated with social distinction.<sup>3</sup>

At the forefront of cultural and intellectual life, the literati of the Ming and Qing dynasties were the central trend setters of the period, and an examination of their autobiographical and reflective writing leaves no doubt as to the role their interest in homoerotic romance played in the production of social status and prestige. In putting forward this argument I am offering a very different view to that recently advanced by some scholars that male-love (男風 *nanfeng*) during this period was not in fact

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perception that homoeroticism was popular and widely accepted in late imperial China.

See Chloe Starr, "Shifting Boundaries: Gender in *Pinhua baojian*," *Nan Nü* 1 no. 2 (1999): 268-302. Sophie Volpp, "Classifying Lust: The Seventeenth Century Vogue for Male Love," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 61 no. 1 (2001): 77-117, and *The Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); My own *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, as well as Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun, *Homoeroticism in Imperial China: A Sourcebook* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Volpp goes part way in addressing this in "The Literary Circulation of Actors in Seventeenth Century China", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61 no. 3 (2002): 949-984.

See also my *Homoerotic Sensibilities*.

accepted or celebrated, but was ethnologised, marginalized and disparaged.<sup>4</sup> Rather, instead of allowing the analysis to be dominated by the logic of classification or signification, this paper seeks to locate our understanding of homoeroticism within relationships of status and power. Such a strategy is in part necessary because while classification entered many areas of life in traditional Chinese society, its deployment in relation to sexuality remained quite different to that outlined by Foucault, for example, to operate in the West.<sup>5</sup> If, as Foucault has argued for Europe, different *epistemes* or *dispositifs* have characterised societies at different times, we must be prepared for disparities in the cultural histories of Europe and other parts of the world. So to say that classification did not govern sexuality in the same way that it happened to in Western Europe does not, of course, mean that China was backward, somehow

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Volpp, "Classifying Lust," 78-81. For a refutation of Volpp's position see Mark Stevenson and Cuncun Wu, "Quilts and Quivers: Dis/covering Chinese Male Homoeroticism," *Tamkang Review* 35 no. 1 (2004): 119-167.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Furth provides a very clear summary of this problem, "Medical literature appeared in harmony with Ming social images of homosexual behaviour as a kind of male dissipation. As such potentially it could distract from family responsibilities and was perhaps imprudent in its wasteful expenditure of vital essence, but it was not, in principle, incompatible with proper male sexuality," see "Androgenous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China*, 9 no. 2 (1988): 7. Biological anomalies detrimental to reproductive success were of more interest than deciding matters of "sin."

left behind or unchanging (the discourse of Orientalism), but it does alert us to the difficulty of transferring terms of analysis between one discursive environment and another.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis in this paper is directed at shifting our analysis from existing paradigms for the study of sexuality which centre on discursive identity and behaviour, and arguing that, at least in relation to homoerotic sensibilities in late imperial China, they be extended and placed within the larger cultural and aesthetic context, particularly the continually evolving culture of the literati.

Which kinds of Ming and Qing materials can be read as literati homoerotic self/representation? The answer can only be all genres of literati writing and art. Homoerotic practices, comments, allusions and fantasies are found throughout literati writing. The literati do represent themselves, or their class, in autobiographical or biographical prose, but we also find them reflected in poetry, essays, epitaphs, fiction, and drama, and especially their jottings and diaries. And contrary to suggestions that such references represent an ethnological gaze that “others” or marginalizes the homoerotic, there is an abundance of material that reveals a literati who hold homoerotic relationships very close to their own hearts. Indeed the material is so abundant that even a comprehensive study must be selective.

For literati in the late Ming dynasty homoerotic relationships with song-boys were one item in a range of accepted and available sensual pleasures pursued by elite men. And

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<sup>6</sup> See Leila J. Rupp, “Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10 no. 2 (2001): 287-302.

their homoerotic behaviour was an expression of privilege for a man of status, as well as a symbol of power. But as this vogue for homoerotic modes of self-expression entered its second century it begins to take on the force of something that is socially or cultural binding, both in the sense that it is consolidating relationships between circles of elite men<sup>7</sup> and that it is somewhat unavoidable as a form of cultural capital. Men met together to enjoy the company of boy-actors, and also capitalised on those social occasions by writing about them, exchanging their writings with friends, and collecting them together in special editions. In his study of urbanisation and the commercial production of pleasure in the Ming dynasty, historian Timothy Brook observes that “[p]ublic exposure was essential to the social purpose of homoeroticism in the late Ming. Like the buying of rare displayable artefacts, it marked off the truly rarefied at the pinnacle of elite status.”<sup>8</sup> Part of this process involved just making it to the metropolitan centres where the process of a literatus’s self-production could begin (often initially in the context of preparing for the imperial examinations). But the act of participation was not fully complete until it had been mediated in forms of literary exchange. In this latter act the boy-actors become a special object of conversation, and in the process they are shown, displayed and depicted within the context of literati gatherings and more private moments of intimacy. They are also being depicted within

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<sup>7</sup> Sophie Volpp, “The literary circulation of actors.”

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 232.



self-portraits composed by the literati men who become their patrons and lovers. In the main actors are written into literati lives, not usually the other way around.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper I want to examine one example of how the public performance of homoerotic feelings and sensibilities in late imperial China is related to a long history of employing *qing* (情 feeling, emotion, sentiment, love) as a force for self-fashioning – in other words, that *nanfeng* (male homoerotic romance) enabled a profession of strong feelings and desires that was both more explicit and more public than would have otherwise been possible. Certainly strong expressions of a truly diverse range of *qing* had been explored and even extolled in late imperial writings; however, when men in the Qing dynasty turn to recording *their own* experiences of *qing* they appear to be less prepared to write in detail about their relationships with women, and are far more inclined to discuss their erotic relationships with young men.

While elite men who exemplify *nanfeng* are portrayed in their own occasional jottings, or even become legendary figures within an evolving corpus of homoerotic theatre writing over the nineteenth century, to date little attention has been given to how elite men treated homoerotic themes within the pages of their regular diaries.<sup>10</sup> While it was not available during the period when this paper was developed, the task of surveying diaries from the period for reference to theatregoing has been made much easier through the appearance of *Jingju lishi wenxian huibian, Qingdai juan* 京劇歷史

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Stevenson also treats this problem elsewhere in this issue.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many of the authors await identification.

文獻彙編·清代卷 (The comprehensive collation of historical documents pertaining to Peking opera, Qing dynasty section), which includes about twenty Qing theatregoers' diaries running to over 900 pages.<sup>11</sup> Among these primary sources are to be found unguarded and vivid descriptions of theatregoing culture and the romantic relationships shared between actors and literati, and these are precious in allowing us insights into not just the rhythms and arrangements of literati men's interactions with boy-actors, but also the way the diaries' authors understood the relationships in terms of their own personal hopes as well as the way they fitted into wider social patterns. In this paper, I use the example of Li Ciming 李慈銘 (1830-1894) and his *Yuemantang riji* [越縵堂日記Diary of Yueman Studio, hereafter the *Diary*] as a case study, supplemented by observations from a number of middle- to late-Qing literati diaries.

Preserved today in the national libraries of Tianjin and Beijing, the *Diary* was reprinted, extracted and cited repeatedly through the twentieth century as an important source of primary and secondary historical data in a large number of fields. Like many other diaries by men of similar status, Li's diary entries include regular passages

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<sup>11</sup> *Jingju lishi wenxian huibian: Qingdai juan* [The comprehensive collation of historical documents pertaining to Peking opera, Qing dynasty section], ed. Fu Jin et al. (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2011). In this article I will continue to cite Zhang Cixi's *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao*, citing this more recent collection only for those passages not originally included by Zhang.

detailing romantic affairs between literati men and *dan*<sup>12</sup> from Beijing opera troupes in the late nineteenth century. However, given the usual impression we have of him as an upstanding and rather sober servant of the imperial bureaucracy his diaries may be taken as a special case in relation to literati self-representation. In the late Qing, and particularly the period spanning the second half of the nineteenth century, Li Ciming was a significant player in the political and cultural life of Beijing. He was already in his own time a household name on account of his poetry, his expertise in the Chinese classics, and also his contributions to historiography. As an official he rose to the position of Investigating Censor of the Shanxi Circuit.

Originally from Shaoxing in Zhejiang, Li first went to the capital when he was 29 to pursue an official career there. By the time he passed away at 64 in 1894, he had spent most of his life living in Beijing, where he evidently gained considerable pleasure from his contemporaries' admiration of his achievements in poetry and scholarship, as well as his outspokenness in criticising politics and the failings of the high officials of the day. He can be counted as one of most prominent cultural identities in the late Qing capital. It is rumoured in contemporary accounts that Li had a very unsuccessful arranged marriage, and despite eventually bringing in concubines he remained

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<sup>12</sup> That is to say, predominantly *dan*, but by no means entirely limited to this or other female role categories.

childless, causing speculation that it was his unhappy family life that made him a frequent visitor of the boy-actors' private apartment in Beijing.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to spending time in the capital's theatre districts, diary writing would appear to have been Li Ciming's favourite pastime, and he dedicated himself to this task religiously. The pages of his diary recorded details of his everyday life, important political events of national interest, as well as notes on evidential historical scholarship (which spanned professional interest and pastime). A chronicle of his life interests spanning over forty years (1854-1894), the *Diary* was, in handwritten copies, "widely circulated within literati circles" well before Li's death.<sup>14</sup> The first publicly released edition was published by the Shangwu yinshuguan in Shanghai in 1919. Since then it has been reprinted and republished either expanded with annotations or

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<sup>13</sup> Dong Conglin, "*Lun wan Qing mingshi Li Ciming*" [論晚清名士李慈銘 On the late-Qing celebrity literatus Li Ciming], *Jingdaishi yanjiu* [Journal of Early Modern Chinese History] 5 (1996): 17. Given the access elite men had to concubines and courtesans I remain cautious when it comes to "substitute" arguments for homoerotic sensibilities in China. His family situation, however, may have contributed to a desire for recognition and even affection.

<sup>14</sup> The Compiling Committee for the Historical Documents Section of Qing History ed. "Yueman tang riji de banben ji zhengli chuban qingkuang jianjie" (越縵堂日記的版本及整理情況簡介 A brief introduction to editions and publication history of The Diary of Yueman Studio), *Shiyuan* 6 (2004). Accessed August 30, 2013: <http://www.historychina.net/magazinefree/html/11/62/content/122.shtml>

extracted according to theme or period. The latest comprehensive edition, totalling 18 volumes, was published by Guangling shushe (Yangzhou, 2004).

While only containing a small number of references to relationships between literati men and boy-actors when considered in relation to coverage overall, the *Diary* remains noteworthy in containing some of the least mediated references from this period to patronage of boy-actors. In the 1930s, while compiling his *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao* (清代燕都梨園史料 Historical materials on opera circles of the capital in the Qing dynasty), Zhang Cixi recognised its importance as historical document and collated a selection of entries and poems relevant to boy-actors in Beijing into a single volume titled *Yuemantang juhua* (越縵堂菊話 Words on Opera from the Yueman Studio), which he published in the first volume of *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao* in 1934. The entries thus collated document Li Ciming's relationships with several boy-actors from 1861 to 1886, the same period within which he progressed from working as a quite lowly official in one of the ministries to a position of considerable power and influence. And from the *Diary* we also witness at the same time his rise as a poet and historian.

More recently, as part of his research for the Qing dynasty section of *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, Gu Shuguang (谷曙光 associate-editor) read through Li Ciming's entire diary once more to draw out further references to be included in *Yuemantang juhua*. This revised edition, published in *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian, Qingdai juan* in 2011, can be regarded as the most complete available. The *Diary*, together with their redactions as Li Ciming's opera notes, reveal Li as a man of

unusual temperament, and they remain today an important source for understanding literati socialisation with actors, making available his notes and impressions of theatregoing over a span of twenty-five years. While his need to believe his feelings for the actors are different to those of most other men is not one that was unusual for the time, the evidently deep need for expressions of respect and favour from the actors betrays an unusual vanity. It is also interesting to note how social concerns around excessive expenditure and lack of taste dominate many of these passages.

Li's diary entries also happen to cover the same decades of the nineteenth century when commercialisation of male-love had reached its height, and male homoerotic prostitution was semi-institutionalised as part of the increasingly influential opera venues of Beijing. Boy-actors, usually those playing the female lead (*dan*), were available for hire at drinking venues, or for visitation at the lavish apartments provided by their masters. Li's diary entries are invaluable in giving so much attention to who was attending the parties and venues. This story of homoerotic romance Li and the other men were participants in was the continuation of what can be described in broad terms as a diverse interest in pleasure in the late Ming dynasty, which continued to have reverberations in the early decades of the Qing, a return to quieter and more private forms of refinement in the eighteenth century, and a revitalisation of public forms of homoerotic socialisation in a commercialised form in the nineteenth century. This last development was not without its private and public tensions.

The tension is partly evident in the two quite different personas that emerge from Li's diary. As an active participant at court in the final decades of the Qing dynasty he was

respected for his courage and forcefulness in attacking wayward high officials as well as his commentary on the state of the traditional Chinese political system. This side of his character is found throughout, but when his pen turns to boy-actors a very different facet in his personality emerges, where he portrays himself as romantic and sensitive, and much devoted to boy-actors. In the passages detailing the “immeasurable pleasure” taken while drinking with *dan* and song-boys his tone is perhaps best described as effusive:

The 13th of the Fourth Month, third year of the Tongzhi reign (1864), fine, wind. In the morning I called on Defu and went to the Three Celebrations (*Sanqing*) Troupe together with drafter Liu Cimin and Tan Yansun of the Ministry of Works. We watched Angelica-Maiden and Angelica-Autumn, both from the Four Happinesses (*Sixi*) Troupe, performing *The Sole Winner* (*Duzhan*). Their presence on stage was tremendously captivating, bringing to mind the grace of performers from the good old days. In the evening I went with Defu to drink at Nurturing Prosperity Restaurant. I called Angelica-Autumn, Defu called Foster-Fortune, and Cimin called Angelica-Maiden [three *dan* from the Four Happinesses Troupe] to serve wine there. At night, I went with Defu, Cimin and Yansun to have a drink at [the *dan*] Foster-Fortune’s house.<sup>15</sup> I called Angelica-Maiden, Cimin called Fresh-Treasure, as well as the boys Exquisite-Orchid, Orchid-Born, and Three-Perfections, and

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<sup>15</sup> While it is not the term used here, actors’ homes were called *siyu* (“private residences”) and served much like nightclubs.

we were joined by three fellows from Jiangxi, names unknown, sharing a table as we drank and gambled. The Wu region lilt [spoken by the *dan*] was so nice,<sup>16</sup> it's been three years since I last enjoyed a drink so much. It was midnight before I got home.<sup>17</sup>

The 16th, afternoon. I went to Three Celebrations Theatre to enjoy the opera. The theatre was unbearably crowded. In the evening I drank at Ample Prosperity Restaurant, attended by Angelica-Autumn. On the way home at midnight, the moonlight was as bright as a painting in the splendid autumn air.<sup>18</sup>

The 3rd of the Ninth Month, third Year of the Tongzhi reign (1864), fine. After dinner Zhu Houzhai invited me out for a drink. Once among the laneways I called Jade-Phoenix and Gardenia-One. My! I hadn't seen either for three years! Their faces showed signs of fading but some of their charm

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<sup>16</sup> Li was from this region himself.

<sup>17</sup> *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao* (Historical materials on opera circles of the capital in the Qing dynasty) ed. Zhang Cixi (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 703.

Hereafter this collection will be referred to as QYLS.

<sup>18</sup> QYLS, 704.



remained, and inevitably the tender feelings returned and the uncommon love revived.<sup>19</sup>

As has often been noted, the boy-actors playing female roles in the Anhui troupes, usually sourced from the Lower Yangtze area, played an important role in the development of Beijing opera and its subsequent popularity. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as is clear from the passages above, the role they played off-stage as catamites was at least as important as their on stage role. However, it is also clear that there is much more going on than simple picking boys up for sexual services.

While Li Ciming is clearly enamoured with the atmosphere of luxury and elegance, on occasions the now explicit commercial tone of the relationships forces him to reveal a more jaded judgement:

The 14th of First Month, fourth Year of the Tongzhi reign (1865), fine, night chilly. Zhou Wenjun of the War Ministry invited me to join him at a banquet

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<sup>19</sup> Literally, “inevitably those fragrant-angelica feelings returned and the red-gardenia love revived (紅梔之愛 *hongzhi zhi ai*),” QYLS, 704. While the gardenia should be white, we need not read any implication of unnaturalness into this positive allusion to the extraordinary beauty he found in their feelings. My translations of actors’ names, based as they are on flower themes, can often only be approximate, in which case I chose a name that evokes similar properties rather than specialised botanical terms.

at the Golden Harmony Lounge in the house of [the *dan*] Orchid-Fairy,<sup>20</sup> together with the prefectural highest honours graduate Wenjie, Lintu from the Ministry of Works, and Yunchen and his brother. I called Angelica-Autumn, together with the boys Crimson-Cloud, Angelica-Maiden, and Plum-Five. They played flute and sang, not finishing until midnight. Angelica-Maiden pretended not to see me, maintaining an icy distance during the whole party. Angelica-Autumn was unsociable at the table and grumbled unrelentingly. They really are a difficult lot to deal with.<sup>21</sup>

The bustling Beijing nightlife of the nineteenth century has a very different atmosphere and structure compared, for example, with the garden gatherings of the Lower Yangtze in the middle of the seventeenth where literati men like Chen Weisong developed romantic relationship with song-boys. Finding a *zhiyin*, or soul-mate, in nineteenth century Beijing was fraught with frustration when the boys were shared with an ever expanding circle of aficionados. One diary entry from 1877 contains a long note on what he regarded as the undesirable consequences of an over-commercialisation of male-love:

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<sup>20</sup> Huixian, the stage name of Mei Qiaoling (1842-1882). At this time Mei Qiaoling was fast becoming one of the most popular actors of the Beijing stage. Soon to become the leader of the Four Happinesses Troupe, he appears regularly in Li Ciming's diary entries. He was the grandfather of celebrated twentieth century actor Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), but died well before Mei Lanfang was born.

<sup>21</sup> QYLS, 704.

The 7th of the Fourth Month, third year of the Guanxu reign (1877)... Some of the more obsessed go searching high and low in pursuit of the cut-sleeve, taking both the beautiful and the ugly, welcoming both the charming and the vulgar, and not distinguishing male from female. Where they retain a modicum of self-respect they are wont to persuade themselves they are romantic. One example is assistant minister Peng from Jiangxia who when inspecting academies in the Lower Yangtze sends home remittances to [the actor] Stunning-One Li that amount to one thousand taels annually. Another is Yan Dali from Dantu who, as soon as he received the imperial commission to inspect academies in Anhui, immediately promised all the boy-actors they would get a good cut out of the travel provisions. Then there is Sichuan judicial commissioner and Jiangxi provincial administrator Li, who since resigning last year and returning to the capital has spent tens of thousands of taels on nightlong musical entertainment. In addition to which, when metropolitan governor Li from Taihe took up his position and commenced his oversight of the capital he often prepared modest gifts to take on outings. As for those in lesser positions, there is no need to elaborate any further. A redundant official nursing an illness, I myself have invested all my efforts in my writing. Blessed with devoted friends, they constantly come to invite me out wining and dining in an effort to cheer me up. While it is not something I do willingly, I do sometimes follow them. I have a soft spot for the two boys Autumn-Caltrop and Aurora-Perfume, and whenever I have a little spare cash I

often spend it on [these two] flowers.<sup>22</sup> Ghosts and demons might haunt men, the mantis may attempt to topple a tree, so there will always be those who will fault and slander good men, spreading rumours or making wisecracks. To be sure, loyal friends have recommended I simply deny the existence of my own involvement and keep names [of *dan*] out of my writing. Have they forgotten that dark clouds may fill the sky but leave no mark upon the sun, or that vines might twist and climb but cause no injury to the stately pine? If I have done something I can't see the point in concealing it. When it comes to the friends in our gatherings, each has his own favourite, but some keep this from their family and others want to avoid malicious rumours, and so the names of the actors they call will not sully the pages of my diary. Those names have been omitted, but that does not mean only the two I have named were ever present at the gatherings. I particularly wanted to offer set out this clarification.

Headed home at dusk.<sup>23</sup>

The mood immediately preceding this passage starts off well, with a sunny recollection of the afternoon he has just passed with friends in the company of several *dan*. Perhaps Li has Chen Weisong in mind when he recalls the spirit of previous generations. And he certainly sees his group as at least emulating the casual

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<sup>22</sup> Li Ciming uses the phrase “flower-leaves 花葉” for this kind of expenditure, an in joke at the time which alluded to the need flowers have of leaves (cash, trappings) to set off their beauty. The image reappears in another passage cited below.

<sup>23</sup> QYLS, pp.705-6.

refinement of those days. But then, without saying so explicitly, he begins to question the value of his own experience in the light of an obviously far less discerning set of men. In short, he reproduces one of the central themes of the mid-nineteenth century homoerotic novel *Pinhua baojian* – the contrast between sublime love and vulgar dissipation.<sup>24</sup> The distinction was not always an easy one to maintain. The friends who caution him fear perhaps that his visits to the entertainment quarters will tarnish a reputation established on a record of state service, and there was always some fear that the boys could be venal and pressure their client-lover's in attempts to increase their beneficence.

The strategy adopted by Li is the regularly encountered one of aligning the self with the ethico-heroic stance of *qing* sensibility, the self as a man of feeling or passions.<sup>25</sup> For the nineteenth century Keith McMahon has suggested that this sensibility may involve a form of nationalist Han nostalgia for the days of the late Ming.<sup>26</sup> Yet, given the last lines from the passage reproduced above, we must also consider whether a more personal form of politics was beginning to take shape, a resistant discourse that claims to balance sentiment and pleasure.

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<sup>24</sup> McMahon, "Sublime Love," 84-5.

<sup>25</sup> Martin W. Huang, "Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 20 (1998): 163-4.

<sup>26</sup> McMahon, "Sublime Love," 109.

Unlike the vast majority of other accounts from the *huapu* where men reveal an emphasis on locating their enjoyment of song-boys in relation to their membership of a group of bon viveur friends, Li shows no such fellowship with his fellow scholar-gentlemen, at least not in this respect. In the following passage he negotiates his own reactions at having to share one boy he was fond of with other men who were taking him out:

Smitten with Autumn-Caltrop's good looks [one particular wealthy official] would spend a thousand taels on him a year. Autumn-Caltrop despised him and did not deign to mention it. Through the introduction of friends I have had Autumn-Caltrop accompany me on the odd occasion, perhaps less than ten times in the last three years. I did not open my purse, nor attach any "leaves" to the flower, even while Autumn-Caltrop treated me very intimately. On each occasion I noticed how smooth and fragrant his gowns were, and that his slender fingers had a very gentle touch. Looking deep into my eyes he looked so sad whenever I left. On one occasion he confided in me, "Should anyone not respond to your summons, the person would hardly be human." . . . .

Having no means to accumulate any status, one can witness his radiance as he takes the stage; endowed with noble amorousness, he seeks nothing more than meditative solitude. Search high and low, you will only find nobility as profound as his is matchless in our present age.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> QYLS, 709-10.

While this kind of comparison between wealthy but vulgar officials and hard-up but refined literati is clichéd, it is at the same time instructive. With the accumulated evidence of these entries it is clear a romantic reputation was exactly what Li Ciming would have liked to have built for himself in the capital, and this was apparently because he sensed it was an important form of cultural capital that he might lack. What he should understand the commercial nature of the relationship, but remains blind to it; he should understand, as the other men he meets at the venues do, that the boys are to be shared within their elite groups (as had even been the case before rank commercialisation, when the boys were owned by men who had no qualms about lending them or gifting them to others) and that this aspect of homosocialisation was at least half the pleasure.

When Li Ciming does participate in this “circulation of actors” his diary entries generally record obstacles. If we believe the *Diary*, Autumn-Chestnut was not the only *dan* to become attached to Li. In a long elegy written on the death of the actor Autumn-Iris (Fu Zhiqiu), Li reminisces over their long-term romantic relationship, even describing the actor as if he were a soul-mate:

When I was [working] in Anhui I got along with the late provincial military commander Li Shizhong very well. Li also had a high appreciation of him [Autumn-Iris]. He requested I allow the boy to visit him, hoping he might be able to stay with him permanently. However, because Li had been an insurgent, Autumn-Iris formed the opinion that he was an unpredictable, and he soon took leave of him and returned. When I was promoted as the

Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, Autumn-Iris accompanied me to Guangdong. Soon I lost this position due to impeachment and he also returned to the capital. The lonely vicissitudes he experienced through life were very similar to mine.<sup>28</sup>

He goes on, summing up how close they were:

In particular I appreciated his dignity, which definitely stood out from the ordinary [actors], and I was saddened at the misfortune he had falling into the life of an entertainer, forced to parade his beauty and sell his art to make a living, something he would never have willingly chosen. I thus twice summoned him to Yueman Studio to enjoy conversation under candlelight, each time continuing late into the night.<sup>29</sup>

There are also numerous poems of Li's among the entries collated by Zhang Cixi, often written in the "private apartments" (私寓 *siyu*) of the actor-catamites and pervaded by an intense eroticism—albeit couched in poetic allusion.

Thus far we have seen how Li uses his *Diary* to situate himself within a discourse of refinement and vulgarity, and his profuse praise of the actors with whom he is most closely associated comes across as simply a roundabout form of self-flattery. In

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<sup>28</sup> *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, vol. 2: 222.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



another passages the emphasis is on the praise he receives from the actors. Reflecting on the occasion of the funeral of the immensely popular and respected actor Orchid-Fairy he writes:

Orchid-Fairy's name was Qiaoling, and he was a Yangzhou man. He was famed for his skill as a performer and was fond of associating with men of letters. In 1859, when I first came to the capital, I met him a few times at parties held by friends, but had never spent money on calling him. That was more than twenty years ago, but whenever I ran into him (Orchid-Fairy) he never failed to acknowledge me. Aurora-Perfume was his student. The first time I called Aurora-Perfume, Orchid-Fairy<sup>30</sup> advised him, "This gentleman is a famous Confucian scholar, you have to do your best to serve him." This year I was at the Temple of Heavenly Serenity when I called Jade Fairy. Jade Fairy was at Shilicao Bridge outside the Right Peace Gate drinking with Orchid-Fairy in a group. Orchid-Fairy turned to him and said, "Honourable Li is an upholder of Confucian virtue, and if you can get to know him you can count it as a great honour." The shared judgement of such ordinary folk is of far greater import than that of palace officials, but of course I felt I didn't deserve it.<sup>31</sup>

As noted above, Li Ciming was a man of unusual vanity, but the fact that a man of his high-standing within the most influential circles of the capital felt the need to call

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<sup>30</sup> Mei Qiaoling, Aurora Fragrance's tutor/owner.

<sup>31</sup> QYLS, 708.

upon the praise of debased status actors to confirm his refinement needs some explanation.

Part of understanding the role of the actors in his life may have been the way public reputations were being made. There is some evidence that his interactions with boy-actors contributed to increasing his already considerable fame as a romantic poet among his contemporaries. Even as late as the 1930s, when visiting boy-actors was no longer fashionable, the publication of *Yuemantang juhua* attracted contributions and support from poets and artists who had lived through the same period. The famous calligraphy artist Zhao Yuanli (趙元禮 1868-1939) composed a suite of five poems for the opening page of the 1934 edition of *Yuanmantang juhua*, one of which read:

While you and I never had the pleasure of having met,  
My writing had the honour of your consideration.  
Among your students the one I envy most is Fanshan,  
Sharing notes and buying pleasure under candlelight.<sup>32</sup>

Fanshan (Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥, 字樊山, 1846—1931), as well as being one of Li Ciming's students, was another leading poet of the time who had passed away shortly before the publication of *Yuemantang juhua*, therefore adding to the nostalgic tone Zhao has aimed at. In another poem of the same page Zhao also describes Li's

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<sup>32</sup> QLYS, 712.

“fondness for viewing flowers as his eyes age and dim”, concluding that “his mind was pure of even the slightest impropriety”.

Zhang Cixi’s collection of Li Ciming’s notes, observations, and comments on theatregoing and exchanges with boy-actors is of key importance in our being able to contextualise the homoerotic nightlife enjoyed by late Qing men in Beijing. Their expansion in *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, as well as the addition of some nineteen additional diaries from other hands, provides a supplement to Zhang Cixi’s *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao* that is important in a number of ways. Reading the earlier anthology it might be tempting to conclude that Zhang had an attachment to the romantic lifestyle conjured up by the *huapu* and therefore collected and arranged his material accordingly, giving an exaggerated or at least compressed impression. One might wonder, too, that with many of the same authors and personalities appearing throughout Zhang’s anthology, that it might represent in large part the taste and lives of a small coterie or clique. With these recent additions, however, it appears that there was no bias in Zhang’s sample, and that it is related to and representative of much larger literature than we had been aware (although some may have suspected) that repeats many of the same themes.

Among these diaries is the anonymous *Xiyuchao riji* (翕羽巢日記, Diary from preening feathers nest] which is largely notes concerning literati leisure time, theatregoing, and intimate relationships with boy-actors. Only about eighty days of the diary have survived, yet, remarkably, theatre related activities and boy-actors are mentioned almost every single day. Comparative research has indicated that the

diary's dates should fall around the Daoguang (1821-1850) and Xianfeng (1851-1861) periods, with some suggesting that the author is very likely to be Shen Baochang of Sichuan,<sup>33</sup> who held a position in the Directorate of Education at the time. Official duties, however, are rarely ever touched upon, with the bulk of the record detailing his trips to the theatres, visits to actors' private-apartments, sharing meals with friends, colleagues and actors – again suggesting that this was typical of life for the scholar-official elite in Beijing at this time. Most passages in the diary are concise, refined and even poetic, and often succeed in recording a subtly intimate mood, as in this passage:

Twelfth Day of the Tenth Month.

In the early morning, Guo Xuezhai dropped in for a while and left. After breakfast Ouke arrived and we went together to watch performances by both Four Happiness and Three Celebrations troupes. It was a capacity audience, with every seat in the theatre filled. On the way back we encountered Ziyu, who joined us to visit Autumn-Violet who had unfortunately gone out. I left a note to invite him for a drink in the evening, and I also sent a message to Little-Elegance on behalf of Ouke. At around four o'clock, Yuhe came. Soon Autumn-Violet also arrived, in a tipsy condition and his cheeks flushed. He came into the room and fell asleep immediately. Little-Elegance then arrived, cooing about just like a dainty bird after a safe corner. The lanterns were raised and the banquet was set, and before long Autumn-Violet was awake. The lamb

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<sup>33</sup> *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, vol. 7, "Introduction to *Xiyuchao riji*," by Gu Shuguang: 27.

was sliced very thin and we ate it from a boiling chafing dish. Autumn-Violet personally prepared the stock, but the chafing dish spilled and it stained his fur coat. How adorable he looked when he tried to lap it up. Around seven o'clock the two boys left, leaving three friends to talk 'till nine o'clock before they headed home.<sup>34</sup>

It would appear that on this apparently ordinary day, not marked in any particular way, the author spent his time at the theatre or sharing conversation and meals with friends in the company of boy-actors, and very similar accounts are given for the other 80 days. There is very little else revealed in the diary about Shen Baochang's life, and too little is known about him to contextualize this passage further, except to acknowledge that he had a fine eye for detail, capturing the intimacy and warmth of friends huddled inside around a chaffing-dish on a cold Beijing winter's day.

The diary of Zheng Xiaoxu (鄭孝胥 1860—1938), an influential late Qing official and diplomat, and infamously prime minister in the Japanese Manchukuo government in the 1930s, could provide us an equally vivid and detailed picture of literati or scholar-officials' theatre activities. Zheng's diary entries from the Guangxu era (1875-1908) reveal that during a period of busy official duties and political crisis in Beijing in the 1880s, he frequented theatres with colleagues and went for drinks in the company of boy-actors' several times each month, and even during an official visit to Shanghai.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, vol. 7: 49.

<sup>35</sup> *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, vol. 7: 536.

For example, in the Twelfth Month of 1889, there are eleven days where he records he went to the theatre, and again in the First Month of 1890, there are eight days.<sup>36</sup> His diary shows that each time he invited colleagues or friends to the theatre or was invited by them he would take time to provide brief comments on the performances.

As a busy politician occupying some of the most crucial posts in the late Qing period, we must wonder how Zheng could have had so much time for relaxing at the theatre. The answer is, again, probably bound up with the social capital generated by public appearances at theatres and the other venues associated with them. He does not record much special interest in drama as performance or art, and what emerges as in so many other cases is the importance of the venues as places enjoyed together with friends, and to be seen and acknowledged by other groups to participate in the particular story of style and romance that was generated in the entertainment districts. Like Li Ciming, Zheng is a particularly important example in confirming that Beijing's homoerotic nightlife was not just for the disaffected and less successful ranks of the literati, but offered a space for public performance and self-representation, if not self-congratulation. Levels of commitment to or involvement with boy-actors varied, but like it or not, the public status of the theatres could not be ignored.

## **Conclusion**

Li Ciming's *Diary* and life is part of a history of narratives and emphases on public and private expressions of male-love which fluctuate over time. These shifts in the

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<sup>36</sup> *Jingju lishiwenxian huibian*, vol. 7: 536-9.

record are related to what writers from the late-Ming to the Qing feel they can reveal of their erotic lives, and in particular, what they reveal of intimate physical contact. By Li Ciming's time there is a note of anxiety surrounding what he is willing and not willing for other people to know about his intimate life, an anxiety that can be explained by combined reference to his status and his personality. It reflects, for example, something of the same anxiety surrounding *qing* during the Ming and Qing noted by Martin Huang. We cannot take *qing* to be a stable term in social life and cultural expression. Its effects, or power, take shape in a manifold relation to social and cultural life reminiscent of Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling".<sup>37</sup>

Homoerotic attraction (男色 *nanse*) was never a singular force in late imperial Chinese culture. It was always contradictory and conflicted. In the late Ming, for example, homoerotic desire was both a sign of dissipation—a product of the libertinism of the day—and was at the same time a sign of refinement and distinction, the latter based on notions of rarity, connoisseurship, and romantic obsession. The great romantics of the early Qing were so successful in promoting male-love within their own circles that by the early nineteenth century it is said the popularity of song-boys was beginning to displace prostitutes from the more respectable corners of the entertainment quarters. It is this success of *nanse*, continuing and expanding in the

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Coining "structure of sentiment," Ding Naifei adapts this term to the *qing* topography of late-imperial China, see *Obscene Things: Sexual politics in Jin Ping Mei* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 294n.11.

development of Beijing opera, that eventually presents problems for Li Ciming—not a moral prejudice directed at homoerotic desire *per se*.

In other words, as he notes in his *Diary*, the problem for Li Ciming was that the theatre-quarters had become increasingly indistinguishable from brothels, or worse, whorehouses. He, on the other hand, would clearly prefer to align himself with “the romantic spirit left by earlier generations.” Officials and students, young and old, money and love, men and women are suddenly all confused and conflated. As Martin Huang has noted, constant attempts to legitimate *qing* in the Ming-Qing period continually ran into trouble, dogged by competing terms such as *li* (reason, principle), *xing* (nature), and *yu* (desire).<sup>38</sup> Thus, where Foucault speaks of “the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, pederasty, and ‘psychic hermaphroditism’ [making] possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’,”<sup>39</sup> I want to suggest that in China the controls were mapped rather differently. And so too was the ‘reverse discourse’ where “homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged.”<sup>40</sup> In China homoerotic desire was not separated from other forms of *qing*, in the sense that *all* forms of *qing* stood in a problematic and ambiguous

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Huang, “Sentiments of Desire,” 156-161.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



relationship to desire and dissipation. Yet at various times *nanse* did seem to offer promise of an alternative realm where *qing* might be explored without the manifold, over-determined range of social pressures. Or it served as a vehicle for ordering discourses of sex and gender. As Huang pointed out, in these attempts to redefine Ming-Qing erotics, as part of an ongoing cultural dialectic *qing* (feeling, sentiment) is continually eroticised and *yu* (desire) is continually sentimentalised.<sup>41</sup> There was too little pleasure in separating the two.

Li Ciming could be utterly credulous when a boy-actor whispered to him in soft tones, “Anyone who would receive your summons and refuse cannot be human.” But how sure of himself is he when he asks, “Why would I want to hide anything?”? Both of these desires, the one for a romantic ideal, the other for a moral self-sufficiency, relate to his confusion within the new public context of what had once been a homoerotic fantasy world accessible only to the elite. He reveals in the *Diary* how his preferred or primary reference point for that fantasy was the debonair poets of the past in whom he sees his own ideal image. He also reveals a reluctance to see other men who share the boys as his peers, and even men he “gets along well with” fail to make appropriate matches when boys are exchanged with them. In the world of “pear garden” socialisation this makes him eccentric and it is no wonder that he reads like something of an outsider. Men of high standing could participate in the “flower appreciation”

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<sup>41</sup> Huang, “The Cult of Qing,” pp. 182-3. “One of the solutions proposed was that if *yu* were indeed an object to be represented, it must be represented in terms of *qing*,” p. 183.

game and often did,<sup>42</sup> but they required a sense of humour that at least played with a carnivalesque subversion of hierarchy.

In the *Diary* Li Ciming has no time for games, but is fixated on an image of himself as exemplary individual. Paralleling the absence of an appreciation of socialisation there is an inability to relate his own activities to public opinion, an inability reinforced by his sense of his own success. While he comforts himself that he has supportive friends, the very next moment he wants to deny that he is any way dependent upon them or that he needs their society. Feigning to be immune from rumour or judgement, he spends long passages weighing up the social undesirability of other dozens of other flower appreciators. He was by no means an old man when he was jotting down these opinions, many of which appear when he is in his mid-40s, but he sounds like one. Why was he going along to join these gatherings at all? Externally he presents himself as reluctant, and in keeping with propriety he should have been busy if not with official duties then with his family or at the very least self-improvement of some kind. The *Diary* is clear on this question too: he needed cheering up. While he refused to see it that way, he had money and status that bought him time with some young stars of the public stage, and that provided him with ready admirers as well as some contentment that he could be publicly seen to have the very best, even if he felt unsure of how to read what the best was.

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<sup>42</sup> Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Asian Theatre Journal*, 27 no. 1 (2010): 100-129.

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