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Relations Between Actors and Scholars During the Ming-Qing Transition, as Seen in *Tao'an Mengyi*

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Abstract

During the final phase of a declining political order, during troubled times, or under other exceptional circumstances, concord between outsider scholars and political authority is easily ruptured. The psychology of scholars and certain actors who were subject to the same “authority” pressure thus came to rest on a common foundation. Zhang Dai’s *Recollections of Tao-an’s Past Dreams* (*Tao’an mengyi* 陶庵夢憶) can be seen as a manifestation of the relationship between scholars and actors in troubled times. Through a deep analysis of the text of “Dream Recollections of Tao An,” we can see scholars beginning to have an emotional appreciation for the independence and individuality of the actors. At the same time, a certain self-consciousness of the actors was awakened, whereby the actors provided spiritual and material support to the scholars during this difficult period. The performance of many scholars in amateur theatrical shows also meant that the status of low-ranking scholars and actors was not significantly different. This new scholar-actor relationship is inseparable from the thought, politics and economics of the late Ming and early Qing period, and should be understood in just such a context.

Keywords

Tao'an Mengyi – scholar – actor – relationship

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Academia has no lack of studies on scholars, and research on actors has yielded fruitful results, but it is rare to compare scholars and actors and put their relationship under the lens of sociology, culture, and psychology. Previous studies often put the emphasis on scholars without realizing it, focusing on the way in which their situations, intellectual background, and sensibilities influenced this relationship while ignoring the unique psychological and emotional dimensions of actors as social beings. We wish to correct this oversight. We put actors and scholars on an equal footing and pay full attention to their special ideological traditions and psychological underpinnings in order to draw some objective and comprehensive conclusions.

Scholars and actors did not have equal social status in Chinese cultural history. Originally, scholars ranked the lowest in the noble class. Even though they gradually separated themselves from that class over the course of history, scholars were nevertheless the gatekeepers of knowledge and participated in national politics. In ancient times, actors were jesters and musicians. After the Mongol conquest of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and as traditional opera developed, being an actor became synonymous with being an opera singer. It was a given that the lowly actor could not be mentioned in the same breath as the honorable scholar. Whereas scholars could be composers, spectators, or even oppressors under normal circumstances, actors could only be performers, objects of public scrutiny and diversion. Even if a scholar admired an actor for her art, his enthusiasm would only lead to and remain in the realm of sexual dalliance, making honest and equal communication between them an impossibility. Moreover, scholars as a class formed in the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), a time of social and political turmoil. Naturally, they longed for political power from the start and schemed and fought against the ruling class throughout history. In prosperous times, the emperor brought scholars into the government, offering them minimal stipends while taking maximum advantage of their erudition. Working for the government offered scholars the prospect of a future, and peaceful coexistence was possible between the two sides. But during social upheavals such as a dynastic change, when politics was thrown into chaos, the political pressure on the scholars became unrelenting, and the delicate entente between the government and the scholars broke down. This scenario provided a psychological basis for empathy between scholars and actors, who were oppressed by the same authority. Under these circumstances, how did this empathy manifest itself, and why? We want to limit this rather general question by restricting the scope of our inquiry to Zhang Dai's (張岱) (1597-1680) book *Recollections of Tao-an's Past Dreams* (*Tao'an mengyi* 陶庵夢憶), which offers a portrait of the relationship between scholars and

actors in a tumultuous era. This book, therefore, serves as the point of departure for our discussion.

The Traditional Relationship between Scholars and Actors

Even though their relationship with the emperor could be fraught with dangerous undercurrents, scholars occupied an enviable position in Chinese society, compared with that of the actors, who sold their labor for the public's entertainment. They might have had discord with the emperor, but scholars possessed serviceable expertise that the emperor had to respect: "Getting along with scholars makes one strong; otherwise, weak."¹ In contrast, actors, whose beauty and talents did not pose a threat to the emperor, were destined to be the playthings of the upper classes. This was true even with sagacious rulers. Emperors played tricks on and humiliated the actors and blamed them for the problems of the society. Indeed, for the wise counselor Guan Zhong (管仲) (723?-645 BCE), the first of three grave mistakes a ruler could commit was "being too close to actors and too far from scholars."² The traditional view held that when political setbacks occurred, actors were often the first group, or not far from the first group, to be blamed.

It is normally the case that the emperor courted scholars but also guarded against them. In contrast, he took advantage of and looked down on actors. When scholars parlayed their knowledge into employment with the government, they had to act in concert with the authority; so as far as the actors were concerned, they became the new oppressors. Therefore, to a large extent actors derived their value in society from entertaining scholars. If scholars ignored them deliberately, actors would have no support for their individual personalities, thoughts, and feelings. A scholar named Gao Cong (高聰) lived during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). He was "well-versed in literature and the classical texts, and amused himself with songs and beautiful women."³ He kept more than ten songstresses and dancers. When he was old and sickly, he did not want these women to entertain others, so he made them "burn

1 An Jiming 安繼民, ed., *Xunzi* 荀子 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2005), 230.

2 Gao Huaping 高華平, Wang Jizhou 王齊洲, and Zhang Sanxi 張三夕, ed., *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2010), 572.

3 Li Yanshou 李延壽. *Beishi* 北史 (*History of Northern Dynasties*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), 1479.

fingers, swallow charcoal, and become nuns.”⁴ This kind of cruel and inhumane treatment exposes the harsh relationship between scholars and actors in this period of Chinese history.

Even though some actors were able to escape their humble position by making use of their talents and beauty, they could not truly integrate into mainstream society. Their social status was always uncertain, and when their sponsors died or abandoned them, they would have no choice but to return to their original station. If true love had occurred between an actor and a scholar, society at large would hardly have countenanced it; reality would have intervened at some point, and each would have retreated to his or her own camp in the end.

As we can see, when there was interaction between actors and scholars, it could occur only within the confines of a commercial transaction whose sole purpose was the scholars' enjoyment. When it went beyond commerce and entered into the realm of culture or personal emotions, the imperial authority would not tolerate it, for it would signal that the scholar had violated the terms of his employment and the actor had overstepped her role as the emperor's plaything. It is true that both actors and scholars were under pressure from the same authority. However, during periods when scholars were in the employ of a particularly powerful emperor, they often became spokesmen for the government and toed the official line with regard to actors. Under these circumstances, it is hard to expect a breakthrough in the negative relationship between scholars and actors. As for actors, no matter how they struggled to shake off the abject status that the authority had assigned them, their lot more often than not was exploited by scholars.

Characteristics of the Relationship between Actors and Scholars in *Tao'an Mengyi*

As mentioned above, during the reigns of powerful emperors, relations between actors and scholars often remained at the level of physical desire and improper dalliance. But did this relationship manifest itself in other ways when the government was weak? Zhang Dai, a scholar during the Ming-Qing transition, provided some classic answers in *Tao'an mengyi*.

Analyzing the book at a deeper level, one finds that relations between actors and scholars no longer remained at the level of amusement and dalliance during this period; a new kind of interaction emerged between them centering on

4 Ibid.

art and culture and based on equality. Scholars of this period started to appreciate actors as sensitive individuals who had more than beauty and artistic talent to exploit superficially but possessed an inner dimension that merited attention. Take, for example, Zhang's description of the actor Zhu Chusheng (朱楚生). "She was not very pretty,"⁵ wrote the author, curbing his enthusiasm only to express it unreservedly later, "but there was aloofness in her brows and passion in her eyes."⁶ She was elegant and refined, eliciting endless sentimentality from others. Zhu's art and beauty were not the only qualities that Zhang admired; he cared about her inner thoughts and sensibilities. She "died for love"⁷ and the passage about her tragic ending brimmed with melancholy. Had the author regarded Zhu solely as a pitiful plaything, he would not have written such sad and deeply felt lines.

Based on appreciation of this kind, what can we say about relations between actors and scholars during this period? The chapter "Drifting Garden" (Bu xi yuan 不系園) contains descriptions of a lively outing attended by actors and scholars. In addition to Zhang Dai, they included Zeng Bochen (曾波臣) and Chen Zhanghou (陳章侯), well-known painters of the late Ming period; Peng Tianxi (彭天錫) and Yang Yumin (楊與民), protégés of powerful and influential people; Chen Suzhi (陳素芝) and the above-mentioned Zhu Chusheng, famous female actors. Even though they differed in profession and social status, these companions consisted basically of actors and scholars. They met at a place other than a theatrical venue, talked about art and writing, and showed appreciation for one another's work. The scholars did not appear supercilious, and the actors were poised and relaxed. Their interaction was not perturbed by sexual tension but, rather, replete with artistic and spiritual reflections. This transcendent gracefulness was reminiscent of the manners of the Wei-Jin period (222-420). Whether the scholars were aware of it or not, their view of actors had elevated from unadulterated objects of play to independent-minded peers; this is what made the excursion of equals possible, having shattered the old model of one-sided licentiousness.

In this period, actors had awoken to a sense of self-awareness, and many of them developed superior artistry, poise, and strength of character, capable of providing the scholars with material and moral support.

5 Zhang Dai 張岱, *Tao'an Mengyi Xihu mengxun 陶庵夢憶·西湖夢尋* (*Tao'an Mengyi and Remembrance of West Lake*), eds. Xia Xianchun 夏咸淳 and Cheng Weirong 程維榮 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2001), 90.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 91.

Actors of different stripes had their roles to play on the stormy stage of the Ming-Qing transition. Even though their status was humble, some actors gained self-respect and became proud of their singularity. In addition to Zhu Chusheng, Wang Yuesheng (王月生) of Zhushi (朱市) was another actor at the top of the heap. Zhang Dai wrote about her in *Tao'an mengyi*: She was self-possessed and dignified, talented though not frivolous. Uninterested in power, she only befriended like-minded people. She lived in a crude and unseemly world yet comported herself like “a solitary plum blossom under a cold moon.”⁸ She had unmatched charm and dignity; with no trace of the eager pliability of the common actor, her style was rather like that of scholars. Actors like her were unlike the actors of old, who were common by their own design. The former learned to appreciate their own beauty and talents, no longer willing to put themselves out for scholars or the noble class.

Scholars excelled at literature and history. They had no trouble providing for themselves in halcyon times of peace, but during the turbulent Ming-Qing transition, they inevitably risked losing their livelihood and ancestral property. Actors, with their exceptional skills and lower social status, were better at making a living. No longer the playthings of scholars, they were in a position to provide their former patrons with material support. When her patron Qi Zhixiang (祁止祥) “sold everything in trunks and leather bags,”⁹ A'bao (阿寶) performed her craft on the street in order to provide sustenance for Qi. Hers is a very good example of an actor using his skills to aid a scholar.

Finally, due to the large number of scholars becoming amateur actors and playing roles in opera, the association between actors and scholars became much closer than before, blurring the social line between them. Before this time, high-ranking officials used to take part in hackneyed dramas and were often ridiculed by historians. Li Cunxu (李存勖), founder of the Later Tang dynasty (923-937), who “often played in comic skits with actors in his court,”¹⁰ is one such example. However, during the Ming-Qing transition, opera was becoming popular, and public opinion no longer criticized officials for playing roles in opera; in fact, it was sometimes regarded as an act of stylish refinement. Many scholars became opera aficionados at this time. Zhang Dai once carried props with him and went to a Buddhist temple in the middle of the night and sang “Han Qiwan Fighting the Jin Army” and “Yangze River Battle”¹¹

8 Ibid., 128.

9 Ibid., 72-73.

10 Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Xin wudai shi* 新五代史 (*New History of the Five Dynasties*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), 398.

11 Zhang, *Tao'an*, 11.

in the empty dharma hall, surprising all the monks who got up to look at the interloper in utter amazement. Such unruly behavior would hardly have been tolerated in a previous era, at least not before being condemned first. But here Zhang wrote of this incident in a self-congratulatory tone in his book, and we can deduce that the cultural background of the era was such that it was acceptable for a scholar to be an amateur opera singer. Many such incidents are described in *Tao'an mengyi*; chapters such as “Evening Opera at the Gold Mountain Temple,” “Drifting Garden,” and “Yan Zhu Temple” all recount occasions of opera singing, but the most representative chapter is “Amateur Actor Peng Tianxi.” Peng had a “family fortune of a hundred thousand taels of gold”¹² at one time, and a “belly full of books, mountains and seas, contraptions, and frustrations.”¹³ We surmise that he was not of humble birth, but his lot was to be a failed and frustrated low-ranking scholar. He attempted to act to vent his frustrations and squandered his family fortune in learning the craft. He then roamed the four corners of the country making a living by taking on bit parts in opera. The vicissitudes of his fortunes in life obfuscated the difference between scholar and actor, and his story became a testament to the intimate association between scholars and actors.

Behind the New Relationship between Actors and Scholars

The new relationship between actors and scholars in *Tao'an mengyi* can be understood in the ideological, political, and economic context of the era.

We will look at the ideological context first.

In every era, the ideology of the times exerts unmistakable influence over society. We therefore start with the popularity of the Yangming School of the Mind (Yangming xinxue 陽明心學). This school of thought had generated much controversy from its inception. Some scholars had subscribed to its ideas, but, because the government tried to suppress it, albeit inconsistently, it petered out during the reign of the Ming emperor Jiajing (嘉靖) (1522-1566). Following the accession of its founder, Wang Yangming (王陽明) (1472-1528), to the Confucian pantheon under the Ming emperor Wanli (萬曆) (1573-1620), it sprang back into vogue very quickly.

Some of its ideas contained the seeds of self-awareness of the common people. Even though Wang did not deny the difference between saints and commoners, he asserted that everyone was endowed with a conscience and an

¹² Ibid., 93.

¹³ Ibid.

innate sense of *dao*. “As long as the people of the four professions do their best, there is no difference between them, since they share the same *dao*.”¹⁴ This statement affirmed the social value of the laborers and the merchants and subverted the traditional view that assured the primacy of scholars and farmers. It filled the gap in social status between the various professions and had a great impact on society at the time. *Tao’an mengyi* reflects this reality:

Waxed bamboo products from Jiaxin, painted bamboo products from Wang Er, bamboo writing implements from Jiang Huayu of Suzhou, copper products from Zhang Tong, and porcelain from Wu Mingguan of Huizhou: these workers worked in humble professions, yet commanded the same respect as government officials. This shows that any occupation can elevate a man’s position, and he becomes abject by his own doing.¹⁵

We can see from the above passage that, during Zhang Dai’s time, various professionals could elevate their status to equal that of scholars. Not only was Zhang not contemptuous of manual workers, but he reaffirmed the value of their professions and put the blame for their negative reputation on the workers themselves. These views on the same sense of *dao* and equality of the professions did not change people’s negative perception of actors, but the compassionate acceptance of the artisan and merchant classes acted as a release valve for actors’ social pressures and made their lives easier.

These prevailing views of society made it possible for actors to reconsider their situation and self-worth and, to a certain extent, alleviated the feeling of inferiority in their interaction with scholars. Zhang Dai once went on a tour to look at the snowy scenery accompanied by his songstresses, two of whom, named Ma Xiaoqing (馬小卿) and Pan Xiaofei (潘小妃), “rolled down a flight of a hundred steps to the bottom of the hill, and stood up covered with snow.”¹⁶ This spontaneous and unrestrained gesture would not have been possible with a fawning and self-deprecating actor in the old days.

We now look at the political context of the era.

Political conditions in the Ming Dynasty were very bad for scholars, who had to fight constantly with the government. Under the reigns of the Jianwen (建文) (1399-1402), Hongxi (洪熙) (1424-1425), Jingtai (景泰) (1450-1457), and Hongzhi (弘治) (1487-1505) emperors, the situation was relatively benign,

14 Wang Shouren 王守仁, *Wang Wencheng gong quanshu* 王文成公全書 (*Complete Works of Wang Wencheng*) (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1934), 12.

15 Zhang, *Tao’an*, 77.

16 *Ibid.*, 116.

but the rest of the Ming Dynasty was highly stressful for scholars. They lived under the constant threat of surveillance, beating, and imprisonment; their stipends were so small that they could hardly support their families.¹⁷ The abuse they suffered was both physical and emotional. Unheard of in the Song Dynasty, which was ruled by mostly benevolent emperors, such mistreatment was rare even under the foreign rulers of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234): Lu Duo (路鐸) (d. 1218), who stopped Emperor Zhangzong (金章宗) (1168-1208) from leaving the capital to escape calamities, and Zong Duanxiu (宗端修) (1149-1208), who shamed Zhangzong's relatives for throwing the emperor's reputation to the wind,¹⁸ were both exonerated unharmed; they did not have to submit to beatings or imprisonment. When, at the end of the Ming Dynasty, the scholars considered the precarious present in light of their glorious past, they must have been full of anger and frustration; they felt unable to stop the destruction of their country and fight the impending foreign rulers, and their impotence only added to their misery.

Faced with this dark and cruel political reality, if the scholars stubbornly stayed the course, to say that they were ineffective would be an understatement: they would risk humiliation and death. Under these circumstances, they had only two choices: either admonish the rulers with tactful words to change the world or to escape it completely. The former means to persuade the rulers with ironic allegories or cautionary tales in order to ameliorate the political climate. There is a history of actors who wove innuendoes into their lines to achieve this desired effect. The traditional comedic actors always had some impact on intellectuals;¹⁹ sometimes the actor and the drama were employed jointly to achieve a political effect, such as when Zhang Dai put on a revised "Icy Mountain Adventure" (Bingshan ji 冰山記) to criticize the state of affairs in the country.²⁰ There are many more instances of escaping the world. When scholars were frustrated with politics, they sometimes turned their attention to other occupations in order to save themselves or to find an outlet for their disappointment. They became enamored of nature and the arts and lavished their attention on such things as scenic attractions (mountains, rivers), gardens, beauty, music, poetry, and colorful anecdotes. *Tao'an mengyi* mirrors this reality, and we have reorganized the chapter names into the following

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- 17 Zhao Yuan 趙園. *Ming Qing zhi ji shidafu yanjiu* 明清之際士大夫研究 (*Scholars During the Ming-Qing Transition*) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1999), 6-11.
- 18 Tuo Tuo 脫脫. *Jin shi* 金史 (*History of the Jin Dynasty*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975), 2205, 2203.
- 19 Yu Yingshi 余英時. *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (*Scholars and Chinese Culture*) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1987), 116.
- 20 Zhang, *Tao'an*, 123-124.

categories for the sake of illustration: scenic attractions,²¹ gardens,²² customs,²³ and anecdotes.²⁴ Virtually all the chapters fall into these categories. Scholars wandered in their gardens amid the rocks and the flowers, reciting lines of poetry, or took trips with actors and harmonized with them in duets. This is how they vented their political discontent and frustrations and searched for temporary freedom of the mind. These were not isolated events during the late Ming period.

In this tumultuous period, scholars penned dramas, played parts in operas, and took sightseeing tours with actors. But behind this ostensibly elegant and romantic lifestyle was a profound sense of existential angst. The choice they had to make between changing the world and escaping it, and the corresponding psychological adjustment that went with the choice, deepened their relationship with actors.

Lastly, we look at the economic context.

Cities grew quickly during the Ming Dynasty. There were thirty three large cities of commerce and crafts, such as Shuntian, Suzhou, Wuchang, and Guangzhou by mid-dynasty. Later, twenty four cities developed gradually, among them Jiujiang, Xian, and Datong.²⁵ Commerce developed quickly as

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- 21 山水名勝：鐘山、報恩塔、日月湖、孔廟檜、孔林、燕子磯、表勝庵、焦山、楔泉、白洋湖、陽和泉、龍噴池、秦淮河房、楊神廟台閣、嚴助廟、爐峰月、湘湖、琅嬛福地、棲霞、曹山、雷殿、品山堂魚宕、愚公谷、阿育王寺舍利。
- 22 亭園花石：天臺牡丹、筠芝亭、礪園、奔雲石、木猶龍、花石綱遺石、梅花書屋、不二齋、岫嶼山房、逍遙樓、天鏡園、不系園、於園、治沅堂、煙雨樓、一尺雪、菊海、懸杪亭、蠟花閣、瑞草溪亭、魯府松棚、山艇子松花石。
- 23 風俗方物：越俗掃墓、魯藩煙火、蘭雪茶、朱文懿家桂、兗州閱武、乳酪、方物、世美堂燈、泰安州客店、樊江陳氏桔、揚州清明、虎丘中秋夜、金山競渡、揚州瘦馬、紹興燈景、水滸牌、西湖香市、鹿苑寺方柿、西湖七月半、定海水操、龍山放燈、蟹會、露兄、閏元宵、合采牌、樓船、阮圓海戲、閏中秋、甯了、甘文台爐、齊景公墓花樽、及時雨、蘇州白兔、草妖、雪精。
- 24 奇人韻事：金乳生草花、金山夜戲、天硯、吳中絕技、濮仲謙雕刻、朱雲崑女戲、紹興琴派、砂罐錫注、沈梅岡、三世藏書、絲社、南鎮祈夢、湖心亭看雪、陳章侯、鬥雞社、牛首山打獵、張氏聲伎、祁正祥癖、二十四橋風月、范長白、諸工、姚簡叔畫、柳敬亭說書、劉暉吉女戲、朱楚生、彭天錫串戲、天童寺僧、范與蘭、王月生、張東穀好酒、閔老子茶、包涵所、朱氏收藏、仲叔古董、麋公、目連戲、韻山、噓社、龍山雪、龐公池、過劍門、冰山記、魯王、祁世培。
- 25 Qin Peiheng 秦佩珩. *Mingdai jingjishi shuluncong chugao* 明代經濟史述論叢初稿 (*First Draft of the Ming Dynasty's Economic History*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1959), 238.

the cities grew in size; crafts became increasingly intricate, and the price of products rose dramatically. One bamboo sculptor from Nanjing, Pu Zhongqian (濮仲謙), “had phenomenal name recognition; his products were considered status symbols and scores of merchants on Sanshan Street benefited from his craft.”²⁶ Well-made pottery and tin utensils were especially sought after. “A cooking pot and a tin funnel cost five or six taels of gold, comparable to the price of antique Shang and Zhou pottery.”²⁷ Commercial activities were well regulated, and the products eclectic and abundant. The Ming writer Liu Tong (劉侗) (1593-1636), who lived under the reigns of Wanli and Chongzhen (崇禎) (1627-1644), had this to say about the flourishing commerce at the time:

The market at City Temple takes place on the first, fifteenth, and twenty-fifth of every lunar month. It starts at Bijiao Alley to the east and winds its way west for about a mile to City Temple. All kinds of products line the street: books old and new, pottery from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, mirrors from the Qin and Han Dynasties, calligraphy and paintings from the Tang and Song Dynasties; and then there are jewelry, elephant tusks, jade, delicacies, and silk from Yunnan, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang provinces. You can find everything here.²⁸

For the scholars who aspired to a life of comfort and pleasure, prosperous cities and abundant merchandise in the Ming Dynasty provided material security and a chance to realize the life of their dreams. Tales of luxury and extravagance abound in *Tao'an mengyi*:

From January to October, my buddies and I would dine on crab regularly. We would gather around noon to boil the crab. . . . There would be fat and juicy preserved duck and cheeses of different kinds . . . we would stew cabbage with the duck juice, which made it look like plates of jade. We would pour cold libations from a jade pot and nibble on bamboo shoots; the rice was freshly harvested Yuhang white, and the tea, Snow Orchid.²⁹

Boats on West Lake had multiple decks; they were the brainchild of Bao Hansuo (包涵所), the deputy minister. They came in three sizes: the

26 Zhang, *Tao'an*, 20.

27 Ibid., 34.

28 Liu Tong 劉侗 and Yu Yizheng 于奕正. *Dijing jingwu lue* 帝京景物略 (*Scenes in the Capital*), ed. Sun Xiaoli 孫小力 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2001), 238.

29 Zhang, *Tao'an*, 132.

large boats held banquets and staged performances with child singers; the medium-size boats displayed calligraphy and paintings, and the small boats carried beautiful women. Mr. Bao didn't think songstresses were servants, so he let them receive guests as Shi Chong (石崇) and Song Qi (宋祁) did. The women amused themselves by galloping through the willow trees on horseback, as their bright and colorful robes flowed gracefully with the wind. They sang faintly and slowly while playing various instruments under the clear windows of the boat, with voices as sweet as the oriole's. When guests came, skits with singing children would be arranged. All the dances and instruments were first rate. . . . With no luxury spared and no desire unsated, I spent twenty years of my life on the West Lake. Beautiful villas and precious jewels were all de rigueur, and this was what the people of Hangzhou meant when they exclaimed, "Anything goes!"³⁰

When economic conditions were relatively stable, Chinese scholars, especially those of higher rank, belonged in some respects to what Thorstein Veblen called the leisure class. They did not partake of economic production but worked in literature, the arts, and politics. They required products of the highest quality; their eating utensils were often exquisite and rare, because to have anything else would have betrayed a lack of social status or taste. To associate with actors could be taken as an indication that they were men of apparent leisure and satisfied Veblen's definition of "conspicuous consumption";³¹ it was a way for scholars to show their social status.

A society rich in material goods provided an advantageous environment for scholars and actors to hone their dramatic skills, deepening the bond between them and the raising artistic standards among actors. Some scholars treated actors better than their retainers or their children's tutors,³² prompting actors to have a sense of gratitude toward their benefactors and enabling them to give material and moral support to scholars during times of social upheaval.

In conclusion, the authors remind the reader that it is not our intention to erase the natural dividing line between scholars and actors or to exaggerate the

30 Ibid., 53.

31 Thorstein Veblen, *You xian jieji lun: guanyu zhidu de jingji yanjiu* 有閒階級論—關於制度的經濟研究 (*The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*), trans. Cai Shoubai 蔡受百 (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1964), 30-53.

32 Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊, *Pushuting quanji* 曝書亭全集 (*Collection from the Book-Airing Pavilion*), ed. Wang Limin 王利民 et al. (Changchun: Jilin Literature and History Press, 2009), 387.

bond between them. Our aim is to offer an investigation of a new kind of relationship between them that resulted from an unusual social situation, putting it in a context that is appropriate for that period, so as to grasp all the cultural phenomena and explain literature objectively and profoundly.

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