



## The Empress Dowager as Dramaturg: Reinventing Late-Qing Court Theatre

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### Abstract

This study argues against the common perception that the Qing court theatre was a closed cultural institution. It suggests that this theatre developed in conjunction with popular performance traditions outside the court that were stimulated by Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908). Through close readings of a set of ceremonial dramas (*yidian xi*) commissioned by the Empress for the birthday celebrations of imperial family members, this essay explores the aesthetic transition from ritual to entertainment in this particular genre. It shows how as Empress Dowager Cixi indulged in her personal fantasies, the court theatre altered. These new plays initiated a paradigm shift from choreographed pageantry to an actor-centered stage, and as such indicate Cixi's important role in the transformation of ceremonial court theatre.

### Keywords

Qing dynasty, Empress Dowager Cixi, court theatre, Chinese theatre, Beijing opera

### Introduction

The theatre bureau of the Qing court had an unprecedentedly packed schedule in April 1883 (the ninth year of the Guangxu 光緒 reign, 1875-1908), three months before the end of the 27-month official mourning period for Empress Dowager Ci'an 慈安 (1837-81) when no entertainment was allowed. For the first time since 1863, the theatre bureau recruited a large number of civilian actors and musicians from the capital to perform at the court to complement existing eunuch

actors.<sup>1</sup> Nineteen professional actors specializing in various kinds of roles and ten musicians/stagehands were appointed court *jiaoxi* 教習 (instructors).<sup>2</sup> Under their supervision eunuch actors had only three months to learn new things. The eunuch actors renewed their skills by learning a few popular *Kunqu* 崑曲 (Kun opera) excerpts. They also rehearsed magic tricks and even brushed up on their storytelling techniques. New headwear, costumes, and props were being prepared for the upcoming performances. This was truly an exciting time for court theatre.

At the center of the sea-change was Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908). The court theatre bureau—Shengping shu 昇平署—performed all these tasks under her instruction. An avid theatre lover, Cixi could hardly wait to restore the court theatre to its bygone glory. On July 15, 1883, one day after the completion of the mourning period for Ci'an, a ten-hour performance was held on the one-story stage of Shufang zhai 漱芳齋, a key venue in the Forbidden City for emperors to throw elaborate banquets for court officials and to stage performances. The program for this particular day began and concluded with short one-act ceremonial plays. Also featured were four *kunqu* excerpts and a *pihuang* 皮黃 play.<sup>3</sup> Something extraordinary happened in what would

<sup>1</sup> In 1863 (the second year of the Tongzhi 同治 [r. 1862-74] reign), an imperial order was issued in the name of Tongzhi, who was approximately six years old. The Shengping shu 昇平署, the court theatre bureau, was ordered to discharge the civilian actors and musicians immediately, because all calendrical performance events organized by that office were put on hold until the interment ceremony was completed for the Xianfeng 咸豐 emperor (r. 1851-61). During the Tongzhi reign, the Shengping shu staff had made several requests to add additional civilian personnel to the court theatre troupe, but all the requests were turned down by Empress Dowager Ci'an.

<sup>2</sup> According to the records of the Shengping shu, the *Enshang riji dang* 恩賞日記檔, the nineteen civilian actors recruited by the Shengping shu in April 1883 specialized in all kinds of role types including *dan* 旦 (young female), *xiaosheng* 小生 (young male), *sheng* 生 (aged male), *jing* 淨 (painted face), *wai* 外 (supporting male), *chou* 丑 (clown), and *wuhang* 武行 (stuntman). Two actors specializing in *yiyang* 弋陽 opera also joined the group. Among the ten musicians/stagehands, Zhang Qi 張七 was a renowned prop maker in Beijing. See Zhu Jiajin 朱家潛 and Ding Ruqin 丁汝芹, *Qingdai neiting yanju shimo kao* 清代內廷演劇始末考 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 2007), 370-71. This work is an extensive collection of extracts from the extant court theatre archives preserved in the First Historical Archives of China.

<sup>3</sup> *Pihuang* was among the hundreds of regional operatic styles that emerged in the Qing dynasty. It was named after *xipi* 西皮 and *erhuang* 二黃, two operatic tunes from Anhui and Hubei provinces that had often been used jointly by troupes in those areas. *Pihuang* was introduced into the capital by Anhui troupes around 1790, when the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor

otherwise be a typical performance routine. The Shengping shu actors staged the first segment of *Chandao chuxie* 闡道除邪 (Expounding the way and fending off evil spirits), a large-scale ceremonial play (*daxi* 大戲) usually reserved for the Dragon Boat Festival in the earlier days.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear whether the special arrangement was intended for bringing good fortune to the Empress Dowager herself, but it does attest to the recently expanded Shengping shu's ability to carry on the legacy of High Qing court theatre. During Cixi's forty-ninth birthday celebration in November 1883, the court theatre troupe held performances for ten consecutive days. From this time onward, court theatre entered its last phase of boom before the demise of the Qing dynasty.

Empress Dowager Cixi is well known for her love for drama, and is clearly the major force behind the renaissance of court theatre during the Guangxu reign. Cixi's passion for popular dramas, especially *pihuang* plays, was probably nurtured while she was serving as an imperial consort during the reign of Xianfeng 咸豐 (r. 1851-61), and grew even stronger when she eventually assumed full control over all aspects of court affairs after the death of the Empress Dowager Ci'an in 1881. Cixi reformed the acting style, themes, and repertoires of court theatre. First of all, in addition to appointing civilian actors to the ranks of *jiaoxi* and *neiting gongfeng* 內廷供奉 (attendants of the inner court), she also established her own troupe, Putian tongqing 普天同慶 (Joyous celebration for all under Heaven), which consisted of 180 eunuchs who served at her private residence in Changchun gong 長春宮 (Palace of Everlasting

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(r. 1736-95) celebrated his eightieth birthday with public performances. *Pihuang* became extremely popular in Beijing, and continued to evolve into what is known as *Jingju* 京劇 or Beijing opera nowadays.

<sup>4</sup> *Chandao chuxie* is one of the many *daxi* created during the reigns of Kangxi 康熙 (r. 1662-1722) and Qianlong commissioned for such occasions as monthly festivals and important court ceremonies. These plays were created in an attempt to fully utilize the space and facilities of the three-tiered stage. During the period of the Qianlong and Jiaqing 嘉慶 (r. 1796-1820) emperors, *daxi* plays were performed annually. The performance of each play was supported by a large cast, and would last for multiple days. In a series of imperial orders issued between 1824-27, the Daoguang 道光 emperor (r. 1821-50) reduced the size of the court theatrical troupe and cancelled the performance of major big plays. From then on, the court actors only performed excerpts from each *daxi* play under favorable financial circumstances. For a detailed discussion on *daxi*, see Wilt Idema, "Performances on a Three-tiered Stage: Court Theatre During the Qianlong Era," in Lutz Bieg, Erling von Mende, and Martina Siebert, eds., *Ad Seres et Tungusos—Festschrift für Martin Gumm zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 25. Mai 1995* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 201-19.

Spring).<sup>5</sup> It is notable that these eunuchs had no training in theatre, but they blossomed in the new environment. Secondly, she summoned famous *pihuang* troupes in Beijing to perform in the court between 1893 and 1900 to showcase their talents and to raise the stakes for court performers. It was not uncommon for performance programs to include presentations by three major groups: ceremonial plays and popular ones performed by the Shengping shu personnel, *kunqu* and *pihuang* pieces by Cixi's own troupe, and signature plays of civilian troupes. This new mechanism of court theatrical performance, as Yao Shuyi 么書儀 and Catherine Yeh have suggested, may have been inspired by the commercial competition among professional troupes in the capital. It was proven to be an effective means to nurture new theatrical talents in the court, which would have been a closed and insular environment.<sup>6</sup>

Cixi's reformation of the court theatre practice left a lasting imprint on both court and popular performance traditions, and my case study explores how Cixi's artistic experiment changed the function and nature of court theatre's ceremonial programs. In order to understand Empress Dowager Cixi's vision on theatre, it is necessary to explore the vast court repertoire accumulated for both purposes. I follow the modern scholar Ding Ruqin 丁汝芹 in dividing the vast court theatrical repertoire into two major categories: *yidian xi* 儀典戲 (dramas for the ceremonial purpose) and *guanshang xi* 觀賞戲 (dramas for "viewing" purposes).<sup>7</sup> Dramas in the *yidian xi* category were commissioned by the Qing

<sup>5</sup> "The Empress Dowager Cixi asked young eunuchs to rehearse dramas. She named [this group of] eunuchs the Putian tongqing troupe. This was created for performances on the occasions of imperial birthday celebration and monthly festivals, and for the enjoyment of high-ranking nobles. ... The Empress Dowager was always very pleased whenever she received compliments from them." Xin Xiuming 信修明, *Lao taijian de huiyi* 老太監的回憶 (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 1987), 38-39. In the Shengping shu records, the plays performed by Putian tongqing are usually marked as *benjia xi* 本家戲 (our own plays). The exact date of the establishment of the Putian tongqing troupe is not known. Some scholars suggest that Empress Dowager Cixi may have been experimenting with the idea of creating her own inner-court troupe as early as the late Tongzhi era. See Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 364; Zhu Jiajin, *Gugong tuishilu* 故宮退食錄 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1998), 566-67; Yao Shuyi 么書儀, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange* 晚清戲曲的變革 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 2006), 41-43.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Yeh, "Where is the Center of Cultural Production? The Rise of the Actor to National Stardom and the Beijing/Shanghai Challenge (1860s-1910s)," *Late Imperial China* 25.2 (2004): 74-118, see 86-88; Yao Shuyi, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange (xiuding ban)* 晚清戲曲的變革(修訂版) (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 2008), 55-56.

<sup>7</sup> See Ding Ruqin, *Qingdai neiting yanxi shihua* 清代內廷演戲史話 (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1999), 34-38.

emperors for all kinds of ceremonial occasions, including popular calendrical festivals, guest rituals, and life cycle rituals such as imperial weddings and birthday celebrations. As such, these dramas were known for their panegyric nature and spectacular pageantry. The plot of a ceremonial drama usually revolves around the theme of the particular festival or imperial activity the play was commissioned for. *Guanshang xi*, on the other hand, had its roots in the popular vernacular tradition. Plays in the *guanshang xi* category were adapted from popular dramas of the Ming and Qing dynasties and performed in the middle section of a ceremonial program.

The demarcation between the ritual and folk components within a ceremonial performance program was carefully maintained since the mid-eighteenth century when the Qianlong emperor established the court repertoire of ceremonial dramas. This changed when Empress Dowager Cixi took full control of the court theatre in the ninth year of the Guangxu reign (1883). This demarcation is historically significant. The Jiaqing emperor, for example, forbade the court actors to incorporate artistic elements from regional operatic styles into the performance of *yidian xi*.<sup>8</sup> What is at stake here is not the incorporation of *guanshang xi*, in its “pure” form, into the ceremonial program, but the inadequate amalgamation of dramatic conventions from one performance context to another. The Daoguang and Xianfeng emperors, for different reasons, continued to maintain routine ceremonial performances at a minimally acceptable level so as to appear to be not violating the tradition established by their ancestors. However, an emboldened Cixi after Empress Dowager Ci’an’s death charted a new course. She thoroughly revised the ceremonial performance program. Under her guidance, the performance of *yidian xi* underwent a series of transformations. Performance conventions of popular operatic genres were incorporated into the newly composed ceremonial plays. *Yidian xi* eventually became a viable component of court theatrical entertainment.

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<sup>8</sup>) In an imperial order issued in 1802 (the seventh year of the Jiaqing reign), the Jiaqing emperor instructed the court actors to rewrite a ceremonial drama with “pure court-style tunes (*libian gongdiao* 裡邊宮調),” because the tunes employed in the play were in undesirable regional operatic styles. A similar order asked the percussive orchestra to refrain from employing the “Suzhou-style percussion” that was inappropriate for the imperial ceremony. See Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 86.

There are a few blind spots in previous studies regarding the ceremonial programs of the late-Qing court theatre. While it is generally agreed that Cixi's patronage of opera troupes and actors cast a long-lasting influence in the development of the *pihuang* performance culture, little is known about how changes were made to the ceremonial programs of court theatre in order to accommodate the new *pihuang* plays. Further, dramas in the *yidian xi* category have often been perceived as being formulaic and lacking in character development and, as a result, have not received due critical attention.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Yao Shuyi suggests that late Qing emperors treated ceremonial dramas as "tasteless chicken ribs" that are "hard to swallow but wasteful to discard."<sup>10</sup> Another commonly held view holds that the ceremonial performances in the late Qing have become nothing more than "empty performances," which lacked creativity and topicality.<sup>11</sup>

Through close readings of a set of ceremonial plays commissioned by Cixi for imperial birthday celebrations, this article argues for the aesthetic significance of such works. My analysis draws upon the following primary sources: (1) *Enshang riji dang* 恩賞日記檔 (Memorials of imperial favors and bestowals), which documents the time and location of public performance events in the court, notes on titles of plays and names of actors who played the lead roles, details of ceremonial processions, and gift items actors received; (2) *Zhiyi dang* 旨意檔 (Archives of imperial orders), which includes orders given by the emperors or empresses on the selection of dramas or assignments of roles for a given performance, their commentary on the appropriateness of the plot, or on an actor's performance; (3) manuscripts of playtexts in a variety of formats, including those specially prepared for the emperor's perusal, and texts with music scores and fully-transcribed spoken lines to be used by the court theatre personnel.<sup>12</sup> My analysis will show how the Empress Dowager

<sup>9</sup> In his study of the spectacular pageants in the court, Idema finds that that "the many pageants that make up the three categories of short plays distinguished by Zhaolian 昭榷 seek their strength in the great number of actors employed, the elaborate costumes and the remarkable props; they hardly have any dramatic plot to speak of." See Idema, "Performance on a Three-tiered Stage," 207.

<sup>10</sup> Yao Shuyi, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ye Xiaoqing, "Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Tributary Drama and the Macartney Mission of 1793," *Late Imperial China* 26.2 (2005): 89-113; see 108, 111.

<sup>12</sup> The primary source of the first two categories, "Memorials of imperial favors and

Cixi reinvented the aesthetics of ceremonial drama while she retained the traditional themes and format of the genre. Although the tradition of group dance and lavish sets from the earlier period continued to dominate the stage, there was now an emphasis on the talents and styles of individual performers. The transition from collective anonymity in dispensable spectacles to individuality in distinctive, engaging performances was the result of the intensified exchange between court and popular theatre made possible by Cixi. These changes were nothing less than revolutionary. In time, the ritual function of ceremonial dramas would be completely replaced by its entertainment value.

Cixi's double identity as the Empress Dowager—a role that allowed her the freedom to indulge in theatre—and de facto ruler—a duty that was gendered male—also made the task of innovation relatively easy. No matter how much they loved the stage, emperors since Qianlong had rationalized the presence of court theatre through a perceived need to entertain their mothers, thus fulfilling their filial duties. Indulging in theatre entertainment could also invite criticism of moral corruption. As Empress Dowager, Cixi was not burdened by this anxiety. Further, by this time, securing political legitimacy was no longer a concern. Therefore, the court theatre no longer served to carry political propaganda. Cixi retooled the court theatre and transformed it from a vehicle of advertising imperial ideology to a venue of artistic innovation. Her interest and aesthetic tastes, rather than masculine imperial ideologies, took center stage.

### Reforming the Ceremonial Repertoire

The repertoires adopted by the late-Qing emperors reflect the aesthetic development of Qing ceremonial dramas from mass spectacle to actor-centered performance. For the purpose of this article it is relevant to trace the transformation of such performance programs arranged for imperial birthday celebrations.

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bestowals” and “Archives of imperial orders,” may be found in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Rujin, *Shimo kao*. The play texts cited in this article may be found in Gugong bowuyuan 故宫博物院院, ed., *Gugong zhenben congkan* 故宫珍本叢刊 (Haikou: Hainan chubanshe, 2001), vols. 660-96.

After the dismissal of civilian actors (*minji xuesheng* 民籍學生) in 1827, the Shengping shu no longer had enough staff members to stage large-scale grand plays for imperial birthday celebrations. The Daoguang emperor thus instructed the eunuch actors to begin and conclude the program with one- or two-act ceremonial dramas, while filling in the rest of the program with short excerpts from popular *Kunqu* or *Yiyang qiang* 弋陽腔 plays, which usually required a smaller cast.<sup>13</sup> A comparison of the 1823 repertoire and those used between 1829 and 1846 for the emperor's birthday celebration confirms this drastic change. In the repertoires from 1836 to 1838, the public portion of the celebration was accompanied mainly by ceremonial dramas, and folk plays were staged mostly in the afternoons for private entertainment.

Late-Qing emperors and empresses after Daoguang continued to explore other options. The Xianfeng emperor, for one, was especially fond of popular theatre, and sought to re-energize the ceremonial performance by incorporating more popular plays into the program. This goal was eventually achieved in 1860, when Xianfeng abandoned Daoguang's policy of forbidding civilian actors to serve in the court theatre. Established actors from Beijing were again appointed to teach and perform in the court. To celebrate his thirtieth birthday, Xianfeng even ordered major theatrical troupes such as Sixi 四喜 and Sanqing 三慶 to perform in Yuanming yuan 圓明園 for fifteen days prior to the birthday celebration—an unprecedented event.<sup>14</sup> The extended four-day

<sup>13</sup> The term used by the court members to address *kunqu* and *yiyang qiang* excerpts is *xiao zhouzi* 小軸子 or *xiao xi* 小戲. *Yiyang qiang* is one of the four major regional operatic systems that emerged during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and branched out into many sub-genres during the Qing dynasty; the other three are the *Haiyan qiang* 海鹽腔, *Yuyao qiang* 餘姚腔 and *Kun qiang* 崑腔. Originating in Yiyang county of Jiangxi province, the *yiyang* music system is known for its use of drums and cymbals, as well as the occasional use of offstage chorus (*bangqiang* 幫腔) in its arias. During the early Qing period, *yiyang qiang* was popular among both the literati and the masses in Beijing, so much so that it came to be known as *Jingqiang* 京腔 (capital style). A significant number of ceremonial dramas used by the court theatre were written in the *yiyang qiang* style. For a general introduction to the rise and dissemination of *yiyang qiang*, see Colin Mackerras, "The Drama of the Qing Dynasty," in Colin Mackerras, ed., *Chinese Theater: From its Origins to the Present Day* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 92-117, see 99-100. A discussion on how *yiyang qiang* was used by the court theatre in the mid-Qing period could be found in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> According to the Shengping shu memoirs, all famous theatrical troupes at that time, including Sanqing 三慶, Sixi 四喜, Shuangkuai 雙奎 and Chuntai 春台, sent actors to perform in the court.



performance for the official birthday celebration featured a combination of a few one-act ceremonial dramas and many popular *kunqu* excerpts. When the Anglo-French joint forces advanced toward Beijing in 1860, Xianfeng and the imperial family fled to Rehe 熱河, and took refuge in the Summer Palace. Even during this particularly difficult time when the capital was sacked by the invading foreign force, the Xianfeng emperor still managed to ask the Shengping shu to recruit new civilian actors from Beijing to perform in the Rehe Summer Palace on a daily basis. Between September 1860 and August 1861, the Xianfeng emperor and his imperial entourage watched as many as 320 dramas, one third of which being *huabu* 花部 dramas.<sup>15</sup> Though many new plays were introduced into the court during this time, the unusual circumstances in the Summer Palace forced the imperial patrons to give up certain theatrical effects they used to enjoy. It didn't seem to matter to Xianfeng, though, as the only thing he cared about was whether the Shengping shu could stage popular dramas as scheduled.<sup>16</sup>

Xianfeng's untimely death put an end to the emerging practice of synchronizing court theatrical performance to that of the ordinary populace. The entertainment turn was apparently considered inadequate by

<sup>15</sup> *Huabu* 花部 (the miscellaneous section) is a term used by the Qing literati and drama historians to refer to all kinds of regional operatic styles, as opposed to *yabu* 雅部 (the refined section), which refers to *Kunqu* and *Yiyang qiang*. The use of *yabu* and *huabu* to distinguish *kunqu* from other kinds of regional operas is said to have originated during the Qianlong emperor's six grand tours south of the Yangzi River between 1751 and 1784. The wealthy salt merchants in the Yangzhou area were responsible for holding welcoming entertainments, of which drama was an important part. It was an established practice that these salt merchants house two troupes—one for *kunqu* actors and the other for actors of other regional operas—to serve in important ceremonial events. After the Qianlong reign, *yabu* and *huabu* continued to be used by the literati, but the more popular jargon terms employed to address this distinction are *Kunqiang* 昆腔 (the *Kunqu* tune) and *luanpan* 亂彈 (the “mixed-up” styles). *Huaya zhizheng* 花雅之爭 (competition between *huabu* and *yabu*) is used by contemporary scholars to mark the rapidly growing popularity of regional operas after the mid-Qing and their eventual predominance over *Kunqu* opera since the late eighteenth century. For the development of the connotations of *huabu* and *yabu*, see Qi Senhua 齊森華, Chen Duo 陳多 and Ye Changhai 葉長海, eds., *Zhongguo quxue dacidian* 中國曲學大辭典 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 11.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Xianfeng emperor ordered a *maoerpai* 帽兒排 (informal performance) in his private quarters as soon as the Shengping shu actors arrived at Rehe. He instructed that “it does not matter if the costumes are not well-arranged. As long as the actors wear official caps (*guanmao* 官帽) it would do.” The instruction was made on December 19, 1860 (the tenth year of the Xianfeng reign). This document is quoted in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 304. English translation mine.

the Empress Dowager Ci'an, and multiple orders were issued in the name of the Tongzhi emperor in the beginning of his reign to dismiss civilian actors recruited into the court in 1860.<sup>17</sup> The same imperial order also called off all performances associated with ceremonial festivities until the completion of imperial funerary rituals for the Xianfeng emperor. While routine performances resumed in 1865, their scale and quality could not be compared to what the imperial family members used to enjoy in the previous decade.

It should be noted, however, that the small-scale ceremonial performances during this time represented only a small part of court theatre's assigned duties. Beginning in 1869 (the eighth year of the Tongzhi reign), despite Ci'an's lack of interest in theatrical entertainment,<sup>18</sup> the Empress Dowager Cixi resumed the Daoguang emperor's practice of holding performances in the Changchun gong 長春宮, her private quarters. Between 1869 and 1872, such informal performances organized by Cixi were held almost on a daily basis. The ceremonial function of court drama was apparently not Cixi's concern at this point. Records kept by the Shengping shu during this period suggest that Cixi watched a great number of popular plays at her private quarters. She often ordered the eunuch actors to update their repertoire and learn new acting techniques from performers of regional operatic genres.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of ceremonial performances, the format of Tongzhi repertoires appears to be similar to the Daoguang ones, in the sense that ceremonial dramas were mostly used to begin and conclude a given program, and folk plays were staged in between. There are two significant changes. First, *pihuang* plays played an increasingly important role in these programs—though *Kunqu* and *Yiyang* plays were still a dominant presence. Unlike the Daoguang emperor, who strictly prohibited the performance of any *huabu* play in a formal performance setting, the

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<sup>17</sup> "As for the ceremonial protocols of the imperial birthdays: princes and high officials used to receive imperial favors to participate in court banquets and theatrical events. This should now be stopped. This, together with all other ceremonial festivities, should be not be held until [the imperial coffin] has been laid to rest forever. ... The civilian staff members recruited in the tenth year of the Xianfeng reign should be dispelled [from the Shengping shu] forever." Quoted in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 321. English translation mine.

<sup>18</sup> See Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 341.

<sup>19</sup> See Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 322.

emperors and empresses of the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns were content to incorporate the popular genre into ceremonial performances.

Second, there was an ongoing effort to update the repertoire of ceremonial dramas. Aside from a few old ceremonial plays that were still in use, the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns saw the emergence of new ceremonial plays. When the court theatrical bureau resumed its regular operation in 1865, the court theatre was no longer able to perform the majority of ceremonial dramas because of the lack of experienced actors. The scaled-back repertoire focused on only a few plays, such as *Fu lu shou* 福祿壽 (Blessing, prosperity and longevity), *Wanshou wujiang* 萬壽無疆 (Ten thousand years of boundless longevity), *Sihai shengping* 四海昇平 (Ascendant peace in the four seas), *Luohan duhai* 羅漢渡海 (Arhats crossing the sea), *Diyong jinlian* 地湧金蓮 (A golden lotus emerges from the earth) and *Yaolin xiangshijie* 瑤林香世界 (The turquoise woods of the fragrant land). The project of creating new ceremonial dramas was initiated sometime before the marriage ceremony (*dahun* 大婚) of the Tongzhi emperor, and continued through the entire Guangxu reign.

### **The *Shou zhouzi* Plays: A New Mode of Presentation**

In 1879 (the fifth year of the Guangxu reign), after the official mourning period for the Tongzhi emperor was over, the Shengping shu prepared to resume court performances. Cixi asked to preview a number of ceremonial dramas, which later on appeared in the imperial birthday repertoire of the same year. Some ceremonial dramas that appeared regularly on the performance programs during this time are apparently newly-composed plays, usually referred to by the court theatrical bureau as *shou zhouzi* 壽軸子 (plays for birthday celebrations).

A new mode of presentation for the theatrical programs for imperial birthday celebrations gradually emerged during Cixi's time. Unlike many one- or two-act ceremonial plays in the repertoire, the *shou zhouzi* plays were much longer, containing four to ten acts. The order of appearance of a *shou zhouzi* play in a program was relatively fixed. A performance program for court ceremonial occasions during the Guangxu reign usually began around eight o'clock in the morning, and ended at two o'clock in the afternoon (as was the case during Guangxu's birthday celebration

in 1884) and could even extend into early evening (e.g. Cixi's birthday celebration in 1893).

Patterns began to emerge. A day's program usually consisted of a selection of *Kunqu* and *pihuang* excerpts, which formed the first two-thirds of the program. They were then followed by a full-scale *shou zhouzi* showcasing the court theatrical troupe's best performers with a large supporting cast in the afternoon. More *Kunqu* or *pihuang* excerpts would be performed before the program was concluded by another ceremonial play with a big cast and grand spectacles.<sup>20</sup>

The term *shou zhouzi* suggests that this group of plays might have been viewed by the court members (including both the audience and the performers) as comparable to *daxi*, the grand-scale ceremonial plays which could be staged only on a three-tiered theatre. The modern scholar Wang Zhizhang 王芷章 notes that “*zhouzi*” 軸子 had been used after the Jiaqing reign to refer to excerpts from *daxi*. Due to the lack of supporting cast, *daxi* had seldom been performed in their entirety after the Qianlong reign. During the Jiaqing era, these plays were adapted and reconfigured as multiple short episodes, each containing four to ten scenes, and performed intermittently over a period of time.<sup>21</sup> While excerpts of *daxi* continued to appear in the performance programs for special occasions, they were no longer used to impress foreign visitors. The term “*zhouzi*”—the axis of a performance program—had a new connotation. They were the core of the program. The *shou zhouzi* plays had now become the highlight of the entire birthday celebration program.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua Goldstein argues that the relatively predictable sequence of a day's performance program in the nineteenth century teahouse theatres in Beijing had something to do with the actors' ranking system in commercial *pihuang* troupes. Usually a typical day's show was divided into three parts: the “small set” (*xiaozhou* 小軸) referred to morning plays featuring young, inexperienced performers; the “middle set” (*zhongzhou* 中軸) were early-afternoon plays featuring first- and second-string actors; the “big set” (*dazhou* 大軸) were usually historical dramas featuring first-rate performers with a large supporting cast. See Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Wang Zhizhang 王芷章, *Qing Shengping shu zhilüe* 清昇平署志略 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), 74-5.

### Thematic Variations of the *Shou zhouzi* Plays

The narrative structure of the ceremonial dramas composed during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns tended to focus on the misadventures of various deities and supernatural figures en route to the Qing imperial court. Sharing similar plot structures, these plays introduce martial arts fighting scenes supported by special theatrical effects. Some plays include non-human spirits or barbarians from exotic foreign kingdoms. These plays typically open with deities explaining the occasion for the celebration (imperial birthday) and their plans (singing songs, performing a dance, or offering auspicious tributary gifts). This is usually followed by violent conflicts. In Heaven, there might be disturbances caused by lower-ranked fairies (e.g. the giant turtle in *Sihai shengping*). In the human world, there might be battles among feudal lords vying for the tributary gifts (e.g. *Bafang xianghua* 八方向化 [Foreigners from the eight directions turn toward transformation] and *Taiping wanghui* 太平王會 [The assembly of kings in a time of great peace]). These plays conclude with reconciliation. Everyone continues the journey in peace and arrives safe and sound at the imperial court to present songs and dance to celebrate the emperor's birthday. Examples include *Hongqiao xian dahai* 虹橋現大海 (Rainbow bridge across the ocean), *Bafang xianghua*, and *Sihai shengping* 四海昇平 (Ascending peace in the four seas).

These “pilgrimage” processes become more complex in Cixi's *shou zhouzi* plays because of a perceived need to increase their entertainment value. Even though popular *shou zhouzi* plays continue the de rigueur tribute-paying theme, they shift the emphasis from panegyrics to theatrical spectacles.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, all of them feature Daoist figures as protagonists. Since there are strong continuities and cross-references among these plays, and many plays feature the same characters, it stands to reason that these plays were composed in close succession.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Extant Shengping shu records suggest that all of the *shou zhouzi* plays gained their popularity during the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns. See Fu Xihua, *Qingdai zaju quanmu* 清代雜劇全目, 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> An example is in the six-scene play *Fushou yannian*. According to the Shengping shu memorial, it was brought onto the stage several times in the early Guangxu years. The manuscript in the *Gugong zhenben congkan* collection of Qing court dramas contains some references to other *shou zhouzi* plays performed at around the same time. When Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 is arguing with Mao Sui 毛遂, he accuses Mao of having stolen Guangchengzi's

Cixi was particularly fond of *Chuntai xieqing* 春台協慶 (A joint celebration in the Spring Pavilion), *Guadie mianchang* 瓜瓞綿長 (Prospering elongated gourd), *Fushou yannian* 福壽延年 (Prosperity and everlasting blessings), *Shengshou shengping* 聖壽昇平 (Ascendant peace on the imperial birthday), and *Shengping yasang* 昇平雅頌 (Elegant hymns celebrating the ascendant peace). While Cixi's motives remain unclear due to the lack of extant historical evidence, she gave clear instructions to eunuchs regarding which plays to revise and perform to celebrate her birthday. She also ordered specific actors to perform for her.

These plays ushered in generic transformations. *Chuntai xieqing*, for example, turned ceremonial drama from solemn ritual theatre into entertaining comedy. As the *Gugong zhenben congkan* 故宮珍本叢刊 edition suggests, this four-act play was written to celebrate the birthdays of the Guangxu emperor and Empress Dowager Cixi.<sup>24</sup> The dramatic narrative is structured around the power struggle among Daoist deities. The light-hearted episodes, following the pattern of folklore narratives, are conceived as a rescue for the otherwise predictable narrative patterns in traditional ceremonial dramas (a group of peasants or deities praising the virtues of the emperor as they travel to the imperial capital). The play opens with the Sage Mother of Northern Yin (Bei Yin shengmu 北陰聖母) appointing Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (a famous Daoist priest of the Quanzhen 全真 sect) the leader of the entourage traveling to the Divine Land (*Shenzhou* 神州). After the opening scene, the play departs from the conventions of ceremonial drama to focus on Qiu's misadventures and other deities' grudges against him, moving away from the conventional panegyrics of the emperor. The patron deity (*tudi* 土地) of Fengle 豐樂 village, for example, stops Qiu to ask for the golden elixir. Annoyed, Qiu gives him a bag of stones. Meanwhile, Liu Changsheng 劉長生,

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gourd last year. Apparently he is talking about the plot of *Guadie mianchang*, another popular *shou zhouzi* play, which may have been performed in the previous year.

<sup>24</sup> *Suizhong Wushi cang chaoben gaoben xiqu congkan* 綏中吳氏藏抄本稿本戲曲叢刊, vol. 22, contains another manuscript version of *Chuntai xieqing* from the Xuantong 宣統 reign (1909-12). The opening stage directions indicate that the play is dedicated to the occasion of the Xuantong emperor's birthday. It was performed around the time of the Lantern Festival. Wu Shuyin 吳書蔭, ed., *Suizhong Wushi cang chaoben gaoben xiqu congkan* (Beijing: Xueyun chubanshe, 2004), vol. 22, 301-50.

jealous of Qiu's promotion, transforms into Qiu's image to lead the congratulatory delegation. The patron deity, infuriated by the bag of stones, confronts Liu, mistaking the imposter for Qiu. Qiu and the imposter each insist that he is the real Qiu. The Sage Mother has to intervene, identify the imposter, and impart judgments. Qiu and Liu admit to their wrongdoings, and harmony is restored. The last act, act four, returns to the traditional ceremonial drama format with the deities arriving at the imperial court and presenting songs and dance in front of the real birthday banquet.

The spectator value of these plays was enhanced by the transformations of deities and comedic episodes involving the deities fighting for various tributary treasures. *Guadie mianchang* and *Fushou yannian* were performed frequently because they featured complex and entertaining character "transformations." *Guadie mianchang*, a two-hour performance according to the records of Shengping shu, revolves around Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 and Mao Sui's 毛遂 competition for Guangchengzi's 廣成子 precious thousand-year gourd. Mao Sui steals the gourd and plans to bring it to the Qing emperor as a tributary gift. The most entertaining portion of the performance was the transformation of these two characters. Dongfang Shuo transforms himself into the image of Mao Sui and steals the gourd from Mao's cave, and Mao transforms into the image of Dongfang and attempts the same trick. *Fushou yannian* continues the conflicts between Mao and Dongfang, but this time they fight for mulberries instead of the gourd. *Shengshou shengping* follows the same pattern and features the exchange of bodies between two deities (the ugly Iron-Crutch Li 李鐵拐 and the good-looking Pei Hang 裴航). These plays represent an important new force in energizing the formulaic patterns of ceremonial drama.

The origin of these birthday plays can be traced back to the *dutuo ju* 度脫劇 (deliverance plays) of the Ming dynasty, such as *Qunxian qingshou pantaohui* 群仙慶壽蟠桃會 (The assembled immortals celebrate longevity at the flat-peach meeting) and *Baxian qingshou* 八仙慶壽 (The eight immortals celebrate longevity) by Zhu Youdun 朱有燉 (1379-1439), a member of the Ming royal family and a prolific *zaju* 雜劇 (comedy) writer. When writing these plays for his own birthday celebrations, Zhu prioritized *paichang* 排場 (*mise-en-scène*) over plot and char-

acter development.<sup>25</sup> Many seemingly irrelevant subplots were designed for comic interludes and mini-skits. For example, the beginning part of the second act of *Qunxian qingshou pantao hui* portrays how Dongfang Shuo manages to steal some peaches of immortality guarded by immortal maidens. A short skit presents Dongfang Shuo dressed first as a tortoise, then as a crane, with the hope that his disguise could fool the immortal maidens and he could steal the peaches. While “treasure-stealing” is a stock plot element that could be found in many folk dramas with Daoist religious elements, this kind of short skit offered a great opportunity for the actors to display their talents and skills.<sup>26</sup>

Cixi’s adaptation made a twist to the conventional theme of “tribute-paying journeys of men/spirits from afar” that one would find in the ceremonial plays of earlier reigns. A representative case is *Sihai shengping*, a one-act play that was staged during the reigns of Qianlong, Jiaqing and Daoguang for various ceremonial occasions. In this play, Wenchang dijun 文昌帝君 (Imperial sovereign Wenchang) leads a group of star spirits to offer congratulations to the Sage Son of Heaven. On their way to the “divine land,” they see many sea monsters passing by, causing roaring waves and chaotic turbulence. Wenchang dijun leads star spirits and dragon kings to subdue the disturbance. Toward the end of the play, a treasure urn (*baoping* 寶瓶) with the inscription of the four-character line Sihai shengping 四海昇平 is brought to the stage as the star spirits’ tribute to the emperor. The Qianlong version of *Sihai shengping*, recently discovered by Ye Xiaoqing, contains multiple references to Lord Macartney’s visit to China in 1793.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the dramatic narrative about the tributary event focuses almost exclusively on the hospitality extended to these guests, as evidenced by the episode in which the immortals clear the obstacles on the sea route for these people. Wenchang dijun indicates

<sup>25</sup> Zhu Youdun believed that the nihilism in traditional Daoist deliverance plays ran contrary to the ideological demands of birthday and other celebratory occasions where these plays were to be performed. Therefore, he steered his deliverance plays towards an emphasis on *mise-en-scène*, away from traditional formulaic plotlines. See Wilt Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-tun (1379-1439)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 78-85.

<sup>26</sup> Idema suggests that this scene may have provided the opportunity for some pantomime. For an in-depth analysis of the theatricality of this scene, see Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-tun*, 82-83.

<sup>27</sup> Ye Xiaoqing, “*Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas*,” 102.



that the English emissaries, upon arriving in China, will receive the greatest treatment.<sup>28</sup>

Historical documents suggest that the Qianlong emperor was extremely interested in European curiosities and admired European crafts and technologies. However, his poems appear to be brushing off the value of the gifts presented by the guests. All he cares about, according to his poems, is whether the emissaries receive the best reception possible in the court. The “fascination for monumentality” and self-glorification may, as Ye Xiaoqing argues, feed into a political vocabulary that is characteristic of Qianlong.<sup>29</sup> However, the act of refusing, or downplaying the importance of local tributes, as well as frequent and generous bestowals from the emperor, have been recognized by scholars as a gift-exchanging practice adopted by early Qing emperors such as Kangxi.<sup>30</sup> Through this process, a sense of superiority is expressed through the emperor’s generosity and benevolence, which further confirms, rhetorically, the empire’s immense material resources.

In Cixi’s *shou zhouzi* plays, this conventional theme was expanded further to offer new interpretation to the political propaganda of “the sage king (cherishes sincerity and) desires no exotic commodities (*sheng-zhu bu gui yiwu* 聖主不貴異物).” The dramaturgical emphasis had shifted from the extended processes of preparing the gifts to the validation of the gift-bearers’ sincerity. Competition for sending the best gift to the ruler is keen, and in the process comedies of error ensue. However, Cixi did not intend to parody the ritual of gift preparation and gift giving. Her attention was attuned to the comedic potentials of the adventures.

In the opening scene of *Guadie mianchang*, as the deities discuss what to bring to the imperial court, they remind each other that “the sage

<sup>28</sup>) “Today the time has come for them to present their tributary memorial and be rewarded with a banquet. It is a great ceremony, joining heaven and man in celebration.” Translation quoted from Ye Xiaoqing, “*Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas*,” 100.

<sup>29</sup>) Ye Xiaoqing, “*Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas*,” 104-08; Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 263-66.

<sup>30</sup>) Michael G. Chang, “The Give and Take of Qing Rule: Local Tribute and Imperial Gifts on Kangxi’s Southern Tours.” Paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting, 2008. Chang’s study focuses on cases with the Kangxi emperor.

king will not crave exotic goods; we have to focus on demonstrating our earnestness (*buguo ge jin qi cheng eryi* 不過各盡其誠而已).” In the new pattern revised by Cixi, dramatic conflicts often arise from the characters’ disparate views of how best to express their earnestness, as exemplified by *Shengshou shengping*. Iron-Crutch Li, the new leader of the deity-delegates, sets out to inhabit a better-looking body after Li Bai 李白, the drunken poet deity, challenges his leadership on the ground of his ugly appearance:

How lucky I am to live in a prosperous time,  
 Yet how woeful I am to be trapped in this body.  
 If I go to the imperial capital, I may incite the imperial scourge.<sup>31</sup>

Obsessed with finding a new body, Li eventually forces Pei Hang 裴航 to exchange his body with him, which turns out to be advantageous for Pei. The lower-ranked Pei Hang assumes the leader’s position. Therefore, when Li regrets and wants Pei to return his body, Pei refuses, and spectacular battle scenes ensue. Similar arrangements can be found in *Chuntai xieqing*. Excessive and inappropriate expression of earnestness leads to conflicts to be resolved by a higher deity. The resolution brings home the message that only unpretentious, genuine gifts will be appreciated. The inappropriately expressed enthusiasm of these deities is then attributed to the unimaginable imperial grace, as the Golden Mother of Yaochi 瑤池 reminds Iron-Crutch Li and Pei Hang: “Li’s mistake, now mended, is understandable, as he is moved deeply by the grace of the sage king and eager to repay the emperor.” Similarly, Mu Gong 木公, the mediator and arbiter of the conflicts in *Fushou yannian*, reminds everyone:

All that is under heaven belongs to the sage mother and relies on and thrives under her grace. How can you claim ownership over any goods? All of these tributary goods belong to the sage mother. All we can do is to demonstrate our earnestness.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Scene two, “Guanxian zhaojing” 拐仙照鏡, in *Shengping yasang* 昇平雅頌 from *Qingdai Nanfu yu Shengping shu juben yu dang’an* 清代南府與昇平署劇本與檔案, in Gugong bowuyuan, ed., *Gugong zhenben congkan*, vol. 662.

<sup>32</sup> Scene six, “Gongzhu wujiang” 恭祝無疆, in *Fushou yannian* 福壽延年 from Gugong bowuyuan, ed., *Gugong zhenben congkan*, vol. 662. Throughout the play-text the deities use “sage mother” to address the subject of their well-wishing. It is clear that this manuscript was revised for Empress Dowager Cixi’s birthday.

The politics of gift-giving and gift-receiving frames the imperial imagination of the emperor's absolute claims over all territories and goods under heaven (*putian zhixia, jie Shengzhu jiangtu* 普天之下皆聖主疆土), thus fulfilling the panegyric function of court theatre. Further, the clumsiness and naiveté of these characters as they fight each other—competing among themselves to give the most precious tributary gift or to determine who receives the most imperial favor—creates lighthearted scenes for entertainment.

### From Pageantry to Actor-Centered Performance

The aesthetic function of court ceremonial dramas had been a main concern for Cixi. The positioning of *shou zhouzi* in the program of a given day's performance at the inner court suggests that they were far from simply "part of the fixed and routine program for a particular occasion."<sup>33</sup> Special arrangements in the program notes of 1891 and 1899 (the seventeenth and twenty-fifth years of the Guangxu reign) reveal a new division of labor between the eunuch actors and civilian actors that formed the "outer school" (*waixue lingren* 外學伶人). In 1891 and 1899, a given day's performance for the imperial birthday celebration included only one *shou zhouzi* play. It was always performed by the eunuch actors and sandwiched by other *kunqu* and *pihuang* programs offered by the outer school. Empress Dowager Cixi reinstated the practice of appointing famous actors from the capital. This process started in 1883, before her fiftieth birthday celebration.<sup>34</sup> Within a few years the theatrical organizations responsible for court performances expanded to include the eunuch actors and civilian actors in the Shengping shu, performers from professional theatre companies, and Cixi's own troupe, Putian tongqing, led by the head eunuch Li Lianying 李蓮英 (1848-1911). As previously discussed, there are reasons to believe that such an arrangement was intended to pit civilian actors and court theatre troupe members against each other in a talent contest. However, towards the late Guangxu reign, the division was less clearly defined.

<sup>33</sup> Ye Xiaoqing, "Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas," 89.

<sup>34</sup> Colin Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera, 1770-1980: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 158.

Newly appointed civilian actors had now become familiar with the performance conventions of ceremonial dramas, and eunuch actors completed their training in popular plays under the guidance of civilian actors.<sup>35</sup>

The dramaturgical shift from valuing *mise-en-scène* and choreographed spectacles to emphasizing the talents and skills of individual performers was clearly a result of the intensified exchanges between court and popular theatres during this period. The aesthetic implications of this shift emerge in three areas of court theatre. First, the increasingly frequent practice of casting the same performers in multiple characters and role types heightened the awareness, among performers and audiences, of the new ontological and aesthetic space among the identities of the performer, the role type, and character. The techniques that allowed performers to explore these enabling relationships include *jianban* 兼扮 (a performer playing different characters in the same production), *shuangyan* 雙演 (one character performed by two different performers), and *fanchuan* 反串 (a performer cast in a role type that is not the one he or she specializes in).<sup>36</sup> Cixi played a pivotal role in introducing these emerging trends from commercial theatre to court theatre. A great number of late-Qing *shou zhouzi* plays feature impostors as characters. The transformation of a character into another character, and the ensuing misunderstanding, provide both comic relief and dramatic conflict. While these techniques were not new or unique to court theatre, their frequent uses suggest that the performers' individual talents were now the focal point of the stage. While all of these plays feature swapped

<sup>35</sup> A Shengping shu memorial of 1892 documented the Empress Dowager's instruction to train eunuch actors to learn and perform new plays (i.e. popular plays) as soon as possible. Another record of 1893 documented a request from the head of Shengping shu, He Qingxi 何慶喜, asking to appoint actors from professional troupes to participate in the performance for ceremonial occasions. See Zhu Jiabin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 396, 399.

<sup>36</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the origin and evolution of these performance conventions, see Wang Anqi 王安祈, "Jianban, shuangyan, daijiao, fanchuan: guanyu yanyuan, jiaose he juzhongren sanzhe guanxi de jidian kaocha 兼扮、雙演、代角、反串——關於演員、腳色和劇中人三者關係的幾點考察," in Hua Wei 華瑋 and Wang Ailing 王瓊玲, eds., *Ming Qing Qing xiqu guoji yantaohui lunwenji* 明清戲曲國際研討會論文集 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo choubuichu, 1997), 627-61. It should be noted that *fanchuan* has recently been used to refer to cross-dressing in strictly gender-specific contexts. For a more detailed discussion, see Andrew Grossman, *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 206.

bodies or mistaken identities, performance strategies vary widely. In act three of *Chuntai xieqing*, both Qiu Chuji and the imposter, wearing the same costumes and make up, appear on the stage in unison. They create a comic scene of theatrical doubles in which one character is split into two, played by two different performers who imitate each other. The practice of *shuangyan* is still wildly in use on the stage nowadays; such an approach became prevalent from the Qianlong reign.<sup>37</sup> In the *shou zhouzi* plays, the actions of the original character may appear to be mundane and far from comical, but the imposter's imitations parody the first performer's presentation and exude a healthy dose of humor. This is a pattern that I will call unilateral transformation (one character transforms himself or herself into another character). To maximize the dramatic effect and to take advantage of its large crew and cast, court theatre performances often feature several such scenes in the same play. In *Yanqing changsheng*, 衍慶長生 (A prolonged celebration for longevity) Ge Hong 葛洪, an ugly spiky-haired man played by a *jing* 淨 (male painted-face role) character, is criticized by other characters as being too ugly to assume a leadership role. As a result, he transforms himself into a handsome young scholar (in the *sheng* 生 role). Liu Haixian 劉海仙 and Hong Ai 洪崖 then transform themselves, respectively, into Ge Hong and show up at Ge's house to attempt to obtain his treasure from his unsuspecting wife. When Ge discovers the scheme, a chaotic fighting scene ensues, which is obviously the highlight of the performance (act three). Featured characters in this scene include Ge Hong (now in the *sheng* role), the two imposters showing up as Ge Hong (Liu and Hong, both in *jing* roles), and four identical avatars of Ge (in the *sheng* role type) that Ge summons to help him in the fight—there is a total of seven performers playing the same role and fighting each other.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> One of the earliest records of such performance could be found in *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄, where Li Dou 李斗 notes that in Gu Ayi's 顧阿姨 all-female *kunqu* troupe, *Shuangqing ban* 雙清班, there were "Shenguan 申官 and Youbao 酉保 sisters, who often performed double in *Sifan*." See Li Dou, *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 203-204. Also see Wang Anqi, "Jianban, shuangyan, daijiao, fanchuan," 649-53.

<sup>38</sup> The play scripts of *Yanqing changsheng* and other *shou zhouzi* plays are included in the third volume of *Kun Yi gezhong chengying xi* 崑弋各種承應戲, in the collection of *Gugong zhenben cong kan*.

A second pattern of identity exchange is bilateral transformation. This happens when two actors exchange their characters while retaining their original costumes and makeup. This theatrical device was extremely popular in the late-Qing court theatre. In *Shengping yasang*, bilateral transformations take place among Iron-Crutch Li, Pei Hang, and Chi-song zi 赤松子. Li enters Pei's body when Pei is meditating (with his soul floating elsewhere), which leaves Pei's soul no choice but to use Li's body. There are multiple layers of identity exchange happening on stage. The actor playing Li probably steps behind the actor playing Pei to portray Li occupying Pei's body. The actor playing Li then moves backstage, while the actor playing Pei (in a *sheng* role) wakes up with Li's signature moves and behaviors (in a *jing* role). The same process takes place in the scene when Pei's soul enters Li's body. The two actors continue the performance in their original makeup and costumes but playing each other's (exchanged) characters.

While cross-dressing and disguise are common devices in most theatrical traditions, Qing court theatre made a unique presence through its unconventional use of the stylization conventions and *hangdang* 行當 (role types) to represent a character's new identity. It goes without saying that the Daoist elements of transformation and soul migration created a nurturing environment for such experiments with performance styles. While costumes or conventionalized facial patterns do make the man, the fully inhabited demeanors are important factors, too. This explains why a character's soul trapped in the body of another character (Pei in Li's body) could not easily convince his close family members (his wife, sister, and brother-in-law) that he is himself. Only after long, close observation of Pei (in Li's body) did Pei's brother-in-law conclude: "His voice, behaviors, and demeanors are indeed identical with Pei, but this is so strange and outlandish. I could hardly believe what I just saw!"<sup>39</sup> Cixi and her fellow audiences derived much pleasure from knowing more about the characters.

A combination of the *jianban* and *fanchuan*, this new technique would surely be challenging for the court actors. We have no way of knowing whether such plays were tailor-made for extremely talented performers. However, it is clear that not all performers in the court theatre could

<sup>39</sup> See *Shengping yasang*, scene five. *Gugong zhenben congkan*, vol. 662.

take on these roles successfully, and such technical failures are parodied in self-consciously metatheatrical moments in some plays. Metatheatricity refers to the theatre's capacity to tell a story while drawing attention to itself as a form of performance, as a form of entertainment. The audience is not "immersed" in the story-telling but rather becomes sensitized to the deployment of various performance styles and even on-stage discussions of theatrical conventions.

The parodic mode, in Cixi's ceremonial plays, ironically, also showcased the actors' individual skills. Take *Shengshou shengping*, for example. In the 1882 edition (the eighth year of the Guangxu reign), a group of immortals in charge of the twenty-eight constellations plan to transform themselves into Tripitaka and his entourage in order to steal their tributary gifts to the Qing emperor. Shihuo zhu 室火豬 takes on a leadership role and starts assigning roles for each member of the group:

[Shihuo zhu looking at Canshui yuan 參水猿]  
 Shihuo zhu: No doubt you will be Sun Wukong.  
 Canshui yuan: No, Sun Wukong has golden eyes. I cannot possibly pass.  
 Shihuo zhu: What a fool! Go get golden eyelashes from the makeup department back stage, and you are done.  
 [To Nütu fu 女土蝠] And you shall be the Tripitaka.  
 Nütu fu: Sure! [Transforms herself (from a bat) into the female form.]  
 Shihuo zhu: This won't work. She's a woman. She will never look like Tripitaka.  
 Nütu fu: Why can I not go? I will stop the female gait.  
 Shihuo zhu: Let us do an audition. Deliver a line with your real voice.<sup>40</sup>  
 Nütu fu: I will read it now. "Oh my disciple. ..."  
 All (laugh): That is outrageous! This will not work! Let us try someone else.<sup>41</sup>

室火豬看(參水猿)科。白：你不用說了。自然你的孫悟空了。  
 參水猿白：那孫悟空是金眼睛，我扮他有些不像。  
 室火白：你好糊塗！到後台同管彩匣的要幾點金貼上就像了……  
 室火作看(女土蝠)科：你扮唐僧吧！  
 女土蝠白：我去很好。(作現女形)  
 室火豬白：使不得，她是個女的，不像。  
 女土蝠白：我是女的就去不得了麼？我不走女步兒就是了。  
 室火豬白：你真嚟子念一句話白我們聽聽……  
 女土蝠白：我念了…(用大喉嚨念科)啊徒弟…  
 眾笑白：這還了得！使不得！另找找。

<sup>40</sup> That is, Shihuo zhu is asking Nütu fu 女土蝠 to stop speaking in falsetto (*jiasang* 假嚟) and practice speaking in full voice (*zhen sang* 真嚟/ *da houlong* 大喉嚨).

<sup>41</sup> Passage quoted from the third scene, *Qiaoban sengzhong* 喬扮僧眾, from *Shengshou shengping*.

This group's clumsy experiments on transformation end in utter failure. In *Shengshou shengping*, the transformation scene does not focus only on showcasing the performing talents of the actors. Rather, the parodic imitation of a familiar plot and performance convention takes the now clichéd theatrical device of identity exchange to a new level. A metatheatrical work such as *Shengshou shengping* relies on both the dramatic narrative and the self-referential acts of theatre-making to convey its complete message. As much as the audience enjoyed the "story," they also derived pleasure from a "sneak peak" at the failures of the (scripted) improvisations unfolding on stage. In Yuan drama, it is not unusual to find such scenarios where a character suddenly disrupts the dramatic illusion by informing the audience that he/she is actually the same performer who plays another character in the same production. This dramatic device developed into a major form of comic interlude in many dramatic genres.<sup>42</sup> In smaller companies where there were fewer performers specializing in each role type, such strategies might have carried a practical function. However, in the court theatre, where there were always sufficient performers for each role category, the above-mentioned situation would never have been a concern. What concerned the imperial patrons is whether this playful deconstruction of established theatrical convention would bring more viewing pleasures. The metatheatrical device thus enabled a paradigm shift from more rigidly choreographed spectacles to an actor-centered stage.

In 1884 (the tenth year of the Guangxu reign), the Empress Dowager Cixi issued an instruction on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday celebration that the Shengping shu members perform more *shou zhouzi* plays, and avoid *kunqu* and *pihuang* plays containing violent content.<sup>43</sup> It is plausible to assume that Cixi was the hand behind all these transformations. The phenomenal popularity of metatheatrical devices in the late-Qing *shou zhouzi* performances testifies to her interest in new performing techniques, which no doubt benefitted from the burgeoning star system of *pihuang*. Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培, the renowned *laosheng* actor

<sup>42</sup> Some earliest examples could be found in *Zhang Xie zhuangyuan* 張協狀元, one of the most important *nanxi* plays. For a more in-depth discussion, see Wang Anqi, "Jianban, Shuangyan, Daijiao, Fanchuan," 629-34.

<sup>43</sup> Cixi's instruction is quoted in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 375.



and the legendary *liyuan dawang* 梨園大王 (king of actors), was appointed by the Shengping shu as a *neiting gongfeng* in 1890. He recounted two such occasions when he was challenged by the Empress Dowager to perform in role categories other than his specialty. He was once summoned to perform the clownish Pigsy in *Dao hun ling* 盜魂鈴 (Stealing the bell of the soul). Running out of time for preparation, he ended up improvising some parts of the performance, including the mixture of various *laosheng* singing styles. His daring move turned out to be a great success, as Cixi reportedly bestowed on him unusually sumptuous rewards, and ordered Pigsy be performed in the *laosheng* role thereafter.<sup>44</sup> In another instance, Tan was asked by Li Lianying, the head eunuch, to perform a vulgar woman in *Tanqin* 探親 (Visiting the relatives), while Sun Juxian 孫菊仙, another famous *laosheng* actor, was ordered to play a middle-aged woman in full Manchu costume (*qizhuang* 旗裝). Cixi reportedly “could barely suppress her laughter” while watching their performance.<sup>45</sup> This episode focuses on the clumsy “performances” of the two characters. In order to ascertain the skills of these two performers, Cixi called on them at the eleventh hour to perform an unfamiliar scene. Under-prepared, Tan Xinpei and Sun Juxian put on a comedy of errors that provided pleasant surprises.

The Empress Dowager Cixi was clearly interested in metatheatrical devices that subverted dramatic conventions. Cixi’s enthusiasm for such scenes is not an isolated instance. Since the Xianfeng and Tongzhi reigns, late Qing emperors had retained a shared interest in the aesthetic implications of reinventing theatrical conventions.<sup>46</sup> As Joshua Goldstein has

<sup>44</sup> Yu Lenghua 于冷華, “Tan Xinpei neiting gongfeng zhuyi 譚鑫培內廷供奉追憶,” in *Tan Xinpei yishu pinglun ji* 譚鑫培藝術評論集 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1990), 118-20.

<sup>45</sup> Liu Juchan 劉菊禪, “Tan Xinpei Shengping shu chengzhi zaji 譚鑫培昇平署承值雜記,” in *Tan Xinpei quanji* 譚鑫培全集 (Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue chubanshe, 1974), 15.

<sup>46</sup> The Xianfeng emperor, for example, once ordered the Shengping shu to incorporate into *laoren chengji* 老人呈技 stunts and acrobatic skills that were usually performed by the Zhangyi si 掌儀司 (Office of Palace Ceremonial) personnel. It is clear from the *Daqing huidian* 大清會典 and the Shengping shu documents that the Zhangyi si staff was in charge of all the stunts and acrobatic-related performance in court ceremonial performance, especially those programs tailored to foreign guests at state-level banquets. What Macartney and his entourage saw when they were received by the Qianlong emperor in the Garden of Ten-thousand Trees (Wanshu yuan 萬樹園) in 1793 is very likely to have been programs provided by Zhangyi si. Wang Zhizhang suggests that there seems to have been a clear

observed, to appreciate this special form of performance, one would have to understand the conventions, character, the age and status of the actor, as well as the multiple layers of signification created by “bouncing” these elements against each other.<sup>47</sup>

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the significance of the exchanges between court and professional companies in the capital. While Cixi’s support and patronage of *jingju* actors and theatrical troupes played a major role in the development of the *jingju* performance culture, the cases analyzed here suggest that the impact of *jingju* on the development and transformation of court drama was much extensive than what we have assumed. The framework of ritual performance gradually gave way to artistic experiments to satisfy Cixi’s appetite for entertainment. In 1894 (the twentieth year of the Guangxu reign), Cixi, in preparation for the festivities of her sixtieth birthday, gave the following instructions to the Shengping shu staff: “Exert yourself and rehearse [the birthday plays] well. Hire famous civilian performers for the *shou zhouzi* plays.”<sup>48</sup> In pursuit of perfection and the coveted effects of identity transformation, Cixi was clearly willing to break the court tradition of casting only eunuch actors in major *shou zhouzi* performances. By the late Guangxu reign, performance programs for the imperial birthday celebration retained only a short opening ceremonial play. The rest of the program was completely dominated by popular *pihuang* plays.<sup>49</sup> Thanks to Cixi, court ceremonial performance had become a pure form of entertainment, departing from its original ritualistic framework.

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division of labor between Zhangyi si and Nanfu, so that Zhangyi si was usually not involved in inner-court performances for imperial family members. However, the division was not that clear-cut, especially after the Xianfeng reign. See Wang Zhizhang, *Qing Shengping shu zhibilue*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 187.

<sup>48</sup> The Shengping shu memorials of imperial favors and bestowals (1894), in Zhu Jiajin and Ding Ruqin, *Shimo kao*, 406.

<sup>49</sup> See Zhu Jiajin, *Gugong tuishi lu*, 568-69.