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THE LEGAL AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THEATRICAL PERFORMERS IN BEIJING DURING THE QING

Ye Xiaoqing 葉曉青

The *jianmin* 賤民, or "debased people" of the Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties can be divided into two groups. The former, concentrated in a particular locality, were mainly descendants of people who had been persecuted for political reasons and forced into certain base occupations under the previous dynasty. They compulsorily inherited their status and occupation generation after generation, and for many of them, the original circumstances that led to their low status was no longer known.[1] The latter were not limited to a particular area, but were classified as debased because of their chosen occupation. These included opera performers—the lowest class of *jianmin*. It was for the former group that the emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1723–35) abolished the status of *jianmin*, not the latter.

The debased people were deprived of many legal rights, of which the most important was participation in the imperial examinations. Some occupations, such as *yamen* runners, were not generally despised despite their legal status. Actors, however, were called by the derogatory term *ling* 伶 and *you* 優, and were subject to both legal discrimination and social condemnation. The circumstances of actors in Beijing, however, may have been different from those in the provinces. Based on material largely from the Imperial Household Department, this paper concentrates on actors within the jurisdiction of the capital and the Court.[2]

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[1] Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, law and society in late imperial China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), and Anders Hansson, *Chinese outcasts—discrimination and emancipation in late imperial China* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1996) are studies on these regional groups. The former concentrates on *yuehu* 樂戶 and the latter deals with several different groups of *jianmin*.

[2] There were eunuch performers in the palace, but they belonged to a different category and are beyond the scope of this article.

The Legal Status of Ling *or* You—*'Actors'*

The Qing inherited the Bureau of Instruction (*Jiaofangsi* 教坊司) from the Ming. It employed *yuehu* 樂戶 as musicians.[3] They were debased people, selected from the provinces to serve in the palace. During the Ming, the

[3] Sommer translates the term *yuehu* as 'Yue households'. See Sommer, *Sex, law, and society*, pp.215–16.

duties of the Bureau of Instruction included entertainment and ceremonial musical performances in the Palace. Even before entering Beijing, the Qing court had decided not to employ female *yuehu* in the Palace.[4] As early as 1644, the first year of the dynasty, eighteen eunuchs were chosen to perform music for the emperor when he visited several temples. At that time, the state ceremonial music was still performed by the *yuehu* in the Jiaofangsi. In 1651, an imperial edict formally banned female *yuehu* from the Palace, their role to be performed by 48 eunuchs.[5] However, male *yuehu* remained in the Jiaofangsi.

The legal status of the *yuehu* as *jianmin* was still retained. In 1723, the first year of the Yongzheng reign, the Provincial Censor Nian Xi 年熙 submitted a memorial advocating the abolition of the category of *yuehu* in Shanxi and Shaanxi. Nian noted that these people were descendants of Ming officials who had supported the emperor Jianwen 建文 against the coup of Prince Yan 燕太子, the future emperor Yongle 永樂. When his coup succeeded, Yongle decreed that the daughters and wives of the supporters of the former emperor would be condemned to the status of *guanji* 官妓 (official prostitutes) "generation after generation." Nian proposed that, as these people were the descendants of loyal officials, it was unjust that they had been reduced to this status. Retention of the category of *yuehu* was of no benefit to the state, and its abolition would be a moral act. Yongzheng approved, and ordered the Ministry of Rites to draft the appropriate regulations. Yongzheng then formally rescinded the status of *jianmin* for these particular *yuehu*, the descendants of the loyal Ming officials now resident in Shanxi 山西 and Shaanxi 陝西.[6]

Four months after Nian's memorial, the Salt Investigating Censor of Liang-Zhe 兩浙, Ge-er-tai 葛爾泰, submitted a memorial advocating rescinding the debased status of the *duomin* 墮民 ("fallen people") and *gaihu* 丐戶 ("beggar households") of Shaoxing 紹興, as they were the descendants of "rebellious generals" during the Song 宋. After listing a number of discriminatory regulations regarding occupation, clothing and so on, Ge-er-tai wrote:

> These people have been in disgrace for several centuries, since appropriate punishment during the Song. Have they not had to eke out a livelihood generation after generation in the most shameless manner? This is because they have had no way to reform themselves. If it were not for your Majesty's unbounded benevolence, they would be reincarnated generation after generation, and will finally be buried in the sea of sin. This slave regards with awe your Majesty's love for the welfare of living things, even to insects and grasses. Now I beg an abundance of your gracious benevolence, and humbly suggest an extension of the favour already granted to the Shanxi and Shaanxi *yuehu*."[7]

Yongzheng approved this, but it was vetoed by the Board of Rites, on the grounds that it was improper and impractical.[8] The Board of Rites argued that relieving them of their traditional occupations would deprive them of their livelihood. Yongzheng then ordered the Board of Rites to resubmit the

[4] Ten years before the Manchus entered Ming China, a Ming court official, Zhu Shichang 祝世昌 (?–1650), who was stationed in Liaoyang 遼陽, surrendered to the Qing. In a memorial to Hong Taiji 皇太極, he requested that captured Han 漢 Chinese women not be classified as *yuehu*. This angered Hong Taiji: "Does Zhu Shichang not know that I have already banned the *yuehu*? Your memorial was submitted to pander to the Han Chinese, for your own fame. Your body is with the Qing, but your heart is still inclined to the Ming ... ." Sun Yingshi 孫應時, who helped Zhu Shichang draft the memorial, was executed. Zhu and his brother were exiled, but released under an amnesty proclaimed in 1645 (the second year of the reign of the Shunzhi 順治 emperor). Cf. *Qingshigao* [Draft history of the Qing dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju edn., 1977), vol.32, pp.9526–8. See also *Man-Han mingchen zhuan* [Biographies of famous Manchu and Han officials] (Harbin: Heilongjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), vol.4, pp.4462–3.

[5] *Qinding Da Qing huidian shili* [Imperial commissioned Collected Regulations and Precedents of the Qing Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shudian, 1991), vol.6, p.1043. The Jiaofangsi was located to the south of the Dongsi pailou; the area is still called Yanyue hutong [Perform music lane]. Nearby is the Bensi hutong, *Bensi* referring to the Jiaofangsi. The Goulan hutong [Balustrade lane], the red light district during the Ming, is also nearby. See Yu Minzhong, et al., eds., *Rixia jiuwen kao* [Studies on the Old News of the Capital] (Beijing: Guji Chubanshe, 1985), vol.2, pp.762–3; Zhang Qingchang, *Beijing jiexiang mingcheng* [History of the names of Beijing streets and lanes] (Beijing: Beijing Yuyan Wenhua Daxue Chubanshe, 1997), p.356; Ye Zufu, "Yuanming liangdai de jiaofang—ji lishishang Beijingshi dongcheng qu Yanyue hutong deng santiao hutong" [The Jiaofangsi in the Yuan and Ming dynasties—the history of three *hutong* 胡同, including the Yanyue *hutong*, in the eastern quarter of Beijing], in Yue Zufu, *Beijing fengqing zatan* [Miscellaneous chats on local conditions and customs in Beijing] (Beijing: Zhongguo Chengshi Chubanshe, 1995), pp.44–7. See also Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo, ed. *Ming-Qing Beijing cheng tu* [Maps of the city of Beijing in the Ming and Qing dynasties] (Beijing: Ditu Chubanshe, 1984), p.27.

memorial, noting, "This is a good thing. The Board's process of examination and advice should not disagree with it. I am returning the original memorial for reexamination and resubmission."[9] Finally the abolition of the categories of *duomin* and *gaihu* in Shaoxing county, Zhejiang 浙江 was approved.[10]

Nian Xi initiated this policy during a period when both he and his father, Nian Gengyao 年羹堯 (? –1726), enjoyed Yongzheng's favour—Nian Xi's sister was Yongzheng's consort, and Nian Gengyao was the Governor-General of Sichuan 四川 and Shaanxi. Shanxi was also under his jurisdiction. Nian Xi must have consulted his father on this matter—perhaps it was even his father's idea. When Nian Gengyao lost the favour of Yongzheng, one of the crimes mentioned in the impeachment proceedings was Nian's supposed attempt to steal the credit from Yongzheng on this issue.[11] On the basis of these two memorials, the Board of Rites issued the following regulations:

> The category [of *jianmin*] will be abolished for the *yuehu* of all provinces, and for the *duomin* and *gaihu* of Zhejiang, and they will take up respectable occupations. Local tyrants and local bullies who continue to insult or take advantage of them as in the past, or any [former *jianmin*] who willingly continue their debased lifestyle, will be punished in accordance with the regulations. If local officials do not implement this [regulation] properly, the Governor-General and the Provincial Governor should impeach them and refer the matter to the Board of Civil Appointments for discussion and sentence.[12]

These various categories of debased people were abolished because the Court could see there was no need to continue to discriminate against certain people because of the political activities of their ancestors. There were various theories about the origins of the *gaihu* of Zhejiang, for example. Ge-er-tai's information came from the local gazetteers. The key point was that they were now permitted to change their occupation for a respectable one (*gai ye wei liang* 改業為良).[13] Various vocations, or trades, however, remained "debased occupations," or *jian ye* 賤業. After the abolition of the category of *yuehu* as *jianmin*, the Palace no longer selected *yuehu* from the provinces, and there was a sharp drop in the number of musicians in the Bureau of Instruction. No one wanted to replace the *yuehu*, mainly because of the tainted reputation of the Bureau. For this reason, in the seventh year of his reign (1729), Yongzheng ordered that the name of the Bureau of Instruction be changed to the Bureau of Harmonious Sounds (Heshengshu 和聲署).[14]

The legal status of the male *yuehu* who chose to stay in the newly-named Heshengshu did not seem to undergo any change. In 1742, Qianlong 乾隆 (1736–95) wanted to dismiss all the musicians in the Heshengshu, due to their lack of skill. The three ministers of the Board of Music presented a memorial, requesting that forty musicians in the Heshengshu should carry on their duties, but that those who were going to leave the Palace should be allowed to change their status:

> These musicians, apart from those recruited from amongst ordinary people,

[6] Cf. *Qingshilu* [Veritable records of the Qing dynasty], *Shizong shilu, juan* 卷 6 reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), vol.1, p.136. According to fieldwork conducted amongst *yuehu* in Shanxi during the 1990s, many claimed they were in fact descended from the Ming Prime Minister Zhang Juzheng 張居正, and had honoured his spirit tablet for generations. Xiang Yang, *Shanxi yuehu yanjiu* [Research on the *yuehu* of Shanxi] (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2001), pp.25–7.

[7] Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'anguan (The First Archives of China, hereafter Yidang) ed., *Yongzhengchao Hanwen zhupizouzhe* [Vermillion-endorsed memorials in Chinese of the Yongzheng reign] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 1991), vol.1, p.652. On "beggar households," see also Hannson, *Chinese outcasts*, pp.76–106.

[8] On the process of ratification and examination of Qing edicts, see Thomas A. Metzger, *The internal organization of Ch'ing bureaucracy—legal, normative, and communicative aspects* (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p.160.

[9] Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'anguan, ed. *Yongzheng chao qijuzhu* [The diaries of rest and repose of the Yongzheng period] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1993), vol.1, p.96.

[10] *Qingshilu*, vol.7, p.209 (*Shizong shilu, juan* 11).

[11] Gugong Bowuyuan, *Wenxian conghian* 8 (1930): 42–3; Hansson, *Chinese outcasts*, pp.164–5.

[12] Xue Yunsheng, *Du li cun yi* [Lingering doubts after reading substatutes], Taipei reprint, Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Centre, series 8, vol.2 (1970), pp.235–346.

[13] A similar point is made by Sommer, *Sex, law and society*, p.265.

[14] Yidang, *Junjichu lufu zouzhe* [Memoriao Packet containing memoria of the Grand Council], microfilm 085857.

> are hereditary *yuehu*, who, according to law, are not allowed to adopt civilian status. After we dismiss them we should allow them to settle in the counties of Wanping 宛平 and Daxing 大興 as *liangmin* 良民 [respectable people]. They can each go their own way. Other people are no longer allowed to point at them, call them *yuehu*, or insult and mistreat them however they like."[15]

This clearly suggests that the *yuehu* could only change their status when they changed their occupation.

Yongzheng exempted some groups from the debased category, but the category itself remained, and the occupation of entertainer or actor remained a debased one. A reliably attested story gives an insight into Yongzheng's attitude towards actors.

> Yongzheng was watching a drama called *The Embroidered Coat* (Xiu ru ji 繡襦記). One episode was called *Zheng Zhan Beats His Son* (Zheng Zhan da zi 鄭詹打子). In the drama, Zheng Zhan was the Prefect of Changzhou. The singing and acting were excellent. The emperor was pleased and gave the actors a banquet. One of the actors casually asked who the present Prefect of Changzhou was. The emperor lost his temper: "You actors belong to the debased class, how dare you ask about official positions? This impertinence cannot be allowed to continue!" The emperor had the actor beaten to death immediately.[16]

Sommer claims that Yongzheng's successor Qianlong's (r. 1736–95) "decision to open civil examinations to the descendants of Yue households and other debased groups was the last nail in the coffin of an aristocratic vision of hereditary status and fixed social structure that had been on the decline ever since the Song dynasty."[17] The question is, however, whether Qianlong's decision really changed the status of entertainers.

In 1771, Qianlong issued the following order on the question as to whether the sons and grandsons of former *jianmin* should be allowed to participate in the imperial examinations.

> The fourth generation may take part in the examinations if all members of their clan, and all their relatives, remain clean. If their uncles, aunts or sisters still remain in their debased occupation, they will not be allowed to contaminate the ranks of the scholars. The second and third generation will not allowed to do so under any circumstances.[18]

In 1788, however, Qianlong issued another regulation:

> Prostitutes, actors and yamen runners, and their children and descendants, are not allowed to participate in the examinations or purchase a degree. If somebody changes their name in order to participate through deception, they will forfeit their degree, and in accordance with the law, they will be beaten one hundred times.[19]

This regulation did not specify the number of generations. Xue Yunsheng 薛允升, a Qing official who specialised in the Legal Code, interpreted this regulation as meaning that "no [*jianmin*] are allowed to participate in the examination or purchase degrees. But if some have changed their occupa-

[15] Yidang, *Neiwufu chenggao zhangyi-si* [Reports from the Imperial Household Department—department of palace ceremonial] packet 1, document no.29.

[16] Zhao Lian, *Xiaoting zalu* [Random notes from the Whistling Pavilion] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1980), p.12.

[17] Sommer, *Sex, law and society*, p.272.

[18] Feng Erkang, Xu Shengheng and Yan Aimin, *Yongzheng huangdi quanzhuan* [A complete biography of the Yongzheng emperor] (Beijing: Xueyuan Chubanshe, 1994), p.212.

[19] Xue Yunsheng, *Du li cun yi*, vol.2, p.240.

tion for more than three generations, it seems that this exclusion should not apply to them." There is little information on whether many third-generation descendants of *jianmin* actually enjoyed this privilege.

Even during the final years of the dynasty, Cheng Changgeng 程長庚 (1811–80), one of the founders of Peking Opera and one of the greatest performers of his time, recalled that he had ended up in a "debased occupation" because of poverty. He claimed that he had come from a respectable family, and that now that he had accumulated enough money to support his family, he wanted to be restored to his respectable status. He had one of his sons adopted by another family, so that he could pursue an official career. Cheng Changgeng's grandson, Cheng Shaotang, studied German in the Tongwenguan 同文館, and interpreted for Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 in his negotiations with foreigners after the Boxer Rebellion. Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962), a famous authority on Peking Opera, was a fellow student of Cheng Shaotang in the Tongwenguan. According to Qi, Cheng Shaotang never openly acknowledged that he was the grandson of Cheng Changgeng, although it was common knowledge. On one occasion, Duanfang 端方 (1869–1911)[20] asked Cheng Shaotang's brother directly whether he was related to Cheng Changgeng, to which the brother replied, "same surname, different clan." Duanfang knew very well what the relationship was, but just said, "same surname, different clan, eh?" This conversation took place after 1900, but clearly a family relationship with an opera performer was something to be denied in polite society.[21] The imperial family, the princes and the aristocrats of late Qing society were particularly keen on Peking Opera. There is a well-known story to the effect that Cheng Changgeng was appointed an official of the sixth rank because of his skill on the stage.[22] There is, however, no record of this in the actual archives of the time.

The Actors' Guild in Beijing (the Jingzhongmiao 精忠廟 Guild) came under the control of the Bureau of Ascendant Peace (the Shengpingshu 昇平署) of the Imperial Household Department,[23] and the appointment of the director and the guild regulations had to be referred to the Imperial Household Department for approval. On occasion the director would seek the assistance of the Bureau of Music and Drama to help resolve internal disputes in the Jingzhongmiao Guild. However, there is no record of any opera performer receiving an official appointment from the emperor or empress dowager because of his skills on the stage.

Bannermen were forbidden to attend and perform in any type of opera. The original reason for this had to do with moral discipline in the army. In 1806, Jiaqing issued an edict condemning the Manchu princes and officials for their decadence. He particularly pointed out, "Among the bannermen there are even some who join drama troupes and perform dramas. They are utterly vile and extremely shameless. This has a great effect on moral values."[24] However, by the late Qing, it was not uncommon for bannermen to attend the opera, and even perform on the stage themselves. Some individual bannermen had become opera singers, and consequently became alienated

[20] Duanfang was an official of the Manchu Plain White Banner. From 1901 to 1905 he held the positions of Governor of Hubei 湖北, Acting Governor-General of Hu-Guang 湖廣 and Liang-Jiang 兩江, and Governor of Hunan 湖南. See Arthur W. Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period*, reprint ed. (Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Company, 1970), pp.780–1.

[21] Cheng Changgeng Yanjiu Wencong Bianji Weiyuanhui, ed., *Gujin Zhongwai lun Changgeng—Cheng Changgeng yu jingju xingcheng yanjiu ziliao ji* [New and old discussions in China and abroad on Cheng Changgeng—collection of research materials on Cheng Changgeng and the development of Peking Opera] (Beijing, 1995), p.37; Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan hui yilu* [Memoirs of Qi Rushan] (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1998), pp.65, 89, 337–8; Colin Mackerras, *The rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1870—social aspects of the theatre in Manchu China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp.177–84; Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese theatre in modern times—from 1840 to the present day* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), pp.38–41.

[22] Zhang Cixi, ed., *Qingdai Yandu Liyuan shiliao, zheng, xubian* [Historical materials on the theatre in Beijing during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1988), *xiace* 下冊, pp.829–30; Cheng Changgeng Yanjiu Wencong Bianji Weiyuanhui, *Cheng Changgeng yu jingju xingcheng yanjiu ziliao ji*, pp.95–6. In this source Cheng is given as belonging to the fifth rank.

[23] The Shengpingshu was the organisation responsible for music and drama performances in the palace. It was first established by Kangxi 康熙 and referred to by its location, the Nanfu 南府. In 1827 Daoguang 道光 changed its name to the Shengpingshu, and its institutional function also changed. See Ye Xiaoqing, "Imperial institutions and drama in the Qing court," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2.2 (Autumn 2003): 329–64.

[24] Yidang, *Zongrenfu, Tongjichu* [Yidang, Zongrenfu, Tongjichu [Records of the imperial clan court], *dang'an buce* no.326, *Zongrenfu zeli* [Regulations of the imperial clan court], juan 21, Jinling, n.p.

from their families and were expelled from their banners, together with their children.[25] An example is the case of the famous actor De Junru 德珺如, a grandson of Mu-zhang-a 穆彰阿. Mu-zhang-a was one of the most powerful Manchu nobles and officials during the mid-nineteenth century.[26] When De Junru decided to become a professional actor, his uncle accused him of "willingly falling into a debased lifestyle" (*zi gan xia jian* 自甘下賤). De was expelled from the clan.[27] Such official bans existed until the end of the dynasty. In the annual reports forwarded by the various opera troupes in the capital to the Shengpingshu in the Palace, an important clause guaranteed that there were no bannermen in the troupe, or no "criminals or wanderers of unknown background."[28]

Theoretically, after Yongzheng exempted the *yuehu* from the status of "mean people," they were allowed to change their occupations and consequently their legal status. Legally, then, the category of *yuehu* no longer existed. Basing their work on written documents, scholars have sometimes overestimated the effectiveness of this change in legal status.[29] During the 1990s, sociologists and anthropologists from mainland China and Taiwan conducted a field survey in Shanxi among several hundred descendants of *yuehu* born during the Republican period. As the Board of Rites pointed out to Yongzheng in 1723, it would be no easy matter for the *jianmin* to change their base occupations. The *yuehu* of Shanxi, to be sure, were no longer expected to serve in the Palace after Yongzheng's edict. They remained, however, servants in local county yamens, a practice which continued into the twentieth century. For example, as late as 1926, the *yuehu* of Hejin 河津 still worked one month every year as servants in the county offices, for which they received no payment. They entertained guests, played music and sang at banquets, much as their ancestors had done.[30] The survey revealed that, even after two hundred years, the *yuehu* were still in low-class occupations, and social distinctions and prejudice, even in such matters as clothing and living conditions, had not changed. The *yuehu* were not allowed to intermarry with others, which led to inbreeding and congenital abnormalities. These people were unlikely to insist on their eligibility to participate in the imperial examinations.[31]

In Suzhou 蘇州, the *yuehu* also remained a distinctive social group. During the Republican period, children of *yueju* 樂局 (the local term for *yuehu*) families were sent to a free school established by a rich industrialist to promote *kunqu* 昆曲, which was in decline. Their parents agreed to this as they knew their ancestors had offended the emperor for some reason which had now been forgotten, but they were resigned to the fact that as *yuehu* they belonged to the lower strata of society, and it was appropriate that their children become opera performers.[32]

Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) recalled there were still "fallen people" and "beggar people" in a similar situation in his home town of Shaoxing.[33] Lu Xun's comments are corroborated by government statistics.[34]

[25] Xue Yunsheng, *Du li cun yi*, vol.5, p.11–15.

[26] Mu became very powerful after 1820. In 1828 he became a Grand Councillor and in the following year became Chancellor of the Hanlin Academy (Hanlin yuan 翰林院). Later he was appointed President of the Board of Revenue and Chief Grand Councilor. See Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period*, pp.582–3.

[27] Beijing Yishu Yanjiusuo and Shanghai Yishu Yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhongguo jingju shi* [A history of Peking Opera] (Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1990), *zhongce* 中冊, pp.472–5.

[28] Yidang, *Shengpingshu* [Bureau of Ascendant Peace] packet, 1823; 1825–69; 1881–82; 1903; Gongzhong zajian Miscellaneous palace archives] packet 2476.

[29] Cf. Tannson, *Chinese outcasts*, p.74: "After the eighteenth century no more information appears to be available either in official records or in other writings about the former musicians' household. This suggests that the musicians ceased to exist as a distinct social group within a few generations."

[30] Xiang Yang, *Shanxi yuehu yanjiu*, pp.211–12.

[31] Ibid., pp.117–19, and 123–30; Qiao Jian, "Yuehu zai Zhongguo chuantong shehui zhong de diwei yu jiaose" [The status and role of *yuehu* in Chinese traditional society], *Hanxue yanjiu* 16.2 (Dec. 1998): 267–84, at 268–74.

[32] Zhou Chunying (ed. Luo Di), *Kunju shengya liushinian* [A sixty-year-long career in *kunju*] (Shanghai: Wenyi Chubanshe, 1988), pp.3–4.

[33] Quoted in Qiao Jian, "Status and role," pp.281–2.

[34] As late as 1928, statistics for all the counties of Zhejiang still listed the category of *jianmin* and the numbers of people in this classification. See Jing Junjian, *Qingdai shehui de jianmin dengji* [The status of *jianmin* in Qing society] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), p.204.

The Social Status of Opera Performers

In both popular parlance and official documents, the terms *chang* 倡 'prostitute' and *you* 'actor' were used indiscriminately, and usually together.[35] Many actors who played the role of *dan* 旦 (a female role performed by male actors) in Peking Opera and other local operas[36] were similar to courtesans in the services they provided to clients off the stage.[37] They were called *xianggong* 相公 or *xianggu* 像姑. During the Qing, Manchu nobles and officials were forbidden by law from visiting prostitutes. In Beijing, consequently, *xianggong tangzi* 相公堂子, brothels with these female-impersonator actors in their early teens, appeared on the scene.[38] The *xianggong tangzi* were also known as *siyu* 私寓 'private dwellings' and were concentrated around Hanjiatan 韓家潭 outside the Qianmen Gate 前門. Like the *changsan* 長三, the exclusive courtesans of Shanghai, the *xianggong* accompanied their patrons in drinking wine and singing for them. Literati wrote poems in their honour, as their counterparts in Shanghai did for the *changsan*.[39] Late Qing novels set in Shanghai, such as *Haishanghua liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (Biographies of Flowers on the Sea), detailed the relationships between literati and courtesans, but the novel *Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑑 (Precious Guide to the Appreciation of Flowers), set in Beijing during the Daoguang period, was about the *dan*, the *xianggong* and their patrons.[40]

The popular view was that *you* 'actors' were even lower than *chang* 'prostitutes'. A prostitute could always marry and 'reform' (*congliang* 從良). Actors, however, could not alter their status (at least for three generations). In acknowledgement of this distinction in status, actors would bow on greeting a prostitute.[41]

Even after the Republic, social contact with actors, especially the *dan*, would bring opprobrium. Respectable people would avoid them. Qi Rushan loved the opera and was an admirer of the famous female impersonator Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), but he hesitated for a long time before making any personal contact with him. In his memoirs, he wrote: "After the *gengzi* 庚子 year of the Guangxu 光緒 [1875–1908] period [1900] I came to know many people in the theatre. Some of my friends disapproved of my having any contact with Mei Lanfang. Even in the second year of the Republic, my own family, relatives and friends, would keep a distance from me."[42]

In Shanghai in 1873, a famous Peking Opera actor, Yang Yuelou 楊月樓 (1844–90), was accused of kidnapping and marrying the daughter of a Cantonese comprador. In fact the girl married him willingly, but the clan objected and brought the case to court. The Shanghai magistrate subjected both Yang and the girl to torture, and demanded that the girl remarry someone respectable. Yang appealed to the Governor of Jiangsu 江蘇, Ding Richang 丁日昌 (1823–82). Ding refused his appeal on the grounds that a "licentious actor" (*yin ling* 淫伶) like Yang would no doubt have been guilty of seducing a

[35] Wang Liqi, *Yuan-Ming-Qing sandai jinhui xiaoshuo xiqushiliao* [Materials on prohibited novels and operas of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981), pp.169–70. Sommer also mentions this point (see *Sex, law and society*, p.230).

[36] Women first performed in this role in the Shanghai foreign settlements during the last years of the Qing as an exception to the Peking Opera convention. It was not until the 1930s that this practice became more accepted. See Beijing Yishu Yanjiusuo and Shanghai Yishu Yanjiusuo, *Zhongguo jingju shi*, *shangce* 上冊, pp.280–91, *zhongce*, pp.41–2.

[37] This aspect of the *dan's* role is described in detail in Roger Darrobers, *Opéra de Pékin—théâtre et société à la fin de l'empire Sino-Manchou* (Paris: Bleu de Chine, 1998), pp.123–49; also see Mackerras, *The rise of the Peking Opera*, pp.145–53.

[38] See Zheng Zhenduo's preface to Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai Yandu Liyuan shiliao*, p.7; Xu Ke, *Qingbai leichao* [Anecdotal sources on the Qing], vol.2, reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), p.5094; Qiu Xing, "Youling zhi renge wenti" [The question of personal character of actors], in *Juxue luntan* [Drama studies forum] (Shanghai: Jiaotong Shuguan, 1918), pp.26–8.

[39] Zhang Cixi has collected a large number of poems and other writings various patrons wrote for the *dan*. See Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai Yandu Liyuan shiliao*, pp.7–116, 237–53. This is a major source of our knowledge of the names and other details of early *dan*.

[40] Chen Sen, *Pinhua baojian* [Precious guide to the appreciation of flowers], reprint ed. (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1994).

[41] Pan Guangdan, *Zhongguo lingren xueyuan zhi yanjiu* [Research on the blood ties of Chinese actors] (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1941), p.256.

[42] Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan huiyilu* [Memoirs of Qi Rushan] (Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1998), p.337.

Figure 1

This painting is entitled "Thirteen Outstanding Stars of the Tongzhi and Guangxu Periods." Painted no later than 1879 by Shen Rongpu. The sixth from the left is Cheng Changgong, the founder of Peking opera; the first on the right is Yang Yuelou; and the third from the left is Mei Qiaoling (1840–82), Mei Lanfang's grandfather (Liao Ben, Zhongguo xiju tushu *[An illustrated history of Chinese drama] (Zhengzhou: Henan Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1996), p.355)*

[43] Ye Xiaoqing, "Unacceptable marriage and the Qing legal code—the case of Yang Yuelou," *Journal of the Oriental Studies Association of Australia* 27/28 (1995/96): 195–212.

[44] The practice of recruiting performers to serve in the palace began during the Kangxi period, not after Qianlong's first visit to the South in 1751, as is generally thought. See Ye Xiaoqing, "Imperial institutions," pp.336–7.

woman from a respectable family. Yang was sentenced to exile in Heilongjiang 黑龍江, but was pardoned as part of a general amnesty on the occasion of the Empress Dowager Cixi's 慈禧 (1835–1908) fortieth birthday.[43]

Under special circumstances, certain outstanding actors had the opportunity to gain wealth and power, precisely because of their closeness to powerful officials. The Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722) loved the opera, and it was he who established the convention of bringing Jiangnan 江南 *kunqu* performers and artisans skilled in making musical instruments into the Palace.[44] One such actor, Yao Tianjin 姚天進, received word that his relatives in Suzhou had become involved in a legal dispute over land. He sought the assistance of Kangxi. Kangxi was willing to help, but it was not appropriate to do so through official government channels. He ordered the Chief Eunuch Wei Zhu 魏珠 to deal with this matter.

According to Qing regulations, the eunuch was not permitted to contact local officials directly. As a member of the Imperial Household Department, however, he could raise the matter with another member of this department, the Textile Commissioner in Suzhou, Li Xu 李煦. In a secret memorial to Kangxi, Li Xu wrote:

> This slave's retainer has returned to Suzhou from Beijing with a report that the chief eunuch Wei Zhu has transmitted an edict from Your Majesty: "The teacher Yao Tianjin had a plot of land reserved for his family tomb, which was stolen. The circumstances of this affair should be investigated and reported, and a memorial submitted. Respect this." This slave immediately called Yao Zikai 姚子開, Yao Tianjin's brother, and his nephew, Yao Zaiming 姚在明, and asked them the location of the land in question. They replied it was close to Huqiu 虎丘, in Zahualin 雜花林. This slave then accompanied Yao Zikai to that place. There was, in fact, a Yao family tomb there, as well as

stone tablets. I carefully questioned the neighbours. They said that when Yao Tianjin's grandfather, Yao Jinghuai 姚敬懷, bought this land from the family of Li Aiqiao 李愛橋, the original owner was still alive. Yao Jinghuai was a devout Buddhist, so he invited a Buddhist monk, Qianlin 千林, to live in a house on that land, so that they could offer incense and pray together. Both are now dead. Later, Yao Zikai had a legal dispute with a man named Wu 吳, so he asked another monk, Xue Fu 雪鳧, to go to the *yamen* to speak on his behalf. The monk expected a gift in gratitude, but Yao didn't have any money, so he gave him the land instead. Xue Fu did not live on the land himself, but let his nephew live there. Last winter they sold this land to the Gu 顧 family to build a tomb. The Yao family decided to sue. This slave visited all concerned to make the matter clear. He called Xue Fu, Yao Zikai, Yao Zaiming and witnesses to be questioned. Xue Fu said, "This land used to belong to the Yao family, but because I did something for them they gave it to me. Now that they are suing me, I do not dare to keep it." This slave thinks that if a monk is involved in litigation, it sullies the purity of Buddhism. Moreover, to ask for property in return for services is not in accordance with the law. Now he realizes he was wrong, and is willing to return the land. It should be returned to the Yao family, and all outsiders should move out immediately. The house and the tomb site should be returned to Yao Tianjin's nephew, Yao Zaiming, to manage it. Now everyone has agreed, and I can report to you in this memorial.[45]

This case was not dealt with by the state bureaucracy. Li Xu's memorial seems to be the only record of it. The Yao family did not raise the matter with the local officials, but directly sought the emperor's support. The Suzhou Textile Commissioner theoretically did not involve himself in local legal disputes, but the local officials feared him because of his direct access to the emperor. This was not an isolated incident. During the Kangxi period a retired actor, after having served the Palace for over twenty years, was able to enjoy his wealth and success in his hometown of Suzhou, wearing clothing and living in dwellings otherwise not permitted to someone of his background.[46]

Qianlong loved the opera even more than his grandfather. His expenditure on it far exceeded that of any other Qing emperor. Suzhou performers could even use their privileged position to request admission into the banner system. Qianlong approved their request, thus granting them the privileges and protection reserved for bannermen. Qianlong regretted this in later life, and forbade his successor emperors from following this practice, because he was concerned that the performers would usurp the limited resources of the original bannermen.[47]

Generally speaking, in the early Qing, access to the court was restricted to the performers from the Suzhou area. In the late Qing, most of the famous opera performers in Beijing had the opportunity to become acquainted with the inner court, the Palace eunuchs and the families of the imperial princes. This put them in a position to protect their own interests, and even challenge government officials. There were at least two occasions when the actors were

[45] Gugong Bowuyuan, Ming-Qing Dang'anbu, ed., *Li Xu zouzhe* [Memorials of Li Xu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), pp.201–2.

[46] Mackerras, *The rise of the Peking Opera*, p.44.

[47] Qing Gui et al., ed. *Guochao gongshi xubian* [Sequel to the history of the palace of the dynasty] (Beijing Chubanshe, 1994), p.34. In fact, Qianlong in his later years was concerned that the number of bannermen had increased to the degree that the state could not support so many of them. He also issued an edict permitting Chinese bannermen to leave their inherited positions and seek employment elsewhere. See Yidang, ed., *Qianlongchao shangyu dang* [Edicts of the Qianlong period] (Beijing: Dang'an Chubanshe, 1991), vol.1, p.791.

able to challenge the authority of the ward-inspecting censors who were directly responsible for them.

In Beijing, the inner city was under the administration of the Commander of the Banner Infantry; the outer city under the control of the ward-inspecting censors, who were responsible to the Censorate. The outer city was divided into five wards: east, west, south, north, and centre. Each area had two censors. The streets were patrolled twice a day. While on patrol the censors rode in a mule-cart preceded by a horse, and in front of them walked four servants, two holding placards and two holding whips, who shouted loudly as they cleared the way. Their placards were very large, and could be used to beat any rowdy persons who might block the way. If the censors suspected any illegality, they had the power to order any drama performance to be stopped on the spot, and the theatre closed down. There were special seats in all the theatres of Beijing, at the side of the stage, known as *guan zuo* 官座 (official seats), which were reserved for the use of the censors.[48]

In 1774 the Inspecting Censor of the South Ward asked a troupe sponsored by one of the imperial princes to perform an opera. They arrived somewhat late, and the censor slapped one of the actors on the face. Even the carriage driver who was carrying their luggage was beaten. After the performance, the censor refused to pay the fee. A few days later a memorial was sent to Qianlong:

> This official Fu-long-an 福隆安 (1743 [or 1746]–1784) respectfully reports a matter about which I have heard. I have heard that the Inspecting Censor of the South Ward, Lu Zanyuan 魯賛元, personally struck an actor, and refused to pay the fee for the performance. So I secretly sent the sergeant of police (*fanzi toumu* 番子頭目) Tuo-xing 脱興 to investigate the matter. I also called the actor who was beaten, Zhu Sanguan 朱三官, to give detailed answers. According to his testimony, "I am a *xiaosheng* 小生 in the new troupe of the imperial prince's household. On the twenty-fourth day of this month, Old Master Lu of the Southern Ward originally agreed to pay thirty strings of cash for one performance. It was performed in the Guild Hall of the Temple of the God of Wealth outside the Xuanwumen Gate 宣武門. On that day, we had to rush there after performing at another place. Originally a meal was included. But the costumes arrived a bit late. A retainer of Old Master Lu shouted and cursed at us in the theatre. I explained the matter and tried to persuade him, but he took no notice. What I did not expect was that Old Master Lu himself would rush into the theatre and shout and curse. Then he personally slapped me across the face. He then told Xiao Ma 小馬 to tie me up and beat me thirty times. The members of the troupe begged him repeatedly before he changed his mind. Afterwards I also heard that Xiao Ma and others slapped the face of the porter who carried our luggage. On that day we performed until the second watch before we were able to rest. It is true that his fee for the performance was not paid." The responsibility of the ward-inspecting censor is to collect information on local conditions and to arrest criminals. If actors or entertainers act illegally, of course this should be

[48] *Qi Rushan quanji* [The complete works of Qi Rushan] (Taipei: Lianjing Chuban Shiye Gongsi, 1979), vol.10, pp.5922–3, vol.4, pp.2367, 2499.

> investigated and punished. But it is not appropriate to beat an actor without reason during a private performance. Lu Zanyuan is a ward-inspecting censor, and just because the troupe arrived late he beat them and forced them to perform into the middle of the night, and then refused to pay them. This is really a case of his relying on his official position to bully people as he wishes. My investigations show that this testimony is accurate. This memorial looks forward to Your Majesty's perspicacious judgement. The twenty-eighth day of the first month of the thirty-ninth year of the Reign of Qianlong.[49]

Generally speaking, it would not have been a matter of great importance if an official slapped an actor, but this particular actor was part of a troupe sponsored by the imperial princes. The author of this memorial, Fu-long-an, was the son of Fu-heng 傅恆 (?–1770), the brother of Qianlong's empress Xiaoxian 孝賢. He was married to Qianlong's fourth daughter, Princess Hejia 和嘉公主. Fu-long-an, together with his brothers Fu-kang-an 福康安 (?–1796) and Fu-chang-an 福長安 (?–1817), and their father, Fu-heng, were the four most important grand councillors of the Qianlong period.[50] Through Fu-long-an, however, the actor was able to have the case brought to the attention of Qianlong.[51]

The other occasion was during the Guangxu period, when there was a dispute between the actors as a group and the ward-inspecting censor. In 1889 the Yucheng Troupe 玉成班 was performing in the Qingheyuan Theatre 慶和園 in Dazhalan 大柵欄 when several servants (a cook, a sedan chair porter and a carriage driver) of the Left Censor, Xu Yingkui 許應騤, and the Vice Censor-in-Chief, Yang Yi 楊頤, provoked an incident. Two of the ward-inspecting censors, Zai Cai 載彩 and Zhang Zhongxin 張仲炘, supported the troublemakers, as they were the servants of their superiors. The proprietor was ordered to close the theatre and apologise. This incident infuriated the Beijing-based drama troupes. Leading actors such as Sun Juxian 孫菊仙 (1841–1931), Yang Yuelou 楊月樓, his son Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓 (1878–1938), and Yu Runxian 俞潤仙, together with the heads of the drama troupes and the proprietors of the theatres, decided to go on strike for seven days. A famous *piaoyou* 票友 (amateur opera performer), Wen Ruitu 文瑞圖, organized some fund-raising activities to lend financial support to the striking performers. Wen Ruitu had previously served in the Imperial Household Department, and was able to lobby his former colleagues in the Palace. When Cixi heard of this, she herself contributed a large amount of money to the support fund. She also ordered the censors to hand over the troublemakers to the authorities. They were ordered to wear the cangue and be held up to the ridicule of the crowd in front of the Qingheyuan Theatre 慶和園.[52]

This incident cannot be found in the archives in the Palace, but there was a precedent during the Qianlong period, and given the close relations between the performing troupes and the court in the late Qing, this account is entirely plausible. It was not so easy to bully the performers of the capital as the performers in the provinces. This is also clear from the *Liyuan waishi*

[49] Yidang, *Junjichu lufu zouzhe*, microfilm, no.97: 974–5. The *Junjichu lufu zouzhe* contains copies of all memorials on which the emperor wrote a vermilion endorsement.

[50] Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and ministers---the Grand Council in mid-Ch'ing, 1723–1820* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), p.174; *Qingshigao*, vol.35, pp.10445–53.

[51] Fu-long-an paid a price for taking on the censor. Three months after this memorial, he was impeached by the censor Li Shufang 李淑芳 on the grounds that his family servant got drunk and caused trouble in a restaurant. Qianlong referred the matter to the Board of Civil Appointments for their "examination and advice," which was that Fu should be dismissed. Qianlong did not accept their advice, and decided that Fu should be retained at his post. See *Man-Han mingchen zhuan*, vol.4, pp.4074–8.

[52] Zhou Mingtai, *Dao-Xian yilai Liyuan xinian xiaolu* [A brief chronological record of the Pear Garden since Daoguang and Xianfeng], reprinted under the title Jingxi jinbainian suoji [Miscellanous notes on the last hundred years of the Peking Opera] (Taipei: Zhuanji Wenxue Chubanshe, 1974), p.70; Li Tiyang, "Qingdai gongting xiju" [Drama in the Qing court], in Beijingshi Xiqu Yanjiusuo, ed., *Jingjushi yanjiu—Xiqu lunhui erzhuanji* [Research on the history of Peking opera—collection of articles on drama, part 2, special issue] (Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 1985), pp.61–73, at 69.

梨園外史 (Unofficial History of the Pear Garden), which describes the opera performers in the capital.[53]

Given the low status of actors in society and the peripatetic nature of their occupation, there were security considerations to be considered when the Court invited them to perform in the Palace. It was up to the chief eunuchs in the Shengpingshu to decide which troupes would be invited, and which dramas were to be performed. The outside actors were paid low salaries, much the same as the eunuchs, and the rewards for even excellent performances would not be more than twenty taels of silver—much less than they could earn outside the Palace. They were, however, in close proximity to the emperor and the imperial family, and it was a great honour which would increase their reputation and their money earning ability outside. To be invited to perform in the Palace was regarded as the peak of their careers. The emperor had to approve the choice made by the chief eunuch, but this was a formality.[54] As Daoguang commented in an edict to the Nanfu on the selection of performers: "Once you have made your decision that's it. All there is left for me to do is give it my approval."[55]

Officials did not dare offend the eunuchs of the Shengpingshu. Li Yongquan 李永泉, a performer who specialized in *hualian* 花臉 (warriors, heroes and statesmen) roles, was arrested for gambling by the Banner Infantry, and incarcerated in the *yamen*. Li's family sought the help of the eunuchs in the Shengpingshu. The chief eunuch only had to drop a hint to the Commander of the Banner Infantry: "The Old Buddha likes listening to Tan Jinfu 譚金福 in the opera *Cao Cao's Capture and Release*." Tan Jinfu, better known as Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917), was a famous singer. Li Yongquan played the role of Cao Cao in the same opera. The hint was clear, and Li was released.[56]

For a performer, having powerful connections improved the possibilities of advancement. When Yang Yuelou was in Shanghai he performed on a commercial basis. He had no official protection when taken to court. He appealed against his sentence many times, but without sucess. He was tortured many times and his ankles were broken during the torture, as a result of which he could no longer play the role of the *wusheng* 武生, or martial arts warrior, and had to change his role to the *laosheng* 老生 (old man). He adopted a new stage name, Yang Houzi 楊猴子 (Monkey Yang), a resentful and bitter comment on his loss of dignity. Ten years later, in 1888, he was chosen by the Shengpingshu to perform in the Palace. There was little communication between the Palace and the provinces, and the eunuchs in the Shengpingshu clearly did not know about the legal case involving Yang in Shanghai ten years earlier.[57] Despite Yang's imposing appearance and acting prowess, his "unconventional and unrestrained" character worried the chief eunuch, Bian Dekui 邊得奎. He twice requested Cixi to dismiss Yang: "As to the civilian teacher [*minji jiaoxi* 民籍教習] Yang Yuelou, his character and language are ostentatious. This slave fears he may cause trouble. I sincerely beg that Yang Yuelou be dismissed. This slave does not dare to act by himself, and

[53] The author was Chen Moxiang 陳墨香 (1884–1942). His father, Chen Xuefen 陳學棻, was a Vice-Minister in the Ministry of Revenue, and an academician of the Grand Secretariat who served as a Provincial Education Intendant in Shandong 山東, Fujian 福建, Jiangxi 江西, and Zhejiang. He died while fleeing Beijing, together with Cixi and Guangxu, when the Allied Armies entered the city in 1900. Chen Moxiang did not seek personal advancement in the bureaucracy, but contented himself with enjoying the opera and writing libretti. He was the patron of Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–68), one of the four famous *dan* of the time. See Chen Moxiang, *Liyuan waishi* [Unofficial History of the Pear Garden] (Beijing: Baowentang Shudian, 1989), pp.310–12, 521–7.

[54] *Shengpingshu*, P. 1494, 1497, 1488, and 1490 contain material on the selection of actors to perform in the palace.

[55] *Daoguang sannian enshang riji dang* [Daily records of imperial gifts in the third year of the Daoguang reign], collection of the National Library of China.

[56] Tan Xinpei related this story to Qi Rushan. See Qi Rushan, "Suibi" [Informal essays] in *Qi Rushan quanji*, vol.7, pp.4236–7.

[57] For details on this case, see Ye, "The case of Yang Yuelou" (details in note 43 above).

awaits your instruction."[58]

In another memorial, Bian Dekui stated:

> This slave Bian Dekui memorialises: The civilian teacher Yang Yuelou caught a cold last night, and was not able to get out of bed. He cannot perform his duties, and reported this matter to this slave. This slave thought about it, but as he does not understand the official regulations, this slave sincerely begs that Yang be temporarily dismissed. I have investigated this person, and I have discovered that his behaviour outside is loose and intemperate. This slave does not dare act by himself, and awaits your instruction.[59]

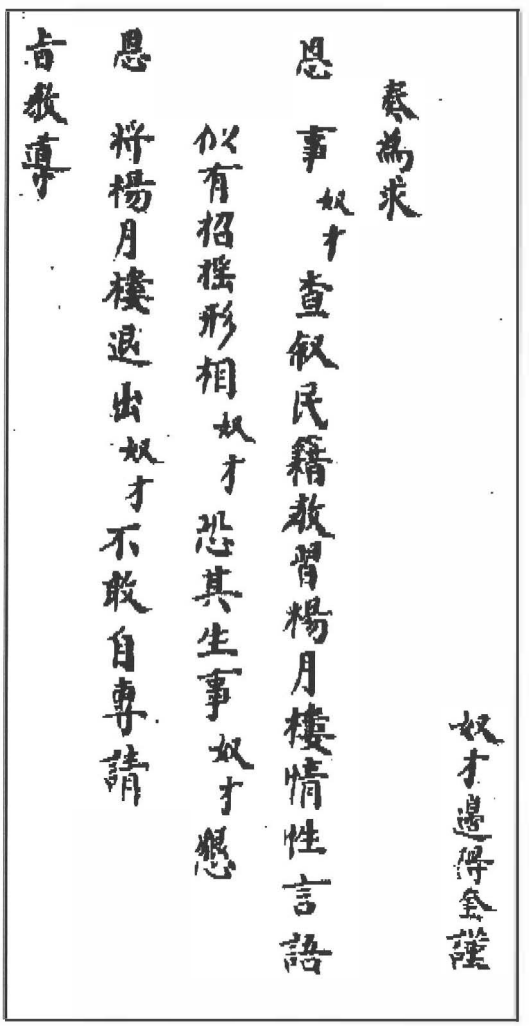
Bian was the chief eunuch, but his recommendations were not accepted.

These memorials were written during Yang's first year or so in the Palace. Yang continued to perform until his death three years later. The Empress Dowager was clearly fond of Yang Yuelou. Some years later, Yang's son, Yang Xiaolou, the most proficient martial arts opera performer at the time, also performed in the Palace. It was rumoured among other actors that the elderly Cixi found him very attractive.[60]

Performing in the Palace may have been an honour, but there was a price to pay. The actors were always on call, and were not allowed to leave the capital without the permission of the Shengpingshu, in case they were needed for a performance. Leaving without permission was considered absconding. Mu Changshou 穆長壽 (1840–1912), a *hualian*, left of his own accord to perform in Shanghai in 1892. The only person who performed in the Palace at the same time as Mu and who had also performed in Shanghai was Yang Yuelou. It seems likely that Yang must have told him of the attractions of Shanghai, and how easy it was to make money there. Even Cixi was not immune from some curiosity about Shanghai. In 1893 she commanded the

Figure 2

This is a memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui, who requested the Empress Dowager Cixi to dismiss Yang Yuelou: "... the civilian teacher Yang Yuelou, his character and language are ostentatious. This slave fears he may cause trouble. I sincerely beg that Yang Yuelou be dismissed. This slave does not dare to act by himself, and awaits your instruction" (see n.58)



[58] In the Archives catalogue this document is given the number Shengpingshu 1499, but is noted "missing." I located it in the Xinzheng Neiwufu zajian—*Shengpingshu*, P. 3946.

[59] Yidang, *Shengpingshu*, P.1450. This is a literal translation of Bian's memorial; the style reveals his relative lack of eduction. Neither of these documents is dated. However, Yang Yuelou served in the palace for only three years, from 1888 to his death in 1891. See Wang Zhizhang, *Qing Shengpingshu zhilüe* [A short history of the Qing-dynasty Shengpingshu] (Beiping: Beiping Yanjiuyuan Shixue/Yanjiuhui, 1937; reprinted Shanghai Shudian, 1991), p.562, which gives a table indicating that Yang died in 1890. However, records in the Shengpingshu archives indicate that Yang was still performing in 1891. After that his name disappeared from the records. Bian Dekui died in 1889, so these documents must date from 1888–89.

[60] Qi Rushan, "Tan si jue" [Talks on four actors], in Beijing Zhengxie Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui, ed., *Jingju tanwanglu* [Talks about the past of Peking Opera] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1990), pp.103–92, at 147–8.

Yucheng Troupe to perform a Peking Opera entitled *Travelling in Shanghai in a Dream* (Mengyou Shanghai 夢游上海), twice within two months.[61]

One of the Shanghai literati, Sun Yusheng 孫玉生 (1863–1939), who wrote novels under the name Haishang Shushisheng 海上漱石生 (The scholar who washes his mouth with stones), had seen Mu Changshou perform in Shanghai:

> Little Mu, a eunuch [*sic*][62] of the imperial court, is very good at singing *heitou* 黑頭 roles … . In the past he served in the Palace, and did not leave the Forbidden City. During the later years of the Guangxu period he suddenly had a strange idea to leave Beijing of his own accord and to come to Shanghai to demonstrate his art in the Dangui Teahouse 丹桂茶園 in Daxin Street 大新街. He became very famous amongst the people of Shanghai, and those who wanted to see his performance had to book seats in advance … . Before dark, the theatre was full, and there was no space for latecomers … .[63]

Mu's disappearance was quickly discovered.[64] An official document was issued and sent to Shanghai. The following year the Shanghai Daotai arrested Mu Changshan and had him escorted back to Beijing. The Jingzhongmiao yamen of the Imperial Household Department posted an announcement on the doors of all the theatres and troupe headquarters. It started by reiterating that the Shengpingshu was in charge of all matters relating to the drama troupes and performers, including approving applications to leave Beijing. It continued:

> Last year Mu Changshou did not apply for leave, but dared to run away of his own accord. He fled to Shanghai, and performed in a variety of dramas. This was really outrageous behaviour. Now the Daotai of Shanghai has arrested him and sent him back to Beijing. The matter was reported and an imperial edict [from Cixi] decided that since Mu was escorted back to Beijing, he should be dismissed from his position in the outer school. The Punishment Review Office [*shenxingsi* 慎刑司] is to be informed that Mu Changshou's sentence is to wear the cangue for three months. From now on, he is only permitted to make a living in the capital, and not to go to the provinces to perform. Mu Changshou, because of imperial favour, was treated leniently, but from now on all actors in the Shengpingshu who dare to break the law will definitely be punished severely. There will be no leniency. Do not say you were not warned. This proclamation has been issued to inform all troupes.[65]

From then on, Mu disappeared from the stage. He reappeared briefly to perform in Shanghai in 1912, and died shortly afterwards at the age of seventy-three.[66]

Conclusion

During the Republican period, the situations of various *jianmin* groups varied significantly. Regional *jianmin*, like the *yuehu*, remained in their ancestral villages or counties, their lives having changed little since Yongzheng's

[61] Yidang, *Shengpingshu*, p.450.

[62] Sun Yusheng misunderstood: Mu Changshou was an actor, but not a eunuch.

[63] Haisheng shushisheng, "Xiao Mu sixing xianzao najie" [The absconding and arrest of Xiao Mu], in *Xiju yuekan* (Shanghai Dadong Shuju) 1.8 (1929): 7.

[64] Yidang, *Shengpingshu*, p.48.

[65] Yidang, *Xinzheng neiwufu zajian, Shengpingshu*, p.3945.

[66] Beijing Yishu Yanjiusuo and Shanghai Yishu Yanjiusuo, *Zhongguo jingju shi, shangce*, pp.534–5.

edict of 1723, they continued along the same lines for several more decades. On the other hand, actors in the major cities were able to take advantage of political change to improve their status. Even before the end of the Qing, opera performers were involved in a number of campaigns to try to change their role and status, especially the implication that they were prostitutes. In 1911 the Director of the Actors' Guild, Tian Jiyun 田際雲 (1864–1925), himself a *dan*, proposed abolishing the *siyu* 'private dwellings' so as to break the link between *dan* and *chang* 'prostitutes'. He also proposed abolishing the practice of the *dan* parading in front of the stage before the performance as if seducing the audience.[67] At that stage, however, he was unsuccessful. As soon as the Republic was established, on 15 April 1912, Tian submitted a request to this effect to the General Police Station of the Outer City—the Qing did not permit any theatres in the Inner City—which was approved five days later. The Police Headquarters issued a public order:

> We strictly forbid the following things: Whereas there are many *siyu* and *xianggong tangzi* in Hanjiatan, Wailangying 外郎營 and other places, which often under the pretext of teaching the performing arts attract young men of respectable families, and adorn them with female charm and singing skills. Literary types and romantic scholars occasionally used these places as venues for banquets and other gatherings. With the passage of time, they became repositories of evil and filth. This old practice continues, and is a phenomenon unique to the capital. It brings the whole country into disrepute, and we have become the laughing stock of foreigners. These people are called *xianggu*, and engage in unnatural practices. Let it be known that opera can make a contribution to the reform of society. The profession of actor does not harm one's status as a citizen. But as for those who seduce people for a living, and imitate the behaviour of prostitutes, their character has reached the limits of depravity. Now the Republic has been established, old depraved customs should all be reformed. This office has the responsibility of reforming social customs and protecting human rights [*baozhang renquan* 保障人權]. We will certainly not allow this sort of decadent behaviour to continue in the capital city of our country. For this reason, it has been strictly forbidden. We expect you will thoroughly reform your previous misdeeds, and each of you should find a respectable occupation. Respect your integrity and become a noble citizen. Now there is a National Law, and from now on this office will not be lenient if anyone outwardly obeys orders but secretly ignores them, and hires young boys to work in a *siyu* or *xianggong tangzi*. Do not dare disobey this order![68]

When Yongzheng issued his edict, it was necessary to change one's occupation to change one's debased status. Now actors as a profession were not debased: it was the personal behaviour of individuals which determined whether they were respectable or not.

Tian Jiyun and some other famous Peking Opera actors also changed the name of the Jingzhongmiao Guild to the "Zhengyue yuhua hui" 正樂育化會 [Rectification of Music Education Society], hoping to raise the status of Peking Opera to become a pedagogical art form. Social prejudice was not

[67] On Tian Jiyun, see Wang Zizhang, *Qingdai lingguan zhuan* [Biographies of drama performers of the Qing dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), vol.3, pp.41–4.

[68] Quoted from Su Yi, *Jingju erbainian gaiguan* [General description of Peking Opera over two hundred years] (Beijing: Yanshan Chubanshe, 1989), pp.170–1; Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai Yandu Liyuan shiliao zheng xubian, xiace*, p.1243; Hou Xisan, *Beijing Lao xiyuanzi* [Old theatres of Beijing] (Beijing: Zhongguo Chengshi Chubanshe, 1996), p.48.

so easily overcome, however. One of the four famous *dan* of the twentieth century, Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–58), recalled that the Shandong warlord Zhang Zongchang 張宗昌 would not allow him to remove his theatrical costume after a performance, and demanded his company in drinking wine, in full female attire. Cheng was furious about this, and vowed never to allow any of his children to become opera performers.[69]

Some time later Mei Lanfang achieved fame, with his high level of artistic skill, self respect and popular support. He performed in Japan, the United States and Russia during the 1920s and 1930s. He became the first Chinese actor to gain international recognition, being awarded two doctorates (from Pomona College and the University of Southern California), and was often addressed as "Dr. Mei."[70] This became a turning point in the status of Peking Opera performers, and many of them became respected and respectable figures in Republican China. In the twentieth century, it became more common for female performers to play the role of *dan* in the Peking Opera. A news item in the *People's Daily* in 2000 reported a performance of the last active male *dan* in China, whose name was Song Changrong 宋長榮.[71] This heralded the end of one of the most characteristic features of traditional Peking Opera.

[69] Liu Yingqiu, "Wode laoshi Cheng Yanqiu" [My teacher Cheng Yanqiu], in Beijing Shi Zhengxie Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui Xuanbian, ed., *Liyuanwangshi* [Past events from the Pear Garden] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2000), pp.231–51, at 236.

[70] Joshua Goldstein, "Mei Lanfang and the nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912–1930," in *Positions—East Asia Cultures Critique* 7.2 (Fall 1999): 377–420; A. C. Scott, *Actors are madmen—notebook of a theatregoer in China* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp.9–10.

[71] *People's Daily*, 17 June 2000.

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