Linking Ancient and Contemporary
Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature
edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

Traditions and Transitions in Eighteenth-Century Qu Poetry
The Case of Jiang Shiquan (1725-1785)

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Abstract The 18th century marks a significant transitional period in the development of classical Chinese theater. It witnessed the decline of the *yabu* or 'elegant drama' (referring to Kun-style theater) and the rise of the *huabu* or 'miscellaneous drama' (also known as *luantan*, 'cacophonous strumming', referring to all other styles of regional theater). It also signalled a shift of focus from the page to the stage, with increasing attention given to the performance aspects of theater as opposed to drama as a form of literary composition. Jiang Shiquan (1725-1785) serves as an illuminating case study for our understanding of this transitional period. On the other hand, he was renowned as a classical poet, a master of *qu* poetry, and the last major playwright in the Qing dynasty. Yet, on the other hand, one can see clearly in his works new trends and styles of writing responding to the rise of local theaters. Focusing on Jiang Shiquan's works, this paper aims to explore the competing styles of *qu* poetry as well as the changing roles and self-perception of a playwright in 18th century China.

Keywords Classical Chinese theater. Jiang Shiquan. Qing dynasty drama. Huabu. Miscellaneous drama.

1 Introduction

The 18th century marks a significant transitional period in the development of classical Chinese theatre. It witnessed the decline of the *yabu* 雅部 or 'elegant drama' (referring to Kun-style theatre 昆曲, the dominant dramatic style in the late Ming) and the rise of the *huabu* 花部 or 'miscellaneous drama' (also known as *luantan* 亂彈, 'cacophonous strumming', referring to all other styles of regional theatre).[1] It also signalled a shift

1 Liao Ben, Liu Yanjun 2003, pp. 106-110. For the regional developments of theatre during this period in the capital city Bejing and other urban centers such as Yangzhou and Suzhou, see Goldman 2012, esp. Chapter Three «Musical Genre, Opera Hierarchy, and Court Patronage», Mackerras 2009, pp. 207-24, and Li Mark 2009, pp. 225-244.

Sinica venetiana 3
DOI 10.14277/6969-095-2/SV-3-15
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-095-2 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-098-3 |

of focus from the page to the stage, with increasing attention given to the performance aspects of theatre as opposed to drama as a form of literary composition. The Chinese term for theatre or music-drama is *xiqu* 戲曲 formed by two characters which represent the two different aspects of Chinese theatre respectively: *xi* 戲 (literally 'play') refers to the performance art and is especially characteristic of earlier forms of Chinese theatre in the Tang and Song dynasties, whereas *qu* 曲 (literally 'songs') is about the poetic art of the sung arias which reached its height in the Yuan *zaju* and Ming *chuangqi* dramas.[2]

To understand how drama was perceived as a genre in the 18th century, let us begin with the official account by the compilers of the imperial library catalogue. At the head of the section devoted to lyrics and arias (*ciqu* 詞曲) one can find the following disparaging assessment:

> *Ci* and *qu* are two genres that are between literature and professional skills.
>
> They are of a rather inferior grade and are not highly regarded by writers.
>
> 詞、曲二體，在文章、技藝之間，厥品頗卑，作者弗貴。(*Siku quanshu zongmu* 1983, 198.1807).

Such demarcation between the two different aspects of drama was also evident in the actual writings on theatre by Qing elite scholars. Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), in his *Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄 (Random repository of idle thoughts), divides his discussions of theatre into two different sections – namely, the *ciqu* 詞曲 section on lyrics and songs focusing on literary aspects, and the *yanxi* 演習 section on performance practices. Even more evidently, the Qing dynasty critic Li Tiaoyuan 李調元 (1734-1803) wrote two treatises on theatre in the 18th century and gave them different titles, namely *Quhua* 曲話 (full title *Yucun quhua* 雨村曲話) and *Juhua* 劇話, reflecting their respective emphasis on Chinese drama as a poetic form (*qu*) and as a theatrical form (*xi*).[3]

More broadly and in a larger context, the 18th century was also a transitional period in terms of literati culture. Shang Wei has described the High Qing (1723-1840) as the final phase of traditional literary culture, during which 'literati' as a category was elusive and difficult to define as it was continuously evolving (Shang Wei 2010, pp. 246, 249). How can we understand the status of playwrights and playwriting during this historical period?

2 For a concise explanation of these two aspects of *xiqu*, see *Zhongguo quxue da cidian* 1997, p. 3. See also Lu Wei 1986, pp. 21-28.

3 These two aspects and their respective traditions were clearly defined in Li's prefaces to the two works. See Li Tiaoyuan 1980, pp. 5 and 35.

It is in these aforementioned contexts and with these questions in mind that we shall turn to Jiang Shiquan 蔣士銓 (1725-1785), who is one of the most interesting figures in the field of Qing dynasty drama and arguably the most important dramatist in 18th century China.[4] Jiang occupies a unique place in the historiography of Chinese drama and could serve as an illuminating case study for our understanding of this transitional period.

On the one hand, Jiang Shiquan was renowned as a classical poet, in fact, one of the three most eminent ones in the High Qing together with Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798) and Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814). Not only was he highly praised by his contemporaries as a master of *qu* poetry in recent times (Li Tiaoyuan 1980, p. 27), he was widely regarded as the last major playwright of classical Chinese drama (Aoki Masaru 1947, p. 134). It is worth noting that by the first decades of the 18th century, the two most famous playwrights in early Qing, Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645-1704) and Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718) had passed away. The type of theatre we find in Yuan dynasty northern *zaju* and Ming dynasty southern *chuanqi*, which usually centred on playwrights and their masterpieces, would soon give way to a new stage centred on star performers. In that regard, Jiang Shiquan was very much regarded the last example of a literary playwright whose works are still worthy of mention in literary histories. Yet, on the other hand, one can also see clearly in the dramatic works of Jiang Shiquan new trends and styles of writing. How do we understand such changes?

In this paper I am going to approach Jiang Shiquan's drama using three pairs of binary terms as my guiding principles. With each pair of binaries, we find opposing or conflicting concepts and aesthetics. Yet, interestingly, these competing styles and forms found a way to co-exist in Jiang's works which cannot be summarised by any single monolithic style. By tracing them to the respective occasions and different theatrical traditions, I aim to show how Jiang Shiquan's dramas are best understood to be situated at the crossroads of these competing styles and developments in the 18th century. This would also inform us on the changing roles and self-perception of a playwright in 18th century China.

2 *Hua* 花 (Miscellaneous Drama) vs. *Ya* 雅 (Elegant Drama)

The competition between the elegant drama (*kunqu* 昆曲) and the miscellaneous group of local theatrical styles is well illustrated in a scene from Act Two of Jiang Shiquan's play *Shengping rui* 昇平瑞 (Auspicious Signs

4 For studies on Jiang, see Xu Guohua 2010, Hummel [1943] 2002, pp. 141-42; Nienhauser 1986, pp. 264-266.

of the Peaceful Age) written in 1751.[5] The scene is imbued with a comical tone. A puppet theatre troupe named Hupin Troupe 糊品班 was invited to give a performance at the residence of the Gao family. When asked about the origin of their troupe's name, one member of the troupe explains that the name derives from the expression *hukou* 糊口 which means literally 'to feed a mouth'. Since there were three members in the troupe, they therefore called themselves the Hupin ban 糊品班, a 'Troupe Feeding Three Mouths', since 'three mouths [*kou*] make up the character *pin*' 三張口湊成一個品字 (Zhou Miaozhong 1993, p. 763). The troupe was then asked about the scope of their repertoire: 'Which theatrical styles do you know? What are some of the plays that you can perform?' 你們是什麼腔? 會幾本什麼戲? This leads to a catalogue of theatrical styles listed by the troupe manager:

> (雜) 昆腔、漢腔、弋陽、亂彈、廣東摸魚歌、山東姑娘腔、山西卷戲、河南鑼戲、連福建的烏腔都會唱，江湖十八本，本本皆全。(*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 763)

> *(The extra speaks)* [We can sing] the Kun-style, Han-style, Yiyang-style, cacophonous strummings (*luantan*), fish-grabbing songs (*moyu ge*) from Guangzhou, maiden-style (*guniang qiang*) from Shandong, Juan-theatre[6] from Shanxi, Luo-theatre[7] from Henan, and even those damned styles from Fujian. As for the eighteen texts widely circulated among the rivers and lakes,[8] we master each and every one of them thoroughly.

The information outlined above is significant, as it provides a clear picture of the vibrant theatrical scene of the High Qing during Jiang's times. A wide variety of theatrical styles were popular. These include not only *kunqu* drama which had dominated the Chinese stage for about two centuries, but also a wide range of regional styles from both the North and the South.

A word to note here is the term that refers to the singing styles from Fujian. In the modern critical edition of Jiang Shiquan's plays, the term appears as *wuqiang* 烏腔 which seems to interpret it as a particular form

5 *Shengping rui* is one of the four plays collectively known as *Xijiang zhugu* 西江祝嘏 (*Birthday Blessings from the West of the Yangtze river*). See *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 1.

6 *Juan xi* 卷戲 is also known as «plays performed for family members» (*juanxi* 眷戲).

7 *Luoxi* 鑼戲 is sometimes also rendered as *luoxi* 羅戲. The two theatrical styles, *luoxi* and the abovementioned *juanxi*, can be combined in performance and are known as *luojuan xi* 羅卷戲. See Yang Liping 2011, pp. 138-140.

8 This passage is possibly the earliest source for the term «Jianghu shiba ben» 江湖十八本. See Bai Haiying 2007, p. 42.

of singing style in Fujian known as the 'Wu-style'.[9] There are, however, no other sources that record a singing style known as *wuqiang* in the history of Fujian theatre.[10] Revealingly, if we refer to the Qing dynasty printings of this play, one would realise that the word in question is indeed *niao* 鳥, pronounced as *diao* in its use as a curse word on this occasion.[11]

The trouper manager refers to the singing styles from Fujian in a derogatory manner which points us towards another aspect of the competition between the elegant drama (*kunqu* 昆曲), a form of high art among literati circles, and the miscellaneous group of local theatrical styles using local tunes and folk songs enjoyed by a wider audience. Such competition was also a form of tension between *ya* 雅 (the elegant and refined) and *su* 俗 (the vulgar and popular).[12]

Later in Act Three of the play, there is an interesting section that suggests that these various dramatic styles had their respective function and status, and could cater to different groups of audience. For example, Kun-style theatre was performed in the Grand Hall for the old lady whose birthday was celebrated. The location and the audience indicate that *kunqu* was regarded the elegant form of theatre to be performed on formal and official occasions. In contrast, puppet theatre was prepared for some other guests in another hall. The reason became clear as Jiang told us, through the words of a member of the audience:

> 昆腔唧唧噥噥，可厭。高腔又過於吵鬧，就是梆子腔唱唱，倒也文雅明白。(*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 768)

> Kun-style is just like the whispering of insects and it is rather detestable. But Gao-style[13] is also overly clamorous. Let's just get them to sing in the Clapper-style (*bangzi qiang*), that would be refined and yet easy to understand.

While *kunqu* might have been considered the elegant form suitable for the more formal occasions, it is clear that this theatrical style has already lost its popularity in the mid-eighteenth century among the wider public.

9 Based on this account, some reference works list *wuqiang* as a form of singing style. For example, see the entry on «wuqiang» in the reference work *Zhongguo quxue dacidian*, p. 64.

10 The entry in *Zhongguo quxue dacidian* cites only the single example from Jiang's play.

11 See, for example, the 1810 edition of *Xijiang zhugu* kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 4406), *Shengping rui*, p. 11a.

12 For an overview of the co-existence and complementary nature of these two styles in the dramatic works of other Qing dynasty dramatists, see Wang Yongkuan 2008, pp. 86-92. On the case of Jiang Shiquan, see also Shangguan Tao 2003, pp. 44-48.

13 A variant of the Yiyang style of Jiangxi province.

The guests who were treated to the puppet theatre rejected *kunqu* and instead went for the clapper-style, one of the many types of miscellaneous drama, which is simpler and considered less sophisticated than *kunqu*.[14] It is worthy noting that they did not simply pick any of the miscellaneous styles. Gao-style, for example, was too noisy to their ears. Instead, they preferred the clapper-style precisely because it is both «refined and yet easy to understand».

This perhaps represents Jiang Shiquan's own aim to achieve a balance between *ya* and *su* in his own dramatic works. The local styles and tunes were regarded popular and *su*. In the preface to one of his plays, Jiang Shiquan clearly advocated the use of local tunes and the language and sounds of the local people.[15] This is reflected in his employment of a series of 'rice-planting songs' (*yangge* 秧歌) sung by a group of farmers in the fields in the play.[16]

Also related to the distinction between *ya* and *su* is the question of literary value. If we consider the ways the *huabu* and the *yabu* are represented in literary histories, plays belonging to the *ya* section such as *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (*Peach Blossom Fan*) and *Changsheng dian* 長生殿 (*Palace of Eternal Life*) are regarded as masterpieces in literary histories. By contrast, the new regional styles of performances relied more on the actor's skills and the actors might not even need or have a script. Hence, these regional plays from the *huabu* have been largely left out in literary histories. This brings us to the second set of working ideas, that is, the competing values between the textual and visual aspects in Jiang Shiquan's drama.

3 Textuality vs. Visuality

At the beginning of the paper, I mentioned the shift of focus from the page (*qu* 曲) to the stage (*xi* 戲) in the 18th century. In this transition, we are dealing with two modes of theatrical performances and aesthetics, what I tentatively call 'textual drama' and 'visual drama', which we find in co-existence in Jiang's works. My primary concern here is about the different ways in which a textual drama and a visual drama relate to its readers.

The basic idea is that 'textual drama' appeals to its readers through textual, verbal, and literary means, encouraging its readers to relate to other literary works and sources. Jiang Shiquan has long been regarded as one of the most erudite playwrights whose «mind was filled with poems and books, of which he can therefore put to use at ease and everything he

14 On the clapper-style, see Tseng Yong-yih 2007, pp. 143-178.

15 See the preface to *Yi pian shi* 一片石 (*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 342).

16 See Act II of *Yi pian shi* (*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, pp. 357-358).

wrote is always cultured and distinguished» 以腹有詩書，故隨手拈來，無不蘊藉.[17] His plays are highly lyrical and literary. This is evident, for example, in his choice of subject matter. One of Jiang's best known works, *Linchuan meng* 臨川夢 (Dream of Linchuan), is a play that dramatizes the life of the late Ming playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616). It puts onstage not only Tang Xianzu himself, but also several fictional characters from his plays as well as a female reader named Yu Erniang 俞二娘 who was said to have died of heartbreak because of her obsession with the *Peony Pavilion*.[18] In the fictional world of the play, the author of *Peony Pavilion* (Tang Xianzu) meets his reader (Yu Erniang); in reality, the play *Lingchuan meng* also functions as a literary dialogue between the author Jiang Shiquan and his readers. There is a presupposition to this dialogue: only readers who are familiar with Tang Xianzu and his literary world can full engage with the references and allusions in the play.

Another textual or verbal element found in Jiang Shiquan's drama is his use of pastiche of Tang poems (*ji Tang* 集唐), a feature which was already commonly employed in late Ming elite theatre.[19] One of Jiang's plays, *Yi pian shi* 一片石 (A Stone Slab), concludes with the following verse:

（集唐）
莫抛心力作詞人，
月夕煙朝幾十春。
此是人間斷腸曲，
可憐無益費精神。
(Jiang Shiquan 1989, p. 374)

(*A Pastiche of Tang Poems*)
Don't cast your mind on being a lyricist,
Moonlit dusks, misty dawns, decades of springs have passed.
This heart-breaking song in our world,
Alas, adds nothing but only wastes my energy.

These four lines are drawn from four different Tang poems by Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (ca.812-ca.866), Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846),

17 Li Tiaoyuan 1980, p. 27.

18 See Jiang Shiquan 1989, especially scenes 4, 10, 15, 16, 17, 19, and 20. On anecdotes about the passionate female reader Yu Erniang, see Xu Fuming 1987, pp. 213-215. In *Linchuan meng*, the girl introduces herself as Yu Ergu 俞二姑.

19 On this phenomenon, see Zong Tinghu, Li Jinling 2009, pp. 141-148, and Dai Jian 2011, pp. 197-201.

and Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) respectively.[20] In fact, three of the four acts in *Yi pian shi* ends with an exit verse written in the style of *ji Tang*.[21] In such pastiches of Tang poems, the original authors of these poetic lines are not identified on the dramatic text.[22] The play again relies on and assumes a common knowledge of literary sources, in this case Tang poetry, between the author and his intended readers. This is what I meant by 'textual drama', drama that functions as verbal text and communicates through literary means.

On the other hand, 'visual drama' relies on spectacular displays, which are omnipresent in Jiang Shiquan's works as well. One of the most striking features of Jiang's drama is his devotion to the creation of visual spectacles in terms of the use of props and elaborate settings as suggested in his very extensive stage directions. For example, one of his plays, *Daoli tian* 忉利天 (Trāyastrimśas Heaven, or The Heavens of the Thirty-Three Devas), stages a Buddhist lion whose entrance on stage was given an elaborate scene with a lion dance routine accompanied by a clamour of gongs and drums.[23]

Furthermore, the success in creating a visual spectacle very often relies on the element of surprise. In Act II of the same play, two celestial ladies are sent to the flower market organised by Buddhabhadra 跋陀羅[24] (359-429 CE) to gather flowers for celebrating the birthday of the Buddha's mother, Queen Maya. Because the flowers have not fully blossomed, the celestial ladies therefore prepare to perform a newly written song to hasten the blooming of the flowers. Before these celestial ladies come onstage, the opening scene includes detailed stage directions on the preparations needed to present this visual spectacle of the flower's sudden blooming:

> (Hang a large red embroidered silk cloth onstage, behind the cloth discreetly set up an elevated pedestal, and from top to bottom encircle the pedestal with tens of layers of flowers.)
> （場面掛紅錦大幛，内暗設一高座，將花數十本層層高下圍繞座下）

20 See *Quan Tangshi (zengding ben)* 1999, 579.6783 (Wen Tingyun), 524.6047 (Du Mu), 457.5213 (Bai Juyi, with *changduan* 腸斷 in place of *duanchang* 斷腸 in this version), 339.3802 (Han Yu).

21 The only exception is in Act II in which, as mentioned earlier, Jiang Shiquan consciously inserts a series of rice-planting songs to inject the language of the local folks in his play.

22 This was the same case both in Qing dynasty printings as well as modern editions. See, for example, the edition of *Yi pian shi* kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 4406), Act IV, p. 20b.

23 See *Daoli tian*, Act I, in *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 689.

24 Buddhabhadra produced the first Chinese translation of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra 華嚴經 (Flower Adornment Sutra).

(*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 697)

Only after the fairies have performed a few songs with the music accompaniment of an old monk, in the middle of their conversation (played by the two female roles 旦), the decorated pedestal was suddenly revealed to their amazement:

（二旦）好説。（内暗撤去錦幛，現出花座介）呀！萬花全放，艷若雲霞。這都是老丈古音感發。多謝！多謝！ (*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 698)

(The two celestial ladies) Your words are too kind. (*Discreetly remove the embroidered silk cloth offstage, revealing the flower-adorned pedestal*) Ah! The myriad flowers have fully blossomed, with exceptional beauty like the rosy clouds. Sir, this is all owing to the moving quality of your ancient music. Many thanks! Many thanks!

Such designs were clearly aimed at providing a kind of visual pleasure and entertainment to the audience, which was very different from the textual and literary engagements that we saw earlier.

It has often been argued that such characteristics in Jiang Shiquan's drama reflected the contemporaneous developments of the local theatrical practices such as the use of masks or the inclusion of dances mimicking the movements of animals such as lion dance (see, for example, Lin Yeqing 2002, p. 84, and Shangguan Tao 2003, p. 47). But another possible source of influence seems to have been overlooked. Could these visual aspects in Jiang Shiquan's drama have been influenced by the court theatrical tradition?

4 Elite Theatre vs. Court Theatre

Theatrical performances had long been part of Chinese court culture and continued to flourish in late imperial China owing to great interest shown by the emperors and their families. In terms of scale, court theatre reached its height during the 18th century under the patronage of the Qianlong emperor (Lang Xiuhua 2001; Tseng Yong-yih 1993, pp. 1-23; Ding Ruqin 2008, pp. 184-95; Yao Shuyi 2005, pp. 80-91; Yao Shuyi 2001, pp. 88-95; Zheng Wenpei 1997).

We need to consider the contrasting aesthetics and demands of elite and court theatre in late imperial China. In elite theatre we have plays written by literati playwrights for an elite audience mostly belonging to their literary circles. These plays represent the aesthetic and stylistic preferences of individual literati playwrights and, as such, can be perceived as evidence of their literary talents. By contrast, court theatre was

neither regarded as literary masterpieces, nor was it usually associated with elite authors. In fact, the authorship of most court plays remained unknown. Produced to fulfill particular social or ritualised functions such as the celebration of imperial occasions or a festivals, court theatre relied less on literary techniques but more on visual spectacles and elaborate settings.[25]

In Jiang Shiquan, however, we have an interesting case of a well-known elite playwright who was also involved in writing theatrical performance for imperial entertainment. In the year 1751, Jiang Shiquan, who was then only in his mid-twenties, was asked by the local authorities in Jiangxi to write four plays collectively titled *Xijiang zhugu* 西江祝嘏 (Birthday blessings from the west of the Yangtze river) for the celebration of the Empress Dowager's birthday.[26] In his plays, we can see a juxtaposition of the different styles and aesthetics of elite and court theatre.

On the one hand, there are traces of influences from court ritual dances and aspects of spectacular visual displays typical of the imperial theatre. This is most evident in the play *Shengping rui* which has two different versions of the closing scene in various editions.[27] The final scene of the 'abbreviated version' ends with the following stage directions:

> （衆持燈上，舞一回下。）(*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 781)
>
> (*Multiple performers enter with lanterns in their hands. Perform dance sequence and exeunt.*)

But if we compare with another Qing edition kept at the Bibliotheque national de France in Paris, we find a much more elaborate sequence:

> （內奏樂，眾扮仙童持燈雲緩上，並肩立介）（王方平、蔡經暗上，立高處介）[28]

25 For recent studies on Qing dynasty court theatre, see Ding Ruqin 1999; Idema 2000, pp. 201-219; Zhu Jiajin 2007; Chen 2009; Ye Xiaoqing 2012.

26 See Wang Xingwu's 王興吾 preface to *Xijiang zhugu*, in *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 659, and Liang Tingnan 梁廷枏, *Quhua* 曲話, *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng*, vol. 8, p. 273. In the collection of the National Library of China in Beijing, there are at least four different editions of *Xijiang zhugu*. The editions differ in several areas such as the inclusion of a preface, the completeness of the preface, and two versions of the ending in the fourth play *Shengping rui*. To my knowledge, the only Qing dynasty edition of the play that preserves the full preface is the copy kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 4406) cited above.

27 For example, one of the copies in the National Library of China (no. XD5720) and the base text used in *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* belong to the 'abbreviated version' system with fewer songs. The Bibliothèque nationale de France copy represents the 'complex version' with a more elaborate closing scene.

28 *Shengping rui*, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 4406) edition, p. 24b.

(Music offstage. Multiple performers enter slowly with 'lantern clouds' in their hands. They stand shoulder to shoulder.) (Wang Fangping and Cai Jing discreetly enters. They stand on a high spot.)

This is followed by two arias interspersed with dialogues between the Taoist adept Wang Fangping 王方平 (Wang Yuan 王遠, fl.146-195), his disciple Cai Jing 蔡經, and an immortal maiden Magu 麻姑 who later arrived,[29] before concluding with another slow sequence of lantern dance.[30] This complex edition gives us an idea of what the simple stage direction «Perform dance sequence» (舞一回) in the abbreviated version might have been fully represented in performance. As the editor of the modern critical edition pointed out, it is unclear whether this additional passage was amended by Jiang Shiquan himself or by performers.[31] However, we may infer from the differentiation between the abbreviated and complex versions that this kind of dance sequence with lanterns was already a commonplace in Qing court theatre performances, such that some editions could save space by simply indicating «perform the routine sequence» without the need to repeat the details. Although Jiang Shiquan's set of four plays titled *Xijiang zhugu* might have been produced in Jiangxi, it served the same purpose as court theatre performed within the imperial palace in the capital. It was also written in celebration of the birthday of the Empress Dowager and one could easily see it in the tradition of such court performances. For instance, one of the plays begins with an elaborate scene describing the auspicious signs of the conjunction of the sun and the moon and the convergence of the five planets which echoes similar performances in an earlier court play performed for the fiftieth birthday of the Empress Dowager.[32]

On the other hand, even when Jiang Shiquan was writing for court entertainment, there were certain textual elements in his drama that are clearly characteristics of elite theatre. For example, the use of pastiche of Tang poems discussed above was characteristic of elite theatre but rarely used in court drama of both Ming and Qing dynasties. However, it appears that Jiang's plays were not restricted by such boundaries. In one of the four plays in *Xijiang zhugu*, most characters, even including

29 This appears to have been drawn from the hagiographies of Wang Yuan and Magu in the *Shenxian zhuan*. See Li Fang 李昉, ed., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 59.369-370, and Robert Ford Campany, *Ge, Hong. To Live As Long As Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 259-264.

30 *Shengping rui*, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 4406) edition, pp. 24b-25a.

31 *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 781, collation n. 9.

32 See *Huang taihou wuxun wanshou chengying riyue yingxiang, rentian puqing 'guban'* 皇太后五旬萬壽承應日月迎祥、人天普慶"鼓板", manuscript copy attributed to Zhang Zhao 張照 et al., in Wu Shuyin 2004, pp. 443-453.

an old farmer and his wife, ostensibly recite a pastiche of Tang poems as their entrance verse (*shangchang shi* 上場詩) when they came on stage. Act II alone uses this literary device six times (*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, pp. 667-674).

A good example of the convergence of these two different styles, namely, the elite and the court theatre, or the textual and the visual, can be found in another play of Jiang titled *Changsheng lu* 長生籙 (Register of Long Life). This play was also written for the occasion of the Empress Dowager's birthday, which may explain its choice to focus on female immortals. Act II features an unconventional female immortal Nüji 女几,[33] who owns a wine-shop and proclaims that her capacity for wine is far superior to the male drinkers:

> （[女几]挂旗介，取酒坐飲介）我前日把杜工部那首《飲中八仙歌》改了改，教人知道他們都是些假量，不免唱來做一椀下酒菜兒。
>
> ([Nüji] puts up the banner of her wine-shop, gets herself some wine, sits down and drinks. She speaks:)
> «The other day I made some changes to that 'Song of Eight Immortals of the Winecup' written by Du of the Ministry of Works, so as to let people know that these lot's reputation for their wine-drinking capacity is all spurious. Why don't I sing this song to go with my wine!»

Du of the Ministry of Works 杜工部 refers to the pre-eminent Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), whose famous «Song of the Eight Immortals of the Winecup» 飲中八仙歌 portrays a group of Tang historical figures and poets who were fond of drinking, including He Zhizhang 賀知章 (659-744), The Prince of Ruyang Li Jin 李璡 (?-750), and also Li Bai 李白 (701-762). In Jiang Shiquan's drama, however, Du Fu's poem was transformed into a new dramatic aria sung by Nüji on the same topic but adopting much more colloquial language and set in an even more jestful tone than the original (*Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 728). This clever verbal display clearly assumes and demands the audience and readers' familiarity with Du Fu's original poem. It also showcases Jiang Shiquan's literary talent on a different level. Not only was he competent in appropriating Tang lines to form a pastiche in his various *ji Tang* poems, he also actively rewrote one of the Tang masterpieces in a different genre.

In midst of such verbal engagements, however, it is noteworthy that the very same scene also contains other elements that pay attention to visual performance as well. The reader is introduced to three other female immortals, Magu 麻姑, Maonü 毛女 (Hairy Lady), and He xiangu 何仙姑 (Im-

33 For an account of this female immortal, see Li Fang, ed., *Taiping guangji*, 59.368.

mortal Maiden He), who later also join the drinking party and they take turns to perform some tricks. For instance, Magu waves her magic whip to summon a transformative dance procession by fishes and dragons, which can be traced to one of the court entertainments in the Han dynasty.[34] Another immortal, Maonü, who lives in reclusion in the mountains, gives a performance on catching butterflies (*pudie zhi xi* 撲蝶之戲), which is her favourite pastime. Catching butterflies is one of the popular performance acts in Chinese drama and folk dance involving characteristic body movements. In Jiang's play written for the imperial occasion, however, it appears to involve more elaborate props and multiple performers:

> 旦起舞拂子内放一大蝶飛出眾小蝶隨繞一回介 (Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji 1993, p. 731)
>
> (Maonü rises and dances, releasing a huge butterfly that flies out from her duster. Multiple small butterflies follow in circles and perform a routine)

In these performances, the focus is no longer on engaging the reader or spectator with literary or verbal words as seen earlier with the use of Tang poems, but instead on captivating their attention with visual spectacles.

Furthermore, the distinction between textual and visual dramas, or elite and court theatres, was more than simply a question of different styles. More importantly, it relates to key questions in defining a playwright and his mode of playwriting. Elite theatre is usually linked with the playwright's self-expression. Recent scholarship has also revealed a strong autobiographical element especially in the elite drama of the Qing dynasty (Du Guiping 2006, pp. 130-141, and Wang Ayling 2003, pp. 81-157). The case of Jiang Shiquan, however, presents an interesting paradox. Commonly portrayed as an elite playwright in literary histories, how shall we understand the other aspect of him as a court playwright writing under commission for a specific occasion?

Perhaps being a dramatist in the 18th century was more complicated than we sometimes assume. In Jiang's account of his own life, there is an entry in the year 1764 that is significant. In that year, when Jiang was forty years (*sui*) old, Qiu Yuexiu 裘曰修 (1712-1773)[35] recommended him for a post in the imperial theatrical institution Jingshan 景山 to write lyrics for the court entertainers, thinking that this could be a way for the emperor

34 *Jiang Shiquan xiqu ji* 1993, p. 730. This form of entertainment was recorded in *Hanshu* 1964, 96.3928.

35 Qiu was a native of Jiangxi just like Jiang Shiquan and was then serving as the Senior vice-minister of Revenue. See Hummel [1943] 2002, p. 172.

to recognize Jiang's talents. But Jiang Shiquan's reaction is noteworthy. He earnestly refused the proposition and soon requested leave from his duties and left the capital (Jiang Shiquan 1993, p. 2480). This is reminiscent of a similar account on the Ming dramatist and literatus Xu Lin 徐霖 (1462-1538). One source claims that the Ming Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 1506-1521) once offered Xu Lin a post in the Court Entertainment Bureau, which Xu begged to decline because the position was associated with professional actors.[36]

Such accounts remind us of the marginal position of some elite writers such as Xu Lin and Jiang Shiquan in late imperial China: They would certainly prefer to be recognised for their talents in statecraft, and not stagecraft; they aspired to be employed in the court, but as a statesman and not as a court dramatist.

5 Conclusion

Using Jiang Shiquan as a case study, we can see a scholar and playwright at the crossroad of various changes and transitions in the history of Chinese drama in the 18th century. I have used three pairs of inter-related binary terms – namely, *hua* vs. *ya*, textuality vs. visuality, elite vs. court theatre – as working ideas in guiding me through the competing styles of *qu* poetry in Jiang's writings.

The fact that Jiang Shiquan was very much positioned in between all these sets of binary ideas serves as a timely reminder of the rigidness and limitation of modern categorisation of both literary forms and literary selves in scholarship and historiography. We tend to follow neat categorization of genres or types of writers. Yet, the actuality of the 18th century theatrical scene was much more complex than such categorisations could capture.

Finally, in this transitional period of the 18th century, when speaking of continuities and discontinuities of literary traditions, it is also important to realise that High Qing literati such as Jiang Shiquan displayed an acute level of self-consciousness towards these traditions. We find increasing awareness towards literary form, traditions of playwriting, and one's own status and his different roles as a playwright.

36 Li Xu 1982, p. 133. For a discussion on Xu Lin's various roles as a painter, calligrapher and court writer, see Tan 2010, pp. 153-159.

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