

Overture

A Chinese comedy sketch from the 1950s commences with two men reminiscing about a day at the opera in times past. “When I was young,” says the comic to the straight man, “the theater wasn’t nearly so orderly as it is now.” The comic begins to narrate the scene: outside the door to the theater stands the barker, announcing the shows and drawing crowds into the semi-open-air playhouse. In a stream of verbal pyrotechnics, the comic imitates the barker’s exaggerated description of the day’s offerings. “You’ll see melodramas and military sagas,” he cries; “there’s flips and there’s fighting—real knives, real spears, real deaths!” But that, the comic claims (back in his own voice), is nothing compared with the chaos inside the theater! Inside, people are milling around looking for seats and locating friends. The opening number has started, but hardly anyone is paying attention. Two men who were listening are now brawling over which of their favorites is the better actor. Vendors are hawking playbills and cigarettes, candied fruits and pumpkin seeds. Table tenders are pouring tea water, and towel servers are dispensing hot washcloths, which they pass out—zip and whoosh—by flinging them through the air across the house. The comic then adopts the voices of two women who have just found their seats and have begun chat-

ting about the weather. “What a nice day it is today,” says the first. “Not a cloud in the sky,” replies the second, at which both women express surprise at the sudden light rain sprinkling down upon them. There is a pause, the comic looks up, and then, mimicking a woman’s voice, calls out: “Hey, you on the balcony, your kid is taking a pee!”¹

The previous description is exaggerated, as might be expected in a comic sketch. But it probably captures a sense of the excitement and pandemonium that would have been encountered in a theater in Beijing in the first half of the twentieth century, or even earlier, if you eliminate the women, the hot washcloths, and the cigarettes.² The anecdote helps us visualize the atmosphere within the playhouses of Beijing in the Qing dynasty and sets the stage, so to speak, for this study of opera in the life of the capital from circa 1770 to 1900. To us the pandemonium presented in the comic routine seems but a gentle send-up of old-style playhouses; but to the Qing court (and others committed to preserving social and moral order) the chaos of commercial opera—both its potential for social disturbance and for conveying subversive messages through the material presented onstage—was no laughing matter. This study of opera in Qing Beijing thus opens a key window onto our understanding of state-society relations and the mechanisms by which ideas and values were shared, shaped, disseminated, and contested.

Before the twentieth century, opera in China was the mass-communication medium of the times, as powerful in shaping and reflecting popular imagination as television and cinema are in our own times. Opera suffused the very fabric of life in late imperial times. It was one of the key mediums through which ideas about the self, family, society, and politics were transmitted over time, over space, and across class. The twenty-volume *All-China Drama Gazetteer* (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi*) lists 394 different regional musical styles of opera, most of which developed and matured during the years 1500 to 1900. The story of how these musical and dramatic subgenres proliferated, interacted, and migrated from region to region can tell us much about trade routes, economic integration, and social interaction in the Qing. My interest lies in examining social interaction and cultural practices. From its emergence in mature form in the eleventh century, at court and in the countryside, opera was intimately connected with religion and ritual, although it also served to entertain. In cities, theatrical performance was mostly spoken about in terms of entertainment and pleasure, although it was never entirely divorced from its ritual origins. Opera was shared across the social hierarchy: for the educated, opera was their entertainment; for the illiterate, it

was entertainment and education. In late imperial China, in which perhaps 10 percent of men and 2 to 5 percent of women were conversant with the prestigious high literary tradition, opera was the medium that shaped and expressed most people's understanding of history and culture. Fortunately, sufficient scripts and descriptive records emanating from the performance culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Beijing have been preserved to allow us to penetrate the values of those who otherwise left but minimal traces in the historical record. The opera culture of Beijing evinces a middle-brow urban sensibility, striated with the high literacy of scholar playwrights and patrons and the artistic talents and practical know-how of the debased-status actors.³

A growing body of scholarship attests that performance is crucial to understanding culture in late imperial China.⁴ To date, much of the English-language use of opera to penetrate the belief systems of semi- and nonliterate Chinese society has focused on rural and ritual performance.⁵ As yet little research has examined theatrical performance in relation to urban audiences and to the transmission of cultural values in an urban context. Scholars such as Tanaka Issei have argued that, over the course of the Ming-Qing era, popular (i.e., rural) dramatic traditions were co-opted by local elites, who refashioned them to be palatable to their own sensibilities and at the same time as a means to inculcate proper moral behavior in less educated members of the community.⁶ My research, in contrast, by focusing on the understanding of opera by different social constituencies within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Beijing, has shown that the tale of appropriations and appreciations of opera stories in the Qing capital is not quite so tidy and linear. Rather, opera during the Qing underwent adaptation and circulation, communication and obfuscation, between and among playwrights, court and other elite patrons, elite and commoner audiences, and commercial acting troupes. By examining the context and content of opera in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Beijing, this work illuminates relationships between culture and power in the Qing dynasty, offering insight into how the state and various urban constituencies partook of opera and the stories played out onstage and manipulated them to their own ends, whether for moral inculcation, for pleasure, for expression of political commentary, or, typically, for some combination thereof.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a golden age for opera performance in the Qing capital. Many genres of opera, from the elegant Kun operas (*kunju*, written by scholar-poets), to the far less literary "flowery opera" styles (*huabu*), all vied for audiences in Beijing. The Qing capital,

with a population of over a million and a thriving economy in the eighteenth century, held out the lure of fame and fortune to opera troupes and individual actors throughout the empire.⁷ This same economic vitality brought an increase in domestic trade that was accompanied by the growth of guild associations in Beijing, which further provided a regionally diversified and trans-regional urban merchant audience receptive to native-place operas of the huabu variety.⁸ The capital also became a magnet for well-educated young men from throughout the empire who came to sit for the metropolitan-level civil-service examinations, or who, having passed the exams, waited in the capital for official assignment. To these numbers were added the sons of sitting officials from the lower Yangzi delta—the Jiangnan, or “south of the River” region—who could evade stringent provincial exam quotas by taking their provincial-level exams in Shuntian Prefecture in Beijing, where competition was less intense.⁹ While sojourning in the capital, often for months at a time, these would-be officials were avid patrons of the opera styles of their home locales. The high proportion of men from Jiangnan in this highly literate cohort ensured that kunju would be well attended in the capital. Men of the Manchu princely households and the Qing Banner garrisons (the state’s chief security forces) stationed in Beijing, both with a surfeit of leisure and wealth, also inflated spectator numbers in the capital playhouses, patronizing commercial opera in defiance of official regulations.¹⁰

Demographic expansion in the eighteenth century further fueled the development of opera in the Qing capital by supplying a steady stream of unemployed boys (including the children of impoverished families) who were indentured into acting careers.¹¹

Even the Qing court furthered development of metropolitan theatrical entertainment by sponsoring operas in the palaces by its own court troupes; it also indirectly prompted diversity of opera style in the capital by requisitioning commercial acting troupes from the central and lower Yangzi regions to perform at elaborate ceremonial occasions, such as the eightieth-year birthday celebration of the Qianlong emperor in 1790.¹² Indeed, the Qing polity, not unlike other early modern states—from Renaissance England and Louis Quatorze France to the sixteenth-century Ottoman Sultanate and Tokugawa Japan—relied on public and theatrical spectacle as a primary medium of power projection.¹³ As such, competing theatrical performance, especially in the immediate vicinity of the court, became subject to intense state scrutiny.

The Qing court was ambivalent about opera, especially as performed in the commercial playhouses of the capital. Although it welcomed, promoted,

even sought out certain elite genres of opera for its own viewing pleasure, it also fought against the encroachment of what it deemed morally suspect, socially corrosive, and politically subversive popular genres of opera in the city at large. From the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century the court banned performance of huabu opera within the city of Beijing. Actors of proscribed opera genres could be banished from the capital. And all officials above rank seven, as well as bannermen, were forbidden by edict to enter commercial playhouses. Fictional accounts and commonplace-book jottings about opera from the time, however, indicate that such injunctions were routinely ignored. Thus, opera performance—who performed it, what was performed, who watched it, and who policed it—came to be a hotly contested site of state-society friction in Qing Beijing. That the state cared so much about commercial opera in the capital surely attests to its importance at the time—both as shaper of popular sentiment and as catalyst for forms of public association.

Opera in Qing Beijing was not unlike performance in other major urban centers throughout the empire, with the great eighteenth-century entrepôt of Yangzhou bearing the closest resemblance.¹⁴ (With the exception of Yangzhou and Suzhou, much less source material is available for sustained evaluation of commercial performance during the Qing beyond the capital.) Yet Beijing's unique role as the capital shaped opera in distinct ways, since the performance of culture there was more politically charged. The Qing court's fears of social unrest (and ethnic strife) were magnified regarding the capital, in part because Beijing was home to the central state apparatus and disproportionately housed the Banner military regiments and administrative units of the regime. Thus, my narrative is particular to Beijing under Qing rule; and yet, as the capital city, Beijing had an empirewide influence. Because of its importance as the political hub of the empire, Beijing drew educated men (and their favored styles of opera) from Jiangnan, Qing China's economic and cultural center. The analysis of opera and its tensions in Beijing, then, also speaks to larger empirewide transformations under way in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries. In particular, through the prism of opera performance we will see the long-term negotiating of aesthetic taste between Beijing as the empire's political center and Jiangnan as its long-acknowledged cultural heartland.

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This study of opera in the Qing capital offers a new approach to Chinese opera history; it contributes to our understanding of Qing urban culture;

and it employs gender as a critical category of analysis in examining state-society relations under Qing rule.¹⁵ Both Chinese and Western scholars, in writing the history of traditional Chinese opera, have tended to treat the development of Qing performance as in large measure isolated from other social and political transformations, seeking causal explanations for change in perceived aesthetic or artistic deficiencies.¹⁶ Currently few scholars in the West study this very rich period in Chinese theater history.¹⁷ Opera historians in China have tended to gloss over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, preferring instead to focus on the heyday of Kun opera in the seventeenth century and the rise of “regional operas” (especially Peking opera) in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Some surveys of Chinese opera history have given short shrift to the period from 1770 to 1900, in part because the multiplicity of genres playing side by side and interacting in the capital complicates a progressive paradigm of historical change, the telos of which is often situated in the triumph of Peking opera as the quintessential national drama (*guoju*).¹⁹ For neat narratives in which one aesthetic style gives way to a new (and implicitly better) one, the hybridity of opera in the capital over these hundred-plus years is problematic. But for my purposes, the very multiplicity of opera types and styles in this era makes it easier to trace competing values and aesthetic practices—and, by extension, patterns and routes of cultural transmission—in the Qing metropolis. In the course of the narration of a larger story about urban cultural transformation, we will see that the eventual success of Peking opera had as much to do with changing court sensibilities and changing political conditions as it did with the genre’s intrinsic aesthetic qualities.

If the teleology in the scholarship on Chinese opera history has been implicit, the assumptions embedded in research on Ming-Qing (and Republican) cities have been made explicit by reflection (for over two decades) on the applicability of Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to Chinese urban communities. In Habermas’s historical sociology of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, France, and Germany, the urban public sphere is the crucible from which participatory politics and civil society emerged in Western Europe.²⁰ Noticing strong parallels between early modern Europe and late imperial China—a burgeoning and vibrant mercantile economy, the proliferation of print culture, and new networks of community and sociability in urban centers—a first wave of historians of urban China in the 1980s and early 1990s sought to locate sites analogous to the European public sphere in Qing and Republican cit-

ies: guild and native-place associations, chambers of commerce, and fledgling newspaper societies, for instance.²¹ As their critics have pointed out, much as these early studies of Chinese urbanism were intent on debunking Max Weber's caricature of China as the moribund, tradition-bound foil to a progressive and rational modern West, they nevertheless still hitched the signifiers of genuine historical transformation to universalized milestones drawn from the particularity of the Western path to civil society and participatory democracy.²² China historians might better find "public sphere" parallels in early modern Japan, where the "private realm" of art, fiction, and drama—albeit exhibited in public spaces—could become a locus for dissent and polemics, protected from state seizure (if not intervention) by its canny willingness to relinquish any claim to the public realm of social order and hierarchical control.²³

But that is not to say that urban spaces in late imperial China could not become loci for the germination of horizontally integrated social organization or even political agitation. A second wave of historical scholarship on Ming-Qing Chinese cities has striven to decouple the urban public sphere from the Western development of modernity and civil society, choosing instead to identify urban spaces that might have fostered social community and mobilization not fully subject to state oversight. Ming and Qing cities, in other words, might share early modern characteristics of social and spatial organization without presupposing that these would end (or ought to end) in democratic process. Susan Naquin's study of temples in Ming and Qing Beijing is representative of this trend, identifying an important "public space" in urban temple life and religious associations.²⁴ More recently Si-yen Fei has posited that in Nanjing during the Ming dynasty there came to be actual and figurative public spaces—if not public spheres—in which residents of the southern capital could appeal for tax reform and protest construction of city walls, as well as shape their own distinctive urban identity through textual discourse.²⁵ My work on opera in the Qing capital continues in this vein, for though networks of gossip, news, and sociability in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Beijing did not generate the overt oppositional politics of the London coffeehouse or the Parisian café, they did produce a vibrant "teahouse" culture of ironic play, sentimental excess, and temporary inversion of social norms; perhaps tellingly, the term "teahouse" (*chayuan*) doubled as an elegant euphemism for the metropolitan commercial stage. The commercial playhouse, I posit, poised at the intersection of private fantasy and public space, was the institution most suited to become

a venue for the circulation of desires and ideas among audiences differing in status and background.²⁶

A third wave of scholarship on the Chinese urban experience has questioned the basic premise of the Habermasian notion of the ideal public sphere. Informed by scholarly reappraisals of early modern Europe, which have criticized Habermas for overemphasizing the rationality of the public sphere, the works of Eugenia Lean and Haiyan Lee on Republican urban culture have argued that sentimentality and sensationalism were central to the coming into being of a Chinese urban public.²⁷ Lean has proposed that fervent popular consumption of news cycles reporting causes célèbres trials in the 1930s were instrumental in hailing modern publics into existence; Lee has shown that the tear-jerker Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly fiction of the first half of the twentieth century served as a literary public sphere wherein readers, by identifying with the plights of fictional protagonists, came to affirm a new form of subjectivity of self as an integral component of universal humanity.²⁸ To be sure, the modern infrastructures and technologies of Republican cities allowed this public sphere of sentiment to be maintained over time and distance in radically new ways, but the potent combination of private passion and public display was not new to the urban experience in twentieth-century China. The operas performed in the Qing playhouses, as I will demonstrate, also reveled in this same mix of sentimentality and sensationalism.

The sentimentality and sensationalism or, more simply, the sex and violence, available to be experienced in this “theatrical public space” will be addressed in my examination of attitudes toward gender and sexuality as revealed through the operas performed in the playhouses of the Qing capital. Numerous literary scholars have assessed gender representations in late imperial Chinese fiction and dramatic literature, but there have been few attempts to examine how elite discourses about gender were refashioned when they moved off the page and onto the stage.²⁹ This has precluded understanding of values beyond those of the high literary elite. The sources on opera in the Qing capital—including diaries of opera fans, guidebooks to the Beijing demimonde, court edicts, descriptions in novels and popular ballads, and hand-copied scripts (which until now have been used only to write opera history)—allow me to attempt to reconstruct performed drama and thence envision imaginings about gender among middlebrow urban audiences.

Representations of gender hierarchies, I find, often became metaphors for articulating other concerns about social hierarchy and political order (or

its lack). In particular, the transgressive woman as a literary trope could have very different social meanings depending upon how a play was performed and who was watching the performance. The study of gender representations thus has implications well beyond our understanding of the lived experiences of women and men; gender is intimately associated with concepts of cultural authority and power. As the works of both Matthew Sommer and Janet Theiss have demonstrated, the Qing state (especially under the activist and expansive policies of the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors) took a proprietary interest in maintaining gender order. Preservation of the normative familial and gender order was vital to the state's civilizing mission, and by extension, its claims to legitimacy.³⁰ This helps explain, too, the court's active role in policing both the dramatic content and the social context of opera performance, which was rife with gender inversions and transgressions. A cultural equation of sorts is evident in the operas of the playhouses, in which sex and gender transgression stood for subversive sympathies and social discontent, whereas violence represented authority's punishment for violations of the social norms.

This book, then, is an interdisciplinary study of opera history, urban culture, and gender representation. It establishes that the networks of patronage, gossip, and literati connoisseurship, reflected and generated by the opera demimonde in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chinese capital, formed a public space for social critique and sentimental indulgence. Discourses about power (both corrupted and ethical) were often articulated through romanticized representations of gender and class in the dramatic narratives performed in the playhouses and in the writings by literate commentators about opera and actors. Ethnic tensions between the Qing court and the Han (especially Jiangnan) elite—too inflammatory to be articulated openly—were often couched in cultural policy and aesthetic preferences regarding opera in the capital. Yet, as will become evident, this metropolitan space for commentary and complaint never coalesced into a viable challenge to state authority. By the late nineteenth century the Qing court, embracing a petty urbanite aesthetic and moral sensibility, had either co-opted or marginalized literati resistance, thereby neutralizing the oppositional potential of the urban playhouse and its most educated patrons.

The narrative of this book begins roughly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, by which time the commercial playhouses in the capital were of sufficient quantity and quality to generate a new genre: guidebooks to the actors and ancillary activities of opera in Qing Beijing. This literature,

intended to be ephemeral (and often—then and later—dismissed as not worthy of serious consideration), opens up to us an entire world of hitherto unexplored urban culture in the mid- to late Qing. This culture delighted in wit, sex, wine, pretty boys, mooning scholars, good acting, and pushing the boundaries of respectability. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary by opera connoisseurs, it was also hierarchical and exploitative of those who delivered the joy and entertainment—especially the cross-dressing actor youths. Although as social practice this urban culture was a distinct product of the Qing political settlement, its literature shared certain continuities (sometimes consciously so) with cultural proclivities and sensibilities of the late Ming. Indeed, the commercial opera theater of Qing Beijing did much to popularize late Ming intellectual concerns and practices—from the transmission of the gender politics of Ming literati drama to the elite male vogue for boy actresses. Thus, commercial opera served to broadcast elements of late Ming thought to a much wider and more diverse audience than it had reached during the Ming. And, much as the Qing state strove to reestablish neo-Confucian rigor in intellectual discourse and social practice, it was not capable of squelching all expressions of cultural heterodoxy, even in the immediate precinct of the throne.

This culture came to a close by the end of the nineteenth century. The chaos of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) radically realigned cultural dynamics in the Qing capital, impacting actors, audiences, and taste in opera. Other more gradual changes, such as the rise of Shanghai and other treaty port cities as centers for entertainment in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fundamentally altered opera in Beijing. The final blow to this mid-Qing urban opera culture came with the occupation of the capital by the troops of the allied foreign powers in the wake of the Boxer Uprising (1900). The fighting disrupted operation of the playhouses and sent audiences (including those at the court) and actors scattering for safety. Although the playhouses later resumed operation, the demimonde culture of opera in Beijing was never quite the same again.³¹

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This book is structured in three parts. Part I begins with a literary analysis of a subgenre of writings known as “flower registers” (*huapu*). Comprised of a tangle of biographical sketches, homoerotic poetry, and theater gossip, flower registers also ranked and commented upon the talents of the actor youths who cross-dressed to play the young female (*dan*) roles. The writers

of such texts are some of the earliest historians of performed urban opera during the Qing. In conjunction with contemporaneous fictional accounts of the opera theater, I read these sources as embedded in long-standing literati connoisseurship discourses about taste and distinction. While telling us much about the actors, flower registers also fill in the “cast” among the audience, shedding light, especially, on the representations and self-representations of the operagoer par excellence—the dedicated opera fan. Through close readings of these works of opera connoisseurship, I further reconstruct audience expectations and aesthetics. The very act of writing a guide to actors and the opera theater was a way for literate opera enthusiasts to distinguish themselves as true connoisseurs, superior to the mixed clientele of moneyed patrons (some merchant, some official) who haunted the commercial playhouses of Beijing, if only through their virtual reenactment and appropriation of performance on the page. These connoisseurs—the self-styled *cognoscenti*—were reinventing through literary production and aesthetic taste a status distinction that had become blurred in the socio-economic realm. Clearly genuinely interested in the practices and players of opera in the city, these contemporary “ethnographers” of the opera *demi-monde* were also drawn to the theater because it offered such rich parables for articulating lumpen literati preoccupations with talent neglected, virtue unblemished, and power resisted.

Without their accounts, too, it would be impossible to reconstruct the social history of opera in the city, which becomes my focus in Part 2. Whereas Part 1 is framed by the concerns of literate opera connoisseurs, Part 2 adds the perspective of the state, especially the Manchu court, necessitating an examination of ethnic tensions as well as tensions of gender and class. Chapter 2 maps out the spatial dynamics of opera within the capital by focusing on three of the key venues in which it was performed: the playhouse, the temple fair, and the salon. Operas, actors, and audiences literally moved from venue to venue, but gender, class, dialect affinity, and ethnicity all in certain ways restricted those patterns of movement and interaction. Opera in the capital, I argue, encouraged multiple boundary crossings—both literal and figurative—making it suspect in the eyes of the state. State regulations attempted to police such crossings to limited effect. Furthermore, the experience of opera connoisseurs mingling with other social classes in the all-male audiences of the playhouses, instead of forging a sense of shared cultural identity, made the cultural critics even more conscious of status distinctions.

Chapter 3 reads opera genre as a contested cultural field in which various agents—the court, Jiangnan music sophisticates, marginalized men of letters, and acting troupes—each held a stake. Whereas the court sought to assert symbolic supremacy in cultural taste and to control social order in the capital by dictating what might be performed, erudite Suzhou scholars of the most elegant (Kun) opera style aimed to rescue their preferred musical genre from “corruption” in the commercial opera marketplace. Meanwhile, down-and-out literate commentators often championed the new and exciting lowbrow genres of opera on display in the capital; and opera troupes and actors struggled to eke out a living in the interstices between court regulation and audience demand. By the end of the hundred-plus years from 1770 to 1900, the opera hierarchy in the capital had been thoroughly re-ordered. Kunju was on the decline, and formerly proscribed lowbrow genres of opera, such as *pihuang*, had ascended the ladder of cultural taste, in large measure due to court patronage. Taken together, while Chapter 2 charts the court’s ineffectual struggle to regulate the locations of playhouses within the city, Chapter 3 shows that, even though the Qing court lost the battle over where opera would be performed, over time it largely won the war on what would be performed.

Against this backdrop of social tensions I reconstruct the performances of specific sets of dramatic scripts in Part 3, tracing the interplay over time between gender and class as markers of moral authenticity and political regeneration in commercially performed operas. Chapter 4 examines the drama *The Garden of Turquoise and Jade* (*Feicui yuan*), written in Suzhou in the early Qing, and its several kunju performance redactions. In the play a poor scholar, an attractive itinerant seamstress, and a bumbling but good-hearted policeman are empathetic and righteous role models fighting against the corrupt power of political cronyism and entrenched masculine privilege. The popularity of this drama onstage reveals that urban audiences identified with the plight of the downtrodden. But whereas in the playwright’s script justice prevails at the end through the intervention of morally upright representatives of the state, performance versions typically closed with the protagonists on the run and the mother of the intrepid seamstress dead. This suggests that audiences appreciated (and opera troupes presented) a dose of tragic but heightened realism in their entertainment fare. Commercial Kun opera, with its sympathy for the victimized gender and classes, offered metropolitan audiences not only a space for sentimental escape but also a forum for expression of pointed social complaint.

Moving from a melodrama about raw abuse of official privilege to family romances rife with desire and gender transgression, Chapter 5 centers on a series of performance scripts about adulterous and treacherous women—the “sisters-in-law” (*saozi*) of the chapter title. The plots of these operas all evolved out of the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) story cycle. Although the cautionary message of these operas was never far from the surface, it is clear that in many of the scripts the characters’ transgressions—the sex and the violence—were what audiences found compelling. Through contextualized readings of multiple redactions of these operas, I demonstrate that the scripts with greater literary sophistication (i.e., kunju scripts) tended to remold the women of these tales into clever (if comic) and sympathetic romantic heroines. In contrast, scripts crudely cobbled together and directed to less literate audiences (i.e., huabu scripts) focused on the revenge of the male characters and their eventual murder of the licentious woman. The chapter further addresses the “scene selections” (*zhezi xi*) staging of commercial opera, with attention to the way this practice altered the original frame message of the playwright’s edition. In the abridged plot sequences of the “sister-in-law” operas in the literate kunju tradition, the focus of the plays switched from the husband’s humiliation and revenge to the wife’s romantic liaison. The kunju treatments of this material loosely operate within a literary discourse (traceable to the late Ming) in which nubile women and their unbridled passions are imagined as signifiers of authenticity.

The tension between class and gender transgressions so central to these plots was refigured when these tales were appropriated and adapted yet again for performance in the pihuang opera genre in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The pihuang operas of this story cycle evince a romanticized class narrative of male brigandage and brotherhood (with roots also traceable to the late Ming), in which violence wins out over the social disruption of sex and romance. Late Qing court enthusiasm for the populist pihuang opera, I suggest, forged an unlikely marriage between action-play violence and state-promulgated familial and gender orthodoxies. As court patronage elevated pihuang’s cultural status, this more misogynistic and moralistic opera treatment came to be embraced by a wider urban audience.

All three parts of this book attest to the place and power of opera in Qing Beijing. Opera had the power to upset social hierarchies: it could make men of means and privilege vulnerable to the charms of lowly cross-dressing boy actresses; it could parody social and cultural norms; or it could be harnessed to the state’s civilizing mission. Opera served as a kind of cultural glue—

creating shared repositories of cultural knowledge (if not common cause) across gender, class, and ethnic differences within the Qing capital. The opera theater was a key site of public discourse in the Qing metropolis; and to the extent that it fulfilled that role in the urban community, it was also a site of competition, conflict, and controversy.