The Mask of Comedy in *A Couple of Soles*

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Offstage

By the seventeenth century, plays of the *chuanqi* tradition had become a favorite theatrical form for China's cultured elite. Highly educated writers composed these operatic texts to avail themselves of the opportunity to write great amounts of verse for the arias as much as to craft a meaningful and entertaining story. These plays were too long to present in a single session; either they were performed over several days or, more likely, only selected scenes were ever staged. To get the whole story or to mull over the emotional power of the arias, readers could refer to the printed versions of these plays published, most often in series, by major printing houses in lower Yangzi region cities. Although at this distance in time we cannot know just how, when, and where a particular play was staged, we can be sure that reading their scripts was a widespread practice among the elite. Scholars of a later age must consider how the realities of their life experiences shaped their reception of the plays.

Peace and social stability were relatively new when Li Yu's 李漁 (1610–1680) comic opera *Bimu yu* 比目魚 (*A Couple of Soles*, 1661) first appeared.¹ The Ming empire having collapsed in the 1640s, the country was still being pacified as the Manchus consolidated their Qing state. Devastation in the major Jiangnan cities, widespread loss of life, and conflicting loyalties had scattered China's cultured class and thrown into question the values of the late Ming literati. In particular, this meant challenging the sensuous courtesan culture and the leisure and indulgence that many had pursued during the 1620s and 1630s. That world had fallen apart just at its glittering height: widespread natural and man-made disasters produced roving bands of brigands, robbers, and rebels, one of whom took Beijing in 1644, causing the last Ming emperor to kill his empress and daughters before hanging himself north of the imperial palace.

1 The text appears in *Li Yu quanji* 李漁全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 1992), vol. 5, and in *Liweng chuanqi shizhong jiaozhu* 笠翁傳奇十種校注, ed. Wang Xueqi 王學奇, Huo Xianjun 霍現俊, and Wu Xiuhua 吳秀華 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji, 2009). An English translation is Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles* 比目魚, trans. Shen Jing and Robert E. Hegel (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2019).

To write a comedy when such events were fresh memories in people's minds was not a common activity among China's scholarly playwrights. But then Li Yu was an exceptional person.² His writing activities were many-faceted: he was famous (or infamous) for writing guidebooks for gardening and on how to select the best concubines, and for his short stories, poems, and essays, in addition to his writing for the theater. He also compiled two massive collections of administrative texts in the 1660s, including his own observations on judicial punishments, imprisonment, and even categories of crime. Beyond his serious interests in governing and despite all recent events, Li Yu could still boast: "Broadly speaking, everything I have ever written was intended to make people laugh." 大約弟之詩文雜著，皆屬笑資。³ Most of his plays were light-hearted romantic comedies, very much in line with the scholar-beauty (*caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人) fashion in escapist fiction that circulated during the first decades of Qing rule. He almost certainly wrote the bawdy parody of that genre, *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat), although he did not acknowledge doing so.⁴

Li Yu's avowed purpose in writing *A Couple of Soles* was to promote traditional virtues—to echo the new Qing emphasis on behavioral standards and their opposition to the hedonistic lifestyle. And sure enough, loyalty to the state and fidelity in marriage are the two major themes interwoven through the play. Neither is caricatured, at least not directly. But as we will see, there was a dark side to Li Yu's humor in this play as backdrop to its superficial amusements.

Love Conquers All (Sort of)

The play begins with the first of its major narrative strands, a love story: a nicely conventional young, hard-working, and gifted Confucian scholar—an orphan, just to avoid any family objections—sees and falls in love with the teen-aged daughter of a beautiful actress. Just at that time the girl's father is forming a "youth troupe" in which this girl, Liu Miaogu 劉藐姑 or Fairy Liu, will play all the central female *dan* roles. In order to get to be near her, the young

2 The most thorough, and most lively, biography of Li Yu is by Patrick Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988). See also Huang Lizhen 黃麗貞, *Li Yu yanjiu* 李漁研究 (Taipei: Chun wenxue, 1974), and Jing Shen, "The Playwright and His Art," in Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 239–70, esp. 241–44.

3 Li Yu, *Yijia yan quanji* 一家言全集, in *Li Yu quanji*, 1.219; trans. Hanan, *Invention*, 75.

4 Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou putuan*), trans. Patrick Hanan (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).

scholar Tan Chuyu 譚楚玉 abandons his higher social status and joins the troupe by answering an advertisement for an actor to perform the painted-face or *jing* roles. But his superior skill in memorization and his assertive manner soon win him the privilege to play *sheng* or leading male roles—opposite Fairy Liu—just as he has been longing to do.

Tan's initial naughty plans for a quick seduction, glossed by professions of deep attraction, are quickly crushed by the troupe's internal rule: no fraternization between the sexes, a rule strictly enforced by their patron deity Erlang 二郎神—who makes no appearance in the play, by the way. But while the young couple grow in devotion to each other, they must reserve their steamy glances for onstage performances in costume. Any greater intimacy is totally out of the question. However, Fairy Liu's mother, aptly named Liu Jiangxian 劉降仙 or Fallen Angel,⁵ has other plans for the girl. That is, she wants her daughter to follow in her own footsteps by taking on selected wealthy lovers as a means to build up the family nest-egg. Despite Fairy's adamant refusal to compromise her chastity, Fallen Angel arranges a match for her with an odious rich man, Qian Wanguan 錢萬貫 (Moneybags Qian)—and receives a thousand ounces of silver in exchange.

On the day that Fairy is supposed to go to Moneybags's house, she changes the program for the day's performance to include a scene from a famous older play, *Jingchai ji* 荆釵記 (The Thorn Hairpin). Its heroine feels that she has been abandoned by her husband, and she jumps into a river to drown herself. As it happens, this performance takes place on a stage overhanging a river, too—and after denouncing her besotted suitor quite directly, Fairly Liu leaps to her watery death. Tan Chuyu, onstage as her husband, quickly realizes that Fairy has taken this drastic action to preserve her commitment to him. And without a second thought, he too leaps in and disappears in the current.

Implications behind the Love Story

At that point of suspense, about half-way through the play, the first day's performance may well have concluded. So I'll stop here and make some observations about this part of the plot. First, the commercial nature of society is manifested repeatedly in this play. Everyone and everything would seem to be for sale: performances onstage and off (pretending to be in love with suitors, in particular), positions in local government, useful connections, and of course,

5 Jiangxian is more literally, "fallen immortal," but "angel" has been used for prostitutes in the U.S. No connection with Biblical stories of Lucifer is intended by this rendition of her name.

flirtation and sex. Not only is the mother willing to sell herself—although only for the right price—she and Moneybags talk about her daughter as if Fairy were simply property to be disposed of as needed for economic gain and personal gratification. Moneybags has other concubines, of course; more is what he wants, his lust—like her greed—being seemingly insatiable.

So much for maternal concern and affection for her offspring! By marked contrast, Fairy despises her mother, not surprisingly, but shows her all courtesy and appropriate respect as befits a filial daughter. Is there social relevance in this portrayal of relationships? Interestingly, “a thousand ounces of silver” (*qianjin* 千金) is a polite way to refer to one’s daughter: Fairy, in this sense, has been symbolized as a trunk filled with precisely that amount of precious metal. This is what Moneybags has had delivered to Fallen Angel’s door in anticipation of her handing over her daughter. The mother is a tactical sex worker; the virginal Fairy is a fungible commodity. Similarly, bribes and extortion are the accepted way that officials make personal fortunes at the obvious expense of the poor—who clearly resent this mistreatment. And yet the officials refer to themselves as *fumu guan* 父母官, “parent officials,” to emphasize their Confucian concern for their subjects. Where money is involved, one-upmanship and the double-cross are ubiquitous in both private and official transactions. In scene 17—after the suicides—Moneybags even refers to himself as a *haohan* 好漢, a “brave fellow,” a term usually applied to heroic figures in such popular narratives as *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Outlaws of the Marsh), perhaps because he is so adept at wielding financial, if not physical, violence on the defenseless. What a comment on Li Yu’s society! The playwright was known for his frequent social commentary, but his over-the-top characterizations and farcical dialogue here make the satire all the more biting. This ostensibly comical social critique is structurally juxtaposed to the markedly different play-within-the-play: *The Thorn Hairpin* is a tale of betrayal and loss; as such this older play is anything but amusing. Allusions to it seem to reflect the darker political and social context in which the comedy appeared. Or, more specifically, the play suggests the betrayal and loss of cultural values felt by many literati that they attributed to inept late Ming rulers.

Administrative Service vs. Eremitism

The second narrative strand, a counterpoint to the love story in the acting troupe, follows a hard-working and dedicated older local administrator named Murong Jie 慕容介 who just cannot wait to retire in order to avoid being drawn into yet more official functions. Using superior military strategy (and fire as a

defensive weapon) he commands government forces to defeat a band of local marauders and their wild animal allies. With that threat to the local civilian population out of the way, Murong makes a hasty retreat into the mountains to hide there as a hermit and fisherman with his like-minded wife. They even take on new names to hide their identity; he becomes Old Fisherman Mo 莫漁翁. Murong's intention had been to wipe out the bandits completely, but his wife had insisted that he treat the enemy kindly and spare lives when he can. As a consequence the bandit leader and some of his henchmen take refuge in their mountain lair, to constitute a threat later in the play when they have rebuilt their strength.

There are several ambiguities worthy of note here. First, although Murong has rendered meritorious service and the people in his jurisdiction all love him, to retire—to reject “fame and gain”—can signal a disapproval of the state and the prioritization of personal integrity.⁶ To retire when the Way does not prevail is a tried and true Confucian dictum (*Lunyu* 8.13) after all,⁷ and at the fall of the Ming, many Confucian scholars and administrators did just that. A number shaved their heads to avoid the hairstyle that the Manchus had imposed on all Han men and had turned to Buddhism, some seriously and others as subterfuge to save their necks; Li Yu was in regular contact with some of these *yimin* 遺民 or “left-behind subjects” of the Ming.⁸

Secondly, the leader of the mountain marauders here is quite the extraordinary figure. He seems to be the offspring of a primitive “strange man” who copulated with the wild beasts of the wilderness, tigers and panthers. So in appearance this fellow is visibly “Other,” even subhuman, a “half-breed,” although his thirst for raiding seems to have strong parallels with late Ming bandit gangs. Moreover, his vanguard is originally comprised of other wild creatures: the illustration for his attack in the play's first edition includes wolves and even snakes in the charge. Is this a caricature of the infamous Chinese bandit who sacked Beijing, Li Zicheng 李自成 (1605–1645)? Or, because he came from the uncultivated northern wilds, is his bestial appearance meant to suggest the culturally alien—hence assumed to be culturally

6 Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 237.

7 Confucius, *The Analects* (*Lun yü*), trans. D.C. Lau (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Press, 1983), 73: “The Master said, ‘... Show yourself when the Way prevails in the Empire, but hide yourself when it does not. It is a shameful matter to be poor and humble when the Way prevails in the state. Equally, it is a shameful matter to be rich and noble when the Way falls into disuse in the state.’”

8 See Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), esp. 1: 646–50, 674–80.

inferior—Tungusic peoples and converted frontier Hans who constituted the Manchu invasion force?⁹ The play gives no direct clues to support these inferences; overt lampooning of the Manchus was too dangerous to attempt during Li Yu's lifetime. Even so, surely contemporary readers would have been prompted to speculate on what this bizarre character symbolized. Also curiously, later in the play the bandit chief engages an imposter to enact a ruse that will allow him to overcome local resistance; this stratagem is reminiscent of clever deceptions employed by the heroic protagonists in the great Ming novel *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms, earliest ed. 1522). This may suggest empire-building aspirations, again pointing toward the Manchus. But we have not yet viewed these scenes.

And the Lovers Are Saved!

We left the play at its midpoint, the overnight break for the audience who would return the following day for the second installment. The heroine leapt into a river and presumably drowned, with her intended husband joining her in her fate. But nothing is quite as it appears in this play; such is the nature of its comedy. The god Erlang had not shown up as predicted to prevent any premature intimacy when the young couple were merely mortal actors, nor does he now. Instead, a second deity intervenes in the drama.

This river god, the "Pacifier-of-the-Waves" Lord Yan 平浪侯晏公, ushers in the second half of the play. It is his birthday, and with his divine minions he has been visiting various shrines across the region to check up on the sincerity of offerings and ceremonies in his honor. The play that takes the lives of the young scholar Tan Chuyu and his beloved was staged in a local celebration of this same god's birthday. He shows up just as the young couple disappear beneath the waves, and, like any good *deus ex machina*, Lord Yan saves the day. However, this being a play by Li Yu, he cannot simply have some kindly older person scoop them out of the water, revive them, and hide them away

9 Hanan, *Invention of Li Yu*, 184, notes the play's artful use of correspondences: the river god parallels the half-human bandit chief; the god is a water deity, while the bandit is a mountain king. As we will see, Murong impersonates the god to offer advice, and the bandit chief employs an imposter to discredit Murong. Perhaps more appropriately, the willing prostitution of the mother, Fallen Angel, contrasts absolutely with the impassioned chastity of the daughter, our heroine Fairy Liu.

somewhere as happened in earlier short stories.¹⁰ Li Yu's cleverness takes the episode much farther.

In his great perspicacity, this deity sees what the couple have done and quickly grasps the sincerity of their devotion to each other. Consequently he is moved to rescue them. He does so by accommodating them to their new surroundings: he changes them into fish, in particular flatfish or soles. Nor does he prevent them from sticking their flat sides together, so throughout their watery adventures the fish are, in effect, copulating the entire time. This is demonstrated on stage by some sort of painted paired-fish costume worn by a single actor—while confirmed in dialogue by the people who soon catch this strange couple of fish in their net.

To tie the two strands of the narrative together, the coupled fish are pulled from the water by servants of the good official who retired to the mountains, Murong Jie, now known as Old Fisherman Mo. Just to carry on with the naughtiness, seeing the fish so joined arouses the female servant's own desires which, we learn, surpass those of her husband in intensity (although she chides him, he is not made into a fool for his shortcomings—she is performed by a *chou* or clown actor, while he is played by a *mo* actor, a formal male character-type).¹¹

Once the fish have been hauled up in the net, the benevolent spirit changes them back into their human forms, to everyone's amazement. "Fisherman Mo" and his wife welcome them and in days to come they arrange a raucous rustic wedding, complete with off-color jokes and various tricks to get the couple hopelessly drunk. Back at the town where the play was being performed, Fairy's mother and Moneybags carry on an outrageous parody of lawsuits: they file countercharges against each other over ownership of the silver paid as Fairy's

10 This is what happens in the Li Yu short story on which this play is based, however; see "An Actress Scorns Wealth and Honour to Preserve Her Chastity" 輕富貴女旦全貞, in Li Yu, *Silent Operas*, trans. Patrick Hanan (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Press, 1990), 161–201. The broader theme of travelers on a boat attacked by bandits or a rogue boatman usually has the girl leaping into the water to preserve her chastity, where downstream she is rescued by a harmless older man before she can drown. This is the narrative core of *The Thorn Hairpin*; a comparable element appears in *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (1621) Story 27: "Jin Yunu Beats the Heartless Man" 金玉女棒打薄情郎; a young man is similarly rescued in *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (1627) Story 20: "Zhang Tingxiu Escapes from Death and Saves His Father" 張廷秀逃生救父.

11 For Li Yu's use of role-types in making gags, see Shen, "Playwright," 262–63. That the flatfish are copulating is made quite explicit by the servant's comments: 嘻！兩個並在一處，正好干那把戲，你看頭兒同搖尾兒同擺，在人面前賣弄風流。 "Hee, hee! The two are stuck tight together and playing 'that game.' You see, they are shaking their heads and wagging their tails together, carrying on their 'romantic business' right in front of us!" Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 142 (modified).

bride price, but the highest official manages to appropriate all the silver offered in the original agreement—and more as well.

Political vs. Personal Loyalties

Once fully recuperated, young Tan Chuyu leaves the mountains to take the civil service examinations and, fulfilling the most hackneyed storytelling convention of the day, earns high marks and is immediately appointed to an important local position. Unsurprisingly, he is posted to the area near where Murong had recently served. However, because Murong had hidden his true identity, Tan does not realize that the older man is both an experienced civilian administrator and competent commander of military forces.

The local bandits Murong Jie had mercifully spared have regrouped, have found a military advisor, and are preparing to invade the area. Upon learning of the imminent attack, fearful local officials send scouts into the mountains to find Murong in order to bring him back to lead their resistance. Hearing this, the raiders find another man who looks very much like Murong Jie; this imposter allows himself to be “found” and “resumes his earlier post.” At his first encounter with the bandits, this “commander” declares the beastly bandits too powerful to resist. As planned, he quickly surrenders and urges all local leaders to do the same. The bandits overrun the region in short order, draining it of all objects of value and imposing their own harsh rule. For his part, the imposter quietly absconds with a great portion of their pillaged treasures.

Before Tan Chuyu took up his post, Murong had secreted in Tan's luggage a booklet with detailed instructions on how to defeat the marauders. Thinking this, too, is a gift from the god, Tan follows instructions and handily destroys the mountain bandits, decisively this time. He also orders the arrest of Murong Jie, thinking that the old official had turned traitor to the state. Former underlings recognize hermit Mo in the mountains as the real Murong; they bring him in chains to Tan's court. A fiery exchange between him and Tan results: each accuses the other of treachery and immoral behavior, of betraying the state or showing deep ingratitude for friendship and disrespect for seniors. Finally the bandit chief himself, now humanly contrite and moved to honesty in the face of execution, explains his use of the imposter and identifies this man as the real Murong. Only his confession can save the old administrator from being beheaded along with him. Greatly relieved, Tan Chuyu and Fairy renew their friendship with the old couple, now recognized for who they truly are; Tan concludes the play by vowing to join the Murongs in the mountains when his term

of office is completed. The value of Confucian service is thus confirmed, as are the obligations of friendship and of respect for elders.

Disguising Li Yu's Times

The final scenes have been largely devoted to suspenseful waiting for mistaken identities to be revealed. This being a comic play, the audience can be confident that everything will turn out right, and when it does, no spectator or reader, then or now, would be surprised. Both will have been treated to the play's series of extravagant exaggerations that follow caricatures and incongruities piled upon absurdities, with not a few dirty jokes added along the way. Neither realism nor historical accuracy was ever a concern in romantic *chuanqi* plays; *A Couple of Soles* is no exception. But the play seems overly light-hearted: it is rife with signs that beg to be interpreted in ways reflective of its time. Especially for readers who could take their time reading and rereading while reflecting on what they were seeing on the page,¹² all of this ostensible silliness could have seemed somewhat forced. The roughly sketched violence and selfishness in the background of the play's comic action might well have evoked painful memories of recent events in their own lives: the play's escapist aspects could hardly divert all traumas of the recent past.¹³ As Patrick Hanan noted, Li Yu regularly relied on "the illusory medium of drama to express a truth that cannot otherwise be revealed."¹⁴

Relevant truths here circle around the catastrophic change of dynasties mid-century. Less than twenty years before this play appeared in 1661, Li Zicheng's bandits had taken and sacked Beijing; the Manchus had used this event as their excuse to restore order by asserting military control over the whole empire—since the Ming state had clearly lost all strength and determination to do so. Yangzhou, a city not far from Li Yu's beloved Hangzhou and closer still to Nanjing where he lived later in life, refused to surrender to the

12 There is no record of the play having been performed in its entirety; perhaps it never was. But Li Yu's, like other *chuanqi* plays written by members of the educated elite, were printed and circulated broadly among that class as texts for reading. Reading allows rereading and stopping to ponder, in marked contrast to a non-stop performance onstage, even though Li Yu asserted that his plays were meant to be seen; see Shen, "Playwright," 264–66.

13 See various first-person accounts in Lynn Struve, *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993); for more on traumatic memories, see her *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming World* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2019), esp. Chapters 3 and 4.

14 Hanan, *Invention of Li Yu*, 89.

Manchu invaders; when the city finally was taken, the Northern armies slaughtered seventy percent of the population, men, women, and children. Other Jiangnan cities were similarly devastated. During those decades, plays and fiction dramatizing contemporary events (*shishi xiju* 時事戲劇 and *shishi xiaoshuo* 時事小說) were being performed and circulated in print, fulfilling something of the function of newspapers two centuries hence by bringing distant events into the lives of viewers and readers. One did not have to see it with his own eyes to understand what misery had been inflicted all across the land. If Li Yu had parallels with reality in mind, he left only suggestions of his meaning, preferring to "gain relief" from the world's problems through his writing.¹⁵

Even so, many of the play's events and situations could have provoked powerful emotional associations for its initial audiences. The gangs of roving bandits (*liukou* 流寇) during the late Ming seem reflected in the barbaric mountain forces beaten back only by the ethical and intelligent leadership of Murong Jie and his protégé Tan Chuyu. And the sensualist greed of Moneybags Qian and even of Fallen Angel as they fight with unscrupulous local officials over possession of Fairy's bride price suggest the venality of the rump Ming court formed in Nanjing, 1644–1645. Retirement, as mentioned above, brings the Confucian maxim to mind. Moreover, in the play Murong Jie seeks out the rock where an ancient worthy stood to fish—a man who had adamantly refused to serve in an official position even when invited by his childhood friend, newly enthroned as emperor Guangwu of Han.¹⁶ In this the official-in-exile seemingly alludes to motivations of the *yimin*, the "left-behind" subjects of the Ming, members of the elite who likewise refused to serve the new government, preferring exile, becoming Buddhist monks, or even committing suicide to compromising their personal integrity and loyalty to the fallen state—despite the flaws of its rulers. At the least, this historical allusion supports resisting the political expediency of taking office under China's new Manchu rulers.

As the river god Lord Yan celebrates his birthday, he sees and evaluates performances by many amateur ritual specialists and their followers at the various temples scattered across the countryside. The performers play local musical instruments and sing repetitious songs with nonsense syllable choruses. The

15 Ibid., 36: "When writing plays, however, I not only gain relief from my depression and resentment, I lay claim to the title of happiest man between Heaven and Earth. ... If one cannot fulfill one's desires in real life, one can produce an imaginary realm in which to do exactly as one wishes. ..." *Li Yu quanji* 11.47: ... 惟於制曲填詞之頃，非但郁藉以舒，愠爲之解，且嘗偕作兩間最樂之人。... 未有真境之爲所欲爲，能出幻境縱橫之上者。....

16 This was Yan Guang 嚴光 or Yan Ziling 嚴子陵 (39 BCE–41 CE); see Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 291–292n168. On Murong's determination to follow Yan's model, see p. 250.

play generally represents these people as primitive in custom and habit, even to the point of infantilizing them. As the God sings, “I enjoy these local customs / So similar to the most ancient times; / So simple and sincere, / And free from any cunning.”¹⁷ But not all villagers are equally grateful for his protection and sincere in their offerings, with the consequence that Lord Yan does not accept them, granting no favors to the region for the coming year.

The deity serves as a critical observer in this regard. To support his evaluations, Li Yu has created distinctions between the several communities the god inspects. For the sincere supplicants, the role-types assigned are *chou* and *mo*; the clownish and often vulgar aspect of *chou* performances are balanced out by the performers of more upright *mo* roles.¹⁸ A similar use of these two character-types can be seen in Murong’s servants as mentioned above: the wife, performed as a *chou*, is outspoken in her sexual interests, whereas her husband (performed as a *mo*) avoids any such inuendo. The Deity’s negative judgment falls on villagers performed by *chou* and *jing*, or painted-face characters, who tend to be violent and can also play the fool.

These role-type distinctions seem to reflect crude social stereotypes of the day. Despite having suffered poverty and want himself, Li Yu clearly aspired to identify with the social and cultural elite, a class that saw themselves as substantially superior in cultural terms to the unlettered masses of the empire. Tan Chuyu and Murong Jie are performed as upright and learned *sheng* and *xiaosheng* respectively. Among the *chou* characters in the play are the wicked imposter who pretends to be Murong Jie in order to help the King of the Mountain overrun the territory previously under Murong’s administration. Appropriately, this man is treated to a hilarious rough and painful ride to the military headquarters once he’s discovered in the mountains (scene 23). Another is the illiterate shepherd boy who provides most of the off-color entertainment at the rustic wedding for Fairy and Tan in scene 19. Although a contemporary reader might not perceive the relevance of these distinctions if they corresponded to his prejudices, they stand out in our more class-conscious age.

Yet Li Yu may well have shared this critical perspective.¹⁹ Printed around the same time, apparently by a friend or acquaintance of Li Yu who used the penname Aina the Layman 艾納居士, the story collection *Doupeng xianhua*

¹⁷ Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 119; see 118–22.

¹⁸ Referring to another Li Yu play, Hanan, *Invention*, 154, notes, “a common function of the *chou* characters in Li Yu: to play out in gross counterpoint the actions of the high characters.”

¹⁹ To judge from his extensive collections of materials meant to serve as advice to administrators, *Zizhi xinshu* 資治新書 (A New Collection for Aid in Governing), Li Yu considered political questions very seriously, and clearly he was well read in this realm of activity.

豆棚閒話 (Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, ca. 1660) presents provocative parallels. Arranged as a series of oral storytelling sessions on hot afternoons in the shade of a makeshift arbor overgrown by runner bean vines, its tales challenge conventional judgments of historical and fictional figures. Exaggeration and caricature dominate these characterizations, as if their author's intention were to provoke questioning of all received wisdom. Aina's focus seems to have been to seek out exemplars of genuine virtue from among the self-congratulatory charades he projects onto most of his subjects. Stories skewer self-styled moralists, do-gooders, and philosophers alike. Nor are common people spared from these barbs; fools and the gullible appear in every story. True goodness seems to be represented only by some of society's most humble. But one of its last stories is told by an older man when asked by the young men in the group to recount events that occurred before they were born. What they get is a chilling account of the brutal and widespread violence, ghastly tales of death and the undead occasioned by rampaging Han bandits and the Manchu armies as they rode roughshod over the hapless common people.²⁰

Could events that traumatic have been unfamiliar to the second generation of survivors? Would their parents not have told them about their experiences? Perhaps not. One might consider possible parallels in more recent times: many Cultural Revolution survivors have declined to detail their experiences with their children, preferring to look forward to better times to come. Following conventional structural patterns for *chuanqi* plays, Li Yu interweaves two plot lines and their separate themes, especially in the play's first half: the love story and the retirement of Murong Jie, chastity and loyalty. The first might appeal more to younger audiences, but surely the second would resonate particularly strongly with those who had served in office, older male readers and playgoers. Both virtues are asserted and then questioned or rejected as their stories unfold: Fairy Liu turns her back on all family obligations and in their piscine forms the yet unmarried couple copulate furiously; the elder administrator values maintaining his individual integrity and peace of mind over continuing

20 Aina jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, ed. Chen Dakang 陳大康 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1998); see Aina the Layman, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2017), 171–85. *A Couple of Soles*, scene 31, ends with a reference to the historical Jie Zhitui 介之推 (c. 650 BCE) who burned to death in a well-intentioned but stupid attempt to get him to leave his mountain retreat; perhaps not coincidentally, the first story in *Idle Talk* rewrites this story to focus on the exaggerated jealousy of Jie Zhitui's wife, subverting the traditional political concern for loyalty by focusing on her resentment over being ignored during the many years Jie had faithfully served his lord. Here, too, the personal outweighs traditional loyalty to one's ruler.

service to state and society—for which he had been amply lauded: he cannot claim to have been slighted by his emperor.

The love story survives apparent tragedy to reach a happy marriage and then, after a period of tense separation while Tan goes off to battle, concludes with a “happily ever after” reunion. But Murong’s paternalistic application of leniency to the subhuman raiders and his subsequent flight into the mountains have a very troubling outcome: the scourging of the region by the resurgent bandits. Could this *not* resonate with readers and viewers old enough to be counted as survivors? For a clearer understanding of the symbolic importance of historical tragedy as subtext here, one might compare the lengthy dispute between Tan Chuyu and Murong Jie to the very brief *da tuanyuan* 大團圓 (grand reunion) scene when both couples come together in the play’s final scene.²¹ A happy ending (or at least a successful conclusion) was conventional for these plays; the final scene Li Yu gives *A Couple of Soles* nominally fills the bill. Even so, the vehemence of the defense of apparently competing values—service to the state versus individual self-protection—provides no unambiguous answers to the question of whether the political and ethical questions involved in voluntary retirement could be easily resolved—or whether the recent past might be so easily forgotten and rendered irrelevant.

Reflections of a Reader

In deciphering what meaning a text might have conveyed, whether intentionally on the part of the author or quite unconsciously embedded there, the historical context is always a reliable source of inspiration. While one can never know what a writer was thinking as he (or she) wrote, we can be assured that whether or not self-consciously responding to outside influences, major events of each writer’s life present their own special pressures. Certainly the writings of 1930s China, before the Japanese invasion, were far different from dominant writing of the 1950s, after the founding of the People’s Republic, the political atmosphere having changed radically in the meantime. The years spent in graduate school during the American war in Vietnam undoubtedly shaped my outlook on study and a career. Writing is always done in a context; so, too, is reading. Have the Vietnam War in my student days and the nearly two decades of U.S. military action in the Middle East jaundiced my interpretation of this

21 Li Yu, *A Couple of Soles*, 214–32 (scenes 20–32), compared to the resolution in 233–38 (the end of scene 32). Another term for this climactic scene is simply *da shousha* 大收煞, the “big ending”; see Shen, “Playwright,” 261.

play? Quite likely, but that constant awareness of distant violence and the human suffering involved may have sharpened my vision in some respects rather than dulling it altogether. Li Yu regularly referred to his poverty and frustration in his informal writings; light-hearted but superficial humor might well have been his expedient to avoid directly addressing the warfare and its outcomes that undoubtedly contributed to his plight. Even if unbidden, events of his times make a shadow appearance from behind his comic mask.