
Recent work on women’s writing in late imperial China has focused on poetry and tanci 彈詞 narratives. With this publication we have the first translation of a female-authored play, especially rare because it is a chuangqi 傳奇 rather than the shorter zaju 雜劇 favored by most women playwrights. In addition to translating and annotating the play, which she discovered in the National Library of China, Qingyun Wu has translated materials that frame it in the sole surviving edition (carved in 1778 and published in 1804): the publisher’s preface, postfaces by the playwright’s father and son, and three poems. Not translated are marginal comments by the father, although these are included in the Chinese text at the back of the book. An introduction, list of women playwrights of the Ming and Qing and their plays, glossary, index of ci 詞 tunes and aria titles, and bibliography of Chinese and Western-language sources complete the contents.

The introduction reviews the meager information available about Wang Yun 王筠 (1749-1819), unusual among published women since she came from the North (Chang’an). Otherwise Wang fits the pattern of literate gentry women of her period. Her father and brother published her poems together with theirs, and other women also offered support, including one who was instrumental in the publication of Fanhua meng 繁華夢 (Dream of splendor and prosperity), Wang’s first play (of three). Also typical is Wang’s use of a semi-autobiographical cross-dressed heroine to explore desires and fantasies that seldom found an outlet in writings by women. Professor Wu situates Fanhua meng in the mid-Qing “climate,” when Confucian gender codes rigidified and cross-dressed heroines often appeared in novels, plays, and tanci (53 of 200 known works have such plots). She views the latter phenomenon, in tanci especially, as a response to the former: as the cult of female chastity intensified under the Manchus, learned women sought to “break out of their immobility through imagination.” (p. 5) In this respect Fanhua meng is typical of narratives authored by women; what sets it apart is Wang Yun’s handling of the cross-dressed plot. The female protagonist, Wang Menglin 王夢麟 (played by the sheng actor), appears in Scene 2 as a woman, but undergoes a sex change in a dream (accomplished through an onstage costume change in Scene 3). “His” glorious dream begins with spectacular success in the imperial examinations (Scenes 5 and 13), betrothal and marriage to the beautiful and talented Miss Xie 謝小姐 (Scenes 6 and 16), encounters with two other beauties (Scenes 9 and 10), and their installation as concubines (Scenes 15, 18, and 19). Blissful self-fulfillment (Scenes 20-22) soon gives way to depression and disillusionment when Wang Menglin awakens to discover that her glorious career as a man was nothing but a grandiose dream (Scenes 23-25).

Professor Wu finds a subtext of “lesbian passion” in this plot, arguing that even after the sexual transformation, Wang Menglin is “always a woman on stage” in
the eyes of the audience, her desire to be a man motivated by love of women more than hunger for fame. (p. 17) While this reading is possible, I am more persuaded by the views of Hua Wei, who stresses Wang Yun’s desire to portray a private feminine realm of emotions (qing) centered on love, family, relationships, and friendship. Where Professor Wu finds coded references to lesbian passion and interprets the representation of polygamy in Fanhua meng as “an opportunity for sisterhood and collective female power” (p. 21), Professor Hua instead concludes that Wang Yun’s personal desires are focused entirely on the character of Wang Menglin and that she “did not intend to use her play to express women’s collective thoughts about their female role and status.”

I mention these somewhat conflicting readings to show how the earliest published criticism on Fanhua meng offers different interpretations of its plot and themes. Professor Wu’s introduction usefully contextualizes Fanhua meng with respect to other plays and tanci narratives with similar plots, which will enable readers to reach their own conclusions after reading her translation.

Translating an unannotated text, especially a play that tweaks familiar conventions, poses challenges. Below I note some problems that came up as I checked the English against the original Chinese. While Professor Wu’s translation successfully conveys the content and mood of Wang Yun’s play, it illustrates some of the difficulties one encounters in this kind of text.

The style betrays a lack of native command of English, in grammatical errors and infelicities such as “slim waist sways with a face scanty of rouge” (niaonuo yaozhi danbo zhuang, 娘曳腰肢淡薄妝), “With a cracking whip, my horse races like the wind blow” (jiabian zou si feng, 加鞭走似風), and “you and I are both lonely in our boudoir, clinging to each other like a skeleton clings to its own shadow” (wo he ni lanfang jimo, xingying xiangyi,我和你蘭房寂寞，形影相依). Overly literal renderings sometimes produce opaque English, especially in extended contexts as in this example from the publisher’s preface:

Since yin and yang, fire and ashes came into being, the differentiation between flowing and blocking, gathering and dispensing never ceased to exist. A foot can be short and an inch can be long. A talented being is not born handicapped. Some are born two feet and others with wings. Can we talk about unfairness in the creation of those forms? (p.39)

蓋自陰陽爐炭之既具，哪無通塞屯亨之不齊？尺有短而寸有長，生才本無或歉，兩其足者傳其翼，賦形詭詭非均？

Other problems of style I noted were jarring colloquialisms (e.g., “buddies” for gujiao 故交, “folks” for qin 親, “guy” for ren’er 人兒), anachronistic language (“went downtown” for jincheng 进城, “evening dress” for bianfu 便服), and poor

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1) Hua Wei, Ming Qing funü zhi xiqu chuangzuo yu piping 明清婦女之戲曲創作與批評 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo, 2003), 118 and 114.