

PENG XU

THE COURTESAN'S "ROLE PORTRAIT"

Brothel Performances and the Qiu Ying Models in Late Ming Suzhou

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to contribute to the historical scholarship on the relationship between pictorial and dramatic arts in China, more specifically, between the use of the "beautiful woman painting" (*meiren tu*) as a prop in brothel theater and the mental habits of late Ming viewers of such paintings. Examples are analyzed within two larger historical contexts: the commercial marketplace and the literary field of drama. The generic quality of the "beautiful woman painting" in the Qiu Ying style, its copied or forged versions, and its inclusion in wood-block drama prints all reveal the diurnal aspect of such images associated with everyday life. I suggest that this graphic genre's erotic energy is rooted in its dramatic context, in which the static image of a beautiful woman could come to life as a courtesan-actress endowed with virtuosity in singing and dancing. Qiu Ying's "portraits" prompted a popularly received response among dramatists such as Tang Xianzu to adopt a new focus on depicting "beautiful woman portraits" in plays (and onstage), known as "beautiful woman plays" (*yanpin*). Scenes of "realizations" and reanimations later fell into disuse in Chinese drama, along with the waning influence of the Qiu Ying models, *Suzhou pian* (Suzhou studio replicas) shops, and the courtesan-actress herself.

Perhaps no dramatist of *chuanqi* (southern romantic comedies) envisaged better than Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616; *jinshi* 1583) a fleeting brothel romance in which a courtesan's portrait features prominently. In his play *The Purple Hairpin* (*Zichai ji* 紫釵記, ca. 1587), the heroine, Little Jade (Huo Xiaoyu 霍小玉), is separated from her lover when he leaves to pursue worldly fame in the capital. In a typical "spring love-longing" scene, she worries about their marriage: if he fails, he might feel too embarrassed to return; if he succeeds, he could be offered a courtesan's *meiren tu* 美人圖 (beautiful woman painting), a token in matchmaking, as an emblem of a new love affair. Little Jade sings: "Now when he, the first candidate, dons a brocaded robe and parades down the Imperial Avenue, there will surely be a matchmaker to corral his steed, unrolling the painted scroll of a beauty and pleading that he accept it" 錦袍穿上了御街游, 怕有個做媒人關住紫驕驕, 美人圖開在手, 央及煞狀元收. The painted scroll will be the portrait of a courtesan. Little Jade goes on, in the aria, to envision a budding romance in the brothel: by daylight, Mister First Candidate is enamored of the courtesan's sweet smile and enjoys her musical performance (笙歌畫引, 平康笑留); by night, he enfolds her in his arms (煙花夜擁).

QUICK CITATION

Xu, Peng. "The Courtesan's 'Role Portrait': Brothel Performances and the Qiu Ying Models in Late Ming Suzhou." *Ars Orientalis* 55 (2025): 57–86

This chain of sourly imagined events begins with the moment when a matchmaker presents one or more courtesans' images painted in a scroll to the potential client. The dramatic action reminds us of the late Ming courtesans' early twentieth-century counterparts, the first social group to use the new technology of photography to titillate potential customers. Postcards featuring unknown courtesans abound at that time.¹ Just as photographic studios in urban centers mushroomed in the early twentieth century, in the late Ming the genre of beautiful woman painting thrived in the marketplace, the brothel, and the theater.

What exactly is painted in the scroll envisaged by Little Jade? The pictorial conventions of the day determined that it could not possibly be the photographic representation of a particular courtesan (a portrait in its true sense), but rather a generic painting of a beautiful courtesan portrayed as though she were playing a historical beauty on the brothel stage—the image is a “role portrait” by my definition. One might imagine that a courtesan's portrait that was intended to be viewed by or circulated among clients would highlight the woman's beautiful face as a natural focus of the gaze. Counterintuitively, facial details may have mattered least of all in the most popular contemporary beautiful woman paintings in sixteenth-century China—that is, those modeled after the paintings of Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552; hereafter, Qiu Ying models). The viewer's attention tended to be arrested by gestures, poses, articles of clothing, and accessories. Ellen Johnston Laing has undertaken comprehensive studies of the Qiu Ying style, and she eloquently summarizes that “Qiu Ying's women are all petite and slender. Their shoulders slant downward at an angle. Their necks are slender (but not skinny) and slightly tapered. Their heads are oval.” The face is even more standardized: always in three-quarters profile, with an “even and regular” contour. Eyes, Laing notices, “are usually askew,” and eyebrows are thin, short arcs. The nose is a single line “demarcating the bridge, then curving around the tip of the nose.” Lips are small and thin, with the corners pulled “upward into a V-shaped smile.” Even a basic costume is formulated: “a long skirt bound just below the bust with long sashes and knotted ties, blouses with full sleeves or narrow cuffs, sometimes narrow stoles.”² Except for works named after specific courtesans, not a single Ming painting labeled *meiren* 美人 can be identified with any degree of confidence as the portrait of a known woman.

Because famous courtesans lived no-less-cultured lifestyles than did respectable women, accessories could not serve as markers of social distinction.³ The identity of the figure in Qiu Ying's best-known work, *A Beauty in Spring Thoughts* (*Meiren chunsi tu* 美人春思圖), for example, has been the subject of three unconfirmed hypotheses constructed by connoisseurs and art historians over the last two centuries—namely, that she is the Nymph of the Luo River,⁴ the Wu Mountain Goddess associated with the “clouds and rain” love-making metaphor,⁵ or a Suzhou courtesan disguised as a goddess (fig. 1).⁶

What do I mean by role portraits of the late Ming courtesan? And how can this new conception help us go beyond conjectures and better understand the nature of the Qiu Ying models? The term *role portrait* highlights the connections between the social group of Suzhou courtesans and the stylized portrayal of female figures represented by Qiu Ying's beautiful woman paintings and their studio replicas. It was an ambiguous type of portrait that belonged to a contemporary art market that tended to reproduce the same physical type, as though these portraits represented an ideal beauty rather than a specific person. At the heart of the great majority of late Ming beautiful woman paintings was the concept of replicability, rather than individualism. As in the case of a modern-day Barbie doll, the lower the degree of mimesis, the sharper the theatrical sense of role playing.⁷ I also identify a coherence in tone and conception among the various visual forms that carry the Qiu Ying style—besides beautiful woman



FIGURE 1. Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552), *A Beauty in Spring Thoughts* 美人春思圖 (detail). Ink and color on paper, H x W: 20.4 x 58.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei

paintings, there are wood-block illustrations in courtesan catalogues and some illustrated dramas—as well as the animation of such images in theatrical performances. I argue that the visual formulae function well to allude to these paintings' general references to courtesan-actresses, costumed in the paintings as historical beauties as though they were on the brothel stage, rather than women of other identities.

These role portraits—where erotic imagery converged with theatrical representation—were essential to perhaps the most fascinating “effects” on the brothel stage: the translation of a static beauty image into a more physically present medium in which the actress was superimposed onto her “portrait.” Martin Meisel defines a similar historical and cultural phenomenon in nineteenth-century England as “realization” or “material increment”: “To move from mind’s eye to body’s eye was realization, and to add a third dimension to two was realization, as when words became picture, or when picture became dramatic tableau.”⁸

The late Ming brothel was an institution that functioned as a theater, featuring young actresses with virtuosity in singing and dancing along with engaging professional teachers, male amateurs, and hangers-on specializing in playing supporting roles.⁹ Scholars agree that the Ming witnessed the turning point in actresses’ retreat from the public view into the private sphere, in comparison with the bygone Yuan dynasty, and that brothel performances featuring women were the only “semi-public” appearances of actresses. The most outstanding feature of the brothel performance was its mixture of actors of both genders, with courtesans playing most of the female roles. In scenes involving a female portrait, even if the prop “portrait” was nothing more than a studio replica of an idealized woman from the marketplace, the conceit of the scroll as a sort of movable brothel would have been intensified by the presence of the courtesan-actress. There would, therefore, have been a revolutionary change in the nature of the play’s mis-en-scène and its reception. I contend that the graphic arts derived erotic

energy from its dramatic context, in which the static image of a beauty could come to life as a courtesan-actress endowed with virtuosity in singing and dancing. For owners of copies of such paintings, eroticism would arise from imagining the painted beauty's reanimation within a theater of the mind.

The theatrical and gendered meaning of the identical facial characteristics, as described by Laing, is a missing perspective in previous scholarship on Chinese portraits. A brief review of how late Ming men pursued revelation of their own character in portraits will reinforce my observation on the intentional artistic decision we find in the beautiful woman paintings under discussion. According to Richard Vinograd's classification of Chinese portraits, there are two types—effigy and emblem—depending on whether the emphasis is on verisimilitude or on “what the portrait revealed, exposed, expressed, or disclosed in the way of personality, character, mentality, or fated destiny.”¹⁰ The latter, “emblem” portrait is a rough equivalent to Yu Ying-shih's definition of “the new subgenre of Chinese literati portraiture,” that is, literati *xingle tu* 行樂圖 (figure painting in a landscape setting), with the overall emphasis on personality and character.¹¹ In contrast to beautiful woman paintings, this subgenre treats the face in an alleged Jiangnan regional style that tries to achieve a three-dimensional look through new coloring methods, possibly borrowed from European portraits.¹² It was a common practice to hire two different artists to create the new three-dimensional look—a specialized landscape painter for the background and furniture, and a portraitist. As professional portraitists' work often turned out to be unsatisfactory, their literati customer's contemplation of the imperfection of likeness (and himself) resulted in a new literary genre called “self-reflection essays,” or *zizan* 自讚, popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ This kind of figure painting—which conspicuously endeavored to appear realistic by hiring a specialized portraitist—is yet to be found as commissioned by women, and I suspect it was never a common practice. Instead, women of any status may have had to comply with the pictorial conventions that annihilate facial differences. Wu Hung's concept of the “stereotype” of beautiful women in Chinese visual and literary arts is quite relevant to my proposal of the notion of role portrait: with regard to beautiful women (courtesan-actresses), an exclusive focus on “types” rather than individuality and social boundaries seems to have endured throughout late-imperial times.¹⁴ Conceptually, however, we need to push forward from the static beauty “stereotype” to the milieu of animated brothel performances, where beautiful women might have used beautiful woman paintings as stage props that functioned as their “portraits” or “self-portraits.”

Here I would like to draw attention to the most fanciful theatrical moment—that of the painted beauty becoming animated onstage. In fact, the late Ming theatergoer's mental habits, cultivated by the conjunction of story and image in the Qiu Ying models, inspired the playwright Tang Xianzu's new dramas and some other “beautiful woman plays” (*yanpin* 艷品, a subcategory in late Ming drama criticism). Given that the hidden ties between the art objects and the theater remain previously unseen, the painted and engraved female figures that proliferated during the late Ming fall outside the radar of modern albums of “performing images.”¹⁵

My secondary contribution, besides the new concept of “role portrait,” lies in my emphasis on the dual aspects of beautiful woman paintings under discussion: they were at once fanciful, melodramatic, and magical in dramatic settings, but also ordinary, marketable art objects in everyday life. I propose to turn our attention to the material dimension of the paintings and to imagine “the overlaps between everyday and performative use” of props along the line of inquiries in prop studies.¹⁶ Although the culture of consumption is a well-established perspective in late Ming studies—Timothy Brook, James Cahill, and Craig Clunas have created effective

interpretive paradigms—this article attempts to reach a conclusion that crosses boundaries between the culture of commerce, visual culture, performance studies, and dramatic literature.¹⁷ The turn to the material dimension also naturally distinguishes my study from previous scholarship that overemphasizes the continuity of a rich literary tradition across different genres featuring a woman's deathbed self-portraiture, ignoring the ever-changing commercial and dramatic contexts.¹⁸ For example, in her studies of female death, the supernatural, and theatricality, Judith Zeitlin sees female self-portraits, or what she calls the "auto-effigy" phenomenon, as literary tokens embodying the timeless and universal value of *qing* 情, or human sentiment, both in cultural affairs and in its relation to traditional Chinese medical discourse, including "the exteriorizations of invisible desires concealed in the female body."¹⁹ In such analyses, the material body of the painting disappears, as does a special type of pictorial dramaturgy associated with the painting.

To suggest a link between the marketplace and the brothel theater, however, one needs inventories and other substantial historical documents, such as those that scholars in material studies have discovered that reveal the recycling and remodeling of early-modern European theater objects outside the theater itself.²⁰ This kind of source material is, unfortunately, lacking in the case of early-modern Chinese studies. The best I can do is to suggest the conspicuous spatial overlap between the marketplace and brothel areas in Suzhou through piecing together historical pictorial representations of the area, guidebooks of late Ming Suzhou brothels, and maps in local gazetteers (fig. 2). Art historians James Cahill and Ellen Johnston Laing have studied some beautiful woman paintings in the context of the late Ming business practice of selling "second-rate copies" and "ghost" paintings.²¹ Among the several urban centers that were hubs for the sale of such replicas or knockoffs, the most prominent was Suzhou. Studio replicas known as *Suzhou pian* 蘇州片—"an extraordinarily wide range of painted goods" produced by Suzhou fakers—were sold in the street markets near the Chang Gate 閶門 (such as Peach Blossom Land 桃花塢 and Zhuan Zhu Lane 專諸巷).²² Qiu Ying was a favorite Suzhou artist of figure paintings in color, and his name may have become a particularly desirable one in the *Suzhou pian* shops, where some scrolls attributed to him may have been generated. As is shown in figure 2, the Chang Gate area is the home address most often mentioned in the catalogue of famous Suzhou courtesans, *Seductive Courtesans of Suzhou* (*Wuji baimei* 吳姬百媚, 1617 preface).²³ The Qiu Ying models thrived in the same neighborhood of famous brothels, where female entertainers specializing in female roles rose to theatrical prominence. Whether or not the consumers of these painting shops and brothels were the same is largely a matter of conjecture. But it is safe to say that the late Ming was a time when brothels, theaters, *Suzhou pian* shops, and spin-off commodities nurtured each other to reach commercial success. When the Ming dynasty collapsed, such burgeoning commercial areas featuring *Suzhou pian* shops, the plays whose plots evolve around them, as well as the courtesan-actress herself waned accordingly.

The Age of Iconographic Replication

Real courtesans were portrayed in the same fashion as the fictional women featured in beautiful woman paintings. One rare example of a painting named after a real courtesan is Wu Wei's 吳偉 (1459–1508) portrait commemorating a courtesan named Wuling Chun 武陵春 (fig. 3).²⁴ The formula in Qiu Ying models was also transmitted across the media of painting and wood-block illustrations as we find it applied widely to catalogues of courtesans.²⁵ The best examples are illustrations of well-known courtesans labeled with their names and rankings

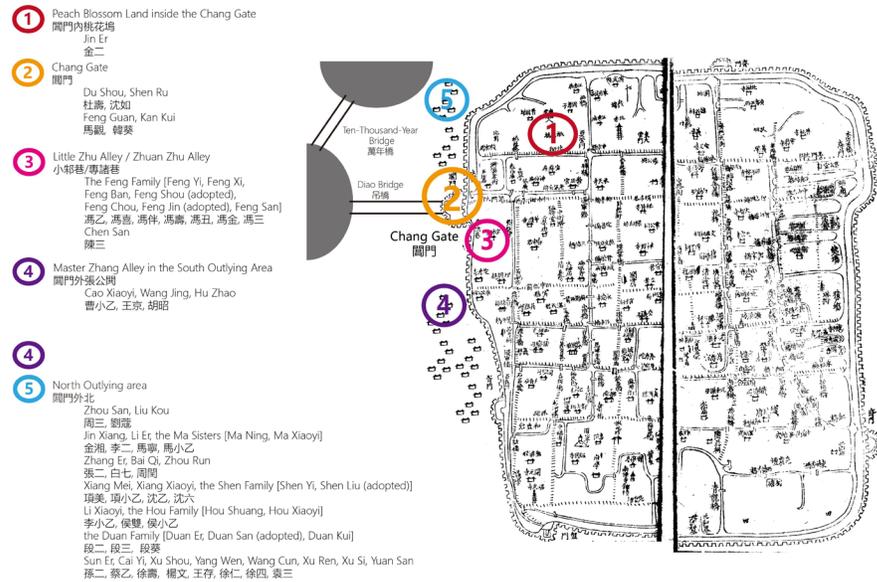


FIGURE 2. The Chang Gate area was the home address of famous courtesans. Well-known brothels and the marketplace for “beautiful woman” painting products were in the same neighborhood. *Local Gazetteers of the Suzhou Prefecture Compiled in the Kangxi Reign* 康熙蘇州府志 (1693), original in Shanghai Library (digitized image, database open access to readers); legend and addition of bridges by the author

in catalogues published in the early seventeenth century as publicity pamphlets for local courtesans.²⁶ The illustrations mostly depict various cultural activities and leisure moments that a client could enjoy with these women, who excelled at cultural skills such as drinking, horse riding, mountain hiking, chess games, chasing butterflies, and so on (figs. 4, 5).²⁷ What enabled the transmission of female icons from the genre of beautiful woman paintings to the medium of wood-block printing was the practice of standardization in iconography. By comparing the above four examples, we can tell that the painters’ execution was often translated



FIGURE 3. Wu Wei 吳偉 (1459–1508), *Miss Wuling Chun* 武陵春 (detail). Ink on paper, H x W: 27.5 x 93.9 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing



FIGURE 4. Portrait of Liang Xiaopian, *Second Among the Medium-Ranking Courtesans, Singing* 二甲三名梁小翻度曲圖. Wood-block illustration in *Seductive Courtesans of Suzhou* 蘇州百媚, 1617 preface

faithfully by skilled engravers. Standardization provided ease of trans-media replication and manufacture.

The best prototype for legitimate copies of beautiful woman paintings, however, is the long handscroll of sixty female figures, ink and heavy color on silk, that is catalogued in the collection of the National Museum of China as “a Qing-Dynasty copy after Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties*” 清人仿仇英百美圖 (fig. 6). Since these figures all look similar to visual representations of real courtesans such as Wuling chun (fig. 3) and Chen Yuan (fig. 5), there must have been a contemporary erotic reality behind the paintings’ decorous classic references (for instance, to the Moon Goddess, Mount Wu Goddess, Wang Zhaojun 王昭君, Lü Zhu 綠珠, Imperial Concubine Lady Ban 班婕妤, Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, Imperial Concubine Lady Plum Blossoms 梅妃, or Xue Tao 薛濤)—an erotic reality that the late Ming mentality may well have easily decoded. The same handscroll may have been in the Shenyang Palace collection, identified as “Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties*” (*Qiu Ying Baimei tujian* 仇英百美圖卷), before it was sent to Beijing. There is another handscroll, entitled “Illustrations of Beautiful Women” (*Jia furen tuli* 佳婦人圖例), in the collection of Waseda University (hereafter Waseda copy), in which the sixty figures are rendered in monochrome and painted on seventeen sheets of various-sized paper (with three or four figures per sheet).

Both the color Beijing copy (see figs. 6, 8b) and the monochrome Waseda copy bear Qiu Ying’s seals and signatures, which we also find on other paintings attributed to him, fake or genuine. The signatures, in which the proper name (Qiu Ying) appears beneath an alternate name, Shifu 實父, resemble the signature on a painting entitled *Saying Farewell at Xunyang* (*Xunyang songbie* 潯陽送別), which is likely a fake, now preserved in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City.²⁸ The seals that read Shizhou 十洲, Qiu Ying’s sobriquet, look similar to his ownership seals whose authenticity is considered undisputed (figs. 7a,b).²⁹

However, evidence abounds of outright faking, and of mistakes generated by mass duplication, suggesting that the copiers took the replication of seals and signatures to be a legitimate

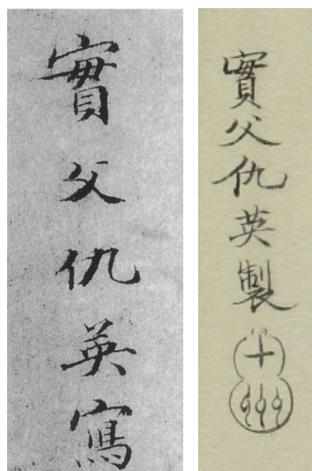


FIGURE 5. Portrait of Fledgling Courtesan Chen Yuan, Style Name Yuzhen, Chasing Butterflies 小妓陳元字玉貞戲蝶圖. Wood-block illustration in *Seductive Courtesans of Nanjing* 金陵百媚, 1618 preface



FIGURE 6. A Qing-Dynasty Copy after Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties* 清人仿仇英百美圖. Images of Wang Zhaojun, Lü Zhu, Imperial Concubine Lady Ban, Zhuo Wenjun, Imperial Concubine Lady Plum Blossoms, and Xue Tao. Image courtesy of the National Museum of China

and indispensable part of their job of copying the original work, rather than replicating the seals and signatures in order to deliberately trick the viewer for extra profit. That is to say, the contemporary customer may have understood that a studio replica was not the original in the same way that we buy reproductions of Ming paintings from museum gift shops. The signature and seal in the monochrome Waseda copy, for example, do not display any effort to look as restrained and dignified as those we see elsewhere (fig. 7b). Similarly, both handscrolls' fifty-seven poems dedicated to the sixty women, inscribed in the upper right corner of each



FIGURES 7a,b. (a) “Qiu Ying” signatures on *Saying Farewell at Xunyang* 潯陽送別, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. After Laing, “‘Suzhou Pian’ and Other Dubious Paintings in the Received ‘Oeuvre’ of Qiu Ying,” 287. (b) “Qiu Ying” signatures on *Illustrations of Beautiful Women* 佳婦人圖例, Waseda University, Tokyo. Image courtesy of Waseda University

image unit (six of which appear in three pairs and thus share poems), whose calligraphy was assigned to the famous artist Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559), are written in a conspicuously clumsy style, openly revealing a hand other than Wen’s. In addition, the color scroll is missing some poems and the Waseda copy contains multiple cases of mislabeling that can be supplied from or corrected by reference to the color copy.³⁰ The discrepancies between the two renditions again indicate that the copiers, like many studio laborers of various times, played fast and loose with the subtle expressions of the Qiu Ying models.

Most of the figures in the Waseda copy appear in an order that is distinctly different from that seen in the color scroll. But its thirteenth sheet happens to depict four figures that appear in the same order, from left to right: a Tang singing girl, Beauty Du; a Tang courtesan, Miss Willow; an abandoned wife, Beauty Xue, also from the Tang dynasty; and a Tang concubine, Beauty Bu (figs. 8a,b). The iconography of the beauties—their settings, costumes, poses, and gestures—is roughly parallel between the two copies. One can imagine that there was a coherent system that provided an important template for many other copies. Making copies of the handscroll, or of a selection of figures from it, was a tool for professional painters working in the commercial environment.

All the figures in the two handscrolls feature the accessorized imagery of ancient beauty icons, including fairly standard and formulaic facial and gestural contours, with various visual cues coded to their respective background stories. Inner evidence from the two scrolls suggests that coherence in artistic expression would have come in handy for copiers. The traditional method of copying is called *lin* 臨 (copying by eye alone, as opposed to making an exact copy). One might note that the poem dedicated to the abandoned wife Beauty Xue in both handscrolls, as seen in figure 8, is a variation on the one recorded in Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) anecdotal account of her story. In Feng’s version, the disappointed wife, Xue Yuan 薛媛, paints her self-portrait and inscribes on it a poem asking her husband to “frequently unroll and *look at* the portrait” 時展畫圖看,³¹ whereas in the two handscrolls, the verb *look at* has been replaced by the verb *copy* (*lin*) 請君時把畫圖臨。

The idea of copying a beautiful woman painting as a public pastime in the method of *lin* is closely associated with the use of *fenben* 粉本, line-drawing drafts for the reference of aspiring painters. As Tu Long 屠隆 (1543–1605; *jinshi* 1577) wrote in the 1590s, “Draft paintings by



FIGURES 8a,b. (a) Section 13 of *Illustrations of Beautiful Women* 佳婦人圖例. Image courtesy of Waseda University. (b) A Qing-Dynasty Copy after Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties* 清人仿仇英百美圖 (detail). Image courtesy of the National Museum of China

artists from antiquity are called *fenben*,” and since such a sketch would be of immediate value to contemporary painters, “those who happen to possess one had better treasure it” 古人畫稿謂之粉本. . . 有則宜寶藏之.³² The popularity of model images “preserved for private use” became a sixteenth-century cultural phenomenon associated with what J. P. Park calls “the democratization of art” along with “the improved economic standing of the late Ming urban classes.”³³ However, in the only extant Ming painting manual exclusively devoted to the genre of figure painting, Zhou Lüjing’s 周履靖 (1549–1640) *Heavenly Forms and Exemplary Manners* (*Tianxing daomao* 天形道貌), there is clearly a lack of the Qiu Ying models—only four out of thirty-six pictures were women, placed at the end of the volume, among which just one was rendered in the Qiu Ying style.³⁴ In the context of Japanese painting, Brenda Jordan has pointed out the function of *fenben* as an important means to transmit “the style of a particular workshop from generation to generation.”³⁵ There was surely the market demand for *fenben* of the Qiu Ying models, and the two handscrolls under discussion may have been a response to it.

The term *fenben* may refer to specialized manuals for painting female images in Ruan Dacheng’s 阮大鍼 (1587–1646; *jinshi* 1616) *The Swallow Letter* (*Yanzi jian* 燕子箋), completed in the Chongzhen reign (1628–1644). When the hero of *The Swallow Letter* is adding his own image to his portrait of his courtesan-lover, he decides not to use a *fenben*—a draft painting of male figures as a model for a portrait of himself—but to “resort to this small mirror” 脫粉本央小鏡菱花, and then to look back and forth at his reflection while drafting his own image.³⁶ This is a manifestation of the gendered divide between a male portrait and a courtesan’s “portrait.” The male tradition pursued a certain degree of verisimilitude, the female one a stereotypical beauty with a generic face. The scholar’s own face must come from a contemporary moment and not be rendered through a veil of past visualizations; or, perhaps, most *fenben* copies for female portraits available at his time were exclusively in the Qiu Ying style. For the image of his courtesan-lover, therefore, he uses as his model a portrait of the imperial concubine Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 (also Wang Qiang 王嬙; ca. 51–15 BCE, frequently the subject of beautiful woman paintings), which the courtesan has borrowed from her neighbor (presumably another courtesan). The resulting painting portrays the courtesan chasing butterflies while orioles flit about overhead near a willow tree, possibly reminding us of the historical courtesan Chen Yuan’s portrait in the Nanjing catalogue (fig. 5). The hero comments approvingly on the

resemblance of his courtesan-lover to the *fenben*, to which she replies: “Nothing about me resembles Zhaojun except that my harsh life in the brothel, like fallen petals of peach blossoms, is comparable to her sufferings from the trip crossing the borders” 諸般不像, 只是桃花薄命, 流落平康, 也與他出塞的苦沒什麼差別.³⁷ But the hero fetches the Wang Zhaojun handscroll and speaks emphatically to it about the resemblance: “She [my lover] duplicates you, Imperial Concubine, in painting” 果然明妃重畫. It is the hero’s transforming imagination alone that superimposes the generic face of the ancient beauty Zhaojun onto that of his courtesan-lover.

Likewise, a bolder hero in another play also spends some leisure time painting in the same genre: holding a brush, he first thinks of reproducing a Zhaojun painting 便要實圖出塞王嬙貌;³⁸ his second thought, unsurprisingly, is to make an exact copy of previously existing models “in the same way I would to create auspicious deity images in the Spring Festival” 似歲底神荼按本勾描. His ideal model is the beauty icon of a famous Han-dynasty queen, A Jiao 阿嬌 (ca. 150–ca. 200), from wood-block imprints that are not yet at his disposal 又沒有個版刊成葫蘆阿嬌.³⁹

To return to the sixty role portraits in the *Hundred Beauties* scroll, in Ming times there was in all likelihood a dramatic dimension to their predecessors. When viewers’ attention was drawn to the accessories of the beauty icons depicted in the handscrolls, they often deduced the women’s various identities and types by associating these accessories with love stories enacted in the theater. In these instances, it better served the emotional intensity of the portrait to be less unique. The image’s affinity with its background stories would create an uncanny effect of lifelikeness, inviting the viewer to reanimate the figure in his imagination. If one finds that a Barbie doll expresses some degree of sexual ideal and gendered expectations, touched up with a sense of playfulness, then one should not feel surprised at a Ming consumer’s fascination with these much earlier female images.

One example should suffice. Jade Flute’s image in the handscrolls does not illustrate any specific scene in the drama (fig. 9). Instead, the four-line verse inscribed beside her image highlights “her hands caressing the pair of jade pendants near a pavilion” 手弄雙環亭下玩—the signature gesture that epitomizes Jade Flute’s longing for her lover in the final days before she perishes for want of him.

The image in the handscroll is certainly intended to revive the viewer’s memory of Jade Flute’s prop portrait in its sentimental, theatrical setting. *The Jade Pendants* (*Yuhuan ji* 玉環記), an anonymous Ming play, may have been based on the northern *zaju* play *Jade Flute’s Marriage Destiny Over Two Lifetimes* (*Yuxiaonü liangshi yinyuan* 玉簫女兩世因緣), attributed to Qiao Ji 喬吉 (ca. 1280–ca. 1345).⁴⁰ The story tells of a courtesan known as Jade Flute who, at the time of her forced separation from her scholar-lover, offers to send a self-portrait to his lodgings in the capital to quench the fire of his love-longing. But after his departure, she pines away and eventually expires while holding tight to their love token, a pair of antique jade pendants. A reincarnation of Jade Flute, a well-born young lady named Flute Jade, daughter of a general, is to marry the hero. The self-portrait somehow resurfaces and is presented to the hero. Miraculously, the general confirms that his daughter has a birthmark on her palm in the shape of the jade pendants, which look exactly like their pictorial counterpart—the jade pendants in the hand of the painted beauty 那圖中美人掌持玉環, 小女亦於此掌中白圈如在.⁴¹

The Jade Pendants has a prominent place in the visual culture and popular repertoire of the late Ming. It is among the twenty or so plays mentioned in Pan Yunduan’s 潘允端 (1526–1601; *jinshi* 1566) extensive records of watching theatrical performances in his luxurious Yu Garden (still a famous tourist attraction in present-day Shanghai) in the last sixteen years of his life



FIGURE 9. Jade Flute in A Qing-Dynasty Copy after Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties* 清人仿仇英百美图. Original in the National Museum of China. Image courtesy of the National Museum of China

(1586–1601).⁴² Furthermore, the attractions of the courtesan's self-portrait scene remained constant for half a century (1570s–1620s): it appears in four drama miscellanies and three popular *kunqu* songbooks published in that period, in addition to the play's three full-text wood-block editions from approximately the same time.⁴³ The sixteenth-century anonymous pornographic novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話) describes in chapter 63 the staging of this scene in a rich merchant-class family's private theater. Perhaps to highlight the emotional crescendo of the drama, the novelist atypically records verbatim Jade Flute's lines sung to the messenger boy before she hands over the scroll painting: "In this life [he and I] are unlikely to meet again. For this reason, I bequeath this painting to him" 今生難會，因此上寄丹青。⁴⁴ Two more arias follow, reinforcing the image of the heartbroken and dying courtesan. A moment later, the heroine asks for the jade pendants, caresses them while crying "Oh, Mister Wei Fengxiang, my love!" and dies. The contemporary viewer of the Qiu Ying figure of Jade Flute must have been well aware of the tradition of her sentimental deathbed scene.

Qiu Ying figures such as Jade Flute refer to the theater externally through a range of static, conventional gestures, props, and pieces of clothing that evoke central dramatic situations. They were designed to bring pleasure through the recognition and sentiment of theatrical presentations.

Displaying beauty icons of the Qiu Ying models in a set was a new trend in social customs of interior decoration, which may have stimulated reproduction of group images, in sharp contrast to the earlier convention of hanging just one scroll per room. Yu Yonglin 余永麟 (fl. Jiajing reign, 1522–1566) records a contemporary idiom in the 1530s: "People today have the lowest taste; they need four paintings to hang [on their walls]" 今人最俗，挂畫四幅。⁴⁵ According to him, the new trend of displaying a set of four vertical scrolls of beautiful women was called "one hall" (*yitang* 一堂). The visual fullness of four figure paintings in one hall finds a fictional representation in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, in which the protagonist's favorite courtesan has her two opposite walls decorated with a set of hanging scrolls depicting four beautiful women in the four seasons, and a portrait of Guanyin of the Ocean Tides placed on the wall in the middle.⁴⁶ Soon, when the courtesan finally shows up, she is the living image of a beautiful woman painting in front of the protagonist: "If she is not the image of a portrait of Kuan-in by Wu Tao-tzu, she must be the subject of a painting of a beauty by Mao Yanshou" 若非道子觀音畫，定然延壽美人圖。⁴⁷ Here the novelist not only makes a silent comment on the vulgar taste of the courtesan—a comment that would have remained hidden to readers unaware of elite taste, but also speaks wittily of the theatricality of brothel culture: the courtesan and the beautiful woman painting are but one.⁴⁸ That one beauty image multiplied into a set of many images recalls medieval folding screens discussed by Wu Hung in his recent study. Wu argues that although screens in various forms had functioned as a medium for beauty icons since the Han dynasty, large standing folding screens, or *lianping* 聯屏, with multiple beauty images nevertheless have a special illusionistic or even "animation" effect.⁴⁹ In fact, Qiu Ying's beautiful-woman folding screen, consisting of nine paintings (each 65.24 by 37.88 cm), authentic but now lost, was treasured by the famous late Ming painter and collector Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525–1590).⁵⁰ In 1554, Xiang solicited inscriptions from eighty-four-year-old Wen Zhengming. Thus, when Song Zhengbi 宋徵璧 (1602–1672; *jinshi* 1643) began his 1633 poem with a line depicting an elite man's folding screen with twelve beauty images 十二雲屏坐玉人, he was both referring to a real standing screen, likely rendered in the Qiu Ying style, and alluding to the size of the man's harem.⁵¹

Pictorial Dramaturgy: From “Beautiful Woman Paintings” to “Beautiful Woman Plays”

By mechanical multiplication, the Qiu Ying models created an audience for these images that any theater would have been happy to share. To dramatists, these popular paintings had intrinsically high value to the theater as the viewers of the paintings automatically saw in them scenes from dramas. They provided a ready-made audience for new dramas that centered on the beautiful woman paintings. Given the Qiu Ying models’ place in popular consciousness and their close association with a prior consensus of erotic imagination, there is no reason to suppose that beautiful woman paintings, as the courtesan’s “role portraits,” would not have influenced Tang Xianzu and his followers directly. The beauty image projected an erotic charge in both its visual and theatrical representations, thereby enabling particular repertoires of *chuanqi* drama. We have encountered in the opening pages of this article one reference to beautiful woman paintings in Tang Xianzu’s play, which, among many other references to beautiful woman painting, may have been one of the attributes of the category of “beautiful woman plays,” or “erotic plays” (*yanpin*) as defined by the drama critic Qi Biaoji 祁彪佳 (1603–1645; *jinshi* 1622).⁵² There are twenty southern comedies (or *chuanqi* plays) and nine northern dramas (or *zaju*) in his annotated bibliographies. Not all of them involve beautiful woman paintings, but they are all preoccupied with explicit portrayals of erotic love for beautiful women.

The list of twenty *chuanqi* plays opens with Tang Xianzu’s *The Purple Flute* (*Zixiao ji* 紫簫記, ca. 1577) and *The Purple Hairpin*, both of which feature a beautiful woman with a prominent



FIGURE 10. Mme. Four Strings in A Qing-Dynasty Copy after Qiu Ying, *Scroll of A Hundred Beauties* 清人仿仇英百美图. Original in the National Museum of China. Image courtesy of the National Museum of China

place in Ming visual culture: Little Jade (Huo Xiaoyu) and a courtesan, Mme. Four Strings (Bao Sixian 鮑四絃), respectively (fig. 10).

Tang Xianzu's 1598 masterpiece, *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭)—a long story of love, despair, death, return from the dead, and marriage—is not listed in Qi Biao's annotated catalogues. But it is even bolder in its allusions to the courtesan's portrait than is *The Purple Hairpin*. *The Peony Pavilion* makes multiple references to Cui Hui 崔徽, a Tang courtesan, and deliberately confuses Cui Hui with another lady surnamed Cui, the heroine of *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記). Legend has it that the desperate Cui Hui, abandoned by her lover, arranged to have her portrait painted by a master and then sent to him, together with a letter that read, "Someday I will no longer resemble the woman in the scroll, and that is when I shall die for you." Before long, she went mad, stopped seeing clients, and eventually died. The story must have been quite popular from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, for it appears in poetry, classical tales, song lyrics (*ci*), and chantefables, the earliest of these being Yuan Zhen's 元稹 (779–831) lost *Song of Cui Hui* (*Cui Hui ge* 崔徽歌).⁵³ But somehow the story seems to have lost its allure in Ming popular culture, so when Tang Xianzu alluded to it three times in *The Peony Pavilion*, he must have done so with specific intention because it was an esoteric reference by his time.

Cui Hui had been erased in the sixteenth-century public's memory, replaced by another figure, Oriole Cui 崔鶯鶯, the heroine of a fourteenth-century northern play called *The Story of the Western Wing*, which thrived onstage in its southern adaptation in the late Ming.⁵⁴ Neither the northern nor the southern version features a prop portrait associated with Oriole Cui. Yet Tang Xianzu playfully portrays the sexual awakening of the heroine Bridal Du in *The Peony Pavilion* as being inspired by *The Story of Cui Hui* (*Cui Hui zhuan* 崔徽傳), which, according to Bridal Du's explanation, tells the story of Oriole Cui as though she and Cui Hui were the same person (scene 10). Experts on Tang Xianzu see this as either a case of his carelessness or as "an unnecessary complication."⁵⁵ This is plausible yet lacks strong interpretive support. Why would the play's various Ming editions retain all three recondite allusions to Cui Hui?

The other two references clearly involve the courtesan's portrait. In scene 14, Bridal Du's deathbed scene, she completes her own self-portrait. We find a line directly borrowed from the probable medieval sources put into the mouth of a page boy—"Cui Hui no longer resembles the woman in the scroll" 崔徽不似卷中人—thus alluding to Bridal Du as a contemporary Cui Hui. And, in scene 26, the hero extols Bridal Du's self-portrait for its resemblance to Cui Hui's portrait 小娘子畫似崔徽—a resemblance certainly not in terms of painting technique, but of the painted beauty's sex appeal.⁵⁶ There is no reason to doubt Tang Xianzu's erudition: how could this renowned poet *not* have known that Oriole Cui and Cui Hui—two female protagonists surnamed Cui—initially appear, respectively, in the Tang poet Yuan Zhen's *Story of Cui Yingying* 鶯鶯傳 and *Song of Cui Hui*?

Oriole Cui finds herself among the Qiu Ying models in the late Ming. For example, the Oriole Cui portrait on the opening page of a 1616 edition openly acknowledges its use of a painting of Qiu Ying as its model (fig. 11). In the static image, the full implications of a real woman can be savored, and its remarkable, magical "realization" or animation into total dynamism is bound to take place, whether on the stage or on the page.

Another manifestation of Tang Xianzu's indebtedness to the Qiu Ying models has also gone unnoticed. In scene 5, *The Peony Pavilion* sets out to frame its heroine Bridal Du within the mental picture of an ordinary beautiful woman painting, thereby echoing its counterpart—her self-portrait created in scene 14. In scene 5, Bridal Du enters and greets her pedantic teacher, describing herself as a stereotypical painted beauty: "Brows limned black with emerald sheen,



FIGURE 11. A Portrait of Miss Cui in the Qiu Ying Style 崔嬪像摹仇英筆. Illustration of He Bi's 何璧 1616 version of *The Story of the Western Wing, Northern Version* 北西廂記

pendants swaying at the waist, pictured beauty steps as from an embroidered screen” 添眉翠，搖佩珠，繡屏中生成仕女圖。⁵⁷ Unlike the protagonist of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Bridal Du's stale elderly teacher is obviously blind to this living image of a beautiful woman painting in front of him; yet the theater spectator, familiar with the visual pleasure of such a painting in typical brothel decoration, would be pleased. The reading public would find their taste for beauty portraits materialized in illustrated drama imprints such as the 1620 wood-block edition of *The Peony Pavilion* by the renowned Suzhou professional Wang Wenheng 王文衡, in which an illustration is set to this very line (fig. 12).⁵⁸ Here Bridal Du is seen from a remote standpoint within a visual tableau—standing between two maidservants on a terrace surrounded by trees and *taihu* rocks. She is easily distinguished by her taller and more richly accessorized figure in a three-quarters profile. The illustration is constructed quite conventionally, with the entire left leaf taken up by an unpopulated landscape and inscribed captions. Yet the right half, or the “portrait,” also displays its architectural and botanical details more proudly and distinctly than it does the facial features of Bridal Du.

In this pictorial fantasy of Bridal Du as the subject of a beautiful woman painting, there are no hints of eroticism, sensuality, or intimacy to modern eyes. It is tempting to downplay Wang Wenheng's erotic investment in creating this illustration—featuring a slender body with few facial details and an unattractive posture, yet a distracting, luscious garden setting—and to ignore its association with a sexual aesthetic. But scene 26 (“The Portrait Examined” 玩真) unveils the enchantment of such paintings by dramatizing how the hero Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅 fetishizes Bridal Du's self-portrait, which displays compositional elements similar to Wang's illustration.

In scene 26, Liu notices that Bridal Du's slender figure and standing posture resemble those of the Moon Goddess, but this suggestion is quickly discarded as there is no cloud supporting her. This painting must be nothing other than a beautiful woman painting, Liu realizes. But he is uncertain whether it is a studio replica done by a professional portraitist or a self-portrait painted by the anonymous mortal girl 是畫工臨的，還是美人自手描的. Finally, judging by the

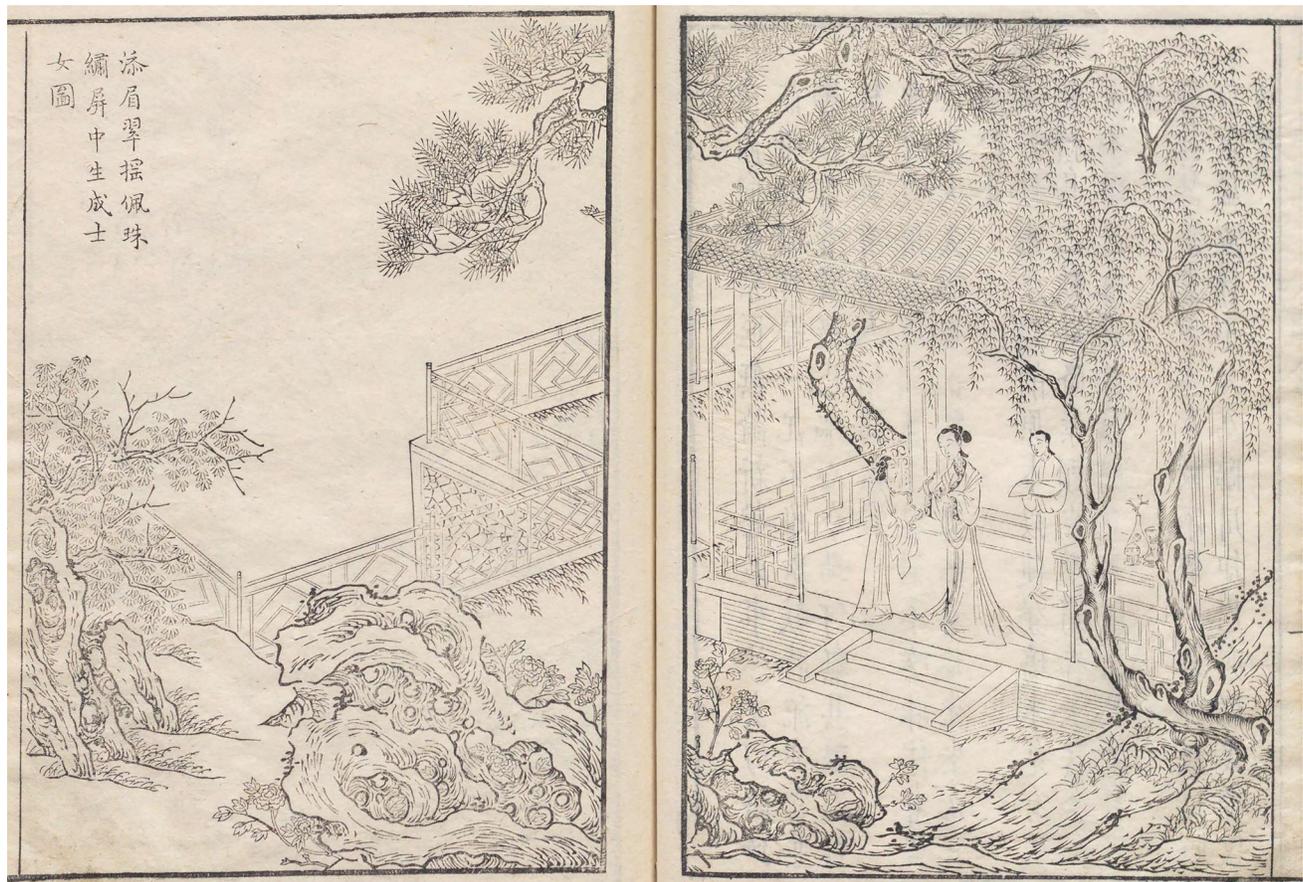


FIGURE 12. The first of thirteen illustrations in *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭, printed in 1620 by Mao Ying 茅暎. The thirteenth illustration is inscribed: “The year of Gengshen, Mid-Autumn Festival, painted by Wang Wenheng” 庚申中秋寫王文衡. Originals in Naikaku Bunko, Tokyo; and National Library, Beijing

figure’s “artless charm,” which a professional painter could never have achieved 總天然意態難模, he concludes that “surely this brushwork shows the skill of the lovely maid herself” 多半他自己能描會脫.⁵⁹ Clearly, Tang Xianzu chose to portray Bridal Du’s painting technique in a “realistic” fashion—that is, to situate her execution on silk within the framework of contemporary-style beautiful woman painting, in which little interest resided in the replication of a likeliness.

Zhou Gongwang’s 周公望 (fl. 1628) *The Story of the Western Wing on Brocade* (*Jin xixiang* 錦西廂) offers a comical parody of the portraiture scenes in *The Peony Pavilion*.⁶⁰ In this case, a female painter’s portrait of a man has the same arousal effect on another woman. The gender roles in Bridal Du’s self-portrait and her lover Liu Mengmei’s fascination with it are completely reversed. The parody heroine Oriole Cui paints her lover Scholar Zhang’s portrait—not her self-portrait—on her round fan after their forced separation. Yet she relies not on any preexisting male icons but rather on her memories of the lover 虛空畫出張生面.⁶¹ Fleeing from the Buddhist temple, she leaves behind the painted fan, which then falls into the hands of the villainous general’s wife, who, lately widowed, falls in love with the painted handsome man. His identity is quite clear since Oriole Cui has inscribed on the fan “Portrait of Junrui” (Scholar Zhang’s style name). Deeply enamored by the male image, she decides to seek out Scholar Zhang and marry him, instead of killing him for being responsible for her husband’s death as she had originally planned.

With the great success of *The Peony Pavilion* came a series of plays whose plots revolve around beautiful woman paintings including the above-mentioned *The Swallow Letter*. Another play missing from Qi's catalogue, but surely having a place in the category of "beautiful woman plays," is Meng Chengshun's 孟稱舜 (1599–1684) *Mistress and Maid* (*Jiaohong ji* 嬌紅記 or *Yuanyang zhong* 鴛鴦塚, 1638 preface). Like *The Peony Pavilion*, it sets out in early scenes to identify its heroine, Bella, as a beauty in a commercially produced beautiful woman painting. The first romantic encounter between the young lovers, in scene 3, when the hero glimpses Bella, is a vivid depiction of his memory of many beautiful woman paintings: "Her cheeks flushed with spring, clear jade yet fragrant—those scrolls of painted beauties were no lies" 翠臉生春玉有香, 則那美人圖畫出都非謊.⁶² The thought that she looks just like the beauties in the many scroll paintings he has viewed—easily accessible in the marketplace—sends a shiver down his spine, and he is instantly in love with her.

Referenced as a painted beauty many times in later scenes, Bella belongs to the marketplace of the idealized, generic beautiful woman paintings. In scene 5, Young Master Handsome, ironically played by a clown, orders his hangers-on to "hire a painter who can find a chance to sneak in and sketch" five pretty unmarried young women in town, including Bella. He also wants to know "if there are any more pretty girls worth painting" 你可引了畫工, 把那些女子的真容, 乘間偷畫來我看, 還再打聽有好的也畫將來.⁶³ At a time before the invention of cameras and smartphones, the only way to complete the task is for the portraitist to stalk women secretly, and then to rely on his memory to paint each of their images on a scroll. In scene 19, the two hangers-on reappear onstage with nine scrolls of beautiful woman paintings. Like Bridal Du's self-portrait in the eyes of Liu Mengmei in *The Peony Pavilion*, the nine painted beauties are first described using literary clichés that insist they all look as beautiful as Guanyin Bodhisattva and the Mount Wu Goddess. Yet a new metaphor is quickly added to cater to the playboy's libido: the two flunkies hang the scrolls on the four walls like pinups, creating the impression that he is surrounded by nine well-dressed singing girls serving him wine at a banquet 四壁安排, 仿佛筵前列錦釵. Provided that Handsome's ritual supplications succeed in animating them, the hangers-on promise that he will enjoy a romantic rendezvous with each one.⁶⁴

Although each scroll bears an actual woman's name, Handsome understands that his prodigal expenditure on them does not guarantee their correspondence to real, identifiable women; the scrolls may well be cheap studio knockoffs like the ones with which the destitute hero is familiar. So he claims that he has enough patience to investigate their true identities before sending a matchmaker to arrange a wedding with one of them 待我查了的當, 內人去求婚便了.⁶⁵ Even in scene 30, in which he finally possesses and worships these expensive pictures in a religious manner, with incense burning in front of the hanging scrolls day and night, he remains wracked with doubt: "I can't tell which are true and which are fake, and so don't care to go straight ahead and make a marriage proposal" 中間未知虛實, 不敢即往求婚.⁶⁶ But it is in this same scene that a courtesan who occasionally visits both Handsome's and Bella's homes as a professional entertainer verifies that there is a real Bella who looks even more beautiful than her image on the scroll. The courtesan's comments do not refer to the verisimilitude of the painting, which the titillated man cares little about—what matters is that Bella is a real woman. Delirious with joy, he sends the matchmaker to ask Bella's parents for her hand in marriage right away, thus triggering a series of tragedies. Up to this point, identifying the heroine as a beauty in a commercial painting has been the major thrust of the play. The complete absence of such dynamics from an earlier *chuanqi* play that tells the same story, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*,

the Story of Mistress and Maid (*Jintong yunü Jiaohong ji* 金童玉女嬌紅記), speaks to how Meng Chengshun distinguished himself from playwrights of the old repertoire.⁶⁷

It seems to have been fashionable to commission a famous female-figure painter and a well-known engraver to create the heroine's portrait(s) that open drama imprints. In the case of *Mistress and Maid*, Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598–1652) was commissioned to paint a set of four portraits of Bella for the edition, which then were successfully transmitted into wood-block prints that readers would encounter before they read the script, just like the Oriole Cui portraits that are set into the opening pages of wood-block editions of *The Story of the Western Wing* (fig. 13). Many wood-block drama editions adopted the structure of half-length portraits of the heroine(s) on their opening pages, followed by illustrations of individual scenes. To take wood-block imprints of *The Story of the Western Wing* as an example, portraits of Oriole Cui after the painterly styles of Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1524), Qiu Ying, and Chen Hongshou open various fashionable drama imprints.⁶⁸

In circumstances where the beautiful woman's portrait appears on the opening page, there was a strong implication that the female role was to be performed by a woman rather than a female impersonator. Other visual hints further suggest that the heroine's images belong to a courtesan-actress, whether her social identity in the story is that of a respectable woman or a courtesan. Chen played with his imagination of Bella being dressed in different costumes and holding different props—a flute, a whisk, a fan, and a mirror. Although Bella in the story is a well-born lady, Chen's logic behind the composition of the set was to represent the four indispensable skills of the courtesan—mastery of a musical instrument, of dance, of solo singing in the southern style, and of maintaining a perfect countenance. The slim type of the vertical flute demands special skills to emit harmonious sound, whisk dance was the courtesan's signature dance style, and solos accompanied by dancing with a round fan were another staple of the courtesan's repertoire.⁶⁹ Certainly, Bella, the respectable lady in the drama, does not possess these skills (no written records suggest gentry-women of the time had that set of skills built into their curricula). The illustration portraits on the opening pages, therefore, are typically the courtesan's role portraits, where magic and wonder take over to reanimate Bella into a real courtesan.

The late Ming Huaiyuantang 懷遠堂 wood-block edition of *The Swallow Letter* also opens with portraits of Flowing Clouds Hua 華行雲 (the secondary female lead [*xiaodan* 小旦] as a courtesan) and Flying Clouds Li 麗飛雲 (the female lead as a well-born lady) by an anonymous painter and engraver (figs. 14a,b). Similar to the sixty role portraits in the *Hundred Beauties* scroll, these two portraits feature beauties typical of the Qiu Ying style, with hints of Chen Hongshou in the way they tilt their heads. Their accessories reinforce the illusion that the role icon they adorn may be reanimated at any time in the theater. The well-born lady Flying Clouds Li, for instance, holds a sheet of paper on which she will write the poem that will be carried away from her desk by swallows (very likely performed by costumed actors onstage) and then dropped, to be picked up by the hero—hence, the title of the play, *The Swallow Letter*. The courtesan Flowing Clouds Hua holds a thin vertical flute, the signature musical instrument of late Ming courtesans. Her posture and gesture suggest her virtuosity in playing the flute: she holds it not in her palm but on one finger, her fingernails long. The viewer of these wood-block engraved portraits thus encounters illustrations that pictorialize the story.

To summarize, beauty images that open illustrated dramas functioned as more than just attachments or adornments. More importantly, to the late Ming reader, they may have signified the dramas as the courtesan-actresses' specialty repertoire. The string of examples I have



FIGURE 13. Opening pages of *Mistress and Maid* 嬌紅記, 1638. Woodblock illustrations engraved by Xiang Nanzhou 項南洲 based on paintings by Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬. Original in Kyoto University



FIGURE 14a,b. Ruan Dacheng 阮大鍼 (1587–1646; *jinshi* 1616), *The Swallow Letter, Commented and Annotated by the Studio of Empathy for Remote Regions* 懷遠堂批點燕子箋, Chongzhen reign edition. (a) Portrait of Flowing Clouds Hua. (b) Portrait of Flying Clouds Li. Original in the Central Library, Taipei

analyzed in this section suggest that established public interest in the courtesan's role portraits and established sexual aesthetics stimulated playwrights to produce new plays, whose stage productions would then cast a courtesan in the lead role to evoke multilayered pleasure. To a lesser degree, this late Ming phenomenon resembles what Joseph Roach describes as the "It-effect" derived from "the feature-by-feature attributes of the actresses playing the heroines" in plays. When a play's paratext "alluded leeringly to their [the actresses'] sex lives off-stage," he suggests—and I completely agree—"the practice of intimacy in public had clearly arrived."⁷⁰

Dramatizing Studio Replicas and Their Reanimation

The best example of the dramatization of the circulation of a studio replica between private households and the marketplace is Wu Bing's 吳炳 (1595–1648; *jinshi* 1619) *The Painted Beauty* (*Huazhongren* 畫中人), published in the Chongzhen reign. The subplot dramatizes how the painting of an anonymous ideal beauty leaves the hands of its initial creator, and how the burning of a random studio replica purchased in the marketplace rescues the original. For the scholar-hero in *The Painted Beauty*, the beautiful woman paintings in the marketplace

are the motivation for his ambition to paint a beauty without any model 自畫一軸美人圖.⁷¹ It is this invented beauty with whom he falls in love and whom he seeks to animate through his passion, like the mythical figure Pygmalion and the statue he adores. The scholar's search for originality is set against the backdrop of a world of highly reproductive commercial products and thus turns out to be in vain. Just as Bridal Du's self-portrait was confused with professional workshop paintings by its intended viewer, Liu Mengmei, the scholar's painting, we are told later, can easily mingle with any beauty portrait in the market, clearly indicating the playwright's realist approach to portraying market forces of the day.

In scene 12 of *The Painted Beauty*, the scholar's strict father learns about the affair between his son and the woman in his painting, and dispels her by burning the painting to ashes. From this point on, the play becomes preoccupied with the destiny of the painting that houses the woman. It disappears for a time but reappears in scene 24, in which the scholar and his page boy rediscover a beautiful woman painting in a Daoist priest's dwelling. Here begins an interesting dialogue about the painting's potential on the portrait market (my emphasis):

SCHOLAR: It's my own brushwork. How can I be wrong about that?! I knew that the painting had never been burnt; my father must never have made you burn it. *It must be you, you little bastard, who stole and sold it! Somehow it changed hands and ended up here in Master Huayang's place.* If you don't tell me the truth, you'll die of a good beating.

CLOWN: Young Master, you can't beat me yet. When Old Master learned about the portrait, he really, truly, asked me to burn it. At that moment I ran into Master Hu [the villain], and he said that *since Old Master wouldn't be able to tell the difference anyway, why not buy some random contemporary-style painting and burn that one instead?*

(生) 自家畫的，難道不認得？我想此畫，原不曾燒，老爺原不曾要燒畫，畢竟是你這狗才，偷來賣了，不知如何又到華陽師父處，若不直說，一頓打死了你。

(丑) 相公不要亂打。老爺聞知有畫，實教繡琴燒毀，偶然撞見胡大官人，他說老爺左右不認得，胡亂買幅時畫，假意燒了。

The page boy's incomplete account omits that he has sold his master's brushwork to the villain for a tael of silver; according to the villain, a "contemporary-style" scroll (*shi-hua* 時畫) is worth three *fen* of silver on the market, that is, 30 percent of the price he has paid the page boy 三分銀子另買一軸.⁷²

Because the Old Master is waiting for the page boy to fetch the portrait and burn it, the villain's stratagem would not succeed if purchasing an over-the-counter replica in a late Ming shop had taken longer than grabbing a soft drink at a nearby convenience store today. Meanwhile, the term *shi-hua*—similar in composition to *shi-wen* 時文 (contemporary-style essays, or the "eight-legged" essays prescribed for the civil service examination), *shi-ben* 時本 (drama editions reflecting the most popular renditions in theater), and *shi-diao* 時調 (popular tunes)—discloses a piece of late Ming reality: "Contemporary-style" pinups were widely available in painting stores. Countless beautiful woman paintings in this style floated in and out of the art market, driven by the commercial culture that surrounded the painted beauty.

Possession of and infatuation with the portrait of a beautiful woman might lead to a Pygmalion realization of the male fantasy. "Since [the painted beauty] bears resemblance to a human," says a Daoist magician who excels at animating painted beauties to serve as singing girls for banquets, "she must be given affection" 既具人形，總屬情類.⁷³ The theory was that, if

a man persevered in showing affection to her, a painted beauty might come to life and become his real, loving wife or mistress.

Against this backdrop, any replicas could be expected to have some association with brothels. In other words, brothels may have constituted a particularized, anecdotal context for many painted beauties rendered in the idealized, if not standardized, manner of beauty-figure painters. In a world that longed for ideal beauties and perhaps found the reality of brothels disenchanting, beautiful woman paintings offered illusion and satisfaction.

Let us consider the situation in which a courtesan was cast in the role of a character who would unroll a beautiful woman painting onstage as a key prop (whether generic or one believed to be her own portrait). As a result, male viewers would have been justifiably preoccupied with the double dose of erotic energy generated by her sexualized body onstage and the painting's intense visuality and aesthetic ideal of beauty. The actress's sexual allure—rather than her facial resemblance to the painted female—would have converged with theatrical representation, thickening the erotic atmosphere of the portraiture scene.

My first example comes, inevitably, from Wu Bing's *The Painted Beauty*, specifically, scene 5, aptly entitled "Entertaining with Magic" (*Shihuan* 示幻). Wu dramatizes with intensity the conceit of an anonymous, ordinary figure painting as a movable brothel in which a painted courtesan resides. At a Daoist magician's feast, the scroll is reanimated to enable her to deliver an eroticized performance for his guests, including the scholar-hero, who is thereby inspired to emulate the magician by painting and animating his own beautiful young woman. Wu proffers meticulous stage directions. The courtesan, played by a secondary female lead in line with theatrical conventions, "suddenly walks from behind the painting, with a fan [in her hand] covering her face," while a gong is struck "backstage" 內鳴鑼, 小旦忽從畫邊走出, 扇遮介.⁷⁴ She serves wine to the men at the table, as all courtesans do. Upon the magician-host's request, she sings a free aria in the northern tune typical in brothel repertory; it begins with the line "Recall our first glimpses of each other in the pleasure quarters" 憶當初瞥向章臺見.⁷⁵ After a sprightly dance circling and spiraling, she abruptly exits 作飛舞盤旋忽下介.⁷⁶

This staging provided, in material form, fantasies in which the male viewers' lived experiences of brothel banquets reflected the fictional space of the prop painting. The idea was to reanimate the painted beauty and let the courtesan-actress who portrayed her demonstrate the musical and dancing skills that were at the core of a courtesan's training. In scene 23 of the same play, the villain borrows from his neighbors a vertical flute, a reed pipe, and a rug for a dance, as preparation for having the reawakened painted beauty serve him wine and entertain the group—just as the woman brought to life by the magician had done in scene 5.⁷⁷ To reproduce brothel experiences at full scale, he also hires male performers/hangers-on. The idea behind this fantasy is simple: since the scroll painting houses the beauty, it must be a portable, pictorial counterpart of the brothel.

In terms of acting and the material conditions of staging, there seems to have been no effort to conceal the actress's body from the audience. In *The Painted Beauty*, for example, there is no doubt that the painting hangs from a table, one of the few pieces of stage furniture, because the word *table* appears twice in stage directions when the painting is onstage. When the soul of the heroine, played by the female lead, arrives to see the portrait and claims her resemblance to the painted beauty, she "hides herself behind the painting" 掩入畫後介. The lyrics she sings suggest that she either stands or crouches behind the table: "I impress my real body on the [woman's] body in the painting" 我把真身合上畫中身 (scene 9).⁷⁸ Because there was no wall to block the viewer's sight on the late Ming arena stage, a table placed in the open

space of the stage could not be expected to be a real hiding place. Hence the audience was expected to trust the heroine's words and imagine, even though she never left their field of vision, that she and the painted beauty had become one.

Tang Xianzu uses this discrepancy between the mental picture suggested by the lyrics and the real vision of the audience to comic effect when Bridal Du's ghost tries to hide behind the painting, which she also claims to be her very own image. In scene 30, "Disrupted Joy" 歡撓, the randy yet loyal Daoist nun senses an affair taking place in Liu Mengmei's room and wants to search the room for evidence. The ghostly Bridal Du insists that Liu unbolt the door to the nun without fear, assuring him that "I shall conceal myself here in the shade cast by this beauty's portrait" 影著這一幅美人圖那邊躲.⁷⁹ As the Daoist nun pushes past the hero and approaches the portrait (which according to the stage directions is to be hung onstage before the scene begins), there is the sound of wind from offstage, the lamp flickers, and the ghost swiftly exits 且閃下介.⁸⁰ The difficulty of visualizing this sequence of actions has led Tina Lu to believe that the painting is supposed to have the magic power to change in size, since the material form of the prop portrait would have been too small to hide anyone of normal size.⁸¹

But is Bridal Du's ghost capable of hiding herself from the nun? Is the portrait a magical one? The staging convention meant that the audience would certainly see the ghostly heroine, regardless of what the Daoist nun might see or not see. The answer is not disclosed until the nun, after her reunion with the resurrected Bridal Du in a deserted village in scene 48, responds to the reanimated young lady's inquiry: "That night, aunt, when you came calling at Master Liu's door, did you know that it was I hiding there?" The nun's answer suggests that the ghost was completely exposed to her naked eye, just as she was to all the audience members: "You tell me: How it is possible for a single scroll of painting to furnish such concealment?" 則道畫幀兒怎放的個人迴避?⁸² This is a comical comment referring back to the performance in scene 30. Not only was the ghost's self-confidence in her magical power misguided, but the audience's mental picture, based on theatrical conventions, is shown to have been unreliable as well—in what may be seen as the theater's own self-referential moment to reflect upon its conventions. We might also wonder whether, in challenging earlier literary and theatrical conventions, Tang Xianzu is once again emphasizing the ghost's lack of a recognizable likeness to the painting, thus differentiating this beautiful woman painting from all the other painted beauties in medieval miracle stories. In those earlier stories, which Tang Xianzu references elsewhere in the play, beauties never fail to merge into their home paintings.

My last example—the casting of courtesans in *The Swallow Letter* in late Ming theater—comes from Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) historical drama *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohuashan* 桃花扇), completed half a century after the collapse of the Ming dynasty. In this play, the villain Ruan Dacheng is put in charge of organizing a troupe consisting of Nanjing courtesans and male brothel guest-performers (*qingke* 清客) in the Nanjing palace, in order to mount *The Swallow Letter* for the emperor. In scene 4, which is marked as happening in the early spring of 1643—the central dramatic action in the historical drama is premised on a temporal sequence—Ruan's private troupe versed in *The Swallow Letter* is "loaned" to a few literati for their enjoyment of the refined theatrical performance.⁸³ At the same time, Ruan is proof-reading a combined edition of his four *chuanqi* plays, including *The Swallow Letter*. By the first month of 1645, a final wood-block imprint is apparently presented to the emperor, who "is greatly pleased and immediately orders the Ministry of Rites to select good palace women and eunuchs to perform *The Swallow Letter*."⁸⁴ But Ruan pleads that he be permitted to cast brothel performers instead, because by 1645 *The Swallow Letter* has become a staple in the brothel

repertoire, often juxtaposed with *The Peony Pavilion* and Yuan Yuling's 袁于令 (1592–1674) famous *The Western Bower* (*Xilou ji* 西樓記, completed ca. 1624).⁸⁵ In Ruan's terminology, palace performers are "untrained voices" 生口, whereas courtesans are "trained voices" 熟口. To ensure the quality of the performance and to protect his own "literary fame," he proposes that several dozen courtesans and male performers be summoned to the Nanjing palace for an audition, which is fully dramatized in scene 25, "Auditioning the Courtesans" (*Xuanji* 選伎). The playwright Kong Shangren even arranges a play-within-a-play skit after a number of "trained voices" are selected and cast in different roles during the audition. According to the stage directions, various brothel performers "act out an aria from *The Swallow Letter* as usual; Ruan Dacheng (played by Secondary Painted Face) acts casually, providing instructions" 隨意演《燕子箋》一曲，副淨作態指點介。⁸⁶

What happens next in Kong's *The Peach Blossom Fan* indicates that the courtesan's presence onstage is measured in relation to contemporary standards of beauty and desire to a much greater extent than was the case for any other performer: within Kong's play, the villain Ruan casts a courtesan-actress—that is, the courtesan-heroine in *The Peach Blossom Fan*—as a clown in *The Swallow Letter*. This must have violated a principle of brothel performances, for the major criterion in auditioning courtesan-actresses was an erotic one—finding the most beautiful courtesan to play the female lead. More specifically, Ruan's task is actually to find a courtesan-actress who will unroll the scroll of the beautiful woman painting onstage and marvel at her own resemblance to the painted beauty. This courtesan-actress, originally cast by the villainous Ruan as the clown in his *Swallow Letter*, soon catches the eye of the emperor in the audience because by convention a courtesan-clown did not have to put on a powdered face. To the emperor, a beauty should act the female lead, and she is then cast back into the lead female role. A fledging courtesan, she makes it clear that she has only *The Peony Pavilion* in her personal repertoire and is therefore an "untrained voice," unsuitable for *The Swallow Letter*. But the emperor asserts that her "extraordinary beauty" 美麗非常 outweighs her inexperience, and that she should memorize the lyrics assigned to the female lead in three days before joining the rehearsal.⁸⁷

Conclusion

A beautiful woman painting used as a prop in the late Ming plays I have analyzed carries with it all the dynamic energies that crossed the boundaries between the art market and the theater, reality and illusion. Such a generic, static beauty icon that mediates between reality and fiction is what I have called a "role portrait" of the courtesan. Once animated into a living and breathing actress with virtuosity in singing and dancing, the beautiful woman image would be superimposed onto the courtesan herself. To late Ming consumers, such a painted beauty remained suspended, waiting to be reanimated by the copier or the admirer. The phenomenon of connecting vertical images of beautiful women to form a folding screen can be traced back to medieval times, but in the late Ming context of new beautiful woman plays, similar objects must have been more erotic to contemporary viewers because the painted beauty's reanimation was not just in the "mind's eye" but in what we might call the "body's eye."

It was the late Ming theatergoer's mental habits, cultivated by the conjunction of story and image in the Qiu Ying models, on which Tang Xianzu's new dramas depended. However, scenes of "realizations" and reanimations fell into disuse in the later history of Chinese drama, alongside the waning influence of the Qiu Ying models, *Suzhou pian* shops, and the courtesan-actress. These were the cultural roots from which the theatrical effects of some beautiful woman plays had stemmed. That is perhaps why "beautiful woman plays" did not find descendants in

the Qing dynasty. The ties between the dramas and the genre of beautiful woman paintings were forgotten. The brothel theater that had once embraced both the pictorial and the theatrical disappeared. The lineage of dramatic works with obligations to the Qiu Ying models ceased.

The hybrid sources I have compiled have been previously unnoticed as materials for investigating the historical phenomenon of beautiful woman paintings. Nevertheless, they provide important data in the art history of this subgenre, in its relation not only to the marketplace but also to the conceit of the courtesan's role portrait both inside and outside the brothel theater. I am aware of these sources' distance from what we traditionally consider to be "historical documents." I want to insist, however, that such unconventional documents allow us to trace the seemingly traceless presence of the courtesan-actress, providing alternative methodologies for imagining her involvement in shaping Tang Xianzu's legacy in the new pictorial dramaturgy.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this article were presented to a wide range of academic audiences at Peking University, Academia Sinica, Yale University, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, University of Toronto, University of California, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. I would like to express deep gratitude to colleagues who hosted the workshops and lectures that featured this research, especially Professors Zhang Ming, Quincy Ngan, Andrea Goldman, Hyun Suk Park, Shana Brown, and Shengqing Wu, among others. An equally great resource of inspiration has been my colleagues at ShanghaiTech University, who read the last revision of the article.

Peng Xu, PhD (University of Chicago), 2014, is associate professor in the Institute of Humanities at ShanghaiTech University. Beginning with her doctoral studies, she endeavored to include gender within the deliberations of literature and theatrical history of early modern China, emphasizing the agency of actresses and women poets. She has published articles in journals such as *T'oungpao*, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, *CLEAR: Chinese Literature, Essays, and Reviews*, and *Late Imperial China*. Her monograph, *The Courtesan's Memory, Voice, and Late Ming Drama* (2025), explores late Ming brothels as a productive literary space.

Notes

- 1 Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), esp. chap. 2.
- 2 Ellen Johnston Laing, "Qiu Ying's Delicate Style," *Ars Orientalis* 27 (1997): 48-49.
- 3 Feminist scholars point out that the seventeenth-century prostituted girls who were trained in elite arts became highly skilled performers for entertaining elite men in the form of competitions, whereas later courtesans who lost such skills and

- literacy often became the object of disparagement in *guixiu*, or gentry-women's literature, as mere sexual partners of the husbands. See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 252-93; and Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- 4 *Midian zhulin shiqu baoji huibian* 秘殿珠林石渠寶笈匯編 (*Forest of Gems in the Secluded Palaces; Treasured cases of art; two imperial catalogues combined*) (1816; repr., Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2004), 1874; Xu Wenmei and Liu

- Fangru, eds., *Ming si dajia tezhan: Qiu Ying* 明四大家特展: 仇英 (Special exhibition of the four great masters of the Ming: Qiu Ying) (Taipei: Palace Museum, 2014), 322.
- 5 Ellen Johnston Laing, "Erotic Themes and Romantic Heroines Depicted by Ch'iu Ying," *Archives of Asian Art* 49 (1996): 84–88.
 - 6 Jiang Youwen, "Zai xi Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Erotic Themes and Romantic Heroines Depicted by Ch'iu Ying' yiwen zhong de Daoyi tu ji Meiren chunsi tu" / 再析 Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Erotic Themes and Romantic Heroines Depicted by Ch'iu Ying' 一文中的《搨衣圖》及《美人春思圖》, *Yiyifenzi* 11 (2008): 9–26.
 - 7 Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 52.
 - 8 Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 30.
 - 9 My recently published book argues that late Ming brothels were substantially related to the theater. Peng Xu, *The Courtesan's Memory, Voice, and Late Ming Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025).
 - 10 Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10–14. A similar view is adopted in Jan Stuart and Evelyn Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in association with Stanford University Press, 2001).
 - 11 Yu Ying-shih is cited in Maxwell K. Hearn, "Qing Imperial Portraiture," in *International Symposium on Art Historical Studies*, vol. 6, *Portraiture*, ed. Society for International Exchange of Art Historical Studies (Kyoto: Society for International Exchange of Art Historical Studies, 1980), 108, 122. For an explanation of the new coloring method invented by the Jiangnan school, see Wen-chien Cheng, "The Chinese Portrait Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum: Reconsidering the Portraiture Status of Ancestor Portraits," in *Faces of China: Portrait Painting of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, 1368–1912*, ed. Klaas Ruitenbeek (Petersberg, Hesse: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2017), 29–30; and Tamara Heimarck Bentley, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599–1652): Authentic Voices/Expanding Markets* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 42–46. For an earlier Chinese discussion of the subgenre, see Zhang Geng 張庚 (fl. 1730s), *Guochao huazheng lu* 國朝畫徵錄 (Veritable records of painters of our dynasty) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu, 2011), 68.
 - 12 *Wusheng shishi* 無聲詩史 (History of silent poetry) (17th century; repr., Shanghai: Shanghai meishu chubanshe, 1963), 71; Aida Yuen Wong, *The Other Kang Youwei: Calligrapher, Art Activist, and Aesthetic Reformer in Modern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 136; Yu Feian, *Chinese Painting Colors: Studies of Their Preparation and Application in Traditional and Modern Times*, trans. Jerome Silbergeld and Amy McNair (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 29–30. For analysis of Zeng Jing's 曾鯨 (1564–1647) paintings, see 近藤秀実, *Bochen huapai* 波臣畫派 (The Bochen school of painting) (Changchun: Jilin meishu chubanshe, 2003); Ma Jige 馬季戈, *Zeng Jing yu Bochen huapai* 曾鯨與波臣畫派 (Zeng Jing and his Bochen school of painting) (Jinan: Shandong meishu chubanshe, 2004); and Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self*, 40–48.
 - 13 See Pei-yi Wu, "Varieties of the Chinese Self," in *Designs of Selfhood*, ed. Vytautas Kavolis (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 117–25.
 - 14 Wu Hung, "Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the Dream of the Red Chamber," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 306–65.
 - 15 Judith Zeitlin and Yuhang Li, eds., *Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2014), esp. chap. 3.
 - 16 Melissa Mueller, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3; Eleanor Margolies, *Props*, Readings in Theatre Practice 14 (London: Palgrave Macmillan Education, 2016), 19.
 - 17 Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999); James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010); James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
 - 18 Ogawa Yōichi 小川陽一, *Chūgoku no shōzōga bungaku* 中國肖像畫文學 (The literature of Chinese portrait painting) (Tokyo: Kenbunshuppan, 2005).
 - 19 Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Life and Death of the Image: Ghosts and Female Portraits in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Literature," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung and Kathrine

- Tsiang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 229–56.
- 20 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 21 Cahill, *Painter's Practice*, 113–48; Ellen Johnston Laing, "'Suzhou Pian' and Other Dubious Paintings in the Received 'Oeuvre' of Qiu Ying," *Artibus Asiae* 59.3/4 (2000): 265–95.
- 22 Yang Chenbin, "Tan Mingdai shuhua zuowei," *Wenwu* 文物 (Archaeological findings), 1990.8, cited in Laing, "Suzhou Pian," 267. For eighteenth-century pictorial representations of the historical area, see Ya-chen Ma, "Picturing Suzhou: Visual Politics in the Making of Cityscapes in Eighteenth-Century China" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2006).
- 23 Wanyuzi 宛瑜子, comp., *Wuji baimei* 吳姬百媚 (Seductive courtesans of Suzhou, 1617 preface), ed. Zhou Zhibiao 周之標 (fl. 1610–1647), original in the National Library, Beijing, facs. repr., Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2002.
- 24 For the entire handscroll with zoom-in views provided by the Palace Museum of China: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228792.html>.
- 25 Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1996), 243–59.
- 26 Catalogues of courtesans with illustrations include *Wuji baimei* and *Jingling baimei* 金陵百媚 (Seductive courtesans of Nanjing, 1618 preface), ed. Li Yunxiang 李雲翔 (pseud. Weilinzi 為霖子), original in the Naikaku bunko, published by Qian Yiwu 錢益吾 in Suzhou.
- 27 For the example of historical courtesans being skillful horsewomen, see Daria Berg's study on Xue Susu 薛素素 (ca. 1575–1652), "Cultural Discourse on Xue Susu, a Courtesan in Late Ming China," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 6.2 (2009): 171–200.
- 28 Perhaps unaware of the case of *A Hundred Beauties*, Ellen Johnston Laing believes that "the phrasing reverses the standard sequence seen without exception in all other Qiu Ying signatures, regardless of whether they are on fake or genuine paintings." See Laing, "Suzhou Pian," 277.
- 29 Laing, 287.
- 30 For example, the Han-dynasty imperial concubine Beauty Ban 班婕妤 is mistakenly labeled as the Tang imperial concubine Jiang Caiping 江采蘋 in the Waseda copy.
- 31 Zhang Shutian and Wang Huaimao, eds., *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集 (Complete works of Feng Menglong) (Huhehaote: Yuanfang chubanshe, 2005), 5:193.
- 32 Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo hualun leibian* 中國畫論類編 (Categorized selections of Chinese painting criticism) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 2:1237–38.
- 33 J. P. Park, *Art by the Book: Painting Manuals and the Leisure Life in Late Ming China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 17, 18, 27. Chelsea Foxwell discusses "copying mania" in the context of post-1750 Japan as a response to a similar market-driven publishing boom in the late Ming era, such as the Chinese literati painting survey *Gushi huapu* 顧氏畫譜 (Master Gu's painting manual) of 1603. See Chelsea Foxwell, "The Painter and the Archive: Models for the Artist in Nineteenth-Century Japan," in *The Artist in Edo Japan*, ed. Yukio Lip-pit, *Studies in the History of Art* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 225–28.
- 34 Zhou Lüjing, *Tianxing daomao*, in *Yimen guangdu* 夷門廣牘 (Large collections from my secluded home) (1597; repr., Beijing: Dongda chubanshe, 1997).
- 35 Brenda G. Jordan, "Copying from Beginning to End? Student Life in the Kano School," in *Copying the Master and Stealing His Secrets: Talent and Training in Japanese Painting*, ed. Brenda G. Jordan and Victoria Weston (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 59.
- 36 *Huaiyuantang pidian Yanzi jian* 懷遠堂批點燕子箋 (The Swallow Letter, commented and annotated by the Studio of Empathy for Remote Regions), original in Shanghai Library, facs. repr. in *Guben xiqu congkan* 古本戲曲叢刊, 2nd ser., *juan* 1, 14b.
- 37 *Huaiyuantang pidian Yanzi jian*, *juan* 1, 13a.
- 38 *Huazhongren* 畫中人 (The painted beauty), vol. 1, 3b. Which play was completed first is unknown, but this line seems to be Wu Bing's mockery of Ruan Dacheng's use of a Zhaojun portrait as a model for the heroine's portrait. If this conjecture is right, then *The Swallow Letter* came out before *The Painted Beauty*.
- 39 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 3b.
- 40 I refer to the two Wanli (1573–1620) editions of *The Jade Pendants*: the Fuchuntang edition (Hall of Exuberant Spring) and the Shenyuguan edition (Studio of Extra Prudence). Both originals are in the National Library in Beijing (facs. repr. of the latter in *Guben xiqu congkan*, 1st ser.). An exceptional case is a heavily revised edition included in Mao Jin's 毛晉 (1539–1659) *Sixty Plays* (*Liushi zhong qu* 六十種曲), which dramatically reduces the role of the courtesan's self-portrait, resulting in her love story receding from the overt, principal plot into a subplot.

- 41 *Guyuhuan ji* 古玉環記 (Antique jade pendants), vol. 2, 67b; Shenyuguan 慎餘館, ed., facs. repr. in *Guben xiqu congkan*, 1st ser.
- 42 *Yuhuatang riji* 玉華堂日記 (Diary of the Hall of Jade Flowers); original in the Shanghai Museum. My two attempts to see the manuscript failed. For secondary information about this precious diary, see An Qi, “Ming gaoben *Yuhuatang riji* zhong de xiqu shiliao” 明稿本玉華堂日記中的戲曲史料 (Primary sources of theater history in the Ming manuscript *Diary of the Hall of Jade Flowers*), in *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu jikan* 中華文化研究集刊 (Volumes of studies of Chinese culture) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1986), 3:450–51.
- 43 The four drama miscellanies that anthologize the portrait scene are: (1) *Sai zhi ge ji* 賽徵歌集 (Anthology of superb songs), published in the Wanli reign (1573–1620), 6 *juan*, in vols. 4:4–5 of *Shanben xiqu congkan* 善本戲曲叢刊 (hereafter SXC), 494–507; (2) Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥 (fl. 1596), ed., *Qunyin leixuan* 群音類選 (Categorized selections from essential dramas), facs. rpt. of rare book in the Nanjing Library (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), under the rubric *Guanqiang lei* 官腔類 (The capital’s tune); (3) *Yueluyin* 月露音 (Sounds of the moon and dew drops) (1616 preface), 4 *juan*, in vol. 2:4–5 of SXC, 552–55; and (4) Zheng Yuanmei 鄭元美, ed., *Yuefu gewutai* 樂府歌舞臺 (Stage for singing and dancing in the music bureau) (ca. 1620s), in the section called *Yue ji* 月集 (The moon volume), in vol. 4:9 of SXC, pages missing (the play appears in the table of contents but the pages are missing from the main text). The three songbooks that promote *kunqu* music are (1) *Shanshan ji* 珊珊集 (Sounds of music) (1617 preface), 4 *juan*, in vol. 2:3 of SXC, pages missing; (2) Ling Mengchu, *Nanyin sanlai* 南音三籟 (Three levels of southern music), which I believe was published in the 1620s, 4 *juan*, vol. 4:7 of SXC, 739–41; and (3) Huai Ding 槐鼎 and Wu Zhijun 吳之後, *Yuefu eyun* 樂府遏雲 (Musical sounds stopping the clouds), which I believe was published after 1624 (the date of *Xilou ji* [The western bower], which it anthologizes, originals in the Peking University Library, Nanjing Library (facs. repr. in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, vol. 1778), and in the National Library, Beijing: <https://sou-yun.cn/eBookIndex.aspx?id=6889>, 3 *juan*, 63b–65b. The three full-text editions were published by Fuchuntang 富春堂 (original in the National Library, Beijing), Shenyuguan 慎餘館 (facs. repr. in *Guben xiqu congkan*), and Jiguge 汲古閣 (*Liushizhong qu*), respectively.
- 44 Feng Yuanjun pointed out in a 1947 essay (in *Guju shuohui* 古劇說匯 [Collected analyses on classical dramas], first published by the Commercial Press in Shanghai) that this line is the only instance where dramatic text is recorded verbatim among the numerous descriptions of theatrical performances of various genres in the novel. See Feng Yuanjun, “*Jin Ping Mei cihua* zhong de wenxue shiliao” 金瓶梅詞話中的文學史料 (Primary materials for studying literary history in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*), repr., Fang Ming 方明, ed., *Jin Ping Mei ziliao huibian* 金瓶梅資料匯編 (Collection of primary materials regarding *The Plum in the Golden Vase*) (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1986), 95.
- 45 Yu Yonglin, *Beichuang suoyu* 北窗瑣語 (Minor talks from the northern window), Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=821319>.
- 46 *Jin Ping Mei cihua* (Hong Kong: Taiping shuju, 1982), 4:1606; David T. Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3:458.
- 47 “A beauty by Mao Yanshou” alludes to Wang Zhaojun’s portrait. *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, 4:1607. Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 3:459.
- 48 On three elements of the theatricality of brothel culture in general, see Keith McMahon, *Saying All That Can Be Said: The Art of Describing Sex in the Jin Ping Mei* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023), 95.
- 49 Wu Hung, *Wu, Hua, Ying: Chuanyijing quanqiu xiaoshi* 物·畫·影: 穿衣鏡全球小史 (Things, painting, and shadows: a brief global history of full-length mirrors) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2021), 92–95.
- 50 Feng Zhiguo 封治國, “Xiang Yuanbian nianpu” 項元汴年譜 (A chronicle of Xiang Yuanbian), in Fan Jingzhong 范景中 and Cao Yiqiang 曹意強, eds., *Meishu shi yu guannian shi* 美術史與觀念史 (Art history and the history of ideas) (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2012), 12:210.
- 51 The full poem, originally from Song Zhengbi’s *Hanzhen tang shigao* 含真堂詩稿 (The poetry from the Hall of Retaining Integrity, Kangxi reign wood-block ed.), is used in Chen Yinke’s detective reading of it as a piece of evidence for the famous Ming courtesan Liu Rushi’s 柳如是 (1618–1664) biographical study, *Liu Rushi biezhuàn* 柳如是別傳 (Supplementary biography of Liu Rushi) (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2015), 1:60–62.
- 52 Qi Biaoia, *Yuanshantang qupin* 遠山堂曲品 (Remarks on *chuanqi* drama from the Hall of Remote Mountains) and *Yuanshantang jupin* 遠山堂劇品 (Remarks on *zaju* drama from the Hall of Remote Mountains). See *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成 (Anthologies of classical

- Chinese drama criticism) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1959), 6:17–22, 176–78.
- 53 Xu Fuming, *Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi* 牡丹亭研究資料考釋 (Interpretation and analysis of primary materials for studying *The Peony Pavilion*) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 38–39.
- 54 For the popularity of the two plays in different cultural arenas in late imperial China, see Ling Hon Lam, “The Matriarch’s Private Ear: Performance, Reading, Censorship, and the Fabrication of Interiority in the Story of the Stone,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65.2 (2005): 376–98.
- 55 Xu, *Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi*, 39. Translated by Cyril Birch as *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan Ting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 46.
- 56 Xu, *Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi*, 38–39.
- 57 Birch, *Peony Pavilion*, 16. Xu Shuofang and Tang Xiaomei, eds., *Mudan ting* (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1997), 18.
- 58 On this prolific painter/engraver, who hailed from Suzhou but was commissioned by famous drama publishers nationwide, see Guo Wei-qu, *Zhongguo banhua shilue* 中國版畫史略 (A brief history of Chinese wood-block illustrations) (Beijing: Zhaohua meishu chubanshe, 1962), 86–87.
- 59 Cyril Birch, *Peony Pavilion*, 144; Xu and Tang, *Mudan ting*, 143.
- 60 Original in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, facs. repr. in *Guben xiqu congkan*, 3rd ser.
- 61 *Jin Xixiang*, scene 3, n.p.
- 62 *Jiaohong ji*, vol. 1, 7b; digital version published by The Library of the Graduate School of Letters and Faculty of Letters at Kyoto University: <https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00031737>. Translated by Cyril Birch as *Mistress and Maid* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 16.
- 63 *Jiaohong ji*, vol. 1, 18a; Birch, *Mistress and Maid*, 35.
- 64 *Jiaohong ji*, vol. 1, 59b; Birch, *Mistress and Maid*, 114–15.
- 65 *Jiaohong ji*, vol. 1, 18a; Birch, *Mistress and Maid*, 35.
- 66 *Jiaohong ji*, vol. 2, 13a; Birch, *Mistress and Maid*, 196.
- 67 Original in the National Library, Beijing, facs. repr. in *Guben xiqu congkan*, 1st ser.
- 68 These include (1) *Zhang Shen zhi zheng Bei Xixiang miben* 張深之正北西廂秘本, for which Chen Hongshou was commissioned to paint the portrait of Oriole Cui and Xiang Nanzhou 項南洲 to engrave it; (2) Gu Xuanwei’s 顧玄緯 1569 edition of *Zengbian Huizhenji* 增編會真記, which claims one of its Oriole Cui portraits to be after the Tang Yin style; and (3) He Bi’s 何璧 1616 *Bei Xixiangji* 北西廂記, which used a fake painting of Qiu Ying as the model for its Oriole Cui portrait.
- 69 Xu, *Courtesan’s Memory*.
- 70 Introduction to Roach, *It*, 16.
- 71 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 38b.
- 72 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 39b.
- 73 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 18a.
- 74 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 16b.
- 75 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 17a.
- 76 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 17b.
- 77 *Huazhongren*, vol. 2, 15b.
- 78 *Huazhongren*, vol. 1, 28b.
- 79 Xu and Tang, *Mudan ting*, 161.
- 80 Xu and Tang, *Mudan ting*, 162; Birch, *Peony Pavilion*, 174.
- 81 Tina Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 53.
- 82 Xu and Tang, *Mudan ting*, 244. Cyril Birch’s translation of this line renders it as if the nun is marveling at the ghost’s magnificent power to hide herself: “I’ll never know how a painted scroll could furnish such concealment.” But unlike her counterparts in earlier miraculous stories, the ghost slips out because she is almost caught by the nun. See Birch, *Peony Pavilion*, 274.
- 83 Xu Zhengui 徐振貴, ed., *Kong Shangren quanji jijiao zhuping* 孔尚任全集輯校注評 (The complete works of Kong Shangren with annotations and commentaries) (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 2004), 1:66–72.
- 84 Xu, *Kong Shangren quanji jijiao zhuping*, 192.
- 85 Xu, *Kong Shangren quanji jijiao zhuping*, 202.
- 86 Xu, *Kong Shangren quanji jijiao zhuping*, 202.
- 87 Xu, *Kong Shangren quanji jijiao zhuping*, 203.