

Cecilia Skemp
Williams - Hislit II
Casebook #5
April 26th, 2024

Historical Timeline

Song Dynasty (960-1279)	<i>Peony Pavilion</i> takes place in the Song Dynasty, particularly the Southern Song. According to Cyril Birch, The play takes place over three years ending in 1158 CE. ¹
Confucianism was revived in a new form with more strict rules and customs. At the time Taoism reached the height of its popularity. The two religions often clashed. ² There are many confucian and daoist characters in <i>Mudan Ting</i> with commentaries on their beliefs and religion.	Mid-Song Dynasty
January 9th, 1127	Song Capital Kaifeng falls to the Jin. ² The secondary plot of <i>Mudan Ting</i> is of the Jin-Song conflicts. The fall of Kaifeng signified a major loss for the Song and the eventual decline of the dynasty. The period after the fall of Kaifeng is referred to as the Southern Song Dynasty.
Treaty of Shaoxing signed in the middle of the Jin-Song wars. Song Dynasty made a vassal of Jin paying yearly tributes of silk and silver. ² A similar event happens in the play when Du Bao makes negotiations during the siege	October 11th, 1141
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)	<i>Peony Pavilion</i> was written by Tang Xianzu, a playwright of the Ming Dynasty. Although the play takes place in the Song Dynasty, many of the values and customs are more familiar to a Ming audience than of a Song one. ³
Tang Xianzu publishes <i>Peony Pavilion</i> . His original production received much criticism from other playwrights due to his refusal to adhere to the traditional <i>xiqu</i> structures. ⁴	1599

1616	Tang Xianzu dies. ⁴ Later Ming playwrights seized the opportunity to adapt <i>Mudan Ting</i> into traditional <i>kunqu</i> form, quickly turning it into a staple of the style. ³
Mei Lanfang performed Du Linian. His performance played an important role in reviving the art <i>kunqu</i> and continuing the tradition. ³	~1920s-1940s
1989	Tiananmen Square Massacre crushed protests aiming to end corruption in the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese military responded and killed anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand people. Peter Sellars' production of <i>Peony Pavilion</i> in 1998 aimed to spread awareness and showcase the struggle of students in corrupt governance through Liu Mengmei. ³
Quartercentenary of <i>Peony Pavilion</i> 's release. Three separate productions arose commemorating this monumental play. One production performed all 55 scenes. ³	1999

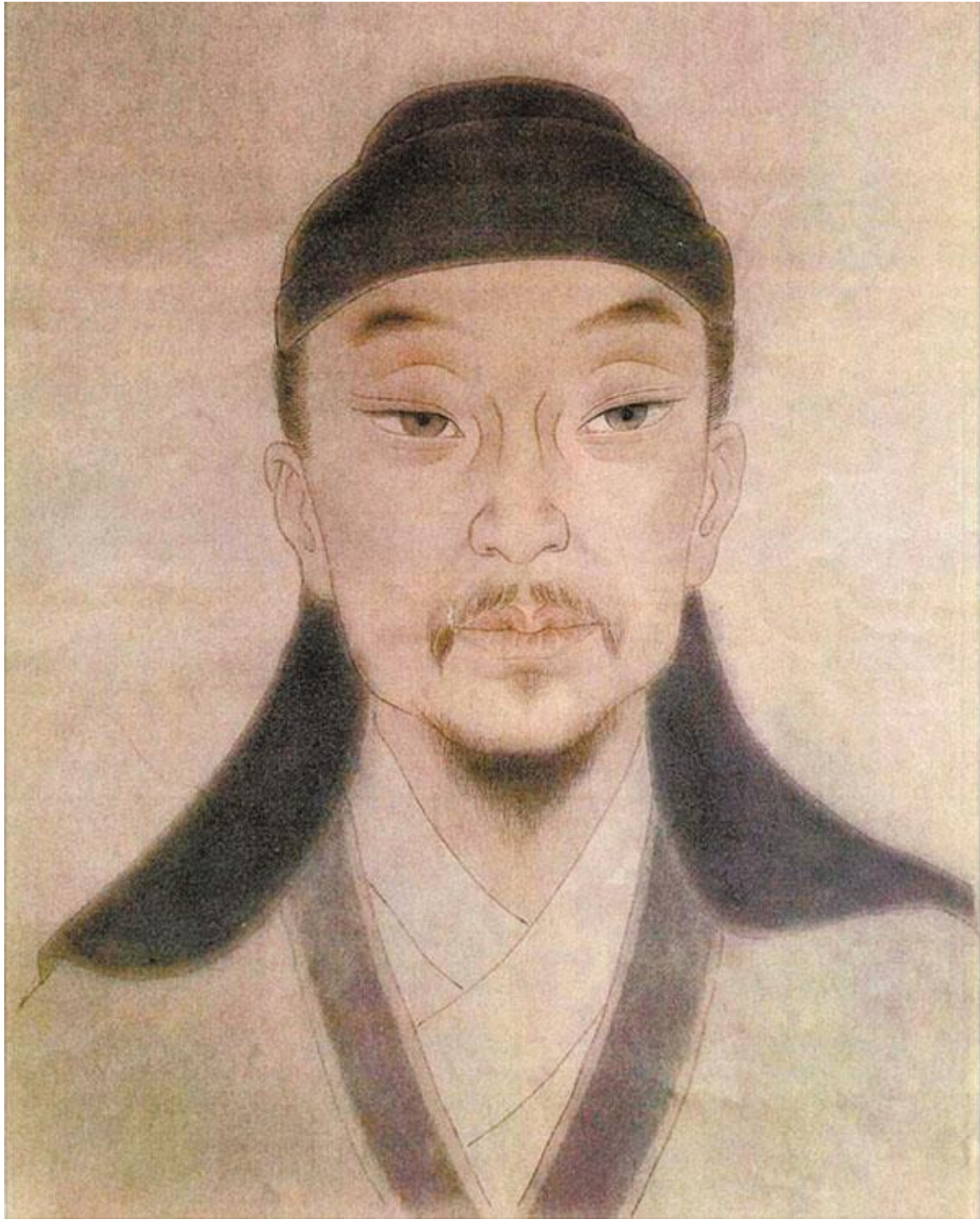
1. Tang, Xianzu. *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan Ting*. Translated by Cyril Birch, Indiana Univ. Press, 2002.
2. Bowman, John Stewart. "China." *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 2000, pp. 3–78.
3. Swatek, Catherine. "Introduction: *Peony Pavilion* On Stage and in the Study." *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan Ting*, by Tang Xianzu. Translated by Cyril Birch, Indiana Univ. Press, 2002.
4. Liu, Wenfeng. 中国戏曲史. Hong Kong, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013.

Casebook #5 Images



Mei Lanfang dressed as *Dan* (Female Lead). As a performer, Mei Lanfang worked to bring back the art of *kunqu* and is one of the reasons Chinese opera is protected as an intangible cultural heritage.

Colville, Alex. "Mei Lanfang, China's Greatest Stage Performer." *The China Project*, 2 Feb. 2021, thechinaproject.com/2021/02/02/mei-lanfang-chinas-greatest-stage-performer/.



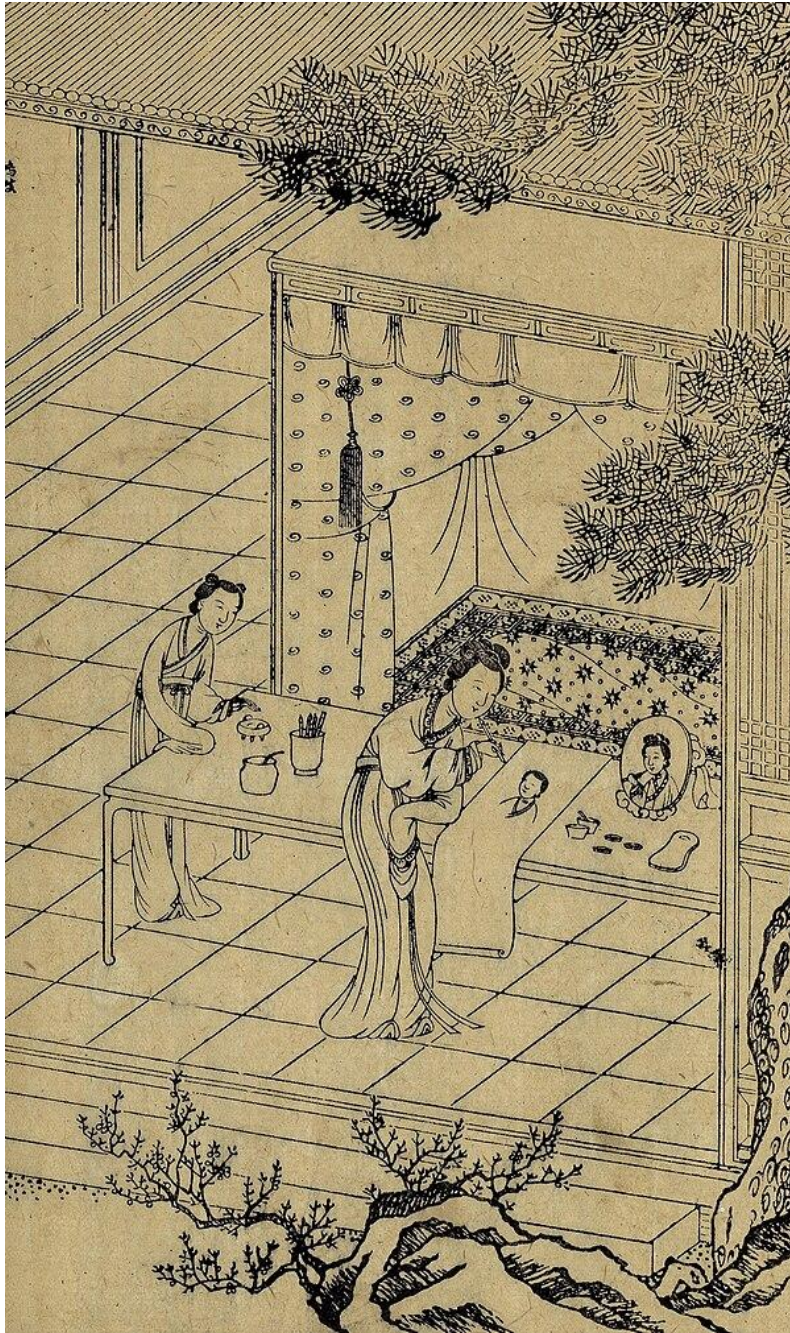
A Linchuan portrait of Tang Xianzu. Tang Xianzu, *Mudan Ting*'s playwright born in 1550, is considered one of the greatest literati of the Ming Dynasty.

Wen, Huibao. “透過湯顯祖講中國故事 - 香港文匯報.” 大公文匯 *Www.Tkww.Hk*, 7 Jan. 2023, www.tkww.hk/epaper/view/newsDetail/1611420132700196864.html.



Woodblock printing of Du Liniang dreaming of the peony pavilion. Du Liniang dreams of Liu Mengmei before she ever meets him in real life.

Tang, Xianzu. *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan Ting*. Translated by Cyril Birch, Indiana Univ. Press, 2002.



A woodblock printing of Du Liniang painting a self-portrait. She creates a silk painting to leave behind a record of her beauty to the world after she dies.

Umasy, Nono. "Peony Pavilion: Map and Timeline." *HistoryMaps*, HistoryMaps, 19 Feb. 2023, history-maps.com/story/Ming-dynasty/event/Peony-Pavilion.



Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei performed on stage. *Kunqu* usually censors explicit visuals so the actions are implied through words, song, and movement.

Ruinawang. "The Preservation of Opera as Intangible Heritage." *Global Heritage*, 30 Nov. 2017, thinkglobalheritage.wordpress.com/2017/11/30/the-preservation-of-opera-as-intangible-heritage/.

Cecilia Skemp
Williams- Hislit II
Casebook #1 Revised
April 26th, 2024

Love, Logic, and Life: Dichotomies of *Mudan Ting* by Tang Xianzu

Tang Xianzu writes in his preface to *Mudan Ting*, “Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died” (Birch ix). This quote expresses the most important aspects of Tang Xianzu’s play. At its core, *Mudan Ting* (interchangeably called *The Peony Pavilion*) ponders the nature of love and humanity. Tang Xianzu explores the themes of love and humanity through dualisms. Some of the dichotomies Tang Xianzu develops throughout *Mudan Ting* are Daoism and Confucianism, illusions and reality, logic and passion.

The primary story of *Mudan Ting* follows Du Liniang (called Bridal Du in the Cyril Birch translation), a young woman who has a dream in which she becomes intimate with a young scholar. She wakes and becomes sick with longing, eventually dying without meeting the man in her waking life. After three years, Du Liniang earns a second chance at life as a ghost with the caveat that she may only be brought fully back to life by the man in her dreams, Liu Mengmei. She meets him as a ghost in the waking world and they make their marriage vows before she reveals she is a ghost. With help from some side characters, Liu Mengmei digs up Du Liniang’s body, gives her medicine, and successfully brings her back to life. They marry once more since she becomes fully mortal and after a series of somewhat comedic somewhat unfortunate events, she reunites with her family with a happy ending. There are many other side plots and characters with their own motivations and interesting dichotomies.

One of the more interesting and grounded dualism is between the Daoist and Confucianist side characters. The Confucianist character introduced early on as Du Liniang’s

new tutor, Chen Zuiliang, an elderly scholar, is not a good scholar. The Daoist character, Sister Stone, introduced only after Liniang falls ill, is a silly abbess. These two characters are constantly pitted against each other and naturally are indisposed to the other's natural foundation. Confucianism is a school of thought centered around humanity while Daoism is a religion focused on the the universe's natural order. Their core beliefs are naturally opposed and Tang Xianzu plays up these disputes.

Sister Stone and Chen Zuiliang are treated mostly in comedic fashion with the same gags of wildly misquoting texts and their names. Sister Stone's name comes from her "rock-hard hymen," which pokes fun at her involuntary celibacy as an abbess (80). "Chen Zuiliang" is his given name meaning "Chen So Good" but he has earned himself the nickname "Chen No Food" from his position as a floundering scholar (11). It is very impactful how Tang Xianzu treats these two characters as comic and spiritual equals despite how the characters view the other as lesser (adding to the comedy). Sister Stone and Chen Zuiliang play a special role in exploring the relationship of philosophy to mankind through satire. Most importantly, neither belief system is held over the other. As can be easy to do when creating a dichotomy between two widely practiced philosophies/religions, Tang Xianzu does not make Confucianism or Daoism out to be better than the other creating a balance of forces and perspectives throughout the play.

At no point in *Mudan Ting* does Sister Stone and Chen Zuiliang act hostile to each other. At worst, they make fun of each other but mostly act for the shared goal of caring for Du Liniang, before and after her resurrection. Both are placed in dual charge of Du Liniang's shrine which her father, Du Bao, established after her death (108). Tang Xianzu makes an effort to show that despite their differences, Daoists and Confucianists are at their core, working for the betterment of the world with loyalty and compassion.

Illusions and reality is another dichotomy Tang Xianzu explores throughout *Mudan Ting*. Another quote from his preface questions the blurred lines in this dichotomy, “Must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal” (ix)? Dreams are integral to *Mudan Ting* from the first scene to the last and everywhere in between. The idea of mixing dreams and reality is interwoven into this text deliberately by Tang Xianzu despite the initial preconceptions that dreams are completely separated from reality. A major scene that touches on this topic is “Scene Thirty-Two: *Spectral Vows*.” Death is mentioned sparsely despite its importance to the plot and how easily it is intertwined with the illusionary effect of dreams.

When Du Liniang finally admits to Liu Mengmei, a young scholar and her lover, that she is a ghost, he, reasonably, despairs over the situation saying, “How can the moon be scooped from the water’s surface, or flowers plucked from the void?” (188) That is to say, how can Liu Mengmei be in love with a ghost, an illusion, a dream? Du Liniang assures him that although she is a spirit, he can secure her return. She goes as far as to chastise him, “Sir, are you not versed in the canonical texts?/ ... / Who is to tell / illusion from reality?” (188). These quotes spoken by Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei encapsulate the recurring theme of illusion and reality with Du Liniang directly dismissing the possibility of a distinct divide between the two. The characters are also using two vivid metaphors to express their fears. Liu Mengmei’s use of the Moon-and-Water and the Flowers-and-Void metaphors expresses the insubstantiality of a soul and dreams.

The moon and water metaphor is an interesting one, as it is referenced multiple times throughout the play often accompanied by a reference to the Bodhisattva Guanyin, a goddess-type figure that Du Liniang is continually likened to for her unparalleled beauty. This adds another layer of illusion, attributing Du Liniang’s existence to that of a goddess or fairy, yet

another seemingly unreachable being. Du Liniang's reply to Liu Mengmei flips around the same metaphors while maintaining the somewhat unstable nature of her existence. She is saying that he will have to "pluck flowers from the void" likely meaning that he will have to dig up her body to retrieve her spirit from the underworld, but that she is still a physical being both real and illusion.

The most prevalent dichotomy of *Mudan Ting* is between passion and logic. The struggle between the heart and the head is a human experience and is the core theme of *The Peony Pavilion*. While it is explored in almost every character individually, it is most clearly embodied by the two characters Liu Mengmei (passion) and Du Bao (logic). Liu Mengmei is Du Liniang's lover and a very emotional character despite his profession as a scholar. Du Bao, on the other hand, fulfills his role of the dutiful prefect and protective father as a paradigm of logic.

Liu Mengmei as the personification of passion is evident from the first moment we meet him in "Scene Two: *Declaring Ambition*." He introduces himself as a poor scholar with ambitions to become a government official. By most standards, one would assume his disposition to be one of structure and logic but that is quickly dismissed as Liu exclaims, "My days are a daze of thoughts of love" (4). As he goes on, it becomes evident that Liu Mengmei's true driving force is his passion. Even his name, which he changed after he dreamed about Du Liniang, reflects his heart full of longing, Liu Mengmei meaning "Willow Dream-of-Apricot" in English. His outward expressiveness continues throughout the play and never changes unlike Du Bao, the embodiment of logic.

Du Bao begins the play as Prefect of Nan'an stating that he is getting older and wishes to retire. However, irony ensues as Du Bao continues to be promoted until he is appointed Chief Minister of the Emperor's court charged with pacifying the siege and invasion of the Tartars

(307). This progression occurs because of Du Bao's devotion to duty. Du Bao consistently follows the core of his beliefs: tradition, texts, and logic. Under the types of pressure that many people might crumble under such as when he is trying to dispel a siege and is informed his entire family has been killed and other devastating about to his personal life. Du Bao doesn't give himself time to mourn even after the siege dispels (291). He relies on logic to keep himself grounded in a world that has turned upside down for him. To Du Bao, emotion is a weakness. Passion does little but make one vulnerable to failure. Logic is his guiding star which keeps him motivated and standing throughout the play.

Passion and logic clash when Du Bao is faced with the extraordinary. His long-dead daughter is alive and married to the promising young scholar. The logical world is challenged and Du Bao refuses to accept that something such as the dead living again is possible. There is an intellectual and physical confrontation between Liu Mengmei and Du Bao as Liu Mengmei shows that illusions are reality. Du Bao tortures him and maintains that reality is reality. In all fairness, Du Bao's actions are entirely rational. Liu Mengmei keeps pushing back, fully with faith in his love that it can overpower rational reality. But just as Liu Mengmei has the logical side of a scholar, so does Du Bao have the passionate side of a man. He can only hold out from embracing his daughter for so long. It is only when Du Linang faints from the grief of being rejected by her father that Du Bao impulsively calls out her name, "[Linang], my Daughter!" (336). His emotional instincts usurp his logical mind in that brief moment, and he finally allows himself to embrace his revived daughter. He finally bridges the duality of logic and emotions.

As Tang Xianzu writes, "Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper" (ix). Confucianism and Daoism, illusion and reality, and even logic and passion are only three of the many dichotomies woven into *Mudan Ting*. These dualisms are not meant to be at war with each

other but experienced together in balance bringing about a deep connection of the play with the lived experience of humanity. Religions and philosophies fight, but they are also friends; dreams may seem unrealistic at times, but, at times, so will reality; the head can think only as far as the heart can feel. Audiences have understood the heart of *Mudan Ting* for over 400 years. Tang Xianzu writes of the complicated life and love everyone can experience.

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Casebook #2 Revised
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How to Play the Peony: Contextualizing *Mudan Ting* in Ming Dynasty Theatre

Mudan Ting (*The Peony Pavilion*) is a very dense opera from Ming Dynasty China. The length stretches well past the standards of a modern play and still manages to fill each word with meaning, never dropping into a dull moment. One could read the play hundreds of times and still find a new meaning in the next read-through. Today, it is easy to look at such a play through the lens of Western theatre/literature as that is what is most commonly taught and spread worldwide, even the traditional theatres of Eastern cultures have not been unaffected by the influence of Western performance throughout the years. In an attempt to de-orientalize *and* de-westernize the perception of *The Peony Pavilion* and other traditional performances, some scholars have taken on the task of looking at *xiqu* (the Chinese umbrella term for Traditional Chinese Theatre encompassing many types of traditional Chinese performance including *nanxi*, *chuanqi*, *kunqu*, and more) from the perspective of the Chinese, specifically the Chinese of the Ming (1368 CE – 1644 CE) and surrounding dynasties for which the *xiqu* had been written and produced for. Two articles, Chen Jingsong's "To Make People Happy, Drama Imitates Joy: The Chinese Theatrical Concept of Mo" and Grant Shen's "Acting in the Private Theatre of the Ming Dynasty," explore the art of *xiqu* that would aid the artists of a modern production of *Mudan Ting*.

The first article written by Chen Jingsong is "To Make People Happy, Drama Imitates Joy: The Chinese Theatrical Concept of Mo." This article aims to reintroduce the concept of *mo* which has been confused with the Western theory of *mimesis* and further misinterpreted for many years as the study of *xiqu* through an indigenous lens has been missing from the academic fields

of theatrical study (Chen 49). *Mo* essentially is the goal of *xiqu*, the effect that *xiqu* attempts to reach through the performance. While *mimesis* focuses on imitating action, translating real-world events into the confined space of the stage, *mo* focuses on representing a character's feelings and thoughts. Chen quotes another scholar, "Yu Shangyuan ... first made such an attempt [to distinguish western theatre and *xiqu*] ... by defining the Western-style performance as 'writing realistically' and the traditional Chinese performance as 'writing suggestively'" (39). This is a simplistic but important foundational difference between the theatrical styles. To write suggestively rather than realistically unleashes the creative potential of the literati creating the stories and opens up a field of possibilities for performers to express their characters.

A Qing Dynasty critic praised Xianzu's *Mudan Ting*, "The characters in *Peony Pavilion* are so vividly portrayed.... The magic of Li Niang, the sincerity of Liu, the weakness of Mrs. Du, and the stubbornness of Mr. Du are all revealed by the writer's display of their seven feelings" (Chen 42). This Qing critic is not alone in his emphasis on the emotional state of the performance, more so than the plot (which is considered the premier element of theatre by Aristotle). Critics of *xiqu* are often far more focused on the portrayal of characters and the abilities of the acting troupes than on the groundedness of the plot. *Xiqu* literati tend to make their plays even more fantastic. These writers show particular favoritism towards dreams and how they reveal the mental world and the actualized world of the play.

Mudan Ting, one of Tang Xianzu's "Dream Plays," is considered a masterpiece in how he portrays the world around Du Liniang, making the dream world seem more real and reality seem more illusory. For example, "Scene 10: The Interrupted Dream" features Du Liniang meeting Liu Mengmei in her dream. Liu Mengmei woos Liniang and she falls in love with him in the brief time they speak and become intimate (Birch 47-50). At first glance, this seems entirely

unrealistic however when considering that in the rest of *Mudan Ting*, outside the dream world, Du Liniang dies, meets the 10th Judge of Hell, becomes a ghost, and then arranges her own resurrection...love at first sight feels fairly more grounded.

This article would be helpful for directors in gaining a fundamental understanding of *xiqu* and how it differs from the traditional Western theatre. The majority of Chen's article explains the goal of *xiqu* through *mo*. As the leader of the vision for a production, a director has much to gain from an understanding of the medium of theatre such as *xiqu*. A director must understand the differences between Western theatre which they may have more experience with than traditional *xiqu*. Given that they may have less exposure or knowledge of non-Western literature, Chen's article bears the knowledge so they may better understand how *xiqu* plays are meant to be read and seen on stage. In the case of *Mudan Ting*, Chen believes Tang Xianzu's writing best demonstrates the Chinese literati's efforts to focus on emotional revelation.

The second article by Grant Shen explores the art of acting in Ming Dynasty theatre. "Acting in the Private Theatre of the Ming Dynasty" explores private performances in which patrons were invited to watch rather than pass by on the street or codified in royal courts. This article specifies practiced traditions of *xiqu*, specifically *chuanqi* of the Ming; it focuses on acting but also brings up traditions of stage, costume, and props. The article does a case study of the method Ming actors would use to realize a script properly. Shen focuses on Du Liniang's character and how her player would come to play her character, offering a walk-through of how a Ming actor would realize her. He follows records of a specific Ming actress, Heng of the Wu Kun troupe, and her method (76).

While Chen Jingsong's article seeks to explain the overarching goal of *xiqu*, Grant Shen's article dives into the details of acting from the eyes of Ming audiences. Shen uses primarily the

writings of Ming contemporary critics and some writings of literati to paint a vivid image of how Ming performance was made and seen by the Ming people. The wonderful details describing the Ming acting method and the overall nature of the profession create a wonderful resource for actors. There is a basis of performance to which Shen makes known. Unlike Western traditions of realism, Shen asserts that “all [Ming] stage movement was based on conventions and thus stylized” (69). All aspects of performance are important, including and especially movement. A Ming actor was greatly judged by their ability to dance in tandem with their voice.

In modern, but also throughout history, western theatre playwrights rely on the spoken word to relay the story. *Xiqu*, however, embraces a suggestive combination of singing, dancing, and movement in addition to playing the role intending to express a character’s emotional state. Tang Xianzu preferred to give Du Liniang specific written stage directions, an example of this also from “Scene 10: The Interrupted Dream”, “She starts in surprised delight and opens her lips to speak, but checks herself” (Birch 48). This scene is important in the play as it expresses Du Liniang’s inner world and the catalyst for her death. Tang Xianzu has a clear vision for Liniang based on her stage directions; there are some scenes in which she is the only character given stage directions aside from “enter” and “exit.” Although stage directions in *Mudan Ting* may seem rather sparse, there is a lot of singing and talking between moments and clear attention shown to Du Liniang’s complex character. With the understanding learned from Shen’s (as well as Chen’s) article(s), readers can see the way Du Lianiang’s character is “revealed” in the script and the importance of her state of being more so even than that of the plot.

The majority of the text of *Mudan Ting* is references, allusions, puns, and slang. To fully understand the script one would need a complete understanding of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Chinese literature, mythology, and poetry. This is a rather demanding request for

the modern Chinese-born person, much less the average theatre artist. Cyril Birch does a good job of providing some contexts for things he deems important to understand to appreciate the *xiqu*, however, there is no way a translator could fit those annotations into an intelligible reading of the play. The references alone could make up a whole book.

If one were to read the text as written, one would not understand the play. The characters' words and actions would be confusing. Shen points out a few examples such as when Du Liniang speaks about the beauty of the garden in "Scene 10: The Interrupted Dream" but is talking about her sexual frustration (Birch 43; Shen 74). The subtextual meanings can be easily lost if one isn't paying close attention. Reading Shen's article will spur actors and directors to take closer looks at the script to understand their characters and meanings better, sometimes even double meanings, of their lines.

These two articles by Chen Jingsong and Grant Shen respectively are a great starting resource for actors and directors trying to stage a production of *Mudan Ting*. These resources help to de-orientalize and de-westernize the modern actor and director's perspectives and methods of working on a *xiqu* production. Chen's article guides directors' visions and allows a fuller understanding of the purpose of a *xiqu*, such as *Mudan Ting*, even if only selected scenes are performed. Shen's article guides actors to a solid foundation. Actors can glean the most from Shen's article with his specific method and description of how Ming actors realize the characters and the careful balance between self and role.

Mudan Ting, Peony Pavilion, is an intensely dense *xiqu* full of emotion, subtleties, and suggestions that require a very balanced and careful performance to "reveal" the potential of every character. Of course, there may be changes given this is not the Ming Dynasty and this essay is being written in English in the United States; modern and Western influences are bound

to occur, but that is not to say that the history and original purpose of the story can be overwritten or made out to be “oriental.” Across cultures, some things never change such as an audience that wishes to be told a story. The heart of the text lies in the revelation of the character and the expression of emotion and the depth at which the character feels. In his preface of *Mudan Ting*, Tang Xianzu wrote, “Has the world ever seen a woman’s love to rival that of Du Liniang?” (Birch ix). The music, the dance, and the setting may change over time, even the words may be lost to time itself, but the soul of a play written about love and the nature of humanity will persist until love itself has died.

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Casebook #3 Revised
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Tang Xianzu's Polemic Peony in Production (Program Note)

Tang Xianzu (1550 CE-1616 CE) was born in the late Ming dynasty, a time of instability and general conflict leading up to the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644. According to Liu Wenfeng, Tang Xianzu was a very active member of the political court serving many years before he retired, disheartened by the reality of politics (5.2). When he first got involved with state affairs, he was completely invested. He believed that actions and honesty could bring about change and form an upright system of justice (Liu 5.2). After he retired from the court, Tang settled down and continued investing his time into playwriting. Tang Xianzu is passionate about everything he applies himself to from literature to politics to religion/philosophy.

Philosophy of human nature is one of many topics Tang applied himself to furiously. In his family background, Tang Xianzu was exposed to Confucian classics and Taoist teachings; however, Tang began to follow the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism later in life (Liu 5.2). Tang's various perspectives and understandings of these varied belief systems become prevalent in the text of *Mudan Ting*, especially in the characters of Chen Zuiliang (Confucian scholar) and Sister Stone (Taoist Sorceress).

Tang Xianzu's most famous play, *Mudan Ting*, is also his most controversial. Other playwrights were dismayed by Tang's crass and sometimes unstructured style. After the play was first performed, some playwrights commandeered the play and rewrote it to be more structured as well as "more singable and stageworthy than the original" which outraged Tang Xianzu whose themes of youthful energy and freeformity were made to emphasize the story (Carlitz 291). It is

unlikely the late Ming revisions of the play were performed but more published as an attempt to appeal to Tang Xianzu and his passionate creativity (Carlitz 291).

The style in which *Mudan Ting* has most traditionally been performed is the classical Chinese opera style called *kunqu* (“Kun Opera”). Although, it is evident the play was not originally written for what is considered traditional *kunqu*. By the 17th century, however, *Mudan Ting* became a staple in the anthologies of classic *kunqu* and remains so today. *Kunqu* “combines song, dance, dialogue, and ... acrobatics, and for most of its history the first two elements were most prized because of the precision and beauty of their synchronization” (Swatek xviii). Beauty is a highly valued aspect of theatre, especially to social elites and it is impressive how the beauty of *Mudan Ting* has persisted for over 400 years.

1999 saw the quatercentenary of *Mudan Ting*’s first publication and with it came a surge of interest in the play and three new revivals. The earliest production was conceived in China by the Chinese director Chen Shizheng. A second avant-garde production made rounds by the American director Peter Sellars. The final iteration of *Mudan Ting*’s revival directed by Guo Xiaonan performed exclusively in China. These three productions brought about a media storm when the Chinese government got involved and supported or disparaged the various productions.

Chen Shizheng’s production of *Mudan Ting* is the most noteworthy. A large part of the concept is that Chen Shizheng aimed to produce all 55 scenes which amounts to 18 hours of performance even with accumulated cuts and abridged arias. This is likely the first time the entire play has been performed at once for hundreds of years. Both Chen Shizheng and Peter Sellars ran into issues with the Chinese government in their respective productions: Chen’s production was described as over-the-top and pornographic and Sellars’ as avant-garde and erotic, both condemned by the Chinese Bureau of Culture (Swatek xvi). Another production was

secretly raised in China by director Guo Xiaonan. Of the three, this production had the shortest run as it got little media coverage outside China. Guo's production was made in direct response to Chen's in particular, following the strictest rules of *kunqu* and censorship claiming that *Mudan Ting* was meant to be performed in such a manner traditionally.

While it is understandable that *Mudan Ting* could undergo censorship to appeal to some audiences, "these critics are willing temporarily to forget that the person who wrote these lewd words was Tang Xianzu himself" (Swatek xxii). Ignoring the "dregs" of *Mudan Ting* erases Tang Xianzu's direction and vision. How the play is meant to be produced is a hot debate, but *Mudan Ting* continues to be performed four hundred years later.

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The Peony: Du Liniang's Passion as the Lover (Blog Post)

The primary heroine of *Mudan Ting* is Du Liniang, also called Bridal Du in Cyril Birch's translation. She is the heart and soul of the entire play. Often portrayed as an ideal woman, Du Liniang was educated by a tutor and raised as the only daughter of a prefect. In many ways, Du Liniang is a model for women even in the 21st century as the ideal lover. Her love drives the story forward even beyond the realms of reality, into dreams, and through death.

At the beginning of the play, Du Liniang is a teenager and through time she grows to be an adult. She is an only child with a doting family to which she is very obedient. However, she is still a teenager. She shows up late to her classes and answers her teacher in passive-aggressive double entendres making fun of him with her servant Spring Fragrance (Birch 27). Even before tutoring, her wit sharpens her tongue, especially when she speaks passionately. Tang Xianzu wrote Du Liniang as a lover. Not just a lover in which, the woman is wont to change her principles but as a lover in and of herself. In the "Preface of the Second Edition," Cyril Birch notes a quote from Tang Xianzu's preface, "Has the world ever seen a woman's love to rival that of Bridal Du?" (ix).

Du Liniang is the most active character driven to achieve her dreams throughout the play. She is an object of devotion to Liu Mengmei but she never lets herself fall victim to becoming a passive "object" only to be admired or desired. The two lovers first meet in the world of dreams before they ever meet in reality. Du Liniang falls so deeply in love that she becomes ill and passes away. This does not stop her from achieving her dreams of finding and marrying Liu Mengmei. In the underworld, she makes a case to the 10th Judge of Hell to give her another chance at life. With her second chance, she organizes meetings with Liu Mengmei in reality— he takes days to recognize her as the woman from his dreams—, orchestrates her own resurrection,

and aids her new husband on his journey to becoming a court scholar. In every instance, Du Liniang grasps initiative and quickly devises courses of action that best benefit her.

It is difficult to glean all of the details in the text on an initial reading. In the text, Du Lianiang's behavior seems rather docile and obedient. Even as she dies, she tells her tutor, "Your pupil is sick and must apologize for long truancy" (Birch 90). On the surface, she exemplifies the behavior of a daughter and a woman in China towards her family. One of the major principles of Chinese family life is Confucian filial piety. "Filial piety is the basic principle of Heaven, the ultimate standard of earth, and the norm of conduct for the people" (Zephier 3). Du Liniang fulfills her duty as a filial daughter through her obedience and desire to marry. Du Liniang's sanctions and qualities make her an ideal woman: somewhat educated, docile, and obedient. And yet, she retains her passion.

One of the earliest actresses to have played Du Liniang is said to have shaped Du Liniang's character in such a manner, exemplifying the subtle complexities of a lover but also of a woman. This actress, Heng, crafted a characterization balancing her passionate drive alongside the devoted daughter (Shen 78). There is a delicate balance between illusion and reality. Heng navigates the divide between the character's mind and the society in which the character is placed not as two separate worlds but as one whole being through it all within the person of Du Liniang.

Loving someone with all you have— body, soul, and mind— is a state very few people can claim to have achieved. It is evident in Tang Xianzu's writing about Du Liniang that he held a special connection to her character above all others in the play, perhaps even above his other plays. Du Liniang and Tang Xianzu are creatures with great passions and ambitions, and Tang Xianzu strives to give her an ending she must work hard for.

Liu Mengmei's character seems to be specifically crafted for Du Liniang rather than her being crafted for him. He fulfills everything she would need to live a comfortable life should she marry and support him. Her actions bolster his standing and ambition more so than when he was alone. Although we never get to meet Liu Mengmei before he falls in love with the dream vision of Du Liniang, his devotion seems surprising to other characters who know him. He fulfills his duty within the play by becoming Du Liniang's husband.

Du Liniang is a lover and she will fight for it. Even within the constraints of society, Du Liniang is quietly ambitious, creates her autonomy, and carves her path. Some might look down on her for being so ambitious in pursuit of love, but is love really such a shameful motivator? Are not women allowed to love and be loved as they please with all their hearts? To know love and to fight for love may be one of the greatest gifts in the world. As Tang Xianzu wrote, "To be as Bridal Du is to have known love" (Birch ix). A model lover, Du Liniang still touches hearts four hundred years after she was first written.

Works Cited

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