

**Female-Female Love in Li Yu's Play *Lianxiang Ban***  
**(怜香伴 The Loving Perfume Companion)**

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## Introduction

‘*Lianxiang ban* Rises from the Dead - A ‘Lesbian’ *Kunqu* Play Directed by a Gay Male 一出男同志导演的“拉拉昆曲’ appeared as the headline in the newspaper *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekly) on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010.<sup>1</sup> This new adaptation of Li Yu’s play filled most of the seats in the famous Poly Theatre in Beijing and received great media attention. Sarah Kile attributes the success of this production of *Lianxiang ban* by seventeenth century Chinese author Li Yu (1610-1680) to a “conversation among China’s traditional art of Kunqu Opera; contemporary film culture; global queer culture; international fashion; and contemporary abstract set design.”<sup>2</sup> Both she and Xu Peng (2010, 230) point out that the lesbian content of the play is emphasised by its marketing, along with its “star studded crew: openly gay director Guan Jingpeng 关锦鹏 (Stanley Kwan), Fashion Designer Guo Pei 郭培, sociologist and marriage equality advocate Li Yinhe 李银河.” *Lianxiang ban* tells a love story between two beautiful and talented women Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua.

The producer Wang Xiang 王翔 once commented on *Lianxiang ban* that, “Because our ancestors (at that time) were not deeply influenced by Christianity [...] they were tolerant toward gays.” His remark attracted my attention because of the word “tolerant”, which suggested a binary attitude towards female love: tolerant or not tolerant. However, in Li Yu’s time, which is around four hundred years ago, the Chinese society may have had very different social values, including how people saw same-sex love. As a result, it is doubtful that Li Yu saw female love different from Wang’s perspective when he wrote *Lianxiang ban* in Chinese social historical context during his time. How did Li Yu, a male writer, represent and think about female love in his play? I turn to focus on the original script and try to summarise his opinion of female love in *Lianxiang ban*. Compared to the shortened Kunqu performance version, which only chooses nine scenes from 36, the original script will help us reach a deeper understanding of the female love between Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua.

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<sup>1</sup> Kile, ‘Sensational Kunqu: A Performance Review of the May 2010 Beijing Production of Lian Xiang Ban (Women in Love),’ *CHINOPERL* 30.1 (2011): 221

<sup>2</sup> Sarah E. Kile, ‘Sensational Kunqu’, 224

Through a close reading of the dialogues between Cui and Cao, and the supporting characters' comments on Cui and Cao's relationship, this thesis will not only give readers a direct impression of Cui and Cao's relationship, but also suggest Li Yu's position on female love in this work.

Li Yu's opinion of female love seems to reflect the opinions of many literati of his time, which makes his notions of female love not merely "his". A viable reason for this is that when Li Yu wrote *Lianxiang ban*, he and his family were suffering from financial difficulties and as a result, he decided to earn a living writing. If Li Yu lived in a society where the literati hated or despised female love he would probably not risk writing *Lianxiang ban*, and consequently cause his family sink into poverty. Therefore, his decision to write *Lianxiang ban* infers a group of readers in Li Yu's day who were most likely interested in or liked female love stories. So, as this thesis will argue, Li Yu's opinion of female love represented in *Lianxiang ban* mirrored many readers' general opinion of female love (at least they were not against it) and Li Yu probably even pandered to their taste when he decided what content to put in Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua's story. Furthermore, *Lianxiang ban* is a vernacular literary work that Li Yu targeted at educated people or literati as his potential readers. Again, it can be argued that Li Yu's opinion of female love was representative to some extent of the literati readers of his time. Above all, Li Yu's opinion of female love in this play reflected a group of literati of his time, so undertaking research on his opinion is worthwhile.

If we are to try to understand Li Yu's opinion of female love in *Lianxiang ban*, it is important to first study the original script closely. Various views and debates of the Cui-Cao relationship unveil Li Yu's position, showing what he eulogises and what he criticises. However, before analysing the text, Li Yu's life, *Lianxiang ban*'s main plot, and social trends related to same-sex love of his time should be introduced and discussed. Analysing these points will help us to understand the personal and social historical reasons behind his opinion of female love in the play; literary work can hardly be isolated from the social values of its time, no matter if it defended the society or criticised the society. Moreover, Li Yu was an accomplished socialite, good

at making friends and widely travelled, so during this life his works were very likely to be influenced by his social network and his vast personal experiences. In his research *Li Yu jiaoyou kao* (李渔交游考 A Study of Li Yu's Social Circle), Shan pointed out that Li Yu's circle of friends consisted of around eight hundred people from all social classes, equally split between non-title literati and civil officials (mainly in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces), including many influential literary giants such as Qian Qianyi (give dates of their life) and Wu Meicun (Shan, 1990). In a time without phones and internet, such a wide social circle is incredible.

So far, Studies on Li Yu have covered his life and thoughts, dramatic theory, plays, short stories, poems and garden design. This thesis will mainly focus on the books and articles on Li Yu's life experience and thoughts. In Volume 19 of *Li Yu quanji* (李渔全集 A Complete Works of Li Yu) (Shan, 1990), Shan Jingxing wrote *Li Yu nianpu* (李渔年谱 A Chronology of Li Yu) and *Li Yu jiaoyou kao* (李渔交游考 A Study of Li Yu's Social Circle). Based on Xu Hanzhang's article *Li Liweng nianpu* (李笠翁年谱 A Chronicle of Li Liweng) (Xu, 1934), Shan's version not only listed the important events of Li Yu's life, but also added more details such as poems Li Yu wrote at an early age<sup>3</sup>. Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang have carried out research on the interactions of Li Yu's life and the revolutionary changes during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition in their book *Crisis and transformation in seventeenth-century China: society, culture, and modernity in Li Yü's world* (Chang, 1992). Patrick Hanan demonstrated Li Yu's creativity in three ways in his book *The Invention of Li Yu* (Hanan, 1988). Firstly, he aimed to "create talk and provoke laughter (1998, 6)." Secondly, his early plays challenged the social conventions of the time. Thirdly, his historical essays were the inversions of the traditional explanation of well-known events. These works on Li Yu as a man help to answer questions such as: What family was Li Yu born to? What ambitions did he have? What difficulties did he experience? What life did he live before he wrote *Liainxiang ban*? What were his

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<sup>3</sup> Shan's *Li Yu jiaoyou kao* also excelled the previous scholar Gu Dunrou's *Li Liweng pengbei kaozhuan* (A Study of Li Yu's friends) in listing more than eight hundred people, which is four times more than Guo's list. Xu Baowei's *Li Yu zhuan* (A Biography of Li Yu) and Du Shuying's *Xikan renjian--Li Yu zhuan* (Observe the World from Dramas--A Biography of Li Yu) were published nowadays (Tianjing, 2014; Beijing, 2015).

literary views? However, by only reading these books we cannot answer my thesis question, because none introduced Li Yu's opinion of female love specifically. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of Li Yu's life, his experiences and thoughts, can help us to further explicate Li Yu's notions of female love.

Furthermore, if we look at the dynastic transition period of the mid-seventeenth century in which Li Yu lived, his writing emerged in an era of fascination with *qing* and male-male eroticism. "*Qing*" in the Chinese context can be translated into "love", "romantic sentiments", "feelings" and "passions." Figuring out the implications of *qing* conceived at Li Yu's time is important for us to understand the *qing* between the two heroines in *Lianxiang ban*.

Martin Huang noticed the fascination with *qing* in Late Ming literature in the mid-seventeenth century. He tried to explore some of the implications of *qing*, which was represented by the Late Ming literati. He argued that the cult of *qing* is a consequence of a new attitude towards desire that emerged in the Late Ming period (Huang, 1988). In the second chapter of her monograph, Wai-ye Li analysed the treatment of *qing* in plays of the Late Ming and Early Qing period (Li, 1993). Li argued that the Late Ming authors tried to solve the conundrum, "how to endow *qing* with absolute value without undermining social political order and the equilibrium of the self (1993, 76)." Hua-yuan Li Mowry's study on *Qing-shi* (a seventeenth century collection of love stories compiled by Feng Menglong) not only provided her own interpretation of *qing*, but also described different aspects of *qing* by categorising, translating and analysing the twenty-four chapters of *Qing-shi* (Li, 1983). In my thesis, I will research on what exactly *qing* is when Li Yu used it to describe Cui-Cao's relationship. Is it a spiritual love between two women or something else?

In addition to *qing*, Li Yu's writing was also related to male-male eroticism in the Ming-Qing era. Bret Hinsch, who wrote *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (Hinsch, 1992)—the first detailed treatment of the male homosexual tradition in China in any western language—demonstrated that China had a deep tradition of male homosexuality seen in both historical records and literary expressions (Hinsch, 1990). It existed not only between emperors and their male lovers, but also existed among

lower classes. Giovanni Vitiello's study on Late Qing *Duanxiu pian* 断袖篇, a male homosexual anthology, showed one half of male homosexual accounts came from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220AD) and the other half came from the Ming-Qing period (Vitiello, 1992). In her pioneering monograph, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (Wu, 2004), Wu Cuncun described the influential male homoerotic sensibilities in late imperial China, especially in Beijing. She argued that the male homoerotic sensibilities were a very central component of the cultural life of the late imperial Chinese literati elites, countering the arguments that homosexuality was marginal and despised during this time. She contributed to our understanding of theaters, boy-actors, the life and taste of the literati class, homoerotic literature, cross-dressing and the conceptions of gender, sex and eroticism of this time period (Wu, 2004). Matthew Sommer studied Chinese laws focusing on sexual intercourse in late imperial China. He argued that the lesbianism was never criminalised because it didn't threaten men, the family and the social order (Sommer, 2000). Among the small collection of Ming-Qing literature on female love, Laura Wu analysed twelve texts, including *Lianxing ban*, and argued that male writing on female love functions as the containment of homosexuality for the benefit of heterosexual sex and marriage (Wu, 2002). She drew her conclusion from the ending of *Lianxiang ban*, in which the husband Fan Jiefu marries both Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua. However, she ignored the main parts Li Yu emphasised in the story, namely how Cui and Cao fell for each other and how they struggled to be together. She also ignored Li Yu's ironic tone when he wrote about Cui's husband Fan Jiefu and Cao's father Cao Gechen, who were seen as obstacles in Cui's scheme and being taken advantage of by Cui in the end. In my thesis, I will rather focus on Cui and Cao's female love and other supporting characters' discussions of Cui and Cao's relationship. The Late Ming to early Qing era was a very chaotic time in Chinese history and dramatic changes in economy, politics and thought occurred. The prevalence of male-male eroticism in this time period contributed to a large quantity of male-male erotic works. In this research, I will take advantage of the rich studies on the topic and explore further female love, which is comparatively ignored. In addition, I will argue against Laura Wu's opinion

of male writing on female love (at least for *Lianxiang ban*'s case) and I will demonstrate my point of view in my coming chapters.

In my thesis, Chapter One will introduce Li Yu's life experience and *Lianxiang ban*'s main plot. I will mainly utilise the biographic method by collecting and analysing accounts on Li Yu, especially his early life before *Lianxiang ban* was written in Hangzhou. In Chapter Two, I will discuss the cult of *qing* and male-male eroticism in Ming-Qing China. I will analyse this from the perspective of cultural history as the *qing* is a unique, ambiguous term and the same-sex sensibilities in China are different from the western discourse "homosexuality." For Chapter Three and Four to follow, I will make a critical textual analysis on *Lianxiang ban* through the eyes of the two heroines and the other supporting characters.

After an introduction to Li Yu the writer and *Lianxiang ban* the story, a discussion of *qing* and male-male eroticism, and a textual analysis of *Lianxiang ban* the script, I argue that Li Yu's writing of *Lianxiang ban* was not a "containment of homosexuality for the benefit of heterosexual sex and marriage", rather, his opinion of female love showed high appreciation and respect. He eulogised the *qing* of Cui and Cao and defended that the *qing* between two women was as valuable as that between a man and a woman. It is easy for us to judge that Cui's husband Fan Jiefu's marrying two women in the end suggests the suppression of female love. However, if we consider Li Yu's admiring tone when he described how Cui carried out her plan to be with Cao, and how Cui's husband Fan and Cao's father were caught in Cui's trap, we can see another perspective: that Li Yu's narrator is on Cui and Cao's side and appreciates female love.

## Chapter One: Li Yu's Life and His Play *Lianxiang Ban*

Li Yu was a playwright, play theorist, architect, garden designer, critic and publisher. Within twenty years after leaving his hometown Lanxi, he wrote tens of plays and short stories such as *Fengzheng wu* (风筝误 Errors caused by the Kite, 1652), *Yu Saotou* (玉搔头 Jade Hairpins, 1655), *Shi'er lou* (十二楼 Twelve Towers, 1658). Furthermore, he organised his own theatrical troupe and trained his concubines to perform. Based on his own practice, he theorised the rules of plays from Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) to his time, which established his name in the history of Chinese plays. He published *Xianqing ouji* (闲情偶寄 Random Repository of Idle Thoughts, 1671), a prominent essay collection of drama, performance and taste for all casual aspects of literati life. At the same time, he designed gardens for himself and some of his friends, who were in official positions. He respected nature, took advantage of local materials and avoided extravagance. As he evaluated himself: "I have two extraordinary skills, one is distinguishing music, the other is building gardens and pavilions." In addition, he wrote the book *Shi lun* (史论 On History, 1664), which challenged many long-standing viewpoints in Chinese history.<sup>4</sup> He was one of the few famous writers who openly made his living on writing and publishing<sup>5</sup> and he sought to protect copyright and seek for patronage for himself.<sup>6</sup> Unlike some solitary literati, his circle of friends reached to around eight hundred from all social classes, equally split between literati and civil officials (mainly in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces.)<sup>7</sup> Unlike those who flattered the officials, Li Yu was a distinguished guest

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<sup>4</sup> For example, on Guan Zhong(管仲) and Bao Shu(鲍叔). During the warring states period, Guan Zhong and Bao Shu were good friends but supported two princes of Qi against each other. The prince supported by Bao Shu became the new king of Qi and imprisoned Guan Zhong. Bao Shu persuaded the king to use Guan Zhong's talent and gradually made Guan Zhong one of the most famous prime ministers in China. People speak highly of their friendship not only because of this but also of Guan Zhong's words "I was associated with Bao Shu in business when I was at difficult times. I used to get a greater amount of money from the profit we made, but Bao Shu thought I was poor so didn't regard me as greedy." Li Yu criticized that if everyone imitates Guan Zhong to get more money for himself in a friendship, there will be more Guan Zhongs and less Bao Shus.

<sup>5</sup> He set up his own publishing house called Jiezi Yuan (Mustard Garden) to publish the works of his friends. Jiezi Yuan products were high in quality and inexpensive in price at that time.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*, Harvard University Press, 1988, 6

<sup>7</sup> Shan Jinheng 单锦珩. *Li Yu quanji (shijiu): Li Yu nianpu; Li Yu jiaoyou kao; Li Yu yanjiu ziliao xuanji* 李渔全集(十九)李渔年谱 李渔交游考 李渔研究资料选集 [Complete works of Li Yu (vol.

of his official friends, which means their friendship was based on mutual appreciation.<sup>8</sup> A common phenomenon called “Da choufeng” in late imperial China, entitled literati to serve officials with their artistic talents and receive funds as gifts. In return, these officials gained fame from making friends with these well-known literati.

*Lianxiang ban* was written as Li Yu’s first play when he moved to Hangzhou in 1650. It tells a love story between a married lady Cui Jianyun and an unmarried Miss Cao Yuhua. They meet at a convent and fall for each other. They take marriage vows in front of the deities, hoping that they will live together like a couple. Lady Cui Jianyun suggests that Miss Cui Jianyun marry her husband Fan Jiefu and then they can be together. In late imperial China, a man can have one wife and several concubines. Wives are the heads of the households while the concubines are servants according to the hierarchy. Cao is from a respectable family and Lord Cao wants his daughter Cao Yuhua to be the wife of a man with a title. Fan Jiefu is a scholar without a title and he has Cui as wife already, so Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua know that Lord Cao will not agree on Miss Cao becoming Fan Jiefu’s concubine. Cui Jianyun tells her husband that she is willing to let Cao Yuhua be the hostess as long as Fan Jiefu marries Cao Yuhua. Fan Jiefu sends a matchmaker to Lord Cao and tells him he wants to marry Cao Yuhua. Fan also says his wife Cui Jianyun has agreed to be a concubine while to let Cao Yuhua become his wife. Lord Cao angrily refuses Fan and accuses him of cheating. Out of anger, Lord Cao moves with his daughter and cuts all contact from Fan and Cui. Three years later, Cao Yuhua becomes seriously ill because of her pining for Cui Jianyun. Lord Cao worries about Cao Yuhua and holds an examination to look for a female poetic companion for his daughter in order to help her recover. Cui hears this information and decides to try a second time to make Cao Yuhua marry Fan Jiefu. She passes the examination and lies to Lord Cao that she is unmarried. Then, she asks Fan Jiefu to visit Lord Cao and tells Lord Cao he is unmarried. As Fan Jiefu has changed his name and passed the civil examination in first place, he successfully gets Lord Cao’s permission to marry Cao Yuhua. After they get married,

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19): A chronicle of Li Yu, a study of Li Yu’s social circle, a selected works of research materials]. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 133

<sup>8</sup> Shan, *jiaoyou kao*, 84-85

Cui tells Lord Cao the truth that she and Fan were a couple. In the end, Both Cui and Cao becomes Fan Jiefu's wives. Cui Jianyun achieves her goal and she and Cao Yuhua finally live together.

As I mentioned in my introduction, a careful observation of Li Yu's early life experience can partly build a link between Li Yu and his work *Lianxiang ban*. Li Yu wrote *Lianxiang ban* when he was 41 years-old in Hangzhou and it was his first published play. In the past forty years of his life, he experienced dramatic changes both in his country and his family. He became a professional writer because of the two following reasons:

### 1. Failure in the Imperial Examinations<sup>9</sup>

During the Ming-Qing dynastic transition period, Li Yu failed to serve the Ming dynasty and refused to serve the new regime. However, he decided to show his literary talent by writing unique plays and stories. Earlier in his life, when he was 25, he participated in the county-level imperial examination and his exam paper on Five Classics was so outstanding that it was printed and used as propaganda by Xu Zhi, the vice officer of Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Education. Unfortunately he failed when he first took the provincial-level imperial examination when he was 29. Three years later, he went to Hangzhou to take the examination again, but on his way to Hangzhou he was blocked from reaching the city. There were only two more imperial examinations held by the Ming dynasty and Li Yu was unable to attend either of them. After the Qing dynasty was established, Li Yu witnessed Manchu's slaughters in southern provinces and realised the cruelty of the Manchu ruler, so he decided not to take the imperial examinations held by the Qing court and not to serve the Manchu regime. Li Yu needed another way to fulfil his literary talents after his path to the authorities was blocked.

### 2. Financial Difficulty

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<sup>9</sup> The imperial examination was a civil service examination system in Imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy.

In 1650, Li Yu was forced to leave his hometown Lanxi County and moved to Hangzhou, the capital city of his province, to earn a living, which resulted in he and his whole family suffered from a severe famine.<sup>10</sup> In 1647, he started to grow crops and lived a solitary, carefree life in the mountains, escaping from the conflicts that raged around him. In 1648, his self-designed villa in Yi Shan (a small mountain in his country) was built. In this peaceful setting, he started his satisfying new life of reading and writing. In his poems, such as *Song of the Mountain Life*, he described his happy moments in Yi Shan. In his article, *Methods to Enjoy Yourself in Summer*, he looked at his life retrospectively and concluded that he had only three years of supreme happiness in his life—from 1647 to 1649. However, he was soon faced with a famine and forced to sell his villa. He wrote in his article, *The Deed to the Villa*, “After ransacking, the famine comes. I have eight mouths to feed, so I have to sell my villa.” In his preface to *Lianxiang ban*, Li Yu’s friend Yu Wei wrote “When Liweng (Li Yu) moved to here (Hangzhou) with all his family, he was really in need...” All this shows that Li Yu had financial difficulties before he moved to Hangzhou. “Selling literary works to fill a hungry stomach”, as he described his situation, was a reflection of his life. In 1651, he published *Lianxiang ban*, which was a big success. One of Li Yu’s friends Shi Jing wrote a letter to Li Yu in 1652, saying,

*Lianxiang ban* and *Fengzheng wu* (Li Yu’s second play) are so good. I spent several days reading them and the comments of appreciation I wrote beside the script were as many as fish scales. Now I read them as my appetizers when I have my meals. Yesterday, they were stolen and I was like a baby losing mother’s milk... Once I get a new copy, I will secretly hide it in my bedroom, and will not let my roommates in, no matter how much they envy me.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Li Yu was born to a rich family but his father passed away when he was 19. After that, the family declined and Li Yu had to support his own family. He could have supported his own family if he gained an official post by passing the imperial exam, but he refused to serve Qing dynasty. Then he chose to buy a small plot of land and live by farming.

<sup>11</sup> Shan Jinheng 单锦珩. *Li Yu quanji (shijiu): Li Yu nianpu; Li Yu jiaoyou kao; Li Yu yanjiu ziliao xuanji* 李渔全集(十九)李渔年谱 李渔交游考 李渔研究资料选集 [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 19): A chronicle of Li Yu, a study of Li Yu’s social circle, a selected works of research materials]. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 25. Own Translation.

Li Yu's early life pushed him to become a professional writer. But it still cannot fully explain why he wrote *Lianxiang ban*, a story about female love, once he arrived in Hangzhou. I argue there are two more reasons. First, Li Yu himself hated cliché and preferred explore more unique stories and disliked writing odes for officials. He said his works "could offer refreshing stimulus."<sup>12</sup> Love stories between two women were still rare at Li Yu's time, though there had been various romance stories between two men. In addition, Li Yu liked to write comedies instead of tragedies, saying "I do not want to sell sadness, and I feel sorry if one of my audience does not laugh."<sup>13</sup> So his ambition to write unique stories with happy endings is one of the possible reasons he wrote *Lianxiang ban*. Second, Li Yu was a lucky man who had a harmonious family, where his wife and concubine got along with each other. In 1645, Li Yu married a young widow Cao. Li Yu described his wife and Cao's relationship in his poem *Xiannei yin* (贤妇吟 On a Good Wife) "In the spring of Yiyou year (1645), I married Miss Cao as my concubine... my wife liked my concubine more than I did, I was so happy about that."<sup>14</sup> Yu Wei, in his preface to *Lianxiang ban*, also wrote,

Liweng escaped from the conflict area with his family... I found that his wife and concubine get along with each other. They are happy to be with him, never complained even though they are in difficult times...<sup>15</sup>

Based on this, Sun Kaidi suggested that Li Yu was inspired by his wife and concubine and wrote *Lianxiang ban*.<sup>16</sup> If we compare Li Yu's family to Fan Jiefu's family, we

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<sup>12</sup> Li Yu 李渔, *Li Yu quanji* (er): *Liweng yijiayan wen ji* 李渔全集 (一) 笠翁一家言文集, [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 1): Li Yu (Liweng)'s essay anthology], (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 163. "当世耳目为我一新"

<sup>13</sup> Li Yu 李渔, *Li Yu quanji* (si): *Liweng chuanqi shi zhong* 李渔全集 (四): 笠翁传奇十种 [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 4): Li Yu (Liweng)'s ten chuanqi plays]. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 203.

<sup>14</sup> Li Yu 李渔, *Li Yu quanji* (er): *Liweng yijiayan shici ji* 李渔全集 (二) 笠翁一家言诗词集, [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 2): Li Yu (Liweng)'s poetry anthology], (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 320. "乙酉小春, 纳姬曹氏, …… 诩知内子之怜姬, 甚于老奴之爱妾, 喜出望外, 情见词中。"

<sup>15</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 3. Own translation.

<sup>16</sup> Sun Kaidi 孙楷第, *Li Yu quanji* (ershi): *xiandai xuezhe lunwen jingxuan Li Yu yanjiu lunzhu suoyin* 李渔全集 (二十) 现代学者论文精选 李渔研究论著索引, [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 20):

can see some similarities. Li Yu married Miss Cao as his concubine and in *Lianxiang ban* Fan Jiefu marries Cao Yuhua as his second wife. Li Yu was from Zhejiang province and Fan Jiefu in *Lianxiang ban* is also from Zhejiang province. Li Yu's favourite concubine Cao shares the same family name with Fan Jiefu's second wife Cao Yuhua. Li Yu's wife got along with his concubine Cao while in *Lianxiang ban*, Fan Jiefu's wife Cui Jianyu not only gets along with Miss Cao, but also loves her. These coincidences may account for Li Yu's idea to write *Lianxiang ban* because he observed a new possibility in a relationship between a wife and a concubine. However, since we do not know whether Li Yu's wife and his concubine Cao loved each other, we cannot say that *Lianxiang ban* is a complete reflection of Li Yu's family life.

In this chapter, I have produced a sketch of Li Yu's life and introduced the story of *Lianxiang ban*. I have analysed possible influencing factors behind his writing of *Lianxiang ban*, focussing on his early life before he moved to Hangzhou. He had great literary talents, but failed and chose not to serve as a civil official in both the Ming and Qing dynasties. Later, his peaceful life was terminated by ransacking and famine and he decided to earn a living based on his literary talents. In addition, his pursuit for writing unique stories with happy endings and harmonious relationships between his wife and concubine also contribute to his creating of *Lianxiang ban*. Evidently these personal reasons aligned with some popular thoughts and fashions at that time, influencing Li Yu's writing of *Lianxiang ban*. They will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two: *Qing-Yu* Value and the Influence of Male-Male Eroticism

In Chinese Literature of the time, there were some important dynamic concepts regarding love and desire, such as “*yu* 欲”, “*qing* 情”. I fail to find identical English words to replace them and it would be improper to use some “similar” modern western terms to discuss the relationship between two heroines in *Lianxiang ban*. Consequently, I will explain these concepts and analyse how the development of implications behind them influenced Li Yu’s writing of the female love in *Lianxiang ban*.

An observation on *yu* and *qing* and how they relate and develop in Chinese history helps us to understand Chinese love stories, including *Lianxiang ban*. *Yu* is very similar to the English word “desire.” In the significant second century Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* (说文解字 Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters, AD121), *yu* is defined as *tanyu* (贪欲 greed). In this case, *yu* is more like a desire to “get more.”<sup>17</sup> When discussing *qing*, the term “*xing* 性” is always mentioned in comparison with it. Martin Huang argued that in pre-Han texts, *qing* and *xing* often have an overlapping meaning, which was “morally good” while by the Han dynasty (206 BC- 220AD), *qing* was given more negative connotations. Dong Zhongshu, 董仲舒<sup>18</sup> (179-104 BC) believed that *xing* is in humanity’s innate nature and can arouse one’s kindness while *qing* can arouse one’s evil counterpart. Furthermore, another scholar Li Ao 李翱(772-841) classified *qing* and *yu* clearly in his *Fuxing shu* (复性书 A Book on How to Return to *xing*, 800AD) “... joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred and desire (*yu*) - these are the components of *qing*. When *qing* has become darkened, *xing* is hidden...”<sup>19</sup> During the Song dynasty (960-1279), the leading

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<sup>17</sup> *Yu* is mostly used as a transitive verb, “to want” rather than being used as a noun in Lunyu (论语 The Analects) and Mengzi (孟子 Mencius) Martin W. Huang. *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24.

<sup>18</sup> He greatly influenced the promotion of Confucianism as the official ideology of the Chinese imperial state.

<sup>19</sup> Martin W Huang, "Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature,"

Neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi 朱熹(1130-1200) argued that the mind was comparable to water, *xing* was comparable to the tranquility of still water, *qing* was comparable to the flow of water, and *yu* was comparable to its waves<sup>20</sup>. In his view, *qing* was morally suspicious, so he always stressed the image of overflowing water to warn people to control their *qing*. Hence, until the Song dynasty, among Neo-Confucianists, the idea of “*xing shan qing’e*” (性善情恶 *xing* is good while *qing* is bad) was dominated. As Martin Huang concluded, “*xing* is like water, *qing* like the flow of water, and *yu* like the waves that threaten to break the dam.” Many Neo-Confucianists wanted to keep the pureness of *xing* by preventing themselves from temptations such as *qing*. In Zhu Xi’s mind, *yu* is a part of *qing* and is even more dangerous than *qing* if one wants to keep his *xing* pure.

However, starting from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), some literati started to re-examine or defend *yu* in Neo-Confucianism’s context. Luo Qinchun 罗钦顺 (1465-1547) challenged Neo-Confucianism’s popular slogan “*cun tianli, mie renyu* (存天理，灭人欲 Keep the principle from the Heaven, eliminate the desire from the heart)” by saying

The fact that people have desires definitely derives from the Heaven. Some are necessary and are what one cannot help; some are appropriate and cannot be changed... The desires, together with pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy, are qualities of nature. Can pleasure, sorrow, anger and joy also be eliminated?<sup>21</sup>

The late Ming literati Chen Que 陈确(1604-1677) also argued that stressing too much on the distinction between *tianli* (天理 heavenly principle) and *renyu* (人欲 human desire) would do harm to one’s mind and body.<sup>22</sup> However, since *yu* has been disparaged for such a long time, the late Ming literati who tried to re-examine it

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*Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (1998): 154. Martin Huang argued that the rise of Buddhism from Han to Tang contributed to the negative attitude toward *qing*.

<sup>20</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *Source Book*. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Luo Qinchun 罗钦顺, *Kunzhi ji* (juan xia) 困知记 (卷下), [Knowledge painfully acquired] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 28. trans. and ed. Irene Bloom, *Knowledge Painfully Acquired* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 121.

<sup>22</sup> Chen Que 陈确. *Chen Que ji* 陈确集 [Collection of Chen Que](Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 424.

strategically ended up adding new implications to *qing*, the broader and more ambiguous term. They sentimentalised desires and stressed what they conceived to be the *qing* element in *yu*<sup>23</sup>. Because *qing* is always presented as something worthy of celebration due to its close relation to *xing*, the rhetorical tact made it easier for people to accept their *yu*, which is disguised as *qing*. Among the blooming fictions, plays and stories, the late Ming writers put *qing* in a very important position, not only promoting it as a supreme human value but also sensualising and secularising it.<sup>24</sup> In *Mudan ting* (牡丹亭 Peony Pavilion, 1598), the playwright Tang Xianzu 汤显祖(1550-1616) spoke highly of Du Liniang's *qing*, which endures even after she dies. He wrote,

Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead may live again. 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. And must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world. Only for those whose love must be fulfilled on the pillow and for whom affection deepens only after retirement from office, is it entirely a corporeal matter...<sup>25</sup>

Here the translator Cyril Birch translates *qing* as “love”, which is appropriate in *Mudan ting*'s story. Along with this influential play, “*qing*” turned to be a very positive word in the literature of that time.

Li Yu was active during the Ming-Qing transition period, and his writing was situated in the late Ming debate on *qing* and *yu*. In his *Liweng shizhongqu* (笠翁十种曲 Liweng's Ten Plays), various *qing* are described and discussed, often eulogised. Li Yu praised the genuine *qing* of his characters such as Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua from *Lianxiang ban* (怜香伴 The Loving Perfume Companion), Emperor Zhengde

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<sup>23</sup> Martin W. Huang. *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>24</sup> Martin W. Huang. *Desire*. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Cyril Birch, introduction to *Peony Pavilion: Mudan ting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), xi

“...情不知所起，一往而深，生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可与死，死而不可复生者，皆非情之至也。梦中之情，何必非真，天下岂少梦中之人耶？必因荐枕而成亲，待挂冠而为密者，皆形骸之论也。”

and a prostitute He Qianqian from *Yu Saotou* (玉搔头 Jade Clasp), and Tan Chuyu and Liu Miaogu from *Bimuyu* (比目鱼 The Flounder)<sup>26</sup>. At least from these three stories, Li Yu views *qing* as an eternal and supreme value among people regardless of gender, status and death.

In the late Ming China, despite literati's positive attitude toward *qing*, the popularity of male-male eroticism among them also influenced Li Yu's writing of *Lianxiang ban*. In Chinese history, male-male eroticism can be found in records predating the Qin dynasty (221BC-206BC). In fact, the well-known idioms such as *Longyang zhipi*<sup>27</sup> (龙阳之癖 Longyang's special hobby), *Duanxiu*<sup>28</sup> (断袖 cutting sleeves), which refers to male-male eroticism, have been present since the Warring States period (475-221BC) and the Former Han Dynasty (206 BC- AD24), when many emperors had male companions along with female.<sup>29</sup> In the Liu Song Dynasty (AD420-479), male-male eroticism was also regarded as common as male-female romance.

All the gentlemen and officials esteemed it. All men in the realm followed this fashion to the extent that husbands and wives were estranged. Resentful unmarried women became jealous.<sup>30</sup>

In *Homoeroticism in Imperial China; A Source Book*, Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson collect and categorise same-sex behaviours in a variety of literary works from imperial China including histories, poetry, drama, fiction and miscellanies.<sup>31</sup> According to their research, except the period from the Warring

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<sup>26</sup> *Bimuyu* (比目鱼, flatfish) In this play, a young man Tan chuyu and an actress Liu miaogu fell in love with each other. But Liu's mother forced her to marry another man. She pretended to accept. One day, when she played the role in a play who would jump into a river, she jumped the river beside to fight against her fate. Then Tan also jumped after her. They became flatfish in the river and lived together forever.

<sup>27</sup> Longyang is a very famous prince in warring states time, he is a well-known for loving males. People use Longyang zhipi to describe a man's fondness for men.

<sup>28</sup> Duanxiu means cutting a sleeve. A Emperor of Han loves his official Dong Xian. One day, he had to leave for emergency. He didn't want wake up his lover so he cut his sleeve pressed by Dong Xian.

<sup>29</sup> Bret Hinsch. *Passion*. 35-36

<sup>30</sup> Bret Hinsch. *Passion*. 56

<sup>31</sup> Selected examples from the categories mentioned: *Shiji* (史记 Records of the Historian), *Yutai xinyong* (玉台新咏 Poems from New Songs from a Jade Terrace), *Nan huanghou* (男皇后 A Male

States to the Former Han dynasty, the Ming and the Qing dynasties contributed a notable proportion of male-male homoeroticism literary works. This suggests the comparative openness towards male-male eroticism in Li Yu's time.

If we think about the three most influential ideological trends in China, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, we may find reasons for the "tolerance"<sup>32</sup> of male-male eroticism. Confucianism pays little attention to male-male sex, focusing more on a man's relation with his emperors, teachers, parents, friends, and children. From a man's perspective, Confucianism fosters male-female marriage, but at the same time, it does not blame a man having concubines and male companions. A man may be criticised by being only with males without carrying on the family line, therefore considered as being ungrateful to their parents. Louis Crompton argued that the closeness between the teachers (male) and pupils (male) fostered the same-sex attractions.<sup>33</sup> According to Taoism, especially Taoist alchemy, male-female sex would help maintain a man's "life essence", while male-male sex has a neutral effect on it.<sup>34</sup> Taoism therefore, does not oppose male-male sex. Buddhism encourages its followers to stay away from all kinds of desires and the desire for male or female makes no difference. Therefore, we cannot say that Buddhism is specifically against same-sex relationship because it is against the all kinds of desires. Nevertheless, some trace of hostility towards the same-sex sexuality is shown within Chinese history. According to Hinsch, due to Christian and Islamic influence in Tang Dynasty (AD618-907), the opposition to same-sex sexuality grew, but never become the main stream.<sup>35</sup> During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), laws were set to ban "young men who act like prostitutes." And during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644),

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Queen Consort), *Bian'er chai* (弁而钗 Caps with Hairpins), *Zi buyu* (子不语 What the Masters Refused to Discuss)

<sup>32</sup> It is risky to use "tolerance" when we talk about same-sex behaviour in Chinese context. As Bret Hinsch argues, the ancient Chinese tend to say a person's same-sex behaviour is like someone's, or to describe it as a person's deeds or hobbies rather than defining the person as a "homosexual" or "heterosexual".

<sup>33</sup> Louis Crompton. *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 221.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* pp. 221

<sup>35</sup> Louis Crompton. *Homosexuality*. 77-78

a regulation especially banning male-male intercourse was practiced in Emperor Jiajin's (1522-1566) period.<sup>36</sup> However, the extensive description of male-male sex in late Ming literature suggests a different reality. Among all, the late Ming book *Bian'er chai* (弁而钗 Caps with Hairpins) written by Zuixihu xinyue zhuren is famous for its daring description of the sexuality of same-sex and bi-sexual lovers and literati's occasional sexual behaviour with their boy servants was approved.

The Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed an openness toward sexual pleasure, especially with regards to the popularity of male-male eroticism. Wu Cuncun retraced the first steps toward this acceptance of sexual pleasure as follows. Firstly, the governmental system of prostitution, used to serve officials, was abolished in the early Ming and substituted by *xiaochang* (笑娼 song-boys).<sup>37</sup> Secondly, the former stability and strong economy encouraged the purchase of sexual happiness, and gave rise to a sexual indulgence (Wu, 2004). Wu Cuncun argued that the male-male sex among literati in late imperial China was so popular that it served as a remarkable part of the whole sexuality, or vogue, of that time. She believed that late imperial China was a period that shared similar fashion with Wei Jin Nan Bei Chao (220-479) when love affairs with young catamites were prevalent.<sup>38</sup> After the fall of Ming dynasty, the male-male sensibilities with song-boys continued and reached an even newer height in Beijing. Early Qing literati's taste for song-boys, catamites, and boy servants was kept and the literature on male-male eroticism was recognised and welcomed.

The popularity of male-male eroticism shows that the biological sex was not an unbreakable barrier if two same-sex persons want to be together. Once people accepted the male lovers and even admired male-male eroticism, it was possible for them to accept female-female lovers. In the patriarchal society of imperial China, a

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Sommer. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 413.

<sup>37</sup> Shen Defu 沈德符, *Wanli yehuobian* 万历野获编 [Miscellaneous notes of Wanli] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), 621.

<sup>38</sup> Plenty references from *Song shu* 宋书 (History of the Song, completed in 5<sup>th</sup>), *Shishuo xinyu* 世说新语 (A new account of tales of the world, completed in 5<sup>th</sup>), *Yutai xinyong* 玉台新咏 (New Songs from A Jade Terrace, completed in 6<sup>th</sup> century)

man who lived exclusively with a man, refusing to have children and to carry on the family name, would have been criticised. Conversely, a woman who lived exclusively with a woman and refused to have children had nothing to do with her original family (her husband can have children with other women). It seems therefore, that there was space for female love stories. However, the female-female and the male-male relationships were treated very differently—indeed, female love was almost not mentioned and neglected in Chinese historical accounts.<sup>39</sup> Compared to the massive male-male erotic *xiaoshuo* (小说 fiction), *biji* (笔记 miscellanies) in the Ming and the Qing dynasties, *Lianxiang ban* is among the very few which focusses on female love.

In this chapter, I introduced the development of *qing* and *yu* in Chinese context and connected the late Ming literati's views of *qing* and *yu* to Li Yu's writing of *Lianxiang ban*. The appreciation and sensualisation of *qing*, as well as the popularity of male-male eroticism, are two social vogues related to *Lianxiang ban*. Chapter One and Two have studied Li Yu as a writer, the *Lianxiang ban* story and the personal and social factors behind the creation of *Lianxiang ban*. Li Yu's view of Cui and Cao's relationship will be analysed through close reading in the following two chapters.

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<sup>39</sup> Laura, Wu. "Through the prism of male writing: representation of lesbian love in Ming-Qing literature", *Nan Nu*, 4(1), (2002): 1-34

## Chapter Three: Cui and Cao's Opinions of Their Relationship

Cao: Let's swear to be sisters this life, become real sisters in the next life.

Cui: It's no good. Don't we have to be women in every life?

Cao: Well, how about being sisters this life, brothers next life?

Cui: No. I have heard there is too much quarrel between brothers. And even good brothers are not as intimate as a couple. So let's be husband and wife next life!<sup>40</sup>

----Scene Ten, *The Loving Perfume Companion*

Li Yu's opinion of female love can be found from the way Cui and Cao interact directly with each other. In this chapter, Cui and Cao's conversations and Li Yu's direct description of them will be analysed.

At Yuhua Convent, when Miss Cao for the first time sets eyes on Lady Cui from the window, she can't help sighing: "What a beautiful lady!"<sup>41</sup> Soon thereafter, when they meet, Cui whispers: "She looks so charming without much make-up. What a real beauty of our time! I am obsessed with her even though I am a woman. Men must be crazy about her for sure."<sup>42</sup> Cui and Cao are well-known beauties in the context of the play. Before they meet, there are many descriptions of their beauty, such as Fan's words on Cui's beauty and the spirits' words on Cao's beauty,<sup>43</sup> so we find Cui and Cao fall for each other at first sight.

In this story, the feeling becomes deeper in the following scene. They are pleasantly surprised when they realise that they are both good poets, which is a rare and precious talent. From Lord Cao Gecheng's words of warning to his daughter in Scene Three, we know it is a time that women were preferred not to develop such

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<sup>40</sup> Li Yu 李漁, *Li Yu quanji (si): Liweng chuanqi shi zhong* 李漁全集 (四): 笠翁傳奇十種 [Complete works of Li Yu (vol. 4): Li Yu (Liweng)'s ten chuanqi plays]. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), 32. Own translation.

<sup>41</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 8 & 16.

talent. He says,

Keep your poems for yourself. Bind your Xi'nang (奚囊 bags in which poets put poems) tightly and never show poems. The remaining scripts and collections that you value should be burned. Innocence is the virtue of women, and your names are forbidden to be leaked out from the inner chamber. No matter how talented you are like Su who writes Huiwen article (回文 an article that you can read from all directions), you'd better be a dutiful Tiansun (天孙 weaver maid.)<sup>44</sup>

This explains why Cao is so happy to read Cui's poem, which describes her fragrance and cannot help writing a poem—also encouraged by the chief nun Jing Guan—praising Cui's poetic talent in return. Two beautiful poems turn their infatuation into admiration for each other. As Cao writes, “I cannot guess if it is musk or orchid. Fragrance of flowers are next to Xie's talent. I smell from a partition curtain, not realising it is from the *Yong Xue*.”<sup>45</sup>

However, they feel deeply saddened after discovering they would be separated due to Lord Cao's departure for the capital. They long to be together and enjoy each other's company, sighing

Who satisfies me? Intimates are few! It is today that I am finally matched with someone.

How can we be born in the same place, come back home after marriage together, sit on one mat singing poems together?”<sup>46</sup>

From the poem I have translated, we see that Cui wants to be with Cao as much

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<sup>44</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 11. Xi Nang (奚囊) means a bag used to keep poems. The genius poet Li He always travels and records poems in his bag. Huiwen (回文) is short for Huiwen Xuanji Tu (回文璇玑图). Lady. Su, the great female poet, organizes and weaves more than two hundred poems on silk and makes them into a whole which can be read from each direction. Tiansun (天孙) means weaver maid here. Own translation.

<sup>45</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 20. 粉麝脂兰未足猜, 芬芳都让谢家才。隔帘误作梅花嗅, 那识香从咏雪来。Xie (谢) suggests Xie Daoyun (谢道韞), one of the most famous female poets in Chinese history. Here, Cui suggests Cao is another Xie Daoyun. *Yong Xue* (咏雪) is Xie Daoyun's most well-known poem which describes snow vividly. *Yong Xue* indicates great poetic talent here. Own translation

<sup>46</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 21 Own translation.

as she can and she is asking to find ways to be with her. During their second meeting soon after, Cui proposes that they should get married in the convent. When Cui dresses up as a handsome bridegroom and Cao dresses up as a beautiful bride, they are both fascinated by each other once more,

Though I am not a real man, I am smitten by you when looking at your lovely face, after dressing as a man (groom). I like you so much, I feel my wild heart!<sup>47</sup>

You see, after dressing up, she looks like Pan An 潘安, Song Yu 宋玉. Are there any other men in this world as handsome as her? If I can marry a husband like her, I would die with no regret!<sup>48</sup>

Then, because Cui's husband Fan Jiefu is accused by Lord Cao of seducing Miss Cao to be his concubine, Lord Cao angrily refuses letters from Fan and Cui to Miss Cao. Therefore, Cui and Cao are parted and unable to communicate for three years. Cao, tortured with the absence of her beloved and her ill-health, is almost dying on her way to meet her father. Her father finds her looking so sick and fragile that he comes deeply concerned for his daughter. She shows her despair to him by saying "It is you that has come to take away my life like a live Rakshasa<sup>49</sup>. And now you pretend to be innocent, asking me why I am in this terrible state. It is my fault, because parents are always correct<sup>50</sup>, how did I come to hate my father?"<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Cui is also trying hard to reconnect with Cao. One day she hears the announcement that Cao Gechen is looking for a female disciple with poetic talent to accompany his daughter. Cui passes Cao Gechen's test, telling him that she is an orphan and has never been married after losing connection with her fiancé. This story is constructed by Cui and

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<sup>47</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 33. Own translation

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 33. Pan An (潘安), A very famous handsome litterateur in West Jin dynasty (266-316) Song Yu (宋玉), A very famous Ode master in warring states period in Chinese history. Own translation.

<sup>49</sup> A Rakshasa is a demonic being from Hindu mythology

<sup>50</sup> Cao is bitterly sarcastic here.

<sup>51</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 69. Own translation.

Fan in order to make it possible for Fan to marry Cao as his wife. Then she successfully becomes Cao Gechen's adopted daughter, and consequently, Miss Cao's elder sister and companion in her inner chamber. Once they see each other, Cao is shocked and stares at Cui, smiling: "Sis, I feel that we have met before as old friends. From now on, I am willing to tell you everything about myself, treat you as my real sibling."<sup>52</sup> After Cui tells Cao how she goes through difficulties to meet her, Cao is touched, saying,

"... you are so driven by love, and you never fail my trust. Alas! There are so many men abandoning their women and cannot love their women forever. You are a heroine, a real man among women. Here you come to see me before I die, climbing mountains, travelling across rivers, going to great lengths to reach me."<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, there is no denying how strong their love is for each other, their admiration for each other's charisma and their tremendous effort to reconnect again. Some may argue that their affection for each other is not love but an affection between *zhiji* 知己. If a person fully understands you and appreciates your ambition,<sup>54</sup> then he or she is regarded as your *zhiji*. The old Chinese saying, "A decent man dares to die for his *zhiji*. 士为知己者死" is also quoted by Cao to express her resolve. I also agree they are *zhiji*. However, their relationship is more than *zhiji*, because the admiration for one's appearances, the pining for a person, the desire to live with this person are more characteristics of lovers. If you regard a person as a *zhiji*, it merely suggests that you have a shared life ambition, such as defending your country and fighting against invaders.

It is with no doubt that Cui and Cao have a special affection for each other. However, how do they define their relationship? From Cui Jianyun's perspective, the

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<sup>52</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 85. Own translation.

<sup>53</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 86. Own translation.

<sup>54</sup> Zhiji (知己) is a very important word in Chinese context. From large amount of accounts, people express their eager to having a zhiji or the difficult to meet a zhiji. There is a very famous saying "It is easier to gain a great amount of gold, but harder to find a zhiji 千金易得, 知己难求。"

closest relationship is between a husband and a wife, which is more intimate than a relationship between siblings, a monarch and officials, or fathers and mothers. She emphasizes that a husband and a wife who sleep in the same bed are more likely to have faith that they will live and die together.<sup>55</sup> To make them look like a husband and a wife, Cui dresses up as a bridegroom and marries Cao who dresses up as a bride. She mentions Zhu Yingtai 祝英台<sup>56</sup>, the heroine of the famous Chinese love story *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, to show that she is not the only girl who cross-dresses. Does she regard her marriage with Cao as a typical marriage? She directly uses “*yin yuan* 姻缘” which literally means marital relationship to indicate their affection.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, she plays a decisive “husband” role in their relationship, using great planning and determination. In order to be reunited with Cao, Cui uses her husband Fan. From Fan’s perspective, gaining one more beautiful woman without his wife’s objection is an advantage. On top of that, he will not lose his wife if he fails to marry Cao. In Cui’s eyes, the relationship with Cao is extremely precious and worth taking every chance to secure it is worthwhile. Her strong feeling for Cao is shown through her admiration for Cao’s appearance and poetic talent, and this admiration arouses her desire to live with her like a couple. Husband (male) - wife (female) model is the best way in her mind to assure unity at that time. She knows that two women like themselves cannot become a real couple in this life, so she tries to reach a similar widely accepted marital condition as an alternative.

On the other hand, how is Cao Yuhua’s perspective of their relationship depicted? Cao Yuhua is destined to be a talented poet like Cui Jianyun, but she is more repressed because of her priggish father. Cui therefore, is like a light shining into her restricted life. At the very beginning of the play, Cao shows her objection to her father’s criticism, “If I meet a talented lady, my poetic talent will not be hidden.”<sup>58</sup> Shortly after she meets Cui at Yuhua Convent. Cui’s artistic talent and beauty attracts her

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<sup>55</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 32. Own translation.

<sup>56</sup> Zhu Yingtai (祝英台), the heroine of one of the most famous Chinese tragedy love story. In this story, Zhu disguises herself in man’s clothes and becomes a classmate of Liang Shanbo.

<sup>57</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 72. Own translation.

<sup>58</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 11. Own translation.

instantly. As an unmarried adolescent girl, this attraction has a significant impact on her. Cao Yuhua is frank and faithful, taking this relationship very seriously. It does not take long for her to accept Cui's proposal, without considering this as an unusual form of marriage. Cao states she will never marry another husband after her wedding with Cui. When Cui suggests for her to marry Fan in order to unite with her, she hesitates but in the end agrees for the sake of Cui. If it was not for her deep affection for Cui, it would have been impossible for Cao, a well-educated lady in early Qing dynasty, to accept being a concubine of an untitled scholar. When they are separated, her lust for life dissipates and she becomes very ill, perhaps better described as lovesick. When her maid Liu Chun asks how she become lovesick over of a woman, her reply describes her opinion with great accuracy of this relationship:

You say that my lovesickness 相思 lacks basis. You silly girl, you only know the origin of lovesickness, while you have no idea of the differences between *qing* and *yu*. *Qing* comes from the heart while *yu* comes from sex. If one's lovesickness is merely from the desire of sex, he will only be called a sex addict rather than maniac in love even though he dies of it. Only Du Liniang 杜丽娘<sup>59</sup> deserves the word "*qing*". She falls in love with Liu Mengmei 柳梦梅, even though she does not see him in real life. If I die, Mrs Fang will do what Liu would do after knowing the truth. 'Liniang' (she refers to herself) may not come back to life, but the female 'Liu' (she refers Cui) will absolutely come to see my coffin. She won't live without me. I made a vow to be Cui's wife in the next life and I hope it comes true soon.<sup>60</sup>

From Cao's perspective, her thoughts for Cui is a result of *qing* and their relationship is almost entirely based on *qing* rather than on *yu*. She mentions Du-Liu's *qing* and states that they too have a strong *qing* between them. Like Du and Liu, even death

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<sup>59</sup> Du Liniang (杜丽娘), the heroine of Peony Pavilion which was written earlier by Tang Xianzu. As a suppressed girl in chamber, one day Du dreams of a youth called Liu Mengmei (柳梦梅) and has sex with him. When she wakes up, she misses Liu but cannot find him. She buries a self-portrait under the Peony Pavilion and dies with pity. Three years later, Liu Mengmei finds this portrait on his way to participate the civil examination in capital. The spirit of Du Liniang asks him to dig out her body and she comes back to life. Enduring so many trials, they finally get together in the end.

<sup>60</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 69-70.

cannot end their relationship.

Love, or more precisely the term “*qing*”, plays a major role in their relationship. What about sexuality? Though there are only a few descriptions of sex, we can still derive some conclusions. After taking an oath in front of the deities, they sing together “The great deities won’t be easily cheated, the liar will be punished violently. We wish from now on to be together in every life, take turns being husband and wife, changing roles in bed.”<sup>61</sup> This sentence does not prove they were sexually involved, however, it expresses their wish to be husband and wife and it seems they do not care who has the husband’s role and who has the wife’s. Cui even makes their goal clearer by saying “Dream the same dream at night, have the same make-up in the morning, blossom like flowers together. One follows the other, singing in the chamber, just like husband and wife.”<sup>62</sup> The only obvious sexual description in this play appears after Cui’s and Cao’s maids pretend to make marriage vows in front of the deities. They sing:

The romantic event is imitated, the fragrance of plum blossoms<sup>63</sup> is leaked when Liangyi<sup>64</sup> are taken off. Why don’t they have a one-foot-long plum branch?<sup>65</sup> Yacha<sup>66</sup> touch each other, the scratching makes Meiwo<sup>67</sup> itch.<sup>68</sup>

This humorous description implies the possibility of Li Yu imagining what the two women may encounter when they have sex. In plays, it is often the case for the author to describe the main characters’ behavior vicariously through servants. So Li Yu writes about female sex between Cui and Cao through their maids. Lady Cui’s maid is *chou* 丑,<sup>69</sup> a type of role who always makes people laugh with vulgar words and deeds, so compared to the heroes and heroines, *chou*’s unusual words and behaviours

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<sup>61</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 34-35. Own translation.

<sup>62</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 34. Own translation.

<sup>63</sup> Fragrance of plum blossoms means the aroma from a lady’s private area

<sup>64</sup> Kunyi 裨衣, equals to 良衣, a kind of trousers which reaches knees

<sup>65</sup> One-foot-long plum branch 梅花棒 means penis

<sup>66</sup> Yacha 丫叉 means twigs and infers to pubic hair

<sup>67</sup> Meiwo 梅窝 means a lady’s private area, which is covered with pubic hair

<sup>68</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 35. Own translation.

<sup>69</sup> Among various Chou 丑 types, Lady Cui’s maid Hua Lin 花玲 is called Cai Dan 彩旦, an ugly and funny female role.

are more acceptable by the audience. *Chou's* words always reflect the very straightforward ideas, far from high morals and social standards. However, it could also merely be a method that Li Yu uses to please his audience.

The most important information we gather here is that Li Yu probably did not know what females do when they have sex, or he may not have wanted to write about it. According to Li Yu's humorous description of Cui and Cao's maids<sup>70</sup>, sex is believed not complete without a penis. Because He believed and admired the love or *qing* between two females. Another reason why Li Yu may not know how female-female sex works is because few of the erotic paintings in the Ming dynasty depicted female-female sex. In other words, female-female sex is generally ignored and underrepresented.

In this chapter, I analysed the changing feelings of both Cui and Cao as the story progresses and separately unfolds from Cui and Cao's view of their relationship. In spite of their different personalities, their words and deeds concretely show that they are clear about how they feel for each other. They know that their relationship is like that of male-female lovers. However, Li Yu fails to give us a direct description of female sex, which leaves an obscure space. In the next chapter, I will analyse other supporting characters in *Lianxinag ban*, and try to decipher their opinions of Cui and Cao's relationship. Their words and deeds have the ability to reflect views different from Cui's and Cao's.

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<sup>70</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 35. Own translation.

## Chapter Four: Supporting Characters' Opinions of Cui and Cao's Relationship

Shakyamuni<sup>71</sup>: *Zhiji* do not envy each other, talents appreciate each other. Let's make them meet each other through the fragrance of orchids<sup>72</sup>, feel pleased when exchanging delicate poems, become obsessed with each other after drinking good liquor. Broaden the field of *qing* and abolish old fences, create such a marriage for the first time in history!<sup>73</sup>

----Scene Five, *The Loving Perfume Companion*

In this play, the supporting characters' words about the Cui-Cao relationship reflect different points of view. Audiences of different ages, gender and status may each find their spokesperson. As a playwright, Li Yu expresses his own unique understanding of women by writing debates and conversations among these characters, rather than commenting directly. We see not only what people around Cui and Cao say but also how deities in Yuhua Convent cooperate in order to make Cui and Cao meet for the first time. In this chapter, various characters will be analysed to see what point of view they hold regarding the Cui-Cao relationship. They are: deities in Yuhua Nunnery, Cui Jianyun's husband Fan Jiefu 范介夫, Cao Yuhua's father Cao Gechen 曹个臣 (Lord Cao), Cui and Cao's maids Hua Lin 花玲 and Liu Chun 留春, Cui Jianyun's cousin, Fan Jiefu's friend Zhang Zhongyou 张仲友 and Yuhua Nunnery's Chief nun Jing Guan 静观.

### Yuhua Convent's deities

In Scene Two, when Fan Jiefu first appears on stage, he mentions that he is the stepson of his childless uncle Lord Fan, who passed away at an early age. In Scene Three, Cao Gechen decides to stay at Yuhua Nunnery for a couple of days before heading to the capital. He asks why the nunnery looks like a literati's private villa. The Chief Nun, Jing Guan 静观, explains to him that the property was given by a kind

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<sup>71</sup> Shakyamuni is one of the deities who are worshiped in Yuhua Convent.

<sup>72</sup> Women's scent.

<sup>73</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 17. Own translation.

Lord Fan. She also adds that Lord Fan's son lives nearby. Combined with this background, Cao Yuhua's coming sparks a dialogue among deities in Yuhua Nunnery and paves the way for the following story.

From what Shakyamuni says, we find out that the aim of the Cui-Cao encounter is to make Cao Yuhua marry Fan Jiefu. When Cao comes to pray, Shakyamuni praises her unique and natural beauty and realises her wish to find a companion who is both talented and good-looking. He says:

Miss Cao should become the *juanshu* (眷属 partner) of Lord Fan's son as well as Cui. Now Cui has become Fan Jiefu's wife, but Cao is still unmarried and lives at Yuhua Nunnery. Today Lady Cui will come to pray, we must create an opportunity to let them get to know each other, and help them to become *kangli* (伉俪 companions).<sup>74</sup>

It is unclear here, whether the last sentence “become his/her companion 结成他的伉俪”, means the union of Cui and Cao or Fan and Cao. Based on his first words, it can be understood as “becoming the companion of Lord Fan's son (Fan Jiefu)”, but according to the previous sentence, it can also be understood as “Cui's companion.” Moreover, “*ta* 他” can infer to both men and women<sup>75</sup>. However, when the Fragrance Messenger 氤氲使 shows up and has a conversation with Shakyamuni, it turns out to be clear that here “*ta* 他” means Miss Cao. The Fragrance Messenger comes with a red thread. In Chinese mythology, lovers are believed to be connected by an unseen red thread. And when he is asked by Shakyamuni if he will come to unite Cui and Cao together, he replies he will. He adds that he will fan the fragrance of Cao to attract Cui's attention. After they meet, their admirations for each other will grow, then the relationship between them will grow as planned.<sup>76</sup> They cooperate to make Cui and Cao fall in love with each other and then, indirectly leading Cao to become Fan Jiefu's second wife, which is the deities' final aim. By giving Fan Jiefu two beautiful talented wives, they repay Fan Jiefu's stepfather Lord Fan's kindness. At the same

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Because until the Literary Revolution in 1920s, the Chinese character “*ta* 她” invented to infer women.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 17.

time, they also fulfil Cao's prayer by sending her a perfect match.

These deities see the meeting of Cui and Cao as a step towards Fan Jiefu marrying Cao Yuhua. It shows that male-female marriage is still considered superior to female-female love, and that female-female love is allowed to exist within the male-female marriage. It also seems to be an acceptable explanation for those who do not understand female-female love. The appearance of the Fragrance Messenger makes Cao and Cui's encounter not only romantic, but also natural. The deities confirm the existence and reasonableness of female-female love.

#### Cui Jianyun's husband Fan Jiefu,

It is worthwhile for us to scrutinise Fan's reaction. As Cui's husband, he only cares for whether Cui will be jealous if he gets a second companion.<sup>77</sup> In late imperial China, it was common for a man with title to have a wife and several concubines, but at the same time the husband often had to deal with fights between his companions. Therefore, he is happy to see that his wife Cui and Miss Cao like each other. In his eyes, Cui is more like an ally who helps him to marry Cao rather than a rival. After he is convinced by Cui, he goes to ask his friend Zhang Zhongyou, who is also Cui's cousin, to go to Lord Cao as a match maker. He tells Zhang in a surprising and pleasant tone that Cao decides to marry him in order to live with his wife Cui. He also introduces how Cui and Cao meet in the convent, how they admire each other's poetic talents and how they got married in the convent.<sup>78</sup> From the tone he explains to Zhang, we know that he is not offended by Cui and Miss Cao, even though they dress as groom and bride and swear to be husband and wife. I argue that it is Cui who makes him believe that Cui and Cao want to be together solely because of their appreciation for each other's poetic talents. This is because Cui only stresses to Fan how she admires Cao's poetic talents but does not mention how she is also very fond of Cao's appearance. So Fan regards Cui and Cao's marriage vows as a special way for them to show their ambition of living together.

It is possible to conclude that Fan regards Cui and Cao as poetic companions

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<sup>77</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 40.

<sup>78</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 50.

who use marriage to fulfil the wish of being together. In addition, he is very pleased to gain another beautiful woman.

#### Cao Yuhua's father Cao Gechen

When Cao Gechen first hears about Cui from his daughter's maid Liu Chun, he wants to find out the reason why his daughter is dying after leaving Yuhua Convent. He questions her,

"It is impossible! Did she get such a severe sickness from a woman? What part of Cui does she love?" Liu Chun replies,

"Poetic talent."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing more."

"Alas, such an idiot girl!"<sup>79</sup>

Lord Cao thinks that his daughter needs a female companion who can write good poems and we should note that Liu Chun tells him that Cui and Cao swear to be sisters rather than husband and wife. Therefore, he does not think that there is affection between his daughter and Cui. Even when he is told the truth by Cui in the end, Cui lies to him that they swore to be sisters rather than husband and wife. So in Cao Gechen's eyes, Cui and Cao are merely poetic companions and specifically sisters. In turn, from the fact that Liu Chun and Cui do not mention the "marital relationship" between Cui and Cao, we can infer that they all know that telling this will not make Cao Gechen agree to the marriage between Cao Yuhua and Fan Jiefu.

#### Cui and Cao's maids Hua Lin and Liu Chun

Cao and Cui's two maids, Liu Chun and Hua Lin, are also important characters in this play. Though they do not have many lines, Hua Lin's advice on cross-dressing and Liu Chun's question on *qing* and *yu* are crucial. For the plot, it is risky to conclude how they see Cui-Cao relationship as there is insufficient evidence. However, their advice and questions do suggest their understanding of a "normal" couple or relationship.

When Cui and Cao decide to swear to be husband and wife, Hua Lin suggests

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<sup>79</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 75. Own translation.

that “According to an old saying, one looks like a dragon when one disguises as a dragon, one looks like a tiger when one disguises as a tiger. Since you two want to be husband and wife, you should also dress as husband and wife and then swear (before the deities.)”<sup>80</sup> From Hua Lin’s words, it seems that she does not care about two women swearing to be a couple, but insists that “swearing to be couple” should only happen between a man-like person and a woman-like person. As a result, she advises them to disguise as groom and bride. In this play, Hua Lin is a *chou* 丑, a role that is purposely funny, vulgar and eccentric, so it is natural for her to propose that Cui and Cao cross-dress. Adding further humour to this situation, Hua Lin even asks Liu Chun to swear to be husband and wife with her just like Cui and Cao. Liu Chun asks Cao why she misses Cui so much, asking,

Miss, there are many stories about lovesickness in history, but your lovesickness is really strange. Lovesickness always comes from romance 风流. It makes sense if you have met a man but you didn’t. Mrs Fan is a woman, you have everything she has and she lacks what you lack. There is no sexual pleasure, what do you want from her? It is like a tremendous debt from a previous life!<sup>81</sup>

In her mind, lovesickness only exists between a man and a woman because of a supposedly unique sexual attraction, but then Cao tells her the difference between *qing* and *yu*, and emphasises their love for each other. Liu Chun says that Du Liniang used to have erotic dreams about her lover Liu Mengmei. Cao replies quickly that she also meets Cui in her dreams, not only at night but also at day. Cao doesn’t explain further whether she has erotic dreams about Cui and there are no further questions from Liu Chun. We can see that she believes that lovesickness comes from romance, and romance only exists between men and women, because only men and women can have sex.

Cao Yuhua refutes Liu Chun’s first point by emphasising *qing*. She stresses that lovesickness could come from *qing* (which is spiritual) rather than *yu*. But she does

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<sup>80</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 32. Own translation.

<sup>81</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 69. Own translation.

not directly say if she has sex with Cui in her night and day dreams. This is understandable, because it is almost impossible for a well-educated woman to talk about sex openly during this period. Moreover, it is unnecessary for her to convey those details to a maid girl. However, she does mention that the figure appearing in her dreams is Cui in man's dress. In her mind, Cui is already attractive, and Cui is even more attractive to her when she dressed up as a handsome man.

#### Cui Jianyun's Cousin Zhang Zhongyou

Zhang Zhongyou is Fan Jiefu's good friend and Cui's cousin. Zhang Zhongyou was the matchmaker of Fan and Cui. When Fan tells him that Cui and Cao swear to be husband and wife and Cao agrees to marry him in order to be with Cui, Zhang calls them "naughty girls."<sup>82</sup> After making sure it is not a joke, he agrees to visit Cao Gechen as the matchmaker of Fan. When Lord Cao asks him why Fan wants to marry his daughter, he tells the truth that Cui and Cao swear to be couple and Cao wants to marry Fan in order to be with Cui.

From these lines, it is suggested that Zhang does not feel angry about or have any negative feelings towards Cui and Cao's closeness and marriage vows. All he cares about or takes seriously is that Cao Yuhua agrees to marry Fan Jiefu in the end. Neither he nor Fan Jiefu sees Cui as disloyal or Cao as strange.

#### Yuhua Convent's chief nun Jing Guan

Jing Guan plays a very important role in this play. Because of the Fragrance Messenger, Cui smells a woman's fragrance and finds a young lady hiding outside the window, which prompts Jing Guan to introduce Cui and Cao to each other. She knows that Cui is a good poet, so she asks her to make a poem on Cao's fragrance. Cui writes a very good poem, displaying her talent, and Cao speaks highly of it. Cui soon realises that maybe Cao is also a good poet, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to appreciate her poems as strongly. Cui and Jing Guan insist that Cao make a poem in return. Soon Cui and Cao develop their admiration for each other and worry that they will not be able to see each other again. Touched by their tears, Jing Guan tells them

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<sup>82</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 46. Own translation.

how to create an opportunity to meet again. Jing Guan not only introduces Cui and Cao to each other, but also comes up with an idea to bring about their second meeting. It is during the second meeting that Cui and Cao decide to get married in front of the Buddha. Jing Guan witnesses the event by accident, and retreats with a smiling face. In the following scenes, she also tries to send a message to Cao from Cui, but fails because of Cao Gechen. Guan likes both Cui and Cao and is positive about their being intimacy. Jing Guan says,

They are so attached to each other, like glue and varnish and they are so congenial. So in this world, not only beauty but also talent are appreciated.<sup>83</sup>

We know that Jing Guan believes that Cui and Cao will become extremely close because of their admiration for each other's talent.

### Summary

To summarise, these supporting characters do not see the Cui-Cao relationship as a romantic relationship equal to a male-female one. They all ignore a very important reason of Cui and Cao's wish of living together, which is their physical attraction for each other. The deities see their encounter as a prelude to the union of Fan and Cao, and make it serve the male-female marriage. Cui Jianyun's husband Fan Jiefu, Cao Yuhua's father Cao Gechen, and Yuhua Convent's chief nun Jing Guan believe that their wish of being together mainly results from their mutual appreciation of each other's poetic talent. Cui Jianyun's maid Hua Lin approves of their marriage, but suggests that they dress as a male groom and a female bride. Cao Yuhua's maid Liu Chun questions Cao's lovesickness for Cui and argues that Cui cannot offer Cao what a man can, namely sex. Zhang Zhongyou cares more about the fact that Cao agrees to marry Fan, suggesting that he does not see the Cui-Cao relationship as a serious romantic relationship, which might undermine Cui and Fan's marriage. As a result, none of the supporting characters discover that Cui and Cao's relationship has

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<sup>83</sup> Li, *chuanqi shizhong*, 22. Own translation.

developed into a love affair.

I argue that Li Yu presents a misunderstanding of the Cui-Cao relationship by the society through the words of these supporting characters. When unveiling the ideas behind these characters' notions of Cui-Cao relationship, Li Yu does not show his support to any one of them, especially in the instance where Liu Chun questions Cao Yuhua why she fell in love with a woman, who, in her eyes, cannot give Cao what a man can. Her question is representative of all who cannot understand female-female love. Cao explains her and Cui's love in length to Liu Chun, which can also be seen as Li Yu's notion of Cui-Cao relationship. Supporting characters, including Liu Chun, help to arouse a debate on love between two women and from the play we can infer that Li Yu understands that love exists between two persons regardless of sex. Of course, how Li Yu depicts women in love does not have to reflect what he thought of female love beyond the boundaries of the play.

## Conclusion

This thesis focused on a mid-seventeenth century play *Lianxiang ban*, where Li Yu depicts a female romantic relationship between Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua. Its uniqueness relies on its female-female love content, which was rarely mentioned in the literature of the time compared to the popular male-male eroticism.

What is Li Yu's opinion of female love in *Lianxiang ban*? Laura Wu argues that as a male writer, Li Yu's writing on female love is for the benefit of heterosexual sex and marriage. However, I would argue that this is not the point of the play. In *Lianxiang ban*, we can infer that Li Yu respects and admires pure female love between Cui and Cao and believes that their love is not inferior to male-female love. To support my argument, I devised a textual analysis of *Lianxiang ban*'s two main characters and other supporting characters, which I argue depict Li Yu's notion of female love within the scope of the play. From his vivid description of Cui and Cao's first meeting, their lovesickness and their loving conversations, Li Yu eulogises their relationship and does not appear to admonish female-female love. At the same time, Li Yu stresses that they have a physical attraction for each other, which is against the supporting characters' opinion that Cui and Cao are merely poetic companions. Li Yu also makes clear to his readers that Cui and Cao love each other not solely because of cross-dressing—Cui frankly admires Cao's beauty as a woman at first sight. Cao is also obsessed with Cui both before and after Cui dresses up as a groom. In fact, only when getting married to Cao in front of the spirits does Cui dress up as a groom. In most occasions, Cui and Cao dress in women's clothing and they still admire each other.

In this thesis, I have also linked Li Yu's life experience, the cult of *qing* and male-male eroticism to infer his positive attitude towards female love. The fall of the Ming dynasty and the cruelty of the Manchu Qing ruler forced him to give up becoming an official, despite his literary talent and commitment to studying hard. However, his ambition to share his talents was revived once he saw his local fellows' enthusiasm for watching a live tiger. He decided to make his works an literary

equivalent of the “live tiger”—unique enough to attract readers and realise his talent. His writing of female love was not a common theme and eulogising female love made his play unique in the literature of this time period. In parallel to his play, Li Yu’s wife got along well with his concubine, which arguably gave him a spark of inspiration to write about female-female love in a positive light. Aside from his personal circumstances, the cult of *qing* and male-male eroticism were two further social-historical reasons that may have inspired him to write *qing*-themed same-sex love stories. *Qing* had been depicted as a very important element in the literature of Li Yu’s time and the popularity of male-male eroticism suggested people did not regard sex as a barrier in becoming a couple. Additionally, *Lianxiang ban* very likely will have been written for profit, and therefore had to be sensational, which the topic of female-female love could have provided. All these factors contribute to Li Yu’s writing of *Lianxiang ban*—a unique, touching female-female love story.

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