INTRODUCTION: WOMEN IN LOVE
AND THE BUSINESS OF MEN IN
LI YU’S CHUANQI DRAMA

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The Fragrant Companions is the product of a particularly tumultuous era in Chinese history. Just seven years prior to the play’s completion in 1651, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was violently replaced by the Manchu-led Qing (1644–1911), a transition precipitated by the traumatic fall of the capital to peasant rebels and the suicide of the reigning emperor. The play’s author, Li Yu 李漁 (hao Liweng 笠翁, 1611–1680), navigated these turbulent waters relatively smoothly, thanks in part to his talent for channeling his prodigious literary gifts into profitable ventures in theatrical production and publishing. The Fragrant Companions (Lianxiangban 憐香伴, literally “Companions Who Love Fragrance,” also known as Meiren xiang 美人香, “The Fragrance of Beauties”) was Li’s first play in the chuanqi 傳奇 genre. He went on to write a total of nine others, which, along with three collections of short fiction, form the core of his literary oeuvre. He also accrued considerable fame from the manuals and essays he wrote or inspired others to create about painting, horticulture, cuisine, and various elegant pastimes that he cultivated as a flamboyant bon vivant. In his lifestyle and his writings he challenged long-held conventions regarding historical events, public morality, literary expression, or other
arenas. His irreverent contrarianism won him popularity and commercial success. But it also provoked disdain, causing him to be seen as an opportunistic bangxian 師閑 (literally “aiding idleness,” meaning a hack writer who caters to the whims of the rich and powerful for financial gain). Such condescending epithets continued to dog his posthumous reputation until well into the modern era, when writers like Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) began the process of rehabilitating him from the disrepute to which he had long been consigned.

While Li’s short stories were first translated into English as early as 1815, the longstanding neglect of his work within China apparently impeded the full range of his writings from reaching foreign audiences. This began to change in the 1960s, when Helmut Martin worked with collaborators in Taiwan to edit and publish Li Yu’s collected works (1970). It picked up pace in the 1980s: two critical biographies were published in the United States, and Patrick Hanan followed his award-winning The Invention of Li Yu (1988) with his translations of The Carnal Prayer Mat (1990), an erotic novel attributed to Li Yu, and selections from Li’s two short story collections, A Tower for the Summer Heat (1992; original title Twelve Towers / Shier lou 十二樓) and Silent Operas (1996; Wusheng xi 無聲戲). Hanan did not apply his prodigious talents to Li’s plays, however, and though The Lively Plays of Li Yu (1980) by Eric Henry does focus on Li’s theatrical corpus, it translates only a handful of extended passages. Non-Chinese readers had to wait until 2020 for the first English version of an entire play, A Couple of Soles (Bimuyu 比目魚), to appear in print. The Fragrant Companions is thus the second of what we hope will eventually be Li’s entire dramatic oeuvre rendered into English as well as other languages.

The Fragrant Companions tells the story of two young gentry ladies who fall in love with each other after exchanging poems
in a nunnery, and who then overcome a series of obstacles to come together through a legitimate marriage—with the same husband. The romance starts with the newly wedded Cui Jianyun 崔箋雲 going to burn incense in the Rain-Flower Nunnery in Yangzhou. At the nunnery she meets Cao Yuhua 曹語花, who has stopped there overnight with her father on their way to the capital for the triennial metropolitan civil service examination. Jianyun is first captivated by Yuhua’s alluringly fragrant bodily scent and natural beauty, while Yuhua reciprocates with admiration for Jianyun’s stunning looks and elegant manner. It is love at first sight.

But the emotional bond between the young women goes even deeper after they discover their shared interest in and talent for writing poetry. Their mutual affection grows so strong that they conduct a mock wedding ceremony at the nunnery and hatch a plan to spend the rest of their lives together by having Cao Yuhua marry Cui Jianyun’s husband as a second wife. The marriage proposal is rejected by Yuhua’s father, however, then further stymied by the machinations of another suitor, and yet further postponed by Jianyun’s husband, who suffers from slander and mistreatment as an indirect consequence of the ladies’ infatuation. Jianyun and Yuhua are forced to part, but three years later they fortunately meet again, in the capital. This time, through a well-contrived scheme and some good luck, Jianyun becomes Yuhua’s literary companion while her husband comes under Yuhua’s father’s tutelage through the palace examination. In the play’s grand finale, the two young women are able to fulfill their wish to live together in a ménage-à-trois marriage.

The relationship between Jianyun and Yuhua goes through a complete cycle of free love that is typical of standard heteronormative Chinese romantic tales—falling in love, pledging to marry without parental permission, longing and becoming lovesick
when separated, and eventually achieving a joyous reunion and sharing a life together. Despite its conclusion in a heterosexual marriage that seems to reaffirm the norms of the Confucian-based gender hierarchy, polygamous marriage, and the patriarchal social order, the heart of the play lies in its portrayal of the two women’s genuine love and passion for each other, their mutual longing when separated, their efforts and resourcefulness to surmount social biases and impediments, and the triumph of their love—even if partially compromised—over social mandates and expectations. The play is not without flaws, but it is indeed a remarkable and rare sympathetic treatment of a subject that historical and literary writings rarely broached over the long span of imperial Chinese history.

Although brief descriptions of the plot of *The Fragrant Companions* can be found in Hanan’s and Henry’s respective studies, close familiarity with its complex story has remained relatively limited outside of—and even to some extent within—China. While sharing much in common with the style and themes of Li Yu’s nine other plays, *The Fragrant Companions* can be distinguished from them in several respects. First, as in many of his plays, the examination system features prominently. But as the locus of (at least temporary) injustice, nepotism, ineptitude, and sheer malice, the range and intensity of its satire toward this institution is unequalled by any of Li’s other works of drama or fiction. Second, the play includes a subplot set in an exotic overseas location—the Ryukyu Kingdom—whose king sends a delegation to China and in turn receives an imperial envoy from Beijing. Third, *The Fragrant Companions* is written in an elevated and markedly more allusive style than *A Couple of Soles* and most of Li Yu’s other later plays. And finally, it is one of the very few literary works of premodern China to treat the theme of female same-sex love in detail. These and other features contribute to
the rich complexity and contemporary relevance of the play, and they have earned it the attention of the foremost scholars in the field of Li Yu studies. As a jewel among Li’s artful and invariably delightful plays, The Fragrant Companions has long deserved to be made accessible to readers and theater audiences beyond China, a task we have undertaken with both humility and considerable pleasure.

LI YU’S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Li Yu was born into a well-to-do gentry family of the Jinhua-Lanxi district of Zhejiang Province in 1611, where he received a classical education in preparation for the official examinations typical of young men of his status. The wars, rebellions, and banditry that marked the dynastic transition at first interrupted and then permanently ended Li’s aspirations to pursue an official career, forcing him to seek an alternative means of making a living. Fortuitously, the rapid increase of literacy, the booming publishing industry, and the relaxation of Neo-Confucian ethics in the late Ming and early Qing all created a sociocultural milieu and market conducive to the growth of opportunities for professional writing. Li Yu became one of the first and arguably the most renowned professional writer and artist of his kind, and he maintained a relatively opulent lifestyle at his Nanjing villa by publishing and selling his writings, running his bookstore, touring the empire with his private theatrical troupe, and engaging in other types of artistic business ventures.

Implicitly and often explicitly dubious toward the strict etiquette of Neo-Confucianism embedded in the curriculum of the examination system and widely shared among the elite, Li Yu emerged as a witty and iconoclastic writer who was obsessed with novelty, ingeniousness, and virtuosity. As Patrick Hanan
has put it, Li’s literary works demonstrate “his individuality, his expression of self, his concerns with the close-at-hand, and his rejection of the authority of tradition.”¹ Some of Li Yu’s choices of subject matter and artistic strategies seem strikingly “modern” even in this day and age. For instance, in his fiction and plays, he ridicules the Confucian rules governing women’s conduct, such as the promotion of chastity and strict limits on women’s education; he also writes about same-sex eroticism not only in *The Fragrant Companions* but in two short stories and one other play;² and, he uses parody throughout most of his fiction and plays to make fun of literary stereotypes and tiresome conventions.

Though recognized for his impressive literary talent, Li Yu’s pursuit of profit through writing and patronage resulted in the aforementioned epithet of “hanger-on.” His notoriety as the author—even if perhaps spuriously—of an erotic novel, and for allegedly “immoral behavior” such as enlisting his two concubines to perform in public with his family theatrical troupe, further contributed to his ill repute. In spite of his partial revival in the early twentieth century, Li Yu’s writings continued to suffer from neglect or, even if they were noticed, bore the brunt of bigoted and uninformed criticism and prudishly motivated censorship. His fiction and dramatic works were often judged to be lacking in historical significance or moral seriousness and castigated for dwelling on “trivial” subjects; *The Fragrant Companions* is the most representative example of this persistent neglect. It is said that the play was seldom performed even during Li Yu’s time, and hardly at all before the twenty-first century. When it was finally staged in its entirety by the Beijing Opera Company in 1957, it was reconfigured as a heterosexual romance, completely stripped of its homoerotic dimensions. While Li’s iconoclasm
may have benefited the play during the early years of the People’s Republic of China, its theme of women in love with one another evidently could not be faithfully rendered in a public performance until the dawn of the twenty-first century.

By the time Li Yu wrote *The Fragrant Companions* in 1651, the *chuanqi* drama already had more than a century of history behind it as an elite art form. Originating from *nanxi* 南戲 (Southern Drama) in the Song dynasty (960–1279), *chuanqi* is a type of sung drama; it is often handled in translation as “opera,” like other traditional Chinese theatrical forms that consist of both singing and spoken parts and alternate between prose and verse. Whereas the actions and dialogues advance plot development, the singing parts reveal the inner states and emotions of the characters. A *chuanqi* play is quite lengthy, containing thirty-plus scenes, and it usually interweaves two or more story lines together, with a romance in the foreground and some political intrigues and military affairs in the background. As Cyril Birch indicated, “the traditional Chinese stage used no sets, and so there is complete freedom of movement and much scenic description (vicarious stage-setting) in dialogue and songs.” Role type is another factor that determines and contributes to the theatricality of *chuanqi* plays. The role types were devised to incorporate a fixed-role system consisting of four main categories of actors, *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, and *chou* (male, female, painted-face, and clown). These four categories are subdivided into more specific role types according to age, social standing, and profession. Unlike Yuan *zaju* (“variety plays”) that were mainly products of professional playwrights and troupes, the *chuanqi* dramatists before Li Yu were mostly amateur writers with official careers, and their plays were typically performed by household troupes owned by wealthy bureaucrats or merchants. By Li’s time, such amateurism and elite taste
had pushed *chuanqi* toward formulaic monotony in musical and narrative structure, cumbersome verbal embellishment, and hackneyed subject matter and generic conventions, all of which often emphasized literati sentimentality and aesthetics at the cost of theatricality. Li Yu is representative of a nascent reaction against these trends, and of the emergence of both professionalism in and popularization of the genre. The plays by Li and many of his contemporaries were generally better suited to performance and also more agreeable to the tastes of a wider social spectrum of audiences than the literati elite.

Li’s approach to dramaturgy is best reflected in his *Xianqing ouji* (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671), a collection of essays on the cultivation of taste amid “idleness.” The first two sections, “The Composition of Plays” and “The Production of Plays,” are probably the most important theoretical discussions of theatrical art in all of premodern times. Concerning *The Fragrant Companions*, the central conception discussed in these two sections is Li’s (re)interpretation of *qi* (the marvelous or extraordinary). As indicated by the name *chuanqi* (transmitting marvels), *qi* is the essential subject in this theatrical art. But in the hands of many of Li Yu’s contemporary playwrights, *qi* verged on the bizarre, outlandish, and absurd. Conversely, some of the subjects and plots typical of the genre, such as the love between *caizi* (a talented man) and *jiaren* (a beautiful woman), and the *caizi’s* success in the civil service examination, became so clichéd that they simply lost their freshness and failed to evoke the proper dramatic responses of excitement and surprise.

Li Yu addresses these problems in two entries in *Xianqing ouji*—“Tuo kejiu” (escaping hackneyed conventions) and “Jie huangtang” (swearing off the ridiculous or absurd)—to explain how he understood and manifested the
concept of qi in his plays. To Li Yu, qi means to seek newness in writing and producing a chuanqi play. As he puts it:

In people one seeks only the old, in things the new. Newness is a term of approbation for everything in the world, but doubly so for literature. This is what the statement “striving to rid one’s writing of clichés—oh, how hard it is!” refers to. And in the art of drama, newness is twice as valuable again as in the other literary genres. Not only is the work of past authors now obsolete, there is a gulf even in my own writing between what I wrote yesterday and what I am writing today. Yesterday’s work has appeared, while today’s has not, and if we regard what has not yet appeared as new, we must accept what has already appeared as old.5

If newness or novelty is the best realization of qi, one needs to find it in normal human situations, and not search for it in the fantastic realm. Li Yu reasons that plays that expound on human feelings and portray events that conform to the normative workings of nature will be appreciated for generations to come, whereas those that are frivolous, incredible, ridiculous, and weird will be forgotten within the lifetime of the playwright. The best way to seek novelty, or qi, according to Li Yu, is to make the ordinary extraordinary, the familiar unfamiliar, and produce surprising and novel effects. Li Yu further explains:

It is said that everyday events have been exhausted by writers of the past and that even the most minute and extremely obscure incidents have been fully explored. That is why contemporary writers seek what is strange and bizarre. But I beg to differ. Not many extraordinary events happen in the humdrum world, but the principles governing human emotions are infinite. As long
as the relationships between rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, exist for one day, there will be feelings and concepts of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. Human nature manifests itself in novel ways with the passing of time. There are certainly events of the past left for writers of a later generation to explore and to depict more sensitively, thus improving on what has been done by one’s predecessors.⁶

This desire to bring out fresh aspects or explore new sensibilities of old subject matter is manifest in Li Yu’s works known as fan’an wenzhang 翻案文章 (inversion or table-turning essays), literally, meaning “essays written to reverse a previous verdict.” This idea is remarkably close to the Western concept of parody and, like the latter, usually involves two texts: a previous historical story or a legend and a later rewriting that undermines or totally reverses the previous text. From the late Ming onward, the notion of fan’an wenzhang became very popular and began to be used as a rhetorical device in both writing and judging history and literature, ranging from Zhang Zhupo’s 張竹坡 (1670–1698) commentary on the vernacular novel Jin Ping Mei (The Plum in the Golden Vase), to Wang Shizhen’s 王世貞 (1526–1590) essay on an episode of pre-Qin history, “Lin Xiangru wan bi gui Zhao lun” 藺相如完壁歸趙論 (A Discussion of Lin Xiangru’s Restoration of the Jade Disk to Zhao), to Li Zhi’s 李贄 (1527–1602) provocative reappraisal of the An Lushan Rebellion (756–763) in his compilation Cangshu 藏書 (A Book to Be Hidden Away).⁷

Li Yu’s own collection of essays on historical events and figures, Li Yu lun gu 李漁論古 (Li Yu Discusses the Past), completed in 1664, can be seen as an entire collection of fan’an wenzhang. In Patrick Hanan’s words, it “was a genre that gave the writer of iconoclastic temper the opportunity to fan’an, that is, to overturn
an accepted historical judgment.” The technique of inversion is even more pronounced in Li Yu’s literary writings, including plays as well as fiction. Li Yu’s fiction and drama, which closely overlap thematically and structurally, share the same set of themes: the proper role of sexual love, domestic moral issues, and the doctrine of karmic cause and effect—themes that are popular across chuanqi drama, huaben xiaoshuo 話本小說 (vernacular short stories), and caizi jiaren xiaoshuo 才子佳人小說 (scholar–beauty fiction). But Li Yu deliberately reversed or reconstructed these stock themes in order to subvert the conventions and norms that are generally upheld in earlier texts. In dealing with the subject of love or sexuality, for example, the transcendent power of qing 情 (love, desire, and feelings) and the obsessive romanticism best exemplified by Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) four “dream plays” is devalued in Li Yu’s play Shen luan jiao 慎鸞交 (Be Careful in Love) and a closely similar short story “He gui lou” 鶴歸樓 (Homing Crane Lodge) in favor of a more rational, practical, reserved, and controlled kind of love. But Li Yu’s works do not affirmatively adhere to the realistic presentation of sensuality or the didactic and aesthetic conventions of this theme that are characteristic of huaben xiaoshuo. Like the tales in Boccaccio’s Decameron, Li Yu approached sensuality in an almost purely comic mode. To Li, sensuality is something amusing, to be laughed at or even satirized rather than celebrated or condemned. For Li Yu’s young lovers, as seen in his short story “Cui ya lou” 翠雅樓 (House of Gathered Refinements) and his novella Rouputuan 肉蒲團, no matter what kind of relationship they are involved in—lawful or illicit, heterosexual or homosexual—the emotional satisfaction of qing and the claims of honor or religious devotion appear irrelevant. Instead, Li treats the sexual fulfillment of its young lovers irreverently, with gusto and humor rather than seriousness. The formulas of scholar–beauty
fiction are invariably inverted and mocked in Li Yu’s dramatic works, but in *The Fragrant Companions* this takes an even more unusual form: the relegation of marriage to a strategy for achieving the protagonists’ desire for a same-sex union.

THE PARODY OF THE “SCHOLAR–BEAUTY” ROMANCE AND FEMALE SAME-SEX LOVE

Given how Li Yu understood the concept of *qi* as bringing out newness from the old and his consistent use of the rhetoric of *fan’an* throughout his writings, it is logical to read *The Fragrant Companions* as an intentional inversion or parodic retake of the stereotypical scholar–beauty romance of Chinese drama and fiction. Such a romance is best represented by *Xixiang ji* (Romance of the Western Chamber) and *Mudan ting* (The Peony Pavilion) of the late-Yuan and late-Ming, respectively, and during Li Yu’s lifetime, by the genre of novellas known as scholar–beauty fiction. *The Fragrant Companions* follows the outline of this tried-and-true-formula: the protagonists possess dashing beauty and peerless talent, their match was made in heaven, the rendezvous occurs in a temple or garden, and the love quest is tested by obstacles (including the objection of family elders) and challenged by villains, until the final consummation of matrimony is ensured by the scholar’s victory in the civil service examination and blessed by the emperor himself. Several scenes of the play are even reminiscent of *Xixiang ji* and *Mudan ting*: scene 5, “Guidance from the Gods” (Shen yin 神引), reminds us of the episode of the flower spirit ensuring Liu Mengmei’s 柳夢梅 tryst with Du Liniang 杜麗娘 in *Mudan ting* (scene 10), whereas scene 24, “Interrogating the Maid” (Kao bi拷婢), invokes Madame Cui’s questioning of Hongniang 紅娘 about her mistress’s affair in part 2, act 4 of *Xixiang ji*. Li Yu
seemed to have the thematic mode of “the talented scholar and his beautiful mate” in mind when he wrote <i>The Fragrant Companions</i>, but he subverted it and told an entirely different story by switching the gender of the talented scholar from male to female.

This gender transformation is significant in several ways. First of all, the fairy-tale formula of the scholar–beauty romance between a man and a woman has been decentered and even upended. The dramatic climax or the happy finale of the standard scholar–beauty play is usually summarized in this couplet: “when the candles are lit in the wedding chamber, his [the male protagonist’s] name is listed on the gold registry of examination passers” (洞房花燭夜，金榜題名時). Such double success in marriage and in officialdom best represented and certainly satisfied an elite male’s desires, which were also assumed to be a woman’s ideal as the vicarious beneficiary of his temporal successes. Instead of the typical ending of such works in the wedding of the protagonists, <i>The Fragrant Companions</i> begins with one: Cui Jianyun, one of the two female protagonists, enters the household of a talented and handsome scholar, Fan Shi 范石, with whom she enjoys the first taste of matrimony. What more could she desire? Only through a chance meeting at the Rain-Flower Nunnery with Cao Yuhua, a fifteen-year-old of peerless beauty and talent, does she realize what is missing from her otherwise fulfilling life. In a scene that mimics the clichéd chance meeting of lovers, the two compose matching poems to display their respective poetic talents, turning the stock storyline upside down and challenging the gendered desires encoded in previous plays. For Jianyun, her marriage to Fan Shi seems not to satisfy her desire for a deeper affection. To Yuhua, love and happiness need not be achieved first and foremost by wedding a successful male scholar; in the denouement, her marriage to Fan Shi serves as an expedient ploy to bring her together with Jianyun.
The hero’s rescue of his beauty is a typical episode in the conventional scholar–beauty play. In *Xixiang ji*, Zhang Gong 張珙 saves Yingying 崔鶯鶯 from the clutches of the bandit ringleader Sun Feihu 孫飛虎, and in *Mudan ting* Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅 raises Du Liniang 杜麗娘 from the dead. Li Yu’s own more conventional play *Shenzhong lou*蜃中樓 (The Illusory Tower) assigns the male protagonist the task of extricating the dragon princess from an abuser. In *The Fragrant Companions*, however, the rescue is accomplished by none other than Cui Jianyun, the talented female scholar. She is the one to hatch the plot to save Cao Yuhua from lovesickness by entering the Cao household under the guise of “poetic companion,” a scheme to which Fan Shi passively agrees but plays no role in carrying out. Thus, the masculine role of savior is assigned to a woman; the inversion retains a conventionally fragile and vulnerable young woman, pining away for the object of her affection, as a beneficiary of the rescue. More important, in *The Fragrant Companions*, “the talented woman” is given agency to not only decide her own fate in love and marriage but also to drive the dramatic plot forward.

Although female characters with literary talents were repeatedly portrayed in previous Chinese theater, including *chuanqi* drama, Li Yu was probably the first to turn the convention of a pair of male-female protagonists into a female duo. The image of the “talented woman” is endowed with dual form through both female protagonists, Cui Jianyun and Cao Yuhua. Both women are gorgeous in appearance and attract each other physically: Jianyun stands out even among the women of Yangzhou famous for their beauty, and Yuhua, born with an intoxicatingly fragrant body scent, possesses a natural charm without need of makeup. But shared by both and appreciated most fervently between them is poetic talent, described as unequaled by their contemporaries, male as well as female. Such talent is problematic
in a male-dominated society; as Yuhua’s father sternly warns her, “Women should not show off their literary talents, and write poetry only to entertain themselves. . . . For women, to lack talent is a virtue.” The quotation of the well-known phrase, “for women, to lack talent is a virtue” (女子無才便是德) can hardly be taken at face value, and the two women’s elegant, learned repartee is an example of just the sort of inversion that Li Yu practiced in all of his writings. We can detect a definite similarity with the celebration of female talent in seventeenth-century scholar–beauty fiction, but in The Fragrant Companions the two female protagonists are more down-to-earth and believable than the formulaic super-geniuses created in the caizi jiaren fiction of that period. Under Li Yu’s pen a woman’s talent (literary or practical), intrinsically worthy of praise, becomes an asset in love and happiness as well as the catalyst of the unfolding drama: the talented woman is loved and loving, and she is empowered—whether emotionally, practically, or both—to fulfill her desire and pursue her love. Li Yu’s generation witnessed the emergence of a group of female talents, particularly in the affluent Yangzi (Chang) River delta of Jiangnan 江南 where Li Yu lived. A number of women even sought and acquired teaching and writing careers. Li Yu associated with some well-educated and well-versed women himself, and two of his plays were prefaced by Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621—after 1701) and Huang Yuanjie 黄媛介 (seventeenth c.), two talented women of the time. From this we can see that the rhetoric of inversion was not only a literary device, but also an effective tool with which Li Yu viewed and reflected his contemporary reality more sensitively than most of his predecessors had.

Though he has been displaced by a “talented woman” and relegated to a subsidiary position within their triangular relationship, the “talented scholar” Fan Shi retains his overall prominence
as the play’s male lead or sheng. (Beginning in scene 23, however, he is called Shi Jian 石堅, so we refer to him hereafter as Fan/Shi.) Indeed, in keeping with chuanqi convention, the second scene consists entirely of good-humored banter among Fan/Shi and his male friends celebrating his wedding. The phrase from the aforementioned scholar–beauty couplet, “the gold register of exam passers,” concludes this play, too: not only Fan/Shi, but most of the male protagonists—his father-in-law Cao Gechen 曹個臣, Cao’s fellow provincial graduate Wang Zhongxiang 汪仲襄, Fan/Shi’s cousin-in-law Zhang Zhongyou 張仲友, as well as his arch-rival, Zhou Gongmeng 周公夢, aspire to and mostly achieve examination success.

But as with the inversion of the conventional heteronormative romance, the play’s portrayal of the examination system also overturns the standard plot lines. Although examination foibles, injustices, and mishaps are hardly unknown in chuanqi plays, very few can compete with The Fragrant Companions in turning the entire examination system, from county-level licentiates and their “teachers” to the solemn precincts of the Confucian temple in Beijing, into a sustained farce.

At the climax of this burlesque, scene 29 “Searching the Crack” (Sou jia 搜挾), begins with body searches of candidates entering the metropolitan examination hall; this leads to the hilarious exposure of Fan/Shi’s nemesis Zhou Gongmeng as he attempts to smuggle in notes by tucking them into his anus, and the subsequent descent into an extended burlesque at the expense of whatever dignity remained in the examination process. This scene might be read as a parodic inversion of scene 41 “Delayed Examination” (Dan shi, 昀試) from Mudan ting, where Liu Mengmei, the young male lead, not only clinches top honors in the metropolitan examinations, but in the process demonstrates his scholarly aptitude and political acumen, with the inferior
essays and strategies of three prior examinees serving as his foils. In *The Fragrant Companions*, by contrast, Zhou Gongmeng, the villain of the play in the painted-face role, displaces Fan/Shi as the protagonist of the entire scene. This role reversal between the painted-face role (usually portraying a boorish and unsophisticated character) and the young male lead frames the travesty of the whole situation: if in *Mudan ting*, the examination hall is where important national policy is discussed and the most capable men are recruited for government service, in *The Fragrant Companions* the hall is turned into a theater of the absurd with a body cavity search that resembles the treatment of criminals in detention, and the depravity of Zhou Gongmeng’s deeds both within and beyond the examination precincts. In the theatrical highpoint centered on Zhou’s antics, Li Yu relegates Fan/Shi and two other law-abiding examinees who enter just prior to Zhou to the function of secondary “props,” thereby reversing the chuanqi convention of treating examinations as a reasonably fair arbiter of talent, as exemplified by *Mudan ting* and numerous other plays.

The denouement in heteronormative matrimony brings us full circle to recall Jianyun’s wedding night in scene 2, now overshadowed by the love of the two women who have eyes only for each other. At a number of points in the play, but especially in scene 5 (“Guidance from the Gods”), scene 10 (“A Joking, Bantering Alliance”), scene 21 (“Sealing a Sorrowful Letter”), scene 23 (“Accompanying a Husband to the Capital”), and scene 27 (“Surprising Meeting”) the intimations of sexual attraction and even the consummation of physical relations between the women are only barely disguised, if at all. Though many readers recognize and acknowledge these homoerotic innuendos, debate over their significance has nonetheless persisted. Some critics in China have slighted the physical dimensions of their bond, even insisting
that their affection is based on and entirely confined to the literary—namely, the mutual appreciation for the abundant poetic talents each possesses. This reluctance to acknowledge physical attraction may be more prevalent among scholars of the older generation, yet in a narrow sense their point is not without merit. Admiration for literary talents lies at the heart, so to speak, of the women’s mutual attraction; if anything it grows ever more ardent as they exchange lovelorn verses and finally reunite as “poetic companions,” thanks to Cao Gechen’s inadvertent intervention. But we should note that intellectual entente is a staple and even a sine qua non in the scholar–beauty tradition. Beauties are of course beautiful, and scholars at a minimum dashingly good-looking. But their mutual attraction is generally ignited and sustained by the poetic exchanges that take place without physical contact, let alone illicit or lewd behavior, until the consummation of marriage. Jianyun and Yuhua’s relationship is much less constrained by such strictures, but it too is still predicated on some degree of sublimation of their raw physical desire. Indeed, the power of Yuhua’s “scent” or “fragrance” (xiang) to ignite Jianyun’s “love” (lian) appears to foreground their physical attraction. The traditional association of fragrance with books (shuxiang) as well as with moral probity and literati values in general, however, points to the multivalence of this olfactory motif embedded at the very heart of the story. In fact, Yuhua emphatically deprecates her own scent in favor of the fragrance (also xiang) of ink that she detects on Jianyun, further reinforcing the centrality of their literary tie (scene 6). And it is this olfactory complementarity between the two protagonists that has led us to render the play’s title in the plural (The Fragrant Companions), unlike previous versions (Fragrant Companion, for example) where the singular noun suggests a focus on only one protagonist.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAY FOR QUEER STUDIES OF CLASSICAL CHINESE FICTION AND DRAMA

Voluminous descriptions of (and commentary on) male same-sex relations go back as far as the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and can be found in histories, poetry, fiction, drama, and prose notes (biji). But historical and literary writings were almost completely silent about female same-sex desire over the more than two millennia of imperial Chinese history. The treatment of female same-sex love is so rare in premodern sources that the scholarly probing of this subject is confined to only a few examples. Aside from *The Fragrant Companions* and Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) classical tale, “Feng Sanniang” 封三娘, the other oft-mentioned examples—such as Shen Fu’s 沈復 (1762–after 1803) *Six Records of a Floating Life* and Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹 (1715?–1763?) *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (or alternatively *The Story of the Stone*)—only deal with female same-sex desire in a peripheral manner or touch on the subject in passing.13 “Feng Sanniang” tells of a beautiful female fox fairy, the titular character of the story: she falls for an equally fine-looking young lady of gentry class and helps her marry a promising young scholar, but she refuses to join the couple in a heterosexual polygamous marriage. Although similar to *The Fragrant Companions* with its clear allusion to the female protagonists’ same-sex desire and love, the abjection of one of the main characters as a nonhuman, and her rejection of a triangular relationship, generate some variables that contrast with Li Yu’s play. These two works written within a few decades of one another are widely considered to be far and away the best representatives of female same-sex desire and love portrayed (respectively) in premodern Chinese fiction and drama.
In addition, there are a few literary works by female writers believed to demonstrate “the woman-preferring woman” desire while not taking female same-sex love as their primary theme. One such example is Wang Yun’s 王筠 (1784–1854) play titled *A Dream of Glory* (1769, *Fanhua meng* 繁華夢). This play deals primarily with a woman’s frustration at not being able to exercise her talents at the imperial examination and in the court; in a dream she imagines herself transformed into a man who enjoys a glorious official career and marries three beautiful women. Despite the claim that this play has “quite a few female same-sex love overtures,” and that the female-turned-male protagonist is attracted to women exclusively, it still depicts a man-centered “polygamous utopia” in which the main character’s gender switch does not challenge the patriarchal status quo.

To scholars of queer studies and lesbian love, the dearth of literary works on the subject of female same-sex love in premodern China is puzzling and challenging. The scarcity of such references in the written record may suggest that the issue “did not constitute a significant source of anxiety for men,” who authored the vast majority of historical and literary writings in premodern times. It could also simply be that since female same-sex relations in premodern China is an understudied or overlooked field, we must dig more broadly and deeply to locate relevant and useful materials. Whichever the case, this vacuum tells us how extraordinarily significant it is that Li Yu, whose many works provide ample evidence of an interest in gender issues, not only selected such a subject, but also treated it as the main theme of the play. The centrality of female same-sex love in this play, and the rarity of this theme in premodern Chinese literature as a whole, make *The Fragrant Companions* an indispensable work for those who are interested in gender relations, same-sex desire, and queer studies of premodern China, as scholars in recent years from both China and the West concur.
In both China and the West almost all recent studies of female same-sex love before modern times treat *The Fragrant Companions* as an invaluable source in dealing with the subject and agree that despite *The Fragrant Companions*’ denouement in a polygamous marriage, the play is in essence the story of two women in love. In highlighting this aspect, the nunnery scenes that testify to the protagonists’ love were the first sections of the play to be translated into English: Dongshin Chang translated scene 6 “Xiangyong” 香詠 (“Praising the Scent in Verse”) and published it in *CHINOPERL Papers* in 2011; Mark Stevenson and Cuncun Wu included their English translation of scene 10 “Mengxue” 盟誚 (“A Joking, Bantering Alliance”) in their edited volume *Homoeroticism in Imperial China: A Sourcebook* (2012).

Published English-language critical studies that are emphatically unequivocal on this point include Laura Wu’s article on the subject of lesbian love in Ming-Qing literature, where she states that the intimacy established between the two female protagonists in the play “is not purely sentimental *qing* 情 but is charged with sensual passions and even carnal cravings.” In the article titled “Transgender Performance in Early Modern China,” S. E. Kile comments that “the most obvious difference between Li Yu’s *Women in Love* [an alternative translation for *The Fragrant Companions*] and other stories of cross-dressing women is that one woman’s love, and her desire for another woman, is the starting point of the cross-dressing. Li Yu’s depiction of their love points to the possibilities within contemporary literati culture for gender performance by a female person.” In her monograph, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, Tze-Lan D. Sang states: “For the reader, doubt is momentarily cast over the viability of bigamy as a practical solution for gentry women’s passion and adoration, as Cao’s father’s objection to his daughter’s becoming a mere concubine indicates. But this objection to bigamy is overcome by the strong
love between the female protagonists, their resourcefulness in outwitting Cao’s father, and their willingness to be of equal status in marriage.” To Sang, “the connection that Li Yu makes here between an all-female ascetic establishment (the nunnery) and female–female desire is provocative.”

A significant number of research articles with a focus on the female–female relationship in *The Fragrant Companions* have been published in Chinese periodicals and journals, although no major studies on female same-sex desire and love have been produced in China in recent years. The relevance of *The Fragrant Companions* to contemporary discussions of queer studies was further confirmed by its 2010 adaptation to the Kunqu opera form, which the internationally acclaimed Hong Kong–based LGBTQ director Stanley Kwan (Ch. Guan Jinpeng 關錦鵬) was invited to direct. Kwan interpreted the play’s female–female infatuation as having an unambiguously lesbian character as well as a protofeminist undercurrent, while downplaying the heterosexual relationship in the original play. Resonating with Kwan’s interpretation, Li Yinhe 李銀河, a famous Chinese sociologist well known in China for her work on homosexuality and as an advocate of marriage equality, has made much of the implications of this seventeenth-century play celebrating love between two women and has led cultural discussions on female same-sex love in premodern China.

As a play focused on gender relations and performance—issues that are very much au courant in contemporary society as well as in academia—*The Fragrant Companions* has the potential for new theatrical adaptations both in and outside of China. In fact, recent productions of this play in Mainland China have demonstrated its possibilities of cross-dressing and chronocrossing. For instance, the 2010 Kunqu performances featured gender-straight artists (female actors playing female characters)
and cross-gender actors (female impersonators playing female characters). The Zhejiang Spoken Drama Troupe created a new experimental version of *The Fragrant Companions* in 2015, incorporating elements of Kunqu opera. This latter adaptation juxtaposes three different frames of space-time, from the Qing dynasty to the Republican period, and then to contemporary China; it emphasized the characters’ psychology and the deep feelings of two women in love. As an avant-garde offering, *The Fragrant Companions* contains many interesting modern and multicultural elements. In 2016 a young actor, Zhang Peng from the Northern Kun Opera House, staged a new version of the play featuring other young Kunqu opera performers in which he emphasized the theme of the women as soulmates. He adopted a retro Qing dynasty-style of theatrical costumes and customs and enhanced the authentic Kun opera musical style by catering to the presumed tastes and preferences of a modern audience. These recent revivals and reworkings demonstrate how *The Fragrant Companions* resonates among contemporary Chinese and other audiences and readers, attesting to its increasing prominence as a precedent for modern discussions of the diversity of sexual expression.

**CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS, IMPERIAL DIPLOMACY, AND THE BUSINESS OF MEN**

In *The Fragrant Companions*, Li Yu realistically reflects two developments of the civil service examination system at his time: the loss of the educational function of dynastic schools and the manipulation of the levers of promotion and demotion to keep the lower degree holders in line. According to Benjamin Elman, the civil service examinations “engendered a dynastic school system down to the prefectural level during the Song and further
down to counties in the Ming and Qing dynasties.” But despite initial success of these schools as an empire-wide educational network, the amount of actual teaching that took place in them gradually decreased over time: “they simply became quota-based way stations for students to prepare on their own for civil service examinations and receive stipends for their efforts.”

Li Yu satirizes the dysfunction of the dynastic schools in *The Fragrant Companions* by having the character Wang Zhongxiang complain that no students visited him during non-exam times, leaving him dependent on his meager teacher’s salary. Thus Wang’s own fate reflects the failure of the dynastic schools: demoralized by his inability to rise in examination rank, he has little interest in anything except squeezing more money out of his students in the form of gratuities for his virtually nonexistent “guidance.”

In deflating the idealized image of scholars as a whole, Li Yu does not spare his male protagonist, either. In *Fan/Shi*, we find few of the faults of his tormentors and rivals, but the romantic flair of a conventional young male role is somewhat hollowed out: he is neither the lovesick Scholar Zhang from *Xixiang ji* nor the daring Liu Mengmei, who rescues his lover from the netherworld in *Mudan ting*. Content to take advantage of the two women’s relationship to get himself another beautiful wife, he savors the pleasures of a polygamist but hardly takes the initiative. When presenting the marriage proposal to Cao Gechen runs into resistance, he is the first to want to back out. The audience can hardly blame him for such fecklessness, for although he is still cast in the male lead and successful in winning both female protagonists, *Fan/Shi* is no longer the love interest of either woman. Li Yu can be said to have written a variation of the standard love comedy, but one in which the conventional talented male scholar is forced to yield his romantic role to the female genius, the *cainü* 才女.
Although Fan/Shi may have ended up down he is hardly out of the picture, and to the degree that he fulfills the societal and familial duties normatively assigned to his gender, the play redeems his earlier humiliation at the hands of Cao Gechen and Wang Zhongxiang with a triumphant dénouement. The penultimate song in scene 36 alludes to the final expression of his comeback: his simultaneous impregnation of both Jianyun and Yuhua, ensuring their fulfillment of a stereotypical beauty’s duty to bear her scholar’s male progeny, thereby extending the lineage’s prosperity into the future. And just prior to this conclusion (in scene 33, “Serving as the Imperial Envoy”), Fan/Shi leads a ritualistically charged mission that, while not entailing the rescue of a woman as in Xixiangji or the nation as in Mudan ting, nonetheless establishes his credentials as a scholar-hero fully deserving the special imperial dispensation he is granted to wed two wives. In that scene, where he is sent as an imperial envoy to confer vassal status to the Ryukyu Kingdom, Fan/Shi acquits himself with dignity and pomp, clothed in elegant attire, described in elaborate verbiage, all earning the awe of the king and his rustic subjects, and the gratitude of the imperial court upon his return.

The request for Chinese intervention in Ryukyu has arisen out of a debate portrayed in scene 11, where courtiers discuss how to defend their islands from predatory kingdoms to the north (Japan) and south (Siam). The king sides with his advisors, who argue for peace with China, and sends an embassy to make their request for conferral of vassal status. In scene 18, the Ryukyuan envoys barely evade a typhoon to make landfall at Cangzhou, where they fortuitously encounter Cao Gechen and enjoy a sumptuous banquet amiably hosted by Cao’s brother-in-law (the local magistrate). Fan/Shi’s acceptance on his father-in-law’s behalf of this overseas assignment enables him to fulfill the role
of dutiful son-in-law, thereby defusing Cao Gechen’s lingering resentment over previous events. In short, the Ryukyu episodes of the play enact the Confucian utopia of bringing tranquility and ritual propriety across the entire range of human relations, from family to nation to “All-Under-Heaven” (tianxia 天下). Fan/Shi does not quell barbarians or bandits through force of arms—as Liu Mengmei or Scholar Zhang do in their respective romances—but his achievement is if anything even more impressive for having civilized piratical neighbors and ensured peace along the nation’s borders through his display of charismatic cultural refinement. Such a role is mirrored in his negotiations with Jianyun and Yuhua, where he threatens them with punishment should they fall into the polygamist’s nightmare: jealousy (over him). Given their feelings for each other, he may be too naive to realize how little he need worry on that score, but he nonetheless demonstrates the Confucian gentleman’s requisite ability to calm any turbulence at home, just as he has abroad. Moreover, the parallel between his charismatic influence over Ryukyu and the authority he wields at home is further emphasized by the Ryukyuan girls he has brought back with him being assigned as maids to each of his two wives. After suffering the humiliation of being stripped of examination rank, his decision to revert to his birth name, Shi Jian—literally “Rock Solid”—mirrors his metamorphosis from helpless victim to first-tier metropolitan degree holder, favored courtier, and most of all, fearless and intrepid imperial envoy.

In conclusion, The Fragrant Companions stands out as a signally important dramatic work in several ways—as Li Yu’s most representative work, as a parody of the scholar–beauty chuanqi romance, and as a peerless example of the sensitive and detailed treatment of female same-sex desire and love in premodern China. We are very pleased by the signs that The Fragrant
Companions, along with many of Li’s other works, has attracted interest in contemporary China, where a more relaxed atmosphere in literary and artistic circles has opened up space for previously taboo works or topics. Not only was it included along with his nine other chuanqi in The Complete Collection of Li Yu’s Works published by Zhejiang Classics Press in 1991, but a stand-alone edition with extensive annotations by Du Shuying was published by the Chinese Social Sciences Press in 2011. Moreover, the modern adaptations of The Fragrant Companions that have been staged in different theatrical genres in Mainland China are evidence of how this play has been revitalized after more than 370 years by inspiring and stimulating modern artists in multiple and thought-provoking ways.

It is our hope that this version of the play will spur stage adaptations for English-speaking audiences in the not-too-distant future. To that end, we have endeavored to convey the language, conventions, and context of the play as faithfully as possible, but with the overall goal of making it accessible to non-Chinese readers (and potentially theatergoers) by introducing some degree of creativity into this translation. This has not meant abridgement or outright rewriting, unfortunate habits of earlier generations of translators from Chinese, but it has sometimes led us to replace obscure idioms with phrases that capture the essence of the original language rather than its literal meaning. In order to make the play more readable and potentially less confusing, we have made two minor changes to the stage directions in the original.

First, we have identified characters by their names instead of only by their role types, as the original text does; and second, we have provided prompts (“says,” “speaks,” or “sings”) to distinguish sung from spoken lines and words or phrases, whereas sung and spoken parts are indicated by different font sizes in the original script. In chuanqi drama, however, it is common to insert
extra words or phrases within sung parts, as what are known as *chenzi* or literally “lining words.” The singing lyrics of *chuanqi* (or *quwen* 曲文) need to follow the rules and forms, for instance with fixed tonal patterns and rhyme schemes. Thus the function of *chenzi* mainly allows a certain degree of flexibility by adding some free words while maintaining these rules and forms. *Chenzi* are usually indicated by using a smaller font in a classical Chinese play script. In this translated text, we have set these off from the rest of the song by reducing their font size (to 10 point), as in this example: I ask: Have the magpies already made a crossing bridge?

We hope that our efforts might serve as one basis for a future production that could bring the play to life and endear it to audiences beyond the Chinese-speaking world.