

**Theatre as Business: A Study on Shanxi Merchants' Sponsorship of
Theatrical Performance in Late Imperial China**

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Statement of originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the reciprocal relationship between Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and the development of Shanxi regional theatre in late imperial China, with a focus on Shanxi bangzi (clapper opera). I argue that theatrical performance was not only a form of entertainment but also a means of implementing business strategies to enhance Shanxi merchants' business performance. The underlying reason for Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship was their pursuit of wealth, influence, fame and status. This is the first comprehensive interdisciplinary study on this topic that involves history, sociology, theatre performance studies and religious studies.

This thesis examines four occasions on which Shanxi merchants sponsored and consumed theatrical performance in association with their commercial activities, namely, merchant guild meetings, temple fairs, socialising with the ruling class, and during household events and in their leisure time. The exploration of the four types of occasions shows Shanxi merchants' direct involvement in theatrical performance with respect to stages, theatre troupes, spectators, repertoire, purposes for performing, and interactions between performers and spectators. The discussion also demonstrates the social and economic effects of theatrical performance.

Shanxi merchants obtained both short-term and long-term economic benefits from their theatre sponsorship. The sponsorship helped them manage their merchant guilds, discipline their guild members, gain a positive image, maintain a close relationship with the ruling class and reinforce their own social status. From the perspective of the history of Chinese traditional theatre, Shanxi merchants' sponsorship and consumption of theatrical performance stimulated the development and spread of theatre, especially Shanxi bangzi.

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Conventions

In principle, I follow the conventions adopted in Zhao (2022a; 2022b) throughout this thesis. For Chinese romanisation, Pinyin is used. Non-English words and expressions are italicised throughout the thesis except for proper nouns (including names of theatre troupes and entertainment venues) and major genres of Chinese theatre. Chinese characters are provided in the running text on their first appearance.

Chinese texts that were written prior to 1949 are cited and listed by title rather than by author. In most cases, scroll (*juan*) number is also given, followed by page number. Exceptions include *Diaries from the Studio for Retreat and Meditation (Tuixiangzhai riji)*, which has no division of scrolls, and excerpts from rare books found in compilations in which scroll number is not given. In such cases, the scroll number is considered to be ‘1’.

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List of Reign Periods in Late Imperial China

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Hongxi 洪熙	1424–1425
Xuande 宣德	1426–1435
Zhengtong 正統	1436–1449
Jingtai 景泰	1450–1457
Tianshun 天順	1457–1464
Chenghua 成化	1465–1487
Hongzhi 弘治	1488–1505
Zhengde 正德	1506–1521
Jiajing 嘉靖	1522–1566
Longqing 隆慶	1567–1572

Wanli 萬曆	1573–1620
Taichang 泰昌	1620–1620
Tianqi 天啟	1621–1627
Chongzhen 崇禎	1628–1644

The Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Shunzhi 順治	1644–1662
Kangxi 康熙	1662–1723
Yongzheng 雍正	1723–1735
Qianlong 乾隆	1735–1796
Jiaqing 嘉慶	1796–1821
Daoguang 道光	1821–1851
Xianfeng 咸豐	1851–1862
Tongzhi 同治	1862–1875
Guangxu 光緒	1875–1909
Xuantong 宣統	1909–1911

Introduction

This thesis explores the reciprocal relationship between Shanxi 山西 merchants' commercial activities and the development of Shanxi regional theatre in late imperial China, with a focus on Shanxi bangzi 梆子 (clapper opera). I argue that theatrical performance was not only a form of entertainment but also a means of implementing business strategies to enhance Shanxi merchants' business performance. The underlying reason for Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship was their pursuit of wealth, influence, fame and status. This is the first comprehensive discussion on the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective. This introduction begins with a historical survey of the rise of Shanxi merchants and Shanxi regional theatre, followed by a literature review and an explanation of the rationale for this research.

Shanxi merchants

Shanxi province, abbreviated as Jin 晉, is located around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. It borders Shaanxi 陝西 province to the west and Hebei 河北 province to the east. The Great Wall marks its northern border with Inner Mongolia. Shanxi merchants became famous and wealthy through interregional and international trade in late imperial China. They were called 'Jin merchants' (*Jinshang* 晉商) because of their common origin in Shanxi. In fact, not all Shanxi merchants started their business in Shanxi. For example, Cao Sanxi 曹三喜, a native of Taigu 太谷 county in Central Shanxi, started selling bean curd or *tofu* in northeast China during the reign of Emperor Chongzhen of the Ming dynasty (Yan 2007b: 438). His *tofu* business laid the foundation for the famous Cao family's large-scale interregional and international trade. Some Shanxi merchants started their business in their native place but

migrated to other provinces for business purposes. For instance, the Kang 亢 family from Pingyang 平陽 prefecture (modern Linfen 臨汾 in south-western Shanxi) was famed for the trade of salt in the Yangtze delta. As such, the term ‘Shanxi merchants’ is used in the present thesis to refer to merchants who were of Shanxi origin no matter whether they did business in or outside Shanxi.

Shanxi merchants as a merchant group (*shangbang* 商幫) emerged in the early Ming dynasty. Their trade routes created an enormous network across both northern and southern regions in China. Shanxi merchants made their economic power felt in both rural and urban areas, especially in northern China. There were various reasons for the rise in prominence of Shanxi merchants in the early Ming dynasty. But the most important was a Ming imperial decree on the salt industry known as *kaizhong fa* 開中法, a grain-salt exchange system that was enacted in 1370. The Ming court installed nine garrisons along the Great Wall to prevent military invasions of the nomads. Two of the garrisons, namely Datong 大同 Garrison and Taiyuan 太原 Garrison, were in northern Shanxi. In 1370, the Commander of Shanxi—who believed that it was too costly for the government to transport grains to these two garrisons from Jinan 濟南 prefecture in Shandong 山東 province because of the long distance—suggested the grain-salt exchange system to Emperor Hongwu (*Mingshi* 80.1935), the founder of the Ming empire. The decree was aimed at inviting merchants to transport provisions including grain from the inland to the northern frontier regions of the Ming empire and to offer them a certain amount of *yanyin* 鹽引 (salt certificate) in return (*Mingshi* 80.1935). Salt was a vital daily necessity. The trade of salt was strictly controlled by the imperial government. Under the grain-salt exchange system, merchants were allowed to collect salt produced from appointed salt fields and to sell it in appointed areas. The grain-salt exchange system was implemented first in Datong Garrison and Taiyuan Garrison and then applied to other border regions. Shanxi

merchants took advantage of the short distance between their hometown and the two garrisons, actively engaging in the trade of salt. They received salt certificates for the trade in *huaiyan* 淮鹽 (the salt produced in the salt fields located to the north and south of the Huai 淮 River in modern Jiangsu 江蘇 and Anhui 安徽 provinces, together known as the Lianghuai 兩淮 area) and sold *huaiyan* in what are now Henan 河南, Anhui, Jiangsu, Jiangxi 江西, Hunan 湖南 and Hubei 湖北 provinces (*Mingshi* 80.1932). Ming Shanxi merchants accumulated vast amounts of capital because of the trade in salt. Before long, their business spread to Changlu 長蘆 salt field in present-day Tianjin 天津 along the coast of the Bohai 渤海 Sea) and to Liangzhe 兩浙 salt field on the coastal areas of modern Jiangsu province. During the Chenghua period of the Ming dynasty, the efficacy of the grain–salt exchange system diminished due to a surplus of bills for the exchange of salt resulting from ineffective control. Also, the limited production had made it difficult for salt merchants to collect salt on time, causing serious financial loss to them (*Mingshi* 80.1938). During the Hongzhi period, many Shanxi merchants gave up the unpromising market in the north and migrated to the south, seeking more opportunities and higher profitability at the Lianghuai salt fields (*Mingshi* 77.1885), which had larger salt reserves and enjoyed a higher productivity.

Shanxi merchants' business grew exponentially in the mid-Ming and penetrated various industries. For instance, from the mid- to the late Ming, apart from the salt industry, the horse markets at the border areas in the north were strictly controlled by government officials with the cooperation of merchants. As two of the horse markets were located in northern Shanxi, Shanxi merchants took advantage of political restrictions and geographic advantage and accumulated a vast amount of capital from the trade (Ge 2009: 39–45). Before the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644, eight powerful merchant families took part in the trade of all kinds of commodities including grains, tea and cloth with the Manchu people from beyond the Great

Wall (Yan 2006a: 195). In 1645, Emperor Shunzhi conferred the title of ‘Imperial Merchants’ (*huangshang* 皇商) on these families as a reward for their contributions to his newly established Qing empire (Yan 2006a: 195). In the High Qing (1683–1799), the imperial court gradually reduced restrictions on border trade to strengthen the empire’s influence on the Mongols through the economy and to obtain more fine war-horses. Despite great risks posed by the unfavourable natural environment and bandits, Shanxi merchants seized the opportunity and travelled deep into Mongol pasture lands via Zhangjiakou 張家口 (in modern Hebei) and Guihua 歸化 (modern Hohhot), the market towns which later became important places of assembly for performers of Shanxi regional theatre.

Furthermore, Shanxi merchants engaged in the international trade of tea with the Russians and pioneered the banking industry in premodern China. During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty, *zhangju* 帳局 (lit. ‘account office’) or *zhangzhuang* 帳莊 (lit. ‘account shop’), most of which were run by natives of Shanxi, appeared in major cities and market towns such as Beijing, Tianjin, Zhangjiakou and Taiyuan. Essentially, they were a type of financial institution that granted loans to merchants doing business in Russia to ensure a constant flow of capital (Zhang and Zhang 2010: 111–112). In the early Daoguang period, Lei Lütai 雷履泰, the manager of Xiyucheng 西裕成 Dye Firm in Pingyao 平遙 county of Central Shanxi, established the first draft bank (*piaohao* 票號) in China, named Rishengchang 日升昌. Before the first appearance of modern banks in China, Shanxi draft banks provided clients with various banking services, including issuing notes, remittances, deposits and loans. Buoyant demand and high profitability attracted merchants from neighbouring counties, including Qixian 祁縣 and Taigu, to enter into the draft bank industry one after another. Up to the Xinhai 辛亥 Revolution in 1911, Shanxi merchants established a large number of draft bank branches along their trade routes. Gradually, in northern China, Shanxi merchants topped all

the other merchant groups and dominated the market towns in Shanxi, Mongolia, Henan, Shandong, Hebei and Beijing.

Many Shanxi magnates appeared in the Qing dynasty owing to a success in trade. As described in the *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 5.2307) edited by Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869–1928), during the Guangxu period, there were fourteen Shanxi merchants who had a total capital of over three hundred thousand taels of silver. Six of them even held more than one million taels (*Qingbai leichao* 5.2307). The great fortune of Shanxi merchants laid a sound foundation for sponsoring Shanxi regional theatre in both their hometowns and the market towns where they sojourned, especially in northern China where Shanxi merchants held market dominance.

Bangzi in Chinese xiqu

In most cases, Shanxi merchants sponsored and consumed northern styles of drama, and they were particularly known for their passion for various forms of bangzi. Two characteristics that distinguish all forms of bangzi from other styles of xiqu 戲曲 (Chinese traditional theatre) are ‘the adoption of the beat-based form (*banqiang ti* 板腔體) for their musical structure and the use of the *bangzi* clapper to mark the accented beat and tap out the rhythm’ (Zhao 2022b: 220). This section gives an introduction to the history of xiqu, the emergence of bangzi and the role of bangzi in xiqu history. There are voluminous research studies on the history of xiqu, as represented by Mackerras (1990) and Dolby (1976). I shall repeat no more in this thesis. Thus, this section addresses the development of xiqu only in brief, focusing instead on different forms of bangzi which are relevant to the analysis in this study.

Xiqu originated from elements of shamanic religious ritual performance in ancient times including ‘combat, costumes, masks, chanting and singing, dance and non-dance movement, facial expressions, drumming and makeup’ (Zhao 2019: 58).¹ Through hundreds of years of development and transformation, ritual performance evolved into theatrical performance, which, as a form of entertainment, has played an important role in the everyday lives of Chinese people for around a thousand years.

The Yuan (1271–1368) dynasty witnessed the rise of zaju 雜劇 (variety play) in northern China, particularly in Dadu 大都 (modern Beijing), Shanxi, Hebei and Shandong provinces. In the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan dynasty, apart from the capital, Shanxi, particularly Pingyang prefecture, enjoyed the greatest cultural life, including theatrical activities (Ji 1993: 124–134). Of the fifty-five zaju playwrights listed in *A Register of Ghosts* (*Lugui bu* 錄鬼簿), who lived from the late twelfth century to the late thirteenth century, fifteen were natives of Dadu, roughly accounting for twenty-six percent, followed by eight natives of Shanxi, fourteen percent. Yuan zaju spread across China and dominated Chinese xiqu markets for more than a century. It began to decline around the 1320s following the deaths of important playwrights (Mackerras 1990: 51), and also as the result of direct competition with the various forms of southern drama (nanxi 南戲), which appeared first as Yongjia 永嘉 zaju in modern Wenzhou 溫州 of Zhejiang 浙江 province in the late twelfth century. During the Wanli period, literati, the nobility and

¹ Some of the important works that address the relationship between religious ritual and xiqu include *Chinese Theatre: An Illustrated History through Nuoxi and Mulianxi* (2022a–b) by Xiaohuan Zhao; *Zhongguo jisi xiju yanjiu* 中國祭祀戲劇研究 (2008) by Tanaka Issei 田仲一成; *Zhongguo xiju shi* 中國戲劇史 (2011) by Tanaka Issei; *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: ‘Mu-lien Rescues His Mother’ in Chinese Popular Culture* edited by David Johnson and Beata Grant (1989); and *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (2009) by David Johnson.

officials in the south lost their interest in zaju and preferred southern dramas, particularly Kunqu 崑曲 or Kunshan 崑山 styles (*Kezuo zhuiyu* 9.336–337).

The Qing dynasty saw a new era of xiqu as numerous regional styles emerged and flourished throughout the empire. Around 1703, for the first time the term ‘bangzi’ appeared as an alternative name for Qinqiang 秦腔, or the Qin Style, the most important northern style of drama in late imperial times (Zhao 2022b: 217–218). Qin style evolved in the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty from Shanxi local songs and dances and *Xiqin qiang* 西秦腔 (the Western Qin Style), which itself ‘evolved from a small-scale folk drama called Longdong 隴東 Tune’ that prevailed in the east of Gansu 甘肅 Province (Zhao 2022b: 216–217). During the Qianlong period, bangzi spread widely into many provinces and became increasingly influential (Zhao 2022b: 195). With further development, around the turn of the Qianlong period, *bangzi qiangxi* 梆子腔系 (the system of clapper style) became one of the four major systems of xiqu styles (Zhao 2022b: 195). The other three were the Kunshan style (*Kunshan qiang* 崑山腔), the Yiyang style (*Yiyang qiang* 弋陽腔) and the pihuang style (*pihuang qiang* 皮黃腔).²

By the mid-nineteenth century, various forms of bangzi appeared throughout the empire (Zhao 2022b: 218). In Shanxi province, there were four major forms of bangzi. The oldest was Puzhou bangzi 蒲州梆子 (Puzhou clapper opera, also known as Puzhou Opera or Puju 蒲劇), which emerged around the turn of the Ming dynasty (Liao 2012b: 209) and was prevalent in southern Shanxi. Puzhou bangzi gave rise to zhonglu bangzi 中路梆子 (lit. ‘middle-route clapper opera’, also known as Shanxi bangzi/Shanxi Opera or Jinju 晉劇), which prevailed in the

² Pihuang was a compound melodic style that played a dominant role in the musical structure of Beijing Opera or Jingju 京劇. Thus, the terms pihuang and Jingju were often used interchangeably in premodern times.

Taiyuan region in Central Shanxi (Liao 2012b: 209). Beilu bangzi 北路梆子 (lit. ‘north route clapper opera’, or *yanju* 雁劇) also developed from Puzhou bangzi and mainly prevailed in northern Shanxi and modern Inner Mongolia (Liao 2012b: 209–210). Shangdang bangzi 上黨梆子 (Shangdang clapper opera) originated from and prevailed in southeastern Shanxi, an area historically under the jurisdiction of Shangdang Commandery (*jun* 郡). It consisted of five melodic styles, including Kunqu, bangzi, *luoluo qiang* 囉囉腔,³ *juanxi* 卷戲⁴ and pihuang (Liao 2012b: 210). These forms of Shanxi bangzi are still prevalent in northern China nowadays. In the present thesis, the term ‘Shanxi bangzi’ or ‘Shan-Shaan 山陝 bangzi’ is used to refer to all forms of bangzi prevalent in the Shanxi–Shaanxi 山西-陝西 (hereafter Shan-Shaan) area.

Other forms of bangzi that were popular in northern China included but were not limited to Henan bangzi 河南梆子 (Henan clapper opera, or Yuju 豫劇),⁵ Shandong bangzi 山東梆子 (Shandong clapper opera)⁶ and Hebei bangzi 河北梆子 (Hebei clapper opera). In eastern China, there was Jiangsu bangzi 江蘇梆子 (Jiangsu clapper opera), which developed from Henan bangzi (Liao 2012b: 221). In the southwest, there was Sichuan bangzi 四川梆子

³ *Luoluo qiang* originated in the Zezhou 澤州 area in south-eastern Shanxi and then spread to both northern and southern regions, according to Liao Ben (2012b: 104).

⁴ The origin(s) of *juanxi* remains unclear. It might have developed from Buddhist music and used to prevail in Henan (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1992b: 87).

⁵ Yuju is a localised bangzi in Henan province. It was probably the result of the interaction between the West Qin style that spread to Henan and some local styles (Liao 2012b: 217).

⁶ Shandong bangzi was a localised bangzi in Shandong province that developed from Shanxi and Shaanxi bangzi. Around the early Qing dynasty, Shanxi bangzi spread to Henan and then to Shandong province (Liao 2012b: 215).

(Sichuan clapper opera, or Chuan bangzi 川梆子), which spread as far as Beijing in the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty (Zhao 2022b: 217–218).

Among all these forms of bangzi, the four major forms of bangzi in Shanxi were linked especially closely with merchants' support. The reciprocal relationship between the spread and development of these four major forms of bangzi and Shanxi merchants' commercial activities reflected the socio-economic factors behind the development of xiqu styles.

Literature Review

This section focuses on three different yet inter-related areas, namely, Shanxi merchants; relationships between Shanxi merchants and Shanxi regional theatre; and theatrical performances and merchant guildhalls. A discussion of studies in these areas yields an understanding of current research findings on Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship and reveals the significance of this comprehensive study on this topic.

Research on Shanxi merchants

The past few decades have witnessed an increasing number of studies on Shanxi merchants and their social influence from the perspectives of financial history, economic history and business management. Notable among them are books by Huang Jianhui (2001, 2002), who provides a detailed examination of the historical background of Shanxi merchants' emergence, their heyday and a systematic analysis of the key strategies which led to Shanxi merchants' success. The latter includes their full use of natural resources in Shanxi, taking risks in entering international markets, creating new industries, excellent human resource management and

customer service skills. These studies have provided valuable insights into the development of Shanxi merchants. As neither of them focuses on Shanxi merchants' cultural and religious life or the regional theatre they sponsored, the interplay between Shanxi merchants and Shanxi bangzi is largely left untouched, even though these cultural phenomena were closely related to Shanxi merchants' business activities. In comparison, Zhang Zhengming and Zhang Shu (2010: 276–285) not only discuss Shanxi merchants' business dealings but also acknowledge the merchants' influence on Shanxi local culture, the development of bangzi performance and architectural design in Shanxi. However, as none of these topics are the focus of their work, Zhang and Zhang do not expand their analysis.

Another scholar worth mentioning here is Ge Xianhui (2009), who discusses the importance of Confucian ideology in Shanxi merchants' business management. In her study of the history of Shanxi merchants, Ge (2009: 136–137) notes that Shanxi merchants attached great importance to education. Studying Confucian moral principles and business skills were both embraced in strict apprentice training processes (Ge 2009: 137–139) because Confucian moral values were conducive to the effective management of their business (Ge 2009: 180). In addition, Ge (2009: 207–222) discusses the construction of Shanxi merchant guildhalls and the operation of Shanxi merchant guilds in association with the cult of Lord Guan or Guangong 關公 (also known as Emperor Guan or Guandi 關帝, hereafter Emperor Guan)—an iconic figure and a representative of Confucian moral values such as *zhong* 忠 (loyalty) and *yi* 義 (righteousness). Ge (2009: 218–222) stresses the importance of the cult of Guangong to Shanxi merchants and their business management and quotes some guild regulations as to how they expressed their belief in the cult of Guangong. However, Ge does not extend her analysis to Shanxi merchants' cultural life and entertainment and overlooks the relationship between Confucian ideology and the theatrical performances staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls.

Despite this, it is clear that scholars such as Ge who conduct research on Shanxi merchants' business activities have realised the relationship between commercial and cultural activities.

A study in English by Shang Daigui (2010: 117–119) on the credit of Shanxi merchants also mentions that Shanxi merchants were influenced by Confucian ideology and worshiped Emperor Guan, considering him an 'incarnation of credibility, loyalty and righteousness' (Shang 2010: 117–128). Like Ge (2009), Shang (2010) only provides a sketch of the cult of Guangong and Confucian moral values without analysing related theatrical performances that preached Confucian ideology. Besides, Shang discusses Shanxi merchants' business operations and human resource management without mentioning that theatrical performance was a common tool of disciplining fellow traders—a point I will return to in Chapter One of this thesis.

Research on Shanxi merchants in relation to Shanxi regional theatre

Historians of xiqu generally acknowledge Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of theatrical performance as an impetus for the development of Shanxi regional theatre. In 1987, Liu Wenfeng published a journal article on the relationship between bangzi and Shan-Shaan merchants. He argued that the emergence of bangzi and the rise of Shan-Shaan merchants occurred simultaneously (Liu 1987: 342). Among Shan-Shaan merchants, there was a keen interest in and a high demand for bangzi as a psychological comfort to relieve loneliness and nostalgia (Liu 1987: 345). Wherever these merchants went, they would invite professional theatre troupes from Shanxi province to perform bangzi plays for them (Liu 1987: 345). Owing to this, bangzi spread to what is now Beijing, Hebei, Shanghai, Inner Mongolia and even as far as Guizhou 貴州, Yunnan 雲南, Sichuan, Gansu, Ningxia 寧夏 and Qinghai 青海 in

western China when it reached maturity after the Qianlong period. Bangzi also influenced the evolution of local xiqu styles in these regions (Liu 1987: 344–349). Liu (1987: 349–351) clarifies the relationship between merchants and bangzi by demonstrating that the merchants' patronage contributed to a considerable part of the income of theatre troupes and performers, and that theatrical performance was a necessary means to promote trade and expand markets. Liu (1987: 352–353) cites several excerpts from newspapers in the 1930s as historical evidence of how people enjoyed commodities and theatrical performances that were supported by merchants at temple fairs. However, based on information from the Republican era (1912–1949) alone, we cannot gain a comprehensive understanding of the extent of the prosperity of bangzi in the Qing dynasty, nor the effectiveness of sponsoring theatrical performance for the improvement of Shanxi merchants' business. That said, this article pioneered research on the relationship between bangzi and Shan-Shaan merchants.

In one of his later works, Liu Wenfeng (2015) goes beyond the scope of his earlier journal article to include the history of Shanxi merchants and the origin of different forms of bangzi. The core finding of this research is that Shanxi merchants provided the financial support for the development of bangzi, and bangzi provided psychological comfort and entertainment to Shanxi merchants while boosting their business. However, the structure of Liu's book weakens the argument. It is composed of four chapters, only in the third of which does Liu discuss Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of theatrical performance. In the first and second chapters, Liu lists many well-known firms established by Shan-Shaan merchants and brief biographical accounts of influential bangzi performers. The fourth chapter introduces the extant and ruined guildhalls in China. Admittedly, these accounts provide valuable references for further research on this topic to utilise. To some extent, however, each chapter can be regarded as a discrete study and therefore they do not provide strong support for the core proposition in the third chapter. Also, Liu Wenfeng discusses bangzi as a whole without specifying how each form of

bangzi was influenced by Shanxi merchants' commercial activities. Despite these aspects, however, this is justifiably a very important monograph on Shanxi merchants and bangzi.

Another important recent work on Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of bangzi by Zhang Linyu and Zhang Zhiyong (2014) is an informative study on the spread and development of Shanxi bangzi in the regions beyond the Great Wall from the Qing dynasty to the end of the twentieth century. The time frame of this study determines that bangzi performance in the Qing dynasty is not its focus. However, this work uncovers plentiful evidence concerning theatre troupes, famous performers, performance venues and festivals, which reveals that Shanxi merchants, especially those who sojourned in the northern frontier regions, played an important role in the development and spread of bangzi via trade routes. Some of the information provided by Zhang and Zhang is included in the present thesis to support the core proposition that Shanxi merchants' commercial activities facilitated the spread of Shanxi bangzi.

Research on xiqu history, theatre troupes (*xiban* 戲班), merchant guildhalls, etc

Despite these studies, the relationship between Shanxi merchants and Shanxi regional theatre has not received much scholarly attention. Consequently, it is mostly dealt with in scattered pieces of information found in studies on guildhalls, xiqu history and theatre troupes. Research on European theatre patrons and Shanxi merchants' counterparts—Huizhou 徽州 merchants'—theatre sponsorship provides some hints on fruitful perspectives to adopt in analysing Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship.

An introduction to bangzi can usually be found in works discussing the general history and evolution of xiqu. In *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (1983) and *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey* (1990), Colin Mackerras (1983: 98; 1990: 54) emphasises that

regional theatre were ‘popular dramas of the masses’ and that the spectators of regional theatre were ‘ordinary people’. Not until ‘the latter part of the Qianlong period’ did ‘officials, scholars and well-to-do merchants’ start to gradually accept and be fond of various forms of regional theatre (Mackerras 1983: 99). Although the place of origin of bangzi is unknown, it is likely that bangzi emerged in the late Ming and spread throughout the empire in the Qing dynasty (Mackerras 1983: 99–100; 1990: 54). Mackerras also provides some interesting explanation of bangzi. For example, he mentions that the main rhythm in bangzi—literally meaning ‘one beat, three eyes’ (*yiban sanyan* 一板三眼)—resembles ‘the 4/4 time of Western music’ (Mackerras 1983: 101; 1990: 55).

Importantly, Mackerras acknowledges the connection between the proliferation of various regional styles, merchants’ commercial activities and the prosperous interregional trade in the Qing dynasty. Mackerras (1990: 58) holds that the ‘revived economy was the impetus’ for the flourishing regional theatre in northern China from the sixteenth century onwards. Also, the possible reason behind the spread of bangzi to Beijing was the demand for Shanxi regional theatrical performances by Shanxi bankers who dominated the financial market there (Mackerras 1983: 100–101). Local merchants provided financial support for theatrical performances at temple fairs and engaged in the establishment of temple theatres because they could increase profit by approaching more customers who were attracted by the performances (Mackerras 1990: 57–58). Mackerras (1990: 58) also introduces Tanaka Issei’s ‘drama circle’ theory, which suggests that in the Ming and Qing dynasties the rise and fall of a regional style in an area depended upon the development of local commerce. These statements reveal that socio-economic factors played a key role in the proliferation of regional theatre in the Qing dynasty. Shanxi merchants’ mobility and commercial activities took an important part in promoting bangzi outside of Shanxi.

Research on Chinese guilds and guildhalls is also relevant to the present study because in the Ming–Qing period Shanxi merchants established merchant guilds and had stages built in many of the merchant guildhalls. Frequent theatrical performances in merchant guildhalls constituted a significant proportion of the entertainment activities of guild members and the management of their guilds.

Many scholars have conducted research on Chinese guildhalls. For example, J.S. Burgess's (1928) *The Guilds of Peking* is based on his investigation of Chinese guilds in Beijing from 1926 to 1927. Burgess (1928: 19) divides the forty-two guilds under investigation into three categories, namely, handcraft, commercial and professional. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through questionnaires designed by himself and his fellow investigators. This research covers many aspects of Chinese guilds, including guild membership, operation of the guilds, guild finances, the apprentice system, the worship in guildhalls and trends in guild life in the Republican era. Although this research was conducted approximately ninety years ago and reflects the situation of Chinese guilds during a transitional stage rather than the traditional mode of Chinese guilds, interviewees' responses are still valuable first-hand resources. Specifically, the approximate age of respondents from commercial guildhalls ranged from forty to seventy, and it was the tradition that their involvement in trading started young (Burgess 1928: 64–65). Hence, they were likely to recall how guilds operated under the Qing dynasty. When it comes to religious ritual ceremonies during guild meetings, Burgess (1928: 181–182) writes that during the ceremonies, performers were hired to 'give a drama for the benefit of the guild spirit who is supposed to be witnessing the performance'. Business issues were discussed and settled 'before and after the play or during intermissions between parts' (Burgess 1928: 182). Here, Burgess considers the theatrical performances at guild meetings a form of entertainment to please gods, yet does not take into account the fact that guild members were also receiving moral lessons when watching the performances. While the focus of

Burgess's study was the organisation and management of guilds rather than the functions of the theatre sponsorship within them, the present thesis expands Burgess's discussion of theatrical performances during guild assemblies, elaborating how Shanxi merchants made use of the theatrical performance to manage the guilds and regulate their fellow traders.

Some scholars pay more attention to religious and cultural life in their studies of guilds. For example, Li Gang and Song Lun (2004) argue that the Ming–Qing craftsmen and merchant guildhalls, represented by Shan-Shaan guildhalls, developed from an integration of a meeting house and a temple into an integration of a meeting house and a marketplace. According to their research, the basic function of a craftsmen and commercial guildhall was to provide a venue for fellow traders to gather and worship patron gods (Li and Song 2004: 35), as the merchants believed that gods would protect them from suffering and maintain the order of the business world. The ritual practices were closely associated with trade (Li and Song 2004: 36). Guildhalls became a focal point for merchants to resolve business troubles and to carry out other business activities. Through further development, guildhalls began to have more functions and temple fairs were held in guildhalls at a fixed time every year. In the end, guildhalls were converted directly into markets (Li and Song 2004: 36–39). Performances of regional xiqu styles staged in merchant guildhalls attracted spectators, who were the guild members' potential customers (Li and Song 2004: 37). It is impressive that Li and Song find sponsoring theatrical performances a means to implement marketing strategies. However, they haven't conducted an in-depth analysis on this opinion. This thesis builds on Li and Song's findings by detailing the functions of Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship.

Li Gang and Zhao Peng (2014) published a journal article arguing that Ming–Qing craftsmen or merchant guildhalls represented by Shan-Shaan guildhalls were an integration of a meeting house, a temple and a trade market. Guildhalls were originally constructed with temples as the

model (Li and Zhao 2014: 137). But apart from worshipping gods, another important intention in setting up guildhalls was to provide a place of assembly for guild members to handle business affairs and to maximise mutual benefits (Li and Zhao 2014: 138). Hence, a guildhall modelled on a temple building was different in nature from an ordinary temple, which was a dedicated place for worship (Li and Zhao 2014: 138–139). Also, the building complex of a meeting house and a shrine in guildhalls provided a venue for temple fairs, and the architectural design and interior decoration of guildhalls satisfied the special need for conducting trading activities, which reflected the circumstance that guildhalls were marketplaces in essence (Li and Zhao 2014: 140–141). Obviously, Li and Zhao’s work built on Li and Song’s research. Sponsoring regional theatrical performances were also considered as a means for implementing marketing strategies in this study (Li and Zhao 2014: 141). Taken together, these two works hinted at the role of theatrical performances staged in merchant guildhalls in promoting commercial activities.

From a different perspective, Tanaka Issei (2011) points out that there is a special relationship between Chinese guildhalls and theatrical performances. In his study of xiqu history, Tanaka emphasises the religious nature of theatrical performance in rural areas and divides theatrical performances into ‘village religious ritual performance’ (*xiangcun jisi xiju* 鄉村祭祀戲劇), ‘lineage theatrical performance’ (*zongzu xiju* 宗族戲劇) and ‘marketplace theatrical performance’ (*shichangdi xiju* 市場地戲劇)⁷ according to their performance venues. Tanaka analyses the distinctive features of these three types of theatrical performance and classifies guilds in the Qing dynasty into merchant guilds, literati guilds and craftsmen guilds, according to the occupation of guild members. Tanaka (2011: 356–374) states that through development and evolution, each of these three categories of theatrical performance spread to large cities

⁷ All the translations in the present thesis are mine unless otherwise noted.

such as Beijing. ‘Village religious ritual performance’ was performed in craftsmen guildhalls, ‘lineage theatrical performance’ in literati guildhalls and ‘marketplace theatrical performance’ in merchant guildhalls. This interesting classification reflects the similarities between the way of organising performances at temple fairs and in merchant guildhalls. That is, the purpose for sponsoring performances on both occasions was to make higher profit by selling more products to consumers. In another study on theatrical performances in guildhalls, Tanaka (2012) begins with an introduction to the three types of Chinese guilds mentioned above, followed by a list of documented guildhalls in the Outer City of Qing Beijing. His analysis is based on this classification and does not consider the local origins of guild members. Nevertheless, his study provides some valuable insights into this topic. Tanaka (2012: 87–89) points out the importance of theatrical performance in managing guilds and punishing those who violated the guild regulations. In the present study, these functions will be demonstrated in detail.

Another work that acknowledges the importance of guildhall theatre (*huiguan juchang* 會館劇場) in the development of xiqu is Wang Qiang’s (2000) *Guildhall Stage and Theatrical Performance* (*Huiguan xitai yu xiju* 會館戲台與戲劇). Wang mainly investigates the geographical distribution of guildhall theatres throughout China and the performances staged in guildhalls and discusses powerful merchants’ contributions to the emergence and development of various xiqu styles. However, one of the major problems with his research on guildhall theatre is that he does not specify the differences between the performances staged in different types of guildhalls as Tanaka does. Another major problem with Wang’s study is that he fails to distinguish playhouses (*xizhuang* 戲莊) from guildhalls. Wang (2000: 240–284) generalises the performances staged in guildhalls and uses historical evidence depicting performances staged in playhouses and theatre gardens (*xiyuan* 戲園) to support his argument about guild theatres and performances staged therein. In the Qing dynasty, some literati and

merchant guildhalls were indeed used as performance venues for social elites' social gatherings. However, in most cases, theatrical performances staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls differed from those in playhouses in terms of their purposes for staging, spectators, troupes hired to put on shows and preferred xiqu styles. Some of Wang's (2000: 248) expressions, such as 'the guildhall theatre of playhouses' (*xizhuang de huiguan juchang* 戲莊的會館劇場), are rather confusing, and suggest that he is unclear about differences between playhouses and guildhalls.

Wang also mentions that he is not aware of the nature of 'guild performance' (*hangxi* 行戲) and speculates that it probably refers to amateur performances by guild members themselves (Wang 2000: 262). In fact, *hangxi* were the theatrical performances staged in merchants and craftsmen's guildhalls (or temples) for worshipping tutelary gods (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1993: 557; 1994: 460). In addition, Wang states that when merchants as a class successfully entered the ruling class, their guildhalls turned from 'a venue for folk performance' (*minjian yanchu changsuo* 民間演出場所) into 'a venue for semi-commercial and semi-official performance' (Wang 2000: 267). The performances staged in guildhalls thus tended to become increasingly refined (Wang 2000: 267). Huiju 徽劇 and bangzi performances staged in guildhalls interacted to form a new style—Jingju—to cater to the taste of officials (Wang 2000: 267). These statements are inaccurate because Wang overemphasises merchant guild theatres' function as venues for powerful merchants' and officials' social gatherings. Through the detailed analysis of Shanxi merchant guilds' day-to-day activities and Shanxi merchants' rise in social status provided in the present thesis, we know that merchant guildhalls were established to provide support to all guild members, regardless of their financial and political power. Guildhalls as performance venues served all guild members, including the most humble and vulnerable. During major festivals, the performances staged inside some Shanxi merchant guildhalls were also accessible to the general public. Therefore, we can consider a merchant

guild theatre to be ‘a venue for semi-commercial and semi-official performance’ when it provided theatrical performances for officials on occasion, but it is erroneous to say that it was no longer ‘a venue for folk performance’. In addition, although guildhall theatres surely contributed to the development of Jingju, Wang over-simplifies the reasons behind the formation of Jingju. These statements clearly indicate that Wang does not have a comprehensive understanding of the guildhall, guildhall theatre and theatrical performance as staged in craftsmen and merchant guildhalls. Thus, his findings on merchants’ contributions to xiqu are ultimately unconvincing.

The aforementioned studies on guildhall theatre point to the fact that merchant guildhalls played an important role in the development and spread of xiqu as well as merchants’ commercial activities. However, considering the limitations of these studies, systematic research on theatrical performances staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls is necessary to uncover how and why the performances enhanced Shanxi merchants’ business.

Scattered information about Shanxi merchants and theatrical performances is also found in research on other aspects of xiqu, such as theatre troupes and performers. Notable studies include Zhang Faying’s (2003) research on the history of theatre troupes. His study draws on historical records of the origin of theatre troupes, operation of troupes, social status of performers and anecdotes about famous theatre troupes and performers. Some Shanxi and Shaanxi bangzi troupes and players who performed in Beijing in the Qing dynasty are mentioned. This research provides valuable information on the relationship between Shanxi merchants and bangzi troupes. For example, Zhang (2003: 356) introduces that there were several types of zhonglu bangzi troupes, including *zihao ban* 字號班 (‘troupes with a formal name’) set up by magnates, *erbao ban* 二抱班 (lit. ‘double-hug troupe’) set up jointly by wealthy persons and performers and *qingcao ban* 青草班 (lit. ‘green-grass troupes’) set up

by itinerant performers in rural areas, each of which had different professional skills and financial standing. Usually, the troupes set up by magnates had decent props and costumes, and had all the leading roles, supporting roles, as well as instrumentalists, while other types of troupes were inferior to them in many respects (Zhang 2003: 356). This classification reveals that there existed some social-economic factors behind the formation and professional level of bangzi troupes. However, analysis and historical accounts concerning Shanxi bangzi in regions other than Beijing only account for a small proportion of this work. Therefore, detailed analysis of these social-economic factors is in need.

Andrea S. Goldman's (2008, 2012) research on the theatre world in Qing Beijing raises the question as to how Shanxi merchants socialised with theatre performers and whether bangzi was truly considered a 'vulgar' form of performances that literati elites tried to keep themselves away from. Goldman (2008) presents research on *huapu* 花譜 (flower-register)—a genre of connoisseurship texts that flourished in the Qing dynasty and was a blend of biographies of performers, assessments of their talent and anecdotes about the xiqu market. Goldman (2008: 18) quotes the connoisseurship discourses written by different literati to exemplify how cross-dressing young male performers noted in flower-register texts associated with spectators. She then uses this to show that the intercourse between the xiqu fans and the young male performers projected the homoeroticism of the Beijing commercial theatre. Among these fans, there was a certain type known as *laodou* 老斗, who were wealthy libertines obsessed with theatrical performances. They patronised cross dressing male performers and purchased their sexual companionship (Goldman 2008: 2–3). Powerful officials and ostentatious merchants were believed to constitute such fans. Most of the time, however, the author does not differentiate between the merchants' native places but analyses merchants as a whole. Hence, to understand the interaction between Shanxi merchants and theatre performers, it is necessary to explore

whether Shanxi merchants truly made up a part of *laodou*, and if so, whether Shanxi merchants' patronage differed from that of other spectators.

Goldman also quotes from flower-register texts such as *A Little Book of Orchids in Beijing* (*Yanlan xiaopu* 燕蘭小譜) and *The Miscellany of Dreams of Grandeur* (*Menghua suobu* 夢華瑣簿) to demonstrate how profligate the merchants were, noting that northerners did not like young male performers who specialised in Kunqu plays (Goldman 2008: 42). Merchants from north-western China who particularly enjoyed bangzi did not have enough aesthetic sophistication and occupied the lowest level in the hierarchy of all patrons (Goldman 2008: 50–53). Their taste was disdained by *huapu* writers (Goldman 2008: 47–52). Apart from these derogatory statements, although disparagement is not Goldman's original intention and she is merely paraphrasing the anecdotes, Goldman's account gives limited insight into the relationship between Shanxi merchants and bangzi, or bangzi performers.

The study which is discussed above constitutes the first part of Goldman's (2012) later work *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900*. Notably, in the following chapter, Goldman (2012: 85, 92) mentions that bangzi theatre troupes could only perform in smaller commercial theatre gardens in the Outer City of Beijing and attracted fewer literati, but the troupes presumably predominated at temple fairs, where audiences had humbler social status. In this regard, Goldman's works point to the link between spectators' social status and xiqu styles, raising more questions about Shanxi merchants' intention behind—and pattern of—their theatre sponsorship, which will be comprehensively discussed in the present thesis.

Studies on Huizhou merchants' theatre sponsorship

Like their Shanxi counterparts, Huizhou merchants were also famed for their theatre sponsorship. Huizhou merchants or Huishang 徽商 refers to the merchant group from Huizhou that emerged in the mid-Ming dynasty, famed for their dominance in the trade in salt in the Lianghuai area. During the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty, Huizhou merchants surpassed all other merchants in southern China in terms of fortune, and Shanxi merchants were the wealthiest in the north (*Wu za zu* 4.74). In light of the similarities between them, research on Huizhou merchants' theatre sponsorship merits special attention in this study on Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of bangzi.

Ke Xiangjun's (2007: 11) research on the relationship between Huizhou merchants and xiqu in the Ming dynasty shows that to indoctrinate their clansmen, Huizhou merchants sponsored Mulianxi 目連戲, a genre of Chinese ritual opera about Mulian rescuing his mother from hell. Huizhou merchants also sponsored commercial troupes' performances during banquets and kept family troupes, especially Kunqu troupes, as a means of manifesting their wealth, maintaining a close relationship with officials and elevating their social status (Ke 2007: 19–22). Huizhou merchants' theatre sponsorship facilitated the development and spread of various xiqu styles including Kunqu in the Ming dynasty (Ke 2007: 20–27). With a focus on Mulianxi, Guo Qitao (2005) presents elaborate research on the relationship between ritual opera and mercantile lineage in Huizhou. He discusses how the gentrified Huizhou merchants generously sponsored Mulianxi performances and how Mulianxi conveyed Confucian orthodox values and educated the mercantile lineage.

Comparing the research on Shanxi merchants in relation to Shanxi regional theatre and that on Huizhou merchants in relation to various xiqu styles in the south, the similarities between the two merchant groups' theatre sponsorship becomes quite clear. For example, they both had

strong native-place identity and established guilds; shared similar principal virtues such as thrift and righteousness; and adhered to similar commercial ethics including fair prices and credit. Also, both Shanxi and Huizhou merchants' business codes of conduct were deeply influenced by Confucian moral values conveyed by theatrical performances. In addition, both merchant groups considered theatre sponsorship an important part of their business strategies and a means by which to enhance their social status.

The differences between Shanxi and Huizhou merchants' theatre sponsorship are also notable. Although both Huizhou and Shanxi merchants kept family theatre troupes, Anhui troupes owned by Huizhou merchants originated from serf-like performers, as noted by Guo Qitao (2005: 197), while most of the Shanxi merchants' family troupes were formed by well-known bangzi performers rather than servants in the merchants' possession. Besides, Huizhou merchants were committed to various xiqu styles in both *huabu* 花部 or 'the flowery styles', which refers to all regional xiqu styles including pihuang, and *yabu* 雅部 or 'the elegant style', that is, Kunqu. In comparison, most Shanxi merchants were particularly interested in various forms of bangzi.

These differences between Shanxi and Huizhou merchants in their ways of consuming and patronising theatrical performances may raise new questions about the relationship between Shanxi merchants and bangzi. For instance, as Huizhou merchants' troupes were formed by servants while those of Shanxi merchants were not, the original intention of the two merchant groups for setting up family troupes was perhaps different. Also, the collaboration between Huizhou merchants and government officials was supported by prestigious lineages. In comparison, the close connection between the ruling class and powerful Shanxi merchants, especially bankers, was the direct result of commercial activities. Herein lies a question as to whether this difference had any effect on the theatre troupes, xiqu styles and performance

venues that Shanxi merchants and Huizhou merchants preferred on occasions for entertaining officials. The search for answers may provide a broader perspective on the interplay between Shanxi merchants and theatrical performances.

Studies on the patrons of European theatre

Last but not least, as theatre sponsorship was by no means confined to China, research on similar topics in different social contexts is also an enriching reference point for this thesis. For instance, studies of aristocratic court theatre in England during the Tudor period provide hints and inspiration for the investigation of the relationship between merchant patrons and Shanxi regional theatre. In her research on early Tudor household revels, Westfall (1990) examines the Chapels, minstrels and playwrights under the aegis of early Tudor noble patrons, as well as the texts of interludes which reflected the preference of the patrons. Westfall (1990: 13) states that early Tudor household Chapels were composed of well-trained actors who staged both sacred and secular plays during household banquets and religious festivals. The actors enjoyed higher salaries and social status than other types of household entertainers, and they had ‘access to elaborate costumes, sets, and properties drawn from its own and the household’s resources’ (Westfall 1990: 62). As for the minstrels, Westfall (1990: 66) believes that the use of heraldic minstrels contributed to the aristocratic patrons’ own power and prestige. The retention of virtuoso soloists allowed noblemen to show their artistic sophistication (Westfall 1990: 75). As ‘players were a luxury, not a necessity’, keeping private theatre troupes demonstrated the patron’s financial power, prestige and taste, and differentiated the patron from poorer noblemen (Westfall 1990: 150–151).

The way in which Shanxi merchants and European noblemen patronised performers share many similarities. Shanxi merchants’ family troupes were also known for their substantial

financial support and superior performances. The retention of family troupes showed Shanxi merchants' prestige and had positive effects on people's perception of the merchants. However, it is unknown whether the performers in Shanxi merchants' family troupes enjoyed a higher social standing. It is also unclear as to whether Shanxi merchants' troupes visited other households and gained rewards as the patronised minstrels did in Tudor times.

In her conclusion, Westfall (1990: 207) points out that maintaining entertainers was a non-profit venture as the noble households actually lost money on them. As no researcher has ever systematically evaluated the monetary benefit that Shanxi merchants could receive from theatre sponsorship, whether the sponsorship of family troupes was also a money-losing investment remains an open question. In short, by comparing research on European aristocratic court theatre and Shanxi regional theatre, one can explore new directions that will lead to creative findings about Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship.

Summary of the literature review

Recent research on Shanxi merchants as discussed above shows a dynamic relationship between Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and theatrical performances in the late imperial era. However, although many research papers contain relevant information, a detailed investigation of Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship remains outstanding. Specifically, studies on Shanxi merchants' businesses do not pay enough attention to theatrical performances. The existing research on forms of Chinese regional theatre usually suffer from generalisation and a lack of detailed analysis. Meanwhile, studies on the interplay between theatrical performances and merchants in the Ming–Qing period tend to focus on Huizhou merchants and Kunqu. As for discussions on the relationship between Shanxi merchants and Shanxi regional theatre, it is difficult to find creative views and perspectives. In addition, studies addressing

other relevant topics such as Chinese guilds, xiqu history and theatre troupes provide valuable clues about Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship. However, Shanxi regional theatre is not their focus. Apparently, there are still many areas that remain to be explored.

Research data and methodology

In brief, this thesis is a historical inquiry into the relationship between Shanxi merchants and Shanxi regional theatre, with a focus on various forms of bangzi prevalent in Shanxi province in the late imperial era, especially in the Qing dynasty. Information concerning Shanxi merchants and performances after 1912 is included as supplementary evidence to support the analysis. This is the first comprehensive interdisciplinary study on this topic that involves history, sociology, theatre performance studies and religious studies. The core proposition of the present thesis is that Shanxi regional theatre owed much of its success to the sponsorship of Shanxi merchants. Also, Shanxi merchants gained both short-term and long-term benefits from engaging in theatre sponsorship.

This thesis reveals that Shanxi merchants sponsored theatrical performance not only for entertainment but also as a business strategy. Historical evidence is interpreted from a business perspective, which is new to this topic. Researchers usually discuss xiqu from theatrical and literary perspectives but pay little attention to the interplay between xiqu and commercial activities as well as the socio-economic factors behind the development and spread of theatrical performance. In fact, theatrical performance was not only a form of entertainment but a tool for managing merchants and merchant guilds; an advertisement aiming to create the merchants' reputation; and a vehicle for building close connections with the ruling class as way of obtaining substantial economic benefits.

When I discuss the underlying sociological reason behind Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship, which was an endeavour to elevate and maintain a high social status via accumulating a great fortune, I will draw on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories on social distinction and forms of capital, as well as Chinese-American historian Ho Ping-ti's research on the social classification of late imperial China.

Specifically, in *The Forms of Capital* (2011 [1986]), Pierre Bourdieu divides 'capital' into several main types, namely, economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital refers to 'economic resources' (Chandler and Munday 2011), and 'is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 79). Cultural capital has three forms, namely the 'embodied state' or 'long lasting dispositions of the mind and body'; the 'objectified state' or cultural goods; and the 'institutionalized state' such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 79). Social capital refers to 'a membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a "credential" that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word' (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 84). The root of the three basic forms of capital is economic capital (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 87). Under certain circumstances the basic forms of capital can be transformed into other types at the cost of one form of capital (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 87). In addition, symbolic capital refers to 'resources available to a social actor on the basis of prestige or recognition, which function as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value' (Calhoun 2002). Cultural capital has a major impact on social distinction (Barker 2012).

The present thesis adopts Ho Ping-ti's classification of social hierarchy in late imperial China on matters concerning the social status of literati and merchants. Ho (1980: 18–20) suggests that the use of *simin* 四民 (scholar, farmer, craftsman and merchant) to refer to the functional

order of social classification of the people below the ruling officialdom was too general because Chinese society ‘was always a multiple-class society’ (Ho 1980: 20). Ho (1959: 333) believes that ‘these four major categories of commoners could be minutely sub-stratified according to the nature of their occupation, wealth, income, style of life, and proximity to or remoteness from the source of social prestige and power’. And he (1959: 336) notes that in the Ming and Qing dynasties Chinese society had ‘a degree of fluidity’ because of the absence of legal restrictions on status mobility.

According to Ho (1980: 17–21), on the top of the social ladder in the Ming and Qing dynasties was the ruling class, which included the nobility and officials. The Qing nobility included ‘imperial clansmen and nonimperial noble houses’ (Ho 1980: 21). ‘In the broad sense’ the officials included the bureaucracy proper, ‘retired officials, expectant officials, and certain types of degree-holders who were potential officials’, such as the holders of the Metropolitan Graduate (*jìnshì* 進士) (Ho 1980: 26).⁸ Holders of the Tribute Student (*gòngshēng* 貢生) and Provincial Graduate (*jùrén* 舉人) academic degrees were also included in the official class. These two titles served as ‘the demarcation between the potential officials and commoners’ (Ho 1980: 27).

Literati (*shì* 士) or scholars consisted of scholar-officials in government service and scholar-commoners who were not (Ho 1980: 35). In the Qing dynasty, government students (*shēngyuán* 生員, popularly known as *xiucai* 秀才), the holders of the first academic degree, along with *jiànshēng* 監生 or the students of the Imperial Academy (*taixue* 太學),⁹ ‘constituted a

⁸ The translation of the name of institutions, posts and titles in the present thesis is based on Hucker (1985), unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Hucker (1985: 150) translate the Imperial Academy or *taixue* as the National University, and *jiànshēng* as National University Student.

privileged class among commoners and an important social “transitional” group’ (Ho 1980: 35). Students of the Imperial Academy were included in the Ming ruling class but were excluded from the ruling class in the Qing dynasty (Ho 1959: 341). In this regard, civil officials were a site of overlap between the ‘literati’ and ‘the ruling class’. The two terms, that is, ‘literati’ and ‘the ruling class’, are closely linked but cannot be used interchangeably. They frequently appear side by side in the present thesis.

This thesis demonstrates that the sponsorship of theatrical performance was a means through which Shanxi merchants realised the transmission of different forms of capital. The sponsorship helped the merchants accumulate all the forms of capital mentioned above. Specifically, Shanxi merchants’ theatre sponsorship during guild meetings and temple fairs helped them gain economic and symbolic capital. The symbolic capital added to the merchants’ cultural capital and could be converted into more economic capital. Entertaining the ruling class with theatrical performances also won Shanxi merchants social capital. As the social capital served Shanxi merchants’ business purposes, it was eventually converted into economic capital. Shanxi merchants with enormous fortune were able to convert their economic capital into cultural capital via purchasing academic degrees, sinecures and official posts, thereby raising their social status. For the merchants with wealth and social status, lavish enjoyment of theatrical performances was a form of conspicuous consumption, thereby flaunting their wealth and reinforcing their newly acquired social status.

Ho Ping-ti (1959: 333–334; 1980: 51) also states that from the founding of the Ming dynasty to 1449, education was the ultimate determinant of a person’s social status. Wealth could only assist a person to attain better education, thereby helping him to gain a higher social status via the Civil Service Examination (1980: 51). However, from 1449 onwards, wealth gradually became a more important factor in one’s social status and eventually overshadowed education

as the determinant of social status after the Taiping Rebellion in 1851 (Ho 1980: 51). The Taiping Rebellion became a significant point in time as it signalled the most dramatic rise of wealthy merchants' social status in the late imperial era. As will be seen in Chapters Three and Four, this point in time also signalled the start of the popularity of bangzi in Beijing and the rapid development of Shanxi merchants' family troupes.

This thesis draws on five types of primary sources. They are: merchant guild regulations, firms' and merchant families' account books and records of merchants' commercial activities; literati jottings (*biji* 筆記) and unofficial histories (*yeshi* 野史); literary works; previous researchers' investigations via fieldwork and archival research; and travel notes by foreign visitors in the Qing dynasty.

Merchant guild regulations, firms' and merchant families' account books, Shanxi merchants' letters and records of guild meetings and events provide us with an overall picture of the business world from the perspective of merchants. Our knowledge of guild operations and regulations largely comes from guildhall stele inscriptions. Researchers have made great efforts over the past few decades to compile and categorise them. Some Shanxi merchants' letters, account books and diaries are also collected and edited. Examples of compilations of these accounts include *The Collection of Treasured Accounts Held Overseas about Shanxi Merchants* (*Guowai zhencang jinshang shiliao huibian* 國外珍藏晉商資料彙編) edited by Gao Chunping (2013) and *The Collection of Accounts of Shanxi Draft Banks* (*Shanxi piaohao shiliao huibian* 山西票號史料彙編) edited by Huang Jianhui (2002). Both of these contain fragments of information, such as Shanxi merchants' diaries, account books, and letters and correspondence between Shanxi merchants, especially bankers, who resided in different market towns. As these accounts focus more on commercial transactions and provide limited information about theatrical performance, they can only serve as supplementary evidence about

Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship. Apart from these compilations, the majority of Shanxi merchants' financial accounts, which have been collected without proper preservation, are inaccessible due to tight restrictions placed by their keepers.

A recent voluminous compilation, *The Extensive Collection of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants* (*Jinshang shiliao jicheng* 晉商史料集成) edited by Liu Jianmin (2018), provides a massive number of copies of Shanxi merchants' account books, epitaphs, genealogies and letters between family members or firms. Some of the copies include information regarding recreational activities such as theatrical performance and have not been made public before. However, the copies are not effectively edited and many accounts are hand-written, making them difficult to read. Nevertheless, this publication is important as it contains new evidence.

Another important work is *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants* (*Jinshang shiliao quanlan* 晉商史料全覽) compiled by Yan Aiyong (2006a; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d). This fifteen-volume work covers various aspects of Shanxi merchants' lives, including introductions to powerful merchant families and outstanding family members, genealogies, records of Shanxi merchants' firms, stele inscriptions, epitaphs, merchants' engagement in festivals and local affairs, and Shanxi merchants' contribution to the spread of Shanxi regional theatre. These historical materials are collected from sources including other relevant compilations, oral history, fieldwork and stories told by Shanxi merchants' descendants and natives of Shanxi.

Precious accounts of Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and sponsorship of theatrical performance are also available in the memoirs of performers. By far the most informative memoir I have found is *A Talk about the History of Jinju in the Past Century* (*Jinju bainian shihua* 晉劇百年史話), which was compiled based on the stories told by former Shanxi bangzi

performer Wang Yongnian 王永年. Wang was born in 1897. The book contains anecdotes about famous performers, theatre troupes and Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship from the Daoguang period to the end of the Republican era. It should be noted that the information in *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants (Jinshang shiliao quanlan)* and Wang Yongnian's memoir is not completely credible as some of the stories are hearsay. Also, some of the details in these two works are inconsistent with information provided in *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi 中国戏曲志)*, an overview of the historical development of all xiqu styles in China. As these three sources are not completely reliable, they are used in this thesis in conjunction with other sources, and where they corroborate each other. Footnotes are provided for questionable accounts.

Ming-Qing literati jottings and unofficial histories¹⁰ that describe the day-to-day life of people in all social echelons are important source materials and will be used in combination with local gazetteers and dynastic histories for historical inquiries into society in late imperial China. Those that are compilations of doubtful secondary sources based on hearsays and bizarre stories such as the *Unofficial History of the Qing Dynasty: A General Survey (Qingdai yeshi daguan 清代野史大觀)*, however, will be avoided in this thesis in favour of prominent scholars' jottings like the *Miscellaneous Knowledge from the Cold Cottage (Lenglu zashi 冷廬雜識)* that contain their personal experiences and understanding of society. This kind of literary sources are more reliable and provide an invaluable insight into social norms, economic and political environment, mass entertainment and social customs in the late imperial era from the perspective of literati elites. Of particular interest to this study is the type of literati jottings called flower-register (*huapu*) texts as represented by the aforementioned *A Little Book of*

¹⁰ In his study on literati jottings, Li Junxiang (2011: 9–10) points out that it is difficult to differentiate between unofficial histories and literati jottings that contain a lot of historical materials.

Orchids in Beijing and *The Miscellany of Dreams of Grandeur*. Many flower-register texts contain information about the socio-political environment of the times, current fashions, anecdotes about the ruling elites' enthusiasm for theatrical performances and the development and popularity of various xiqu styles including bangzi.

Fragmentary evidence is also found in the literary and fictional works of the literati. Literary works, such as *Diaries from the Studio for Retreat and Meditation* (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 退想齋日記) by Qing scholar Liu Dapeng 劉大鵬, provide vivid pictures of folk religions, daily life, aristocratic household revels, festivals, popular recreational activities and theatrical performances in both urban and rural areas. Also, bamboo-twig lyrics (*zhuzhici* 竹枝詞) written by literati elites provide 'lyrical descriptions of everyday life' (Wang 2003: 33). This form of poetry contains 'four lines of seven characters each' and is 'a traditional form of Chinese folk literature' (Wang 2003: 33). Literati elites composed bamboo-twig lyrics to eulogise beautiful landscapes, narrate local cultures and voice their opinions about changing fashions and major events in the contemporary political context (Mo 2002: 126). Many bamboo-twig lyrics give us graphic accounts of temple fairs, the lifestyle of merchants, theatrical performance and theatre performers.

Ming–Qing fictional works such as *The Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qilu deng* 歧路燈) also provide important information about xiqu history. It is not uncommon that scholars use Ming–Qing fictional works in their research on Chinese law, religion and society for the time. For instance, Xiaohuan Zhao (2011: 133) uses *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢) as a window through which to look at 'judicial practice and politico-legal culture' and 'the relationship between law and politics' in late imperial times. Cuncun Wu (2004: 15) refers to *The Precious Mirror of Ranked Flowers* (*Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑒) in addition to literati jottings such as flower-register texts in her discussion of homoeroticism in the Qing dynasty

as shown in the relationship between young male theatre performers and literati, believing that fictional works provide a vivid account of social life.

Data collected by other researchers through field and archival research about Shanxi merchant guilds, religious ritual practices, ancient stages and temple fairs are good complements to the aforementioned sources. Travel notes by foreign explorers and the information in western scholars' investigations of Chinese society conducted from the Qing dynasty onwards to the early Republican era are still valuable. It is impossible for us to witness directly how people lived their lives in late imperial China. However, as explorers and scholars who carried out research at that time were eyewitnesses, the first-hand information that they collected via immediate observation is rather convincing.

A close examination of the historical materials mentioned above enables us to reconstruct a full picture of the world of theatre in the eyes of Shanxi merchants. This thesis examines four occasions on which Shanxi merchants sponsored and consumed theatrical performance in association with their commercial activities, namely, merchant guild meetings, temple fairs, socialising with the ruling class, and during household events and in their leisure time. The exploration of the four types of occasions shows Shanxi merchants' direct involvement in theatrical performance. It does so through discussions of stages, theatre troupes, spectators, repertoire, purposes for performing, interactions between performers and spectators, as well as the social and economic effects of staging.

By examining these occasions, this study depicts a reciprocal relationship between Shanxi merchants and theatrical performance. Shanxi merchant played multiple roles when they sponsored theatre and enjoyed theatrical performance. As ardent disciples of gods, they deemed theatrical performance a form of sacrificial offering. As spectators, they enjoyed theatrical performance with fellow-traders, officials and family members. As financial supporters, they

paid for the establishment of stages inside merchant guildhalls, temples and their private mansions; retained family theatre troupes; obtained high-quality costumes and props to the best of their financial means; and established a close relationship with the performers and troupes they patronised. The merchants also benefited from sponsoring theatrical performance because it brought them the gods' protection, fame, business opportunities and great fortune. More importantly, theatrical performance, theatre performers and troupes all benefited from Shanxi merchants' sponsorship and consumption. Shanxi merchants' pursuit of wealth and their desire to climb the social ladder were important socio-economic factors that enabled the spread and rapid development of Shanxi regional theatre, especially Shanxi bangzi, in the Qing dynasty.

Thesis structure

This thesis consists of four chapters in addition to this Introduction and a Conclusion. Each of the four chapters focuses on one type of occasion on which Shanxi merchants sponsored and consumed theatrical performance. Chapter One considers theatrical performance during Shanxi merchants' meetings, which took place frequently inside their guildhalls. Shanxi merchants established hundreds of guildhalls throughout the country in pursuit of mutual benefit with fellow traders. The merchant guildhalls jointly established by Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants, and sometimes with Gansu merchants, will also be taken into consideration as Shanxi merchants cooperated with Shaanxi and Gansu merchants to gain commercial advantage over rival merchant groups from other parts of China. They also shared similar local culture and were fond of similar xiqu styles—that is, various forms of bangzi. Through textual analysis of various guild regulations, this chapter demonstrates that the theatrical performances that Shanxi merchants sponsored during meetings were not only a form of entertainment but served as a tool for disciplining and educating guild members, thereby helping the guilds and their

members to attain better economic benefits. Meanwhile, the wide geographical spread of Shanxi merchant guildhalls throughout the Qing empire and Shanxi merchants' zest for theatrical performance facilitated the spread of various xiqu styles via trade routes, especially forms of bangzi.

Chapter Two examines temple fairs and temple fair performances sponsored by individual Shanxi merchants or Shanxi merchant guilds in both market towns and rural areas in northern China. During a temple fair, the temple theatre or guildhall theatre was the centre where people gathered and enjoyed theatrical performance. Theatrical performance was the major event that attracted people to attend the fairs. The more exciting the performances were, the more consumers were attracted to the fair. Theatrical performance on this kind of occasion not only generated immediate revenue for Shanxi merchants but also built their image as powerful and earned them favourable reputations, thereby contributing to their business performance in the long run. Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of temple fair performances facilitated the mobility of spectators and theatre performers, thereby contributing to the spread of bangzi from urban areas to rural areas.

While Chapters One and Two discuss Shanxi merchants as a whole regardless of their financial power, Chapters Three and Four focus on the magnates, who were hungry and thirsty for a higher social status and played a role in changing the traditional social ladder of China. Chapter Three demonstrates that after having accumulated great fortune, many powerful Shanxi merchants successfully elevated their social class and established a close relationship with the ruling class to seek their protection and to gain economic privileges. To maintain this relationship, wealthy Shanxi merchants frequently entertained these social elites with theatrical performance at various venues: Shanxi merchant guildhalls, the private residences of cross-dressing young male performers and Shanxi merchants' private mansions and restaurants. Shanxi merchants' passion for theatrical performances and their association with the ruling

class facilitated the spread of bangzi into the social elites in late Qing Beijing, the centre of the xiqu market in China at the time.

Chapter Four continues the analysis of the magnates' engagement in theatrical performances and demonstrates Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performances during household events and in their leisure time. It shows how Shanxi merchants and their descendants manifested their wealth and social status by consuming theatrical performance. The climate of lavishness from the mid-Ming onwards nurtured the merchants' indulgence in theatrical performance. According to Wu Jen-Shu (2006: 218–219), a Taiwan-based historian of Ming–Qing society and economy, studies on the climate of lavishness in Ming–Qing China are concentrated in four fields: luxurious consumption and consumer society, the role of fashion in promoting consumption and productivity, material culture, and differences in the consumption patterns of people in different social echelons. Chapter Four falls in the fourth field and discusses Shanxi merchants' luxurious consumption vis-à-vis their social status.

Scholars such as Wu Jen-Shu adopt sociological theories and concepts to study the culture of consumption and social distinction in late imperial China. The discussion in this chapter follows their path. Some of these sociological concepts and theories adopted in Chapter Four include 'conspicuous consumption' and 'the leisure class' introduced by American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (2012), as well as the distinction of consumption pattern between people in different social classes discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). The magnates who entered the leisure class established private mansions with stages, set up family troupes and held theatrical festivals. These practices helped merchants display their financial standing and social influence and contributed to the development and spread of Shanxi bangzi. The demonstration of Shanxi merchants' conspicuous consumption in this chapter also proves that although Shanxi merchants were in pursuit of a high social status, they did not mimic the ruling class and literati in their lifestyle and engagement in cultural activities.

These four chapters are interconnected rather than discrete. For instance, the Shanxi merchant guildhalls discussed in Chapter One hosted theatrical performances during guild meetings (Chapter One), temple fairs (Chapter Two) and occasions for socialising with literati elites (Chapter Three). The four chapters are of the same importance because taken together, they portray a comprehensive picture of the interplay between Shanxi merchants and theatrical performance in late imperial China. The thesis then concludes with a summary of its new findings, followed by their implications for this topic and other research in the field.

Chapter One: Theatrical performance during Shanxi merchants’ guild gatherings

This chapter examines theatrical performances during Shanxi merchants’ guild gatherings in late imperial times. It begins with a historical survey of the development of commercial activities in China, the emergence of powerful merchant groups and the operation of the merchant guild system. It then introduces the establishment of Shanxi merchant guildhalls in the Ming–Qing period and delineates Shanxi merchants’ sponsorship and consumption of theatrical performance based on guild regulations and recorded guild happenings. By analysing the historical texts, this chapter reveals that the sponsorship of theatrical performance during guild gatherings served Shanxi merchants’ business purposes. Theatrical performance acted as a tool for reinforcing the importance of religious rituals, managing merchant guilds and disciplining guild members.

A historical survey of commerce and the guild system

Commerce and merchant groups

China was historically an agricultural society. Merchants ranked at the bottom of the traditional Chinese social hierarchy according to the Confucian and Legalist ethos. Although the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC) and the Warring States periods (476–221 BC) witnessed the growth of commodity exchange and the rise of famous merchant tycoons such as Fan Li 范蠡 (536–448BC) and Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (292–235BC), by the end of the Warring States period there arose statesmen and philosophers in the states of Qin 秦, Chu 楚 and Qi 齊 who proposed a strong centralised economy (von Glahn 2016: 60–83). In the fourth century BC, Shang Yang

商鞅 (c. 395–338BC), a famous statesman in the state of Qin, implemented a series of reforms to enhance the prosperity of the state. The policies he introduced covered a variety of areas and included emphasis on agricultural production and discouragement of commerce (*Shiji* 68.2230). Han Fei 韓非 (c. 280–233BC), one of the major pre-Qin Legalist philosophers, stated that ‘the enlightened king so administers his state as to diminish the number of tradesmen, craftsmen, and idlers, and to lower their names in order to incline their minds to primary callings and to lessen their interest in secondary occupations’ (Liao 1959: 296). Traders and craftsmen were ‘the vermin of the state’, for they ‘disguise worthless, broken articles as proper goods, collect useless luxuries, accumulate riches, wait for good opportunities, and exploit the farmers’ (Liao 1959: 297). If the rulers did not get rid of the ‘vermin’, ‘it would be no wonder at all if within the seas there should be states breaking up in ruin and dynasties waning and perishing’ (Liao 1959: 297). In the early years of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 8), Emperor Gaozu (r. 202–195 BC) ordered that ‘merchants should not be allowed to wear silk clothing or to ride chariots’ (*Shiji* 30.1418). Although these restrictions on merchants were removed after Emperor Gaozu died, merchants and their offspring were still forbidden to take up posts as government officials (*Shiji* 30.1418). Under the reign of the Emperor Wu (r. 141–87BC) of the Han dynasty, anti-commerce policy was systemised (Tang 2018: 6). From then on, lending weight to agriculture and restraining commerce (*zhongnong yishang* 重農抑商) became a tradition. It exerted an overwhelming impact on Chinese people’s perception of trade and the social standing of merchants for over 2000 years.

Despite this, in the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, China witnessed a gradual increase in commercial activities. In 584, following an imperial decree of Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty (Sui Wendi, r. 581–600), construction began on a ‘regionally important canal’ (Twitchett 1979: 114–115). This heralded the creation of the empire-wide network of water

transportation which would benefit regional and national trade in China for over a thousand years, although Confucian officials with physiocratic economic views considered the project nothing but a waste of money (Twitchett 1979: 114, 138). In the beginning of the Tang dynasty, official markets were established in the capital and major urban centres at the behest of Emperor Gaozu of the Tang (r. 618–626) (Wechsler 1979: 177). During the reign of the Emperor Zhongzong (r. 683–684, 705–710) and Emperor Ruizong (r. 684–690, 710–712) of the Tang dynasty, ‘the imperial family, and the emperor’s relatives by marriage’ started to sell official posts, allowing commoners including merchants to purchase a higher social status for themselves (Guisso 1979: 321–322).

The Song (960–1279) dynasty witnessed the emergence and flourishing of market towns and an expansion of the circulation of commodities. Product specialisation in each region, the large population, the increasing demands for commodities and an effective waterway transportation system encouraged merchants to engage in regional trade (McDermott and Shiba 2015: 368–370, 401). During the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), thanks to the convenient transport, townspeople in Lin’an 臨安 (then the capital city, modern Hangzhou 杭州 in Zhejiang province) had access to various services and a great variety of commodities including luxury goods from the large number of stores (Gernet 1962: 44–51). From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, wealthy merchants appeared as an active social echelon between the ruling class and the masses (Gernet 1962: 60) and benefited from state monopolies (Gernet 1962: 81–82). The importance of merchants and the empire’s reliance on commerce was reflected in the taxes levied on the trade in salt. The ‘Treatise on food and goods’ (*shihuo zhi* 食貨志) of the *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi* 182. 4456) records:

During the Dali 大歷 period (766–779) [of the Tang dynasty] ... the taxes on the trade in salt made up fifty percent of the total taxes on the land under heaven (*tianxia* 天下). During the Yuanyou 元祐 period (1086–1094) [of the Song dynasty], the taxes on salt produced at the Lianghuai and Shanxi salterns ... had already made up to two thirds of the total taxation income in the Tang dynasty. From the late Shaoxing 紹興 period (1131–1162) till now ... the amount of taxes collected from one province outstripped the total amount of taxes collected in the Tang dynasty.

In the Ming dynasty, although the imperial court did not intend to encourage commercialisation, the unprecedented expansion of commerce was so rapid that it altered social life (Brook et al. 1998: 670–672). During this time, Shanxi merchants, the pioneers in large-scale regional trade, appeared. As related in the Introduction to this thesis, the principal reason for their emergence was the grain-salt exchange system (*kaizhong fa*). Other factors, such as lack of farmland and natural disasters also made the natives of Shanxi take up the life of a merchant, an occupation which had previously been regarded as inferior.

Shanxi merchants generally started their business by transporting provisions such as grains to frontier regions in the north and obtaining government permission to sell salt, one of the government-controlled commodities. In the mid-Ming, Shanxi merchants' counterparts—Huizhou merchants—appeared when *kaizhong fa* went out of control and the Lianghuai salt fields showed higher productivity. Many natives of Huizhou migrated to Yangzhou 揚州 and dominated the trade in *huaiyan* (salt from the Lianghuai area). The trade in *huaiyan* brought a long period of economic prosperity to Yangzhou (*Wu shi zhi* 1.326). Some wealthy Shaanxi and Shanxi salt merchants also moved to the Lianghuai region, settled down and took part in the trade. But in this area, they were not powerful enough to compete with Huizhou merchants

(Cited in Zhang and Wang 1985: 108). Both Shanxi and Huizhou merchants expanded their businesses into many other industries and set up branches throughout the empire. Apart from salt, Shanxi merchants were also involved in the trade in an assortment of goods, such as ironware and herbal medicine. In the Qing dynasty, some Shanxi merchants traded tea with Russians. In the latter half of the Qing dynasty, Shanxi merchants also created the banking industry in China. In comparison, many Huizhou merchants opened and ran pawnshops and engaged in the domestic trade in tea and timber. There were other merchant groups or so-called ‘guest groups’ (*kebang* 客幫) that were active in Ming–Qing times, including but not limited to the Shaanxi merchant group (*Shaanbang* 陝幫), Sichuan merchant group (*Chuanbang* 川幫), Shandong merchant group (*Shandongbang* 山東幫) and Guangzhou merchant group (*Guangbang* 廣幫) (*Qingbai leichao* 5.2286). Although not all the merchant groups emerged in the Ming–Qing period, their business evolved further during this period of time.

With the rapid commercial development, people’s attitude towards commerce gradually changed. In the mid-Ming dynasty, merchants from various regions, including Huizhou and Shanxi, started to gain a name for specialising in a particular type of goods (Brook 1999: 119). In the late Ming dynasty, merchants took pride in their wealth (Brook 1999: 212–213). They showed it off by wearing luxurious clothes and living extravagant lives. Merchants’ social status was enhanced as well, especially in the Qing dynasty, partially because of the popular *juanna* 捐納 and *juanshu* 捐輸 system (the office selling system), which encouraged commoners to pay taels of silver in exchange for government posts and academic degrees. Many wealthy merchants, who had a clear understanding of their profession’s unsavoury reputation, tried hard to provide their offspring with higher education and had a craving for degrees and titles in the hope of climbing the social ladder. Shanxi and Huizhou merchants were known for their active participation in the office selling system, as academic degrees and

government posts brought them symbolic advantages and economic benefits. Chapter Three will provide a more detailed discussion of the rise of merchants' social status.

However, degrees and titles could not completely shield merchants from risks and difficulties, not to speak of the less powerful merchants who were unable to seek benefits via the office selling system at all. Merchants had to manage risks of many kinds pertaining to their business: an unstable political environment during wartime such as the First Opium War (1839–1842), which weakened the domestic economy; natural disasters that led to a decline in productivity; and fierce competition from rivals including smugglers could all become obstacles in their way of seeking fortune. In addition, sojourning merchants might feel homesick and lack a sense of belonging. Long journeys exhausted them. And they might become sick or even die from disease. To overcome these difficulties, self-governing guilds were established to provide merchants with mutual assistance.

The establishment of merchant guilds

In a narrow sense, the Chinese term *huiguan* 會館 was a synonym for *hang* 行, *hanghui* 行會 or *hangbang* 行幫, which refer to an association established by sojourners who have the same hometown or occupation (Ho 1966: 11). In a broad sense, *huiguan* also refers to a 'guild house', 'meeting house' or 'guildhall' where *hanghui* members gathered (Ho 1966: 11). In this case, it is a venue or building rather than an association or society.¹¹ To clarify, in this thesis,

¹¹ The Chinese word *huiguan* comprises two characters which refer to 'association' and 'house' respectively. Chinese scholars tend not to differentiate between these two concepts in their research on *huiguan*. However, it is difficult to translate *huiguan* into English as there is no English word which covers both the meanings. Despite the fact that there are always objections concerning the accuracy of applying 'guild' as the translation of *huiguan* as an association due to the differences between Chinese *huiguan* and European guild, the term 'Chinese guild' is still widely used in Western studies of Chinese history (Moll-Murata 2008: 213–215).

the generic term ‘guild’ is used as a translation of ‘hang’, ‘hanghui’ and ‘hangbang’, while the place where guild members congregated is rendered as ‘guildhall’.

Generally speaking, based on the profession of their members, guilds in late imperial China can be classified as literati guilds, merchant guilds and craftsmen guilds. In his research on the history of Chinese *huiguan*, Ho Ping-ti (1966: 62–64) notes that there were also guildhalls established by migrants from the same native place and by workers working for the canal system. Only a few guildhalls were of these types. The majority of guildhalls fell into the three most common types of guildhalls.

As early as the Sui dynasty (581–618), *hang* or guilds, a type of loosely organised merchant association, appeared in Luoyang 洛陽 of Henan province as a result of a growing market and government oppression of merchants (Quan 1986: 29, 36). In the Song dynasty, apart from being an organisation for regulating the relations between merchants, artisans and the imperial government, this early form of guild provided support for merchants and artisans in need (Gernet 1962: 87). Local government authorities applied to the leader of a guild ‘when making requisitions of any kind, whether of goods from the shops or of artisans from the workshops’ (Gernet 1962: 88). There were official intermediaries who ‘ensured that fair prices and fair wages were paid’ (Gernet 1962: 88). However, it is unclear whether guild membership and guildhalls existed at that time (Liu 1988: 4–5).

It was not until the Yongle period of the Ming dynasty that the first guildhall was established in Beijing and used as a venue for social gatherings by capital officials who were originally from Wuhu 蕪湖 in modern southern Anhui province (Ho 1966: 11, 15–16). Other early guildhalls of the same nature established in Beijing before the Wanli period included the Fuzhou 福州 Guildhall, the Shexian 歙縣 Guildhall and the Jishan 稽山 Guildhall (Ho 1966: 15–16). From the late Ming onwards, some guildhalls of this kind in the Outer City of

Beijing gradually transformed into literati guildhalls, providing accommodations to candidates for the Civil Service Examination (Ho 1966: 17).

Traveling merchants also began to establish merchant guildhalls in the Ming dynasty. Moll-Murata (2008: 222) states that in the Ming dynasty, at least twelve craftsmen and merchant guildhalls were built throughout the empire. The Qing dynasty saw the peak period in the establishment of craftsmen and merchant guildhalls (Moll-Murata 2008: 247).

Some merchant guilds emphasised the shared native place of guild members regardless of the commodities they traded in, while others focused on the shared industry. For instance, the *Miscellaneous Notes from Tianjin (Jinmen zaji 1.41)* records the presence of two Shanxi merchant guilds in Tianjin in the late Qing dynasty. One was established exclusively by Shanxi tobacco merchants, the other by Shanxi pawnbrokers, salt merchants and grocers. Also, in Beijing, the pawn guild established in 1803 welcomed all pawnbrokers working in the capital and environs regardless of their native places (Li 1980: 6). For the purposes of the present thesis, I will discuss the guilds established by natives of Shanxi regardless of which industry they were in.

Besides *huiguan*, the most commonly used designation for merchant guilds was *gongsuo* 公所 (lit. ‘public house’), such as the Chongde 崇德 Gongsuo in Suzhou 蘇州 founded by book merchants (Peng 1995: 1000) and the Hedong 河東 Gongsuo in Beijing set up by Shanxi tobacco merchants (Peng 1995: 1004). There is no precise definition of these designations, and their commonalities and dissimilarities remain contested (Zhou et al. 2002: 4–8). In general, most of those designated as ‘X Guildhall’ emphasised the common native place of the members and were founded before the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), whereas the majority of ‘X

Gongsuo' emphasised the shared occupation of the founders and were founded in the period subsequent to the Taiping Rebellion (Zhou et al. 2002: 6–8).¹²

For most merchant guilds, a firm (*shanghao* 商號) manager (*zhanggui* 掌櫃) joined a merchant guild as the representative of his employees (Burgess 1928: 124). A firm manager reported to the business owner regularly by letter or face to face. In most cases, merchants were not forced to join a merchant guild; seldom did guild regulations mention that membership was compulsory for a merchant to conduct a trade. However, as a guild member's business was under the protection of the guild and the members could obtain considerable benefits, it is reasonable to infer that merchants found joining guilds profitable and expedient.

The management of a well-organised merchant guild resembled the management of a village, and a merchant guild resembled a lineage association. A group of leaders, including elders and guild members who had high moral prestige or capability, formed the board of directors (Golas 1977: 567). Well-trained and experienced foremen also took a part (Burgess 1928: 137). This group of leaders acted as the patriarch in a lineage, who had the right to manage the association, to provide education, to make judgements and to impose punishment (Yao 2013: 12). Chinese people put considerable emphasis on lineage. As sojourning merchants left their hometowns and did business in market towns far away, they could only seek support from their fellow-

¹² Not every venue designated as 'X Guildhall' was a guildhall in nature. In his study on Chinese guildhall theatre, Wang Qiang (2000: 248–249, 252–256, 274) misinterpreted historical accounts and considered the Guildhall of the God of Literature (Wechang huiguan 文昌會館) and the Guildhall of the God of Wealth (Caishen huiguan 財神會館) in Beijing as guildhalls. The Guildhall of the God of Culture and the Guildhall of the God of Wealth were in fact temples that were sometimes used as venues for entertaining officials with theatrical performances. These so-called *huiguan* were differentiated from merchant guildhalls in terms of basic functions. In *The Miscellany of Dreams of Grandeur* (*Menghua suobu* 1.4) by Yang Maojian 楊懋建 (*juren* 1832), it is clearly described that the Guildhall of the God of Culture and the Guildhall of the God of Wealth were 'places for banquets and social gatherings', and they were playhouses (*xizhuang*).

traders instead of the lineage. The merchant guild, therefore, functioned as the substitute for a lineage association to unite, manage and serve the sojourning merchants.

The main functions of a merchant guild included setting up guild rules to regulate its members; protecting fellow traders from unfavourable external factors; creating and maintaining a social network among fellow traders with a common native place to construct a sense of belonging; as well as settling business disputes. To ensure the value of membership and a well-functioning merchant guild, ideally, the guild leaders were required to act as not only patriarch but protectors because, as Pierre Bourdieu (2011 [1986]: 86) states, in every group the leaders are required to ‘represent the group, to speak and act in its name and so, with the aid of’ the total social capital of the group, ‘to exercise a power incommensurate with’ their personal contribution to the group. Also, the leaders could ‘defend the collective honour when the honour of the weakest members was threatened’ (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 86). The concentration of social capital in the hands of leaders also ‘has the effect of limiting the consequences of individual lapses by explicitly delimiting responsibilities and authorizing the recognised spokesmen to shield the group as a whole from discredit by expelling or excommunicating the embarrassing individuals’ (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]: 86). That is to say, the guild members, especially the weakest ones, were under the protection of a guild. Membership guaranteed that these less powerful members could obtain the greatest benefits from the collectively owned social capital of a guild. Whether Shanxi merchant guildhalls ensured that all guild members were under protection regardless of their power will be discussed later in this chapter.

A merchant guildhall provided board and lodging to travelling merchants; provided a place where merchants assembled and kept stock; and served as a venue for gatherings and offering sacrifices to patron gods. As guildhalls were expensive to build, less powerful or wealthy

merchants gathered at temples or restaurants instead. The funding for establishing a merchant guildhall and managing a merchant guild was obtained from sources including membership fees, taxes on commodities (*lijin* 釐金), penalties, donations from members and social elites and revenue generated from managing properties (Quan 1986: 155–156; Wang and Li 2013: 96–99). In the Shan-Shaan Guild of Fuyang 阜陽 in northern Anhui, even apprentices were required to pay a certain fee at the end of each year (Yan 2007a: 266). Of all the funding sources, the establishment of a merchant guildhall relied chiefly on fellow merchants' donations. The amount of money donated by each member varied widely. In 1746, 391 merchants donated around 8200 taels of silver for the establishment of the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng 聊城 in Shandong province. Around eighty-three percent of the fund was collected from thirty-nine large stores, while seventy-three small sellers only contributed around zero point five percent of the total amount, each of them less than one tael.¹³ Other expenditures included taxes paid to the government, a relief fund for fellow traders in difficulties, expenses for entertainment, banquets and religious ritual practices (Quan 1986: 156–157), and guildhall maintenance fees.

Guild members attended guild meetings regularly. Quan Hansheng 全漢升 (1986), a renowned Chinese economic historian, divides merchant guild meetings in late imperial China into four general types, namely, meetings of the board of directors, regular meetings on fixed dates, extraordinary general meetings and annual meetings once or twice per year, usually on the relevant patron gods' birthdays (Quan 1986: 153–155). Usually, the annual meeting, 'a combination of religious service and business deliberation', was of the greatest importance (Burgess 1928: 143, 145). As there was no standard format for drafting guild regulations and

¹³ These numbers and proportions are calculated according to the stele inscriptions that record the establishment and renovations to the guildhall. See Zhang 2009: 342–353.

holding guild meetings, the way in which merchants held meetings varied. However, what we do know is that theatrical performance played an important part in Shanxi merchants' guild meetings, which will be discussed in the following section.

Theatrical performances during Shanxi merchants' guild meetings

This section deals with the theatrical performances presented in association with Shanxi merchants' guild meetings and the business functions that the performances served. Apart from entertaining fellow-traders, theatrical performance was used to discipline guild members. This means of managing merchant guilds proved quite effective. From the perspective of xiqu history, the wide geographical distribution and the large number of Shanxi merchant guildhalls and Shanxi merchants' constant demand for theatrical performance during guild meetings were an important impetus behind the spread of Shanxi regional theatre from Shanxi province to other parts of China.

Shanxi merchant guildhalls

The earliest known Shanxi merchant guildhalls were established in mid-Ming Beijing. Among them were the Pingyao 平遥 Guildhall, Linxiang 临襄 Guildhall, Linfen 临汾 Eastern Guildhall, Linfen Western Guildhall and Lu'an 潞安 Guildhall. An increasing number of Shanxi merchant guildhalls appeared in other provinces in the Qing dynasty with the expansion of Shanxi merchants' businesses. From the Ming dynasty to the Republican era, Shanxi merchants established, or assisted in the establishment of, more than five hundred merchant guildhalls throughout the country (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 230). Many of them were

established in the High Qing era (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 220–230)—a golden age that ran over a century from 1683 to 1799. Some of the well-preserved or rebuilt Shanxi merchant guildhalls include the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi 社旗 in Henan province, the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng in Shandong province, the Pingyang Guildhall in Beijing, the All-Shanxi Guildhall (Quanjin huiguan 全晉會館) of Suzhou in Jiangsu province, and the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Bozhou 亳州 in Anhui province.

Generally speaking, there were four methods for Shanxi merchants to establish a merchant guildhall. One of the common ways was to raise funds, purchase land or property and build a guildhall. Other guildhalls, such as the Shanxi Guildhall of Anshan 鞍山 in Liaoning 遼寧 province and the Shanxi Guildhall of Zhangye 張掖 in Gansu province, were reconstructed and expanded from Temples of Emperor Guan (Guandi miao 關帝廟). Still other Shanxi merchant guildhalls, such as the Fushan 浮山 Guildhall and the Yuxian 盩厔 Guildhall in Beijing, were shared with candidates for the Civil Service Examination. Finally, some Shanxi merchants also provided funds to literati guildhalls. Roughly during the Shunzhi period of the Qing dynasty, natives of Wenxi 聞喜 county in southern Shanxi who held government posts or academic degrees and resided in Beijing established a literati guildhall named the Wenxi Guildhall (Yan 2007a: 16). During the Daoguang period, thirty-two merchants from Wenxi, most of whom were pawnbrokers, donated nearly eight hundred taels of silver to the renovation to this guildhall (Yan 2007a: 17). These four methods indicate the unclear boundary between a Shanxi merchant guildhall and a temple, and Shanxi merchants' close association with officials, both of which ensured that bangzi performances reached a wider audience, as we shall see in Chapters Two and Three.

As Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants frequently cooperated in trade because of the provinces' adjacent locations, shared main trade routes to other regions, similarities in customs, and emotional connections through marriages, many of these guildhalls were jointly established by Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants, hence 'Shan-Shaan Guildhall'. Some merchants from Gansu province also joined the alliance as evident in the Shan-Shaan-Gan 山陝甘 (Shanxi, Shaanxi and Gansu) Guildhall of Kaifeng 開封 in Henan.

The geographical distribution of the guildhalls was consistent with the distribution of regional markets dominated by Shanxi merchants. As Shanxi merchants focused on trade in the north, around seventy-three percent of Shanxi merchant guildhalls were located in northern China, as recorded in *Shanxi Merchants' Guildhalls (Jinshang huiguan 晉商會館)* (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 220–230). These guildhalls were most densely distributed in modern Henan (eighty-four), Beijing (seventy-one), Shanxi (sixty-five), Inner Mongolia (fifty-eight) and Shandong (thirty-four), where theatrical performances, especially bangzi performances, were very popular in the Qing dynasty.

The theatre stage in Shanxi merchant guildhalls

Theatrical performance was a major recreational activity during Shanxi merchants' regular meetings. Many Shanxi merchant guildhalls, especially large ones, featured one or more stages for performances. There were two stages inside each of the Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun 多倫 in modern Inner Mongolia and the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Zhoukou 周口 in Henan. The Shan-Shaan-Gan Guildhall of Kaifeng featured three stages, and the Shan-Shaan West Guildhall of Hankou 漢口 in Hubei province featured five. Most of the guildhalls and stages are unfortunately no longer extant or have left no record (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009:

220–230). According to Yan (2007a: 371–384), many Shanxi merchant guildhalls and guildhall stages were ruined or demolished, especially during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and before and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

The number of stages in a merchant guildhall mirrored the guild's financial standing because the construction of stages was very costly, and their maintenance and renovation caused extra expenditures. Take the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng for example. In 1743, Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants sojourning in Liaocheng, Shandong, purchased a piece of land for 836 taels of silver, including twenty-four taels of contract fee (Zhang et al. 2009: 342). Three years later, the merchants collected nearly 8200 taels of silver from 391 guild members (including a few individuals) for the construction of the guildhall (Zhang et al. 2009: 343–353). In 1766, 'many years having passed [since the guildhall had been established], the stage was at serious risk of collapse, and the guildhall was going to fall down' (Zhang et al. 2009: 359). Therefore, the guild members had a discussion and decided to renovate the guildhall. The guild collected around 1100 taels of silver from 140 firms, and the renovation to the stage and construction of a new opera watching tower (*kanlou* 看樓) cost around one thousand taels (Zhang et al. 2009: 359–363). In eighteenth-century Shandong, one thousand taels of silver were certainly not a small amount. It was roughly equivalent to what a skilled labourer would have earned working every day for forty-five years.¹⁴ The Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng only had one stage. The cost of construction and repairs would surely have been much higher for guildhalls with more than one stages such as the Shan-Shaan West Guildhall of Hankou.

Perhaps due to cost, not every stage was built during the construction of the guildhall. Some stages were added to the building complex long after. For instance, the Shan-Shaan Guildhall

¹⁴ The numbers are calculated based on the 'nominal wages of workers in public construction, 1769–95' (Allen et al. 2011: 12).

of Zhoukou was first established in 1693, while its stage was added in 1837 (Yan 2007a: 163, 166). It was not compulsory to build a stage inside a merchant guildhall. For merchant guilds without a guildhall or a stage, entertaining fellow traders at temple theatres and restaurants or renting other merchant guildhalls could be a solution. For instance, before their guildhall had been built, the members of the Herbal Medicine Guild in Beijing invited theatre performers to perform at temples for worshipping Herbal King (Yaowang 藥王) (Li 1980: 92). Similarly, during the Jiaqing period, the guild regulations introduced by the Cotton Fluffing Guild of Yucheng 渝城 (modern Chongqing 重慶) indicated that all guild members would gather at the City God Temple (Chenghuang miao 城隍廟) for theatrical performance every year (Peng 1995: 543). After the guildhall had been built, the Herbal Medicine Guild lent their stage to fellow traders in the same industry for free (Li 1980: 94). Also, when there was a need for theatrical performances, the guild of sugared-cake (*tangbing* 糖餅) merchants in Beijing rented the stage in the Zheci 浙慈 Guildhall founded by clothing merchants from Cixi 慈溪 county, Zhejiang province. As such practices seem to have been common, it is very likely that Shanxi merchants who did not have guildhalls made similar arrangements.

Theatrical performance and guild management

Shanxi merchants gathered frequently, and Shanxi merchant guilds organised theatrical performances during guild meetings. The business of businessmen is business. The merchants did not sponsor theatrical performance for nothing. In fact, theatrical performance was strongly related to the day-to-day operation of Shanxi merchant guilds. Theatrical performance during their guild gatherings was not only a form of entertainment but also a tool for disciplining guild

members. This section discusses in detail how theatrical performance worked to achieve this goal.

1. Theatrical performance as a sacrificial offering

To start with, as mentioned earlier, one of the primary reasons for establishing merchant guildhalls and holding guild meetings was to worship patron gods who ensured the fellow traders' safety and the prosperity of their businesses. Theatrical performance was usually embedded in religious ceremonies during Shanxi merchants' annual guild meetings to entertain patron god(s) of the guilds and guild members.

The stele inscriptions (Quoted in Li 1980: 46, 50, 60) by the Tobacco Guild of Beijing describe the establishment of the guildhall and the purpose of guild members' gatherings:

Our merchants' safety and business rely on the gods' protection. Beginning today, anyone who runs shops and resides in the capital will have a place to gather; anyone who engages in trade and comes back will have a place to live. On the gods' birthdays, we celebrate here. During the Spring Festival, we assemble with joy here ... Merchants who would like to build close relationships with each other organise gatherings here.

The guildhall within the Zhangyi 彰儀 Gate in Beijing is the place where the Tobacco Guild members worship the Perfect Sovereign of the Virtue of Fire (Huode zhenjun 火德真君), Emperor Guan and the God of Wealth (Caishen 財神).

Whenever a meeting is held, our fellow traders who live in Beijing will assemble here [that is, the guildhall]. After the ritual ceremonies, there will be a banquet.

The Pigment Guild of Beijing similarly recorded (Quoted in Li 1980: 1, 4, 7):

The main hall is the Hall of Great Emperor of Perfect Martiality (Zhenwu 真武), whereas Emperor Guan, the Dark Altar (Xuantan 玄壇) and the God of Wealth are enshrined on the left, Old Immortals Mei Fu 梅福 and Ge Hong 葛洪 on the right ... We, merchants from Shanxi who do business in Beijing, are truly blessed and under their protection.

In the ninth month of each year, theatrical performances are staged, and sacrificial offerings are provided to celebrate the birthdays of Old Immortals Mei Fu and Ge Hong.

In his research on craft, professional and merchant guilds in 1928 Beijing, irrespective of the native place of guild members, Burgess (1928: 181–182) gives a description of the ‘general form of religious ceremony’ practiced in all these types of guildhalls, ‘irrespective of the master worshipped’:

A general form of religious ceremony is practiced in all these guilds ...

When most of the members have arrived the play for the god begins. Actors, hired for the purpose, give a drama for the benefit of the guild spirit who is supposed to be witnessing the performance. Before or after the play or during intermissions between parts, announcements are made, and the business of the guild is discussed. Fines are announced and the names of offenders are read, or guildsmen who have transgressed the rules are summoned for trial in the presence of the master. Part of the program is the introduction of new members.

In some cases, a feast is given for all the members, in others, for the officers only; and in other cases, there are no feasts at the time of the annual guild meeting. Feasts also are considered an honour to the guild god.

After the worship, the play and the feast are over, it is customary for the elders or officers to carry out the ceremony known as *Sung shen* [*song shen* 送神], or the ushering out of the god.

Burgess (1928: 62) asserts that the guildhalls in question functioned ‘very much as they have functioned since ancient times’. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that Shanxi merchant guilds in Qing dynasty Beijing followed similar processes during their annual guild meetings.

These accounts suggest that the theatrical performance during guild meetings was largely to express appreciation for patron gods’ blessing on the merchants’ safety and fortune. It was a form of sacrificial offering and was, from the perspectives of the merchants, an effective way to please the gods who were believed ‘in common with their worshippers, to have passion for the drama’ (Gordon Cumming 1888: 187–188). Theatrical performance was a tool to enhance Shanxi merchants’ business as the gods who were sufficiently satisfied with the plays would properly improve the merchants’ welfare and the prosperity of their business in return.

2. *Penalty performances* (*faxi* 罰戲)

Apart from being a form of entertainment, theatrical performance during guild assemblies served as a tool for cementing group cohesion and reinforcing discipline. One specific form of discipline was to require a guild member who had violated a rule to be punished for this offense by paying for a theatrical performance. These performances were consequently known as *faxi*,

which can be translated as ‘penalty performances’, or in the verbal form ‘to be assessed a penalty performance.’ Penalty performances were a common form of punishment in the Ming and Qing dynasties in both urban and rural areas. They were taken as a method to enforce non-governmental regulations, including village rules (*xiangyue* 鄉約), lineage rules (*zugui* 族規) and community rules (*shogui* 社規), which largely kept order in these clans and social entities (Che 2009: 48). Similarly, in merchant guilds in various regions, regulations were also established, and penalty performances were usually included in guild regulations as a form of punishment for guild members’ misconduct and mistakes. Guild members who violated guild regulations were required to pay for theatrical performances, and other guild members could attend to enjoy the performances. For instance, in the Daoguang period, the regulations of the Tobacco Merchant Guild of Yucheng in Sichuan province prescribed (Quoted in Peng 1995: 551):

Guild members who sell tobacco on the streets will be regarded as disobeying the guild regulations. If this kind of behaviour is discovered, let him pay for his wrongdoings by bearing the costs for a performance and a four-table banquet.

Also, in the late Qing, the Silk Guild of Wuling 武陵 in Hunan province renewed the guild regulations (Quoted in Peng 1995: 212) and set eight terms to restore the order of the industry:

All members are expected to obey the regulation once we have declared these eight terms above. We hope that this regulation works effectively. If any member complies with the

regulation in public but opposes it in secret and his behaviour is found out, he will be punished by paying for a theatrical performance and a ten-table banquet.

How penalty performances regulated Shanxi merchant guild members was shown in many stele inscriptions as exemplified by ‘The summary of the regulations publicly discussed and accepted by fellow traders regarding the steelyard inscribed on the stele’ (*Tonghang shanggu gongyi dengcheng dinggui gaibei* 同行商賈公議戡秤定規概碑) (Quoted in Zhang et al. 2009: 340) in 1724. Composed by the Shan-Shaan Guild of Sheqi in Henan province, this has come to be known as the earliest record of penalty performances in merchant guildhalls:

Sheqi is a market town where merchants and commodities from all over the country gather to trade. Some of the store owners intend to benefit from using different steelyards instead of the standard one. This kind of behaviour is very hard to avoid. Hence, all the members of our guild and the guild leaders gathered at the Temple of Emperor Guan [alternatively known as the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi] and determined together that the standard steelyard must be fully represented as ‘sixteen *liang* 兩 for one *jin* 斤’.¹⁵ ... Harmonious relations ought to be valued by fellow traders, and the host and guests should not irritate each other. Fellow traders must not change to other steelyards in secret after this regulation is publicly discussed and accepted. Anyone who violates this agreement will be punished with payment for three theatrical performances. Anyone who refuses to do so will be sent to the local government officials for further investigation, bringing along his steelyard. In case in the future someone intends to violate the regulation, we fellow traders will report our decision to Lord Cai 蔡

¹⁵ *Liang* and *jin* are Chinese units of weight. In the Qing dynasty, one *jin* roughly equaled sixteen *liang* or zero point six kilograms.

the county magistrate and ask for a formal announcement in order to totally clear up this serious problem.

This account shows that penalty performances were in effect a warning and a way of protecting the guild members from the potentially harmful consequences of the county magistrate's decision, which would exert a negative influence on guild members' future career.

During the Daoguang period of the Qing dynasty, the Pigment Guild of Beijing introduced a new regulation to reinforce the standard price of tung oil. This description (Quoted in Peng 1995: 609–610) shows not only the function that penalty performances carried out but also the relationships between guild management, penalty performances and religious rituals:

Recently, many cunning people have appeared presenting false reports to the guild regarding the quantity of tung oil that has been sold. It seems indecent for the guild to need to investigate the issues frequently. Guild members must stick to the standard price without trying to lower it and must accurately deliver the report about the quantity of tung oil being sold to the guild. Any shameless person who disobeys the regulation, undercuts, and gives false information about the quantity of tung oil must be punished by paying for a banquet with theatrical performances in front of the gods once his behaviour has been found out by other guild members. Refusal to obey this decision is not acceptable. If anyone refuses to comply, or quibbles and denies, the guild will make an objective judgement. If one has no conscience about violating the rule and the shameless behaviour cannot be found out, then the gods will scrutinise his behaviour and will not protect him.

As the theatrical performance would be staged in front of the patron gods of the guild as described in this account, these gods were the most important spectators. Performances were presented as sacrificial offerings to please the irate gods, who were supposed to mete out punishment to wrongdoers. In other words, it was the fear of divine retribution rather than written terms that restricted and guided merchants' behaviours. Penalty performances in this case were a tool to reinforce the gods' power over the guild.

Another account, 'The stele inscription about the introduction of the Liyi Guild regulation' (*Lingchuan Liyi huiguan liyue beiji* 陵川禮儀會館立約碑記) (Quoted in Zhang et al. 2009: 450) dated in 1835 reads:

Apart from the rites of Spring Prayer and Autumn Repayment (*chunqi qiubao* 春祈秋報), firms located within three worship communities (*she* 社)¹⁶ are required to offer sacrifice to patron gods each month as usual. The guild, rather than any individual, will be responsible for organizing extra funding for unplanned renovation to and repairing of the guildhall, other kinds of religious ritual practices, or donation. Anyone who breaks these rules will be punished by paying for a three-day theatrical performance.

As can be seen in this account, fellow traders would be punished if they did not worship gods on time, or if they intervened in guilds' fairs without permission. Penalty performances were

¹⁶ David Johnson (2009: 1) describes *she* as a territorial unit in rural China which 'existed only to sponsor festivals and their associated rituals'. Xiaohuan Zhao (2021: 1) states that *she* may refer to 'a ritual community or a community worship association bound up with the Lord of the Soil' or Tudi shen 土地神. *She* could be formed by a single village or several villages (Johnson 2009: 1). Large villages had several *she* (Johnson 2009: 1)..

used to highlight the importance of religious belief, restrict guild members' rights and reinforce the guild's control over its members.

Penalty performances were in fact adopted by Shanxi merchant guilds as an alternative to financial penalties. Penalties were applied to deter guild members' misconduct and unethical behaviours of many kinds. For example, a fine of fifty taels of silver would be imposed on members of the Sheqi Shan-Shaan Guild who intentionally stopped passers-by in an attempt to make a sale (Zhang et al. 2009: 379). However, from a business perspective, a punishment like a financial penalty was an inferior approach to shaping guild members' behaviour as it focused on 'the introduction of an unpleasant aspect of work' (Heery and Noon 2017). It was an aversive stimulus which resulted in 'predispositions to escape or retaliate and disabling anxieties' in the long term (Skinner 1965: 183). In this regard, fines would represent a disturbance in a merchant guild and were thus unfavourable, because a harmonious relationship was highly valued by Shanxi merchants.

Understandably, penalty performances were a better solution than fines in terms of the positive effects they would bring. Penalty performances could reduce adverse emotional effects as they could bring joy to guild members. In his observation of Chinese trade associations in the late Qing, Macgowan (1886: 184) noted that it was likely that the 'blending of conviviality and punishment' was a strategy created and adopted by craftsmen and merchants in late imperial times. The practice brought about 'urbanity and harmony' (Macgowan 1886: 184). Wrongdoers could derive satisfaction during the performance because they as the hosts were treated with 'decorous politeness' by spectators (Macgowan 1886: 184). Scholars in modern times hold similar opinions. In his study on penalty performance, Che Wenming (2009: 55) suggests that penalty performances were 'more acceptable to the one being punished' than strict enforcement of regulations and that the performances provided a friendly atmosphere for guild members.

Also, in her research on theatrical performance during banquets in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Li Jing (2011: 146–148) points out that theatrical performances during guild members' assemblies emphasised harmony and kindness, and could serve as a buffer against punishment and unpleasant business disputes.

Some other means of punishment that were adopted by Shanxi merchant guilds included forbidding a member from opening his firm (Zhang et al. 2009: 380), a payment for bricks (Zhang et al. 2009: 450) and a payment for firecrackers (Zhang et al. 2009: 451). None of these could lighten the atmosphere at a guild members' meeting, or enhance the solidarity of a guild, in the way that penalty performances did.

Despite this, evidence suggests that the efficacy of penalty performances depended on the financial power of guild members. Managers of small firms might be more likely than those of large firms to try to avoid such a punishment because it was comparatively costly for them to pay for theatrical performances. Based on the analysis of literati jottings, novels and stele inscriptions in the Ming and Qing periods, Cheng Lujie (2017: 16–17) notes that from the Kangxi period to the Qianlong period, in both urban and rural areas the approximate price of a theatrical performance gradually increased and ranged from six to twenty taels of silver. Some terms in guild regulations required guild members to pay for both performances and banquets. The cost of penalty performances and a banquet was a big burden for small firms considering their relatively low revenue.

The annual revenue of firms can be calculated based on *lijin*, a 'self-imposed tax on commodities sold by the members' (Macgowan 1886: 63). Take the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng for example. The 'Shan-Shaan guildhall stele inscription regarding the collection of *lijin*' (*Shan-Shaan huiguan jiebo litou beiji* 山陝會館接撥釐頭碑記) records the amount of *lijin* collected from all guild members from 1811 to 1815. The rate of *lijin* equalled to zero

point one percent of the total value of commodities sold by the members each year (Zhang 2009: 424). During the five-year period, a firm named Gongxinfeng 公信鳳 contributed around 430 taels of silver in total (Zhang 2009: 424), or around eighty-six taels per annum on average. Therefore, the average total value of commodities that Gongxinfeng sold each year was roughly worth 86,000 taels of silver. However, Yongxing 永興 Leather Goods Store only contributed around one tael of silver in total (Zhang 2009: 434), around zero point two taels per annum on average. Hence, its average annual revenue was only 220 taels. Assuming that the price of a performance, including all kinds of extra expenditures, was twenty taels of silver,¹⁷ and Gongxinfeng and the Yongxing Leather Goods Store were both punished by penalty performances because their firm managers infringed the guild regulation, then the manager of Yongxing Leather Goods Store had to pay around nine percent of their annual revenue for the performances, while the manager of Gongxinfeng only had to pay around zero point zero two percent. That is to say, smaller firms might find penalty performances a harsh punishment due to their proportionately high cost, but to stores with a much better financial standing, the cost of penalty performances was insignificant. As a result, it is possible that the managers of small stores tended to obey the guild regulations in order to avoid the financial loss resulting from penalty performances, while the managers of large stores took penalty

¹⁷ As Cheng (2007: 18) believes that from the early to the mid-Qing dynasty, the price level of theatrical performance was similar in urban and rural areas, the assumption about this price is made according to the theatrical performance staged in the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue miao 東岳廟) at Dongshen 東神 Hill in Puxian 蒲縣 county of Shanxi. In 1752, the local residents near Dongshen Hill paid more than twenty taels of silver for a theatrical performance staged in the Temple of the Eastern Peak to worship the god. The cost of the performance included the payment to theatre troupes, the labour cost of carrying prop boxes and the payment for sacrificial offerings (Cao 2012: 70). If theatrical performances were required to be presented in front of a shrine in a merchant guildhall, then perhaps the cost of penalty performances would also include the labour cost and the payment for sacrificial offerings.

performances less seriously. The efficacy of penalty performances in this case was thus doubtful.

One question that arises here is whether merchant guilds could effectively keep powerful merchants from disobeying the guilds' regulations. Considering that merchant guild leaders and local gentry in villages carried out similar responsibilities, evidence about the gentry's influence on the order of local communities provides some hints. In the Temple of King Yu (Yuwang miao 禹王廟) of Qingbei 青北 village in Pingshun 平順 county of Shanxi, a stele inscription (Quoted in Feng 2002: 448) dated 1803 regarding the prohibition of gambling describes:

Gambling became increasingly rampant ... We villagers gathered and decided to prohibit it ... In case of disobedience, [we or this inscription stipulate that] a villager who harbours a gambler and the gambler himself will be punished by paying for a three-day theatrical performance. The leader of the *she*¹⁸ for that year will be responsible for signing a contract with a theatrical troupe; the gambler and the one who harboured him will pay the price. If the leader(s) of the *she* ever gamble, their penalty will be doubled.

This inscription shows that in the Qing dynasty, people had already realised that the leader of a community or an association tended to disobey regulations, and that they had already developed a solution in this regard. On this account, however, Feng Junjie (2002: 449) notes that 'it was unavoidable that the leader(s) of the *she* deliberately chose the theatre troupes who asked for a higher price to perform'. Also, as stated in *China's Gentry* (Fei 1953: 11, 17, 32),

¹⁸ For the explanation of *she*, see footnote 16.

villagers had little control over local issues, while the gentry, ‘a class of persons with a definite position and definite functions in the traditional society of China’ that included ‘returned officials or the relatives of officials or simply educated landowners’, whose economic power was much higher, had a great influence on decision making. The statement points to the possibility that large firms could take advantage of their standing in a merchant guild and that they might also have control over the guild’s regulations as the management of a merchant guild resembled that of a village.

Golas (1977: 576) believes that powerful members in merchant guilds might not ‘promote their own interest at the expense of other members’ and guild regulations were set to promote ‘the general good of all the guildsmen’. However, Burgess’s (1928: 130–131) survey of Beijing merchant and craftsmen guilds shows that although the majority of guildsmen could obtain considerable economic benefits, only few members emphasised ‘the privilege of participation in the control of the guild’. Therefore, it was very likely that only the dominant members, usually the financially dominant ones, had total control over guild regulations. If this was the case, then whether penalty performances would be used and the way in which they would be used to regulate guild members would depend on the guild leaders’ will.

Despite these controversies, evidently, two former artists (maybe performers) recalled the activities in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Zhoukou in the Republican era, stating that ‘anyone who disobeyed the guild regulations had to take out money from their own pockets to pay for the banquets for guildsmen to settle the matter. So, no one dared to disobey the guild regulations’ (Yan 2007a: 198–199). That is to say, penalty performances worked effectively as a way of punishment in at least some Shanxi merchant guildhalls.

3. *Theatrical performance as a tool for education*

While penalty performances were used to discipline guild members, the content of plays shaped guild members' behaviour through moral lessons about Confucian virtues. Performers were regarded as a very inferior social stratum in imperial China and were considered a 'negatively privileged', 'impure' group of people (Marsh 1961: 58). Interestingly, in imperial China, theatrical performance had long been considered an important means through which to promote moral values. The underlying reason behind this didactic function of theatrical performance was that the majority of the population were poorly educated and did not study Confucian moral values via formal schooling as literati elites did.

In her research on popular literacy in Qing China, Evelyn Rawski (1979: 1) states that full literacy 'was attained only after long study of Confucian classics, and the large corpus of commentaries, histories, and literary materials handed down from previous centuries'. 'Those who were educated were by definition educated in the orthodox classical curriculum, largely the monopoly of a small group of males who competed for examination degrees' (Rawski 1979: 1), that is, the literati elites. In his research on traditional Chinese society, Hsiao-Tung Fei (1953: 61) classifies knowledge into two types, namely, 'understanding of the physical world' and understanding of moral norms. According to him (Fei 1953: 60–61), literati or *shidafu* 士大夫 were the men who possessed or were trained to possess the knowledge of morality and were expected to act upon the norms. This kind of knowledge differentiated them from those who had knowledge of the natural world and production and affirmed their domination of society (Fei 1953: 64). The ones who possessed the knowledge of production, such as farmers, craftsmen and merchants, as opposed to the literati, were the ones to be ruled (Fei 1953: 61–65). Notably, next to scholars, merchants were the most well-educated class (Yu 2018: 122). Because merchants' 'profession required a certain degree of literacy', a merchant 'was more

likely than the peasant or artisan to pursue basic studies, if he had social ambition' (Ho 1980: 78). Wealthy merchants were more literate than less powerful merchants (Rawski 1979: 9–10). Less powerful merchants were 'at least functionally literate' because responsibilities such as bookkeeping and writing contracts constituted part of their occupation (Rawski 1979: 9–10). Despite this, merchants without formal schooling were still to be educated and ruled.

Theatrical performance was the most popular form of mass entertainment and spectators were usually actively engaged in and touched by the plots of plays. In the late imperial era, the ruling class made use of plays which touched upon Confucian moral values to indoctrinate the masses, thereby serving to maintain the social order and the dominant position of literati elites (Yang 2012: 74; Chen 2008: 84–85). In the Qing dynasty, the imperial court imposed repeated prohibitions on erotic plays and those which were contrary to orthodox ideology or the ruling class's interests.¹⁹ The imperial court's intention in prohibiting these plays clearly reflected the function that theatrical performance carried out in indoctrinating the masses.

Even some literati elites themselves watched theatrical performances for enlightenment. In a story in *A Sequel to the Talks about the Wandering Life* (*Langji xutan* 6.4210–4211), famous Qing scholar-official Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅 (1775–1845) writes:

When Gong Haifeng 龔海峰, a scholar-official from the same native place as I am, was in post in Pingliang 平涼 prefecture [in modern Gansu], his four sons all followed him and studied at the study room inside the local government office. One day, Gong prepared music and wines to entertain a guest in the study room. The four sons were all excited and wanted to watch theatrical performances. Gong preached at them: 'Which one is better, studying or

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of banned plays in the Qing dynasty, see Ding 2010.

watching performances?’ His youngest son ... now a Grand Coordinator (*guan* 觀察), then answered: ‘Watching performances is better’. Gong got angry and asked him to leave. His eldest son ... now a Vice Prefect (*juncheng* 郡丞),²⁰ answered: ‘Of course studying is better’. Gong smiled and said: ‘This is cliché. No one does not know it.’ His second son ... now a nominating civil officer (*xiaolian* 孝廉), answered: ‘We must study and also must watch performances’. Gong said: ‘This is a statement to mediate between their answers. Your answer is just like the kind of person you are’. His third son Xiaofeng 小峰, now a County Magistrate (*yihou* 邑侯), answered: ‘Studying is watching performances. Watching performances is studying’. Gong stroked his beard and laughed: ‘You get the point’.

Evidence of the educational function of theatrical performance is also found in Shanxi merchant guildhalls. For example, the stage inside the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi was named ‘Xuanjian lou’ 懸鑒樓, meaning literally ‘the building with a mirror hung high above’, indicating a claim that the performances staged therein reflected reality. Also, part of an antithetical couplet carved on the pillars of the stage inside the Luze 路澤 Guildhall of Luoyang in Henan province reads: ‘The man is a mirror, and so is the past; go and watch the man and the past’ (Yan 2007a: 115). The ‘mirror’ here is also a metaphor for ‘reflection’, indicating that performances ‘take good and evil deeds in the past as examples to admonish people of the present’ (*Qilu deng* 71.395). Prominent Ming philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) stated that ‘stories [plays] about loyal ministers and filial sons educate the benighted people’ (*Wang Wencheng quanshu* 3.40.101). ‘People are unaware [of the

²⁰ *Juncheng* was an unofficial designation for *tongzhi* 同知.

inculcation], but they accept the characters' conscience. This is beneficial for society' (*Wang Wencheng quanshu* 3.40.101).

Shanxi merchants were interested in theatrical performances about historical stories, stories of legendary heroes, stories about merchants' lives, erotic plays and folklore (Liu 2015: 190). However, on formal occasions, such as the guild assemblies for worshipping Emperor Guan in the Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun in modern Inner Mongolia, erotic plays were not allowed, and nor were performers permitted to display indecent behaviours (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 93). Shanxi merchants conformed to these conventions to ensure that the performances during guild gatherings were not blasphemous. These conventions also ensured that the messages that the guild members received from the performances were in line with Confucian virtues and that they adhered to these virtues when doing business. After all, whether merchants acted morally in business was closely connected with their income.

In late imperial times, merchants' codes of conduct were expected to be consistent with the requirements of Confucian virtues. Merchants sought to study Confucianism because they expected that the appearance of knowing Confucian moral values could promote their business (Yu 2018: 126). In his discussion of how Confucian morality was incorporated into merchants' codes of conduct in the late Ming, Brook (1999: 216) notes that a 'stable, long-term profit requires honesty, not deceit'. 'Diligence and modesty', the Confucian virtues emphasised by Civil Service Examination candidates, were applicable in the commercial world (Brook 1999: 216). 'The immoral businessman who sinks to corrupt schemes will ultimately fail in his enterprise' (Brook 1999: 216). Guo Qitao (2005: 57) states that the business ethics of Huizhou merchants—the counterpart of Shanxi merchants—included 'conventional commercial lore with a fundamentally Confucian orientation, incorporating such cardinal Confucian ethics as righteousness, honesty, and trustworthiness'. Only when making money in a 'Confucian grand

way' could they generate long-term profits (Guo Qitao 2005: 193–194). Similarly, Shanxi merchants' moral standard in the business world was that being honest and righteous was a prerequisite for making profits (Zhang and Zhang 2010: 151). Confucian moral values also frequently appeared in merchant manuals written for neophytes in trade, and Confucian teaching formed an important part of apprentices' training programs (Lufrano 1997: 51–67).

The performances that were staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls acted as a tool for teaching guild members right from wrong as well as preaching morality. Characters in the performances, such as loyal officials and heroes, acted as their 'tutor'. The way in which Shanxi merchant guild members received moral lessons when watching performances in guildhalls is stated in the stele inscription of 'Shan-Shaan guildhall stele inscription regarding the reconstruction of the stage, mountain gate and bell and drum pavilions' (*Chongxiu Shan-Shaan huiguan xitai shanmen zhongguting ji* 重修山陝會館戲台山門鐘鼓亭記) (Quoted in Zhang et al. 2009: 476) found in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng:

There is a Shan-Shaan guildhall in the southeast of Liaocheng ... In the year of Gengzi 庚子 [1840] during the Daoguang period, when I served as the County Magistrate of Chiping 茌平 [now part of Liaocheng city in Shandong] I visited the guildhall, and it was still in good condition. In the following year, the year of Xinchou 辛丑 (1841), when I was handing over a legal case in Chiping, I travelled from Yingling 營陵 to Liaocheng again and visited the guildhall only to find out the buildings in front of the main-hall burned to ashes. I could not bear to see the ruins. I asked about the cause; someone in the guild said: 'Early in the first month of this year, theatrical performances were staged here. Due to inattention, the players allowed a fire to start in the guildhall. The fire swept through the stage and the bell and drum towers.' Ah! Years of efforts were ruined within one day ... I, a poor Shaanxi native, was

too poor to make any donation. Lingering and looking at the ruins, I felt so ashamed of myself. This spring I was appointed to the magistracy of this county. Immediately after getting off my chariot, I kowtowed to Emperor Guan to worship him on behalf of the local residents, not just on behalf of Shan-Shaan natives. After kowtowing, I went downstairs with the guild manager and inspected the stage [which has been renovated] ... The stage and the bell and drum pavilions were more magnificent than they used to be. The merchants asked me to write something [to record the renovation to the guildhall]. I said: ‘Stages become famous for theatrical performances. What is presented onstage appears flippant, but it is all based on true stories about loyalty, filial piety, integrity and righteousness. Performances are staged at places accessible to hundreds and thousands of people. The benighted men and women watch the performances and are touched by the performances. Even if no one has supervised and taught them right from wrong, these benighted people can suddenly realise their mistakes and then correct them’.

Although the account does not mention the names of the plays, the official who composed this inscription was glad to see that the performances staged in this guildhall were about the core values of Confucianism, including loyalty (*zhong* 忠), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), integrity (*jie* 節) and righteousness (*yi* 義), and that the ‘benighted’ people could be influenced by the stories while watching the performances. It is unknown as to on what occasion the stage caught fire, despite the information that it happened in the first month of the lunar year. The performances could have been either during an annual meeting or at a temple fair during the Spring Festival. Nor did Li clarify whether the merchants were also considered ‘benighted’. However, as sojourning merchants lived and worked at this guildhall, they certainly constituted part of the spectators who were to be educated via theatrical performance.

It is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of the attempted indoctrination via watching performances, given that inculcation is a long-lasting process and that no historical account keeps track of the changes in guild members' behaviour over time. However, it is reasonable to infer that performances about loyalty, filial piety, integrity and righteousness contributed to guild members' moral codes when addressing business issues.

Guildhalls and the spread of Shanxi regional theatre

As discussed above, theatrical performance was of great importance to Shanxi merchant guilds and so Shanxi merchants frequently invited theatre troupes to perform during their guild meetings. This section shows that owing to the demand for theatrical performance and the high frequency of staging, a reciprocal relationship was established between Shanxi merchants' guildhalls and the development and spread of theatrical performance.

Itinerant troupes, one of the major contributors to the spread of various forms of regional theatre in the Qing dynasty, usually travelled along trade routes (Mackerras 1983: 98). The majority of theatre troupes that performed in Shanxi merchant guildhalls were of this kind. 'Trade routes were theatre routes' (*shanglu ji xilu* 商路即戲路)—this old saying circulating in Shanxi province reveals that Shanxi merchants' trade was the impetus behind the spread of Shanxi regional theatre. As sojourning Shanxi merchants were particularly passionate about Shanxi bangzi, they frequently invited Shanxi bangzi troupes to perform at their guildhalls in towns and cities, thus facilitating the spread of Shanxi bangzi outside Shanxi. The spread of Shanxi bangzi also nurtured new xiqu styles where the merchants sojourned. In addition, Shanxi merchant guilds provided venues for troupes specialising in other xiqu styles, providing a platform for the communication between various xiqu styles.

The table below lists several Shanxi merchant guildhalls and scattered evidence about theatre troupes once performed in these guildhalls.

Table 1 Well-documented names of theatre troupes that performed in Shanxi merchant guildhalls in the Qing dynasty and their xiqu styles

Guildhall	Date/Year	Name of troupe(s)	Xiqu styles	Source
Northern China				
The Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng in Shandong province ²¹	The Daoguang period	Shuangkui Association (Shuangkui she 雙魁社), Fusheng 復盛 Association (Fusheng she 復盛社) and Deyi Association (Deyi she 德義社) from Shanxi province		Li 2009b: 91

²¹ The information regarding the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng in Table 1 does not mention xiqu styles. The xiqu styles of the performances by the Four-Joy Troupe in 1852, the Troupe of Perfect Prosperity in 1873, and the Troupe of Perfect Prosperity in 1878 are deductions from historical materials, as will be discussed later in this section.

	1845	The Troupe of Triple Celebration (Sanqing ban 三慶班) and the Four-Joy Troupe (Sixi ban 四喜班) ²²		Li 2009b: 92; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a, 32
	1846	Deyi 德義 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33
	1848	Fusheng 復盛 Big Troupe		Li 2009b: 91
	1852	the Four-Joy Troupe from Qiuxian 邱縣 county in Hebei province	Hebei bangzi	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33
	1853	Hongqing 鴻慶 Troupe		Li 2009b: 91
	1853	Liansheng 連升 Troupe, one of the private troupes of the Kong 孔		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33

²² It is unclear whether the Troupe of Triple Celebration and the Four-Joy Troupe mentioned in writings on the walls of the Liaocheng Shan-Shaan Guildhall were the two reputable Anhui troupes of the same names from the south which were invited to perform in Beijing to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Emperor Qianlong. The Troupe of Triple Celebration from Anhui travelled to Beijing in 1790 and disbanded in 1889 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1999: 816). The Four-Joy Troupe from Anhui travelled to Beijing shortly after the arrival of the Troupe of Triple Celebration (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1999: 816). It disbanded in the mid-Guangxu period (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1999: 816).

		family in Qufu 曲阜 in Shandong province		
	1854	Wanqing 萬慶 Troupe from Dongchang 東昌 prefecture in Shandong province		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33; Li 2009b: 91
	1855	Defeng 德鳳 Troupe from Dongchang		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33, 664
	1856	Shengfeng 盛鳳 Troupe		Li 2009b: 91
	1857	The Four-Joy Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33
	1860	Taihe 泰和 Troupe and the Troupe of Triple Celebration		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 665; Li 2009b: 91

	1860	The Troupe of Triple Celebration		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33
	186?	Three local troupes		Li 2009b: 91
	1862	Wanqing Troupe from Dongchang		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33, 665; Li 2009b: 91
	1864	The Troupe of United Celebration (Tongqing ban 同慶班) from Anhui province		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 33; Li 2009b: 91
	1867	Spring-Stage Troupe (Chuntai 春台班)		Li 2009b: 91

	1871	Wanqing Troupe from Dongchang		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 34, 665
	1872	Wanxing 萬興 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 665
	1872	The Troupe of Perfect Prosperity (Quansheng ban 全盛班) from Taiyuan prefecture		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 665
	1873	The Troupe of Perfect Prosperity from Fengtai 鳳台 county in Zezhou 澤州 prefecture in southern Shanxi (modern Jincheng 晉城) ²³	Shangdang bangzi	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 34

²³ Li Quan (2009b: 91) believes that this troupe performed in 1882.

	1878	The Troupe of Perfect Prosperity from Taiyuan prefecture	Zhonglu bangzi	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 34, 665
	1879	Fushun 福順 Troupe		Li 2009b: 91
	1879	Sansheng 三盛 Troupe		Li 2009b: 91
	1882	Xishou 喜壽 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 34; Li 2009b: 91
	1884	Sisheng 四盛 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 35
	1885	Shansheng 山盛 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 35, 665

	1886	Shuangqing 雙慶 Troupe and Fuxi 福喜 Troupe		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 665
	1888	Wanqing Troupe from Chiping county in Shandong		<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994a: 665
The Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun	Qing dynasty	Troupes from Zhangjiakou	Zhonglu bangzi	Zhang and Zhang 2014: 92–94
The Taifeng 太汾 Guildhall of Yinchuan 銀川 in Ningxia province	Guangxu period	Itinerant troupe	Shanxi bangzi (e.g., Puzhou bangzi)	Che 2016: 653
The Pingyang Guildhall of Beijing	Late Qing dynasty	Guo Baochen 郭寶臣	Puzhou bangzi	Yan 2007a: 39
The Shanxi Guildhall of Yuxian 禹縣 in Henan	Qing dynasty	Unknown	Shanxi regional theatre	Yang 1992: 221-22

Eastern China				
The Shanxi Guildhall of Xuzhou 徐州 (in modern Jiangsu province)	From the Qing dynasty to the Republic of China		Shanxi bangzi, Qinqiang, Jingju and other local troupes	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1992a: 763; Yan 2007a: 276
North-eastern China				
The Shanxi Guildhall of Haicheng 海城 in Liaoning	From the Qianlong period onwards		Shanxi bangzi, Qinqiang, Hebei bangzi, Kunqu, etc	Yan 2007a: 334
Southern China				
The Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Hankou in modern Hubei province	Guangxu period		Bangzi troupes from Shanxi and Shaanxi	Bangzi Liu 2015: 163

As shown in Table 1, most of the records are of Shanxi merchant guildhalls in northern China, where Shanxi merchants were most active. In Duolun, which was a significant market town located at the northern frontier region of the Qing empire, sojourning Shanxi merchants dominated the trade with the Mongols (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 93). In 1745, Shanxi merchants established the Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 220). The guild members worshipped Emperor Guan in the fifth lunar month every year, held great celebrations and invited Shanxi bangzi troupes to put on shows for twenty-four days (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 93). The guildhall featured two stages. Conventionally, in the early morning, the troupe performed for the guild leaders on the small stage inside the middle yard (*zhongyuan* 中院) of the guildhall (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 94). At midday and in the evening, the performances were on the larger stage, and all local residents in the town could appreciate the performances for free (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 94). Once, a Shanxi bangzi troupe that had achieved fame in Zhangjiakou was invited to perform at the guildhall (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 93). The remuneration was six thousand taels of silver: a huge amount of money which could cover the troupe's operating costs for half a year (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 93).

Zhangjiakou is located around 250 kilometres southwest of Duolun and two hundred kilometres northwest of Beijing. It was another market town where Shanxi bangzi prevailed. Theatre lover Wu Runqing 吳潤青, son of the Prefect of Xuanhua 宣化 prefecture (in modern Zhangjiakou) in the mid-Guangxu period, wrote about the relationship between the prosperity of Shanxi bangzi and Shanxi merchants' business in Zhangjiakou (*Saibei xiju yiwen*, quoted in Zhang 2006: 130).

The most prosperous businesses [in Zhangjiakou] were tea firms, draft banks and money shops (*qianhang* 錢行) owned by Shanxi merchants. Therefore, Shanxi merchants were the most powerful merchants in Zhangjiakou. So, performances in the locality were mainly Shanxi bangzi, and local bangzi took the second place. There was no pihuang.

During the Qianlong period, Shanxi merchants sojourning in Zhangjiakou established a theatre garden inside the Shanxi Guildhall of Zhangjiakou. This theatre garden, named the Theatre Garden of Great Prosperity (Daxingyuan 大興園, also known as Huifangyuan 會芳園 or the Theatre Garden for Meeting Beauties), was the oldest theatre garden in the town (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1993: 525). This theatre garden was used as a venue for discussing business issues and entertaining guests (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1993: 525). The theatre garden also maintained a theatrical troupe, which bore its name. The majority of the theatre performers in the troupe sang in Shan-Shaan bangzi, while some others specialised in a local form of bangzi called *kou bangzi* 口梆子 (Sun et al. 2015: 18), meaning ‘the form of bangzi in Zhangjiakou’. From the 1860s to the end of the Qing dynasty, theatrical performances staged in this theatre garden were mainly bangzi plays in different forms, especially zhonglu bangzi and beilu bangzi (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1993: 525).

In the Qing dynasty, in hope of gaining fame, many Shanxi theatre performers travelled from their hometown to perform for Shanxi merchants who resided in Duolun and Zhangjiakou. Some of them also frequently travelled between these two towns to put on shows. Being one of the most important theatre gardens in Zhangjiakou during the late Qing, the Theatre Garden of Great Prosperity witnessed many bangzi performers’ rise to fame. For example, in 1890, Liu Derong 劉德榮, a beilu bangzi performer from Xinzhou 忻州 prefecture in northern Shanxi, was introduced to Zhangjiakou and joined the troupe maintained by the Theatre Garden of

Great Prosperity (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 71). Liu became locally popular immediately after his debut at the theatre garden (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 68–71). In 1891, during a temple fair, the Troupe of the Theatre Garden of Prosperity competed with the troupe kept by another theatre garden (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 71). Liu Derong won considerable fame by virtue of his professional skills in the competition (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 71). The next year, Liu Derong followed the Troupe of the Theatre Garden of Prosperity to perform and provide training to amateur performers in Duolun (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 71–72). Through Shanxi merchants' trade routes, bangzi performers like Liu Derong not only brought Shanxi bangzi out of Shanxi but also improved the acting skills of Shanxi bangzi performers in different market towns.

Local Shanxi bangzi troupes also travelled to other market towns and cities in northern China to perform for Shanxi merchants in their guildhalls. For instance, Liaocheng in southwestern Shandong province was a thriving city located around five hundred kilometres south of Beijing. In the Qing dynasty, 'It was densely populated. Literati and merchants gathered in the city like clouds' (Quoted in Zhang et al. 2009: 400). The city was located near the Grand Canal that connected Beijing and Hangzhou. 'Merchant ships from the south came and went endlessly' (Quoted in Zhang et al. 2009: 525). In 1746, Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants jointly established the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng. The information regarding the troupes that played in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng in Table 1 was gathered from the writings on the walls in the guildhall by itinerant theatre performers. Li Quan's (2009b: 95) study on these writings reveals that the majority of plays that they performed were about outstanding military generals and officials, fights against evil people, and stories that eulogised righteousness, kindness, honesty and selflessness. In short, the content of the plays was largely in conformity with the purpose of preaching Confucian moral values as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Although the writings on the walls do not reveal the theatrical styles that the performers specialised in, the names of the plays and the native places of the troupes provide some clues. In 1872 and 1878, the Troupe of Perfect Prosperity (Quansheng ban 全盛班) was invited to perform at the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng, and among the plays they performed were *Zhan huangpao* 斬黃袍 (Behead the Yellow Robe) and *Er Jingong* 二進宮 (Entering the Imperial Palace Again) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 34, 665). Notably, this troupe was from Taiyuan, where the dominant xiqu style was zhonglu bangzi (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 74). So, it is very likely that the Troupe of Perfect Prosperity was a zhonglu bangzi troupe and the plays they performed at the guildhall were most probably zhonglu bangzi plays.

In 1873, a troupe from Zezhou 澤州 prefecture in southern Shanxi, also named the Troupe of Perfect Prosperity, performed in this guildhall (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 34). According to the inscriptions on the wall, the plays that the troupe performed included bangzi plays such as *Qingguan ce* 清官冊 (The Book of an Upright Official) and pihuang plays such as *Tan Huangling* 探皇陵 (Visiting the Imperial Tomb) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 34). The troupe was highly likely to be a Shangdang bangzi troupe for several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, Shangdang bangzi consists of five melodic styles, including bangzi and pihuang. Thus, Shangdang bangzi performers could perform both bangzi and pihuang plays. Pihuang and bangzi also constituted part of the melodic style of other xiqu styles such as Cantonese opera and Chuanju (Sichuan opera), a compound xiqu style that emerged in Sichuan province in the late Qing (Liao 2012b: 228, 232). But these xiqu styles did not prevail in Shandong province. Besides, this Troupe of Perfect Prosperity was from Zezhou prefecture in southern Shanxi, the heartland of Shangdang bangzi. Last but not least, according to *Records of Chinese Theatre* (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 96), as early as around 1810, it was the sojourning Shanxi pawnbrokers who first introduced Shangdang bangzi to Shandong province. Thus, it is

reasonable to believe that Shanxi merchants sojourning in Shandong invited Shangdang bangzi troupes to perform for them from time to time. The Shan-Shaan guildhall of Liaocheng, the largest assembling place in Shandong for stagestruck Shanxi merchants, was an ideal destination for itinerant Shangdang bangzi troupes.

The penetration of Shangdang bangzi into Shandong province owing to Shanxi merchants' support also facilitated the emergence of a local bangzi style—*zaobang* 棗梆 (lit. 'date clapper opera'). Around 1875, a Shangdang bangzi troupe named the Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings (Shiwan ban 十萬班) travelled from Shanxi to Shandong province (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 34). It itinerated and performed in southwestern Shandong for around one year (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 96). Soon after the Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings left, Shangdang bangzi performer Pan Zhaoxu 潘朝緒 started to recruit students from this region and formed the Troupe of Righteousness and Prosperity (Yisheng ban 義盛班), signalling the emergence of *zaobang*, which suited the taste of local people and adopted Shandong local dialect (Liao 2012b: 216).

As Shanxi merchants' business spread across China, the influence of Shanxi bangzi extended beyond the northern regions. In eastern China, around the mid-Ming, sojourning Shanxi merchants had already established a Shrine to Saint Guan (Guansheng ci 關聖祠) (that is, a Temple of Emperor Guan) in Xuzhou 徐州 of northern Jiangsu province (Yan 2007a: 273–274). In 1742, Shanxi merchants funded the reconstruction of the temple and expanded it into the Shanxi Guildhall of Xuzhou (Yan 2007a: 273). Shanxi bangzi, Qinqiang, pihuang and Xuzhou local troupes all performed in this guildhall (Yan 2007a: 276). As the performances in the Shanxi Guildhall of Xuzhou were open to the public (Yan 2007a: 276), local people must have been aware of Shanxi bangzi and perhaps appreciated Shanxi bangzi plays from time to time.

The establishment of Shanxi merchant guildhalls in Jiangsu and Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of Shan-Shaan bangzi therein were two of the direct reasons for the emergence of Jiangsu bangzi. 'During the mid-Ming dynasty, Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants were found all over Xuzhou ... In the late Ming and the early Qing dynasty, when Shan-Shaan bangzi first appeared, it quickly spread to Henan, Shandong, and Fengxian 豐縣 county and Peixian 沛縣 county [of Jiangsu] which were contiguous with Shandong, and then was popularised in the Xuzhou region' (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1992a: 141).

Also, in southern China, in the Guangxu period, Shanxi bankers sojourning in Shanghai established the Guildhall of the Draft Bank Industry (Huiye gongsuo 匯業公所). 'To meet Shanxi merchants' needs for appreciating theatrical performance from their native place', a theatre garden named Sweet Osmanthus Teahouse (Dangui chayuan 丹桂茶園) was set up in the same street, and 'bangzi troupes performed there all year round' (Liu 2015: 162). Although this theatre garden was not established by the Guild of the Draft Bank Industry, the performances staged therein catered to the tastes of the guild members. In late Qing Shanghai, in some ways these bankers' strong preference for bangzi over other xiqu styles evoked theatregoers' fervour for bangzi performance (Liu 2015: 162).

Shanxi merchant guild members appreciated not only Shanxi bangzi but also other xiqu styles, allowing for performers from various regions to showcase their acting skills and promoting the communication between different xiqu styles. For instance, the writings on the walls of the Shan-Shaan Guild of Liaocheng show that in 1852, a troupe named the Four-Joy Troupe (Sixi ban 四喜班) based in Qiuxian county in Hebei province performed several typical bangzi plays, such as the *Chunqiu bi* 春秋筆 (*The Spring and Autumn Pen*) and the *Ming yue zhu* 明月珠 (*The Bright-Moon Pearl*) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 33, 665). Considering that the troupe was a Hebei local troupe, it is likely that the Four-Joy Troupe was a Hebei bangzi troupe.

According to Ma Longwen and Mao Dazhi (1982: 40–41), the earliest documented Hebei bangzi troupe, the Troupe of Everlasting Peace (Yonghe ban 永和班), was set up in 1852. As it took a rather long time to train young performers, the Four-Joy Troupe must have been in existence for some years before their performance at the guildhall in 1852. Thus, the Four-Joy Troupe could probably be regarded as the earliest documented Hebei bangzi troupe. Also, in 1864, an Anhui troupe, the Troupe of United Celebration (Tongqing ban 同慶班), performed three plays at the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng, namely, the *Da ci fu* 大賜福 (*Giving Great Blessing*), the *Long hu dou* 龍虎鬥 (*The Fight of Dragon and Tiger*) and the *Gan san guan* 趕三關 (*A Chase Crossing Three Mountain Passes*) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994a: 33; Li 2009b: 91). The first two were Huiju plays, while *A Chase Crossing Three Mountain Passes* might be performed in pihuang. From the 1850s to the 1870s, some local troupes based in Dongchang prefecture of Shandong also performed in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng, though it is difficult to decide whether these troupes were Hebei bangzi troupes or Shandong bangzi troupes, for both xiqu styles enjoyed popularity in Shandong during this period of time. In addition, in the late Qing, semi-professional Weixian *yangge* 蔚縣秧歌 troupes—which were formed by farmers who were also amateur performers—once performed at the Theatre Garden of the Grand Prosperity inside the Shanxi Guildhall of Zhangjiakou (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1993: 87).

This section demonstrates that in the Qing dynasty, sojourning Shanxi merchants throughout the country sponsored theatrical performance by itinerant troupes from different regions. The prosperity and mobility of Qing Shanxi merchants were the major impetus behind the interplay between at least ten xiqu styles, including zhonglu bangzi, beilu bangzi, Shangdang bangzi, Hebei bangzi, Kunqu, pihuang, Weixian *yangge*, *zaobang*, Qinqiang and Jiangsu bangzi.

Conclusion

The political environment in the beginning of the Ming empire kick-started the five-hundred-year prosperity of Shanxi merchant groups. To provide mutual support to fellow traders, Qing Shanxi merchants established hundreds of merchant guildhalls in major market towns throughout the empire. Sojourning Shanxi merchants gathered at guildhalls to worship gods, socialise and settle business issues. The less powerful gathered at temples, restaurants, and so on. Theatrical performance presented on these kinds of occasions not only provided the guild members with entertainment but also functioned as a tool for uniting, controlling, educating and disciplining guild members. These functions were important for the long-term economic benefits of Shanxi merchant guilds and guild members.

Shanxi merchants not only appreciated various forms of bangzi performances but showed interest in other xiqu styles. They invited itinerant troupes from far and wide to perform during guild gatherings at their guildhalls, promoting the dialogue between different styles. The spread of Shanxi bangzi later nurtured sub-genres such as *zaobang*. In this regard, Shanxi merchants' zest for theatrical performance and the wide geographical spread of Shanxi merchant guildhalls facilitated the spread and development of various xiqu styles via trade routes, especially bangzi styles.

Chapter Two: Theatrical performances during temple fairs

This chapter deals with Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of theatrical performances during temple fairs. It begins with a brief introduction to the tradition and organisation of temple fairs in China, followed by a detailed discussion as to how Shanxi merchants promoted temple fairs and temple fair performances. Sponsoring temple fair performances, as we shall see, helped Shanxi merchants not only to gain immediately revenue but also to establish a positive image, which was important for the merchants' long-term economic benefits. More importantly, Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of temple fair performances facilitated the wide spread of Shanxi bangzi from urban areas to rural areas.

Market fairs in China

Market fairs (*hui* 會) in traditional Chinese society can be divided into temple fairs (*miaohui* 庙会), which took place during festivals, and periodic markets (*ji* 集 or *shiji* 市集).²⁴ There is no standardised terminology in Chinese for 'market fair' and 'periodic market', and *ji*, *hui* and *shi* 市 are sometimes used interchangeably in historical records. According to the *Miscellaneous Knowledge from the Cold Cottage* (*Lenglu zashi* 8.5286), 'the market (*shi*) is called *shi* in the south, *ji* 集 in the north, *ji* 疾 in Sichuan, *xu* 墟 in Guangdong, *jiezi* 街子 in Yunnan, and *chang* 場 in Guizhou'. The *Miscellaneous Records of the Capital* (*Yanjing*

²⁴ Periodic market is excluded from the present study due to a lack of evidence concerning Shanxi merchants' theatre sponsorship.

zaji 1.120) notes, ‘buying and selling at markets are called *chenxu* 趁墟 in the south, *ganji* 趕集 or *ganhui* 趕會 in the north and *ganmiao* 趕廟 in the capital’.

The periodicity of markets varied in different regions. Only in highly commercialised or densely populated places were market fairs held more frequently (Zhao 2017: 182). For instance, during the Daoguang reign there were two periodic markets per lunar month as noted in the *Miscellaneous Records of Fujian* (*Min zaji* 3.53). But in Beijing, which was more commercially active, market fairs were held on the third day of a lunar month at the Temple of Soil (Tudi miao 土地廟), the seventh and eighth days at West Sipailou 西四牌樓 and the Huguo 護國 Monastery, and on the ninth and tenth at East Sipailou 東四牌樓 and the Longfu 隆福 Monastery (*Yanjing zaji* 1.120).

During market fairs, merchants flocked to the place to seek business opportunities. Usually, the major temple or the main streets in a local community served as the venue for the fairs. In a poem written in the style of ‘bamboo-twig lyrics’ (*zhuzhi ci*), early Qing scholar Shen Jiyou 沈季友 wrote about the commodities selling at the market fair held at the Baoguo 報國 Monastery. ‘Song and Yuan antiques are as many as five-colour silk threads/They strive to be presented at the grand fair for sale this morning’ (*Yanjing chunyong*, quoted in Lei et al. 1997: 47).

Temple fairs are still held today to offer sacrifices to gods of local communities and entertain them with singing, dancing and theatrical performances. Temple fairs and all other types of temple festivals are collectively known as *yingshen saishe* 迎神賽社, and are ‘a living tradition’ that developed from an ‘annual ritual of “offering prayers in spring and giving thanks in autumn”’ (*chunqi qiubao*) which itself emerged in the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BC) and ‘evolved into a local community festival in the Han dynasty’ (Zhao 2021: 1–2). In the Sui and

Tang dynasties, with the development of Buddhism and Daoism, an increasing number of temples and monasteries were established in towns, serving as venues for musical and theatrical performances and commodity exchange on the dates for offering sacrifices to gods (Zhao 2017: 158). From the Song dynasty onwards, especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the buoyant economy and increasing number of folk religions encouraged the construction of more new temples and monasteries, furthering the development of the temple fair economy (Zhao 2017: 158–159). In the Ming–Qing periods, temple fairs in both urban and rural areas usually supplemented periodic markets (Zhao 2017: 182) in terms of their function as an occasion for buying and selling.

Temple fairs were of great importance to local economies. A good example of this was the Fifth-Month Temple Fair (*wuyue miaohui* 五月廟會) in Yuci 榆次 county in Central Shanxi, from which we can discern that any changes to a temple fair would have a considerable impact on the local community and local merchants. The Fifth-Month Temple Fair, which had been held for centuries in honour of Chenghuang 城隍 the City God of Yuci, lasted for one and a half months (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.565). The majority of merchants who travelled to Yuci during the fair were from Taigu county (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.565). After the famine in the early Guangxu period, the local economy and commodity exchange in Yuci largely relied on the fair (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.564). In 1898, the then Magistrate of Yuci county surnamed Zhang 張 lodged an appeal to the Prefect of Taiyuan prefecture for judgement because the Magistrate of Taigu county surnamed Wu 吳 had announced that a new fair would be set up in Taigu during the same period as Yuci's Fifth-Month Temple Fair (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.565–4.8.566). The residents of Yuci were concerned about the new fair and Magistrate Zhang emphasised in the appeal that the planned new fair in Taigu would affect the economy of Yuci county because Taigu merchants would no longer travel to Yuci for the Fifth-

Month Temple Fair (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.565–4.566). The Prefect eventually rejected the decision of Magistrate Wu of Taigu county to guarantee the sustainability of Yuci's local economy and the welfare of local residents there (*Guangxu Yucixian xu zhi* 4.565–4.567).

Temple fairs were also of great importance in terms of their recreational functions. In towns and cities, it was believed to be inappropriate for elites, ladies and children from educated families to attend temple fairs because they were expected not to socially interact with poorly-educated people. Regardless, officials, scholars and the nobility all took the opportunity to consume, entertain and offer sacrifices to gods (*Qilu deng* 3.11).

Theatrical performances were always an integral part of religious ritual practices (Johnson 2009: 3) and functioned as both a sacrificial offering to gods and a major attraction for local communities during temple fairs. Tanaka (2011: 284) states that in towns and cities in northern China, the local government usually regulated temple fair performances, and a great proportion of the cost of the performances was assigned to local merchants. For instance, local merchants and landlords in Tangyin 湯陰 county of Henan covered seventy percent and thirty percent respectively of the expenditure on the local temple fair performances during the Yongzheng period (Tanaka 2011: 282).

Indeed, the account books of a small late Qing Shanxi merchant firm named Rongqing Tang 榮慶堂 reveal that donations towards temple fair performances constituted part of the regular expenditure of the firm. From 1882 to 1887, Rongqing Tang regularly donated money for the performance of plays as prayers for peace (*ping'an xi* 平安戲) in the first lunar month and contributed once or twice in a year to the theatrical performances in a village named Zhaojiazhuang 趙家莊 (Liu 2018: 123–237). There were several villages named Zhaojiazhuang in Shanxi province. Considering that this firm also attended the market fairs at

Ansheng 安勝 village (Liu 2018: 126), which was located in Shouyang 壽陽 county in Pingding 平定 prefecture (in modern Jinzhong 晉中) of Central Shanxi, it is likely that this firm resided in a village very close to or in Shouyang county, and that the Zhaojiazhuang village that the firm owner or manager visited frequently was the one under the jurisdiction of Shouyang county. Given that this firm did not have much money saved, the performances were rather costly. The account books show that the firm only saved 420 *wen* 文 (approximately half a tael of silver)²⁵ from its revenue in 1885 (Liu 2018: 183). However, in 1886, the firm spent 112 *wen* on *ping'an xi* and 504 *wen* on the performances in Zhaojiazhuang (Liu 2018: 183–198).

Looking at Rongqing Tang's account books, it is unclear whether the manager of the firm was pleased to pay for the performances because the humble revenue of the firm indicated that the temple fairs, which were supposed to boost the sales of local firms (Tanaka 2011: 282), did not seem to be very beneficial for Rongqing Tang. As firms were obligated to donate to the performances regardless of their financial situation, the expenditure was in fact a financial burden for small firms.

In comparison, individual merchants with higher financial standing, including wealthy Shanxi merchants, and some merchant guilds were able to hold temple fairs on their own. These wealthy merchants and merchant guilds were indubitably in a better position than small firms such as Rongqing Tang to sponsor major events and could benefit more from the sponsorship, as we shall see later in this chapter.

²⁵ *Wen* was a monetary unit. The monetary system in China was rather complicated, especially in the Qing dynasty. The exchange rate between tael (*liang*) and *wen* fluctuated from time to time and varied in different regions. For detailed information about the exchange rates between different monetary units in the Qing dynasty, see Leonard and Theobald (2015).

Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of theatrical performances at temple fairs

Shanxi merchants were both participants in and sponsors of temple fairs. As sponsors, Shanxi merchants provided venues and players for temple fair performances. This yielded them both short-term and long-term economic benefits. From the perspective of xiqu history, the mobility of spectators and theatre troupes during temple fairs sponsored by Shanxi merchants facilitated the spread of Shanxi bangzi styles from urban areas to rural areas.

To begin with, some of Shanxi merchant guildhalls discussed in Chapter One functioned not only as places of assembly for merchant guild members' gatherings but also as venues for temple fairs. In the Qing dynasty, guildhalls had points of resemblance to temples in terms of basic functions. In rural areas, 'during public worship, temples were the venues for staging theatrical performances. Usually, these temples were the venues for villagers' social gatherings and public activities' (Duan 2009: 119). As discussed in Chapter One, Ming-Qing merchant guildhalls also carried out these functions. Also, Burgess (1928: 187) speculates that because the pattern of worship in guildhalls assembled that in ancestral halls (*citang* 祠堂) in rural areas, 'guild worship may have originated as a mere transference of the behaviour pattern' of family clans to guilds. In urban areas such as Beijing, the distinctions between temples and guildhalls were blurred (Naquin 2000: 612). Both guildhalls and temples hosted recreational activities such as theatrical performances, jugglers and banquets (Van der Sprenkel 1977: 614). One of the major differences between the functions of merchant guildhalls and temples was that the social gatherings at merchant guildhalls had a closer association with business issues. Merchant guildhalls, in this sense, were derivations of temples with extra commercial functions and specific sponsors.

The designation of Shanxi merchant guildhalls clearly reveals the similarities between merchant guildhalls and temples. Many Shanxi merchant guildhalls were known as temples to

local residents. For instance, based on the information provided in *Shanxi Merchants' Guildhalls (Jinshang huiguan)* (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 227–228), thirty-five out of eighty-four Shanxi merchant guildhalls (including those jointly established by Shanxi merchants and Shaanxi merchants) in Henan province were known as the Shan-Shaan Temple (Shan-Shaan miao 山陝廟), the Shaan-Shan Temple (Shaan-Shan miao 陝山廟), or the Temple of Emperor Guan (Guandi miao). The three characters for the Shan-Shaan Temple were even engraved on the top of the roof of the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Luoyang, indicating that this alternative name was generally accepted and that Shanxi merchant guildhalls were temples in nature.

The main god enshrined in most of the Shanxi merchant guildhalls was Guan Yu 關羽 (?–219), courtesy name Yunchang 雲長, a famous military general in the late Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Guan Yu is also one of the main characters in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi 三國演義)*. He is known as an incarnation of loyalty, righteousness, bravery and benevolence. Guan Yu is also known as Lord Guan (Guangong), Emperor Guan (Guandi), Holy Emperor Lord Guan (Guan Sheng Di Jun 關聖帝君) and related names. According to *The Chronicle of Buddha (Fozu tongji 6.178)*, the deification of Guan Yu dates to the Sui Dynasty. The patriarchal temple of Emperor Guan (Figures 1 and 2) which dated to the same era (*Fozu tongji 6.178*) is located in Haizhou 解州 prefecture in southern Shanxi.²⁶ As early as the Tang dynasty, Guan Yu was listed in the official register of sacrifices (*Xin Tangshu 新唐書 13.377–378*).

²⁶ According to *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi 1990a: 549)*, the temple was established roughly in 589. According to the 'Stele inscription regarding the reconstruction of the Emperor Guan Temple of Haizhou' (*chongxiu Haizhou guandi miao beiji 重修解州關帝廟碑記*) erected in 1809 in the temple (Figure 3), the temple was established in the Sui dynasty.



Figure 1 The Emperor Guan Temple of Haizhou. Photo taken by the author in Haizhou, Yuncheng city in southwestern Shanxi on 24.04.2019.

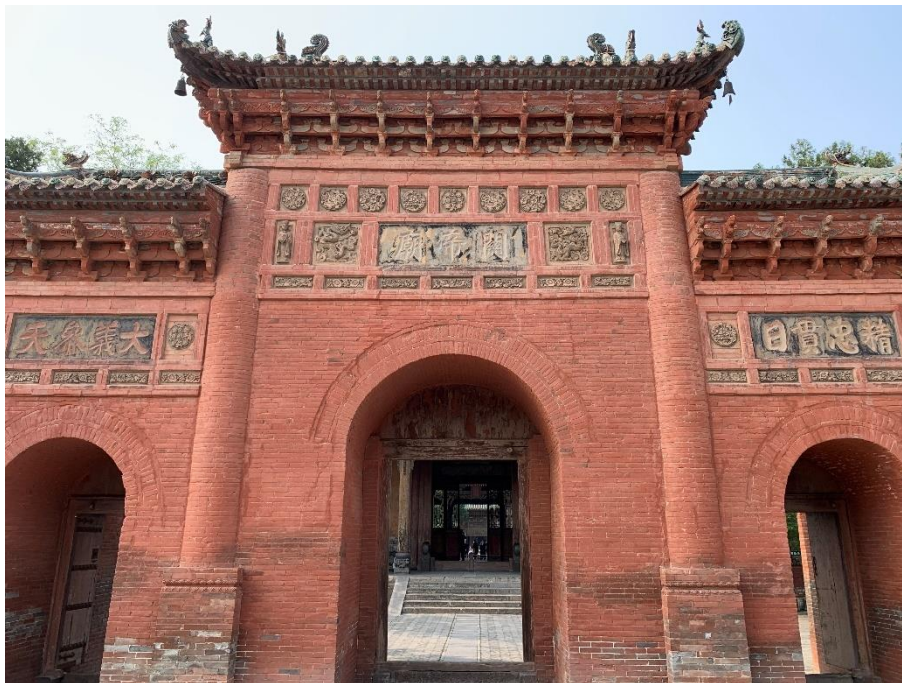


Figure 2 Duan men 端門, the main gate of the Emperor Guan Temple of Haizhou. Photo taken by the author in Haizhou on 24.04.2019.



Figure 3 'Stele inscription regarding the reconstruction of Emperor Guan Temple of Haizhou' (partial). Photo taken by the author in Haizhou on 24.04.2019.

Until the Yuan dynasty most of shrines and temples devoted to Emperor Guan were in northern China, especially in Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, Hebei and Beijing. During the Wanli period of

the Ming dynasty, Emperor Guan became a patron god of trade and commerce (Yan 2006b: 252). Shanxi merchants seemed to hold special reverence for him because Shanxi was the native place of Emperor Guan. The Mongolians were also familiar with the god, probably because Shanxi merchants who engaged in border trade introduced the cult of Guangong to the northern frontier regions (Yan 2006b: 252). From the Qing dynasty onwards, Emperor Guan became one of the most omnipresent gods throughout the country thanks to the imperial court's support and promotion. This was although the court's promotion Emperor Guan was in part to please the Han people and thus insure against their revolt against the Manchu regime (Yan 2006b: 282–290).

The shrines of other gods such as the God of Wealth and Laozi 老子 could also be found in Shanxi merchant guildhalls. Some guilds also worshiped the tutelary god(s) of their own industries, such as the Old Immortals Mei Fu and Ge Hong enshrined in the Pigment Guildhall of Beijing. But in most Shanxi merchant guildhalls, these gods did not take on central importance.

The architectural style of Shanxi merchant guildhalls also reflects the similarity between guildhalls and temples. Shanxi merchant guildhalls vary greatly in scale. While the small Pingding Guildhall of Beijing only has around fifteen rooms (Hu and Bai 1994: 191), the All-Shanxi Guildhall (Quanjin huiguan 全晉會館) in Suzhou covers an area of more than six thousand square meters (Yan 2007a: 268). The landscape architecture of Shanxi merchant guildhalls, especially the larger ones, generally resemble that of temples. Take the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng for example. The guildhall covers an area of more than 3300 square meters and forms a three-row-and-two-courtyard (*sanjin liangyuan* 三進兩院) complex (Yan 2007a: 221). Situated along the east–west axis of the guildhall are, in turn, the mountain gate (*shanmen* 山門), which comprises three gatehouses (*menlou* 門樓); the front yard; the stage,

which faces the west and is flanked on either side by a drum tower and a bell tower; the middle yard; the Grand Hall of Emperor Guan or the main hall; the rear yard; and a two-storey Spring-and-Autumn Pavilion (Chunqiu ge 春秋閣), which is the tallest building inside the guildhall (Yan 2007a: 221–223). The main hall takes the central position in the guildhall. Inside the main hall stands the statue of Emperor Guan accompanied by that of his son Guan Ping 關平 and Emperor Guan's loyal follower Zhou Cang 周倉 (Yan 2007a: 223). Two side halls (*peidian* 配殿) dedicated to the God of Wealth and the God of Literature (Wenchang 文昌) respectively are situated on either side of the Hall of Emperor Guan. The front section of the middle yard serves as a guild theatre with the stage oriented towards the three halls and two two-storey opera watching towers between the stage and the halls (Yan 2007a: 221, 223).

Like temples, some Shanxi merchant guildhalls functioned as markets for the transaction of goods during temple fairs for offering sacrifices to the gods. Courtyards inside guildhalls or the open space outside guildhalls served as trading areas. For instance, the vegetable oil market in Beijing opened in the Ming dynasty and moved to the Linxiang 臨襄 Guildhall during the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty as 'the guildhall was very spacious and could house hundreds of people. It is very suitable for being a market' (Quoted in Li 1980: 334). Also, from the Qianlong period onwards, temple fairs were held every year at the Shanxi Guildhall of Haicheng 海城 in Liaoning province (Yan 2007a: 334). During the Republican era, some Shanxi merchant guildhalls still functioned as markets. In Henan, whenever temple fairs were held in Shan-Shaan guildhalls, each guild would assign fifty to seventy guild members to organise and manage the venues (Yan 2007a: 199).

Shanxi merchants also generously provided funding for the construction of temples and temple stages. During the mid-Qing, Wang Tailai 王泰來, a merchant from Jincheng 晉城 of south-

eastern Shanxi, paid around thirty thousand taels of silver for the construction of a temple devoted to the God of Fire (Huoshen 火神) in Jieshou 界首 town in modern Anhui (Yan 2007a: 199). Also, in 1796, Shanxi merchants established a stage facing a Temple of Emperor Guan in modern Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia (Che 2016: 390). Every year on the thirteenth day of the fifth lunar month, itinerant performers and amateur performers put on performances during the temple fair (Che 2016: 390).



Figure 4 The stage flanked by a drum tower and bell tower in Shanxi Merchant Guildhall of Taiyuan or the Shanxi Merchant Museum of Taiyuan (Taiyuan Jinshang bowuguan 太原晉商博物館). This guildhall was established in modern times in imitation of the typical architectural style of Shanxi merchant guildhalls. Photo taken by the author in Taiyuan, Shanxi on 16.04.2019.



Figure 5 The main hall and the yard between the stage and the hall in Shanxi Merchant Guildhall of Taiyuan.

Photo taken by the author in Taiyuan, Shanxi on 16.04.2019.



Figure 6 The stage in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Liaocheng in Shandong province with a path underneath

(Photo courtesy of Wang Luwei 王潞偉)

Apart from providing venues for temple fairs, Shanxi merchants also invited theatre troupes to perform at temple fairs in some major market towns. In the Qing dynasty, Xinglongkui 興隆魁, a Shanxi merchant's firm which specialised in the exchange of leather goods with the Mongols, invited theatre troupes to put on performances twice per year at the Temple of Emperor Guan outside the Dajing Gate (*Dajing men* 大境門) in Zhangjiakou (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 115), one of the vital passes in the northern frontier region. Dajing Gate was located in Zhangjiakou, one of the major market towns where Shanxi merchants gathered in the frontier regions.

Shanxi merchants usually sponsored temple fair and temple fair performance in major market towns. Their sponsorship facilitated the mobility of both theatre troupes and spectators, thus accelerating the spread of bangzi from urban areas to rural areas. It did so in two main ways. First, when villagers left their home village for a town during major temple fairs, they were able to appreciate theatrical performances that they otherwise would not be able to see. In his *Diaries from the Studio for Retreat and Meditation* (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.108), late Qing Shanxi scholar Liu Dapeng offered a vivid account of people walking all the way from their home villages to the Jin Shrines (Jinci 晉祠) in the prefectural capital of Taiyuan to watch performances during temple fairs. The Jin Shrines is the memorial temple of Shu Yu of Tang 唐叔虞. The temple fair on the fourth of the seventh lunar month at the Jinci Shrines was for offering sacrifices to the Holy Mother (Shengmu 聖母) (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.8), that is, Yijiang 邑姜, the wife to Zhou Wuwang 周 or King Wu of Zhou (?–1043BC) and the mother of Zhou Chengwang or King Cheng of Zhou (?–1021BC). As described in *Diaries from the Studio for Retreat and Meditation*, the temple fair was a major festival celebrated by twenty villages (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.113). On the days of the celebration, worshippers flocked to the temple. 'When the rains stopped travellers from returning home, the temples and inns were packed out'

(*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.113). Although we do not know whether Shanxi merchants sponsored this temple fair, this account gives us an example of the mobility of spectators from rural areas to urban areas during a temple fair and the coverage of a performance staged in a town.

Second, theatre troupes that were sponsored by and usually performed for Shanxi merchants travelled from urban areas to rural areas, allowing villagers who did not travel to urban areas to access theatrical performances of a high professional level. Evidently, famous troupes from urban areas were invited to perform during temple fairs in villages where leaders of the local communities were willing to pay a high price for temple fair performance. In the 1680s, as mentioned in Chapter One, Shanxi merchants in Zhangjiakou established the Theatre Garden of Great Prosperity (Daxingyuan), the oldest theatre garden in the town (Che 2016: 59). The theatre troupe owned by the theatre garden and carried its name was invited to perform during temple fairs in rural areas such as the one held at the White Dragon Cave (Bailong dong 白龍洞), a mountain cave located twenty kilometres southeast of Zhangjiakou (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 111). Worshippers donated to the establishment of a temple at the entrance to the cave (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 111), so that they could offer sacrifices to the White Dragon. In their research on the spread of zhonglu bangzi and beilu bangzi beyond the Great Wall, Zhang Linyu and Zhang Zhiyong (2014: 111–12) provide a detailed description of the temple fair performance at the White Dragon Cave:

The temple is dedicated to Lord King the White Dragon (Bailong wangye 白龍王爺), a god who was a white serpent by origin ... the stage was very small. There was not enough room for prop boxes backstage ... The annual temple fair held at the White Dragon Cave occurred on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month ... although the temple was located in a remote place, the price of theatrical performances was set high. Troupes invited to play here were all

good ones, such as the Troupe of the Theatre Garden of Great Prosperity (Daxingyuan), the Troupe of the Little Theatre Garden of Prosperity (Xiaoxingyuan 小興園), the Troupe of the Old Theatre Garden (Jiuyuan 舊園), the Troupe of Long-lasting Success (Changsheng ban 長勝班), the Troupe of Jade Harmony (Yushun ban 玉順班), and so on. They played here many times ... Every time when the troupes arrived, the eight community heads (*sheshou* 社首) themselves carried the prop boxes on their back to the backstage as a way of showing respect for Lord King the White Dragon ... The White Dragon Cave Temple fair was very lively. People from adjacent places including Yubaodun 玉寶墩 village, Wangjiazhai 王家寨 village, Xiaoxinzhuan 小辛莊 village, Yulincun 榆林村 village, and so on, all came to watch the performances. Pedlars from Zhangjiakou also went to put up sheds to do business.

Named after the theatre gardens that owned them, these troupes were all reputable bangzi troupes in Zhangjiakou at that time. Zhang and Zhang (2014: 94–95) believe that the majority of the most demanding spectators of Shanxi bangzi in Zhangjiakou were sojourning Shanxi merchants and their employees. Their taste and demand forced theatre performers to improve their professional skills, and this was why famous theatre performers were found beyond the Great Wall (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 94–95). Therefore, to better meet Shanxi merchants' requirements and cater for their tastes, the theatre performers in these troupes were expected to possess high acting skills. When these troupes were invited to perform in remote areas, the performances benefited residents from nearby villages such as Xiaoxinzhuan who might not otherwise have an opportunity to watch Shanxi bangzi performances of a high professional level. Take the Troupe of the Theatre Garden of Great Prosperity for example. The troupe received acclamation from theatre lover Wu Runqing because the theatre performers could perform nearly two hundred plays, which was by no means easy (Sun 2015: 19). The troupe

was invited frequently to go on show tour in Chahar 察哈爾 and was warmly welcomed by villagers there (Sun 2015: 19).

There were some factors which likely helped to increase the number of spectators at temple fairs, thereby furthering the spread of theatrical performances. First, the more bustling a market town was, the more frequently theatrical performances were staged in temples, and the easier it was for performances to spread. For instance, there was a Temple of the Black Dragon (Heilong miao 黑龍廟) located on the top of Mount Crouching Tiger (Wohu shan 臥虎山) in the Linxian 臨縣 county of western Shanxi. At the foot of the mountain, there was a bustling riverside market town named Qikou 碛口 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 554).

From the Daoguang period of the Qing dynasty to 1941, there were over three hundred firms, large or small, in the town. Firm managers from seven provinces opened stores there. Therefore, theatrical performances were frequently staged there. Dozens of shows were put on every year. The temple theatre was hardly vacant except in winter. (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 554)

Shanxi merchants sojourned in busy major market towns and cities rather than small villages. It is not difficult to imagine that in crowded marketplaces like Linxian county, temple fair performances sponsored by the merchants could reach a much wider audience than in rural areas.

Also, an advantage of using Shanxi merchant guildhalls as the venues for temple fairs to encourage the spread of theatrical performances was that many of the guildhalls were capacious enough to house huge crowds. ‘The bigger the temple and broader its social base, the larger the

public that would be likely to come and watch' (Naquin 2000: 634). It was also the case with Shanxi merchant guildhalls. As we shall see later in this chapter, a guildhall was the reflection of a Shanxi merchant guild's power. Therefore, many Shanxi merchant guilds spared no effort in making their guildhalls as magnificent and large as possible. For instance, the size and grandeur of the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi in Henan was awe-inspiring. The courtyard in front of the stage could house as many as ten thousand spectators (Yang 1992: 231). The two-storey towers on both sides of the stage could house more than five hundred spectators (Yang 1992: 231). During major festivals and temple fairs sponsored by Shanxi merchants, such as the thirteenth day of the fifth lunar month, the day on which Emperor Guan was believed to sharpen his blade, theatrical performances captivated spectators from near and far. Usually on these kinds of occasions, the masses could watch theatrical performances free-of-charge (Yan 2007a: 276, 422). In her *Wanderings in China*, C. F. Gordon Cumming (1888: 188) describes how crowded a merchant guildhall was during a theatrical performance:

It is a strange sight to look down upon that densely packed yet ever-restless throng, almost all dressed in blue—that sea of flat faces and shaven heads which fills every available corner of the temple court, and of the steps leading up to the altars, above which the idols sit enthroned.

Gordon Cumming's description was based on her observation of a Ningbo 寧波 merchant guildhall in Fuzhou, capital of Fujian 福建 province. As it was commonplace for the masses throughout the empire to gather in merchant guildhalls for theatrical performances in Qing times, one could surely sight similar spectators in Shanxi merchant guildhalls as well. Owing to the size of the event site, theatrical performances staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls could

reach even more spectators at one time, thereby making a wide social impact. Likewise, it is likely that if Shanxi merchants sponsored fairs and performances in local temples, they intended to choose relatively large temples because the merchants had sufficient funds to do so. We can speculate that the performances sponsored by Shanxi merchants in large temples also attracted a wide audience.

Theatre sponsorship and merchants' business performance

Merchants' sponsorship of temple fair performances livened the daily life of the local communities. But it is inaccurate to say that their theatre sponsorship was totally altruistic (Mackerras 1990: 57). In fact, sponsoring theatrical performances during temple fairs was a business strategy. It not only brought merchants immediate income but also a positive image, thereby their long-term economic benefits. This section demonstrates the link between sponsoring temple fair performances and merchants' business as exemplified by the case of Shanxi merchants.

Although organising temple fairs and temple fair performances cost money and manpower, merchants could reap a high income within a short period of time. Temple fairs accompanied with theatrical performances were 'remunerative from a financial point of view in attracting attendance, and therefore customers' (Smith 1899: 63). During temple fairs, 'to hold a drama performance was a necessary and useful part of buying and selling' (Mackerras 1983: 109). 'Salesmen and entertainers accompanied religious festivals, promoting cultural as well as economic integration' (Naquin 2000: 626–27). The more attractive the theatrical performances were, the more consumers would attend the fairs, and the higher above usual income merchants could gain. Also, during temple fairs, products were sold at a premium price. As a bamboo-

twig lyric by early Qing scholar Qian Chengzhi 錢澄之 (1612–1693) describes, ‘The root pines in an old monastery were piled with goods/Eyes were filled with rarities and the price was inflated’ (*Dumen zayong* quoted in Lei et al. 1997: 19).

More importantly, via sponsoring temple fair performance, merchants could gain positive publicity and prestige, which were important for their business in the longer term. An example presenting the link between sponsoring temple fair performance and the sponsors’ enhanced image and prestige was *duitai xi* 對台戲 (lit. ‘performances on opposite stages’), a type of competition between two or more theatre troupes during festivals. Shanxi merchants and firms often sponsored *duitai xi*. In the Qing dynasty, Ji Weicong 冀惟聰, a member of the nineteenth generation of the affluent Ji family from Jiexiu 介休 county, kept his own family theatre troupes and sent the performers to perform *duitai xi* during a temple fair (Yan 2006a: 241). Also, two grocery firms of Shanxi merchants (Dadeqing 大德慶 and Fushenghe 福盛和, which were located near the Dajing Gate in Zhangjiakou) invited Shanxi bangzi troupes to compete with each other at two separate Temples of Emperor Guan on the same days of the seventh lunar month every year (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 123). The performances always caused a sensation as the two powerful firms went all-out to invite the best troupes from Zhangjiakou (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 123).

The two grocery firms spared no expense to invite the best troupes because the event served their business. In his memoir, Wang Yongnian (Wang et al. 2009: 284) talks about *duitai xi*, confirming that the organisation of a *duitai xi* was linked to the organiser’s power:

Generally speaking, it was enough to invite one theatre troupe to perform when theatrical performances were needed at one place. But there were special cases. During temple fairs,

important religious ceremonies for worshipping gods, [festivals for celebrating] abundant harvests and other major events, large villages or powerful families ... would invite two or even three troupes to hold a great celebration ...

What spectators truly cared about was the plays, theatre performers, costumes and performance of the troupes ... *duitai xi* was by nature a competition in acting skill. Spectators ... made critical evaluations and harsh judgements ... Therefore, this kind of performance was very challenging. The troupes which took part in *duitai* competition had to make an all-out effort, perform the plays that they were most skilled in, send the most outstanding theatre performers to perform, show the spectators their best theatrical properties ...

Needless to say, this kind of performances was ... marvellous ... This was the spectators' favourite kind of theatrical performance. Outstanding troupes were very willing to perform during *duitai xi*. If they won a *duitai* competition, they could receive extra rewards from *she*²⁷ and gain widespread fame ... Less powerful troupes were so afraid of *duitai xi* ... Few spectators stayed in front of the stage. If the troupe lost *duitai xi*, the sound of people reviling them was heard from around.

Wang's description reveals that *duitai xi* were usually held by powerful organisers such as wealthy villages and local families. Hence, the ability to hold a *duitai xi* performance, especially a marvellous one performed by outstanding theatre performers, was a reflection of its organiser's power. Also, as theatre performers' great acting skills meant a high performance price, a theatrical performance of a high standard reflected its sponsor's wealth. Therefore, if a

²⁷ For the explanation of *she*, see footnote 16.

duitai xi was organised by a merchant, the performance would cultivate the merchant's image as being powerful and wealthy.

In addition to this, sponsoring a *duitai xi* during temple fairs was also linked to its organiser's prestige. Adam Yuet Chau (2005: 149) proposes that what attracts peasants to temple fairs is the need for '*honghuo* 紅火' (lit. 'red and hot'), a Chinese word that he describes as a concept that 'embodies a native conception of social life that values and convergence and intermingling of a lot of people and the collective production and consumption of loud noises, vibrant colours, fragrant smells, savoury tastes, radiant heat, and heightened excitement'. *Honghuo* is a highly exciting condition and 'the desired goal and outcome' of major events (Chau 2005: 150). It is only when an event is *honghuo* enough that it can be deemed successful and can enhance its organiser's prestige (Chau 2005: 150).²⁸ In this sense, if merchants sponsored competitive *duitai xi* during temple fairs which fulfilled the spectators' expectation of *honghuo*, then the performances could increase the merchants' prestige and local influence.

Now, we see how merchants benefited from sponsoring temple fair performances. If merchant guilds sponsored temple fair performances, there were other methods of gaining a positive image and prestige. Specifically, performances during temple fairs attracted the public to Shanxi merchant guildhalls. Spectators who attended the temple fairs came to appreciate not only commodities and performances but also the architecture. Those who admired the architecture would have a clear perception of the power of Shanxi merchant guilds because the design of guildhalls and the stages inside showcased it.

²⁸ Chau's description of *honghuo* is based on his study on temple fairs in northern Shaanxi province in modern times. However, it is also accurate of other regions. His description can be contextualised in the present thesis because temple fairs in the Qing dynasty produced the same effect and served the same goal.

In his research on Qing merchant guilds, Daniel Macgowan (1886: 139) stated that some guildhalls in China were ‘truly palatial, representing the highest specimens of Chinese architecture’, ‘the most striking portion being a court for theatrical performances in honour of the gods’. In rural Shanxi, local elites paid to establish stages in villages to show the power and wealth of their clan (Duan 2009: 157) because how majestic a stage could be was associated with its sponsor(s)’ financial situation (Duan 2009: 64). By the same token, as Shanxi merchant guildhalls resembles temples, stages inside the guildhalls performed the same function, that is, to showcase the guilds’ wealth and power.



Figure 7 The stage in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi in Henan province (Photo courtesy of Wang Luwei)

Shanxi merchant guildhalls were famous for their sheer grandeur, large area, exquisite wooden and stone carvings and magnificent buildings. A bamboo-twig lyric written by Qing official Cui Xu 崔旭 (1767–?) describes the grandeur of Shanxi merchant guildhalls in Tianjin. The poem (*Niantang zhuzhici*, quoted in Lei et al. 1997: 444) reads:

Businessmen and tradesmen have made large fortune;

[Their guildhalls were] ornately decorated with golden plaques.

Hokkiens and Cantonese please do not boast of the grandeur [of your guildhalls];

Nowadays, Shanxi guildhalls rank among the best.

It is unclear when Cui Xu composed these lyrics and to which guildhall he referred. Cui's explanatory notes on the poem suggest that this guildhall was the very first Shanxi merchant guildhall in Tianjin (*Niantang zhuzhici*, cited in Lei et al. 1997: 444). Therefore, the Shanxi merchant guildhall he wrote about could be the Jindu 晉都 Guildhall established in 1761 by Shanxi tobacco merchants (Shanxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009: 220). While appreciating the Shanxi merchant guildhall, Cui Xu was fully aware of Shanxi merchants' increasing social influence in the Zhili 直隸 area²⁹ in the mid-Qing dynasty and the large fortune that they accumulated. By the same token, spectators who attended temple fairs held in Shanxi merchant guildhalls would have the same reaction.

Shanxi merchant guilds also had a special method for showcasing their power. In 1817, the guild members of the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi, Henan, believing that their guildhall was magnificent enough, spent the extra three thousand taels of silver originally collected for the renovation to the guildhall on the erection of two steel flagpoles in the front of the guildhall instead (Zhang 2009: 423). The erection of a flagpole in front of a house was a well-established tradition to showcase a scholar's success in the Civil Service Examination. As described in the *Unofficial History of the Scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 5.34) by Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701–1754), when Yan Zhizhong, one of the characters in the story, obtained the Tribute Student (*gongshen*)

²⁹ Zhili refers to the areas directly under the jurisdiction of the imperial government.

degree, he erected a flagpole, probably in front of his house, to manifest his achievement, and held a banquet for his relatives. In the case of the Shan-Shaan Guild of Sheqi, as described in ‘The stele inscription of the steel flagpole in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi town’ (*Sheqi zhen Shan-Shaan huiguan tie qigan ji* 賒[sic.]旗鎮山陝會館鐵旗杆記), the guild members intended to showcase their wealth rather than any academic degree (Zhang 2009: 423). The flagpole, combined with the guildhall, was designed to showcase the merchant guildhall’s distinction and the guild’s superiority over the guildhalls established by other merchant groups. The guild members proudly recorded that ‘Shan-Shaan guildhalls could be found throughout the empire. They were all grand and impressive. But only in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Zhuxianzhen 朱仙鎮, and now in the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi, can you see flagpoles’ (Quoted in Zhang 2009: 423).

Spectators could also perceive a guild’s great wealth by comparing their theatregoing experiences at guildhalls with other places. As described by Li Haiguan 李海觀 (1707–1790) in his novel *The Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qilu deng* 49.264–265), the main character Tan Shaowen went to a Plague God Temple (Wenshen miao 瘟神廟) with his friend Xia Ding one day, and to a local Shan-Shaan Temple with his cousin Wang Longji on the next day, to watch theatrical performances. The performances at the Shan-Shaan Temple were sponsored by Mr Cao from an oil mill to redeem his vow. The performances were ‘more splendid than that held at the Plague God Temple. The courtyard was spacious, and the stage was towering ... just the female spectators standing to the east of the paved road towards the main hall alone outnumbered the spectators that the Plague God Temple could house’ (*Qilu deng* 49.265). The Shan-Shaan Temple in the novel is identified by Yan Aiyong (2007a: 108) as the Shan-Shaan-Gan 山陝甘 Guildhall of Kaifeng in Henan province. By comparing the number of spectators, Li Haiguan expresses his favourable impression of the large size of the Shan-Shaan Guildhall.

The towering stage and the size of the guildhall mirrored the guild's financial power and the guild members' enthusiasm for theatrical performances. In this regard, Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of performances in guildhalls during temple fairs built up a powerful image and a favourable reputation for their guilds.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, many Shanxi merchants' guildhalls enshrined Emperor Guan. A temple fair was a good opportunity for the merchants to demonstrate their honesty and righteousness to the general public. Specifically, tablets and gatepost couplets in guildhalls which eulogised Emperor Guan's virtues, such as righteousness, loyalty, honesty and justice, and wall paintings depicting the stories about the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* indicated that Shanxi merchants were so respectable that they did not simply have an eye on profit. Even if the merchants did not necessarily have Emperor Guan's moral virtues, they could control people's perception of Shanxi merchant guild members by showing the spectators their pursuit of morality.

Some Shanxi merchant guildhalls erected statues of Emperor Guan reading a copy of one of the Confucian classics, *Spring and Autumn Annals*. This, together with the establishment of the Spring-and-Autumn Pavilion in guildhalls, showed not only that Shanxi merchants were faithful followers of Confucianism but also that they had a high financial standing. Some large merchant guildhalls, such as those of the Shan-Shaan Guild of Liaocheng and the Shan-Shaan Guild of Sheqi, established a Spring and Autumn Tower (Chunqiu lou 春秋樓) in their guildhalls. The stele inscription of 'The record of the establishment of the Spring-and-Autumn Tower' (*Chuangjian Chunqiulou beiji* 創建春秋樓碑記) states that when the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi was first established, the guild could not afford to build the tower (Zhang 2009: 370). Twenty-six years after the establishment of the guildhall, 409 guild members

donated more than 7700 taels of silver³⁰ for the construction of the tower. That is to say, without considerable financial power, the project could not have been accomplished. People who attended temple fairs at these guildhalls, especially the literati who could read the stele inscriptions, could clearly see the guilds' efforts in promoting Confucian moral values and their investment in worship.

Clearly, some Qing merchants understood the importance of theatre sponsorship during temple fairs for the advertising of their guilds. At the horse market in Zhangjiakou, if a performance was sponsored by a guild to worship its tutelary god, usually a red satin banner of three meters in length would be held up to show the guild's name (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 124). As a result, the name of the guild was exposed to all spectators, including potential consumers of the guild members' products, thereby raising the spectators' awareness of the guild and creating business opportunities for the guild members.

Qing merchants were also fully aware of the linkage between their own prestige and the acting skill of the theatre troupes they invited. According to Gordon Cumming's (1888: 188–189) observation and experiences of watching theatrical performances in a temple theatre in Fuzhou, wealthy merchants who 'wished to gain popularity with gods and with his fellow-citizens' would 'engage a first-rate troupe with magnificent properties, and the performance is admirable' (Gordon Cumming 1888: 188–189).

Although it is not possible to evaluate the efficacy of the sponsorship of temple fair performances due to the lack of statistical data showing change in Shanxi merchants' revenues

³⁰ These numbers are calculated based on information provided on the stele inscription of 'The record of the establishment of the Spring-and-Autumn Tower'. See Zhang 2009: 371–378.

before and after the fairs, a reciprocal relationship was successfully established between the merchants' economic benefits and temple fair performance.

Conclusion

Originating as an ancient ritual ceremony for offering sacrifices to gods, temple fairs evolved into an important occasion for commodity exchange as well. Theatrical performances during temple fairs entertained not only gods but spectators. As theatrical performance was the major attraction for local communities, and local communities were the potential consumers, merchants commonly sponsored the events to serve their business goals. This chapter has discussed the case of Shanxi merchants and their guilds to exemplify that sponsoring temple fair performance helped merchants gain short-term and long-term economic benefits, thereby accumulating their economic capital.

Some Shanxi merchant guildhalls functioned as the venues of temple fairs. The sheer grandeur and the architectural style of the guildhalls manifested the merchant guilds' power and guild members' morality to spectators, thereby contributing to the merchants' positive image, which was important for the merchants' long-term economic benefits. By the same token, some merchants sponsored the events in their own name and invited commercial troupes or sent their family troupes to perform in temples. As the quality of performances was linked to the merchants' public image, the merchant sponsors tended to select theatre troupes with high acting skills to guarantee the spectators' enjoyment.

From the perspective of xiqu history, Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of temple fair performance facilitated the spread of bangzi. It accelerated the mobility of spectators and theatre troupes via trade routes, creating opportunities for spectators to appreciate theatrical

performances, especially high-quality ones that they otherwise might not have been able to access.

Chapter Three: Shanxi merchants' sponsorship of theatrical performances during social intercourse with the Qing ruling elites

So far, we have discussed how Shanxi merchants as a whole obtained economic benefits via sponsoring theatrical performance. In the following two chapters, the focus shifts to the wealthiest group of Shanxi merchants, who made use of theatrical performance to increase their power in the late Qing dynasty. Their wealth and social standing furthered the development of bangzi and strengthened its position in the xiqu market.

Having accumulated considerable fortune, some wealthy Shanxi merchants were able to pursue a higher social standing, which allowed them to establish a close relationship with the ruling elites, thereby obtaining more business opportunities and economic prerogatives. This chapter argues that theatrical performance served as a tool for maintaining the relationship between Shanxi merchants and the Qing ruling class. It begins with a brief introduction to the rise of the social status of merchants in the Qing dynasty, followed by an explanation of the close connection between Shanxi merchants and the Qing ruling class. It then discusses the popularity of theatrical performance in elite circles and demonstrates how Shanxi merchants entertained these people with theatrical performance. From the 1850s to the end of the Qing in 1911, the rise and fall of the Shanxi banking industry and Shanxi merchants' relationship with the ruling class had direct impacts on the rise and fall in popularity of bangzi among the elite circles in Beijing—the centre of xiqu market in China.

Shanxi merchants' social status and association with social elites

The late imperial era saw the most dramatic change in the traditional Chinese social hierarchy, especially the social mobility between wealthy merchants and literati. In the Ming and Qing periods, the traditional social stratification of *simin* (lit. 'four people'), that is, scholar (*shi*), farmer (*nong* 農), craftsman (*gong* 工) and merchant (*shang* 商), gradually changed (Yu 2018: 104–121). This was particularly the case in Huizhou prefecture, the native place of Huizhou merchants, and in Shanxi province (Yu 2018: 104–121), where merchant families attached considerable importance to commerce.

The change in general perception of the social status of merchants was a long process. From the Song dynasty onwards, people's prejudice against merchants as being of inferior occupation gradually declined (Yu 2018: 104–121). During the mid-Ming, the boundary between merchants and literati started to loosen up, especially in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River (Yu 2018: 107–108). This process accelerated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when some literati abandoned the study of Confucian classics in favour of going into business (*qi ru jiu shang* 棄儒就商) (Yu 2018: 133, 182). For scholars who failed to achieve a high academic degree via the Civil Service Examination System and thus failed to make a good political career for themselves, or who encountered other insurmountable obstacles to officialdom, engagement in trade was an act of expediency for them and their family. For instance, in the early Qing dynasty, a poor and reclusive scholar named Wei Xi 魏禧 (1624–1681) in Ningdu 寧都 of Jiangxi province who admired merchants' financial power wrote about his preference for wealth over study (Handlin Smith 1998: 431, 439). Also, Shen Fu 沈復 (1763–?), a mid-Qing scholar and the author of *The Six Records of a Floating Life* (*Fusheng liu ji* 浮生六記), was bent on sending his only son to take on apprentice in trade because he was suffering from

financial difficulty and could not find another way out within a short time (*Fusheng liuji* 3.80–90).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a series of social and political upheavals, including the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804), the First Opium War (1839–1842), natural disasters and the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) put an end to the so-called ‘High-Qing’ period, and was marked by an economic depression and fiscal crisis (von Glahn 2016: 361–364). The social unrest further reduced the difference between merchants and literati in their social status and tightened the connection between them. From the 1850s onwards, an increasing number of merchants and government officials cooperated in running modern enterprises (Chen 2004: 209–210). Gradually, engaging in commerce became an important means by which government officials generate extra income (Chen 2004: 216).

While literati stepped into the business world for fortune, wealthy merchants managed to improve their social status in various ways. First, salt merchants were classified under merchant household registers (*shangji* 商籍) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so that their descendants were given special quotas for sitting the Civil Service Examination, thereby becoming literati and eventually joining the ruling class (Ho 1954: 155).

Also, powerful merchant groups—such as Shanxi merchants and Huizhou merchants who engaged in the trade of strictly controlled commodities—relied on the imperial government’s protection, established a close connection with the imperial house and enjoyed economic prerogatives and honour, which all contributed to the merchants’ increased social status. For instance, Wang Xie 王協, a salt merchant from Beizhai 北柴 village in Taiping 太平 county (in modern Xiangfen 襄汾 county in Shanxi) engaged in the salt trade in Shanxi, Anhui and Jiangsu provinces. Wang received feasts, calligraphy from Emperor Qianlong and

other rarities as gifts for carrying out imperial errands during Emperor Qianlong's inspection tours to the south in 1780 and 1784 (Yan 2007b: 69–70).

In addition, wealthy merchants could purchase academic degrees and government posts via *juanna* and *juanshu* or office selling to enhance their social status and enter the elite class. To tackle fiscal deficit, the Qing government expanded office selling to attract donations from commoners (Kaske 2011: 80–90). The practice of grain donation in exchange for government posts was known as early as the Qin dynasty (Xu 1950: 5–6). Similar regulations had been occasionally adopted throughout the period from the Qin to the Song dynasty (Xu 1950: 5–6). In the southern Song dynasty, the imperial court sold minor titles of nobility to wealthy merchants and their wives to raise funds for military projects. Gernet (1962: 89–90) believes that there must have been 'parvenus' who made use of the practice to satisfy their vanity. However, it was not until the Jingtai period of the Ming dynasty that office selling turned out to be an important means of raising funds for the imperial government (Xu 1950: 6–15). The system was overused after the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods of the Qing dynasty (Xu 1950: 24). In her research on office selling in nineteenth century China, Kaske (2011: 88) describes *juanna* as 'contributions voluntarily delivered to the Board of Revenue under temporary statutes and were supposed to be collected by the Board for matters of imperial sovereignty, such as large-scale river conservancy projects and wars fought by imperial troupe', while *juanshu* referred to 'either contributions to provincial governments that were not allowed to sell substantive offices or, very often, semi-voluntary "contributions" that were imposed on salt merchants or other holders of state monopolies'. Commoners could occasionally receive substantive official posts via *juanshu*, but they were 'discriminated against by the procedure of selection for appointment, which reserved more slots for *juanna* candidates' (Kaske 2011: 89). However, after 1854, to 'manipulate the market and attract more contributors' as a way of generating more revenue, the Board of Revenue (*hubu* 戶部) abolished the difference between

juanshu and regular *juanna* (Kaske 2011: 89). ‘All contributions had become *juanshu* contributions’ (Kaske 2011: 96). Many wealthy Shanxi merchants, including firm managers and business owners as well as their family members, were enthusiastic participants in office selling. For example, the Qing imperial court bestowed honorific titles upon fifty-two members of the Wang 王 family from Lingshi 靈石 county of Central Shanxi (Cheng and Gai 2008: 18). From the Jiaqing to the Tongzhi period, over sixty members of the Wang family bought government posts and academic degrees via office selling (Cheng and Gai 2008: 18). Also, in 1853, Cheng Qingpan 程清泮, a native of Pingyao county who was once the manager of Rishengchang Draft Bank, spent 750 taels of silver to purchase for himself a government post of the upper sixth rank (*pin* 品) and honourable titles for his grandparents (Hao and Huo 2016: 1366). ‘Up to the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in 1851’, the Civil Service Examination had always been the ‘primary channel’ for upward mobility (1980: 51). However, ‘after the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion ... money overshadowed higher academic degrees as a determinant of social status’ (Ho 1980: 51).

Partly because of officials’ engagement in commerce and merchants’ engagement in the expanded office selling system, in the Qing dynasty, ‘the social distinction between officials and rich merchants was more blurred than at any other time in Chinese history except for the Mongol Yuan period’ (Ho 1980: 82). In the late Qing, possessing titles, academic degrees or government posts was in some cases a precondition for merchants to assume leadership in their guilds (Chen 2004: 183). More importantly, titles, degrees and government posts strengthened Shanxi merchants’ position and brought them convenience when doing business with the ruling class.

In the late Qing, the business of Shanxi draft banks was tightly connected with government departments and officials. According to Yan (2007c: 305), nearly all the members of the ruling

class, from noble princes to officials such as Magistrates (*zhixian* 知縣), relied on particular draft banks to hide their dirty money obtained via corruption. Hao and Huo (2016: 1372) describe:

Draft banks paid great attention to social intercourse with the official circle. Beijing was the most important place. Managers in each provincial capital also selected talents who were refined in manner and were capable to take on the task [of socialising with officials]. Many of them held the academic degrees of the Provincial Graduate, Tribute Student and Government Student. Managers of Beijing draft banks frequently came in and went out of the gates of the nobility and officials. Managers of draft banks in every provincial capital always visited the offices of Governor-Generals (*zongdu* 總督), Provincial Governors (*xunfu* 巡撫), Provincial Administration Commissioners (*buzhengshi* 布政使) and Surveillance Commissioners (*anchashi* 按察使) to seek business opportunities and to demonstrate their talents. For instance, Weishengchang 蔚盛長³¹ Draft Bank established a connection with Prince Qing of the First Rank (Qing qinwang 慶親王);³² Baichuantong 百川通 Draft Bank³³ established a connection with Zhang Zhidong 張之洞;³⁴ Xietongqing 協同慶 Draft Bank³⁵ established a connection with Dong Fuxiang 董福祥;³⁶ and Zhichengxin 志

³¹ Weishengchang Draft Bank was owned mainly by the Hou 候 family from Beijia 北賈 village in Jiexiu county.

³² Yikuang 奕劻 (1838–1917), a prominent minister in the late Qing, was one of the great grandsons of Emperor Qianlong.

³³ Baichuantong Draft Bank was owned by the Qu family from Qixian county.

³⁴ Zhang Zhidong (1838–1909) was a prominent high-ranking official in the late Qing most famous for his leading role in the Self-Strengthening Movement (*yangwu yundong* 洋務運動).

³⁵ Xietongqing Draft Bank was owned by the Wang family from Niedian 聶店 village in Yuci county and the Mi 米 family from Wangzhi 王智 village in Pingyao county.

³⁶ Dong Fuxiang (1840–1908) was a military general in the late Qing.

成信 Draft Bank³⁷ established a connection with the Guangdong Customs Superintendent (*yue haiguan jian du* 粤海关監督). The draft banks all gained considerable benefit from the relationship.

For Shanxi merchants, the relationship with government departments as well as dignitaries added to their prestige and economic benefits. Shanxi draft banks provided Qing government departments and dignitaries with various services, including processing office selling and sending remittances; transferring soldiers' salaries and military provisions; managing deposits for officials and government departments and transferring public funds; and loaning money to the imperial government to support public projects (Sun 2011: 216–227). During the period of social upheaval from the First Sino-Japanese War or the War of Jiawu 甲午 (1894–1895) to the Xinhai Revolution (1911–1912), the relationship between the Qing imperial government and Shanxi bankers reached its apogee (Kong 1984: 1), as shown in the case (Yan 2006a: 475–476) of Dadetong 大德通 Draft Bank, which was mainly owned by the famous Qiao 喬 family from Qixian county in Central Shanxi:

The prosperity of the business of draft banks was largely attributed to their association with officials ... the managers of various branches of draft banks all made good friends with Governors-General and Governors (*dufu* 督撫), Circuit Intendants (*daotai* 道台) and

³⁷ Zhichengxin Draft Bank was established by Yun Chengwang 俞成望 (1655–1737) from Taigu county. Although Rishengchang Draft Bank established in 1821 is generally believed to be the earliest draft bank in China, research reveals that the earliest draft bank in China was actually the Yizhenquan 義振泉 Draft Bank established in 1659 by the Dai 戴 family from Qixian county. Zhichengxin Draft Bank, which was established in 1679, was the second earliest draft bank in China, and operated for 235 years (Yang and Yang 1998: 13–18).

members of the imperial house. Gao Yu 高鈺 [1854–1919], the manager of Dadetong Draft Bank, was an ‘expert’ in associating with officials. In Beijing he associated with Zhao Erxun 赵爾巽 [1844–1927] and Prince Qing of the First Rank. If Zhao was sent to the Eastern Province [present-day Jilin 吉林 and Heilongjiang 黑龍江], then Gao went to the Eastern Province. If Zhao returned to Beijing, Gao would also return to Beijing. If Zhao were dispatched to Sichuan, then Gao would go to Sichuan as well. Gao trod in Zhao’s steps. They were inseparable. Dadetong was virtually the private warehouse of Zhao Erxun. Governmental officials in every provincial capital, such as Duanfang 端方 [1861–1911], the Provincial Governor of Shaanxi province, once sent soldiers to provide escort for carriages of Dadetong. Lord En 恩 of Yanping 雁平 Circuit, Xu Baosheng 徐葆生 the Administrative Clerk (*zhishi* 知事) of Shuozhou 朔州 prefecture, and Gao Yu called each other ‘brother’. They wrote letters to each other very frequently. Notably, during the Boxer Rebellion, when Empress Dowager Cixi escaped to Xi’an 西安 and stopped at Qixian, Dadetong Draft Bank was set up to serve as her temporary palace.

After the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion, Shanxi draft banks started to remit provincial tax revenues to Beijing for the imperial government (von Glahn 2016: 387). The large funds from tax receipts that Shanxi banks collected allowed for a broadened portfolio (von Glahn 2016: 387), thus accelerating the expansion of the Shanxi merchants’ banking industry.

In short, Shanxi merchants established a close connection with members of the Qing ruling class, especially after the Taiping Rebellion. The social capital that they accumulated in this way guaranteed them economic capital and furthered their upward social mobility in the late Qing. This network with the ruling class required ongoing maintenance. The following sections demonstrate how Shanxi merchants frequently entertained these social elites with banquets and

theatrical performance as a way of cementing this valuable relationship, and how the rise and fall of Shanxi bankers and their relationship with the social elites directly influenced the popularity of bangzi.

Qing ruling elites' passion for theatrical performances

Before discussing how theatrical performance served as a bridge between Shanxi merchants and social elites, it is necessary to discuss the passion of the Qing ruling class for theatrical performance. This was the prerequisite for Shanxi merchants resorting to theatrical performance to establish and maintain social relationships with them.

To begin with, according to the *Collection of Anecdotes about the Pear Garden of Beijing* (*Beijing liyuan zhanggu changbian* 1.174), towards the end of the Qing, people from all social echelons, including 'emperors and empresses, pedlars and corvées were all obsessed with theatrical performances.' Theatrical performance was an important form of entertainment among the Qing nobility, especially Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), one of the most important close associates of Shanxi bankers. In the Empress Dowager's later years, she usually enjoyed theatrical performances during her spare time (*Yiling zhuan* 1.156). Many contemporary outstanding performers, such as Puzhou bangzi performer Guo Baochen 郭寶臣 (1956–1918) and Hebei bangzi performer Hou Junshan 侯俊山 (1954–1935), served the imperial family and performed in the Forbidden City or the Summer Palace from time to time as per imperial command. Empress Dowager Cixi even provided Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917), one of her favourite pihuang performers, with the annual stipend due a sixth rank official (*Lingshi* 1.32). Only when Empress Dowager Cixi and Emperor Guangxu evacuated to Xi'an in 1900 in the wake of the Boxer Uprising (1900–1901) were the entertainments during

empress's birthdays and festivals cancelled (*Chang'an Gong ci* 1.184). When Empress Dowager Cixi and Emperor Guangxu returned to Beijing in 1901, the theatrical performances for the imperial house resumed, and Tan Xinpei was summoned to perform in the imperial palace for three days in that year (*Qingbai leichao* 11.5043).

Other members of the imperial family were also interested in theatrical performance. Sometimes Empress Dowager Cixi invited Princes and Grand Ministers (*wangdachen* 王大臣) to join her in appreciating theatrical performances. 'The Grand Minister put the experience in writing out of pride' (*Yiling zhuan* 1.156). Also, Shanqi 善耆 [Prince Su 肅, 1866–1922] was obsessed with theatrical performance. Around 1875, he moved to Tianjin, bringing along a drummer named Hu Qiubao 胡秋寶 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990b: 248). Under Shanqi's order, Hu established Little Four-Joys (Xiao Sixi 小四喜) performing school and recruited poor children from nearby counties to teach them Hebei bangzi and pihuang plays (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990b: 248).

Furthermore, many Manchu bannermen were so passionate about xiqu that they often broke the statutory restrictions on watching theatrical performances. Qing emperors imposed many regulations to prohibit bannermen from visiting theatre gardens and keeping private theatre troupes. In his *Collection of Anecdotes about the Pear Garden of Beijing* (*Beijing liyuan zhanggu changbian* 1.174), Zhang Jiangcai 張江裁 notes:

Although Qing emperors were fond of theatrical performances, they well understood that theatrical performances did more harm than good ... Most bannermen were idle and did not want to study. They were usually addicted to this.

Theatre gardens were considered ‘gathering places for cheats, rebels, and wastrels’ (Goldstein 2003: 755). As early as 1671, Emperor Kangxi ordered that ‘in the Inner City of Beijing, no theatre gardens be allowed to set up. They should be banned for good’ (Quoted in Ding 2010: 17). In 1736, Supervising Censor (*jishizhong* 給事中) Deshan 德山 submitted a memorial to the throne, recommending to Emperor Qianlong ‘prohibiting bannermen from visiting theatre gardens to reduce unnecessary expenditure’ (Quoted in Ding 2010: 81). The memorial (Quoted in Ding 2010: 82) proposed:

Your Majesty the Emperor ... in consideration of the growing population of bannermen and their hardships in making a living, you planned and prepared in many ways, and asked the exchequer to lend them money ... Against all expectations, having a glance at the newly opened theatre gardens, [one will find out] that the majority of people gulping wine there are bannermen.

In 1740, 1762 and 1776, Emperor Qianlong reiterated the prohibition imposed on theatre-going bannermen and handed out heavy punishment on them, including dismissal and public floggings (Ding 2010: 92–93, 104, 113). From the Jiaqing to the Tongzhi period, emperors had to impose repeatedly the prohibition on bannermen and on the theatre gardens opened inside the Inner City of Beijing (Ding 2010: 147, 154, 161, 254, 290). The imperial court also prohibited government officials from keeping private troupes in the name of frugality (Ding 2010: 148). All these orders, however, proved to be ineffective.

Appreciating theatrical performance also constituted an important part of officials’ daily life. Many officials in the capital city pursued a lavish lifestyle that involved frequent banquets and

theatrical performances (Zhang 2021: 53–55). Outside the capital, although high officials were not allowed to keep family theatre troupes, keeping private troupes in the name of local government and inviting commercial troupes to put on performances in government offices were generally permitted (Liu 2017: 59–60).

In short, the Qing ruling class developed considerable passion for theatrical performance. This created an opportunity for Shanxi merchants to entertain them with performances during social occasions.

Theatrical performance—a bridge between Shanxi merchants and social elites

As discussed earlier, there was a reciprocal relationship between Shanxi merchants and the ruling class. As a result, it was common for Shanxi merchants to socialise with these social elites. This section demonstrates that theatrical performance was a bridge to link them together during such occasions to maintain this valuable relationship between them.

Theatrical performance appeared in written communications as a general topic of conversation, indicating the close and friendly relationship between Shanxi merchants and members of the elite class. For instance, in February of 1900, Liu He 劉和, a subordinate of Lord En of Yanping Circuit wrote a letter to the manager of Dadetong Draft Bank to express appreciation for the hospitality extended to him and Lord En during their recent visit to the Dadetong's Beijing branch, and to report the amount of money Lord En withdrew and spent in Beijing. The letter (Quoted in Zhang 2013a: 299–300) also mentions some personal matters including experiences of enjoying theatrical performances:

On the second of the twelfth month, I left Beijing and travelled to the west ... I arrived at the office on the eleventh day. On my way back, rain, river and snow were normal, causing no danger to the people who lived along the way. As for the wedding of my master's son, we received the cash gifts from two branches of your draft bank. I would like to say thank you on behalf of my master in advance. The wedding ceremony was on the twenty-fourth day ... In the office, theatrical performances have been staged for four days to entertain guests. Lord En was very fond of them [that is, the performances].

This account does not mention whether the theatre troupe was invited by Shanxi merchants to perform at the wedding ceremony. But it is clear that the recipient—that is, the manager of Dadetong Draft Bank—was aware of the theatrical performance and might have had a conversation about it with Liu He or Lord En of Yanping Circuit in advance.

As the social distinction between rich merchants and literati elites was blurred, very often they jointly held social gatherings. The *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 8.3594) describes officials' social gatherings in Beijing:

Group gathering and greeting (*tuanbai* 團拜) was held in every spring. In the capital city, officials from every government department and ministry as well as scholars who sat the imperial service examination [in the same year] would hold the event. The event was organised by the person who was responsible for it in the year. A banquet was held, and theatrical performances staged. The cost could be as much as hundreds of taels of silver. The scholars and officials with less [financial power] would also find a place for drinking together. Perhaps it was because the capital was too vast and the population too large, making things changed frequently throughout a year, so people found group gathering and greeting an

opportunity to meet each other in person. It was also the case in other provinces. Also, in many cases, scholars and officials jointly held the events with merchants.

In many other cases, Shanxi merchants invited the ruling class to attend banquets and entertained them with theatrical performances. Some account books of Shanxi draft banks kept records of the cost of entertaining guests, including officials, indicating that the expenditure of socialising with them accounted for a basic part of the operation cost of draft banks. For instance, in 1876, one branch of Rishengchang Draft Bank spent around 1380 taels of silver on paper, inkstones, bamboo brushes, entertaining guests and *juanshu* (Hao and Huo 2016: 693). From 1900 to 1901, the Hankou branch of Xietongqing Draft Bank spent around a hundred taels of silver on the banquets held for entertaining Lord Xu 許 and Lord Wen 文 and other guests (Hao and Huo 2016: 1130). The account does not include the full names of the two lords. It is likely that they were regular clients of the draft bank, and the relationship between them and the manager of the bank was so close that detailed information seemed unnecessary.

Shanxi merchants entertained the ruling class mainly at Shanxi merchants' guildhalls, young male performers' private residences, theatre gardens and perhaps at the merchants' private mansions and restaurants as well. The venues where—and the way in which—Shanxi merchants entertained the ruling class, as we shall see, helped them gain both social capital and symbolic capital.

1. Shanxi merchant guildhalls

As discussed in Chapter 1, the stages inside Shanxi merchant guildhalls were the cynosure of all eyes at major events. In some Shanxi guildhalls with stages, separate seating areas were

provided for important guests. The arrangement of seats reveals that the leaders of Shanxi merchant guilds and important guests such as officials and notables enjoyed the same prestige.

In the Shan-Shaan Guildhall of Sheqi in Henan, the two opera watch towers were designed for officials (Yang 1992: 231). Also, the stage inside the Pingyang Guildhall of Beijing is believed to have been built for the Empress Dowager Cixi to appreciate Guo Baochen's performances (Yan 2007a: 39). Like the stage of Shufang Studio (Shufang zhai 漱芳齋) in the Forbidden City and that of the Dehe Garden (Dehe yuan 德和園) in the Summer Palace, the palatial stage inside the Pingyang Guildhall featured a device that could elevate and lower performers (Yan 2007a: 39). Having a tasselled canopy, the opera watch tower to the front of the stage was likely to be exclusively the domain of leaders of the guild and important audiences (Xiao 2016: 84). In addition, in the Shanxi Guildhall of Xuzhou in Jiangsu province, the seats for Shanxi merchants and important guests were on the platform in front of the main hall of the guild (Yan 2007a: 276). From the late Qing to the early Republican era, on the thirteenth of the fifth lunar month, natives of Shanxi and local notables in Xuzhou would be invited to appreciate theatrical performances in the guildhall (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1992a: 763). Amateur performers who were natives of Shanxi and local theatre troupes would be invited to put on shows (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1992a: 763).

Entertaining the ruling class in Shanxi merchant guildhalls did not mean that only bangzi troupes were invited to perform. For instance, pihuang and local style performances were also staged in the Shanxi Guildhall of Xuzhou (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1992a: 763), as was also the case for the Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 412):

The performing activities of amateur xiqu enthusiasts in modern Inner Mongolia enjoyed a relatively long history ... During the early Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty, in the mansion of the First-Rank Prince of Alxa (Alashan qinwang 阿拉善親王), from nobility to their subordinate officials, family retainers and servants of the palace, all kept up with the fashion for learning to play theatrical performance as a form of entertainment. They pioneered the establishment of amateur performer clubs (*piaoshe* 票社) in the Inner Mongolia region. At first, they played in Kunqu, Yiyang qiang and bangzi qiang, and later more often in Jingju.

Meanwhile, merchants from the hinterland constantly passed across the Ming Great Wall to trade in Inner Mongolia and established guildhalls in major towns on the grassland. Local lords, the nobility, gentry, officials, merchant leaders and guild leaders always gathered in merchant guildhalls for amateur performances. The events were usually held during social gatherings and meetings. The amateurs had fixed entertainment venues and all the equipment. The small stage inside the Shanxi Guildhall of Duolun was mainly used by amateurs for staging performances to entertain themselves.

In Beijing, some guildhalls functioned as playhouses where literati elites gathered to socialise and appreciate performances and were considered decent venues for occasions as such. Some Shanxi merchant guildhalls were rented out for this purpose. In his research on theatrical performances in guildhall theatres in the Qing dynasty, Tanaka Issei (2012: 90) demonstrates that some powerful Beijing merchant guilds let out their stages to outsiders as a way of earning extra income. The costs of renting a guildhall as the venue for staging performances on special occasions were clearly listed in *The Guild Regulations of the Pawnshop Industry* (*Dangye*

shanghui zhangcheng 當業商會章程) (Quoted in Tanaka 2012: 90) introduced by Shanxi pawnbrokers in late Qing Beijing, showing that it had become a common practice for Shanxi merchant guildhalls in Beijing to provide the services of playhouses.

When people come to rent the guild as the venue for staging theatrical performances for occasions such as birthday celebrations, they must inform the guild leaders of their request. Only when they have obtained a document written with ‘Approved’ are these people allowed to rent the venue.

If outsiders rent the guildhall as the venue for staging theatrical performances for celebrating birthdays, in the daytime, they need to pay thirty-five silver dollars (*yinyuan* 銀圓). If their events include late night performances (*dai deng wan* 帶燈晚), then they need to pay an extra 35 silver dollars.

Water consumed during performances, in the kitchen, or by performers at the proscenium and backstage costs three silver dollars.

In the daytime, cleaning the backstage costs eight strings of cash per play. If the event includes late night performances, the cost is sixteen strings of cash per play.

The guildhall is let to outsiders for staging performances and rooms are fully furnished. If the furnishings are damaged, ruined or destroyed, or if someone allowed a fire to start due to inattention, then the broker and renter are required to make financial reparation.

In 1792, Feng Minchang 馮敏昌 (1747–1806), a high-ranking official in Beijing, once held a banquet accompanied with theatrical performances at the Fenyang 汾陽 Guildhall of Beijing

to celebrate his father's sixty-eighth birthday. The guests who were invited included his 'predecessors, fellow officials and family friends' (quoted in Qi 2011: 158). Qi Jing (2011: 158) holds that Feng Minchang was a reputable official in Beijing, so his guests must have been prominent officials and notables. Thus, the performances staged could be in Yiyang qiang or Kunqu, which prevailed in literati elite circles in Qianlong-period Beijing.

When Shan-Shaan bangzi came into fashion in the capital, bangzi troupes were invited to liven up the social gatherings of social elites. In *A History of Performers (Lingshi 1.87–88)*, Mu Rugai 穆儒丐 writes:

Big-Headed Wang (Wang datou 汪大頭) was a native of Beijing. His name was Guifen 桂芬 ...³⁸ He played the old female role of *laodan* 老旦 ... The second son of the Shan 善 family (Shan eryl 善二爺), the younger brother of Prince Su [that is, Shanqi], was very fond of Guifen and once invited him to perform together with the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony (Baoshenghe ban 寶勝和班) for four days in the Fenyang Guildhall of Beijing.

Considering the function that the Fenyang Guildhall of Beijing carried out, it is likely that Shanqi, a Manchu nobleman, rented the guildhall to appreciate theatrical performances and for socialising with men in his coterie. Which theatre troupe or performers were invited would have totally depended on his likings.

³⁸ Wang Guifen was a remarkable Jingju performer who joined the Spring-Stage Troupe (Chuntai ban) in Beijing and the Troupe of Grand-View Garden (Daguanyuan 大觀園) in Shanghai. He also served the imperial house (*Lingshi 1.87–89*).

In guildhalls that functioned as playhouses, ‘rules of etiquette and display of pomp were highly valued’ (Liao 2012a: 271). Theatre troupes with high professional skills were preferred during the gatherings of these social elites (Tanaka 2012: 90, 95–96). We know little about the content of the plays staged in Shanxi merchant guildhalls for entertaining the ruling class. As Shanxi merchant guildhalls functioned as playhouses on such occasions, historical materials depicting the performances in commercial playhouses provide some hints. In *The Miscellany of Dreams of Grandeur* (*Menghua suobu* 1.2), Yang Maojian 杨懋建 describes the performances staged in playhouses in Beijing as ‘pure singing and elegant dancing to the accompaniment of silk and bamboo instruments’ (*qingge miaowu, sizhu die zou* 清歌妙舞, 絲竹迭奏).

As service providers, Shanxi merchant guild members might not have socialised with their clients. Nevertheless, a connection between Shanxi merchant guildhalls, theatrical performances and social elites was successfully established, indicating a close relationship between Shanxi merchants and the ruling class.

2. *Xiachu* 下處 (lit. ‘lowly place’)

Another venue where Shanxi merchants entertained the ruling class was *xiachu*, or the private residences (*siyu* 私寓) of young male performers. Throughout the period from the Qianlong era towards the end of the Qing dynasty, female entertainers were largely forbidden as they were believed to be ‘the source of the demoralisation that brought about a crisis to rigorous Confucian discipline’ (Guo 2022: 37; see also Ding 2013: 131–133). As a result of this, young male performers were commonly trained to become male prostitutes in their stead. Female prostitutes were still found in various regions, including Beijing. However, they were deemed

much inferior to their male counterparts. A man was disparaged by his contemporaries if he bought the company of female prostitutes (*Chunming menglu* 1.139).

Young male performers who were also prostitutes were called *xianggong* 相公 by norm. Therefore, the private residences of young male performers were also known as *xianggong tangzi* 相公堂子, ‘the parlour of young male performers’. It is written in the *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 11.5094) that as *xianggong* was originally an honorific title for officials, alternatively, young male performers were called *xianggu* 像姑, meaning ‘like a girl’ as a way of differentiating them.

Xiachu was a pleasure house, commonly seen in Qing Beijing and Tianjin, where young male performers provided entertainments and sexual services to their clients. The great majority of *xianggong* were cross-dressing impersonators, but some of them played other roles including the young male role called *xiaosheng* 小生 (Wu 2017: 32–33). The age of *xianggong* ranged from thirteen to twenty (Wu 2017: 28). The majority of *xianggong* were *pihuang* performers, and there were others who specialised in *bangzi* and *Kunqu*.

The operation of *xiachu* is described in the *Miscellaneous Notes about Tianjin* (*Jinmen zaji* 2.217) completed in 1884 by Zhang Tao 張燾:

The masters of the *xiachu* were called the boss (*laoban* 老闆), the majority of whom used to be performers themselves. Having accumulated considerable fortunes, they kept young

performers, chose a parlour name (*tang ming* 堂名)³⁹ for their own *xiachu*, and taught young performers to sing and dance.

The atmosphere at *xiachu* and the services provided there helped its clients gain symbolic capital, because they were made to feel that they were very important people, regardless of their social echelon (Wu 2004: 149). The *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 11.5094) provides a detailed description of the environment in *xiachu*:

Performers' residences were called *xiachu*. Residences as such were concentrated at Hanjiatan 韓家潭. Some others were at Cherry Diagonal Alley (Yingtao xiejie 櫻桃斜街). The gate of a *xiachu* was hung with a signboard bearing the name of so-and-so Parlour and with a lantern. When guests entered a residence through the gate, doormen would stand up and wait on them. When the guests asked them for something, they kept their hands at their sides and spoke in a low voice in a very cautious manner. Then they lead the guests into the residence. Flowers, trees, ponds and artificial hills in the courtyard, as well as cooking vessels, wine vessels, calligraphies and paintings inside the rooms were all finely displayed. When the guests went out of the rooms, then [they could sit beside] a row of spotted bamboo, brew some tea and have a nice chat. Servants outside the door stood quietly and solemnly, surrounding the place. No whisper. No coughing. People who came to this place could keep away from all their worldly concerns.

³⁹ Mackerras (1972: 149) states that a parlour name 'was often used also to refer to the senior actor who lived and taught there'.

During the mid-Guangxu period, literati elites particularly liked this [that is, these kind of places or experience]. Moon shone above Hanjiatan. The sound of pure singing (*qingchang* 清唱) was heard from all the windows. These were truly ornaments to the peacefulness.

As it was costly to visit *xiachu* and to socialise with young male performers, the frequent customers of *xiachu* were mainly wealthy people, such as affluent officials and magnates. The well-off clients of *xiachu* were known as *laodou*. *The Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 11.5095–5096) also provides an account of the cost of having wine and food at *xiachu*:

Laodou having a drink at *xiachu* was called ‘drinking’. They could drink as much wine as they wanted, but there was no hot meal. What was put on the table was plates holding fruits, dried fruits, refreshments, cold meat dishes and the like. After wine, they had rice congee to satisfy their hunger. In the mid-Guangxu period, the wine [and services] cost ten *qian* 錢 or 40 *min* 緡⁴⁰ plus eighteen *min* in tips, adding up to fifty-eight *min* in total.⁴¹ Thenceforth silver depreciated, so the price changed to five taels of silver. When silver dollar started to be widely circulated, the price changed from five taels of silver to seven or eight silver dollars. The price increased to several times what it was. But there was still [some performers] asking for a higher price ...

Laodou having meals at *xiachu* was called *baifan* 擺飯 [lit. ‘displaying meals’]. A banquet was prepared; rare and fine dishes were dazzlingly displayed; the worthy host and good guests were both drunk and full up. A banquet cost dozens of taels of silver. This cost was even

⁴⁰ *Qian* and *min* were monetary units in the Qing dynasty.

⁴¹ Fifty-eight *min* equated to fifty-eight strings of silver cash.

pushed up due to the rather large tips to the chefs and servants. Even if a man was frequently badgered by young male performers, he would not take up every invitation unless he was very wealthy.

Clients did not visit *xiachu* merely for repasts, wines and singing. In her research on homoerotic sensibilities and the relationship between young male performers and literati in late imperial China, Cuncun Wu (2004: 12) states that young male performers ‘performed manifold roles: actor, social entertainers and/or catamites’. For Qing literati elites, visiting *xiachu* and developing an intimate relationship with young male performers was one of the ‘supreme forms of aesthetic refinement and signified status and taste’ (Wu 2004: 9) and was also an accepted extravagant and fashionable lifestyle (Guo 2022: 44). Chao Guo (2022: 49) further argues that because male *dan* 旦 (female role in theatrical performances) were considered ‘gendered females’, and the ‘cultivated femininity of male *dan* was a projection of their fragile status’, what the well-off patrons truly enjoyed at *xiachu* was the obvious manifestation of their dominant social status.

Therefore, it is not surprising that wealthy Shanxi merchants frequently entertained officials and the nobility at *xiachu*. In his study on the relationship between Shanxi bankers and Qing government officials, Kong Xiangyi (1984: 2) describes:

The people with whom draft banks associated ranged from ministers and directors to doormen and storehouse keepers (*kubing* 庫兵) ... Shanxi bankers paid them bribes [of different amount of silver] based on their ranks. During the Spring Festival or other festivals, Shanxi bankers would certainly give them money or gifts. From the twentieth day of the twelfth lunar

month to New Year's Eve, two or three rickshaws were assigned to give out the gifts everyday ... As for the nobles and high-ranking officials (*wanggong daren* 王公大人), Shanxi bankers would entertain them at *xiachu*, and served them attentively.

Kong's study reveals that it was routine for Shanxi merchants, especially Shanxi bankers, to entertain the social elites at *xiachu* as a way of suborning officials. As young male performers were regarded as 'objects of sublime beauty' (Wu 2004: 4), and their appearance rather than dramatic skills were more important to their clients (Wu 2004: 134; Guo 2022: 42), 'serving the princes and lords attentively' here might mean 'asking the most beautiful young male performers to serve them'. Thus, on these occasions, Shanxi merchants, officials and the nobility cared less about the artistic proficiency of performers.⁴²

3. *Restaurants and theatre gardens*

Restaurants and theatre gardens were also venues where Shanxi merchants and literati met. In *The Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qilu deng*), a novel completed by Li Haiguan in the Qianlong period, there is a mention of the social activity of merchants and scholars in a restaurant. On one occasion, the main character Tan Shaowen and his cousin Wang Longji would like to invite their sworn brother Sheng Xiqiao to have lunch and watch theatrical performances. On the day of the gathering, Tan and Wang have a brief discussion with Sheng about the venue, which is a restaurant named Penghu Hall (*Qilu deng* 18.107).

⁴² Chao Guo (2022: 47) states that the preference of lovers of late Qing xiqu for young male performers 'led to a serious decline in artistic standards'.

Sheng Xiqiao said: ‘Good brother, you are a businessman. If you invite those Suzhou, Hangzhou, Shanxi and Shaanxi guests, then you entertain them at restaurants, and that’s all right. But how can we brothers go to restaurants to have meals?’

Longji said with a red face: ‘Because you like entertainments. Theatrical performances were available there. So, we invite you to be there’.

The ‘Suzhou, Hangzhou, Shanxi and Shaanxi guests’ in the text refer to merchants who came from these places. We know this because Wang Longji once tells Sheng that his capital circulates between Suzhou and Hangzhou (*Qilu deng* 15.88)—in other words, he has a business relationship with people in Suzhou and Hangzhou. In addition, the story is set during the reign period of Emperor Qianlong in Kaifeng, then a bustling city where many Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants sojourned.

Tan Shaowen was a descendant of a literati family. Sheng Xiqiao, a descendant of government officials, lived in a rather decent mansion and enjoyed a profligate lifestyle. On the contrary, Wang Longji was no one but the son of a merchant. He was merely the owner of a small firm and always felt lowly in the relationship with Sheng. Their conversation reveals the gulf between merchants and literati elites in their social status, as well as the distinction between the venues where these two groups of people should go to watch theatrical performances by social norm. The fraternising between them affirms that in the Qianlong period, despite the fact that merchants could socialise with literati elites, they were still considered lowlier than literati—at least in the eyes of the author of the novel.

Although Sheng Xiqiao is not satisfied with Wang Longji’s arrangement, he eventually compromises and goes to the Penghu Hall (*Qilu deng* 18.107–110). As he loathes even the best dishes provided there, a chef working at the government office of the Circuit Intendant is asked

to cook for him (*Qilu deng* 18.109). He too is unsatisfied with the shows at the Penghu Hall and considers the performers' behaviours inappropriate (*Qilu deng* 18.107). Wang Longji begs his pardon for the performers' unprofessionalism because the performances were 'of a theatre garden' (*Qilu deng* 18.107). In this respect, restaurants were ideal places for merchants to dine and watch performances. For literati elites, they were acceptable, but certainly not preferable. Theatrical performances staged at theatre gardens were also far from satisfactory at the times. This text reveals that Shanxi merchants were frequent customers of restaurants where they could enjoy theatrical performances. It is likely that they entertained literati elites there occasionally.

Liao Ben (2012a: 135) provides an explanation as to the categorisation of restaurants which provided theatrical performance similar to theatre gardens, writing:

the description in the book [*The Lantern at the Crossroads*] is about performances in restaurants. But in the text, Penghu Hall is repeatedly referred to as a 'theatre garden' or 'playhouse'. Clearly, this kind of restaurant which features a venue for performances has already started to transition into theatre gardens in terms of their functions ... But the main business of restaurants was still selling wines and meals.

From the late Qing to the early Republican era, with further development, theatre gardens became a more ideal venue for social gatherings. A distinguishing feature of theatre gardens as a type of performance venue was that no catering services were provided to consumers (Liao 2012a: 147). In late Qing Beijing, restaurants and theatre gardens cooperated to provide one package service to customers (Qi 1979: 2802). Restaurants not only provided food and drinks for consumers but reserved seats on their behalf for theatrical performances (Qi 1979: 2802).

Famous writer and drama theorist Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1979: 2802) writes about the banquets organised in theatre gardens by sojourning merchants in Beijing:

Beiping [that is, Beijing] business and artisan circles were extremely fond of theatrical performances ... Let me talk about the business circle first.

Every spring, people in the business circle would invite their clients to have spring wine [*chunjiu* 春酒, a banquet to celebrate the new year]. If they had spring wine, they must appreciate theatrical performances. But few of them would specifically hold *tanghui* 堂會⁴³ [lit. ‘hall meeting’] performance. Only a few guilds, such as the herbal medicine guild, silk and satin guild, pigment guild, red stuff guild [i.e. jewel and jade guild], antique guild, and so on, had their own guildhalls. Other guilds did not have guildhalls of their own. Even if they did have a guildhall, only occasionally did they invite theatre troupes to perform for themselves. Most of them dined in restaurants and appreciated theatrical performances at theatre gardens.⁴⁴ In the past, the rule of theatre gardens was that the tickets for the seats upstairs facing the stage on three sides were not for sale. These tickets were all assigned to over twenty restaurants, which sold the tickets on behalf of the theatre gardens. Large restaurants grasped the opportunity to promote business. For example, when a powerful firm

⁴³ *Tanghui* refers to a type of social gathering with theatrical performances organised in indoor venues, such as guildhalls, private mansions and play gardens, on special occasions.

⁴⁴ The original text here is ‘*xiguanzi* 戲館子’, literally meaning ‘theatre house’ (Qi 1979: 2802). This designation requires a brief explanation. As Qi Rushan suggests that guild members did not have meals at *xiguanzi*, this kind of venue was devoted to theatrical performances and did not provide meals as restaurants did. Also, in Beijing, after the late Qianlong period, the most common type of venue for theatrical performances was teahouse theatre (*chayuan juchang* 茶園劇場) or theatre garden, and restaurants gradually declined (Liao 2012a: 138). Thus, the term ‘*xiguanzi*’ most likely refers to ‘theatre garden’.

gave a banquet, they usually reserved over a dozen tables. If the clients who went to appreciate performances had to find seats for themselves, this was quite troublesome.

Although Qi Rushan does not mention the native place of the merchants, it is certain that the ‘pigment’ guildhall in this account refers to the Pigment Guildhall of Beijing established by pigment merchants from Pingyao county of Central Shanxi. First, according to Hu and Bai (1994: 183), Shanxi merchants dominated the pigment industry in Beijing. Also, the Shanxi merchants’ Pigment Guildhall indeed featured a stage, which is consistent with Qi Rushan’s description. In addition, the Pigment Guildhall of Beijing was the only guildhall established specifically for the pigment industry (Hu and Bai 1994; Li 1980; Shangxi sheng xiju yanjiusuo 2009). Therefore, sojourning Shanxi merchants in Beijing indeed entertained important guests in theatre gardens.

Qi Rushan does not make it clear in his description of the banquets whether the merchants’ guests included members of the ruling class. However, officials were highly involved in the day-to-day operation of merchant guildhalls in Beijing, and guildhalls bridged the gap between officials and merchants in their social standing (Hu and Bai 1994: 10; Liu 2005: 126–127). Qi Rushan himself, a literatus who had a close relationship with merchants, officials and nobility, was also invited to attend merchants’ banquets (Qi 1979: 6348–6349). Therefore, it is highly unlikely that officials were absent at the grand banquets arranged by Shanxi merchant guild members during the Spring Festival.

4. Shanxi merchants' private mansions

Another possible venue where officials enjoyed theatrical performances in Qing times was Shanxi merchants' private mansions, although not much detailed information about this is available to us. For instance, the Meng 孟 family was originally a reputable gentry family in Taigu county of Central Shanxi. From the early years of the Qing dynasty to its Daoguang period, many descendants of the family successfully obtained high academic degrees such as Metropolitan Graduate, or held government posts, such as Salt Controller (*yanyunshi* 鹽運使) and Judicial Secretary of Provincial Administration Commission (*buzhengsi liwen* 布政司理問) (Yan 2007b: 449). Around the mid-Qing dynasty, the Meng family stepped into the business world and managed over thirty firms including money shops, pawnshops and fabric shops (Yan 2007b: 449). The Meng family owned more than twenty private mansions, the largest one of which occupied an area of over twenty thousand square metres and featured gardens and a courtyard, complete with a theatre stage (*xitai yuan* 戲台院) (Yan 2007b: 450). This private mansion functioned not only as the Meng family's summer resort but also a venue for gatherings of the local gentry (Yan 2007b: 450).

One of the most powerful Shanxi merchant families, the Qiao family in Qixian county, established a particularly intense relationship with dignitaries and socialised with them at their private mansion during major family events. In 1900, a letter (quoted in Zhang 2013a: 295) from Jia Ziyong 賈子詠, an official of Shanxi Chamber of Commerce, to the manager of Dadetong Draft Bank read:

Recently, because your business owner's auspicious birthday was approaching, I went to his place to extend my greetings to him. As I was enjoying the superb food and drinks as well as

warm hospitality, apart from heartfelt appreciation for your business owner's loving care, my gratitude is beyond description.

Dadetong Draft Bank was established around 1884, chiefly by the Qiao family (Yan 2006a: 125, 471). The 'owner' mentioned in the letter was likely to be Qiao Zhiyong 喬致庸 (1818–1907), the then-patriarch of the family.

Another example of dignitaries visiting Shanxi magnates' mansions is given in *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants (Jinshang shiliao quanlan)* (Yan 2006a: 100), which describes:

The famous Qing minister, Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠 (1812–1885), after having left his post as the Governor-general of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces as well as the Administrator of Xinjiang Affairs, was on his way back to the capital for his accession to the Grand Minister of State when he made a special visit to the private mansion of the Qiao family to have a discussion with Qiao Zhiyong.

During his visit to the mansion, Zuo Zongtang, who had once been sponsored by the Qiao family, wrote an antithetical couplet (Cheng and Gai 2008: 134), praising the Qiao family

members' virtue. The antithetical couplet is now inscribed on the spirit screen (*yingbi* 影壁) at the main entrance (Figure 8) to the Qiao Family Compound (Qiaojia dayuan 喬家大院).⁴⁵



Figure 8 The spirit screen at the main entrance of the Qiao Family Compound. Photo taken by the author in Qixian county of Central Shanxi on 18.04.2019.

The private mansion of the Qiao family covers an area of more than ten thousand square metres and contains twenty-six courtyards (Yan 2007d: 244). Many horizontal tablets and poetic couplets were inscribed by prominent late Qing officials, such as Zuo Zongtang and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (Yan 2006a: 717), showing the family's prestige. The compound features

⁴⁵ The Qiao Family's Compound is now a museum of traditional Chinese folk residences. It has become a well-known attraction in the past few decades because *Raise the Red Lantern*, a famous movie by Zhang Yimou 張藝謀, was filmed there.

a stage which is in the stage yard. The stage is currently used as a venue for video shows or short theatrical performances for tourists. The spacious courtyard in front of it is a resting area. The stage is adorned with detailed wooden carvings, gilt dragons and patterns and coloured pictures (Figure 9).



Figure 9 The stage inside the Qiao family's private mansion in Qixian county. Photo taken by the author in Qixian county of Central Shanxi on 18.04.2019.

We do not know whether the Qiao family entertained officials such as Zuo Zongtang with theatrical performance. However, considering the size of the stage and the exquisiteness of the decorations, the members of the family must have been very fond of theatrical performance. As theatrical performance was usually embedded in Shanxi magnates' banquets (Yan 2006a: 783), it was highly likely that officials were entertained with theatrical performances during their visit to Shanxi merchants' mansions.

The rise and fall of Shan-Shaan bangzi among the Beijing ruling class

As noted in the previous section, the xiqu styles that were preferred at social elites' gatherings changed over time largely depending on the elite circles' predilection. Among all the xiqu styles that were chosen for entertaining the ruling elites, bangzi was the most distinctive because it had never enjoyed royal patronage. This section demonstrates that it was Shanxi merchants' passion for theatrical performance, their elevated social status and their relationship with the ruling class that facilitated the spread of Shanxi bangzi into elite circles. Also, the popularity of Shan-Shaan bangzi in late Qing Beijing was closely linked to Shanxi merchants' commercial activities. This upsurge in popularity of Shan-Shaan bangzi followed the rapid development of Shanxi draft banks and the accelerated upward mobility of merchants after the Taiping Rebellion. After the outbreak of the Boxer Uprising, Shan-Shaan bangzi declined following the downfall of Shanxi bankers.

The rise of bangzi in Beijing

Beijing, the centre of the xiqu market in the Qing empire, witnessed two upsurges in popularity of bangzi. The first upsurge was in 1779 when the famous female impersonator Wei Changsheng 魏長生 brought Qinqiang, the earliest mature form of bangzi, into the capital and started the fashion for bangzi there. Wei's performances caused a great sensation in the capital as they satisfied the spectators' need for novelty and sensual pleasure (Zhou 2007: 473). During this time, there arose some keen supporters of bangzi, including the nobility and dignitaries. For instance, Wang Chang 王昶 (1725-1806), a literatus from Jiangsu who once served as the Right Vice Minister of the Ministry of Justice (*xingbu you shilang* 刑部右侍郎), wrote a foreword to *A Little Book of Selected Records of Qin Clouds* (*Qinyun xieying xiaopu*

秦雲擷英小譜), a collection of brief biographies of Qinqiang performers active in the Qianlong period, indicating that he was interested in Qinqiang.

From the late Qianlong to the late Daoguang period, the spread of bangzi in Beijing was constrained due to the increased popularity of Anhui troupes and imperial decrees prohibiting Qinqiang performances. Although bangzi did not completely wane in the capital, it did not have significant influence on the Beijing xiqu market. In *The Miscellany of the Dream of Grandeur* completed in 1842, Yang Maojian (*Menghua suobu* 1.2) wrote about the unfavourable position that bangzi troupes were in at the time.

A playhouse was designated as a ‘hall’ or a ‘guildhall’. It is where the gentry celebrated their birthdays and entertained their guests ... The theatrical performances in playhouses had to be performed by Anhui troupes. Large theatre gardens such as the Tower of Expansive Virtue (Guangde lou 廣德樓), the Tower of Expansive Harmony (Guanghe lou 廣和樓), the Theatre Garden of Triple Celebration (Sanqing yuan 三慶園) and the Theatre Garden of Celebration and Entertainment (Qingle yuan 慶樂園) also mainly invited Anhui troupes to perform. The less powerful theatre gardens invited a mix of Anhui troupes, smaller troupes (*xiao ban* 小班) and troupes from the west (*xi ban* 西班 [that is, bangzi troupes]).

The second upsurge in the popularity of bangzi started in the Tongzhi period. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, Shanxi merchants’ large-scale inter-regional trade helped create the transmission routes for Shan-Shaan bangzi troupes across the country. Usually, Shan-Shaan bangzi performers first travelled to Zhangjiakou to put on shows in theatre gardens including the Theatre Garden of the Great Prosperity (Daxingyuan) established by Shanxi merchants, and

then travelled to Beijing (Sun 2015: 15) because of the large potential market for theatrical performances there. The most outstanding performers, represented by Hou Junshan and Guo Baochen, were provided with the opportunity to serve and to receive praise from the ruling class.

In his *Assorted Remarks on Old Plays* (*Jiuju congtan* 1.11–12), Chen Yanheng 陳彥衡 (1868–1933), a famous *jinghu* 京胡 musician, makes it clear that bangzi came into fashion in late Qing Beijing mainly because of Shanxi bankers' support for Shan-Shaan bangzi:

During those times, there were bangzi troupes, apart from Anhui troupes. In Qing Beijing, banks were all run by Shanxi merchants. They enjoyed Qinqiang, so bangzi troupes reached their apex. The most well-known bangzi troupes were the Troupe of Righteousness and Harmony (Yishunhe ban 義順和班) and the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony (Baoshenghe ban).

Judging from the context, the word Qinqiang is most probably used here to refer to regional forms of bangzi from Shanxi and Shaanxi rather than Shaanxi bangzi as the word is understood in its strict sense. This is also the case for the rest of the chapter unless otherwise noted. The leading performer of the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony was Guo Baochen. The troupe was also known as the Troupe of Auspicious Prosperity and Harmony (Ruishenghe ban 瑞盛和班) or the Troupe of Perfect Triumph and Harmony (Quanshenghe ban 全勝和班).

The early Guangxu period saw the beginning of the heyday of Shan-Shaan bangzi in Beijing. The *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 11.5012) reads:

In the early Guangxu period, Qinqiang suddenly came into fashion. The music was rapid and loud. It sounded like someone weeping bitterly and it saddened its listeners. But xiqu lovers were all fond of it. It was hard to argue with them on whether the style was good or not. Performers no longer sang in Kunqu, Yiyang qiang and other xiqu styles. Even if someone occasionally sang in these styles, audiences were few.

In 1862, after having gained a fame in northern Shanxi and Zhangjiakou (Liu 2015: 124), former Shanxi bangzi performer Hou Junshan arrived in Beijing, joined the Troupe of Perfect Success and Harmony and later mainly sang in Hebei bangzi there (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 1149). ‘When the Beijing dignitaries met him, they were surprised and regarded him as a rarity. Most of them were infatuated with him and were delirious with excitement’ (*Lingshi* 1.37). In his *Assorted Talks on Rouge and Powder* (*Fenmo congtan* 1.9), Huang Shiquan 黃式權 (aka Mengwansheng 夢畹生, 1852–1925) writes about the change that Hou Junshan brought about in the Beijing xiqu market:

Between the year of Guiyou 癸酉 (1873) and that of Jiayu 甲戌 (1874), Shisan Dan 十三旦 [that is, Hou Junshan] achieved considerable fame in Beijing owing to his gorgeousness ... At first, people in the capital did not like Shan-Shaan zaju [that is, Shan-Shaan bangzi]. Some people derided it and considered the performers to be ‘Yiyang bangzi 弋陽梆子 performers from Shanxi who ascended the stage with rouge and powder and

resembled wooden chicken' (*fenmo dengcheng lei muji* 粉墨登場類木雞). But when Hou Junshan arrived in the capital, people started to blindly follow the trend and scrambled to deeply admire him.

Hou Junshan was invited to perform for officials during *tuanbai* to celebrate the Spring Festival. The Troupe of Righteousness and Harmony and the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony were also invited to perform on the same occasion, signalling the heyday of bangzi in late Qing Beijing elite circles (*Liyuan yiwen* 1.5; *Qingbai leichao* 11.5020).

In 1884, Hou Junshan was summoned to perform in the inner court (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 1149), creating a precedent for bangzi performers serving the imperial family. In his *History of Performers* (*Lingshi* 1.38), Mu Rugai writes:

At first, performers who served the imperial family in the inner court were all from Anhui troupes. None of the famous Qinqiang performers were selected to take on the task, except Junshan. He even enjoyed greater favour with the rulers than Tan Xinpei did. Xinpei could indeed win the favour of the Empress Dowager Cixi. But Emperor Guangxu disliked him very much and said that he was as poorly educated as a eunuch. But Emperor Guangxu particularly liked Junshan because Junshan was literate.

In comparison with the description in *The Miscellany of the Dream of Grandeur* (*Menghua suobu*), bangzi troupes attained a much more favourable position during this time. In his *Much-told Tales about the Pear Garden* (*Liyuan jiahua* 1. 150), Wang Mengsheng 王夢生, a late Qing xiqu connoisseur, writes:

The time of origin of ‘Qinqiang’ is unknown ... During the Tongguang 同光 period [that is, from the Tongzhi to the Guangxu period], the Troupe of Righteousness and Harmony and the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony were the most famous bangzi troupes in the capital. This xiqu style was further divided into Shan-Shaan style, Zhili style, Shandong style and Henan style. Shan-Shaan style was the authentic one. Thus, Shanxi troupes were treasured in the capital. The Troupe of Righteousness and Harmony and the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony were both known as Shan-Shaan troupes. The advertisement of the performers from eastern Zhili who were good at singing carried the headline ‘newly arrived from Shan-Shaan’ to show their authenticity. In fact, their xiqu style was mixed with Jingqiang 京腔 ... and was not the original style sung by strong men from Guanxi 關西.⁴⁶ In the mid-Guangxu period, Premier Zhang Zhiwan 張之萬 [1811–1897] from Nanpi 南皮 county in Zhili liked this style [that is, bangzi]. Thus, during government officials’ gatherings in the new year, the Troupe of Righteousness and Harmony and the Troupe of Treasured Triumph and Harmony were able to take on the responsibility for performing during the event, being neck and neck with Anhui troupes.

Like Yiyang qiang, Kunqu and pihuang, Shan-Shaan bangzi attracted the interests of the ruling elites. Despite the fact that bangzi did not enjoy royal patronage, whether in Beijing or in other regions, officials were willing to publicly express their interest in bangzi. Around 1882, Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), the then newly appointed Governor of Shanxi province, once attended the Fifth-Month Temple Fair in Yuci county in Central Shanxi (Wang et al. 2009: 95). Zhang, accompanied by local gentry and officials, appreciated theatrical performances at a temple

⁴⁶ Yiyang qiang was also known as Beijing Style (Jingqiang 京腔) in the late Qing dynasty. Guanxi generally refers to the west of the Hangu 函谷 Pass. The Hangu Pass is in modern Sanmenxia 三門峽—the border area of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan provinces.

devoted to the God of Literature (Wang et al. 2009: 95). Some of the plays staged on that day included *A Bed Full of Ritual Tablets* (*Man chuang hu* 滿床笏), *A Happy Family* (*Quanjia fu* 全家福) and *Subdue Jiang Wei* (*Shou Jiang Wei* 收姜維) (Wang et al. 2009: 95–96). Pleased with the performances, Zhang Zhidong ordered his subordinates to hold a Sixth-Month Temple Fair in Taiyuan (Wang et al. 2009: 96; *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 36). On the day of the Sixth-Month Temple Fair, six of the most reputable Zhonglu bangzi troupes in the prefecture were sent for to perform for the event (Wang et al. 2009: 96; *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 36).

It was also common for prominent scholars such as Li Ciming 李慈銘 (1830–1894) to visit theatre gardens to appreciate bangzi performances. In his multi-volume work *Diary from the Yueman Hall* (*Yueman tang riji* 越縵堂日記), Li kept an account of the theatrical performances, troupes, plays, cost of performances and banquets, and tips to performers and servants from the early Tongzhi period to the mid-Guangxu period. According to Zhang Dechang's (2021: 241) calculation based on Li Ciming's diary, in 1886, Li and his friends spent around forty taels⁴⁷ of silver on the theatrical performances by the Troupe of Double Harmony (Shuangshunhe ban 雙順和班), a bangzi troupe established in 1873 which was originally named the Troupe of Perfect Success and Harmony (Quanshenghe ban) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1999: 817).

The change in the social elites' preference for xiqu styles seemed to happen all at once. In the early Guangxu period, when Manchu official Zhenjun 震鈞 returned to Beijing from the south, he was shocked that 'every literatus was fond of it [that is, bangzi]' (*Tianzhi ouwen* 7.27). Zhenjun's writing was clearly an overstatement, given that there were literati who disdained

⁴⁷ This number is calculated based on Li Ciming's account statements and the list of exchange rates between several monetary units in Beijing in different periods of the Qing dynasty provided by Zhang (2021: 7, 241).

bangzi, as we shall see in the next section. But his surprise indicated that there must have been a powerful and immediate impetus behind the sudden change.

This thesis suggests that the impetus was the rapid expansion of Shanxi merchants' banking industry and their tight connection with the ruling class. We know that it was Shanxi merchants who brought Shan-Shaan bangzi to Beijing, and the peak of the Shanxi banking industry and the heyday of bangzi in Beijing happened simultaneously. Because Shanxi merchants entertained the ruling class with theatrical performances including bangzi performances, there existed a causal relationship between Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and the predilection of the ruling class for bangzi.

Shanxi bankers' close relationship with Empress Dowager Cixi and Cixi's predilection for various regional xiqu styles had an important part in the spread of Shan-Shaan bangzi into the ruling class and approved the causal relationship. Liana Chen's (2020: 58–59) research on court performances in the Qing dynasty shows that Cixi developed a great interest in popular xiqu styles of her times, collectively known as 'chaotic playing' (*luantan* 亂彈),⁴⁸ and ordered her private troupe—the Troupe of Universal Jubilation under Heaven (Putian tongqing ban 普天同慶班) to learn from commercial troupe performers in Beijing. 'The interaction between court theatre and commercial troupes in Beijing reached its height between 1893 and 1900' because Empress Dowager Cixi, who was unsatisfied with 'the occasional appearances of famous actors

⁴⁸ 'Chaotic playing', or *luantan*, is a general term for popular xiqu styles and its meaning changed over time. In the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty, chaotic playing was a derogatory term for Qinqiang (Zeng 2007: 154; Zhao 2022b: 221). During the Qianlong period, it became the general term for all *huabu* styles, as opposed to the *yabu* style that is Kunqu (Zeng 2007: 155; Zhao 2022b: 221). In the late Jiaqing period Yangzhou, *luantan* was the alternative name for clapper- and chaotic-playing style, or bangzi luntan qiang 梆子亂彈腔 (Zeng 2007: 159), which was the product of the merging of Qinqiang with the Kunshan-Yiyang Style, or Kun-Yi qiang 昆弋腔, in the late seventeenth century (Zhao 2022b: 220).

[from outside the Forbidden City] in court performances’, summoned all commercial theatre troupes in Beijing to provide daily entertainments to her (Chen 2020: 59, 237). During this period, a Shangdang bangzi troupe owned by Shanxi merchant Wang Wancheng 王萬成 (aka Wang Dadan 王大旦) was summoned to perform for the inner court. Wang Wancheng, a native of Huguan 壺關 county (in modern Changzhi 長治) who was born in the Tongzhi period, sojourned in the Fenyang area and worked for a rich family to make a living (Yan 2007b: 95). Wang married a daughter of the family and inherited a fortune from his father-in-law, which allowed him to start his own business (Yan 2007b: 95). Later, Wang claimed to have spent one hundred thousand strings of copper cash setting up a private Shangdang bangzi troupe, naming it the Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings (Shiwan ban),⁴⁹ and recruited over a hundred performers, some of whom were reputable performers in the Jincheng area (Yan 2007b: 95; *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 95, 450–451). The troupes’ costumes were either gold-plated or embroidered with golden threads (Yan 2007b: 95). The troupe had been influential for a long period of time in the Shangdang area owing to its outstanding members and luxurious costumes and props (Yan 2007b: 95; *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 95). In 1895, the troupe travelled to Beijing and performed in the Summer Palace to celebrate Empress Dowager Cixi’s sixtieth birthday (Yan 2007b: 95). Pleased with the performances, Empress Dowager Cixi bestowed a new name—Cheerfulness Troupe (Leyi ban 樂意班)—upon the troupe (Yan 2007b: 95; *Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 617).

The Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings was the only Shangdang bangzi troupe known to us that performed in the imperial palace. This royal command performance was significant as, first, it reaffirmed the impact of Shanxi merchants’ commercial activities on the spread of Shan-Shaan bangzi in the ruling class; and second, it reflected the tight connection between the

⁴⁹ It is unclear if this Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings was the one mentioned in Chapter One.

Qing court and Shanxi merchants. Without the reliance of the Qing court on Shanxi merchants' fortune and the reliance of Shanxi merchants on the Qing court's permission to conduct business in government-controlled industries, it would have been far less likely for Shangdang bangzi performers to have made their presence felt among the ruling class, considering that this xiqu style did not prevail in the Beijing area.

The royal command performance not only contributed to the spread of Shanxi bangzi among the ruling class but also benefited the development of the theatre troupe. Empress Dowager Cixi ordered that from then on, the troupe was no longer under the obligation to service local governments, and that it was exempt from paying taxes (Yan 2007b: 95). Empress Dowager Cixi's decision on the troupe's exemption from providing service to local governments was important for the troupe, for in the Qing dynasty, performers who provided service under local governors' command were usually treated unfairly. The shows were usually prolonged because government officials selected too many plays (Wang et al. 2009: 282). Services as such placed a burden on theatre troupes because they received no income (or very little income) from it and the performers even had to pay for their own food and drinks (Wang et al. 2009: 282). As no regulations were introduced concerning theatre troupes' services to local governments, in some cases government officials asked for performances out of their personal interests, leading to theatre troupes' unnecessary economic loss (Duan and Cao 2018: 40).

The fall of bangzi in Beijing

The prevalence of Shan-Shaan bangzi in late Qing Beijing, however, did not last long. Towards the end of the Qing, especially after the Boxer Uprising, the popularity of Shan-Shaan bangzi gradually decreased, partly because of the strong competition from pihuang and the decline of Shanxi merchants. Bangzi lost the competition with pihuang because it did not enjoy royal

patronage and full support from literati elites as pihuang did. Furthermore, the harsh political and economic environment pushed Shanxi merchants out of their banking industry. As a result, Shanxi bankers—the main supporters of Shan-Shaan bangzi in Beijing—could no longer provide financial support for this xiqu style.

Specifically, despite some literati's predilection for bangzi as discussed above, other literati considered bangzi 'vulgar' as opposed to Kunqu, Yiyang qiang and pihuang. To some of the literati elite, predilection for a particular xiqu style was not only a matter of fashion but also a matter of prestige. Although to some extent, their disdain for bangzi rested on the unsecured social hierarchy rather than on the xiqu style *per se*, their dissenting voices made it difficult for bangzi to achieve an impregnable position in the Beijing xiqu market.

Some literati's opinion against bangzi was demonstrated in *huapu* or flower-register texts, a genre of anecdotal writing composed by and circulated among literati who were also xiqu aficionados to praise the beauty and talents of contemporary performers. According to Chao Guo (2022: 39, 45), in the Qing dynasty, xiqu lovers could be divided into two groups, namely literati connoisseurs and well-off patrons (*laodou*), although the boundaries between them were not clear-cut. From the Qianlong period to the end of the nineteenth century, flower-register texts were in fashion among the literati connoisseurs (Wu 2004: 18). Most of the objects of appreciation in flower-register texts were cross-dressing young male *dan* performers singing in Kunqu and pihuang styles. Flower-register texts were not only a form of literary game that manifested the literati connoisseurs' proficiency in literature but also a type of 'self-conscious writing to be distributed as handbooks for those wanting reliable information about male *dan*' (Guo 2022: 45).

Noteworthy is that well-off patrons—including Shanxi merchants—and Shan-Shaan bangzi were also included in some of the flower-register texts, such as the earliest flower-register

text—*A Little Book of Orchids in Beijing* (*Yanlan xiaopu*) by Wu Changyuan 吳長元. However, bangzi performers were usually depicted as ‘dissolute’, and Shanxi merchants as ‘vulgar’, as we shall see in the accounts below.

When reading the texts, it is important to bear in mind that the flower-register writers’ disparagement of *xiren* 西人 (people from China’s western provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi), merchants and bangzi did not necessarily represent the opinion of all the members of literati circles. As Goldman (2012: 22) notes, a flower-register writer usually depicted himself as having failed in his political career and ‘drowned his disappointment in obsession with the theater’. The underlying reason for these flower-register writers to express their contempt for natives of Shanxi, merchants and bangzi was that these literati intended to make use of flower-register texts to differentiate themselves from ‘upstart’ merchants in taste, with the hope of ‘reinventing a status distinction that was being eroded in the socioeconomic sphere’ (Goldman 2012: 22), and to voice their disappointment in dynastic decadence towards the end of the Qing.

Ample evidence indicating these intentions is found in *The Qing Dynasty Historical Accounts about the Pear Garden in Beijing* (*Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* 清代燕都梨園史料) compiled by Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (1934a, 1934b). *A Little Book of Orchids in Beijing*, which is included in this compilation, contains biographies of sixty-four young male performers who were active during the period from 1774 to 1785. Twenty of them were Kunqu performers, while the others specialised in *Yiyang qiang* and *Qinqiang* (the Qin Style). In this work, Wu Changyuan frequently tried to draw a clear-cut distinction between the northerners and the southerners, and between wealthy merchants and himself, a member of the Beijing literati circles. For instance, *A Little Book of Orchids* (*Yanlan xiaopu* 2.5) notes:

Zhang Lianyi 張蓮宜 is a native of Taiyuan, Shanxi ... His tenderness and graceful movement resembles that of Suzhou ladies. One will by no means realise that he is the son of *xiren*. He does not make seductive gestures to keep up with the current fashion, so the rich pay no attention to him.

A Little Book of Orchids (Yanlan xiaopu 4.3) also writes:

Xiling 錫齡 *guan* 官 [Beau Xiling]⁵⁰ ... is graceful and gorgeous but not flirtatious ... However, the rich people adore spring flowers rather than autumn fruits, so Xiling does not enjoy great fame. Considering his situation, I heave a sigh.

In this account, ‘spring flower’, or *chunhua* 春華 referred to a person with a showy appearance but without inner beauty and refinement, as opposed to ‘autumn fruit’, or *qiushi* 秋實, which referred to a person who had admirable inner beauty. Clearly, Wu Changyuan believes that rich merchants were vulgar because they indulged in erotic sensibility and the physical beauty of performers, as opposed to refined literati such as himself who had true aesthetic taste.

⁵⁰ The word *guan* refers to young male performers who were also male prostitutes. The character was used as a suffix attached to the stage names of some performers to indicate their occupation. Cuncun Wu (2004) translates ‘*guan*’ as ‘beau’.

Similar descriptions are found in *The Record of the Unshed Tears on the Golden Stage* (*Jintai canlei ji* 1.5) completed in 1828 by Zhang Jiliang 張際亮. His account showed an obvious disdain for less refined performers and their merchant patrons.

Meng Changxi 孟常喜, whose courtesy name is Huixiang 蕙香, is a native of Yangzhou with a forthright and wild manner. He likes drinking. Sometimes when he is drunken, he curses loudly ... Feng Hongxi 馮紅喜, whose courtesy name is Yixian 藝仙, is a native of Suzhou. His wild manner resembles that of Changxi. Merchants particularly like him.

Some other literati demonstrated their negative opinions about bangzi by linking it with moral degeneration and the decline of the Qing empire. For instance, in *Missing the Beauty* (*Huifang ji* 1.13) completed in 1876, the author Luomo'an laoren 羅摩庵老人 (pseud.) advised that worthy literati, the social elites, should stay away from immoral and flirtatious performers. Qing scholar Tan Xian 譚獻 (pseud. Miyue louzhu 糜月樓主) annotated the text (*Huifangji* 1.13), criticising Hou Junshan's flirtatious manner on stage and considering spectators' liking for Hou a result of dynastic decadence.

Luomo'an Laoren wrote:

Although performer is a lowly occupation, the personality and morality of performers vary. The ones who are close to the worthy gentry can definitely be worthy of respect. They do not flatter others, do not speak of obscene matters.

Tan Xian noted:

There is a performer from the west named Shisan Dan [aka Hou Junshan], whose performances look like a butterfly in a fierce wind. What he performs is all obscene plays. The spectators watched his shows, which resemble intimate games. It is because society is on the wane that the world of xiqu has become like this.

Taken together, while wealthy Shanxi merchants and some officials supported bangzi, some literati deemed bangzi a symbol of deterioration. The intention behind these literati's disdain for bangzi was to justify their own taste.

Here arises the question as to why flower-register writers were so against merchant magnates and their taste, while some officials and wealthy merchants shared interests in xiqu styles. In his research on the social stratification in China from 1600 to 1900, Marsh (1961: 34–42) divides Chinese society into three strata based on the roles that people played. The second stratum was constituted of 'local literati' who were 'degree holders not in office' and wealthy merchants or landlords without degree. Despite their dramatic difference in financial status, scholars not in office and rich merchants without proper education combined to fulfil similar social roles such as managing local communities. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, once these wealthy merchants acquired prestige via the office selling system, they could enter the top level of the social ladder. One example in Ho Ping-ti's (1980: 83) research on social stratification in late imperial China shows that a wealthy merchant could even be rewarded with a government post of as high as a lower second rank.

Even if some scholars succeeded in the Civil Service Examination, were appointed to official positions in the capital, and received a reasonable salary, some of them still lived in poverty due to excessive expenditure on banquets and entertainments for the purpose of socialising with fellow officials, rewards for servants, properties, and so on (Zhang 2021: 52–57). Chance of promotion was also slim, considering the large number of candidates who purchased positions and were awaiting appointment. Thus, accumulated cultural capital did not necessarily guarantee high prestige. That is to say, with a great fortune, merchants without much cultural capital could easily become high officials and gain a high social status, while poor erudite men might be locked in the desperate struggle for money and status all their lives.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital, which is influenced by one's education and origin and reflected in tastes, determines class distinctions (Bourdieu 1984, 11–96). 'Taste is the basis of all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others' (Bourdieu 1984: 56). When tastes 'have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes' (Bourdieu 1984: 56). When the Shanxi magnates and their descendants of humble origin and with limited formal schooling stepped into the elite class, the social advantage of flower-register writers who also belonged to this class but had limited economic capital was threatened. Therefore, they tended to distinguish themselves from the merchants by the refusal of their taste in theatrical performances. By refusing the taste of wealthy merchants, they could legitimise and reinforce their social status.

Although not all literati elites showed disdain for magnates and bangzi as lower-register writers did, bangzi clearly did not receive complete support from literati elites. As a result, without full approval from literati elites, who set the trends in the xiqu market, Shan-Shaan bangzi could not draw a wider audience in Beijing, thus being unable to compete with pihuang, which was

enthusiastically welcomed by spectators from all social echelons. Wealthy Shanxi merchants, the main supporters of Shan-Shaan bangzi, only constituted a minor part of audiences in Beijing after all (Zhou 2007: 534).

The thirteenth year under the reign of Guangxu (1887) was the turning point of bangzi in the Beijing xiqu market. According to Zhou Yibai's (2007: 533) calculation based on *The Brief Notes on the Capital* (*Dumen jilue* 都門紀略), from 1864 to 1887, the number of bangzi troupes active in Beijing gradually increased, meaning that the popularity of bangzi did likewise. In 1887, there were three bangzi troupes and three pihuang troupes in Beijing (Zhou 2007: 533), indicating that the competition between the two xiqu styles were rather intense. However, in the same year, Yucheng 玉成 Troupe established in 1885 by Hebei bangzi performer Tian Jiyun 田繼雲 (1864–1925) made its debut in Shanghai (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990b: 652). The performance set a precedent for 'two in one pot' (*liang xia guo* 兩下鍋), referring to bangzi and pihuang performers joining the same troupe and putting on a show side by side (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990b: 652). Thereafter, bangzi gradually lost its competitiveness. In *A History of Performers* (*Lingshi* 1.35), Mu Rugai write about the situation that bangzi was in in the face of the competition with pihuang:

As for when bangzi emerged, the time of origin is very difficult to investigate and to attest to ... Since Anhui troupes started to gain popularity, bangzi was nearly eliminated in the capital. Although some well-known bangzi performers were still performing, they gradually became obscure. Guo Baochen was a typical example.

In the *Assorted Remarks on Old Plays (Jiuju congtan 1.11–12)*, Chen Yanheng provides a more detailed description of the decline of bangzi in Beijing:

Ever since Tian Jiyun established Yucheng Troupe, bangzi troupes have started to recruit performers singing in erhuang 二黄 (that is, pihuang). But famous performers were few ... The most eminent were Qinqiang performers who played *laosheng* 老生 roles, including Guo Baochen, also known as Lao yuanyuanhong 老元元紅, Yang Wazi 楊娃子, Dazihong 達子紅 and Shisanhong 十三紅; performers who played *huadan* 花旦 roles including Shisan Dan, Yizhandeng 一盞燈, Fu caizi 福才子 and Lingzhicao 靈枝草; performers who played *qingyi* 青衣 roles, including Laoyuhe 撈魚鶴 and Liuliu Dan 溜溜旦; who played *hualian* 花臉 roles, including Heideng 黑燈 and Yinyu 銀玉; as well as those who played *chou* 丑 roles, including Liu Qi 劉七 and Zhang Hei 張黑. Because experienced Shanxi performers withered day by day, gradually, Beizhi bangzi 北直梆子 performers started to mix with Shan-Shaan bangzi performers in one troupe. [The situation of Shan-Shaan bangzi or Shan-Shaan bangzi troupes] has been bound to go from bad to worse. It was perhaps because the majority of bangzi plays were so vulgar and noisy and lacked the pleasures of tranquillity that the gentry did not like them. Thus, bangzi could not compete with erhuang and was eventually knocked out [of the world of xiqu in Beijing].

Based on these accounts, the zenith of Shan-Shaan bangzi in Beijing started in the early Guangxu period and lasted for less than 20 years. Theatre historian Zhou Yibai (2007: 534) holds that the ‘two in one pot’ mode was in fact a method for remedying the unfavourable situation. His statement indicates that the ‘two in one pot’ mode signalled the apparent downward trend in the popularity of bangzi in Beijing.

In addition to insufficient support from literati, the unstable social, political and economic environment before the collapse of the Qing empire accelerated the downfall of Shan-Shaan bangzi. Shan-Shaan bangzi fell into decay in Beijing after the Boxer Uprising. Simultaneously, the Shanxi merchants' banking industry declined rapidly in the face of stiff competition from the development of modern banks and the social turmoil before the collapse of the Qing empire. The concurrence suggests a connection between Shanxi bankers' business and the extent of bangzi's popularity in Beijing.

In Beijing literati circles, Shan-Shaan bangzi performers such as Yang Wazi and Heideng mentioned in Chen Yanheng's writing above were still invited to perform at officials' *tanghui* performances by 1902, as shown in *A Brief Record of Jingju in the Last Century* (*Jingxi bainian suoji* 1.96–101) by official and theatregoer Zhou Mingtai 周明泰 (aka Zhou Zhifu 周志輔, 1896–1994).⁵¹ This book covers anecdotes about and brief records of not only Jingju performers, but performers who specialised in other xiqu styles, including Kunqu and bangzi, who had achieved a position in Beijing xiqu society. The book contains few records of Shan-Shaan bangzi performances after 1902, indicating that Shan-Shaan bangzi waned in Beijing after the outbreak of the Boxer Uprising.

The outbreak of the Boxer Uprising provoked severe crisis in the Beijing xiqu market. Pihuang successfully revived owing to the imperial house's predilection for it, the 'great love of the people' for it, and the reformation of, for instance, the content of libretto, led by reputable performers of the time (Mackerras 1972: 231–232; Mackerras 1997: 13–14). In contrast, the downfall of bangzi was irretrievable partly because Shanxi bankers, the main supporters of the xiqu style, suffered serious financial difficulties as a result of the uprising.

⁵¹ Zhou Mingtai's book was originally named *A Brief Record of the Pear Garden Since the Daoguang and Xianfeng Periods* (*Dao xian yilai liyuan xinian suoji* 道咸以來梨園繫年瑣記).

In his letter penned in 1908 to bankers from Qixian, Taigu and Pingyao counties, Li Hongling 李宏齡, the then manager of the Weitaihou Draft Bank's Beijing branch, wrote that after the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Uprising, their business in Beijing started to decline due to competition from the Bank of the Ministry of Revenue (Hubu yinhang 戶部銀行, also known as Da-Qing yinhang 大清銀行), the modern banks newly established in various provinces and the penetration of foreign banks into China (*Shanxi piaoshang chengbaiji* 1.185). The Shanxi merchants' banking industry was not able to maintain 'financial market stability in times of crisis' due its inherent limitations (Zhou et al. 2017: 384). Although Shanxi draft banks gained more fame for their trustworthiness even during the difficult time resulting from the Boxer Uprising (*Shanxi piaoshang chengbaiji* 1.177), they 'lost their monopoly of government business' because 'after 1900, Chinese revenue pledged against foreign loans or indemnities began to be deposited in foreign banks' (Yang 1952: 84). As the majority of Shanxi bankers were too conservative to join in modern banks despite the attempts of leading bankers such as Li Hongling to persuade them, Shanxi draft banks went bankrupt one after another and the whole industry quickly declined by the end of the Qing dynasty.

With the circumstances as such, entertaining the imperial family and high officials with theatrical performances could no longer set right the situation that Shanxi merchants' businesses were in. Appreciating theatrical performances was, perhaps, the last thing that they would do during a financial crisis.

Conclusion

In the late Qing dynasty, powerful Shanxi merchants managed to obtain a higher social status and accumulated social capital via association with the ruling class, thereby seeking business

opportunities. Shanxi merchants frequently entertained the ruling class with banquets and theatrical performances as a way of maintaining their relationship. Sojourning Shanxi merchants' thirst for theatrical performance and their trade routes provided Shan-Shaan bangzi troupes with opportunities to put on shows in the capital. The most outstanding performers were able to perform for the social elites, thus facilitating the spread of bangzi into the elite circles. After the Boxer Uprising, Shan-Shaan bangzi gradually went out of fashion because of stiff competition from pihuang, insufficient support from the literati and the financial crisis that beset Shanxi merchants.

This chapter demonstrates that the rise and fall of Shanxi merchants had a significant influence on the spread and development of Shan-Shaan bangzi in Beijing. It also shows that although wealthy Shanxi merchants had successfully improved their social standing, they were not powerful enough to shape the xiqu market as the literati elites did.

In Beijing, the popularity of bangzi rose and fell, and bangzi eventually lost the competition with pihuang. But in Shanxi, bangzi had been highly popular from the mid-Qing onwards. Although Shanxi merchants could not shape the xiqu society in Beijing, in Shanxi, their deep involvement in theatrical performances had a profound influence on the xiqu market there, especially in the late Qing, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performances during household events and in their leisure time

Having built up enormous fortunes and obtained titles as shown in previous chapters, many wealthy Shanxi merchants and their descendants stepped into the leisure class. They pursued a luxurious lifestyle and a lavish appreciation of theatrical performances during household events and in their leisure time. While Shanxi bangzi was deemed vulgar by some literati elites in Beijing as presented in Chapter Three, for Shanxi merchants, an active engagement with Shanxi bangzi and theatrical performances proved to be a manifestation of their elevated social status.

In Shanxi province, to better enjoy theatrical performances, some wealthy merchants established stages in their private mansions, set up family theatre troupes and held theatrical festivals. In market towns, sojourning Shanxi merchants held indulgent banquets or booked out performances (*baochang* 包場) in restaurants. Some of them also spent large fortunes establishing an intimate relationship with cross-dressing young male performers. Shanxi merchants' enjoyment of theatrical performances on these occasions was a form of conspicuous consumption that manifested their wealth and social status. Their appreciation of theatrical performance improved the communication between performers, facilitated the development of Shanxi bangzi and brought prosperity to the xiqu market in various market towns.

The leisure class in late imperial China

As discussed in Chapter Three, Shanxi merchants with considerable financial power tended to enhance their social status via office selling and a close association with the ruling class. These merchants successfully stepped into the leisure class. Members of the 'leisure class' are those

who are exempt from manual work, according to American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (2012: 10). In his insightful research on social stratification in Ming and Qing China, Ho Ping-ti (1980: 154) defines the leisure class in late imperial China as ‘active and retired officials, scholars from families of independent means, and *nouveaux riches*, who, after making their fortunes in trade or elsewhere, joined the ranks of the elite’. Wealthy Shanxi merchants and their descendants who obtained official and academic titles fell into this class and are the focus of this chapter.

Members of the leisure class had distinctive characteristics. Ho Ping-ti (1980: 154) suggests that the ‘common status symbols’ of the leisure class in late imperial China were ‘a leisurely mode of life and the pursuance of sophisticated hobbies’. Their leisurely mode of life covered many aspects, including living on a grand scale, maintaining a large number of servants, supporting kinsmen and engaging in lavish recreational activities (Ho 1980: 157). Also, in his influential work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (2012: 84) describes that the ‘leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community’ (Veblen 2012: 84). The reflection and basis of repute was ‘pecuniary strength’. To show pecuniary strength, the leisure class engaged in conspicuous consumption (Veblen 2012: 84); that is, ‘spending on goods and services primarily to display income or wealth, or to attain a certain social status’ (Hashimzade et al. 2017).

In late imperial China, merchants’ increased social status was not stable due to their relatively lower cultural capital. Therefore, they felt eager to express themselves in certain ways (Wu 2017a: 7). After they had become wealthy enough, nothing ‘but conspicuous spending for cultural purposes could secure more prestige’ (Ho 1980: 160). Shanxi merchants and Huizhou merchants—the two most powerful merchant groups in late imperial China—and their

descendants were the representatives of a lavish mode of life. Salt merchants who resided in the Lianghuai area, including Huizhou merchants and some Shanxi and Shaanxi salt merchants, were famous for their gentrified image and their involvement in theatrical performance, gardens and expensive cultural goods such as curios, calligraphy and classical paintings. In comparison, Shanxi merchants who lived in northern China took less interest in material objects and were more enthusiastic about building private mansions, enjoying theatrical performances and holding banquets and grand events.

Current social research on Ming-Qing merchants' extravagant lifestyle and their consumption of cultural products and cultural activities mainly focuses on Shanxi, Shaanxi and Huizhou salt merchants in the Lianghuai area. In his comment on Ming-Qing *nouveaux riches*'s use of cultural products, Ho (1980: 157–161) interprets it as a form of conspicuous consumption and social emulation aiming to maintain their social prestige. Similarly, in his research on the consumer society in the late Ming, Wu Jen-shu (2008: 87, 167) believes that wealthy merchants mimicked the behaviours of wealthy literati elites to gain symbolic capital. Just as Ho (1954: 158) describes, by 'sponsoring various cultural activities, members of the salt merchant families, notwithstanding their social origin, were admitted into the true elite'. However, these works do not discuss much about merchants' consumption of theatrical performance, which was also an important type of cultural activity; nor do they address the conspicuous consumption of both stay-at-home and sojourning Shanxi merchants in the north.

The following sections of this chapter demonstrate that Shanxi merchants' luxurious consumption of theatrical performance was indeed a form of conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless, it was unnecessarily a social emulation. Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performance was different from that of the literati in many respects. They developed a unique way of displaying their enhanced social status via consuming theatrical performance.

Theatrical performance and conspicuous consumption

In Chinese society, frugality has always been highly valued. Even emperors were expected not to overspend because lavishness was considered ‘the greatest evil’ (*e zhi da ye* 惡之大也) (*Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu* 1.229; *Suishu*: 24.682). Although ‘in theory the morally worthy and the talented people should enjoy more’, ‘since this was not always the case, interpretations based upon such concepts as fate (and later, *karma*) were introduced from ancient times’ to reduce a high standard of living (Yang 1957: 36).

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, however, with the development of the economy, lavish lifestyles became inevitable and increasingly common in many regions. Rich literati became the model for an indulgent lifestyle and luxurious consumption of activities. Wealthy merchants, or the *nouveaux riches*, who possessed much larger fortunes, tended to outdo whatever the wealthy literati elites did (Ho 1980: 158).

In his oft-cited work *The Diary from the House of Retreat and Meditation* (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.98), Liu Dapeng, a reputable scholar from Taigu in Central Shanxi, writes about his experience of the climate of lavishness in his hometown at the turn of the twentieth century:

The climate of lavishness is extreme in Taigu. Each firm in Central Shanxi entertains guests with sumptuous wines and meals ... There were some merchants who stuck to frugality. Other merchants shouted at them, believing that they were out of step ... I am in Taigu. The rich people laugh at me because my clothes are inelegant.

Taigu was the wealthiest county in Central Shanxi from the Ming to the mid-Qing dynasty and the hometown of many Shanxi magnates whose assets were valued at hundreds of thousands or even millions of taels of silver (*Xinxiu Taigu zhi xu* 1.272). The climate of lavishness was found not only in an affluent county such as Taigu but in many major cities and towns throughout the empire. In his *Supplementary Records from the Whistling Pavilion* (*Xiaoting xulu* 2.4733–4734), Qing Manchu nobleman Zhaolian 昭樵 (1776–1829) describes the extravagance of wealthy merchant families in Beijing:

Take the rice merchant Zhu 祝 family for example. The Zhu family started their business in the Ming dynasty. They are richer than the nobility ... As for the Hao family from Huairou 懷柔 [in modern Beijing] ... Emperor Qianlong once stayed at their home. They served Emperor Qianlong with superb cuisine and with more than a hundred dishes ... the meals for one single day cost over a hundred thousand taels of silver ... Wang family ... gathered theatre performers and was indulged with music and dances.

As an inseparable part of a lavish lifestyle, theatrical performances during revels such as luxurious banquets and *tanghui* were exclusively for men of means to liven up the atmosphere. The high frequency of banquets and *tanghui* organised by the mid-Qing officials was described in the *Old Tales about the Pear Garden* (*Liyuan jiuhua* 1.14–15):

Tanghui were held around twenty to thirty times each year. When the New Year festival holiday ended, all provincial governments held theatrical performances to celebrate the gathering and send greetings to peer officials. When Governor-generals and Governors,

provincial and regional military commanders (*tizhen* 提鎮), and the [chief commanders of] Provincial Administration Commissioner and Surveillance Commissioner (*liangsi* 兩司) came back to Beijing [from their hometowns], their fellowmen and subordinates there held banquets with theatrical performances and fine wine to entertain them. In the years when the Civil Service Examination was held, scholars who newly obtained the Provincial Graduate degree from each province would all hold banquets to entertain local authorities. The cost for a one-day banquet with theatrical performances was between two hundred and three hundred taels of silver. The cost was either covered by local governments or assigned to each attendee so that each person only needed to pay two or three taels.

Wealthy merchants were also actively involved in banquets and *tanghui* performances. Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty censured salt merchants for keeping ‘theatre troupes and female entertainers, enjoying dancing and singing, holding banquets and visiting gardens incessantly’ (*Shizongxian huangdi shengyu* 26.2). During the Daoguang and Tongzhi periods, two theatre troupes, namely the Spring-Stage Troupe (Chuntai ban) and the Moral-Sound Troupe (Deyin ban 德音班), were kept by salt merchants in Yangzhou to specially put on performances during banquets. The expenditure on the maintenance of the troupes was as high as thirty thousand taels of silver per year (*Jinhu qimo quanji* 1.4).

The high cost of organising events indicated that *tanghui*, banquets and keeping family troupes were out of the reach of commoners and literati elites with humble financial standing. A grand event or entertainment activity could put a middle-segment family into bankruptcy. In the Qing dynasty, although people who belonged to the middle segment of society increased their consumption of everyday luxuries such as silverware and silk accessories (Wu and Wang 2017: 212), they were unlikely to hold this kind of event, given that the estimated total capital of a

middle-segment family ranged from 50 taels of silver to 1,000 taels (Wu and Wang 2017: 195). At a *tanghui* performance, ‘even a small tip given by an official was sufficient to hold a complete live performance’ (*Qilu deng* 78.442). The ability to organise *tanghui* and banquets as well as keep family troupes set wealthy people apart from the rest of the population.

In the Qing dynasty, the frequency of organising *tanghui* performances even became a criterion by which to evaluate a household’s power. As described in the eighteenth century novel *The Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qilu deng* 56.303), Tan Shaowen quarrelled with his concubine Wu Cuijie, who acquired knowledge only through watching theatrical performances, and called her a ‘silly woman of a humble family’ because she judged his behaviours by comparing him to fictional characters in plays. In a moment of anger, Wu Cuijie retorted:

Are silly women of humble families willing to watch plays? Look at you, a true well-bred man! Is my next-door neighbour to the east, Commander Song’s family, less powerful than yours? They organised *tanghui* performances more than ten times each year!

Here, we see once again that frequent and lavish consumption of theatrical performances during household events and leisure time was a typical form of conspicuous consumption that distinguished the leisure class from the others.

Shanxi merchants’ lavish consumption of theatrical performances

During Shanxi merchants’ important household events and their leisure time, watching theatrical performances was a very welcome entertainment and a reflection of Shanxi

merchants' pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle. Although hard work and frugality had been valued by the founders of many Shanxi merchant families, it was unlikely for their descendants to stick to their family tradition.

In his diary in 1897, Liu Dapeng (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.74) wrote about the theatrical performances at the Chang family's mansion in Yuci county:

From the wealthy Chang family in the Chewang 車輞 village of Yuci county, one person obtained the Graduate for Pre-eminence (*bagongsheng* 拔貢生), and another person obtained the academic degree of the Provincial Graduate in the Civil Service Examination this year. The brothers [perhaps the sons of the patriarch] succeeded in the Civil Service Examination in the same year. This is indeed great. I've heard that tomorrow they are going to hold a celebration with theatrical performances and wines. Two theatre troupes are going to perform in front of the shrine dedicated to the God of Examinations (Kuixing shen 魁星神). One theatre troupe is going to perform in front of the ancestral hall. They spared no expense.

During major festivals, business owners held banquets with performances to regale not only their family members but also employees. For instance, the Dong 董 family of Dushu 杜戍 village in Hongtong 洪洞 county of Shanxi, one of the 'eight big families in southern Shanxi' (*Jinnan badajia* 晉南八大家), achieved prosperity via the trade in salt starting from the Ming dynasty. The descendants of the family either pursued government posts or operated money shops, pawnshops, salt shops or grocery stores (Yan 2007b: 307–308). The employees of the family businesses were very well-paid. 'In the first lunar month of a year when all store

managers came to present their annual report, [the business owner] always arranged lavish banquets to reward them and invited a famous theatre troupe to liven things up' (Yan 2007b: 308). 'The expenditure was considerable' (Yan 2007b: 308).

Also, in his study on Shanxi merchants' celebration of festivals and ceremonies, Cheng Suren (2003: 136), a local archivist in Central Shanxi, describes that from the Daoguang period, merchant families in Central Shanxi celebrated festivals and held ceremonies on a grand scale as a way of and interacting with people in different sectors of society. Take the Cao 曹 family for example. On the first day of the first lunar month, as an inseparable part of the Spring Festival celebration, theatrical performances began at noon (Cheng 2003: 136). In the evening, 'managers of local stores and firm managers who sojourned in various regions and came back during the Spring Festival all came to the Cao family's mansion to send their greetings' (Cheng 2003: 136). From midnight to dawn, the Cao family held banquets to entertain firm managers, followed by more performances (Cheng 2003: 136). The Lantern Festival witnessed the family's greatest celebration of the year and the most lavish consumption of theatrical performances (Cheng 2003: 137). Right outside the gate of their mansion and firms, the Cao family set up tents decorated with lanterns and stages for *zhonglu bangzi* or *yangge* 秧歌 performances (Cheng 2003: 138).

Some Shanxi merchants, especially Shanxi bankers from Central Shanxi who had superior financial status, established family troupes to better entertain family members and peers. Organising *tanghui* performances, establishing family troupes and setting up stages inside private mansions⁵² had all become the fashion for Shanxi magnates (Niu 2014: 150–151). The

⁵² Shanxi merchants, especially bankers from Central Shanxi, were known for their magnificent private mansions. Many of their mansions are extant and well-preserved. Some of the famous ones include the Qiao Family's Compound (Qiaojia dayuan 喬家大院) in Qixian county, the Qu Family's Compound (Qujia dayuan 渠家大院) in Qixian county, the Wang Family's Compound (Wangjia dayuan 王家大院) in Lingshi 靈石 county and the

following sections demonstrate that the underlying intention behind these activities was to show off the merchants' wealth and social status.

Shanxi merchants' private mansions and family troupes

Family troupes not only provided entertainment to their owners but also manifested their owners' financial power because the prerequisite for Shanxi merchants and their descendants to establish a private troupe was mainly fortune. How successful a Shanxi merchant's family troupe could be largely depended on its owner's investment in it. As Shanxi merchants' family troupes performed not only in merchants' private mansions but also in public, the troupes contributed to the merchants' prestige locally.

Setting up family troupes was not a new fashion in the Qing dynasty. In the mid-Ming dynasty, the majority of family troupe owners were officials, local gentry and salt merchants based in modern Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces (Yang 2006: 33–35), then the most affluent regions in China. Thereafter, family troupes experienced a rapid development. The importance of theatrical performance as a form of entertainment during banquets increased (Yang 2006: 38). In the mid-seventeenth century, the development of family troupes suffered a temporary setback due to the turmoil of the Ming–Qing transition. But it quickly revived in the Kangxi period, reached its peak in the Qianlong period, and then started to fall from the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods (Yang 2006: 38, 88). From the Daoguang period until the end of the Qing, it was Shanxi merchants living in northern China who were the most passionate about keeping family troupes and had the financial power to do so.

'Hall of Three Abundances' (Sanduo tang 三多堂) of the Cao family in Taigu county. Almost all of these mansions feature one or more stages.

It was rather costly to keep family troupes. As flaunting of wealth deviated from Confucian values, officials were, in fact, prohibited from maintaining family troupes in both the Ming and Qing dynasties. In 1724, for example, an imperial decree (Quoted in Ding 2010: 51–52) issued by Emperor Yongzheng stated:

It is definitely not a good thing for government officials at all levels to keep family troupes. I know very well its harm. Performers either count on their sponsors' power and trouble the poor or are sent to their sponsors' subordinates or local gentry to ask for rewards in many ways. Even worse, they take advantage of these opportunities to consort with other officials, play up with them and make trouble. A family troupe made up of twenty to thirty members costs more than thousands of taels of silver ... Officials of the rank of Prefect and above have many affairs to deal with every day. How could they have leisure time for this? Any official who keeps family troupes is not considered a good official. I order you, Governors-General and Governors, to investigate the issue from time to time. As for Governors-General and Governors yourselves, if anyone keeps family troupes, you must inspect each other's place and report it clearly in a secret memorial to inform me.

In 1769, Emperor Qianlong reissued this imperial decree because some government officials had ignored it and entrusted another official to buy young performers for them (Cited in Ding 2010: 107–108). In 1799, Emperor Jiaqing issued another decree regarding the prohibition of government officials' family troupes because some magistrates of prefectural and provincial capitals disobeyed the imperial decree and kept family troupes to perform during banquets. One banquet cost hundreds of taels of silver, which the guests who attended the banquets were

expected to cover (Cited in Ding 2010: 148). The cost was so high that the guests found it a burden (Cited in Ding 2010: 148). However, all these decrees proved ineffective.

While the imperial court tried to regulate officials, though unsuccessful, merchants enjoyed much more freedom in keeping family troupes. Although the imperial government also disapproved of merchants' extravagance, the sumptuary decrees issued by emperors seem to have had little influence on wealthy merchants' investment in family theatre troupes.

In the Qing dynasty, both Shanxi merchants and their Huizhou counterparts were famous for keeping family troupes. The great prosperity of Yangzhou salt merchants' family troupes in the mid-Qing was partly attributed to both the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors' support as a reward for their continuous donation to the imperial court (Zheng and Liu 2013: 34). In comparison, the development of Shanxi merchants' family troupes, had a close link with the economic recovery from the Taiping Rebellion period (1850–1864) and the peak of the banking industry from the mid- to late Qing dynasty.

Table 2 lists some major and relatively well documented Shanxi merchants' family troupes that were active in the Qing dynasty.

Table 2 Shanxi merchants' family troupes

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
Wang Yue 王鉞	Yuci	The Four-Joy Troupe	1859–1864	Wang et al. 2009: 27–45; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 450
Qu Yuangan 渠源淦	Qixian	The Troupe of Pear- Garden Gathering (Ju liyuan 聚梨園)	1868–1877	Wang et al. 2009: 40–55; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 451–452

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
Li Yuhe 李玉和	Xugou 徐溝	The Troupe of Dancing Clouds (Wuni yuan 舞霓園) ⁵³	Established around 1856	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 450; Wang et al. 2009: 55–68
Sun 孫 family	Taigu	The Troupe of Coloured Clouds (Jinni yuan 錦霓園)	1880 to the early Republican era	Wang et al. 2009: 77–83
Wei 尉 family	Xiangfen	Unknown	Unknown	Yan 2007b: 325

⁵³ In Wang Yongnian's memoir (Wang et al. 2009: 55–68), this troupe is called 'Troupe of Five-Virtue Garden' (*Wuyi yuan* 五義園) and is said to have been active from 1872 to 1876. The information in *Records of Chinese Theatre* (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 450) is more reliable as it is based on the local gazetteer of Xugou county published in 1939.

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
Yue Caiguang 岳彩光	Qixian	The Troupe of Growing Clouds (Yunsheng ban 雲生班) ⁵⁴	1798 to the Xianfeng period	Wang et al. 2009: 15–17; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 97, 433
Shi Chengying 時誠瀛 (1825-1898)	Xugou	The Little Pear Garden (Xiao liyuan 小梨園)	1881–1891	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 434; Wang et al. 2009: 128–137
Guo Yingzhao 郭應照	Jiexiu	The Pear Garden of Prosperity (Lu liyuan 祿梨園)	1892–late Guangxu period	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 435

⁵⁴ Wang Yongnian (Wang et al. 2009: 16) mentions that it is unclear whether The Growing-Cloud Troupe was established by Yue Caiguang.

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
Li Zhenshi 李箴視 and Yin Guanglu 尹光祿	Pingyao	The Big Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest (Da Zhufeng yuan 大祝豐園) and The Little Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest (Xiao Zhufengyuan 小祝豐園)	The Little Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest was established in 1906	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 436; Wang et al. 2009: 168–173.
Su Xing 蘇興	Qixian	The Troupe of Triple-Celebrations	Established in roughly the late Xianfeng period	Wang et al. 2009: 20–22

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
Cui Yufeng 崔玉峰	Yuci	The Troupe of Preserving Harmony (Baohe ban 保和班)	1875–1877	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 434
Qu Benwei 渠本渭 (sponsor)	Qixian	The Troupe of Everlasting Clouds (Yongni yuan 永霓園)	1918–?	Wang et al. 2009: 216
Kang family	Pingyang	Unknown	Active during the mid-Kangxi period	<i>Xixiage yesheng</i> 2.64
Yang 楊 family	Taigu county	The Second Garden of Coloured Clouds (Er Jinniuan 二錦霓園)	1893	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 435; Wang et al. 2009: 155–161

Owner's (Sponsor's) name	Owner's (Sponsor's) native place	Name of troupe	Active years	Source
The Chang family from Yuci county (sponsor)	Taigu county	The Male Pear Garden (Qian liyuan 乾梨園)	1894 ⁵⁵	Wang et al. 2009: 161–166; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 436
Wang Wancheng	Huguan 壺關 county	The Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings ⁵⁶	Active in the Guangxu period	Yan 2007b: 95–96; <i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1990a: 95, 617.
Sojourning Shanxi merchants	Xiawa 下窪 County of Aohan 敖漢 Banner in modern Inner Mongolia	The Troupe That Appeals to All (Xianyiguang ban 咸益 廣班)	Around 1765	<i>Zhongguo xiqu zhi</i> 1994b: 373–374

⁵⁵ According to *Records of Chinese Theatre* (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 436), the Male Pear Garden was established in 1904.

⁵⁶ The troupe was also known as the Troupe of Cheerfulness or Leyi ban. It was taken over by a person named Zhang Santu 张三秃 in 1908 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 450).

Only two out of seventeen of the troupes listed in the table were established before 1850. The majority of the troupes were set up after the Taiping Rebellion, suggesting that the pinnacle of Shanxi merchant private troupes coincided with rise of Shanxi merchants' banking business. The earliest and also the only recorded Shanxi merchant's Kunqu troupe was set up by the Kang family, an affluent salt merchant family sojourning in Yangzhou, who was originally from Pingyang prefecture of Shanxi and had a grand mansion there. Record of the Kang family's troupe is found in the *Unofficial History from the Pavilion of Sojourning Clouds* (*Xixiaye yesheng* 2.64) by late Qing writer Sun Jing'an 孫靜庵:

In the mid-Kangxi period, the *Palace of Eternal Life* (*Changsheng dian* 長生殿), a *chuanqi* 傳奇 play, was first produced. The Kang family asked their family troupe to put on the play. The props and costumes cost more than four hundred thousand taels of silver. In the late Yongzheng period, the mansion caught fire. The fire lasted for seventeen days and nights. All treasures were gone.

The account emphasises the cost of the troupe and the Kang family's manifestation of wealth via a family troupe. The possible reasons as to why the Kang family kept a Kunqu troupe were that they had assimilated into the local culture of the Lianghuai region at the time, and that Shanxi bangzi had not yet come into fashion in the Kangxi period. Unfortunately, apart from the information in this account, we do not know much else about Kang's troupe.

The following stories of three magnates in late Qing Central Shanxi, namely, the Qu family from Qixian county, the Li 李 family from Pingyao county and the Cao family from Taigu

county, provide us with more detailed insight as to Shanxi merchants' pattern of lavish consumption of theatrical performances.

The Qu family

The Qu family was best known for tea trade with the Mongols and Russian as well as draft bank business. Some of the most famous firms owned by the family included Changyuchuan Tea Firm and Baichuantong Draft Bank. During the Qianlong period, Qu Tonghai 渠同海 (1723–1789), one of the fourteenth generation of grandsons of the founding ancestor, started to engage in interregional trade, signalling the beginning of the rapid development of the Qu family's business (Yan 2006a: 132).

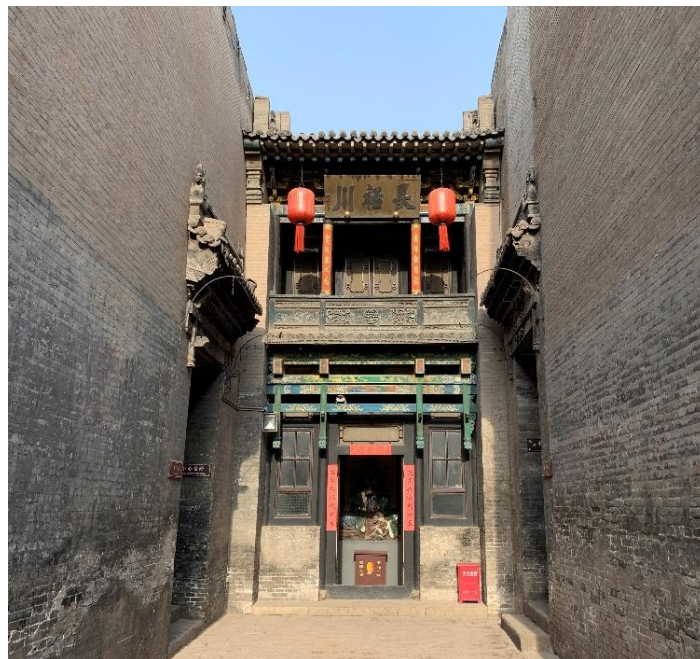


Figure 10 The headquarters of Changyuchuan Tea Firm in Qixian. Photo taken by the author on 18.04.2019.



Figure 11 European style wall decorations in one of the yards of the headquarters of Changyuchuan Tea Firm.

Photo taken by the author on 18.04.2019.

In the early nineteenth century, Qu Changfa 渠長發 (1787–1865), then the patriarch of the Qu family and one of the grandsons of Qu Tonghai, accumulated immense capital through more than thirty years in business (Yan 2006a: 132). Although it is unclear exactly when the establishment of the Qu family's private mansion began, it was Qu Changfa who primarily directed and contributed to it (Yan 2006a: 721). The extant part of the mansion consists of eight compounds, nineteen courtyards and over 240 rooms (Yan 2007d: 259).

Many members of the Qu family purchased government post titles. According to the list of official titles displayed in the Qu family's private mansion (Figure 12), over the course of the Qing dynasty, twenty-six members were bestowed official titles, around eight-five percent of which were sinecures. These titles gave the family great honour and reflected the family members' position in the leisure class.

渠氏家族官职表	
第十三世	渠锡畴 康熙二十六年—乾隆三十四年 (1687—1769) 83岁例赠承德郎 (正六品, 虚职)
第十四世	渠同海 雍正元年—乾隆五十四年 (1723—1789) 67岁守御所千总 (正五品, 虚职)
第十五世	渠 潘 乾隆九年—嘉庆二十一年 (1744—1816) 73岁昭武都尉都司衔教授武德佐骑尉守御所千总 (正四品, 虚职)
第十六世	渠映潢 乾隆二十三年—道光十二年 (1758—1832) 75岁, 直隶州州同衔 (从六品, 虚职)
	渠长盛 乾隆三十八年—咸丰三年 (1773—1853) 81岁守御所千总钦赐昭武都尉都司 (正四品, 虚职)
	渠长发 乾隆五十二年—同治四年 (1787—1865) 79岁蓝翎候銜道国子监典籍 (正七品, 虚职)
	渠长嘉 乾隆五十九年—同治二年 (1794—1863) 70岁, 盐运司同衔 (从四品, 虚职)
第十七世	渠源淦 嘉庆九年—道光九年 (1804—1829) 26岁准赠中宪大夫 (正四品, 虚职)
	渠源道 嘉庆二十四年—光绪四年 (1819—1878) 60岁, 通唐奉政大夫同知衔 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠源洛 道光二十三年—光绪二十三年 (1833—1897) 65岁, 中议大夫花翎道衔分部副郎 (从三品, 虚职)
	渠源淦 道光二十七年—民国三年 (1847—1914) 68岁, 花翎同知衔四川内江汶川县知县兵部武库司主事唐贡生 (正五品, 虚职)、(正六品, 实职)
	渠源溯 道光三十年—民国六年 (1840—1917) 78岁, 奉直大夫蓝翎分部员外郎 (从五品, 虚职)
	渠源浚 道光三十二年—民国九年 (1842—1920) 79岁, 奉直大夫晋封资政大夫法部员外郎 (正二品, 实职)
	渠晋葵 咸丰七年—民国八年 (1857—1919) 63岁, 花翎候同知补用训导唐贡生 (正五品, 虚职)
第十八世	渠晋卿 同治三年—民国十三年 (1864—1924) 61岁, 花翎五品衔内閣中书丁酉科副贡生 (正五品, 虚职)、(从七品, 实职)
	渠本立 道光十年—光绪七年 (1830—1881) 52岁, 通政大夫三品衔候选道增生 (正三品, 虚职)
	渠本静 道光十六年—光绪十八年 (1836—1892) 57岁, 奉直大夫蓝翎分部员外郎 (从五品, 虚职)
	渠本发 生卒年未记载。武德骑尉守御所千总 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠本济 生卒年未记载。例授修职郎 (正八品, 虚职)
	渠本征 同治九年—民国十六年 (1870—1927) 68岁, 例授修职郎 (正八品, 虚职)
	渠本沂 同治十二年—光绪二十七年 (1873—1901) 29岁, 奉直大夫花翎同知衔太学生 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠本渭 光绪六年—民国十七年 (1880—1928) 49岁, 同知衔分部员外郎 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠本善 同治三年—光绪三十二年 (1864—1906) 43岁, 暨佐依部候銜道增生 (从九品, 虚职)
	渠本津 咸丰十一年—光绪十六年 (1861—1890) 30岁, 同知衔平定州儒学训导副贡生 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠本源 同治十二年—光绪二十九年 (1873—1903) 31岁蓝翎同知衔湖北候补知县太学生 (正五品, 虚职)
	渠本楚 同治元年—民国八年 (1862—1919) 58岁 资政大夫典礼院直学士工部科进士 (正二品, 实职)

Figure 12 List of official titles of the Qu family members. The list is a modern compilation. Photo taken by the author in the Qu family's private mansion on 18.04.2019

One of these members, named Qu Yuangan 渠源淦 (1847–1914), the son of Qu Changfa, played a role in the development of Shanxi bangzi. Qu Yuangan inherited over a million taels of silver from his father (Yan 2006a: 133) and indulged in seeking pleasure. Qu Yuangan was a fan of Shanxi bangzi. In his time, there was a well-known Shanxi bangzi troupe named the Four-Joy Troupe established by Wang Yue 王鉞, then the head of the Wang family from Niedian village in Yuci county of Central Shanxi. Qu Yuangan believed that although the Four-Joy Troupe was formed by outstanding performers, its props and musical instruments were not good enough (Yan 2007b: 375). Hence, in around 1868, he formed his own family troupe, the Troupe of Pear-Garden Gathering (Juliuyan 聚梨園)⁵⁷ in hope of competing with the Four-

⁵⁷ The name of the troupe is questionable. In *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi 1990a: 451–452)*, it is recorded as the Garden of Gathering Wealth (Juliuyan 聚利園). According to *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants (Jinshang shiliao quanlan)* (Yan 2006a: 375) and the oral history by former Shanxi bangzi performer Wang Yongnian (Wang et al. 2009: 40–55), the name of the troupe was the Troupe of Pear-Garden Gathering. The present thesis adopts the name ‘Pear-Garden Gathering’ because it is

Joy Troupe and of gaining lasting fame in the locality (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 451–452; Wang et al. 2009: 44).



Figure 13 The stage (reconstructed) in the private mansion of the Qu family. Photo taken by the author on 18.04.2019.

Qu Yuangan ordered Wang Lianqing 王連慶, the accountant of the Qu family and the manager of the Qu family's amateur troupe (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 452), to make all the arrangements for setting up the family troupe. Qu spared no expense on his troupe. The prop boxes of the troupe were bought from a store called Hengji 恆記 in Suzhou (Wang et al. 2009: 44). Famous performers from Central and southern Shanxi were hired on a high salary (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 452).⁵⁸ To better train the performers and appreciate *tanghui*

inscribed on a horizontal tablet by Guo Shixing 郭士星, a drama theorist and an official in Shanxi province. The tablet is hung in the Qu family's private mansion during my visit to Central Shanxi in 2019. Notably, Guo Shixing is also the chief editor of *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi) Shanxi juan*. Hence, it is possible that *Records of Chinese Theatre* contains errors of fact.

⁵⁸ According to *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 450), the Four-Joy Troupe disbanded in 1864 and many of its members joined the Gathering of Pear Gardens. However, according to Wang Yongnian

performances, Qu Yuangan also established a stage in the Qu family's private mansion (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 452). The courtyard in front of the stage was rather spacious, as shown in Figure 13. As the owner of the troupe, Qu Yuangan did not need to engage in the process of recruiting performers, training and performing. The large fortune that he possessed guaranteed the professional level of the troupe and the high quality of the props and costumes.

The Li family

The Li family was the most affluent merchant family in Pingyao county of Central Shanxi during the period from the reign of Emperor Xianfeng to that of Emperor Guangxu. The family rose to prominence owing to their dye stuff business. Around 1823, Li Daquan 李大全, then the owner of the family business, set up Rishengchang, the first draft bank in China. When Li Daquan passed away in 1826, his eldest son Li Zhenshi 李箴視 (1811–1882) took over the ownership of the draft bank (Yan 2006a: 167). Under the leadership of Li Zhenshi, the Li family reached its peak very soon (Yan 2006a: 169). In the late Daoguang period, Li Zhenshi and his brothers and cousins started the establishment of four private mansions (Yan 2006a: 171). The four mansions combined were known as the Li Family's Fort (Lijiabao 李家堡), which covered an area of around twenty-three thousand square metres (Yan 2006a: 171).

(Wang et al. 2009: 27), the time of origin of the Four-Joy Troupe was unclear. It was either formed in 1859 or 1865 and operated for five years. Wang's description shows that he tends to believe that the troupe was formed in 1865 and disbanded after Wang Yue, the owner of the troupe, has heard about the superiority of the Troupe of Pear-Garden Gathering over his troupe (Wang et al. 2009: 45). No matter what the truth was, there existed a link between these two troupes, and Qu Yuangan's family troupe was indeed superior to Wang Yue's.



Figure 14 The Headquarters of Rishengchang Draft Bank in Pingyao County of Central Shanxi. Photo taken by the author on 17.04.2019.



Figure 15 The back hall of the Rishengchang Draft Bank, the venue for banquets.

Photo taken by the author on 17. 04.2019.

Like the Qu family, the Li family members also actively engaged in office selling and lived luxurious lives after having accumulated a great fortune. None of the members of the family

obtained academic degrees via the Civil Service Examination, but most of them purchased government posts and honorific titles (Yan 2006a: 172). For example, in spite of insufficient education, Li Zhenshi purchased a government post as the Prefect, a civil position of the lower fourth rank (Yan 2006a: 173). His brother Li Zhenting 李箴聽 purchased a military official post of the lower second rank (Yan 2006a: 173). Li Zhenshi also purchased honourable titles for his deceased great grandfather, grandfather and father. Even the wives of the Li family members also received titles. As a result of the elevated social status owing to purchased titles, the descendants of the family could marry into high-status families (Yan 2006a: 173).

During the Tongzhi period, Li Zhenshi established a stage inside his private mansion so that his family members could enjoy theatrical performances at home (Yan 2006a: 175). Around the late Tongzhi or the early Guangxu period, he also provided financial support to his nephew Yin Guanglu 尹光祿 to set up a family troupe (Yan 2006a: 790) named the Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest (Zhufengyuan 祝豐園). Yin Guanglu, a descendant of one of the wealthiest families in Pingyao (Yan 2006a: 790), was an indolent merrymaker who indulged in gambling and theatrical performances (Wang et al. 2009: 168–169). His father was Li Zhenshi's brother-in-law. Yin set up the Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest to please his grandmother and his uncle Li Zhenshi (Yan 2006a: 790). It was unclear whether this troupe was a zhonglu bangzi or Puzhou bangzi troupe. According to *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants (Jinshang shiliao quanlan)* (Yan 2006a: 791) and Wang Yongnian's (Wang et al. 2009: 168–170) memoir, it seemed to be a zhonglu bangzi troupe. But some Puzhou bangzi performers also joined in (Yan 2006a: 791). Some performers could also sing in Kunqu (Yan 2006a: 791).

The Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest was believed to be the most outstanding Shanxi bangzi troupe in Pingyao at the time as it was formed by the most famous performers who had

remarkable artistic skills (Yan 2006a: 175; Wang et al. 2009: 169). Yin Guanglu spent a large sum of money on props and costumes and hired famous painters to paint stage sceneries for the troupe (Yan 2006a: 791). The troupe's prop boxes were deemed novel and unusual for their time. For instance, in the play named *Sacrifice at the Leifeng Pagoda* (*Jita* 祭塔), the performers could light a fire inside the artificial pagoda on the stage. The creativity reflected the merchant family's zest for theatrical performance and their enormous investment in it.

Evidently, the troupe succeeded in showing off the wealth of the Li family. As the props and costumes were so elaborate, the scenery so vivid, and the performances so ostentatious, the troupe was also called in jest 'the Troupe of One Hundred Thousand Strings' (Shiwan ban) or 'the Dressing-and-Wrapping-Up Troupe' (Zhuangguo ban 装裹班) (Yan 2006a: 791). These names demonstrated, perhaps hyperbolically, that the characteristic that set the troupe apart from other theatre troupes in Central Shanxi was the wealth of its owner. The troupe performed not only in Fenzhou 汾州 and Taiyuan prefectures in Central Shanxi but in Zhili area as well (Yan 2006a: 791). Thus, the Li family's lavish consumption of theatre was conspicuous not only to spectators in Shanxi but also to those who were in other provinces.

The Cao family

We now look at in detail the theatrical festival organised by the Cao family at Beiguang 北洸 village in Taigu county, which was considered a major event in Taiyuan prefecture. Although historical accounts known to us on Shanxi bangzi, including *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants* (*Jinshang shiliao quanlan*) (Yan 2006a: 785), usually describe this event as an amateur performance, it was in fact atypical because most of the performers who were invited to the event were professional rather than amateur. Thus, in

the present thesis, the event is considered a yearly theatrical festival rather than an amateur performance.

The Cao family was one of the most prominent merchant families in Central Shanxi. The ancestors of the Cao family made a living out of farming for hundreds of years until Cao Sanxi 曹三喜, the fourteenth generation-grandson of the founding ancestor, travelled to North-eastern China in the late Chongzhen period of the Ming dynasty to start selling *tofu* and stew pans to make money (Yan 2006a: 46–49). Cao Sanxi's small business laid a foundation for the Cao family's business in large-scale regional trade. As early as the Qianlong period, the Cao family had already gained notable success in the business world (Yan 2006a: 49). In the early 1800s, the Cao family was divided into twelve branches, of which the most influential and wealthiest was called the Hall of Three Abundances (Sanduo tang 三多堂) (Yan 2006a: 49–51), meaning the family of plenty of sons (*duozi* 多子), plenty of good fortune (*duofu* 多福) and long life (*duoshou* 多壽).

The period from the reign of Jiaqing to the reign of Guangxu saw the rapid growth of the Cao family's business (Yan 2006a: 51). After the Daoguang period, with over three hundred firms, a total capital of over six million taels of silver and over twenty two thousand employees throughout the empire, the Hall of Three Abundances reached its apex (Yan 2006a: 51). The Cao family's firms could be found not only in many provinces in China but also in some foreign countries such as Russia and France, as shown in Figure 17. According to the *Anthology of Trivial Matters in the Qing* (*Qingbai leichao* 5.237), in the Guangxu period, the Cao family was the second wealthiest merchant family in Shanxi. The relatively well-preserved Cao family mansion in Taigu county is the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances branch of the Cao family. The mansion covers an area of around 10,600 square meters and consists of fifteen yards (Yan 2006a: 706), including two courtyards with stages (*xitai yuan*) as shown in Figure

16. The three main yards inside the mansion are called the Yard of Plenty of Good Fortune (Duofu yuan 多福院), the Yard of Long Life (Duoshou yuan 多壽院) and the Yard of Plenty of Sons (Duozi yuan 多子院).



Figure 16 Stages inside the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances in Taigu county in Central Shanxi. Photo taken by the author on 18.04.2019.

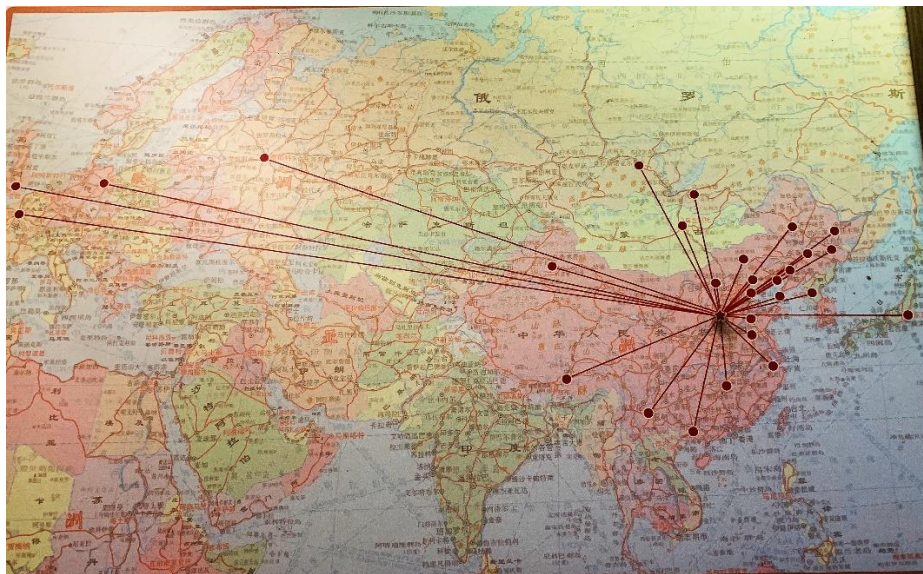


Figure 17 The geographical spread of firms owned by the Cao family. Photo taken by the author in the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances in Taigu county on 18.04.2019.

With the massive accumulation of wealth, the family developed considerable interest in obtaining official titles and academic degrees to enhance the social status of the family members. The Cao family's genealogy displayed in the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances (Figures 18 and 19) shows that nearly all male family members from Cao Sanxi to later generations possessed titles and degrees, quite a few of which were honorific titles. Therefore, all these family members belonged to the leisure class in the Qing dynasty.

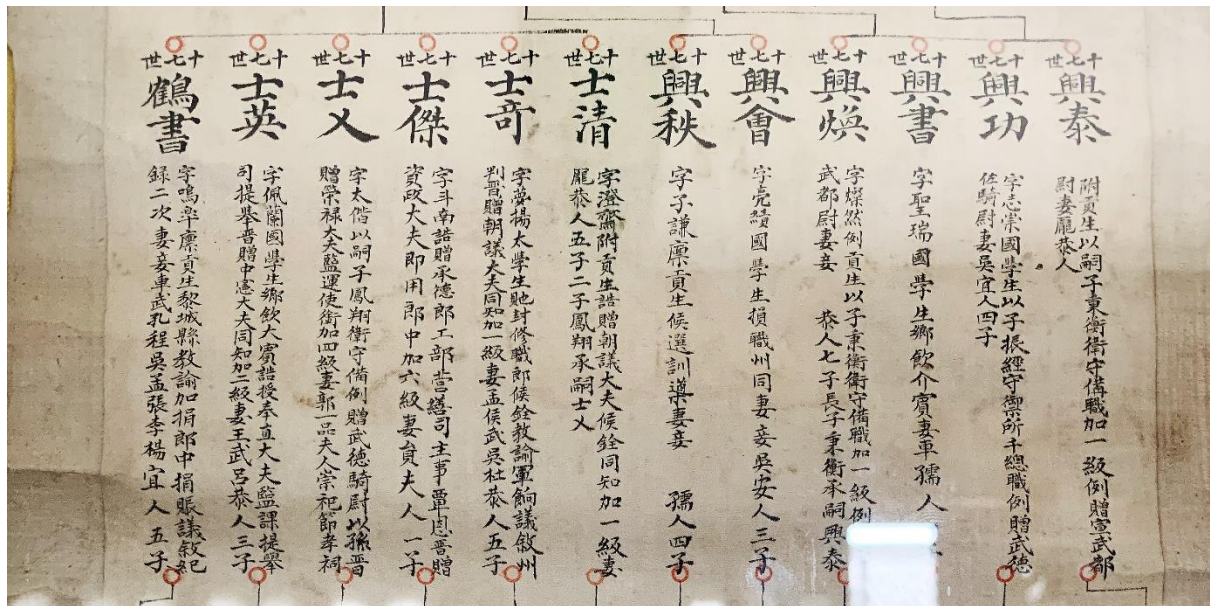


Figure 18 Cao family's genealogy (partial 1). Photo taken by the author in the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances in Taigu county on 18.04.2019.

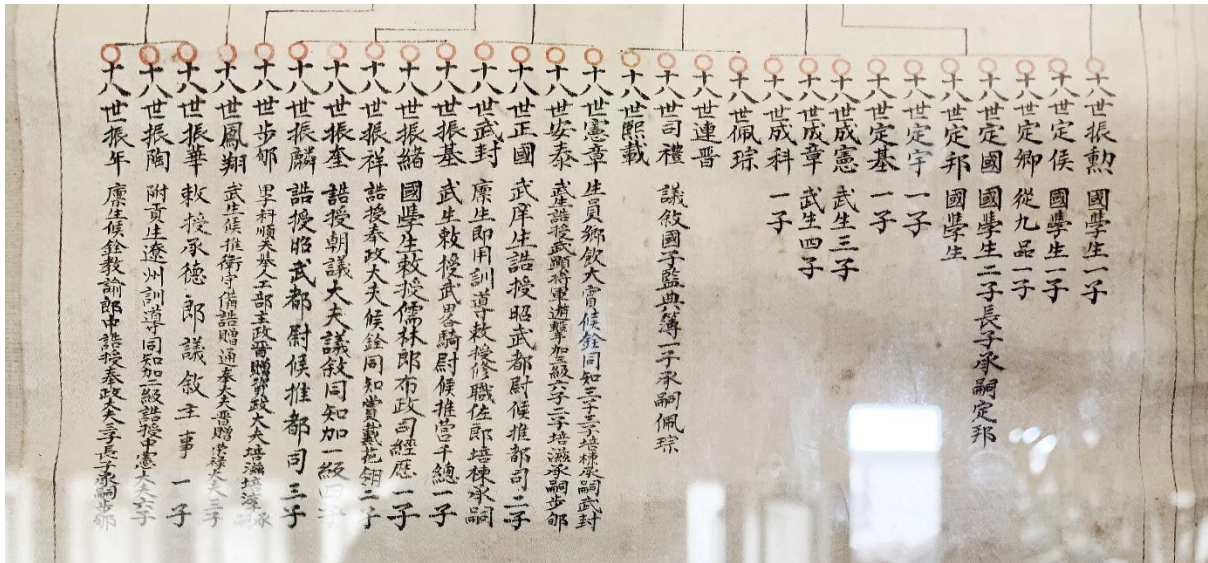


Figure 19 Cao family's genealogy (partial 2). Photo taken by the author in the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances in Taigu county on 18.04.2019.

Like the two families discussed above, the descendants of the Cao family also lived a leisurely mode of life and adopted an extravagant lifestyle. An excessive consumption of theatrical performance constituted a part of this. The Cao family members were passionate about theatrical performances, especially those in the style of zhonglu bangzi. Whenever they celebrated birthdays and weddings or entertained guests with banquets, they would invite theatre troupes to put on performances (Yan 2006a: 784). Sometimes they invited one troupe to perform inside the mansion to entertain the wives of the family members, and two more troupes to perform *duitai xi* for the local community on a temporary stage in the village (Yan 2006a: 784).

What distinguished the Cao family's engagement in theatrical performance from that of all the other merchant families in Central Shanxi in the late Qing was the annual theatrical festivals held by the Hall of Three Abundances. Detailed descriptions of the festival, including anecdotes about performers and the organisation of the event, are available in *A Comprehensive Survey of Historical Accounts about Shanxi Merchants (Jinshang shiliao quanlan)* (Yan 2006a:

782–789) and the oral history by former zhonglu bangzi performer Wang Yongnian (Wang et al. 2009: 7–10), who used to attend the event with his master when he was a teenager. According to *Records of Chinese Theatre (Zhongguo xiqu zhi 1990a: 92)*, during the Tongzhi and Guangxu periods, Cao Kerang 曹克讓 (1866–1920), the twenty-first-generation grandson of the founding ancestor, set up an amateur troupe (*zile ban* 自樂班) to entertain himself. In the late Guangxu period, every winter after the end of the winter payment period (*dongbiao* 冬標),⁵⁹ famous performers and instrumentalists gathered at the mansion of the Hall of Three Abundances to perform and have fun with the Cao family members (Yan 2006a: 784). It is unclear as to exactly when the Cao family held the first annual theatrical festival known as the ‘Combined Performances at the Hall of Three Abundances’ (*Sanduo tang huiyan* 三多堂會演) (Yan 2006a: 788). Wang Yongnian attended the theatrical festival in 1912 or 1913 (Wang et al. 2009: 9). According to his description (Wang et al. 2009: 8–9), the event had already fully developed at that time. Thus, the theatrical festival seemed to be a further extension of the artists’ yearly gathering in winter and was held many times until the early 1920s.

Wang Yongnian (2009: 8) describes the festival as a ‘privately organised high-level theatrical performance event’ that lasted for a month in late winter every year. It was different from

⁵⁹ *Biaoqi* 標期 refers to ‘the deadline for settling payment in business’ (Huang 2002: 37). In Shanxi province, by tradition, one year was divided into four *biao* or payment periods, namely, *chunbiao* 春標 (the spring payment period), *xiabiao* 夏標 (the summer payment period), *qiubiao* 秋標 (the autumn payment period) and *dongbiao* 冬標 (the winter payment period) (Huang 2002: 37).

The period of payment originated because of the international trade with modern Mongolia and Russia in the Qing dynasty (Huang 2002: 37). Merchants who travelled to what is now Mongolia exchanged goods for another without bringing cash (Huang 2002: 37). Financial institutes in Zhangjiakou provided with them financial support behind the scenes (Huang 2002: 37). At the end of one payment period, usually in winter, merchants collected their revenue in form of silver.

common amateur performances because less skilful performers and instrumentalists did not dare to join the event (Wang et al. 2009: 8). Performers were split into different groups based on the role they played and the plays they would like to perform (Yan 2006a: 785). For instance, on one day, all the performers playing the painted-face (*hualian* 花臉) role performed *The Matching of Dragon and Phoenix* (*Long feng pei* 龍鳳配). On the next day, all these performers performed *The Portrait of the Eight Righteous Men* (*Bayi tu* 八義圖) instead. On the third day, all performers playing the whiskered-male (*xusheng* 鬚生) role performed *Hit the Golden Branch* (*Da jinzhi* 打金枝). The shows began at five o'clock every afternoon and ended at ten at night (Yan 2006a: 786). On the following day, people discussed the shows and appraised the performers' skills (Yan 2006a: 786). As the spectators were demanding, the participants tried to perform or play instruments to the best of their ability (Wang et al. 2009: 9).

How the Cao family treated the participants in the theatrical festival was a clear reflection of the family's financial power and the family members' extravagance. Every year over a hundred people attended the festival (Yan 2006a: 786). The participants included experienced and reputable performers, young performers, amateur performers, poor scholars and members of other merchant families in Central Shanxi who were also theatre-lovers (Yan 2006a: 786–787). The event consisted of two parts—performances in the east yard where all performers were accommodated, and the performances in a separate hall that was accessible to all villagers (Wang et al. 2009: 202). All the performers lived in the east yard of the private mansion of the Triple-Plenty Hall. Grand banquets were prepared for the participants during lunch time. They were also served snacks every morning and evening (Yan 2006a: 786). According to Yan (2006a: 786), during the one-month event, the Cao family provided them with as many free meals, accommodations, tobacco and other necessities as they wanted. The Cao family

members also lavished gifts on famous performers (Yan 2006a: 786). For instance, Cao Shijia 曹師嘉 was very fond of Wang Yunshan 王雲山, stage name Maomaodan 毛毛旦 (Yan 2006a: 786), a cross-dressing *xiaodan* 小旦 performer who had an attractive appearance and a soft and bright vocal style and gained a fame in Central Shanxi in 1915 (Wang et al. 2009: 189). As a gift, Cao gave Wang a good sedan pulled by fine horses (Yan 2006a: 786). Considering Cao Shijia's generosity towards Wang Yunshan, it is very likely that the fashion of having an intimate relationship with young male performers as discussed in Chapter Three spread to regions beyond Beijing and Tianjin.

We do not know the exact cost of organising the grand event. However, thanks to the detailed descriptions of the occasion, it is not difficult to image how lavish and festive it was. Although the Cao family's fortune was already in decline in the late Qing and the early Republican era, the financial power of the family was still enormous, and its descendants could still afford their hobbies.

The stories of the three families above reveal the general pattern of Shanxi merchants' lifestyle and consumption of theatrical performances, that is, accumulating fortune, establishing mansions with theatre stages, hiring well-trained performers and purchasing luxurious props and costumes, and showing off their fortune via the family troupes and theatrical performances. Shanxi merchants started this fashion and had a clear understanding of the function that their family troupes carried out. It was unnecessary for merchants themselves to directly engage in the operation and training of their troupes.⁶⁰ The secret behind the success of a Shanxi

⁶⁰ In his research on theatre in Qing Yangzhou, Colin Mackerras (2009: 212) states that in the eighteenth century 'most of the men in China at the time who sponsored private companies trained their own house-slaves in theatre'. It 'was not the norm' to get 'ready famous actors from outside' (Mackerras 2009: 212). In the late Qing, this norm seemed to have changed dramatically, as most of the family troupes owned or sponsored by Shanxi merchants

merchant's family troupe was the leisure and fortune of its owner. A considerable economic power was the guarantee for purchasing high-quality prop boxes and attracting professional performers and instrumentalists with high professional skills. Therefore, the success of a merchant's family troupe was a barometer of the owner's economic situation and rich lifestyle. During household banquets, this kind of lavish consumption was conspicuous to guests. When the merchants' family troupes itinerated in other places, the lavish consumption of theatrical performances was conspicuous to spectators elsewhere.

Sojourning Shanxi merchants' conspicuous consumption of theatrical performances

Compared to Shanxi merchants who resided in their hometowns, sojourning Shanxi merchants consumed theatrical performances in different ways. Those in Beijing kept pace with the literati's fashion in *xiadan* 狎旦, or establishing an intimate relationship with cross-dressing young male performers and purchasing their sexual services, as mentioned in Chapter Three. Their excessive expenditure on the relationship differentiated them from other clients of the young male performers. Outside the capital, in some market towns in northern China, Shanxi merchants set up theatre gardens or made block bookings to watch performances in theatre gardens. While a theatre garden was not considered a decent place for social elites to appreciate theatrical performance in Beijing, Shanxi merchants redefined the position of theatre gardens in some other market towns and made the experience of watching performance there a manifestation of their elevated social standing.

were formed by already-famous performers. Some others set up professional training academies and recruited children.

Theatrical performance and theatre gardens

The majority of historical accounts about sojourning Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performance focus on those who travelled beyond the Great Wall and those who resided in a few major cities in northern China, such as Beijing and Tianjin. To begin with, Shanxi merchants who sojourned beyond the Great Wall were the major constituents of *lümeng shang* 旅蒙商, which was 'the general term that refers to the merchants, firms and merchant groups that were active and engaged in trade in the Mongolia grassland areas in modern northern China from the late Ming to the 1950s' (Wei 2020: 67). These merchants resided in major market towns at the northern frontier regions, such as Guihua or modern Hohhot, Duolun in modern Xilingol League (Xilingele meng 錫林郭勒盟) of Inner Mongolia, and Zhangjiakou which was located near the Inner Mongolia-Hebei border. These towns deserve attention because of Shanxi merchants' market dominance and the prosperity of theatrical performances there owing to their support from the early Qing to the Republican era.⁶¹

Sojourning Shanxi merchants in the middle and west part of Mongolia held banquets and appreciated performances at big playhouses (*da xiguanzi* 大戲館子), a form of entertainment venue which seems to have emerged to cater to Shanxi merchants' likings (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 89). Big playhouses appeared in the Tongzhi period (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 425).

They

⁶¹ The theatre market in the northern frontier regions did not seem to have immediately suffered from the social turmoil caused by the collapse of the Qing dynasty. In their informative research on the development of *zhonglu bangzi* and *beilu bangzi* beyond the Great Wall, Zhang Linyu and Zhang Zhiyong (2014) enumerate many anecdotes regarding *bangzi* troupes and *bangzi* performers in market towns beyond the Great Wall, such as Zhangjiakou, Baotou (in modern Inner Mongolia) and Guihua. Some Shanxi merchants who sojourned in these places were still actively involved in theatrical performances in the early Republican era.

were not a specialised venue for commercial theatrical performances. Rather, they were attached to the catering industry ... In the off-season of commercial activities, the main business of big playhouses was making yellow wine (*huangjiu* 黃酒), letting cutlery, and so on. In the high season, their business was mainly providing catering services and theatrical performances ... Big playhouses were the main performance venues for bangzi troupes. (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 425)

Some of the big playhouses were owned or run by Shanxi merchants themselves. For instance, in Guihua, there was a big playhouse named the Guildhall of Goodness and Happiness (*Jiale huiguan* 嘉樂會館) established in the Qianlong period (Che 2016: 376). The Guildhall of Goodness and Happiness used to provide a venue for banquets and gatherings for important figures such as local government officials and Assistant Commandants of the Eight Banners Military Units (*baqi zhujun xieling* 八旗駐軍掣領) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 430). In 1877, Wang Lucheng 王祿承, a native of Xinkou 忻口 town (in northern Shanxi) rented the place, converted it into a big playhouse and renamed it as the Garden of Entertaining Beauties (*Yanmei yuan* 宴美園) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 430).

The business of big playhouses and the boom of the xiqu market beyond the Great Wall was closely linked to the economic cycle of Shanxi merchants. The relation between Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and the prosperity of xiqu and big playhouses in Guihua is described by Zhang and Zhang (2014: 132) as follows:

Every winter, merchants engaged in the trade with the Mongols, bringing heaps of boat-shaped silver ingots, returned to Guihua from Dakulun 大庫倫⁶², Qiaketu 恰克圖⁶³, Hongmiaozi 紅廟子,⁶⁴ and so on. There came the golden season of theatre gardens,⁶⁵ restaurants, brothels and gambling houses following the arrival of these merchants. Famous performers from different places gathered at Guihua. In a roughly three-month period from the first nine days (*yijiu* 一九) to the ninth nine days (*jiujiu* 九九),⁶⁶ theatre-lovers watched performances without limit and enjoyed meeting up with numberless famous performers.

The architectural design of big playhouses catered to the needs of spectators. A big playhouse usually had a spacious hall and a fixed stage with seats arranged both upstairs and downstairs so that customers could enjoy meals and performances simultaneously (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 425). After 1912, these big playhouses were transferred into teahouse theatres (*chayuan juchang* 茶園劇場), a type of specialised theatre garden where meals were not provided (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1994b: 425).

It is unclear as to exactly how much Shanxi merchants spent on each performance staged in big playhouses. What we do know is that these merchants were rather generous. After the

⁶² Dakulun included modern Ulaanbaatar.

⁶³ Known in Russian as Kyakhta, Qiaketu is a town located in the border area between Russia and Mongolia. It used to be an important market town under the jurisdiction of the Qing empire.

⁶⁴ Hongmiaozi was an alternative name of Urumqi (Wulumuqi 烏魯木齊). In one of his bamboo-branch lyrics depicting the local customs in Urumqi, prominent Qing official Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) adds that ‘powerful merchants were all from Guihua ... The distance from Guihua to Dihua 迪化 (Urumqi) was only two months’ walk. But merchants needed to bring pots and tents’ (*Wulumuqi zashi*, quoted in Lei et al. 1997: 3726).

⁶⁵ Here the authors Zhang Linyu and Zhang Zhiyong consider big playhouses to be theatre gardens or teahouse theatres.

⁶⁶ After the winter solstice, every nine-day period was called ‘one nine’, or *yijiu*. Winter was by tradition divided into nine nine-day periods. *Yijiu* also refers to the first ‘one nine’. *Jiujiu* refers to the ninth ‘one nine’.

winter payment period, the merchants who sojourned in Guihua would frequently made block bookings at big playhouses to entertain guests. As described by Zhang and Zhang above (2014: 132), Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performance brought the business of big playhouses to a climax every year, meaning that their expenditure contributed most to the revenue of big playhouses during the three-month period after the winter solstice. Thus, their expenditure on theatre must have been rather high.

Shanxi merchants who sojourned in Zhangjiakou entertained peers in theatre gardens. In his oft-quoted work *Anecdotes about Theatre beyond the Great Wall* (*Saibei xiju yiwen*, quoted in Zhang and Zhang 2014: 86), theatre lover Wu Runqing provides a detailed description of the arrangement of events, matters of etiquette, participants and the environment inside theatre gardens in the mid-Guangxu period:

Most spectators who appreciated performances in theatre gardens were merchants. (As a rule, in the Qing dynasty, people in political circles were not allowed to visit theatre gardens to watch performances. This was a rule for local government officials. As for *muyou* 幕友 and *shaoye* 少爺, they had *guan-zuo* 官座. Literati usually came at the invitation of merchants. Craftsmen and farmers could only watch *yetaizi xi* 野臺子戲.⁶⁷ They were not qualified to enter theatre gardens.) Thus, merchants were all invited by each other. Clearly, there were matters of etiquette on this occasion between hosts and guests. This is the reason for the appearance of big hats (*damao* 大帽) and big garments (*dagua* 大褂).

⁶⁷ *Muyou* or private secretaries refers to literati hired by the local governments as assistants without government posts. *Shaoye* refers to the young masters of prominent families. *Guanzuo* refers to official seats. *Yetaizi xi*, literally meaning 'wild stage performances', refers to performances staged by itinerant troupes at open-air places without a fixed stage.

If a firm planned to invite guests to appreciate theatrical performances on a fixed date, it would list [the name of guests] and handed in the list to a theatre garden in advance. The theatre garden would then send out the invitation on behalf of the firm ...

On the day of entertaining guests, on the side of the host, by tradition, several servers were sent to the theatre garden, wearing big garments and big hats. This kind of uniform was of course public property owned by the firm. The servers also brought a small bag of Pekoe [black tea] ...

The performances at the theatre garden started at noon. Servers were required to go there to make arrangements at eleven o'clock. When they arrived at the theatre garden, they put a small amount of black tea into each of the pea-green (*douqing* 豆青) lidded bowls (*gaiwan* 蓋碗) which were placed on the tables that the firm had reserved ... to show that these tables were reserved ...

All the guests who were invited also came dressed in their best. Inside the gate of the theatre garden, a big billboard was hung facing the entrance. Written on it was information as to which firm reserved tables today, which row the seats were in, or which tables upstairs they reserved ...

Inside the gate there was a person working at the theatre garden, who was especially responsible for waiting for spectators to come. When a spectator arrived, he would ask: 'Which firm invited you?' If the spectator answered with the name of a firm, the person would call loudly: 'so-and-so firm, take care of your guest (*liaoke* 料客)' ...

When the host and the guests met, whether they knew each other or not, they bowed to each other with hands folded in front of the body (*zuoyi* 作揖). The host would then invite the guest to take a seat.

This description reveals lots of important detailed information regarding the nature of entertaining guests at theatre gardens in Zhangjiakou in the late Qing dynasty. Much like sojourning merchants in Beijing and Henan province, merchants who sojourned in Zhangjiakou were also regular customers of theatre gardens. It must have been very common for Shanxi merchants to entertain their guests there, considering that specific uniforms were always prepared at the firms and that the person waiting at the entrance had a clear process to follow as to how to welcome the guests invited by firms. Given that careful preparation and arrangement were in need prior to the events, and rules of etiquette were required, entertaining guests at theatre gardens was not a casual occasion. In the late Qing dynasty, the ‘architectural space’ in theatre gardens in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin ‘was used to demarcate and reinforce the social divisions’ because every ‘seating area had its place in the social hierarchy’ so that spectators from different social echelons ‘could be literally located’ (Goldstein 2003: 763). But in Zhangjiakou, theatre gardens did not welcome craftsmen and farmers, whose social status was lower. Decent outfit, a sign of wealth and prestige, was required at the occasion. Thus, theatre gardens in Zhangjiakou were decent places for entertaining guests of status. Since only merchants and literati elites were allowed to socialise at this kind of venue, these two bevvies of people enjoyed an equally high social status in Zhangjiakou. Wu Runqing was the descendent of a scholar official. His opinion was, thus, that of the literati circle and was an accurate reflection of the literati’s perception of wealthy merchants. Hence, his writing shows a dramatic increase in the social status of wealthy merchants towards the end of the Qing dynasty. Frequently entertaining guests and appreciating theatrical performances in theatre gardens displayed Shanxi merchants’ wealth and social status.

In his research on the social stratification of China from 1897 to 1927, Li Mingwei (2005: 57) states that in major cities or littoral and coastal cities, the social status of the merchant class greatly improved. Merchant giants’ lavish consumption became a fashion (Li 2005: 37).

Citizens of other social strata emulated their consumption patterns (Li 2005: 57). The writing of Wu Runqing does not reveal whether in inland cities such as Zhangjiakou merchants were superior to officials. However, as the dramatic increase in merchants' status was a general and apparent trend throughout the empire, and Zhangjiakou was very close to the capital city, it is highly likely that Shanxi merchants in Zhangjiakou were also socially superior, and their consumption pattern was a manifestation of their superior social status. Shanxi merchants came to set the trend in consumption patterns, rather than emulate them.

Merchants' lavish consumption of theatrical performers' companionship

As shown in Chapter 3, sojourning Shanxi merchants in Beijing entertained the ruling class at *xiachu*, the private residences of young male performers. Shanxi merchants themselves also frequented *xiachu* as both customers and patrons of young male performers. Compared to other groups of spectators such as scholars who wished to purchase the companionship of young male performers, Shanxi merchants were better-off and more generous. Their lavish consumption of young male performers' companionship was a manifestation of their economic superiority.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, in the Qing dynasty, many cross-dressing young male performers were considered 'de facto male prostitutes' and were comparable to courtesans (Ge 2008: 46). Of matters concerning the nature of the relationship between spectators and cross-dressing young male performers, the majority of historical accounts focus on the ruling class and educated elites, so little is known about merchants, let alone Shanxi merchants. However, scattered evidence points to the fact that, like literati elites, wealthy Shanxi merchants also established intimate relationships, perhaps including sexual relationships, with young male performers.

The spectators who purchased the companionship of young male performers were known as *laodou*. In his *Miscellaneous Writings from Jili Studio (Jiliju zazhu 6.1735)*, theatre historian Zhou Mingtai states that up to the nineteenth year under the reign of Emperor Jiaqing (that is, 1814), patrons of famous young male performers were still known as ‘foster fathers’ (*gandie* 乾爹). The appellation ‘*laodou*’ appeared in the late Jiaqing period and had been in existence until the Xuanton period (*Jiliju zazhu 6.1735*). Thus, ‘foster father’ and *laodou* were synonymous with each other. Zhou Mingtai’s description is about Beijing theatre society. In Zhangjiakou, however, in the Guangxu period, Shanxi merchants who patronised cross-dressing young male performers were still known as foster fathers. In *Anecdotes about Theatre beyond the Great Wall (Saibei xiju yiwen, quoted in Zhang and Zhang 2014: 85)*, Wu Runqing writes:

By routine, in the early twelfth month, a troupe leader led *dan* performers (most of them were *huadan* performers. Next in number was *qingyi*. At that time all performers were male. There were no female performers) to Shanxi merchants’ big firms to sign a contract for the show (*xie zhuozi* 寫桌子, [literally, ‘write tables’, that is, to ask the merchants to decide the number of spectators who would attend the show]) ...

The majority of *dan* performers in a troupe were natives of Shanxi. Most of them were foster sons (*gan erzi* 乾兒子) of the managers of tea firms and draft banks. So, the troupe leader’s success in writing tables entirely depended on *huadan*. Also, by tradition, firms entertained guests with theatrical performances in the first month of a lunar year. If it was in a year of settling large bills, the event was greater. None of the firms in Zhangjiakou did not uphold the convention. However, the number of people who would attend the show [and the amount of money that a firm would pay] depended on whether a firm was large or small. For instance, entertaining members of the Dadetong Draft Bank was the biggest business of troupes ...

When a troupe leader entered the gate of a firm, he flattered the manager of the firm excessively. And the *huadan* performer who was the foster son of the firm manager had to demonstrate his greatest ability to persuade the manager to sign the contract. They asked for quite a high price. Finally, firms like Dadetong had to write as many as tens or a hundred of tables [that is, to decide the number of people who would sit down at this many tables] and paid in cash for the performances immediately after having written tables.

All the firms in Zhangjiakou, large or small, followed this pattern in signing a contract with theatre troupes. Many a little makes a mickle. The money collected from the firms was paid to theatre performers as their annual pay.

Clearly, because *huadan* performers were wealthy Shanxi merchants' foster sons, Shanxi merchants were *laodou* or foster fathers. Thus, the relationship between Shanxi merchants and the young male *huadan* performers they patronised were beyond a 'spectator–performer' relationship. Again, it is hard to believe that the fashion of establishing an intimate relationship with young male performers was restricted to Beijing and Tianjin.

Not every *laodou* was enormously rich, but as it was costly to purchase young male *dan* performers' companionship, *laodou* were usually wealthy enough. In his *First Collection of the Records of Sleeping While Awake* (*Xingshuilu chujì* 3.1210), Qing scholar Deng Wenbin 鄧文濱 (1811–18?) writes:

The bigwigs in Beijing found it disappointing if they held a banquet without summoning *xianggong* and found it remarkable if they could summon *xianggong* ... Only *xianggong* could wear the fanciest clothes in Beijing. Only *xianggong* could place the rarest treasures at

their places. Only *xianggong* could live in the most splendid and spacious houses ... There were people who dissipated their fortune because of consorting with *xianggong*.

Deng Wenbin may have hyperbolised the lifestyle of the young male performers because this text is a satire that attacks the extravagance of young male performers who were also male prostitutes. But this text certainly suggests that enjoying the companionship of young male performers was an entertainment exclusive to the rich. The performers could maintain a glamorous lifestyle owing to *laodou*'s patronage. Their lifestyle also met the high-status clients' demand for good taste.

The fashion of intimate relationships between literati men and young male performers dates back to the mid- to late Ming dynasty and has always had a close connection with social status. Various factors gave rise to the fashion for male love among the literati elite circles. Cuncun Wu (2004: 33–39) states that the second half of the Ming dynasty saw a growth in literati elites' pursuit of homoeroticism partly as a result of libertinism, individualist philosophy of the Doctrine of the Heart (*Yangming xinxue* 陽明心學) introduced by Wang Yangming, and Wang's disciples' 'free expression of human nature and desire, as well as encouraging a carefree attitude to life'. Chao Guo (2021: 294) suggests that apart from a ban on female prostitutes, as influenced by the 'philosophical transformation in latter half of the Ming dynasty', frustrated scholars in the late Ming dynasty who failed in their political career started to deem young boy performers male prostitutes who could satisfy their 'sensual or even carnal enjoyment'. Especially in Beijing after the Yongzheng period, cavorting with young male performers became a social fascination (Wu 2004: 3–4). This fashion continued until the end of the Qing dynasty, when the centre of male homoeroticism shifted from the south to the Zhili area. 'Around the turn of the Guangxu period, in a chat among literati in the capital, some

literati called others “some performer’s *laodou*” and deemed this appellation commonplace’ (Quoted in *Jiliju zazhu* 6.1735).

From the late Ming to the mid- Qing, the literati’s fascination with young male performers was a means of displaying their sophistication, good taste, refinement, status, wealth and aesthetic predisposition (Wu 2004: 57–115; Wu 2017: 86; Volpp 2011: 179). An attachment to young male performers presented literati’s social, cultural and economic capital.⁶⁸ Liangyan Ge (2008: 42) notes that the shift of the centre of male homoeroticism from the lower reaches of the Yangtze River to Beijing—the political centre—was a clear reflection of the ‘inextricable connection of male homoeroticism to power and status’.

Noticeably, when fraternisation with young male performers was commercialised in the period from the mid- to the late Qing, their clientele was not confined to the literati elite circle anymore. As Cuncun Wu (2014: 116) states, ‘while not all boys were available to just anyone, anyone with money could find a boy’. Any affluent person was able to purchase the performers’ companionship regardless of their social class. At least after the Daoguang period, being a *laodou* was more a manifestation of economic power and had less to do with cultural sophistication, as shown in a bamboo-branch lyric titled ‘Laodou’ (*Dumen zayong*, quoted in Lei et al. 1997: 190) by Yang Jingting 楊靜亭:

It doesn’t matter whether one has a dark face or a pockmarked one,

⁶⁸ Sophie Volpp (2011: 173-213) suggests that the romantic story of the love affair between Qing official Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1625–1682) and cross-dressing performer Xu Ziyun 徐紫雲 as well as Chen’s scholar friends’ engagement in this relationship amplifies that from the late Ming to the early Qing a literatus’ attachment to young male performers or a desire for such an attachment was to tighten the relationship with his peers in his coterie. A true affection for a performer was unnecessary in fulfilling this need.

Clothes must always be glamorous.

Without gold worth a million coins,

It is hard to buy the title of *laodou*.

Wealthy people such as the managers of Shanxi merchants' draft banks, along with members of the Imperial Household Department (*neiwufu* 內務府), clerks managing documentations (*jinghan shuban* 經函書辦), sons of high officials, as well as candidates in the Civil Service Examinations constituted the main spectators of Beijing theatre gardens and established a close association with performers (Qi 1979: 6350). As for their social status, according to Li Mingwei's (2005: 69) statement of the social stratification in Beijing, wealthy Shanxi merchants occupied the second highest position on the social ladder. As the most prestigious people, including officials and nobles, were in fact legally restricted from visiting theatre gardens, theoretically, wealthy Shanxi merchants were the most esteemed of all *laodou*.

Other distinctive characteristics of sojourning merchants in comparison with other *laodou* were their manner and expenditure on socialising with young male performers. In the jestbook named *Extensive Record of the Forest of Jokes* (*Xiaolin guangji* 笑林廣記), for example, *liangmi dou* 量米斗, a Chinese measure of rice, is used metaphorically to refer to sojourning merchants who were *laodou* as it was 'straight and square' (*duanfang* 端方), and 'when it was full, it was then tipped over, all the chaff and grain husk was poured out of it' (*man ze zhong fu, qing jin zaokang* 滿則終覆, 傾盡糟糠), meaning that merchants spent all their money immediately after they had earned enough (*Xiaolin guangji* 1.5–6). In contrast, officials as *laodou* were rich and impetuous, and poor literati as *laodou* 'empty-handed' (*kongkong miaoshou* 空空妙手) (*Xiaolin guangji* 1.6–7). Very poor *laodou* were 'essentially not like

laodou but they pretended' (*Xiaolin guangji* 1.7). Their expenditure on *xiadan* was limited, 'like dots and drops of water' (*diandian didi* 點點滴滴) (*Xiaolin guangji* 1.7).

The joke is hyperbolic because, apparently, it was unlikely for sojourning merchants to spend all their money merely on patronising young male performers. But this text suggests that, first, to be a veritable *laodou*, one had to possess fortune. Second, wealthy merchants as *laodou* must have spent a considerable amount of money on young male performers for companionship, and it was their expenditure that distinguished them from other *laodou*.

An account in the *Essays on the Chrysanthemum Sector* (*Jübu congtao* 1.209) by Luo Yingong 羅癭公 (1872–1924) affirms this interpretation of the joke:

Yang Yunfang 楊韻芳 [a Jingju performer] was particularly extravagant. He liked consorting with westerners and always got drunk at their home. So, scholars did not show up at his place.

Here, Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants were known as 'westerners' (*xiren*) or 'merchants from the west' (*xishang* 西商). The affinity between an extravagant performer and merchants from the west as well as scholar-officials' disregard for such a performer indicates that Shanxi merchants as *laodou* were known for their extravagance and financial superiority over scholars. Thus, this text not only reveals that being a *laodou* was a clear manifestation of Shanxi merchants' high economic capital but suggests that Shanxi merchants spent more on performers and that they were more eager for a lavish lifestyle as a manifestation of their social status.

Extravagance and the status mobility of Shanxi merchant families

The analysis of wealthy Shanxi merchants' conspicuous consumption of theatrical performances presented above reveals a divergence of opinions on the primary intention of merchants' consumption of cultural products and engagement in cultural activities, which, as discussed earlier, was social emulation by nature. The present chapter echoes historian Wu Yulian's (2017) research on eighteenth-century merchants' engagement in cultural products as to whether merchants truly wished to eventually become literati.

In the late Ming, wealthy merchants still tried their best to emulate literati elites, 'shook off' their identity as merchants and joined literati circles (Handlin Smith 1998: 423). Two hundred years later, this was not the case anymore. Wu Yulian (2017: 14) holds that 'merchants might identify, understand, and enjoy themselves outside the realm of literati–merchant competition'. 'While becoming a literatus might be an important goal for merchants, it was by no means the only or even primary focus in their lives' (Wu 2017: 14). Historian Yu Ying-shih (2018: 204) also questions Ming–Qing merchants' preference for a 'gentrified' way of life. He believes that undoubtedly there were indeed merchants who wished to eventually become literati (Yu 2018: 199). But these kinds of statements about merchants mimicking literati behaviours oversimplifies historical fact, for there were also merchants who did not wish to start a political career and who were satisfied with their own lives (Yu 2018: 199).⁶⁹ To some merchants, government posts were in fact commodities. Therefore, entering officialdom did not glorify their lives (Yu 2018: 202).

The analysis of late Qing Shanxi merchants' lavish consumption of theatrical performance provided earlier in this chapter demonstrates a similar finding. Merchants are merchants.

⁶⁹ Noticeably, Yu Ying-shih (2018: 123, 204) mentions that the popularity of Ming–Qing fiction and theatrical performances were linked to the rise of merchant class and literati's engagement in trade.

Merchants' business is business. Although Shanxi merchants indeed ingratiated themselves with officials, invited scholars to teach their sons and longed for official titles, the great majority of them and their descendants did not pursue a political career as scholars did. In 1893, Liu Dapeng, a poor scholar who had to tutor merchants' offspring for income and attended merchants' feasts, complained in his diary (*Tuixiangzhai riji* 1.18) that only one or two out of ten people in Taigu were willing to be scholars, while most of them chose to engage in trade. What Shanxi merchants cared about the most was the economic benefits and the wealthy and powerful image they created for themselves. Displaying financial power via conspicuous consumption of theatrical performance was certainly instrumental for Shanxi merchants to maintain and showcase their prestige. However, they did not necessarily follow the pattern of literati in doing so.

Specifically, if merchants merely wished to mimic literati elites' way of consuming theatrical performance, the Shanxi bankers sojourning in Beijing should have visited the theatre gardens that the ruling class and educated literati preferred. They should have stayed away from Jinyuanlou 晉元樓, a theatre garden where Shanxi merchants usually assembled, which was described by Qing scholar Yang Maojian as an unpleasant place to go without private rooms (*yazuo* 雅座) for high-status spectators (*Menghua suobu* 1.6–7). Shanxi merchants should have socialised with the famous cross-dressing young male performers who were also famous in the literati circles and at least publicly expressed their interest in Kunqu, the refined xiqu style. As for setting up family troupes, they should have tried to be actively involved in scriptwriting and acting to show off their sophistication as some literati did. However, little evidence has been found as to these activities.

The fact as shown in this thesis was that wealthy Shanxi merchants not only developed their own lifestyle and expensive hobbies and enjoyed entertainments in their own ways but also

lead the ruling class and educated elites into their recreational world. The relationship between Shanxi merchants and performers/performances, and the relationship between merchants and literati, were the outcomes of commercialisation and the reflection of the impact of commerce on social stratification in the latter half of the Qing dynasty. While some literati were still questioning *nouveaux riches*' taste, literacy, lifestyle and family pedigree, Shanxi merchants had long been leisurely strolling around their own realm of treasure and pleasure. The once-popular idea 'merchants as déclassé and scholars as exalted' came to be held by the literati alone and was a futile defence that merchants did not care much about.

Conspicuous consumption of theatrical performance and the development of xiqu

The legacy of the Shanxi merchant group—the most powerful merchant group in the second half of the Qing dynasty—was discontinued in the Republican era. As frugality is considered a moral value that has always been held in high esteem in Chinese society, authors of some historical accounts such as Shanxi local gazetteers blame Shanxi merchants and their descendants for squandering their family fortunes and bringing about their downfall. Although Shanxi merchants' consumption of theatrical performance had an unfavourable impact on their accumulation of fortune in the long run, lavishness was by no means the only factor that eventually led to the rapid decline of Shanxi merchants. The decline in wealth and influence of Shanxi merchants was a complicated issue that involved many factors, including international and domestic economy, political turmoil and competition from the foreign modern banking industry.

Here, I do not attempt to rebut criticism of Shanxi merchants' conspicuous consumption. Rather, it is the contribution of their lavish consumption of theatrical performance to the development and spread of Shanxi regional theatre, especially zhonglu bangzi, that deserves

more attention. A good case in point is the theatrical festival held by the Cao family, which, as mentioned earlier, facilitated the interaction between performers and musicians and enlightened young performers. In his teens, Wang Yongnian, a Zhonglu bangzi performer, attended the festival with his master several times (Wang et al. 2009: 8–9). There, he had the opportunity to appreciate the performances of many experts, such as zhonglu bangzi performer Dawanrou 大碗肉, literally meaning a ‘big bowl of meat’, who was a ‘bearded-male’ (*xusheng* 鬚生) actor famous in both Shanxi and modern Hohhot. Wang Yongnian also saw Wang Xiyun 王喜雲 (1863–?), another bearded-male actor who had performed and gained fame in various cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Zhangjiakou, Baotou and Guihua (Wang et al. 2009: 9; Zhang and Zhang 2014: 135, 141). Wang Yongnian (Wang et al. 2009: 9–10) believes that the performers’ distinctive way of singing and acting and the numerous plays they excelled at were eye-opening. In addition, not only the personal experiences of the famous performers but also the stories they told about the world of xiqu enlightened him (Wang et al. 2009: 10). Wang made good friends with and met many experts at the festivals (Wang et al. 2009: 10). These people extended his knowledge and contributed to his artistry (Wang et al. 2009: 10). Wang Yongnian was probably the only late Qing zhonglu bangzi performer who gave an account of his experience of performing. But he was certainly not the only person who benefited from the event.

Some wealthy merchants from Central Shanxi also set up professional theatrical performance training schools, known as *keban* 科班, such as the Troupe of Growing Clouds (Yunsheng ban 雲生班) established by Qixian merchant Que Caiguang 岳彩光 in 1798 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 433), the Troupe of Preserving Harmony (Baohe ban 保和班) established in 1875 by Yuci merchant Cui Yufeng 崔玉峰 (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 434), the Little Pear Garden (Xiaoliyuan 小梨園) established in 1881 by Xugou 徐溝 merchant Shi Chengying 時成瀛

(*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 434; Wang et al. 2009: 128–137) and the Little Garden of Wishing for Good Harvest (Xiao Zhufengyuan 小祝豐園) established in 1906 by Yin Guanglu (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 436; Wang et al. 2009: 168–173). While it is unknown which form of Shanxi bangzi that the Growing-Cloud Troupe specialised in, the other three troupes all specialised in zhonglu bangzi. Some other merchants merely provided funds for theatrical performance training schools without retaining ownership. For instance, the Chang family from Yuci county provided financial support to a *dan* performer named Zheng Sanyin 鄭三印 to set up a professional training school designated as the Male Pear Garden (Qianliyuan 乾梨園) (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990: 436; Wang et al. 2009: 161–166).

Among all the theatrical performance training schools in Shanxi, those set up by Shanxi magnates enjoyed a higher reputation because of stronger financial support. Numbers of well-trained students from the schools later had an important place in the development of zhonglu bangzi. Their artistic skills were handed down from generation to generation and still influence the performing art of zhonglu bangzi even nowadays. Meng Zhenqing 孟珍卿, a member of the Little Pear Garden, was an exemplar. Wang Yongnian's narratives about the Little Pear Garden and Meng Zhenqing were rather detailed. A short excerpt from his narratives is given here. In 1881, Shi Chengying, a descendant of a wealthy merchant family in Xugou of Central Shanxi, who had accumulated a great wealth and enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle for years, set up the Little Pear Garden in hope of dignifying his family and gaining a lasting fame (Wang et al. 2009: 129). The professional training academy lasted for ten years and trained two groups of students (Wang et al. 2009: 128). Meng Zhenqing (stage name San'ersheng 三兒生), a clever and diligent student in the second group trained for the male role of *sheng* 生, travelled from place to place in Shanxi, Beijing and Tianjin after graduating from the school and put on plays side by side with 'almost all zhonglu bangzi players famous at his time', or played

supporting roles in their shows (Wang et al. 2009: 129). Meng possessed good professional skills in both civil and military plays and could also sing in Kunqu (Wang et al. 2009: 130). Later reputable zhonglu bangzi performers such as Ding Guoxian 丁果仙 (1909–1972) and Guo Fengying 郭鳳英 (1921–2005) sought his advice about artistic technique and learned a lot from him (Wang et al. 2009: 130).

Apart from the training schools, Qu Yuangan's family troupe—the Troupe of Pear-Garden Gathering—is worth mentioning because it gained greater fame for its efforts to reform the singing style, music and instrumental accompaniment (Wang et al. 2009: 54–55) of Puzhou bangzi and its contribution to the formation of zhonglu bangzi. As there were too many performers in the troupe, Qu Yuangan combined the troupe with the Qu family's amateur troupe and then assigned all the performers into two separate groups (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 452). One group, known as the Upper Group (*shangban* 上班), focused on the reformation of singing styles and staging, while the other group, known as the Lower Group (*xiaban* 下班), focused on training young performers (Yan 2006a: 134).⁷⁰ Drum player Song Xing'er 宋興兒, instrumentalist Peng Gen 彭根 and some reputable performers in the troupe started the reformation (Wang et al. 2009: 52). One of the innovations developed by Qu Yuangan's troupe was to separate the seating areas of instrumentalists who played stringed instruments or *wenchang* 文場, and those who played percussion instruments or *wuchang* 武場 (Wang et al. 2009: 52). Instrumentalists were also required to wear a hat and a garment to create a professional look (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 77). In addition, the performers also 'sang in a

⁷⁰ According to the oral history by Wang Yongnian, there were three possible reasons behind the division of the troupe. First, performers with higher artistic skill formed the Upper Group, while the rest of them formed the Lower Group. Second, the Upper Group focused on commercial performance, the Lower Group on training. Third, the Upper Group sang in the reformed singing style, while the Lower Group in the original style (Wang et al. 2009: 52).

lower-pitched voice to avoid hoarseness’, so that their singing sounded softer and could cater to the taste of spectators in urban areas (*Zhongguo xiqu zhi* 1990a: 91–92; Zhang and Zhang 2014: 77). The new singing style laid a firm foundation for the formation of zhonglu bangzi (Zhang and Zhang 2014: 77). Qu Yuangan’s family troupe itinerated in various counties in Central Shanxi and other prefectures including Taiyuan, Fenzhou 汾州 and Pingding, thus facilitating the spread of the reformed zhonglu bangzi in Shanxi province (Wang et al. 2009: 52).

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed Shanxi merchants’ lavish consumption of theatrical performances for entertaining family members and peers during various events and leisure time. Having accumulated enormous fortunes, the descendants of wealthy Shanxi merchants entered the leisure class and lived a leisurely mode of life. Intending to maintain and reinforce their social status, Shanxi merchants lavishly engaged in cultural activities—theatrical performances in particular. To better consume theatrical performances, Shanxi merchants established stages inside their private mansions, set up family theatre troupes and held theatrical festivals. Sojourning merchants made block bookings to watch performances in taverns, frequented theatre gardens and maintained an intimate relationship with young male performers.

While imperial decrees were repeatedly issued to prohibit government officials from keeping family troupes because it was against Confucian moral values, the imperial government gave merchants much freedom in this. Merchants in Central Shanxi were particularly passionate in establishing family troupes and stages inside their private mansions. The stories of the Li and Qu family show that establishing a family troupe was a direct method of manifesting wealth

because apart from a zest for theatre, the secret behind the success of Shanxi merchants' family troupes was mainly great fortune. The creative props, exquisite costumes, and the ability to hire the most reputable performers and instrumentalists clearly reflected Shanxi merchants' financial power. This kind of consumption was conspicuous not only to locals but also to people in other counties and provinces as the troupes itinerated. The theatrical festival held by the Cao family in the late Qing was also a reflection of the family members' leisurely mode of life and their wealth. The Cao family covered all the costs and lavishly entertained all participants during the events. This kind of consumption of performances was conspicuous to local communities.

In Beijing and major market towns in northern frontier regions, Shanxi merchants routinely held grand banquets and frequently entertained guests in theatre gardens. As the money that Shanxi merchants spent on banquets with performances constituted a major part of big playhouses' overall revenue, appreciating performances at big playhouses was a reflection of Shanxi merchants' fortune. Shanxi merchants kept up with the fashion in *xiadan* and frequented theatre gardens. The historical evidence available to us suggests an intimate relationship between Shanxi merchants as patrons and young male performers as catamites. The relationship further reinforced and manifested Shanxi merchants' wealth and social standing.

From the perspective of theatre history, Shanxi merchants' conspicuous consumption of theatrical performances facilitated the development and spread of Shanxi regional theatre, especially *zhonglu bangzi*. Shanxi merchants' contributions to the development of *xiqu* still influence the performing art of *zhonglu bangzi* even nowadays.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the dynamic relationship between Shanxi merchants and theatrical performances from a socio-economic perspective and adopted sociological theories in the analysis of historical evidence. In so doing, this thesis has shed light on the underlying reason for Shanxi merchants to sponsor and lavishly consume theatrical performances—that is, their desire to acquire and maintain a high social status. The above observation is made in line with the cycle of capital, a theory developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who states that under certain circumstances the three essential forms of capital—economic capital, cultural capital and social capital—are transferrable.

To be specific, Shanxi merchants sponsored theatrical performances during guild gatherings and temple fairs as a way of accumulating economic capital. When some of them became wealthy enough, they converted their economic capital into cultural capital, the sign of social status, by purchasing government posts and degrees. With high economic capital and cultural capital, they were able to make use of theatrical performances to socialise with the upper-class elites as a way of accumulating social capital, thereby adding to their economic capital. With substantial economic capital and an elevated social status, Shanxi merchant giants and their descendants engaged in the conspicuous consumption of theatrical performances to maintain and reinforce their social status.

The success story of Shanxi merchants began in the early Ming dynasty when the Hongwu emperor issued an imperial decree called *kaizhong fa* encouraging merchants to engage in the trade of salt. Owing to this decree, Shanxi merchants started their regional trade and then gradually expanded their business to many other industries such as tea, horses and herbal medicine. In the Qing dynasty, especially from the mid-Qing onwards, Shanxi merchants'

business further expanded. They established the very first draft bank in the early nineteenth century. The emergence of draft banks signalled the beginning of the banking industry in China and the golden age of Shanxi merchants' business, which continued until the collapse of Qing dynasty in 1911.

The Qing dynasty also witnessed the rapid development of numerous regional xiqu styles throughout the country. Predominant in Chinese theatre were four major systems of xiqu styles, namely bangzi, Kunshan, Yiyang and pihuang, and predominant in Shanxi theatre were the four regional forms of bangzi: Puzhou bangzi, Shangdang bangzi, zhonglu bangzi and beilu bangzi, which are collectively known as Shanxi bangzi. All these forms benefited from Shanxi merchants' support.

Shanxi merchants were passionate about theatrical performances, especially their 'hometown theatre'—Shanxi bangzi. This thesis has discussed four major occasions on which Shanxi merchants appreciated theatrical performance: Shanxi merchant guild gatherings, temple fairs, socialising with the ruling elites and during household events and leisure time. Chapter 1 focused on theatrical performances during Shanxi merchants' regular gatherings. From the late Ming to the late Qing, Shanxi merchants established more than five hundred merchant guildhalls throughout the country to provide support to fellow traders. Shanxi merchant guildhalls functioned as venues for settling business issues, worshipping patron gods and entertaining. Merchants routinely gathered at their guildhalls to watch theatrical performances together. Less powerful merchant guilds did not have a guildhall of their own or a guildhall big enough for theatrical performance, so their members usually gathered at restaurants and temples instead. Theatrical performances on these kinds of occasions were certainly not for entertainment purposes only. In fact, theatrical performance served Shanxi merchants' business. Penalty performances or *faxi* frequently appeared in Shanxi merchant guild regulations as a

tool of disciplining guild members. Also, the content of performances, which conveyed Confucian moral values, indoctrinated guild members so that they would behave better when doing business.

Chapter 2 demonstrated that temple fair performances sponsored by Shanxi merchants functioned as advertisements for Shanxi merchants and their merchant guilds, thereby leading to both short-term and long-term economic benefits. Shanxi merchants' guildhalls provided venues for temple fairs and temple fair performances. Some Shanxi merchants also provided funds for the construction of temples and temple theatres. During temple fairs, theatrical performance was an important factor in attracting consumers from near and far. The more attractive the performances, the more potential consumers would attend the fairs, and the higher immediate revenue Shanxi merchants could gain. In addition to this, the artistic skills of performers, the architectural design of merchant guildhalls, the statues of Emperor Guan and inscriptions eulogising Emperor Guan's moral virtues all helped to promote a positive image of Shanxi merchants amongst their customers. The powerful and reputable image that Shanxi merchants created for themselves through sponsoring temple fair performances had a favourable effect on their long-term business performance, that is, higher economic capital.

Of all Shanxi merchants, the wealthiest benefited most from theatrical performances. In the late Qing dynasty, business owners and firm managers who possessed vast wealth without formal schooling were active participants in the office selling system to purchase government posts and academic degrees as a way of increasing the cultural capital of themselves and their family members. A higher status made it more convenient for them to establish and maintain a close relationship with ruling elites, thereby increasing their social capital. As a close relationship with the ruling elites guaranteed economic privileges and protection, these wealthy merchants then transferred their social capital into economic capital. Chapter 3 shows in detail

that to maintain the relationship, wealthy Shanxi merchants entertained scholar-officials and aristocrats with theatrical performances.

As suggested in these three chapters, what Shanxi merchants cared about most was their economic capital. As the three essential forms of capital were transferable, they could accumulate economic capital via various methods with the help of theatrical performances. But we also need to keep in mind that given that merchants had been considered an inferior occupation for around two thousand years, the fundamental reason for Shanxi merchants' desire for economic capital was a pursuit of a higher social status, which was reflected by prestige.

In the late Qing, when the wealthy Shanxi merchants, especially bankers from Central Shanxi, climbed up the social ladder and stepped into the leisure class, they and their descendants lived a leisurely mode of life and consumed theatrical performances on a grand scale as a way of maintaining their social status. To better entertain their family members and peers, they established stages inside their private mansions, kept family theatre troupes and held theatrical festivals. Sojourning merchants held lavish banquets, made block bookings in taverns and appreciated theatrical performances at theatre gardens. Some of them also spent lavishly on the companionship of young male performers. All these activities constituted conspicuous consumption that manifested Shanxi merchants' wealth. Theatrical performance was the most pervasive form of mass entertainment in late imperial China, so the merchants' consumption of theatre could be exposed to large number of outsiders with various social backgrounds, making it more conspicuous than consumption of other cultural products and activities. Merchants were not required to possess certain competencies or qualifications for activities such as keeping family troupes. As long as the merchants had enough resources, they could easily notch up success in setting up an outstanding troupe. Hence, lavish consumption of

theatrical performances was a rather direct and easy method employed by Shanxi merchants to show off their wealth and power. The way in which Shanxi merchants lavishly consumed bangzi performances also indicates that although merchants were hungry for a higher social standing, many of them did not mimic literati elites' way of consuming cultural products and engaging in cultural activities because they did not wish to identify themselves as literati.

From the perspective of xiqu history, Shanxi merchants' sponsorship and consumption of theatrical performances stimulated the development and diffusion of theatre, especially Shan-Shaan bangzi. First, Shanxi merchants' guildhalls throughout the country provided venues for itinerant troupes to put on shows, creating a network via which various regional xiqu styles spread widely. The mobility of theatre troupes facilitated the interaction between different xiqu styles, thereby giving rise to new styles, furthering the development of existing styles and reducing the importance of the geographical origin of each xiqu style. Second, as members of the Qing ruling class were enthusiastic about various xiqu styles and Shanxi merchants' passion for theatrical performances attracted Shanxi performers to travel to Beijing, Shanxi bangzi successfully spread to elite circles in Beijing. Lastly, Shanxi merchants' lavish mode of life and conspicuous consumption of theatrical performances fostered the reformation of the singing, music and instrumental accompaniment of Shanxi bangzi. Many students who graduated from Shanxi merchants' theatrical training schools later turned out to be reputable theatrical performers who had places not only in the history of Shanxi bangzi but also in xiqu history as a whole.

All in all, this thesis proves the existence of a dynamic relationship between Shanxi merchants' commercial activities and theatre. It gives an insight into the socio-economic factors that facilitated the development and spread of regional styles and reveals that theatrical

performance was not only a form of art but an embodiment of the social, economic and cultural history of late imperial China.

The Shanxi merchant group—one of the most powerful merchant groups in the second half of the Qing dynasty—declined following the fall of the Qing empire due to many factors including the ever-changing international and domestic economy, political turmoil and competition from the foreign modern banking industry. Shanxi merchants' engagement in theatrical performance as sponsors and spectators, while not a crucial factor in their rise and fall as a merchant group, proved to be a crucial factor in the development of bangzi from a regional styles in the Shaan-Shan area to a predominant form of xiqu throughout China's northern provinces in the late imperial period. Therein lies its significance for xiqu history.

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