

Book Reviews

Bannermen Tales (Zidishu): Manchu Storytelling and Cultural Hybridity in the Qing Dynasty. By Elena Suet-Ying Chiu. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. Pp. xiv + 366. \$49.95/£35.95.

Elena Suet-Ying Chiu has written a clear and comprehensive account of an important genre of Qing-dynasty literature and the cultural context from which it emerged. In five main chapters and an epilogue, it takes up *zidishu*'s 子弟書 origins and evolution, aspects of performance, bilingual Manchu-Han texts, *zidishu* written in Chinese, the dissemination of texts, and the relationship between *zidishu* and Manchu ethnicity. Based on wide reading of primary texts in Manchu and Chinese and of secondary scholarship in Chinese, Japanese, and Western languages (mostly English), her study makes an indispensable introduction to the topic in both literary and historical terms.

The encyclopaedic nature of its coverage makes the work difficult to summarize adequately. What follows is an enumeration of several key points and an assessment of some of the surprises they bring. The first and perhaps most important is that this “minority literature” was not necessarily written in Manchu language. In its earliest beginnings during the Kangxi era through at least the Qianlong reign, some texts were partly written in Manchu or were written in both Manchu and Chinese versions. As the use of Manchu language declined among Manchus themselves after Qianlong's reign, more and more *zidishu* were written only in Chinese. The form had run its course by the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, by which time Manchu identity itself was under siege. Arguably the most famous late author of *zidishu*, Han Xiaochuang 韓小窗, composed entirely in Chinese. The term *zidi* 子弟, we learn on p. 77, means bannermen, and the point is that it is the ethnicity of the author or performer, not the language used, that defines the form. *Zidishu* was never a form in which Chinese composed, although Chinese could be found among the audiences, particularly toward the end of the Qing, and particularly in Beijing.

Performance of *zidishu* took place on two levels. Elite performances took place indoors, often in clubs. More popular performances took place outdoors, or else in teahouses. In some cases performance of *zidishu* and Peking opera could take place in the same venue or on the same occasion, and they could be mixed with other kinds of performance like jokes and witty dialogues. Since the musical aspect of the genre has been lost, we have only limited knowledge of what a performance sounded like, but it is certain that a three-stringed lute (or *sanxian* 三弦) was an essential component. In contrast to Peking opera, we learn, where professionals drove innovation, it was

more the amateur than the professional that developed the form, even though popular performances were widely enjoyed.

Zidishu cannot be considered oral literature, since texts were a big part of the production process. If one compares Manchu versions of specific stories with their Chinese counterparts, one can find interesting differences. For example, the story of Meng Jiang nǚ 孟姜女 turns out differently in Manchu, where anger is directed not at Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 but at Lǚ Buwei 呂不韋, who claimed Qin Shihuang as his son and so cast doubt on the emperor's legitimacy. A mixed Sino-Manchu example, "Pangxie duan'er" 螃蟹段儿 (Eating crabs) takes pride in its description of the Manchu character, Second Auntie, as an elegant woman. In other cases, too, the author takes pride in Manchu identity and sees it as superior to Chinese.

Elsewhere, in texts entirely in Chinese, one finds emphases that differ from the versions that emerged directly from Chinese culture. Two of the most interesting are in the ways that Granny Liu 劉姥姥 and Wang Xifeng 王熙鳳 of *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 are rendered in *zidishu*. In *zidishu*, Granny Liu is an entertainer from a farm family, not just a simple country woman, whereas Xifeng is a more positive character than in the novel. Using the lens of *zidishu* to look at *Honglou meng* is also interesting. For example, the pipe Xifeng smokes in chapter 101 is thought to show her rather unattractively masculine to students of the novel, but in *zidishu* versions it merely establishes that she is a Manchu. It turns out that even Grandmother Jia 賈母 smokes a pipe in *zidishu*. However, *zidishu* about imperial bodyguards (*shiwei* 侍衛) tend to lament the loss of vigour that came over this corps of military man toward the end of the dynasty and the wastrel-like behaviour many displayed. The wastrel-like behaviour of Baoyu 寶玉 and some of his friends in the novel may stem from some of the same waning vigour of *shiwei*.

A section on the dissemination of texts sets up a contrast between woodblock and hand-copied versions of the same tale. Woodblocks were more expensive and were turned out by publishing houses, which sold them in bookstores. However, the quality was not high. Hand copying was cheaper and was undertaken by family-owned publishing businesses, which distributed them at temple fairs or at home. When they were distributed at temple fairs, handicrafts might be sold at the same time. Sometimes the hand-copied texts were freer and less moralistic than the woodblock versions. Production and distribution were a little different outside the main market of Beijing, in places like Shenyang and Tianjin. Shenyang was important as a secondary Manchu capital, but for the most part it merely imported or reproduced texts from Beijing, especially in the last half-century of the Qing. It is interesting that Cheng Weiyuan 程偉元 of *Honglou meng* fame was a publisher of *zidishu* in Shenyang. Tianjin was another major centre for the production of texts, and it remains a major repository of this literature to this day.

The epilogue at the end of this study underscores a point Chiu has made throughout: that the composition and performance of *zidishu* were important means of asserting and shoring up Manchu identity, even when Manchu language itself was seldom used. It is conceivable that even as far away as the Manchu garrison of Guangzhou, *zidishu* played this role, and it is certain that *zidishu* helped advance Manchu self-fashioning in Shenyang and Tianjin. This was true on both the amateur and the popular levels of performance, even though the ostensible goal of performances was to entertain.

One somewhat sad though interesting irony emerges from this study overall. Especially when the topic was *shiwei*, the genre could take a rather moralistic, disapproving tone about the behaviour of the characters they described. So even as *zidishu* portrayed Manchus on their own terms, they found much to take issue with. The reasons for the genre's eventual decline had to do with the fact that to be a Manchu was no longer valued at the very end of the Qing; but it was also the case that the somewhat wayward behaviour of Manchus and the moralistic attitudes taken toward them in literature no longer appealed. As the subtitle of the book reveals, the story of *zidishu* is one of cultural hybridity, of a minority culture trying to hold its own in a fraught landscape, one in which it gradually lost ground.

This study is well written, and with copious and lively translations it reads very well. Furthermore, there is always some irony or contrast or puzzle that draws the reader forward through the rich array of detail. The data's very richness can sometimes give rise to new questions. For example, what is the relationship between a single *zidishu* story (the kind that could be woodblock printed or hand copied, and might also be performed orally) and a single performance programme? Thus, if one went to a teahouse or joined a club in which *zidishu* were performed, would the show consist of just one story, or might more than one be presented on a given occasion? And if the latter, was that a rarity or the norm? The study makes it clear that a session of *zidishu* could feature add-ons of Peking opera or jokes, but it does not reveal for certain how many *zidishu* might appear together at one time. It is also not entirely clear whether some effort was made to vary the tone, so that not only sad or moralistic pieces would be performed. Judging from the richness of the data seemingly available, perhaps it might be possible to find answers to these questions and to others that might arise. The very strength of this fine study leaves this one reader wanting still more.

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