ONE

Floating Sleeves, Willow Waists, and Dreams of Spring: Entertainment and Its Enemies in Song History and Historiography

Beverly Bossler

WHEN HISTORIANS OF China list the important cultural developments of the Song dynasty, they tend to mention the examination system, the development of *ci* poetry, literati painting with its emphasis on pastoral scenery, and the new emphasis on moral self-cultivation associated with Neo-Confucianism. Notably, none of these developments was or is especially associated with the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou. Although Hangzhou was undeniably the political and cultural center of the Southern Song, few scholars have ascribed long-term significance to the cultural delights so readily available in that bustling metropolis, with its theaters, tea houses, and wine shops.[1]

In recent research, I have argued that performance, and especially music and dance, were central features of Song literati culture, with broad implications for many other aspects of social and even political life.[2] That we do not immediately associate the Song with the flourishing of performing arts is due to a variety of factors. One of these is certainly the ephemeral nature of performance itself: dance and song are difficult to capture in text and thus tend to be less visible in the historical record than other social or cultural phenomena. But in fact we do have written descriptions of performances from the Song. Far more important to our lack of awareness, I think, were (and are) cultural biases that have led authors to downplay the presence of performance in Song literati society.

These biases include some that were already expressed in Song, but even more important were those introduced after the Song, both during the late imperial era and in modern scholarship.

Joseph Lam has described how, from early times in China, attitudes toward ritual and popular performances were strictly bifurcated: ritual music was admired and praised while performance for entertainment, especially that featuring women, was regarded as morally dubious.[3] We shall see below that, over the course of the Song, music and dance entertainments became increasingly prevalent in social life (not least, though not exclusively, in Hangzhou). As a result, concerns about the moral implications of such performance also intensified. In the centuries that followed, efforts to portray the Song as a time of moral rejuvenation (as the period when Neo-Confucianism was founded) contributed to further erasure of the evidence for Song entertainments. More recently, modern scholarship has not only continued to be influenced by a desire to associate the Song with moral learning, it has also absorbed biases inherent in the structure and categorization of Western academic disciplines. As a result, not only have historians mostly failed to recognize the significance of surviving materials on Song entertainments, even Song writings on ritual music and dance (which were generally valued by traditional scholars and thus survive in copious amounts in the sources) have been largely ignored.[4]

This chapter reviews the evidence for the ubiquity and significance of dance and music performance, and especially entertainment performances, in the lives of Song literati and especially in Hangzhou. It then presents a case study of the Song phenomenon of banquet writings (*yueyu* 樂語, *zhiyu* 致語) to show how ambivalent attitudes toward the performing arts during and after the Song, combined with the later construction of the Song as an era of Confucian revival, systematically disguised the importance of that period's entertainment culture. Recognizing the importance of performance, and understanding why we have hitherto overlooked its significance, provides us with new perspectives on Song history and historiography.

Music and Dance in the Song

To the extent that the performing arts of the Song have been studied to date, the subject has largely been the purview of historians of Chinese

dance and theater.[5] While acknowledging the Tang as the period when Chinese music and dance traditions began to incorporate many foreign elements, and when dance as a performing art became particularly popular, dance historians point to the Song as a time when these elements became fully assimilated into Chinese music and dance styles, and created a foundation for a distinctly "Chinese" form of musical theater.

Most of our technical knowledge of Song music and dance comes from musical treatises and descriptions of court ceremonies. Based on such texts, in combination with literati collected works and nostalgic urban accounts, dance historians have traced innovation in Song dance styles, and especially the increased popularity of formally structured group dances (*duiwu* 隊舞) at court ceremonies. They point out that such group dances were integral to Song versions of the proto-theatrical form, the "great songs" (*daqu* 大麯), song suites with a unified theme or musical mode.[6] Although the *daqu* form had existed in the Tang, over the course of the Song it was increasingly associated with narrative content, and theater historians see this Song transition as a critical step in the development of the dramatic form we call Chinese opera.[7]

Theater historians also point to the Song as a time when dance and music performances (in accord with the development of theater arts more broadly) moved out of the court and became part of urban life.[8] Dance was integral to the amusements available in the markets and entertainment districts of Song cities. Meng Yuanlao (fl. 1126–47), the author of a nostalgic account of the Northern Song capital Kaifeng, describes how, at the turn of the twelfth century, the capital's entertainment districts already featured performers of all stripes, from singers to dancers to comedy players. At New Year's, special dance and song venues were set up and the performances held there were attended even by the women of noble families.[9] Such entertainments were even more ubiquitous in Hangzhou, as we shall see below.

The fact that theater arts underwent such profound development in the Song already hints at their importance in Song cultural life, but the significance of music and dance in the Song period went well beyond mere aesthetic experience.[10] To begin with, entertainment became an important element in political life, not least because of the extensive sponsorship of entertainment by the Song government. Imperial birthdays and other holidays were celebrated with elaborate banquets to which court officials were invited. These banquets demonstrated the court's grandeur

by featuring spectacular presentations involving hundreds of performers drawn from the Court Entertainment Bureau (Jiao fang 教坊).[11] The music, dance, and other theatrical vignettes performed on these occasions punctuated the multiple rounds of wine that were presented by order of rank to the attending officials.[12] A surviving description of one such banquet, held during the reign of the emperor Huizong (徽宗, r. 1100–26), reveals that they tended to be all-day affairs: After entering the court and making proper obeisance, the officials took their seats. Several dozen lovely female musicians, exquisitely costumed, were arrayed at the south end of the palace. As the first rounds of wine were circulated, they began to sing. Their song performance was followed by dance sequences and comedy sketches, bracketed by congratulatory exchanges between the emperor and his officials. On the particular occasion commemorated in this description, in the late afternoon the emperor graciously invited his guests to ascend a palace tower from which distant peaks and the surrounding countryside could be seen. This outing was followed in the early evening by an excursion to view the lanterns, which our interlocutor tells us "filled the landscape without end, like stars hanging in space." The assemblage then repaired to yet another palace where every kind of delicacy was set out in antique vessels. Taking his seat, the emperor personally urged his officials to eat and drink while palace women played music for their enjoyment. The gathering finally broke up about midnight, and as the officials returned home townspeople thronged around them to gawk.[13]

To be sure, only officials of court rank were privileged to attend imperial banquets in the palace; but similar entertainments were extended to officials outside the court, with government-registered entertainers attached to every prefectural (and by the Southern Song even county) yamen for the express purpose of providing music and dance entertainment at regularly held official banquets.[14] At court, newly minted degree holders were welcomed into officialdom with banquets, replete with musical entertainment, given in their honor; in the prefectures, students who had passed the preliminary examinations were similarly celebrated.[15] Thus well before achieving official status, those who had had a modicum of success in the examinations were familiar with music and dance entertainment in the context of official banqueting. The association of banquet performances with official life assured that such performances evoked status and social cachet.

But in fact one did not have to be an official to enjoy such performances. Over the course of the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods, music and dance entertainments had become available to anyone who had the financial means to visit the commercial courtesan quarters that flourished in every major regional city. Nor were such commercial entertainments the only option, for well-to-do men of the Song perpetuated the Tang practice of taking women with entertainment skills into their homes, as maids or quasi-concubines. Keeping troupes of entertainers in one's household had been a mark of elite status since early times in China, but a number of factors contributed to the unprecedented spread of this phenomenon from the late Tang into the Song. One notable shift was the Song government's abandonment of sumptuary regulations that in earlier dynasties had at least nominally tied the number of concubines a man could have—as well as the number of musician-slaves he could keep—to his official rank.[16] The government's disinclination to impose such sumptuary regulations was in turn undoubtedly related to the growing and increasingly commercialized economy of the Tang-Song transition. Economic growth created a significantly larger elite class, which meant that many more men could afford concubines and other dependent servants. At the same time, the commercializing economy meant that new forms of indentured labor were becoming common, and female labor of all types was becoming widely available for purchase or hire. Accordingly, household entertainers (in this period generally called "household courtesans" *jiaji* 家妓 or, more politely, "household charmers" *jiaji* 家姬) came to be conspicuous presences in the households of noble and high-ranking official families in the Northern Song. By the Southern Song, the fashion for keeping entertainer-concubines (*jiqie* 妓妾/姬妾) had spread throughout literati society, and entertainment had come to be an important element in contemporary understandings of a concubine's role.[17]

In contrast to the performers of the Entertainment Bureau and in the commercial entertainment districts, the women who entertained in Song households were usually not professional entertainers so much as servants who were taught a variety of skills, some related to entertainment. They were frequently indentured at very young ages and instructed within the masters' households, and often they seem to have been expected to do household and other chores as well as entertain. Our sources suggest that, like their professional counterparts, young women brought in as entertainer-concubines might specialize in any of a wide variety of musical

skills. The instruments they played ranged from simple clappers to drums, flutes, *pipa*, and even *qin*. Some were known for their abilities to sing or dance, and often both. The ubiquity of such entertainers in the households of Song elites is evident from the volume of anecdotal literature involving them. To cite one example, a humorous anecdote describes how Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) attended a party at the home of a powerful literatus (*haoshi* 豪士) who had ten or more "attendant charmers" (*shiji* 侍姬), all very lovely and skillful. One of the women, particularly favored by her master, was very good at dancing and singing (*shan gewu* 善歌舞). Although she was quite beautiful, she was rather hefty. When her master ordered her to solicit a poem from Su, he responded by writing:

> The dancing sleeves twist and writhe; the shadows shake, the thousand-foot dragon and snake move. The singing throat warbles; the sound shakes half of heaven.
>
> 舞袖蹁躚，影搖千尺龍蛇動，歌喉宛轉，聲撼半天風雨寒。[18]

The humiliated entertainer beat a hasty retreat. Another anecdote describes in passing how Shao Bowen 邵伯溫 (1057–1134) was frequently entertained at the home of a general who kept several "serving maids" (*shibi* 侍婢). After the general's death, his widow had a birthday and ordered her sons to invite Shao to a banquet. She sent one of the former maids (*jiubi* 舊婢) out to dance. Slightly tipsy and thinking of former days, Shao composed a poem that concluded,

> Flying and fluttering, the embroidered sleeves above the red chemise; the dancing charmer still has her old spirit. In the midst of the party don't blame me for not enjoying myself; the general and I were old friends.
>
> 翻翻繡袖上紅裈；舞姬猶是舊精神。坐中莫怪無歡意；我與將軍是故人。[19]

Although these anecdotes suggest that some dancers were adult women, dance in particular often seems to have been a specialty of pre-pubescent girls, called "little chignons" (*xiao huan* 小鬟) for their

distinctive hairstyle of paired chignons. Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) opens one *ci* poem with the phrase "The dancing *huan* is lovely" (舞鬟娟好) and goes on to contrast her youth with his own old age.[20] In a poem describing a friend's pavilion, the Southern Song author Sun Yingshi 孫應時 (1154–1206) relates, "When guests come he calls for wine and has them stay to drink; the marvelous dances of the *xiao huan* aid in raising the cup" (客來呼酒徑留飲；小鬟妙舞工持觴).[21] In the preface to a teasing poem Zhao Dingchen 趙鼎臣 (b. 1070) wrote for a friend, Zhao notes that the friend had "recently bought a dancing *huan* who was very beautiful but still immature" (新買舞鬟甚麗而尚稚).[22] Yang Zemin 楊澤民 (n.d.) prefaces a *ci* poem by explaining that at a banquet he directed one "Little Spring" to dance and adds the note, "Little Spring is a young entertainer in my household" (小春乃吾家小妓也).[23] We should also observe that in two pictorial images of entertainers we have from the Song, "The Night Revels of Han Xizai" (*Han Xizai yeyan tu* 韓熙載夜宴圖) and "Palace Orchestra Rehearsal" (*Geyue tujuan* 歌樂圖卷), the figures shown dancing are dramatically smaller in size than the other women, and the dancer in "Night Revels" seems to wear the *xiao huan* hairstyle. *Xiao huan* were by no means exclusively dancers: We also see them described as engaging in other activities such as playing musical instruments. But descriptions of individual dancers in Song poetry do often focus on *xiao huan*. We might speculate that Song dance, which emphasized twisting, turning, and backbends, was most easily mastered by young bodies.

In sum, a wide variety of sources demonstrate that music and dance entertainments were a central feature of Song literati social life, from official banquets at court to private gatherings at home. Why, then, has this phenomenon not been more remarked upon?

Ambivalent Attitudes

One factor was undoubtedly the reticence of Song men themselves with respect to the prominent place of entertainment in their lives. That reticence reflected a longstanding cultural ambivalence toward music and dance. As Joseph Lam has pointed out, on the one hand, the earliest classical ritual texts treated music and dance as central elements in the solemn rituals necessary for governance, and also as natural expressions of the human spirit that were essential aspects of a gentleman's education.[24] The importance of music in the Chinese classical tradition

has led one expert to declare, "Among all the countries of the world, there is probably no other that has held music in such high esteem [as China has]."[25] On the other hand, from the classical period on, music and dance—especially when performed by women for the entertainment of men—were also associated with licentiousness, decadence, and failed governments. By the beginning of the imperial period, the phrase "the sounds of Zheng and Wei" (鄭衛之聲) was commonly used to refer to "licentious" music that could endanger public and private morality alike.[26] In other words, educated men in the Song well understood that the right kind of music and dance were essential elements of the rituals that were fundamental to proper ethical rulership, and could be important components of individual self-cultivation. At the same time, they were aware that the wrong kind of music and dance was inimical to moral cultivation, personal integrity, and to good government.

Against this background, some Song men took an academic or historical interest in the subject of performance. The eleventh-century scholar Liu Bin 劉攽 (1023–89) was struck by the fact that his peers did not routinely participate in singing and dancing themselves. Liu observed that where men of the past had danced together at drinking parties, in his own day dancers were expected to be able to bend and twirl in extraordinary ways and required specialized training. He also noted that in his day respectable people did not want to imitate professional performers (who still bore the social taint of their slave-status predecessors). As a result, he concluded, gentlemen no longer got up and danced.[27] In about the same period, the renowned polymath Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031–95), famous for his broad curiosity on any number of topics, included music and dance among his wide-ranging studies. Shen focused mostly on the history of various musical modes, but in passing he commented on the dances performed to those modes. After noting that a number of old tunes for the "Mulberry Branch" (*shizhi* 柘枝) song suite were no longer extant, Shen observed that the early Song minister Kou Zhun 寇准 (961–1023) had had a fondness for the Mulberry Branch Dance (*shizhi wu* 柘枝舞); whenever he had guests he would have it performed, with the performances lasting an entire day. Shen added,

> Today in Fengxiang there is an old nun who was one of the performers in Lord [Kou]'s day. She said, "In those days 'Mulberry Branch' still had more than ten sections (*bian* 遍); the 'Mulberry

> Branch' they dance today, compared with that time, doesn't have more than two or three." The old nun can still sing the tune: busybodies frequently pass it on.[28]
>
> 今鳳翔有一老尼，猶萊公時柘枝妓。
> 雲：「當時《柘枝》尚有數十遍今日所舞《柘枝》比當時十不得二三。」老尼尚能歌其曲好事者往往傳之。

In the mid-twelfth century, the scholar-official Ge Lifang 葛立方 (d. 1164) likewise wrote about the vicissitudes of various dance forms, including the Mulberry Branch Dance. Ge hypothesized that the dance had come to China from various countries to the south (*nanman zhu guo* 南蠻諸國), and had flourished in the Tang.[29] Quoting from earlier poets, he observed that the dance had traditionally been accompanied by drum and song, and he added that this remained the case his own day. But Ge went on to show that earlier poets had described the dance as involving variously one or two performers. He then pointed out, "Today, some use five [dancers]; this is rather different from the ancients" (今或用五人， 與古小異矣).[30] And finally, toward the end of the Southern Song, Zhou Mi turned a scholarly eye on the government-sponsored dances of his day, observing:

> When banquets are bestowed on the prefectures on the occasion of imperial birthdays, they direct dozens of groups of vulgar courtesans to dance in the courtyard, forming the words "All Under Heaven at Peace."
>
> 州郡遇聖節錫宴，率命猥妓數十羣舞於庭，作天下太平字。

Zhou remarks that this practice is "quite uncanonical" (*shu wei bujing* 殊為不經), but then quotes evidence from Tang texts to show that this type of dance, using performers' bodies to spell out auspicious messages, had a long history before the Song.[31]

All of these authors were clearly aware that music and dance had changed irrevocably since classical times. Like many of their contemporaries, they recognized the Tang, in particular, as a period that had seen tremendous expansion of the number and variety of music and dance forms. But where Liu, Shen, Ge, and Zhou expressed an essentially neutral attitude toward these developments, others saw the changes of the

Tang—and by extension, the state of music and dance in their own day—as cause for grave concern. The court official Fan Zuyu 范祖禹 (1041–98) pointed to the example of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56), whose court was renowned for spectacular entertainments but who had nearly lost his empire in the An Lushan Rebellion, to emphasize the dangers posed to good governance by inappropriate court music.[32] The Northern Song music theorist Chen Yang 陳暘 (ca. 1055–ca. 1122), while meticulously describing the elaborate dances inherited from the Tang, repeatedly inveighed against them and urged Emperor Huizong to excise female entertainers from court performances:

> Having female performers from the inner palace join hands [lit. join sleeves] and sing of their troubles in order to extend the pleasure of your officials, is this not almost the same as lord and minister playing around together? This was certainly a contributing factor to the Tang's decline and collapse. How can one not take heed?!
>
> 以禁中女伶連袂歌怨以盡臣下之懽，豈不幾於君臣相謔邪？唐之所以衰亂不振者，彼誠有以召之也。可不戒哉！[33]

In the face of these anxieties about the moral status of contemporary music, the Northern Song court carried out a nearly continuous series of efforts to reform music and restore it to ritual purity. Over a century of such efforts culminated in the extraordinary 1104 decision to use the length of Emperor Huizong's fingers as the basis for creating standardized pitch pipes.[34]

While the court theorists sought to reform music and dance as a foundation for governing, scholars debated their usefulness for personal cultivation. Some argued for a continued place for music and dance in the education of upper-class men. Thus Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86), in his *Precepts for Family Life* (*Jiafan* 家範), stipulated that boys who reached the age of thirteen should begin to study music, recite poetry, and dance the *shao* (a dance mentioned in the *Book of Ritual*).[35] But, as evident in Liu Bin's comments above, many other Song men seem to have felt that participation in dance and music was no longer a desirable or even appropriate activity for scholars. Sima Guang's contemporary Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–77) warned that, in his own day, even the music of the classical *qin* was "not far from [the sounds] of Zheng and Wei."[36] Likewise, the