

## Book Review

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Ariel Fox

***The Cornucopian Stage: Performing Commerce in Early Modern China***

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023, 278 pages.

ISBN 9780674293755

The terms “early modern” and “late imperial” have been used prevalingly to refer to the Ming-Qing period in China. The former situates China within the global emergence of characteristics of a modern society, encompassing aspects from everyday life in urban centers to nationwide economic development; the latter delves into the heyday and its embedded decadence of the last two imperial dynasties in Chinese history, as evidenced in literature, technological developments, foreign policies, et cetera. While scholars have shared their insights on using either term,<sup>1</sup> Ariel Fox’s *The Cornucopian Stage* takes

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\* Manuscript received: April 30, 2025; completed: August 27, 2025; approved: January 27, 2026.  
2025年4月30日收稿，2025年8月27日修訂完成，2026年1月27日通過刊登。  
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1 An example of such discussions was carried on at the panel “New Directions in Late

*chuanqi* 傳奇 plays composed by a group of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commercial playwrights active around Suzhou in the Jiangnan region as the pivot to illuminate the reasons why both terms can be applied to Ming-Qing China. The book adroitly unfolds a stage brimming with, inspired by, and actualized through commercial activities, namely—in Fox’s words—a cornucopian stage. On such a stage, the playwrights, together with their theatrical worlds, traverse the limits of cities, regions, countries, and seas to connect to the global contexts of early modern society. On this same stage, the playwrights demonstrate alternative conceptions of social relations to the top-down, imperial discourse of “the central state” 中國. As the “director” of the spectacular, Fox excels in close readings of both extant and extinct plays to bring to light a group of playwrights that have long been understudied. She also skillfully deciphers the performance tradition encoded in generic components of their plays to address the questions of why and how theater is paramount to understanding commercial activities in late-Ming and early-Qing China.

To set her protagonists at the center of the cornucopian stage, Fox in the introduction spotlights the playwrights in the “Suzhou circle.”<sup>2</sup> Despite their prolific careers, we have little biographic information about such playwrights as Li Yu 李玉 (before ca. 1610-after 1667), Zhu Suchen 朱素臣 (ca. 1620-1701), Zhang Dafu 張大復 (before 1620-after 1661), Ye Shizhang 葉時章, and Qiu Yuan 邱園 (1671-1690).<sup>3</sup> Fox points out that the two terms often used to refer to these playwrights, the “Suzhou school” 蘇州派 in Chinese scholarship and “Suzhou playwrights” by English-language scholars, can be misleading, for the former generates contention over the membership of a “school” ironically

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Imperial Chinese Literature: Markets, Media, and Mayhem” at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) 2024 Annual Conference in Seattle, WA, on March 15, 2024. Ariel Fox was one of the panelists.

2 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 12.

3 Their estimated years of birth and death can be found in *ibid.*, 1, 6-7, 9.

unknown to any of its members and the latter provokes misunderstanding by selectively, rather than comprehensively, including playwrights active in Suzhou.<sup>4</sup> Following scholars such as Li Mei 李玫, Fox suggests a return to, rather than a departure from,<sup>5</sup> an earlier term of “playwright circles” 編劇集團 proposed by Zhou Yibai 周貽白 (1900-1977), thereby introducing “Suzhou circle” as a new phrase.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of “circle” dilutes the aura of singular authorship and emancipates anyone interested in these commercial playwrights from the futile attempt to pin down the biography of one specific author.<sup>7</sup> It foregrounds the “network” that Fox builds up as a methodological apparatus of studying playwrights from a humble social background and their uncanonized plays.<sup>8</sup> The “network” positions plays by playwrights in the Suzhou circle within a series of commercial activities involving coauthors, editors, actors, audiences, and copyists.<sup>9</sup> As a play escapes from the haunting specter of an authoritative author, it acquires “its own modes and sites of production and consumption” and

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4 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 6-9, 12.

5 Kang Baocheng 康保成, for instance, takes a departure from the term “Suzhou writers’ group” 蘇州作家群, which Li Mei uses in her work, to construct and reiterate the “Suzhou school.” Kang Baocheng, *Suzhou jupai yanjiu* 蘇州劇派研究 (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1993), 29-34. Fox mentions Kang’s work in note 18 on page 9.

6 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 12.

7 In his study of northern *qu* 曲 in sixteenth-century China, Tian Yuan Tan likewise uses terms such as “literary circles” and “*qu* community” to refer to the literati writers, readers, and connoisseurs of *qu*. Both Tan and Fox use “circles” to designate a group of dramatic composers. Yet the “circles” and “community” in Tan’s discussion have cultural elites as their central figures, whereas the “Suzhou circle” in Fox’s definition has no such leaders. Tian Yuan Tan, *Songs of Contentment and Transgression: Discharged Officials and Literati Communities in Sixteenth-Century North China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asian Center, 2010), 9-13.

8 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 13-24.

9 *Ibid.*, 23.

becomes “part of a larger ecosystem of early modern theatrical experiences.”<sup>10</sup> It is by navigating through such a network of plays and playwrights that Fox establishes a cornucopian stage, which literally manifests exuberant commercial activities in the real world and metaphorically produces thinking as well as rethinking of what theater was in early modern China.

The four chapters excavate from the cornucopian stage an increasingly expansive world of money through four commercial forms, from as petty as a copper coin to as massive as global capital accumulation. Chapter one, “Money Props and the Properties of Money,” highlights money, “coins” more precisely, as an “anti-object” in plays.<sup>11</sup> *Chuanqi* plays often revolve around an irreproducible, invaluable object, such as the self-portrait in *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 and the fan in *The Peach Blossom Fan* 桃花扇.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, money as small as a coin shares hardly any characteristics of those objects—not only is a coin reproducible, but its value is also shown on its face.

The chapter juxtaposes two sets of plays that feature coins as their central “(anti-)object” to investigate different interpretations of money. The first set includes two *zaju* 雜劇 plays composed by a generation earlier than the playwrights in the Suzhou circle, Xu Fuzuo’s 徐復祚 (1560-ca. 1630) *One Copper Penny* 一文錢 and Ye Chengzong’s 葉承宗 (1601-1648) *Jin Zizhi Changes the Name of Elder Brother Squarehole* 金紫芝改號孔方兄. In both plays, an anti-object, a coin, leads to “an antisocial dead end in which all previous relations between the self and others are no longer tenable.”<sup>13</sup> The minimal value of a single coin serves as a satire of the complete bankruptcy it causes.

While the first set of plays criticizes money for its moral and social

10 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 24.

11 Ibid., 34.

12 For discussions of such objects in plays, see, for instance, Tina Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

13 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 41.

corruption, the other set of two plays composed by the playwrights in the Suzhou circle “rewrite[s] the commensurating power of money as fundamentally generative.”<sup>14</sup> *Dragon and Phoenix Coins* 龍鳳錢 by Zhu Suchen, as Fox argues, illuminates the money’s nature of being “owned by anyone and no one.”<sup>15</sup> The two coins in the play, one carved with two dragons and the other with twin phoenixes, generate new forms of being beyond the control of an emperor, the supposedly predominant power in the human world. Similarly, *Coins of Heavenly Peace* 太平錢 attributed to Li Yu revolves around coins to imagine “a social whole constructed out of the circulation of money—a circulation that pointedly excludes the emperor.”<sup>16</sup> While money “resists playing a proper *chuanqi* object,”<sup>17</sup> playwrights in the Suzhou circle take advantage of that anti-object in their plays to explore alternative ways of unfolding dramatic stories and to reflect on the new social relations in their own era.

Chapter two, “Every Man a Merchant,” underscores merchants as a group of characters that the playwrights in the Suzhou circle brought from the margin to the center of the stage to grapple with a new sense of self and subjectivity emerging in early modern China. The dominant hierarchy of *shi* 士 (scholars), *nong* 農 (farmers), *gong* 工 (artisans), and *shang* 商 (merchants) encountered constant challenges in the late Ming and early Qing as the boundaries among the social positions became blurred. The *chuanqi* stage, which was predicated on a role type system manifesting and dramatizing such a social hierarchy, faced a similar question of how to present characters that hardly fit into a pre-existing role type. With her focus on merchants onstage, Fox brilliantly incorporates generic conventions of *chuanqi* drama into her literary analyses of play texts and incisively points out that the plays produced by the Suzhou circle

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14 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 35.

15 Ibid., 54.

16 Ibid., 65.

17 Ibid., 41.

“deconstruct and open up the nature and meaning of merchanthood.”<sup>18</sup>

All the plays examined in the chapter address the question of what it means to be a merchant—a retreat from or engagement with the mundane world, a righteous or corrupt man. The two late-Ming plays, Liang Chenyu’s 梁辰魚 (ca. 1521-ca. 1594) *Washing Silk* 浣紗記 and Wang Daokun’s 汪道昆 (1523-1593) *Roaming over Five Lakes* 五湖遊, feature the historical role model of merchants, Fan Li 范蠡 (536-488 BCE). In both plays, Fan’s business career is presented as a reclusion from the mundane world. In contrast, the merchant characters depicted by the playwrights in the Suzhou circle demonstrate increasing engagement with society. In *Fifteen Strings of Cash* 十五貫 attributed to Zhu Suchen, a supporting *mo* 末 character, a merchant named Tao Fuzhu 陶復朱, exercises heroic actions that a protagonist often does in a play and engages in worldly affairs through his commercial activities. In *Winning the Prize Courtesan* 占花魁 attributed to Li Yu, the merchant Qin Zhong 秦鍾 is the righteous protagonist played by the role type *sheng* 生. In *Peace for the Ten Thousand People* 萬民安, a long-lost play of which a summary is preserved and also attributed to Li Yu, its representation of a marketplace onstage creates a metatheatrical moment when being performed in a market and heralds a new subjectivity among the audience. The chapter concludes with two plays attributed to Zhu Suchen, *The Appearance of the Star of Literature* 文星現 and *Moon over the Qin Tower* 秦樓月. Both plays create metatheatrical effects through self-references of commercial activities involved in acting, staging, playwriting, and theatergoing. It is in plays as such that the merchant is transformed into “the universal everyone,”<sup>19</sup> giving rise to an early modern identity.

Chapter three, “Ventures over, under, and beyond the Seas,” focuses on the market and expounds how waterways as a marketplace, from canals in Suzhou to oceans beyond reach, “[function] as both a historical site of and a heuristic

18 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 76.

19 Ibid., 125.

for conceptualizing new social relations that remake the limits of community and humanity.”<sup>20</sup> In the chapter, Fox compares plays that she dates to before and after the fall of the Ming to elucidate the dynamics between the horizontality of commercial transactions and the verticality of a political structure that an imperial order aims to establish. Zhang Dafu’s *Three Kinds of Happiness* 快活三 and Ruan Dacheng’s 阮大鍼 (ca. 1587-1646) *A Pair of Golden Placards* 雙金榜, both of which Fox dates to the late Ming, feature commercial activities between people from the central state and those overseas. The plays’ endings envision the subsumption of the horizontality of the market to a vertical, imperial order, even though the plays also reveal the fluidity of social and cultural identities. Zhang Dafu’s other play dated to the early Qing, *The Sound of Reading* 讀書聲, reveals alternative conceptions of intra- and international orders by “constantly [trespassing] and [inverting] the supposed order of things.”<sup>21</sup> The imperial order in *The Sound of Reading* is installed by less an inclusive than an exclusive expansion, with “the loyalist and the savage”<sup>22</sup> left out. In all these three plays, the ocean serves as a stage—“a space that acts as both a surface and a boundary, where characters can become something that they were not before.”<sup>23</sup> The chapter concludes with an inspiring reading of “The Rakshas and the Sea Market” 羅刹海市 in Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) *Records of the Strange from the Studio of Leisure* 聊齋誌異. The sea market in the story is a liminal, stage-like space that facilitates intersections among various worlds and produces “legible value and stable meaning,”<sup>24</sup> but that market is nothing more than a “watery mirage.”<sup>25</sup>

Chapter four, “Staging the Endless Surplus,” examines the eponymous

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20 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 127.

21 Ibid., 154.

22 Ibid., 164.

23 Ibid., 165.

24 Ibid., 171.

25 Ibid.

play of the book, *Cornucopia* 聚寶盆 attributed to Zhu Suchen. Fox traces the origin stories of the protagonist in *Cornucopia*, the legendary late-Yuan and early-Ming merchant Shen Wansan 沈萬三 (ca. 1330-1379), and the magical “treasure-gathering” 聚寶 object he obtains. She incisively demonstrates that Shen’s cornucopia differs from its earlier prototypes, for the way in which it generates wealth resembles “not so much agrarian production or mammalian reproduction [...] but the market.”<sup>26</sup> In Zhu’s play, the conflict between Shen Wansan and Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368-1398), the founding emperor of the Ming, metonymizes “a fundamental tension between the imperial state and the market.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike earlier stories of Shen Wansan in which he is depicted as a usurer to whom the emperor teaches a lesson, the play presents Zhu as the usurer and Shen as an incarnation of the god of wealth. In so doing, the play “is able to rescue merchant capital accumulation from its unsavory historical practices, recasting it as a force of nature.”<sup>28</sup> As Shen Wansan becomes the “merchant-god” in the cosmological economy and the emperor an intruder of that order, the play “discredits the state’s totalizing claims of authority over value.”<sup>29</sup> It instead underlines merchant capital as a manifestation of the divine force in charge of the flow of money in human society. The chapter ends with a close reading of An Zhiyuan’s 安致遠 (1628-1701) *ci*-lyric about watching *Cornucopia* to reflect on the preceding analyses of the cosmological order of economy. From An’s perspective, the new order of economy is capable of enslaving everyone and embeds “a decadent too-muchness.”<sup>30</sup>

The conclusion in *The Cornucopian Stage* connects the mercantile world emerging from the plays by the playwrights in the Suzhou circle to the early

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26 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 188.

27 Ibid., 194.

28 Ibid., 199-200.

29 Ibid., 206.

30 Ibid., 211.

modern globe of theatrical and commercial activities. Plays staged in cities such as London, Amsterdam, and Osaka, together with those in Suzhou, reverberate one another to encapsulate the coeval-ness of early modernity in the long seventeenth century.

The book opens up a few questions that can be further discussed. In the coda of chapter one, Fox examines a series of early-Qing poems on appreciating a Wanli (r. 1572-1620) coin preserved by Ming loyalist Lin Gudu 林古度 (1580-1666). Despite the mass production during the Wanli reign, such coins were no longer reproducible in the early Qing. The specific coin that Lin preserved had further acquired personal, political, and social significance at literati gatherings where it was eulogized. The coin seems to have transformed from an anti-object into an object similar to those in *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Peach Blossom Fan*. That leads to a question of where we should draw the line between an anti-object and an object? Can an object be transformed into an anti-object, or even vice versa? In both chapter four and the conclusion, Fox beautifully elucidates how the arithmetic of profit becomes “an aesthetic and an ethnic”<sup>31</sup> onstage. Apart from interpreting that as a celebration of a new economic order, would it be possible to uncover any anxiety about miscalculation or incalculability that may motivate the aestheticization of “the arithmetic”? Finally, the plays discussed in the book are primarily drawn from compilations of full-length imprints and manuscripts. All the incisive analyses invite a further comparison between those full-length versions and their extracted scenes in collections such as *Coat of Patched Fur* 綴白裘, which may reveal how professional performers adapted the playwrights’ theatrical inventions in their practices.<sup>32</sup>

Joining a series of scholarly discussions on theater and theatricality of

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31 Fox, *The Cornucopian Stage*, 217.

32 Fox mentions *Coat of Patched Fur* several times in the book and discusses a few scenes from it in the footnotes.

early modern China in recent decades,<sup>33</sup> Fox in *The Cornucopian Stage* brings a spectacular assemblage of understudied plays by a group of underrated playwrights to the center of the academic stage. The author deepens our understanding of those playwrights through her sophisticated analyses of the plays that are often considered too “commercial” to be appreciated for their literary value. She also expands the scope of the studies of early modern Chinese theater by expounding the connection between theatrical activities and commercial market. In initiating new directions and new paradigms in the field, *The Cornucopian Stage* gestures towards a worldly discourse of early modernity evolving around non-elite social groups and establishes Suzhou in Ming-Qing China as a significant interlocutor in such a discourse.

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33 See examples in, chronologically, Judith Zeitlin, *Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); and Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscape to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).