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Glowing Clouds in an Azure Sky:

A Newly Discovered

Royal Pageant

WU XIAOLING

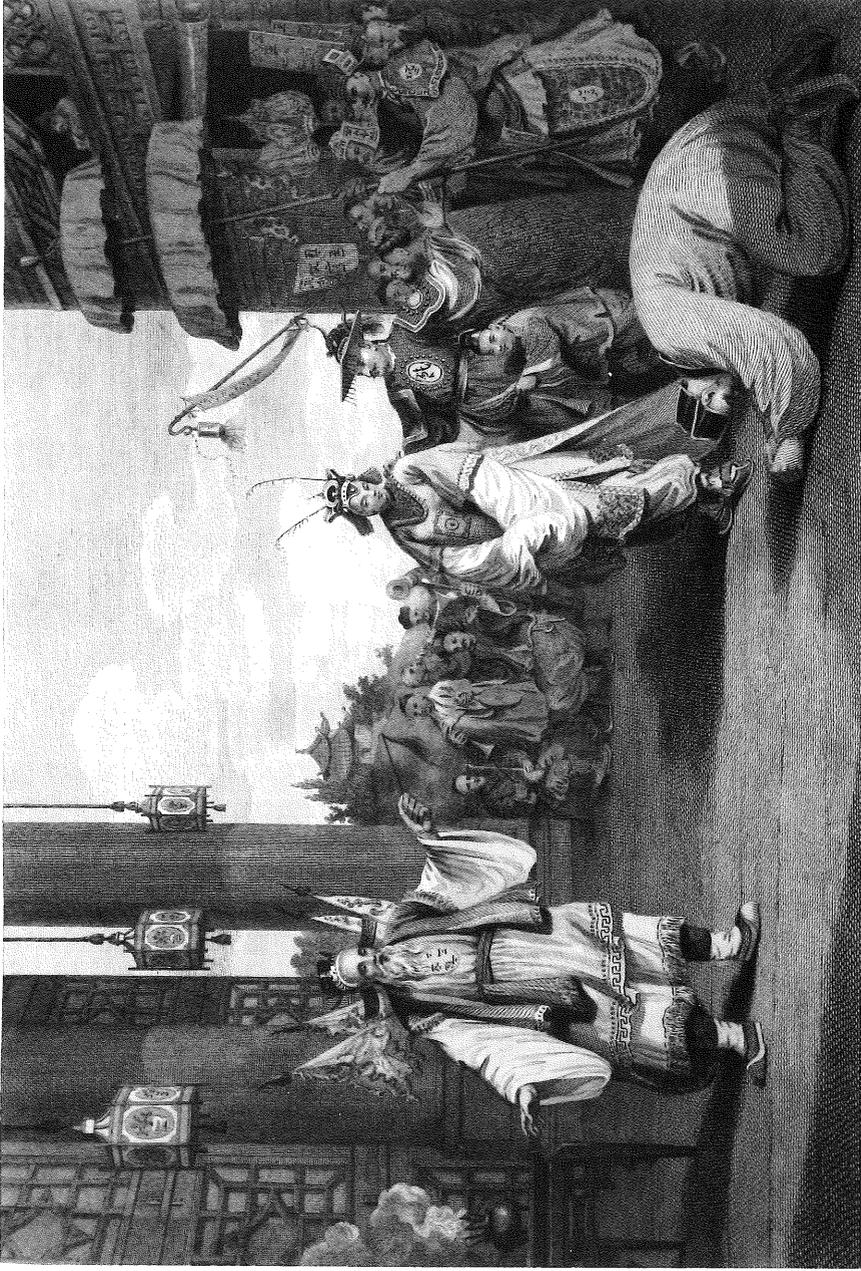
[Translated by LINDY LI MARK and SAMUEL H. H. CHEUNG]

During the spring and summer of 1982 I visited seventeen American universities under the sponsorship of the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. My goals were both to participate in discussions with Sinologists and to survey rare book collections, focusing on items of classical Chinese literature and drama.

In the Gest Library of Princeton University I discovered a rare and perhaps singular copy of a one-volume play entitled *Bitian xiaoxia* [*Glowing Clouds in an Azure Sky*] (see Illustration 1). Its story concerns a pilgrimage of the second emperor of the Qing dynasty, Aisingoro Ye, to the sacred mountain Wutai.¹

Qu Wanli's [Ch'ü Wan-li] *Catalogue of the Chinese Rare Books in the Gest Collection of the Princeton University Library* says this about *Bitian*:

Bitian xiaoxia. Six chapters, two volumes in one binder. Hand-copied manuscript. Eight columns of twenty characters per page. Block — 17.8 x 11.8 cm. This play is divided into six scenes, relating the story of court officials greeting the Qing emperor on his third pilgrimage to Mt. Wutai. The fifth scene is titled "Ten Thousand Nations Pay Homage," including the king of Holland and other European nations. The play appears to have been composed during the Kangxi reign. This is probably a corrected man-



1. Pictured here is one of the engraved plates published in Sir George L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (pub. in London, April 12, 1796, by G. Nicol), in the Firestone Library Collection. This mission was in fact the Macartney mission to the Qianlong court. *Bitian xiaoxia* must have been performed in a fashion similar to the play depicted here, which is being performed on the palace stage in the late 18th century.

uscript [*qinggao ben*]. There is no record of other circulated editions.

In the following I expand on these remarks.

THE EDITION

Ordinarily, the printed format of plays is as follows: the lyrics are in single columns, starting vertically at the top marginal frame. The dialogue may be in single or double columns of smaller characters, indented from the top by two characters. Manuscript plays also follow this convention, with the exception of musicians' copies, which do not have the standard format.²

The Gest Library manuscript has an unusual feature, namely that both lyrics and dialogue are indented by two characters. However, all expressions involving an imperial reference are raised to the top margin. Examples of this are *wansui*, *tianzi*, *huangchao*, and *jinluan*. From this one can conclude that it is an imperial household manuscript (*nei chaoben*).

There were four types of imperial household manuscript. One type was for the emperor's personal reference when attending a performance. These manuscripts, known as *andian ben* [palace repository copy] were bound in yellow silk with titles in cinnabar red ink. Another type was kept in the Palace theatre department (Shengping shu) and were called *kucang ben* [archival copies]. A third type, the *neixue ben* [internal instructional copy], was for the instruction of eunuch actors. Finally, texts used by outside troupes during special command performances were called *waixue ben* [external instructional copies]. By style and format, *Bitian* belongs to the palace repository category. But, as the text is not free of graphic errors, it has to be a yet unedited copy; not a "corrected" manuscript as Qu surmised. The existence of "other circulated copies" is indeed highly improbable.

TYPES OF DRAMA

Palace performances comprise four major types. The first is that of grand historical dramas, covering almost all dynasties from Qin to Ming. These dramatizations, some as long as 240 scenes, were mostly based on legends and stories. For example, *Ding zhi Chunqiu* tells the story of the Three Kingdoms, and *Zhongyi xuantu* is taken from the Water Margin sagas.

A second type of palace drama is composed of calendrical celebration plays, called *yueling chengying*. An example of a New Year celebration play is *Xichao wuwei*; an example of an early spring celebration play is *Zhuixu mianshan*; then there are *Pujian xianxie* for the fifth month celebration, *Shuangdu yinhe* for the seventh month celebration, *Dangui Piaoxiang* for the mid-autumn celebration, and *Ruyuan yingxin* for the New Year's Eve celebration, and so on for each month of the year.

A third type consists of short plays celebrating royal *rites de passage*, referred to as *fagong yazou*. For example, *Hongsi xieji* is a play performed to celebrate an imperial engagement; *Ciyun xilei* is performed in celebration of the birth of a prince; *Zhufu chengxiang* is performed upon the establishment of a new reign; *Jiyao chenghuan* is performed for the ceremony of Receiving the Imperial Chariot.

Finally, a type of short play was composed for imperial *red-white* (birthday-funeral) rituals. For example, for the birthday of the queen mother there is *Huajia tiankai*; for the birthday of the emperor there is *Sanyuan baifu*; for the empress's there is *Lingshan chengqing*; and for the crown prince — *Chunyang zhuguo*.

A close examination of these court plays has revealed special ones for banquets, for triumphant returns, sacrificial rituals, military reviews, receiving and sending off the royal entourage and so forth. It seems that *Bitian* was performed for the occasion of the Emperor's Pilgrimage to Mt. Wutai for the celebration of the Wenshu Bodhisattva. Therefore, it most likely belongs to the category of royal receptions. This classification, however, is merely conjectural on my part. This play is not found in any other library in the world, private or public. Neither is it included in the admittedly incomplete Shengpingshu [Palace theatrical department] catalogue in the PRC National Archive.

PERFORMANCE

Palace performances of all types had several noteworthy characteristics: grandiose pageantry, elaborate stage props, sumptuous costumes, and mechanized stage scenery. Two large stages have been preserved in Beijing: one in the Palace Museum and the other in the Summer Palace. Both are three stories high. Gods and buddhas could be made to descend from above in "cloud carriages"; demons and monsters would rise up from below.

When the celestial maidens strewed flowers, blossoms would fill the air; when Guanyin appeared in a vision, golden lotuses would float up from the ground. A rough estimate of the number of actors required for a performance of *Bitian* is 243 persons, including 18 Arhats, 60 Stem-Branch patron gods, 4 dragon kings of the seas, 8 heavenly dragons, 5 gods of the mountains, tribute-bearing envoys from 10 nations, portraying the proverbial "Divine bureaucracy in heaven, royal household on earth." Appearing in this play are also processions of blue lions, red carp, divine turtles, and immortal cranes. While such extravaganzas unquestionably show the materialistic indulgence of the Qing court, the contribution that palace plays have made to the progress of the theatrical arts in Chinese history is also an undeniable fact. The grand staging of *Damingfu* with the 108 Water Margin stalwarts, the procession of soldiers and cavalry of *Shanghai Guan*, the lantern parade of *Yezhan Ma Chao*, the dance of the flower gods of *Youyuan jingmeng*, all stem from palace theatricals. These products of the palace performance tradition with spectacular stage effects enrich the cultural experience of mass audiences today.

DATING

The composition of *Bitian* can be dated through its relation to the Qing emperor's pilgrimages to Mt. Wutai. Qu Wanli remarked that it was probably written during the Kangxi reign (1662-1722). Although conjectural on Qu's part, I believe that he is largely correct. There is evidence that pins down the date further.

Among the Qing emperors who made pilgrimages to Wutai were: Emperor Xuanye (reign title Kangxi); Emperor Hungli (Qianlong); and Emperor Yongyen (Jiaqing). Emperor Xuanye made five pilgrimages: the first and second were in 1683; the third in 1689; the fourth in 1702; and the fifth in 1710. Now, in which year was *Bitian* written?

In the text of the play, the following lines point to a birthday celebration of the emperor: "To celebrate the eternal life of the sacred one, by way of the ceremony for Wenshu [*jie Wenshu zhi daochang, zhu shengren zhi wan-shou*] . . . when the fragrant and colored clouds shift, it is the birth time of the eternal Divinity [*fuyu caiyun yi, qitian shengshou qi*] . . . Million more years for the Holy Son of Heaven [*wei sheng Tienzi tien shou baiwan*]." The fifth scene of the play contains the following line which tells that the age of

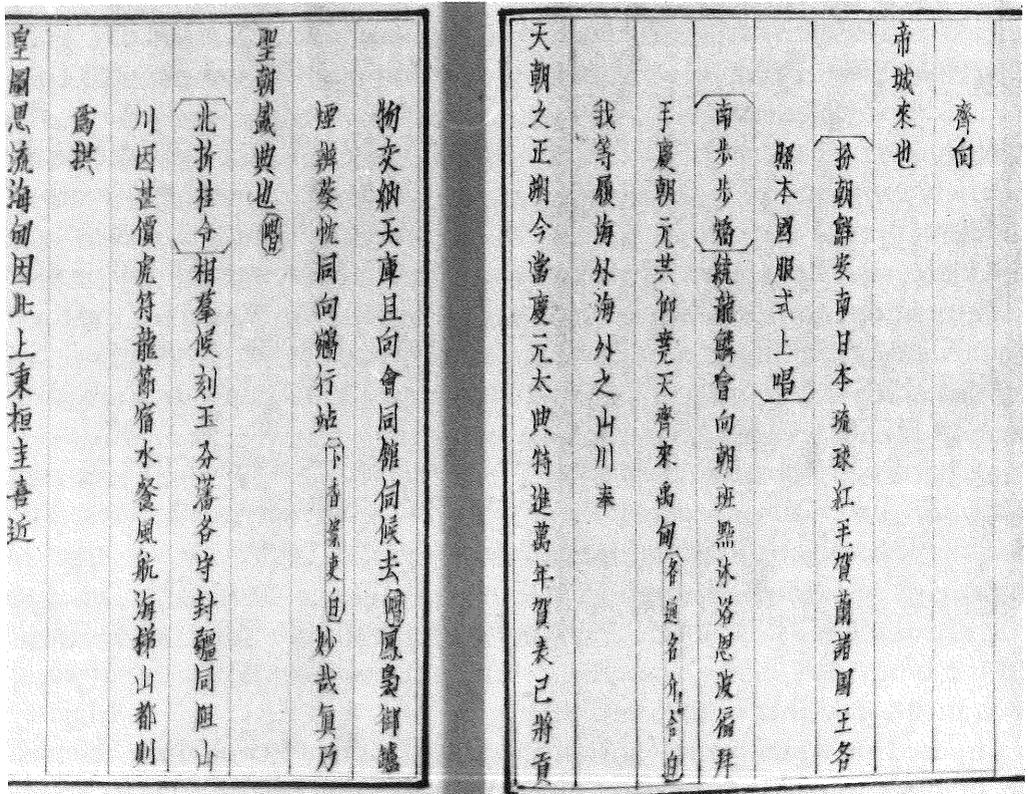
the emperor that year must have been a multiple of ten: "On the day when the Holy Son of Heaven celebrated the beginning of a new decade" [*qing yuan zhi ri*]. Furthermore, there are six references to the *jiazi* year in the lyrics and speeches in the sixth scene, which would place the play precisely in the year 1684, the year when Emperor Xuanye became thirty years of age.

However, there are yet a few discrepancies to be accounted for. The play also mentions that "the Sacred entourage ascended Mt. Wutai for the third time" and "the Holy Son of Heaven visited Wutai for the third time." Yet among the five pilgrimages to Wutai enumerated above, not one took place in 1684. What is the explanation?

According to records in the *Draft History of the Ch'ing Dynasty* [*Qingshigao*], the three Qing emperors visited Mt. Wutai altogether 13 times. Yet, in the biographies of these three monarchs, only Xuanye was recorded as having gone 5 times. Huangli went 4 times, Yongyen went only once. Evidently, there must have been gaps and errors in this draft history of Qing. In the biography of the emperor in question, *juan* seven of *Qingshigao*, it was mentioned that in the third month of 1684, a *jiazi* year, "His Majesty composed an Wutai commemorative essay." This entry could have referred to an unrecorded visit. Xuanye ruled for sixty-one years, the longest reigning monarch of the empire. Unofficial reports claimed that his father, Emperor Shunzhi, abdicated the throne at the death of his favorite consort Dong E Fei and became a monk on Mt. Wutai in 1661. It is therefore very likely that Xuanye visited Wutai more than five times. Although this supposition has yet to be substantiated, it appears reasonable to conclude that the play was written during the Kangxi reign.

CONTENTS

Bitian consists of six scenes. The first, titled "Da Fo sheng dian" [Great Buddha ascends the throne] describes how the Buddha of Longevity, Guanyin, and the Arhats order the heavenly maidens to scatter blossoms in preparation for receiving the emperor. The second scene, "Zhu xian zhu jia" [Birthday blessings from the immortals], enacts the gathering of immortals, such as Xiaofu, Han Xiang, Magu and all those who have achieved immortality, to gather in the celestial pavilion to await the royal arrival. The third scene, "Qianqui haiyan" [Long life blessing from the ocean and river



2. A page from *Bitian*, in which the names Korea, Annam, Japan, the Ryukyus, and Holland appear.

deities], relates the presentation of gifts from gods and goddesses of the oceans and rivers such as the water spirit Hangao, Lochuan, Master of the Eastern Sea, and other undersea gods. The fourth scene, “Shanling chaohu” [Homage of the mountain gods], enacts the procession of the gods of the Taihang, Taiyue, Yangjiao, Yinniu, and Gushe mountains on their way to greet the emperor. The fifth scene, “Wanguo laichao,” shows envoys from Korea, Japan, Annam, the Ryukyus, Holland, Persia, Russia, and other foreign countries, as well as such aboriginal tribes as the Diaoti, Zuochi, Chuanxiong, and Da’er. (See Illustration 2.) The sixth scene, “Sihai-Shengping” [Peace within the four seas], ends with the gods of the sixty cyclical stems singing the praise of repetition of the *jiazi*. In the pattern of traditional Chinese drama, this is a scene that brings into focus the theme of the entire performance.

The Qing court witnessed increasing activity in palace theatre beginning with the first emperor, Shunzhi. You Tong’s famous *zaju*, *Du Lisao* [Read-

ing Lisao], won the admiration of the emperor, who decreed it to be set to music as part of the repertoire of elegant songs. During the Kangxi reign, it was known that Emperor Xuanye was deeply attracted to a *chuanqi* composition, *Changshengdian* [*Palace of Eternal Life*], by Hong Sheng. However, until now no records, let alone actual scripts, of Qing palace theatrical performances dated earlier than the Qianlong reign (1736-1795) have been known. *Bitian* is the only play preserved from the Kangxi period (1662-1722). It is indeed a great privilege for me to have been able to fill a gap in the history of Chinese drama with an Wutai drama that has been preserved thousands of miles from its homeland.

NOTES

1. I acknowledge my thanks to Profs. Andrew Plaks and Yu-kung Kao of Princeton for making available a xerox of *Bitian*.
2. The translators of Mr. Wu's text note that the script of *Bitian* does not include a musical score. However, alternation between northern and southern tune titles (in all but scene 2) indicates the use of pentatonic and heptatonic modes. Scene 2 has only southern tune titles.

GLOSSARY

andian ben	安殿本
<i>Bitian xiaoxia</i>	碧天霄霞
Changshengdian	長生殿
Chuanxiong	穿胸
<i>chunyang zhuguo</i>	純陽祝國
<i>Ciyun xilei</i>	慈雲錫鬚
Da Fo sheng dian	大佛昇殿
Da'er	大耳
<i>Damingfu</i>	大名府
<i>Dangui piaoxiang</i>	丹桂飄香
Diaoti	雕題
<i>Ding zhi chunqiu</i>	鼎峙春秋
<i>Du Lisao</i>	讀離騷

fagong yazou	法宮雅奏
fuyu caiyun yi, qitian shangshou qi	馥郁彩雲移 齊天聖壽期
Gushe	姑射
Han Xiang	韓湘
Hangao	漢皋
Hongsi xieji	紅絲綸吉
Huajia tiankai	花甲天開
huangchao	皇朝
jiazi	甲子
jie Wenshu zhi daochang, zhu shengren zhi wanshou	借文殊之道場，祝聖人之萬壽
jinluan	金鑲
Jiyao chenghuan	吉曜冰散
kucang ben	庫藏本
Lingshan chengqing	靈山稽慶
Lochuan	洛川
Magu	麻姑
nei chaoben	內鈔本
neixue ben	內學本
Pujian Xianxie	蒲劍間邪
Qianqiu haiyan	千秋海晏
qinggaoben	清稿本
Qingshigao	清史稿
qingyuan zhi ri	慶元之日
Ruyuan yingxin	如展迎新
Sanyuan baifu	三元百福
Shanghai guan	山海關
Shanling chaochu	山靈朝履
Shengping shu	升平暑
Shuangdu yinhe	雙渡銀河
Sihai shengping	四海昇平
Taihang	太行
Taiyue	太岳
tianzi	天子
waixue ben	外學本

Wanguo laichao	萬國來朝
wansui	萬歲
wei sheng Tianzi tian shou baiwan	為聖天子添壽百萬
Wenshu	文殊
Wutai	吾台
Xiaofu	嘯父
Xichao wuwei	喜朝五位
Yangjiao	羊角
Yezhan machao	夜戰馬超
Yinniu	銀牛
Youyuan jingmeng	游園驚夢
yueling chengying	月令承應
Zhongyi xuantu	忠義璇圖
Zhu xian zhu jia	諸仙祝嘏
Zhuixu mianshan	追敘綿山
Zuochi	齋齒