



# Multiple Titles and the Creation and Dissemination of Flower-Part Drama

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**Abstract.** The phenomenon of a single Flower-Part drama having multiple titles is closely linked to its creative processes and dissemination strategies. Variations in title arising from phonetic transcription errors, arbitrary naming conventions, and the use of different names by different troupes for the same play reflect the oral and collective nature of Flower-Part repertoire creation. Furthermore, its open creative model allowed for the flexible restructuring of performance content through "splitting" and "merging," leading to the formation of new play titles. Under the pressure of drama censorship policies, troupes repeatedly altered play names to ensure their continued presence on stage. Thus, multiple titles—resulting from both deliberate design and objective circumstances—became a significant strategy in the dissemination of Flower-Part repertoire.

**Keywords:** Flower-Part drama, Multiple titles for one play, Orality, Drama censorship, Dissemination.

## 1 Introduction

A close examination of historical materials related to Flower-Part drama reveals numerous plays bearing multiple names. While Ming and Qing *chuangi* and *zaju* also include plays with alternative titles, the phenomenon is neither as extensive nor as complex as in Flower-Part drama. This is intimately connected to issues of creation and dissemination within the Flower-Part tradition. Academic research on multiple or variant titles for the same Flower-Part play has often focused on specific cases, examining the generation of their alternative names, such as Liu Tie's "A Study of Different Names for the Same Play in Qing Court Birthday Performances." [1] There is a scarcity of papers specifically dedicated to the relationship between multiple/variant titles and the creation/dissemination of Flower-Part drama. Li Dongdong's "An Exploration of the Relationship Between Qing Dynasty Flower-Part Drama Censorship and Multiple Titles" [2] provides a relatively in-depth analysis of the connection between Qing censorship policies and the generation of alternative titles, offering a valuable reference for this paper. However, that essay focuses on the logical relationship between title alterations, multiple titles, and the "ban-performance" dynamic within the context of Qing censorship. This paper, instead, traces the historical formation of

alternative titles, analyzing multiple titles as a survival strategy for Flower-Part drama, driven by both subjective design and objective necessity.

## 2 Orality and Collectivity: Multiple Titles and the Creative Characteristics of Flower-Part Repertoire

Generally, orality, collectivity, variability, and transmissibility are considered fundamental characteristics of folk literature. Flower-Part drama, whether in terms of its creators, audiences, narrative content, or aesthetic tastes, possesses a strong folk character. Its basic features closely resemble those of folk literature. The formation of multiple titles for Flower-Part plays is undoubtedly related to their oral and collective creative characteristics.

Although Flower-Part drama flourished during the mid-to-late Qing dynasty, it did not leave behind as many published scripts as *chuangi* or *zaju*. A significant reason is that Flower-Part drama largely relied on oral transmission. Plays gradually developed by folk artists through collective creation over long artistic practice maintained an evolutionary state of transmission, transformation, and refinement within the living tradition of 'oral transmission and mental absorption.'<sup>[3]</sup> For instance, the play listed as *Feng Dabo* (Sewing the Sash) in the appendix of *Jinle Kaozheng* (Investigation of Contemporary Music) was written as *Feng Dabao* in the Jiaqing-era publication *Pinghua*, titled *Feng Dabao* in the "Baiben zhang" play catalogue, and recorded as *Feng Dalu* in Volume 2, Issue 2 of *New Fiction* (1905). These erroneous transcriptions primarily involve homophones or similarly pronounced characters, likely resulting from oral transmission. Another example is a note in *Haishang Liyuan Zazhi* (Shanghai Theatre Magazine) regarding the play "Cuixiang Jijian" (Cuixiang Delivers a Letter): "Note: This play is also called *Yi Cuihua*, which is actually a mistaken transcription of *Yi Cuihua*."<sup>[4]</sup> Here, "yi" (遺) and "yi" (贍) are also homophones; such miswriting is clearly an outcome of oral transmission.

Oral composition was a major form of creation for Flower-Part drama. Initially presented in the form of an 'outline'—containing only a brief plot summary, with lyrics, melodies, dialogue, and stage actions improvised by the actors.<sup>[5]</sup> It is unsurprising that play titles underwent variations during oral transmission. For instance, the aforementioned *Feng Dabo* from *Jin Yue Kaozheng* appears as *Feng Dabao* in *Pinghua* and *Feng Dabao* in the "Baiben zhang" catalog. Beyond these homophonic errors, this play was also recorded as *Chen Sanliang* or *Fuchun Lou* in books like *Tingchun Xin Yong* and *Jun Tian Li Xiang*. *Chen Sanliang* is named after the protagonist, *Fuchun Lou* after the story's location, and *Feng Dabo* after a key event. These three naming methods, selecting elements of character, setting, and event, reflect different naming habits and preferences, as well as the arbitrariness in alias generation for orally transmitted scripts. Such titles focus on expressions of popular culture, aligning more closely with public aesthetic trends.<sup>[6]</sup> This arbitrariness is even more evident in the generation of aliases for *Xi Feng*. This play is titled *Xi Feng* in books like *Xiaohan Xin Yong*, *Rixia Kan Hua Ji*, and *Tingchun Xin Yong*, while *Dumen Jilue* and others list it as *Xi Feng*, *Zhengde Xi Feng*, *Meilong Zhen*, and *Youlong Xi Feng*. The play depicts the Ming Emperor

Zhengde traveling incognito to Meilong Town, where he flirts with the beautiful tavern keeper Fengjie, who becomes angry until he reveals his identity. From Xi Feng to Zhengde Xi Feng to Youlong Xi Feng and Long Xi Feng, all titles revolve around the "flirting with Feng" plot, but the subject doing the flirting changes to "Zhengde," "wandering dragon," or simply "dragon." Such variations likely occurred because oral script creation lacked, and did not require, a fixed text. When actors announced play titles or different troupes performed it, they might modify the original name based on personal (or troupe) naming habits and tastes.

Furthermore, the unique performance system developed by Huabu opera to suit its audience highlights a lifelike, popular performance style.[7] Folk troupes often had a tradition of "shuoxi" (orally directing/explaining plays), where performances proceeded without fixed scripts, relying on actors' improvisation. Due to the absence of fixed written scripts, the exchange of information about plays, whether among performers or between performers and audiences, was primarily conducted orally. Consequently, abbreviated or arbitrary play titles could emerge, such as naming a play solely after its protagonist or a particular plot point. Often, Flower-Part plays were created collectively by entire troupes or even multiple troupes, and thus did not carry the strong sense of authorship associated with literati plays. Troupes could alter play content and titles without concern for accountability, which is also a significant reason for the proliferation of alternative titles. Tingchun Xin Yong, compiled during the Jiaqing period, records the plays various troupe actors excelled in. It notes that Yao Cuiguan of the Shuanghe Troupe performed "plays like Wenliang Zhan (The Warm-Cold Cup), vividly portraying the characters' spirit," and that Han Sixi of the Dashunning Troupe performed *Beiwa Jin Fu* (Carrying the Child into the Mansion) and "could rival Yao Cuiguan." [8] Cui Lin of the Jinghe Troupe excelled in *Beiwa* (Carrying the Child), while actors like Lianguan from the Sanqing Troupe and Shuangxi from the Hechun Troupe also excelled in *Beiwa*; the Chuntai Ban Ximu (Chuntai Troupe Play List) also lists *Beiwa*. *Wenliang Zhan*, *Beiwa Jin Fu*, and *Beiwa* are essentially the same play, but different troupes used different names when performing.

The generation and evolution of alternative titles are both outcomes of the oral, collective creative mode of Flower-Part drama and provide a vantage point for observing its open creative characteristics in the absence of original materials. From the phonetic errors in *Feng Dabo*, to the multiple changes in the naming of *Xi Feng*, to the array of alternatives for *Sougu Jiugu* (Searching for and Saving the Orphan), the variations in titles during oral transmission allow us to see quite clearly the flexibility and inclusiveness of Flower-Part drama, which were also intrinsic drivers of its vigorous development.

### **3 "Splitting" and "Merging": Multiple Titles and Variation in Flower-Part Repertoire**

The open scriptwriting model and performance flexibility of Flower-Part drama led to gradual variations during the performance process, which in turn generated multiple titles. Specifically, common variation methods involved the "splitting" and "merging"

of plays: dividing a multi-act play into single acts or a few highlights (zhezixi), or combining several plays (or parts) with similar or connected plots into one. "Splitting" and "merging" inevitably involved the addition, deletion, or shifting of emphasis in the plot, leading to changes in title. The cases of Yuni He (River of Mud), also known as Jiaoguan Xiaoxian (Calling at the Pass, Minor Manifestation), and Silang Tanmu (The Fourth Son Visits His Mother), also known as Tanmu Huiling (Visiting Mother, Returning the Order), quite representatively illustrate the relationship between play "splitting"/"merging" and the generation of multiple titles.

Performing plays in split form provided the possibility for multiple titles. Yuni He, also known as Jiaoguan Xiaoxian or simply Jiaoguan, is recorded in the eleventh collection of Zhuibaiqiu under the title Yuni He. It dramatizes the story of Luo Cheng, who is framed by Li Yuanji, has his horse trapped in mud, dies under a hail of arrows, and is posthumously vindicated by Prince Qin, Li Shimin.[9] The Qingshengping Ban Ximu (Qingshengping Troupe Play List, 1824) lists both Yuni He and Jiaoguan Xiaoxian, seemingly distinguishing between the extracted highlight and the full play. However, it is important to note that another Yuni He was commonly performed during the Daoguang period. Dumen Jilue mentions an actor named Sixiangguan excelling in the role of Xue Rengui in Yuni He. This play is included in Qingdai Nanfu yu Shengpingshu Juben yu Dang'an (Scripts and Archives of the Qing Dynasty Nanfu and Shengpingshu). It tells the story of Tang Taizong Li Shimin, who, following a dream, goes in search of worthy men, goes hunting, chases a white rabbit, mistakenly falls into mud, is nearly killed by Gai Suwen, and is saved by Xue Rengui. The discrepancy between Prince Qin Li Shimin and Tang Taizong Li Shimin indicates a difference in the historical setting of the plays. Moreover, Qingshengping Ban Ximu arranges plays chronologically; Yuni He is listed below Jiaoguan Xiaoxian, above which are plays like Duipao Fangpao, which also involve Xue Rengui defeating Gai Suwen and Li Shimin dreaming of and seeking the "White-Robed General" Xue Rengui. This aligns more closely with the Yuni He concerning Xue Rengui. Therefore, the Yuni He recorded in Qingshengping Ban Ximu is more likely the one about Xue Rengui, not Luo Cheng, and should be considered a different play from Jiaoguan Xiaoxian. In other words, by the Daoguang period, Jiaoguan Xiaoxian may have become the common name for the Luo Cheng Yuni He, or the full version was seldom performed, with Jiaoguan Xiaoxian representing it.

Merging plays for performance, due to the addition of new content, could lead to changes in the original name. It is generally believed today that Silang Tan Mu and Tan Mu Hui Ling are the same play. However, based on Qing dynasty records, this was not initially the case. For instance, the "Baibenzhang" Pihuang Ximu separately lists Silang Tan Mu (in six volumes) and Tan Mu Hui Ling (in two volumes). The Erhuang Xi Mulu records: Silang Tan Mu (six volumes), Hui Ling (two volumes). Clearly, they were not considered one play. The six-volume Silang Tan Mu was priced at "two diao" (generally one diao equaled one thousand copper coins), while the two-volume Tan Mu Hui Ling was priced at "five hundred and twenty" coins[10], indicating Silang Tan Mu was far more extensive. In fact, among the several versions of Silang Tan Mu circulating in the Qing, there existed a gradual development where the 'Hui Ling' section was added later.[11] The 1824 Qingsheng Ping Ban Ximu records Silang Tan Mu. Dumen

Jilue mentions this play several times, always titling it Tan Mu or Silang Tan Mu. The earlier appearance of the title Tan Mu Hui Ling is in the late-Daoguang Chuntai Ban Ximu. Judging solely by the name, the Tan Mu Hui Ling recorded there seems to be Silang Tan Mu with Hui Ling added later. However, in Ju Bu Qunying and Qun Fang Pu, compiled around the late Tongzhi period (early 1870s), both Tan Mu and Tan Mu Hui Ling are mentioned. For example, Qun Fang Pu records that Zhang Xiulan of the Chuntai Troupe, skilled in the qingyi (virtuous female) role, excelled in Hui Ling, while Hu Xilu excelled in playing the Princess in Tan Mu. Combined with the "six volumes" vs. "two volumes" distinction in the "Baibenzhang" catalog, at least during the Tongzhi period, these two could not be considered one play.

A performance notice in Shen Bao (Shanghai News) on December 27, 1876, for "Dan Gui Tea Garden · Twelfth Night" included "Silang Tanmu with Huiling"[12]. This suggests that at that time, Huiling was not yet fully integrated with Silang Tanmu, though they were often performed together. On July 18, 1908, Shuntian Shibao · Xiping (Shuntian Times · Drama Review) listed both Tanmu and Tanmu Huiling. Subsequent installments of Xiping detailed the plot of Silang Tanmu, ending with the Fourth Son reuniting with his family, without the "returning the order" plot. Haishang Liyuan Zazhi (Shanghai Theatre Magazine), compiled in Xuantong 3 (1911), when introducing Silang Tanmu, clearly included the "Huiling" plot. Xikao (Drama Examination) published in Shen Bao in 1911, introducing Silang Tanmu, also included the "Huiling" plot. By that time, referring to Silang Tanmu also known as Tanmu Huiling corresponded to reality. Through the above analysis, it is evident that the formation of Silang Tanmu also known as Tanmu Huiling involved a process: during the Daoguang period, both plays were performed; until the Tongzhi period, Silang Tanmu and Tanmu Huiling were still often performed separately; by the Guangxu period, combined performances began to appear; thereafter, the two plays gradually merged into one, making the designation Silang Tanmu aka Tanmu Huiling accurate.

In summary, multiple titles for Flower-Part plays are closely linked to variations in their performance. The variation mechanism constituted by "splitting" and "merging" allowed a single narrative motif to generate multiple performance forms, ultimately reflected in changes to the title, fully demonstrating the flexibility and vitality of Flower-Part drama. The dynamic evolution of multiple titles was both Flower-Part repertoire's adaptation to the performance market and a result of Flower-Part drama's shift from a playwright-centered model (as in chuangi) to a performer-centered one.

#### **4 Ban and Alteration: Multiple Titles and the Dissemination Strategy of Flower-Part Drama**

As Huabu opera developed and expanded, official opera prohibition policies and community regulations, originally targeting chuanqi and zaju, began to encompass Huabu opera, gradually evolving to focus on Huabu as the primary object of censorship. Qinqiang, which captivated everyone from the imperial family and nobility down to commoners during the Qianlong reign, was also driven out of the capital under prohibition policies.[13] As prohibition efforts deepened from targeting musical styles

to criticizing specific play content,[to adapt, some troupes disregarded bans, frequently undermining prohibitions overtly and covertly through disguises, which soon became a reality—prohibition without eradication.[14] Among these tactics, name alteration became a crucial survival strategy for Huabu plays.

An early instance of criticism directed at Flower-Part plays is likely the Jingjiang Chengyi Tang Jieyan Yinxi Shuo (1834)[12], which attributed the cause of a fire at the Yue Temple stage to the performance of "lewd plays" like Tiaolian Caiyi (Lifting the Curtain, Cutting Clothes) and Mai Yanzhi (Selling Rouge). Judging by its performance content, Mai Yanzhi included plot elements such as secret engagements, but labeling it a "lewd play" seems overly harsh. From the Daoguang to the Guangxu reigns, Mai Yanzhi was a frequent target on play prohibition lists; the reasons for its prohibition rarely criticized its plot, but rather focused on excessive acting during its performances. Yang Maojian criticized its performances for "seductive appearances that teach lewdness"[15]. Although repeatedly listed on prohibition rosters, Mai Yanzhi maintained a considerable performance market in the late Qing, with numerous documents recording its performances and actors. However, being specifically named as a lewd play, altering its title became a necessary measure for advertising performance information and continuing stage presence. As stated in Shen Bao · Xiping on November 20, 1888: "As for the prohibition of lewd plays, play names are frequently changed; for example, Shazi Bao (The Kill-the-Son Retribution) changed to Tianqi Miao (Tianqi Temple), Mai Yanzhi changed to Yuehua Yuan (Moonflower Destiny), and so on, too numerous to list." [16] This is a relatively early record of the name Yuehua Yuan. Earlier documents mostly recorded this play as Mai (or Mai) Yanzhi. This material indicates that Yuehua Yuan originated from a title change due to the play's ban. The name Yuehua Yuan combines one character from each of the protagonists' names. The altered name maintains an internal connection to the play's content while appearing completely unrelated on the surface, and is more elegant than Mai Yanzhi. Although late Qing calls to ban Mai Yanzhi persisted, its ability to remain frequently on stage was significantly aided by its title change to Yuehua Yuan. During the Guangxu and Xuantong reigns, performance notices in publications like Youxi Bao (The Game Paper) and Taiwan Nichinichi Shinpo (Taiwan Daily News) used the title Yuehua Yuan. A "Prohibition of Lewd Plays" notice on October 25, 1910, stated: "On the 20th, Yongqing Tea Garden scheduled Yuehua Yuan (i.e., Mai Yanzhi) for daytime performance. This play is indeed a lewd play; authorities, concerned about public morals, stopped the performance on site." [15] The alternative title Yuehua Yuan itself was also listed within the scope of banned plays. Yuehua Yuan, arising from a title change to evade a ban, itself became listed as banned after at least over twenty years, having significantly contributed to the dissemination of Mai Yanzhi.

The Daoguang-era Yihua Tang Tiaoyue (Yihua Hall Regulations) explicitly listed numerous plays that should be banned, such as Jie Jian (Prison Break), Dao Huangfen (Grave Robbery of Imperial Tombs), Tou Ji (Chicken Stealing), Da Dian (Fight at the Inn), Sha Seng (Killing the Monk). Words like "da" (fight), "sha" (kill), "tou" (steal), "dao" (rob), "jie" (robbery) in the titles indicated the plays' characteristics of "encouraging lewdness and theft, murder and brutality." To evade censorship or avoid easy identification as banned plays, some plays began altering their titles, removing ele-

ments associated with encouraging lewdness or theft. Shazi Bao, with its murder and retribution connotations, was changed to Tianqi Miao. This name-changing strategy achieved some success. A play prohibition proclamation issued in the Shanghai International Settlement in 1885 listed seven alternative names for this play (Diyi Bao, Yuan Huan Bao, Shan E Bao, etc.) but omitted Tianqi Miao[17], likely because this name differed too much from the original and other alternatives, making identification difficult from the name alone. The seven listed names reveal that Shazi Bao underwent several name changes to counter prohibition efforts, reflecting the difficult survival circumstances of Flower-Part repertoire. Although Tianqi Miao allowed it to evade detection temporarily, a 1909 Chengdu theater ban again mentioned "Shazi Bao changed to Tianqi Miao"[18]. To survive, the play had to create new titles again. On January 20, 1911, Shen Bao mentioned the lewd play Shazi Bao changing its name to Qinglian Fang'an (The Upright Official Investigates the Case) and Heshang Bushou Qinggui (The Monk Violates Monastic Rules), etc.[19]. Changing to Qinglian Fang'an moved further towards aligning with official discourse, completely downplaying murderous elements in the title. Such title alterations provided a safe haven against censorship policies.

Regarding the phenomenon of play prohibitions being ineffective, the Shen Bao article "On the Investigation and Banning of Lewd Plays in the British Concession" (December 20, 1900) offered a relatively profound analysis. It first listed some plays whose names were changed due to the ban, such as Haichao Zhu (Sea Tide Pearl) changed to Biyu Chuan (Jade Bracelet). Under the background of play prohibition, performing under alternative titles on stage was common practice. As for the causes of this phenomenon, it cited both the corruption of social morals and actors/troupes prioritizing profit over righteousness. The reason for the ineffectiveness of the ban was that name changes were driven by profit. It revealed the underlying motivation for name changes under prohibition: plays were banned mostly for plots encouraging lewdness/theft or actors using physical display for spectacle. However, in a social climate of "rampant lewdness," these were precisely what audiences enjoyed. Ordinary people with a taste for the sensational thus formed a natural alliance of interests with the suppressed folk Huabu troupes.[20] Therefore, driven by market profit, troupes repeatedly renamed banned plays to allow their continued performance.

Multiple titles in Flower-Part repertoire reflect both the survival predicament of Flower-Part drama under censorship policies and its strategies for seeking a way out. Conversely, examining prohibition content reveals it primarily targeted plays deemed to encourage lewdness/theft, murder, or absurdity. Such plays, due to their stage spectacle and stimulating plots, were often highly popular in Flower-Part performances. The phenomenon of multiple titles in Flower-Part repertoire was precisely a product of the conflict between the official stance represented by play prohibition and the folk aesthetic represented by Flower-Part drama.

## 5 Conclusion

Multiple titles in Flower-Part repertoire are a natural extension of the oral and collective creative traits inherent in Flower-Part drama as a form of folk literature and art. Furthermore, due to its open creative model, Flower-Part plays could undergo content merging and splitting during actual performances, thereby generating new play titles. Under the pressure of Qing dynasty play prohibition policies, multiple titles also became a passive choice made by Flower-Part drama for survival. It can be said that multiple titles in Flower-Part drama are linked to both the creative characteristics and dissemination strategies of its repertoire. Using this as a starting point, even in the absence of original scripts or performance materials, we can still glimpse the general ecology of Flower-Part drama through changes in titles, as well as the internal reasons for its ability to flourish amidst the complex social background of the mid-to-late Qing. However, constrained by the fragmentary nature of historical materials, presenting a complete picture of all alternative titles for Flower-Part drama and their evolution remains challenging. If digital humanities techniques could be introduced for systematic inductive analysis of title variations, it might further reveal the complex facets of Flower-Part drama during the modern cultural transformation.

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