
Exclusive Pleasures on the Cheap

Yuan Dynasty *Sanqu* Songs
on Courtesan Kickball

PATRICIA SIEBER

In Chinese poetic culture, *sanqu* songs represented a new frontier when they came to the fore in the Yuan dynasty (1234–1368). *Sanqu* encompassed the topics addressed by earlier poetic forms—the rigors of official life in the case of *shi* poetry, the sentimental realm of the courtesan quarters in the case of *ci* song lyrics. At the same time, such songs also embraced the realm of leisure, including sports, games, and all manner of performance, with a distinctive vigor and verve. In contrast to an aesthetic of elegant refinement so prominently articulated in the critical corpus dedicated to *shi* poetry, *sanqu* songs often displayed their authors' pursuit of virtuosity and showmanship in a manner that could be appreciated by literary cognoscenti and popular audiences alike. Given that *sanqu* was a musical genre whose melodies were known and transmitted at court and among literati and the populace alike, such experiments could be embodied at multiple levels: literary phrasing, colloquial flair, prosodic cleverness, innovative narratorial perspective, thematic twists, and melodic emphasis to name the most obvious. Importantly, such ingenuity was not decried as superficial posturing, as had been the case for earlier poetic forms. Instead, Yuan sources approvingly note the popular renown that some of these literary feats generated for their authors.¹

So prominent was this preoccupation with “instant hits” that we might speak of an “aesthetic of play” where authors voluntarily entered into the

“game of songwriting,” a literary playground governed by certain rules and conventions.² However, such literary play did not take place within a “magic circle” divorced from everyday life; given the broad currency of literary skills in social contexts (noted in the introduction to this volume), such literary gamesmanship could have real-world effects, as this discussion of songs about kickball (*cujū*), one of the most popular sporting games of the Yuan period, will show. Such songs offered a platform for a pleasure-centered ethics of play while experimenting with voice, point of view, and language register. Meanwhile, such songs also reappraised relationships between courtesans and literati, a development that scholars have pointed to in other contexts. Songs about kickball thus constituted a dual playground of urban sophistication (*fengliu*). Details about the sport itself are relevant here: kickball’s complicated techniques combined with the novel phenomenon of courtesan kickball teams during the Yuan period offered room for literary experimentation while also allowing for exploration of gender dynamics. The songs thus illuminate the gendered functions of play discussed here and elsewhere in the volume.

Among the six extant *sanqu* song suites about kickball, the two authored by Guan Hanqing (ca. 1220–after 1279) are attested in Yuan-era sources, while the other four, by Sadula (1300–48?), Deng Yubin (fl. 1294–97), Zhang Kejiu (ca. 1270–ca. 1350), and Tang Shi (fl. 1360) respectively, appear in Ming dynasty anthologies. The songs all rely on a shared knowledge of the technical vocabulary associated with kickball; at the same time, the songs embed the ball game in different gendered sociabilities and poetic mythologies. If some songs foreground an eroticized display of the female body in motion, in others, the representation of technically accomplished play as a discursive space gains ground. Hence, these *sanqu* songs are located at the convergence of form and content organized around the Yuan-dynasty elevation of “skilled play.” They form part of a broader social valorization of games of all kinds, while also offering imaginative remediations of elite pursuits.

Sanqu Songs, an Aesthetics of Play, and Kickball Culture

In light of the new prominence and social approbation of literary playfulness, it is perhaps not so surprising that playful forms proliferated in

the *sanqu* corpus.³ In the ready accessibility of its playful features, such an aesthetic differed in spirit from the often visually or allusively oriented literary games that had long been part of literati culture. If such literary games were designed to demarcate an in-group of literary cognoscenti, *sanqu* songs structured their play so that it took a certain skill to write such songs, but a formal education in the classical Chinese canon and poetic corpus was not required to appreciate the results. In other words, the threshold for enjoyment of the aesthetic features of *sanqu* was typically much lower than for other forms of poetry.

Several factors contributed to such accessibility. *Sanqu* drew on a lore of urban knowledge shared across different social strata and genders. However, rather than writing *about* such urban practices in the sentimental or historiographic manner of other lyrical genres, *sanqu* songs often gave such cultural activities a new twist. Specifically, Yuan songs and plays evince a new subject position, that of the spectator, who is capable of simultaneously embracing two points of view: that of himself as an observer and that of different protagonists within the narration.⁴ Such a bifurcation of perspective stood in marked contrast to allegorical or identificatory readings and opened new forms of literary play. One way in which such a duality might manifest is through the ability to concurrently appreciate an urban pastime and enjoy its playful reenvisioning in song. *Sanqu* typically involved some form of remediation—that is, the implicit mimicry (immediacy) or overt and self-conscious recreation (hypermediacy) of other literary genres within the bounds of an emergent medium.⁵ *Sanqu* songs made use of a range of other texts drawn from different genres, but rather than simply treating such borrowings as an allusion or as an intertext, such recontextualization frequently also invoked the textual and extratextual practices associated with such source materials. At the same time, *sanqu* songs were not uniform in their approach to how such remediation functioned. In some cases, the willful juxtaposition of multiple texts created a form of hypermediacy, but in many others, the desired effect of such an invocation of source materials was the creation of an enhanced experience of immediacy for audiences and readers.⁶

Extant *sanqu* song suites on the popular game of kickball (*cuju*) are no exception. In a triangulation between prior textual genres, the actual game of kickball, and subject positions within the songs, they seek to provide an

immersive experience for their audiences. However, the precise cultural trope and spectatorial configuration on which such a song-based description of the game was staged varied from song to song. In all instances, the songs must be understood against the backdrop of the newly prominent pleasures of urban life in the Yuan metropolises of Dadu (the newly founded Yuan capital, modern Beijing) and Hangzhou (the former capital of the Southern Song). We should not leap to the conclusion that such urban pastimes were simply a diversion for displaced literati. Instead, the policies of the Mongol rulers in many cases amplified cultural trends incubated in earlier periods, and many of these leisure activities found favor among people belonging to a wide range of social strata, ethnicities, and genders.

What I translate here as “kickball” has a long history documented in Chinese textual and visual sources. A recent spate of scholarship in Chinese has examined the history of the game partly with a view toward claiming that the earliest form of soccer originated in China.⁷ However, as a broad array of sources ranging from the Warring States period to the Qing period shows, kickball was not a monolithic, unchanging game.⁸ Rather, it encompassed different sportive practices, the most influential of which, apart from the fact they involved kicking a ball with different body parts, shared little with the agonistic, goal-centered structure of modern soccer. By the Yuan period, the game began to generate its own documentation in encyclopedias and specialized manuals dedicated to the game.⁹ In one of the many continuities of urban life between the Southern Song period and the Yuan dynasty, kickball not only continued to be played among diverse segments of the populace, but also found favor among new groups of practitioners. For one, as depicted in figure 4.1 from a popular illustrated encyclopedia, *Collection from the Expansive Forest of Things Worth Knowing* (*Shilin guangji* [1328–1332]), the game appeared to have found new adherents among Mongol officers even as they continued to practice their own steppe-based pastimes (falconry, archery, and more).¹⁰ Insofar as three people are involved with the ball, this illustration is likely a snapshot of the “three-player kickball” (*sanren changhu*) format in contrast to “solo player kickball” (*yiren changhu*), “two player kickball” (*er’ren chang hu*) or “team kickball” (*yuanshe*). Not all forms of the game involved a competition between teams. Instead, the objective of this type of “plain kicking” (*baida*) was the consummate execution of certain movements by a small



FIG. 4.1. Mongol officers playing kickball to the accompaniment of music (Shilin guangji 事林廣記, 1328–32). Source: Shane McCausland, *The Mongol Century: Visual Cultures of Yuan China, 1271–1368* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 77. Image file courtesy of Reaktion Books.

group of players. The quality of their moves was adjudicated by a judge (*jiaozheng*). Moreover, as the illustration makes clear, the game was often accompanied by music, suggesting that this style of kickball blurred the boundaries between “sport” and “dance.”

For another, in the Yuan dynasty, in addition to seasonal kickball playing among respectable women, public women active in the entertainment quarters began to get involved with kickball culture. In figure 4.1, the presence of female musicians (playing clappers and drum) on the left points to one role that courtesans-cum-musicians assumed in the culture of the game.¹¹ Most distinctively, courtesans began to train on all-female teams (*shinü yuanshe*) to compete in public matches. We can infer that female

kickball performers participated in three different kinds of formats: the “official field” (*guan chang*), “the pole net field” (*ganwang chang*), and the “field site” (*changhu*). The second of these featured a single goal (*qiumen*) (see figure 4.2), while the other two did not involve a goal at all. In all cases, the skill with which specific movements were executed determined victory or loss.¹² Thus, in the course of a game, the different parts of the female body, including the courtesans’ bound feet (*jinlian*), were subject to intense scrutiny, adding to the erotic allure of the game.

From the extant corpus of *sanqu* songs, we can infer that the matches of all-female kickball teams were attended by the scions of well-heeled families—examination candidates, leisured dandies, and songwriters, among others.¹³ The dual social identity of players and audience as participants in the game on the one hand and as courtesans or patrons on the other—what have been called epitheatrical bonds in another context of patrons and skilled players—loomed over *sanqu* representations of the game’s signif-

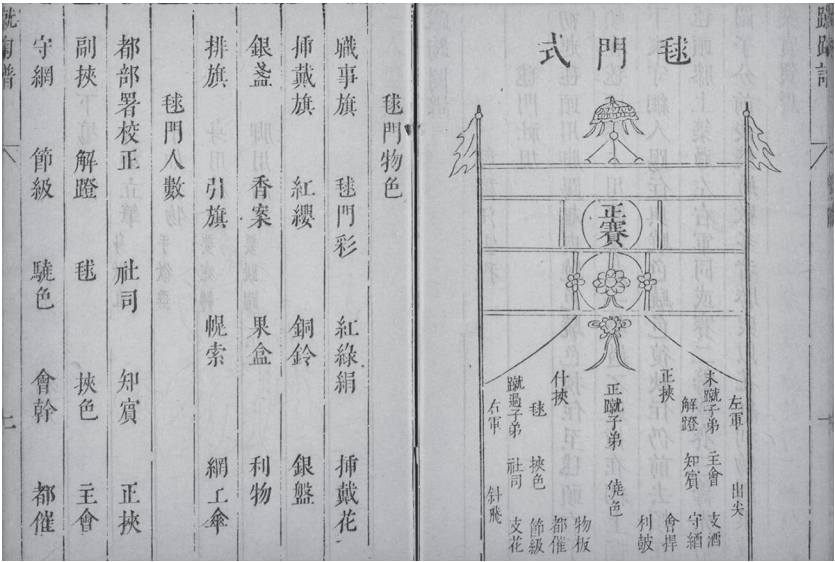


FIG. 4.2. Illustration of the “pole net” style of kickball in the earliest extant kickball manual. Shuofu 說郛. n.p: 1646. v. 103, seq. 59. Courtesy of Harvard-Yenching Library.

icance.¹⁴ As a leisure activity, such kickball games could aspire to being utopian spaces devoid of normative economic pursuits, entrenched social hierarchies, and asymmetrical power relations.¹⁵ As the introduction to this volume notes, games were coded as masculine or feminine, but the extent of talent, skill, and accomplishments involved might conform to or challenge gender norms. In the Yuan dynasty, a game with highly skilled male and female practitioners—like kickball—held out the promise of a more egalitarian relationship between courtesans and their male patrons; however, to the extent that courtesans could not transcend sexual objectification, such a game, like the sex games discussed in chapter 5, nevertheless took place in the shadow of gender asymmetries. Meanwhile, in contrast to the sentimentality found in patron-courtesan relations explored in chapter six, these songs are devoid of any hint of emotional attachment. *Sanqu* songs about kickball position the game as a realm of leisure where specialized knowledge of the game might allow for new forms of gendered representation (women) and gendered self-representation (men).

The best known evidence for self-styled mastery of nontraditional, entertainment-related savoir faire derives from a song suite about Guan Hanqing entitled “On Not Submitting to Old Age” (Bu fu lao). This song likely spoofed the common trope of quitting the entertainment quarters for good and was mapped onto the dynasty’s most accomplished playwright.¹⁶ In the manner of other pseudo-biographies about playwrights in *sanqu* form, the song spliced different elements of urban pursuits into a fictional biography that highlighted the subject’s sexual prowess; capacity for liquor; familiarity with music, acting, and comedy; and importantly, for our purposes here, the ability to play assorted games.¹⁷ In one of the stanzas of this song suite, Guan Hanqing is said to have mastered the following urban pastimes:

I have mastered the games of chess (*weiqi*) and kickball (*cuju*).
 I have mastered playing dominoes (*darwei*).
 I have mastered comic routines (*chake*),
 Singing and dancing,
 Playing wind and string instruments.
 I have mastered vocal performance,
 Poetic recitation and playing the “Double-Six” game (*shuanglu*).¹⁸

Even if the song is a hyperbolic and fictitious biography, it nevertheless captures one of the main threads of Yuan-dynasty urban entertainment culture, that is, the alternative gendering of male pursuits.

Specifically, all three of the songwriters examined in this essay—Guan Hanqing, Sadula, and Deng Yubin—tapped into a rhetoric of a differently conceived model of masculinity. Instead of hewing to the traditional persona of a homosocially oriented scholar-official devoted to the study of the classics in the service of the common good and patrilineal mobility, these urban denizens made no secret of flaunting their embrace of sensory pleasures. However, rather than denigrating Confucian learning per se, this construction of masculinity was underwritten by an expansive understanding of talent. In their own view, it was the elaboration of talent—be it in the realms of writing, acting, musical performance, or assorted games—that distinguished them from the prurient commoners or the abusive lechers of the privileged classes excoriated in plays and *biji* memoirs alike. As the song about Guan Hanqing cited above put it, such urbanites were said to be “quick and clever (*linglong*), sophisticated and sharp (*titou*).”¹⁹ At the same time, in marked contrast to the scholar-official elite who traditionally had kept public women at arms’ length, these men publicly reveled in the companionship of courtesans as sensuous beauties, intimate companions, and fellow talents.²⁰ In the words of the song about Guan Hanqing, these types of men “place first in the arena of entertainment (*paichang*) and of romance (*fengyue*).”²¹ As we shall see, how exactly the presence of courtesans manifested in songs written about and by these urban sophisticates varied, but publicly visible contact with women was clearly a *sine qua non* for this type of masculine persona.

In what follows, we will examine three songs in detail. It will be apparent that all three songs strive to make the description of the game of kickball an opportunity to show off the writing skills of the composer, while also displaying the writers’ familiarity with the cultural lore of urban sophistication. Thus, all three songs deploy some amount of technical knowledge about kickball, and they all resort to deliberate mixing of polite and informal registers. However, beyond the overlap in phrasing to characterize the game, the songs tell us less about the game itself than about the kind of experiences that these descriptions of kickball sought to provide for their listeners and readers. In that regard the songs differ in at least three

aspects: first, in the texts they seek to remediate within the protean form of *sanqu* song; second, the degree to which they eroticize the courtesan players, and third, the type of sociability their understanding of the game seeks to purvey. Moreover, the songs also adopt different literary techniques to recreate the game in the frame of the songs. One stays within bounds of omniscient narration, while the other two play with the possibilities of the bifurcated perspective of “a game within a song.”²² The first song to be discussed belongs to the oldest extant *sanqu* songs on the topic of female kickball players.

Guan Hanqing: Game as Pleasurable Examination

Guan Hanqing’s song suite “Female Kickball Players” (Nü xiaowei) is, as modern scholars have noted, by far the most technically oriented of the three songs under consideration.²³ In fact, the song suite would not be intelligible without reference to the specialized manuals on kickball published in the late Yuan and early Ming period. Thus we can view Guan’s song as an attempt to remediate a genre of technical writing within the form of *sanqu* through adding three dimensions—time, materiality, and social space—all replete with evaluative overtones. In drawing heavily on the catalog of specialized movements listed in the manuals, the song revels in players’ technical expertise. At the same time, the song improves on such manuals insofar as it combines the various technical moves into a time sequence. Accordingly, instead of offering a dry list of terms in the manner of a manual or a static image found in an encyclopedia, the song presents the various technical moves kinetically. Moreover, it maps such movements onto dynamic, kinesthetically animated, and starkly material bodies. As these bodies traverse the terrain of the play space, they admix the earthiness of sweat and dirt with sublime beauty. In contrast to the manuals’ exclusive focus on the mechanics of the game, the *sanqu* song invites readers to watch the players and imagine themselves as an implied audience as the song toggles back and forth between action and reaction. In the following translation, quotation marks indicate technical kickball terms.

[*To the tune of “Dou anchun”*]

Amidst the kickball fields,

In the alleys that resound with the clanging of jade accessories

[on horses and people]—

Their renown travels north and south

In the entire world they are admired.

In the intricacies of the game, they excel.

The sound of the ball being tossed—it makes everyone cheer.

Those calls are lively.

[Everything] is just about perfect!

Leisurely and sideways—their golden lotuses.

Delicate and relaxed—their jade bodies.

Their skirts sway lightly.

Their embroidered belts float sideways.

Their dancing sleeves drop down.

[*To the tune of “Zihua’er”*]

They kick a “bucket handle kick” particularly hard.

The “folding fan kick” is extra swift.

They have a thousand ways to dribble.

Up and down—expansive and even—

Talking of technique—it is so spot on

that “shoulder kicks” come into play.

“Maneuvers of twists and turns” are varied.

The “hidden feet kicks” are nimble.

[*To the tune of “Xiao taohong”*]

For “fake outs,” they diligently apply their ingenuity.

They do not fall short of their much-lauded ability.

Amidst the throngs of women [players], they are the most esteemed.

They are incredibly experienced!

When their bodies touch, they do not come into contact with the ground.

Once they have pursued a hundred kicks,

everything is happily wrapped up.

[*To the tune of “Diaoxiao ling”*]

As they flare their nostrils

A different fragrance is blown out.

Their silken socks are sticky with colored mud.

The many skills of their natural artistic talents!

Even if you are matched in “arranged groups of three” or “orchestrated
pairs of two,”

The “mandarin duck hook” is like a painting.

Unexpectedly, we have been fooled into thinking that the team members
are hesitating and holding back.

[*To the tune of “Tusi’er”*]

The powdery sweat—pearls drop in profusion.

The bejeweled hairdos are lopsided; their hair—the color of raven-black
jade—is piled up askilter.

The “fake kick” and the “true kick” have been pulled off.

Leaning sideways, their bodies move,
their willowy waists lithe—

A bundle of appreciation!

[*To the tune of “Shengyao wang”*]

How neat!

Such technique is rarely seen.

The “left basin” and the “right break” are practiced through and through.
Perfect indeed!

With a minimum of energy,

Parallel to each other, their feet advance one by one.

As they come and go, they flutter about like butterflies.

[Coda]

Without having left the leisured grounds amidst the flowers and the wil-
lows [i.e., professional entertainment quarters],

No matter whether it is the small kicks of the plain style on the field

Or a team match under the kickball goal, the women have no peers any-
where.

In all competitions, they take first place.²⁴

In terms of poetic subgenre, Guan Hanqing's song about female kickball players takes the form of a praise song or a kind of ode (*yong*).²⁵ Whereas other "humble subjects" had already been addressed in ode-like poetry prior to the Yuan dynasty, odes to a game and its female practitioners were rare.²⁶ Moreover, what is singled out for praise is not the beauty, sexual savvy, or moral fortitude of the players, but rather their technical prowess and dedication to the mastery of the game.²⁷ While the song is not indifferent to the female body as an object of eroticized beauty, that language is quite attenuated. In fact, one might argue that the first stanza's mentions of "golden lotuses" and "jade bodies" sets up certain expectations only to frustrate them. If such phrasing goads the reader into wondering about the sexual availability of the female players, subsequent stanzas redirect the reader's attention to the women's technical expertise instead.

In Guan's song suite, the stanzas move from the actual game to a range of appreciative language about the women's technical perfection. The appreciation is cast in a very informal register—"They are incredibly experienced!" "Spot on!" "How neat!" "Perfect indeed!" Thus, irrespective of whether these are actual spoken phrases derived from Yuan-dynasty proto-Mandarin, the language register suggests that these lines at least resemble what an audience member might exclaim when watching a kickball game. In doing so, Guan Hanqing's song suite presents an omniscient narrator in the position of a fan—someone who is not only cognizant of the rules, the special terms, and the reputations of the players, but cognitively engaged in the observance of the game with a community of other fans ("it makes everyone cheer"). In this animated embodiment of the players' movements and the appreciative viewer's response, Guan's song makes potentially complicated content more accessible and also creates the illusion of experiential immediacy.

Interestingly, the song purveys at least two different kinds of experiences. On the one hand, the implied reader is someone who can appreciate physical activity apart from the manual labor of agriculture, the skilled labor of handicraft, or the sexual labor of romance. For such a reader, the body is aestheticized in a realm of leisure governed by intense training and kinetic perfection. On the other hand, as the first and last stanza make explicit, the competitive game of kickball also alludes to the civil-service examination system. In the first stanza, the clanging of "precious jade" points to the fact

that the well-heeled elite attended such kickball matches, an observation also borne out by the descriptive details found in other *sanqu* songs about kickball.²⁸ In the final stanza—the equivalent of a climactic punch line in single-stanza songs (*xiaoling*)—the reader’s expectations are confounded. The song takes up the idea of a competitive arena (*chang*) to compare the entertainment quarters and the implied world of officialdom. Contrary to what we might expect from normative masculinity, it is the realm of leisure that wins the day, culminating in the claim that the perfection of this form of female competition is without peer.

Importantly, in this climactic part of the song, the language of immediacy is made most explicit: through metaphoric overlay, two experiences are simultaneously made available “without leaving the leisured grounds of the entertainment quarters.” By inhabiting the perspective of the narrator, the reader is invited to imagine an actual kickball game. At the same time, insofar as this subject position mimics that of a judge, such a vantage point affords the male reader an opportunity to adjudicate what constitutes perfection. Thus, the song not only delivers an animated rendition of the game itself, but stages it in the guise of an experience that would likely not be available in real life—the coveted role of an authoritative examiner in a dynasty that held examinations very infrequently. Rather than feeling relegated to the sidelines of normative life scripts, readers could attain satisfaction in the realm of games that might surpass that of the competitive realm of officialdom.

In this and in other songs by Guan Hanqing, a culture of highly formalized play allows for a shared form of expertise that is not predicated on the systematic exclusion of female attainment that is characteristic of the civil-service examinations. In Guan Hanqing’s telling, kickball and its representation in the playful genre of *sanqu* potentially opened up a literary space where men and women could not only embody the alternative gender norms of urban sophistication (*fengliu*), but also project new kinds of sociabilities—a space where shared technical expertise is idealistically portrayed as a new currency of interaction in mixed-gender urban communities. To be sure, Guan’s understanding was only one attempt to mobilize kickball as an imaginative shortcut to reimagine particular elite experiences. The kickball song suites attributed to the diasporic poet, songwriter, and official Sadula and official and Daoist devotee Deng Yubin, respectively,

show experimentation with narrative structures and offer another vision of what the game could mean for male-female sociabilities.

Sadula and Deng Yubin: Game as Everyday Myth

In the wake of the publication of the first *sanqu* anthology, *Sunny Springs, Brilliant Snow* (*Yangchun baixue*, 1324), other writers picked up motifs found in that seminal collection. Among them ranked Sadula, a 1327 metropolitan graduate (*jinshi*) and a member of one of the dynasty's prestigious cultural academies.²⁹ Primarily known as a *shi* poet, Sadula has only a single extant song suite, entitled "Courtesan Kickball" (*Jinü cuju*), to his name. After a distinguished official career, he retired to Hangzhou, the epicenter of entertainment and song culture in the latter half of the Yuan dynasty. In contrast to Guan Hanqing's song suite, Sadula's appeared in the mid-fifteenth-century collection of song and plays *Songs of Harmonious Resplendence* (*Yongxi yuefu*, 1566), a collection strongly associated with the Ming court. Given the Ming court's documented involvement with the revision of the Yuan song and drama corpus, we must be more cautious in reading Sadula's song suite as a commentary on urban Yuan culture.³⁰ However, in terms of language, form, and tune sequence, Sadula's song suite hews closely to Yuan models. Hence, editorial caveats notwithstanding, Sadula's description opens up a new perspective on how the portrayal of kickball could remediate another rarefied experience—that of the visit of a female deity or immortal.

In Chinese poetic culture, the trope of female immortals initiating mortal men into the erotic arts emerged with the rhapsody in the third century bce. Typically, in such a rhapsody, a goddess descends from on high and shares her knowledge with a mortal man in a beautiful natural setting. The most famous examples include the mythical encounter between the Goddess of Mt. Wu and King Xiang of Chu (*Gaotang fu*) and that of the Goddess of the Luo River and Cao Zhi (*Luo shen fu*). Echoing a shamanistic tradition, such encounters seemed reserved for male members of the imperial elite.³¹ Moreover, these early accounts invariably end on a sad note, since the union between goddess and mortal proves to be short-lived. In Sadula's song, however, the exclusive experiences of kingly figures are mapped onto the spectators of a kickball game in the heart of a city:

[*To the tune of “Liangzhou”*]

The plain silk shirts hang around and

The multicolored silk sleeves envelop the jade sprouts [e.g., fingers].

The brocaded stockings pad and the black shoes surround the kicking
golden lotuses [i.e., the feet].

Below the bleachers of officialdom, people all jostle in admiration.

[The players] resemble the Fair Maiden Sunü having been blown here
from the Palace on the Moon.

Truly, they are like transcendents that have been blown down [to earth] by
a Heavenly wind . . .³²

After continuing the description of the game with technical moves similar to the ones found in Guan Hanqing’s song suite, Sadula’s song ends on the following stanza with a tongue-in-cheek twist on the usual unhappy ending:

[Coda]

If one were to say that you have attained the wish of cherishing jade and
cherishing fragrance [sexual intimacy] in a bedchamber;

If one were to say that you have been matched at a banquet suffused in a
fresh breeze and a bright moon inside a kingfisher-decorated hall:

Then it would be [none other than] the six-sided ball made of fragrant
leather that made the match.

Yet next to the trellis overgrown with vines,

In front of the moss-covered cave,³³

It turns out that you have not stepped away a single step from the gather-
ing [on the field].³⁴

In this song, in contrast to Guan Hanqing’s third-person description, the last stanza clearly invokes a second-person interlocutor. Like Guan’s final stanza, Sadula’s song also introduces a comparison. However, the analogy here is not between officialdom and the culture of games, but between sexual encounters that could range from the myths of poetry to the real-life patronage of courtesan players. So what is promised to this “you” of the final line? On the one hand, it would appear that encounters with immortal women would be out of reach for most men, either because they were not

of distinguished enough standing (the culture of rhapsody) or because of the rarity of such accidental encounters (Daoist legends). On the other hand, patronage of real courtesans might not be readily available, either. For one, an ordinary viewer might not have the financial wherewithal to support a courtesan, let alone bring her into his household. For another, even men of considerable standing might not find favor with the women they wanted to patronize. An anecdote from *The Record of the Green Bowers* (Qinglou ji, 1364) about a *zaju* actress with the stage name Shunshi xiu (fl. 1321–27), who had a lifelong intimate relationship with songwriter and scholar-official Wang Yuanding (fl. early fourteenth century), attests to the possibility that a public woman might scorn even the most well-placed of suitors. According to this account,

when Aluwen (fl. 1314–1336), the [prominent Mongol] official [and occasional songwriter], who served in the Secretariat [one of the most powerful agencies at the Yuan court], wanted to take up intimate relations with Shunshi xiu, he asked her one day in jest: “How do I compare with Wang Yuanding [from the Western Regions]?” She said: “You, my Sir, are an official. Yuanding is a literatus. In matters of state and the common good, Yuanding cannot rival you, Sir. However, when it comes to matters of romantic poetry and love, you, Sir, do not dare to look upon Yuanding.” Aluwen smiled and desisted.³⁵

By contrast, the game of kickball allows for the viewer to indulge in the fantasy of such a scenario without being at the mercy of one’s own status, lack of cultural attainment, wealth, luck, or someone else’s favor. In Sadula’s description, at the end of the match an assembly of female immortals “wipe off the sweat with silken handkerchiefs and pick up hair ornaments that had fallen down [in the course of the game].”³⁶ In other words, in this poetic rendition, the game remediates otherwise exclusive forms of sexual intimacy as a form of erotically charged sportsmanship. In its casual invocation of the rhapsodic tradition, the song popularizes a potentially exclusive pleasure in dual form. First, the reader of such a song might not have to attend a game in order to imagine themselves as a potential companion of kickball-playing immortals. Second, if readers had the opportunity to attend such a match, their experience of the game itself might be altered in line with Sadula’s vision. In other words, it is not just a matter of *sanqu*

remediating the roles of an ancient poetic form in contemporary literary guise, but the game itself and the social encounters it might facilitate in turn may become an occasion to fancy oneself a “king of yore” favored by an “ancient goddess.” Thus, in contrast to Guan Hanqing’s song, Sadula’s song suite more explicitly veers in the direction of a dual take on the game of kickball as a skilled sport and an erotic fantasy. If this kind of deliberate ambiguity is only implicit in Sadula’s song, the *sanqu* song by Deng Yubin makes such a double entendre explicit.

Like Sadula’s song suite, Deng Yubin’s *sanqu* song first appeared in the mid-Ming *Yongxi yuefu* collection. Like Sadula, Deng Yubin had served as an official, albeit in a minor capacity, before retiring to devote himself to Daoist activity. In addition to a number of explicitly Daoist songs, he composed “The Double Entendres Surrounding a Female Kickball Team” (“Shinü yuanshe qiqiu shuangguan”) in ten stanzas.³⁷ The title already signals that the song suite should be read at two levels—of the game and of the erotic fantasy embedded in it. To make the conceit more effective, Deng’s song suite reconceives of the game as a match between male and female teams. Deng’s most striking innovation may well be the way the song suite focalizes the description of the game itself. In many ways, Deng’s song suite describes the same technical maneuvers featured in Guan Hanqing’s and Sadula’s songs. However, in contrast to the use of second-person address in the punch line of Sadula’s song, Deng Yubin’s suite consistently interweaves second-person perspective with the description of the match. Throughout the song, the second person alternates between a purely spectatorial position invoked in the informal phrase “you see” (*nikan*) and an immersive assumption of the perspective of the male players in the guise of “you” (*ni*). Here is how such a metatheatrical oscillation structures the opening stanza of the song with all the “you” phrases in italics and all the technical phrases in quotation marks:

Enveloping a ball full of harmonious air
 Once it’s kicked off, a hundred subtleties arise.
 [In a game] together with the scions of the entertainment quarters (*zidi*),
 a light bump of the loins, a smarting touch of the knees
 In a moment, they hold up the ball with their chests.³⁸
You see those “evasive loins,”

“A fake kick,” a “true dribble,”
The thigh sharp as a blade.
As she moves, *you* acknowledge that her tack is for real.
As she advances, *you* recognize her as the big gun.
The set-up is tight.
The scion yells—now *you* know how much her kick would hurt *you*.³⁹

In the concluding line of the stanza, the boundaries between the male players on the field and the spectator are clearly delineated, but in highlighting access to physical pain, here a bifurcated perspective converges on the notion of vicarious experience. Thus, in contrast to Guan’s song of seamless immersion, Deng Yubin’s insists on the visibility of the remediation. The explicitly sexualized nature of the song becomes apparent in its use of mythology to describe the players. Not only are there “lonely male phoenixes who have descended from the nine empyrean heavens to seek out female phoenixes,” but the female players are compared to “female immortals who have crossed the bridge in great number.”⁴⁰ While the song suite overall is not as tightly written as either Guan Hanqing’s or Sadula’s, it most clearly dramatizes the game of kickball as a “divine pleasure” on the cheap.

Conclusion

By the standards of classical poetry, *sanqu* may come off as “shallow genre,” but on closer inspection it reveals itself as a form governed by an aesthetic of play. It may be tempting to think that only anonymous *sanqu* songs revel in this aesthetic, but as the range of songwriters who wrote on the game of kickball demonstrates, men from the highest official echelons (Sadula), the middling ranks (Deng Yubin), and noncredentialed literati circles (Guan Hanqing) all experimented with such an aesthetic. Their songs infused playfulness not only into how they described the world, but also into what they chose to write about. As is typical for *sanqu*, the final lines of the three songs offer surprising punch lines that seek to playfully thwart the time-honored expectations of potential listeners and readers alike. In Guan’s case, that twist takes the form of an inversion of the hierarchies of officialdom and the games of the pleasure quarters; in the case of Sadula and Deng, the songs transpose the tropes of the visitation

of female deities and immortals onto the realm of games. In all cases, the songs foreground immersive immediacy and imaginative access to what were otherwise exclusive or even nonexistent prerogatives such as regular civil-service examinations or unpredictable divine visits. In doing so, these songs experiment with new narrative perspectives, ranging from expert fan to cognitively engaged spectator.

At first glance, a game like kickball may seem a harmless if frivolous pastime. But after Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–98), the founding emperor of the Ming, assumed power, he issued various edicts to rein in the culture of play, particularly among his military troops. One edict noted that among the troops stationed in capital, those who engaged in learning how to sing would have their tongues cut off and those who played kickball would have their feet cut off.⁴¹ From this vantage point, a culture of play is not a peripheral phenomenon but can be seen as a countercultural sphere conceived in contradistinction to conventional domestic and public pursuits by men and women alike. In the full-fledged articulation of an urban space of games and performance, Yuan *sangu* deploy the technical and aesthetic expertise embodied in female kickball players not as a metonym for the neglected scholar-official, but as the privileged currency of an alternative economy of play.

Notes

1. Patricia Sieber, “Nobody’s Genre, Everybody’s Song: *Sangu* Songs and the Expansion of the Literary Sphere in Yuan China,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 29–64.

2. For the self-conscious navigation between different genres as practiced by the best documented *sangu* songwriter, Zhang Kejiu (ca. 1270–ca. 1350), see Jaehyuk Lee, “A Dialectic between Genres and Extension of Poetic Function: Zhang Kejiu’s ‘Regulated Songs,’” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 89–112.

3. Eleanor H. Crown, “*Jeux d’Esprit* in Yüan Dynasty Verse,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 2, no. 2 (1980): 192.

4. Casey Schoenberger, “Storytellers, Sermons, Sales Pitches, and Other Deceptive Features of City Life: A Cognitive Approach to Point of View in Chinese Plays,” *CHINOPERL* 38, no. 2 (2019): 129–64; Karin Myhre, “Performing the

Emperor: Sui Jingchen's 'Han Gaozu Returns to His Home Village,'" *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 31–58.

5. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

6. Patricia Sieber, "A Flavor All Its Own: Some Theoretical Considerations of *Sangu* Songs as Mixed-Register Literature." *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 203–35.

7. This summary is primarily drawn from Wang Yan, Sun Fei, and Dong Jie, "Lun Zhongguo gudai nüzi cuju de fazhan yu yanbian," *Shandong tiyu xueyuan xuebao* 36, no. 3 (2020): 68–74.

8. Textual sources include entries in dynastic histories, poems, poetic rhapsodies, court lyrics, and manuals on how to play the game; visual sources include stone reliefs, paintings, bronze mirrors, tomb figurines, clay pillows, woodblock illustrations, and porcelain. For a brief survey of the visual materials, see Li Yaqun, Ma Guoqing, and Zhu Shuju, "Cong Linzi cuju bowuguan cang cuju wenwu qian xi cuju yundong de fazhan yanbian," *Wenwu tiandi* (2010): 92–6.

9. The earliest manual is entitled *Illustrated Manual of Kickball* (Cuju tupu). It was included in Tao Zongyi's (1329–1410) compendium *Shuofu*.

10. For an alternate interpretation see Shawn McCausland, *The Mongol Century: Visual Cultures of Yuan China, 1271–1368* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 76.

11. On the difficulties of adequate terminology for professional women entertainers, see Beverly Bossler, "Vocabularies of Pleasure: Categorizing Female Entertainers in the Late Tang Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 72, no. 1 (2012): 71–99.

12. See Wang, Sun, and Dong, "Lun Zhongguo gudai nüzi cuju," 70–71.

13. I have not found evidence on what qualified people to become part of the audience (e.g., paid admission) or whether popular audiences would also have been among the viewers. For another public ball game known as *chuiwan* that was documented with a manual in the Yuan dynasty, see Gui Yan, Zhang Tianju, and Han Liebao, "The Study of *Chui Wan*, a Golf-Like Game in the Song, Yuan, Ming Dynasties of Ancient China," *Journal of Sport History* 39, no. 2 (2012): 283–97.

14. Mark Stevenson, "One as Form and Shadow: Theater as a Space of Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Frontiers of History in China* 9, no. 2 (2014): 225–46.

15. Rudolf Wagner and Catherine Yeh, "Frames of Leisure: Theoretical Essay," in *Testing the Margins of Leisure: Case Studies on China, Japan, and Indonesia*, ed. Rudolf Wagner, Catherine Yeh, Eugenio Menegon, and Robert Weller (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2020), 296.

16. Patricia Sieber, *Theaters of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama, 1300–2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 61–69.
17. Wenbo Chang, “Performing the Role of the Playwright: Jia Zhongmin’s *Sanqu* Songs in the Supplement to *The Register of Ghosts*,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 59–88.
18. Attributed to Guan Hanqing, “Bu fu lao,” in Sui Shusen, comp., *Quan Yuan sanqu* (QYSQ), rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1989), 1:173.
19. Guan, “Bu fu lao.”
20. For the shift in appreciation of courtesans in the Yuan dynasty, see Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000–1400* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 295–97.
21. Bossler, *Courtesans*, 295–97.
22. I modify here the trope of a play within a play to recognize the fact that “spectatorship” could bridge different forms of cultural display, not just plays as text and plays as performance.
23. See Wang Xueqi, ed., *Guan Hanqing quanji jiaozhu* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1988), 790–99. Deriving from an ancient military officer title, usually rendered “colonel,” *xiaowei* functioned both as a general term for players as well as a more specialized designation in certain kickball formats.
24. Guan, “Nü xiaowei,” in Sui, comp., QYSQ, 1:177–80.
25. On “praise song/odes” as one of the legacy genres contributing to the rise of *sanqu* songs, see Idema, “The Ultimate *Sanqu* Song: Yao Shouzhong’s ‘The Complaint of the Ox’ and Its Place in Tanaka Kenji’s Scholarship on *Sanqu*,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 17–18.
26. For a brief discussion of a Tang-dynasty rhapsody on the kickball playing of palace women, see Wang, Sun, and Dong, “Lun Zhongguo gudai nüzi cuju,” 69.
27. For a similar emphasis on the technical side at the expense of eroticization, see Guan Hanqing’s song-suite on the leading actress of the day. Guan, “Zeng Zhulian xiu,” in Sui, comp., QYSQ, 1:170–71.
28. Tang, “Cuju,” in Sui, comp., QYSQ, 2:1606.
29. McCausland, *Mongol Century*, 147–50.
30. See Tian Yuan Tan, “In Praise of This Harmonious and Prosperous Empire: *Sanqu*, Ming Anthologies, and the Imperial Court,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2021): 142–49.
31. David Hawkes, “The Quest of the Goddess,” *Asia Major* 13, no. 1–2 (1967): 71–94.
32. Sadula, “Jinü cuju,” in Sui, comp., QYSQ, 1:700.
33. The previous two lines are tentative translations.

34. Sadula, “Jinü cuju,” 700.
35. Xia Tingzhi, *Qinglou ji jianzhu*, ed. Sun Chongtao and Xu Hongtu (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1990), 102.
36. Sadula, “Jinü cuju,” 700.
37. Deng, “Shinü yuanshe qiqiu shuangguan,” in Sui, comp., *QYSQ*, 1:306–8.
38. This line is a tentative translation.
39. Deng, “Shinü yuanshe qiqiu shuangguan,” 306–7.
40. Deng, “Shinü yuanshe qiqiu shuangguan,” 307.
41. Wang, Sun, and Dong, “Lun Zhongguo gudai nüzi cuju.”