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Women and Men, Love and Power: Parameters of Chinese Fiction and Drama

edited and with a foreword by
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Parameters of Chinese Fiction and Drama

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Foreword

by

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What happens when you turn a group of bright undergraduate and graduate students loose on the world of Chinese fiction and drama, inviting them to read whatever in that world strikes their fancy, and to write about whatever aspects of the works they have chosen that they think are the most significant? The results are both surprising and refreshing, to say the least.

Before giving a brief summary of what transpired in this experiment, I should mention that the participants ranged all the way from first-year freshmen who knew no Chinese whatsoever to PhD candidates who were about to take their comprehensive examinations in Chinese literature. Their majors ran the gamut from nursing and business to history and engineering. The only academic concern they shared was their curiosity about Chinese fiction and drama.

In previous years when I taught this course, I provided much more guidance about which works to choose and the types of approaches and topics to employ in studying them. This year, I decided to concentrate more on letting the students know what was available and telling them just enough about what was out there to whet their appetite for one or another text, group of texts, theme, method, author, and so forth. My rationale for adopting this new strategy was prompted by my observation that Penn students are becoming more and more creative and self-motivated.

The papers in this collection are a good indication of the truly thoughtful and insightful research and analysis that students are capable of doing on Chinese fiction and drama, even without a background in Chinese studies. Perhaps most impressive of all is that students without

any Chinese language training are capable of making genuine contributions to the study of Chinese fiction and drama by relying on translations and their own intelligence.

Incidentally, the papers in this collection constitute about half of the papers submitted in my class. While I have selected them for inclusion because they are truly outstanding and because I wanted to keep this collection to a manageable size, this is not to say that the other papers in the class were lacking merit. Quite the contrary, all of the papers I received that semester (Spring, 2009) made valuable observations. If there is a difference between the papers included here and those that were omitted, it is because — in general — these are better written, clearer, and more logically organized.

The most obvious outcome of this relatively laissez-faire procedure is that, given their druthers, students overwhelmingly (more than 95%) will choose to write about fiction rather than drama. I do not care to speculate why this is so, but have my own suspicions, and I am sure that many of those who encounter this collection and its Foreword will have various explanations for this unmistakable phenomenon.

Secondly, without any prompting from me, by far the most popular focus was on women’s issues. Thus we have in this collection papers on vixens, shrews, maidservants, nymphomaniacs, femmes fatales, and courtesans. Students were also deeply intrigued by the implications of foot-binding and all manner of love stories. This preference for women’s issues was held by both male and female students, although the latter (who made up slightly more than half of the class) had a somewhat greater predisposition for women’s issues than the former. Some of the discussions that emerged in the class revealed that the students thought that, despite the fact that traditional Chinese society and historiography were heavily masculine-oriented, literary resources show women to have been incredibly resourceful and capable. In other words, women in pre-modern China — although severely constrained by institutional, social, and moral norms and standards — were able to assert themselves by cleverly and intrepidly working through and around the system. Although I have been studying Chinese literature for nearly forty years, it is only the innovative and perceptive investigations of my students that have enabled me to realize the subtleties of women’s issues in traditional Chinese literature and society.

Next, as a countercurrent to this fascination with everything pertaining to women, there

was also a strong interest (particularly among a certain segment of the male students) in misogyny, heroes, outlaws, hoodlums, alcohol, and similar macho themes. In the papers that deal with such “men’s issues,” we find an appropriately critical, even clinical, type of inquiry, not the sort of sensationalism into which such subjects might devolve in the hands of less serious students.

In contrast to this attention to the sometimes sordid underbelly of male-dominated pre-modern Chinese society, there was a fixation on the civil service examinations, officialdom, and the bureaucracy into which they fed, and the power structure of which they constitute the most conspicuous and formal components. This is a perennial focus in all classes on pre-modern Chinese culture and society that I have taught. Naturally, students are intrigued by the relationship between success in education and desirable employment. However, since the young men who were studying to pass the exams might be thoroughly distracted by a beautiful girl (or an enchanting fox!), attention to the examination system and officialdom is also often linked to other themes.

Finally, astute inquiries into the relationship between literature (especially fiction) and history were pursued by several members of the class. Some of these inquiries were carried out at a very sophisticated level, even by students with no previous training in Chinese language, literature, or history. Also undertaken were detailed investigations of the representation of other lands and peoples in Chinese literature, and the extent to which materials from fiction, for instance, can serve as reliable data for studies of trade, travel, diplomacy, and ethnography, or whether such representations should be relegated more to the realm of imagination.

Taken all together, the papers in this volume, and from the class as a whole, are examples demonstrating that literary studies do not belong to specialists alone. Anyone with a genuine interest in Chinese literature who is willing to apply him/herself has the potential to make useful discoveries from the attentive reading of fiction and drama. These papers are proof positive of the contributions that percipient laypersons are capable of making to literary studies. I hope that readers of this collection will enjoy and profit from these studies as I certainly have.

The Deviant: Examining the Relationship between Foxes and Humans in Chinese Literature

by
Kailun Wang

Abstract

This study discusses the deviant behavior exhibited by the fox character in Chinese fiction and culture and analyzes the ways in which such behaviors influence the human protagonist. The actions of the protagonist allow the author and reader to consider and critique the lives of people in real life. The study first defines the fox in Chinese literature and then the fox as deviant. Finally the paper focuses on the ways in which deviance affects the individual. The works of Pu Songling, Ji Yun, and He Bang'e form the basis of study throughout. Further studies in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are recommended.

Introduction

Foxes in Chinese literature are often portrayed as outsiders and deviants in society. They choose their own lifestyle and do not adhere to a set of social regulations. The human-vulpine relationship explores the realm of the extraordinary, controversial, and taboo, yet these tales can be interpreted as allegories that express common Chinese ideologies. Because they are seen as supernatural beings, the foxes' interactions with people are considered strange and fantastical. Their marginalized status in literature places them in a compromised position: they have the freedom to pursue a socially unconventional lifestyle, but, when contesting against humans, it is ultimately the action of the human character that decides the outcome of the story. This study examines the way in which the deviant nature of the fox in such stories allows the reader or auditor to reflect on and criticize the lives of ordinary people.

Encounters with foxes place protagonists in precarious situations, often bizarre or role-reversing, in which humans must act appropriately to bring back order. Ultimately, fox tales

demonstrate the importance of individual performance. With this in mind, the study will focus on the works of Pu Songling, Ji Yun, and He Bang’e.

Definition of the Fox

In Chinese literature and folk culture, foxes are presented as supernatural beings. In Chinese, these creatures are commonly described as *huxian*. As a “species,” they have diverse paranormal abilities and personalities. Nevertheless, Huntington explains that “although there is not a single Fox, there are a finite number of distinct traditions of talking about foxes” (5).

There are two common physical manifestations of the fox in literature and folklore. One of the most prevalent delineations is the animal that can transform into a human. Described as beautiful and witty, fox-men and fox-women take on the forms of wistful scholars, young maidens, wise sages, or seductresses. Much of the enchantment of the human-transforming fox relies on his or her overall attractiveness and intelligence. The vulpines are rarely outright powerful, relying on brute strength. Instead, fox magic generally borders the earthy and practical. The vixen Miss Hong of He Bang’e’s “The Red Girl,” in *Yetan suilu* (Occasional Records of Conversations at Night) offers dishes at a wedding, and fox-fairy Jiaonuo in Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Strange Tales from Make-do Studio) cures the male protagonist of a deadly illness (quoted in Huntington 38; Pu 32). Their powers make the vixens seem like extremely talented young women rather than hocus-pocus beasts. There is little difference between Miss Hong and any charming resourceful girl, nor between Jiaonuo and a beautiful and skillful nurse. Not only do these foxes look like humans, their powers emulate talents that the ideal man or woman might possess. Similarly, the dangers posed by a fox are no more threatening than the scheming and betrayals perpetrated by humans. He Bang’e draws parallels between human and vulpine evils; Huntington explains that “He ... reverses monstrosity back onto humanity, using language linked with the fox’s traditional deceptions” (72).

The opposite of the human-like vulpine is the fox that resembles a specter, whose presence is felt, but whose physical form is barely suggested, if mentioned at all. Though it plays a role similar to that of the mischievous poltergeist or house ghost, the haunting fox is not considered to drift among the dead. Ji Yun writes, “The dead and the living walk different roads,

but foxes are between the dead and the living” (quoted in Huntington 1).

Much of a fox character’s disposition is colored by its author’s preference. Furthermore, the same author may choose to portray different vulpine characters with distinctive traits. The depiction of a fox depends on the message or opinion that the author wishes to express. A malleable archetype, the fox spans a wide spectrum of roles; the meaning behind a story constructs its character’s purpose and role. The same could be said of foxes in Chinese religion. Kang Xiaofei concludes that “the fox cult in China demonstrates that popular cults of demonic origins had great appeal to people of all social backgrounds because they provided opportunities to pursue amoral, personal, and local interests” (198). The fox cult has a different meaning for every person, and its religious role is shaped by each person’s personal needs.

Fox Deviance

The word “deviant” is defined as “differing from a norm or from the accepted standards of society” and “one that differs from a norm, especially a person whose behavior and attitudes differ from accepted social standards” (“Deviant” def. 1). Foxes do not purposefully engage in nonstandard behavior for the sake of clashing with society. They are not the stereotypical deviant archetypes such as the disillusioned troublemaker or the rebel youth. They are not intentional deviants. What makes these supernatural creatures stray from the norm is not what they do, but what they are. Furthermore, in order to consider foxes as substandard, they should be examined from a human perspective. From a vulpine character’s point of view, the deviant behaviors they demonstrate are simply a part of their species. Thus, to be abnormal is normal for a fox, but out of the ordinary if examined using the standards of human society. Therefore, the following deviances of fox existence are examined through the lenses of human cultural and social standards, especially the beliefs and habits of the late Imperial Dynasties.

The various roles that a human-transforming fox assumes are at times unconventional. The most infamous example is the vixen. Seductress, lover, wife and even mother, the vixen plays a broad range of female parts. But vixens operate differently from ordinary women who share similar positions. In contrast to Chinese women in tales, these female foxes are highly independent and mostly free from the constraints of a male-dominated society. In Chinese tales,

human women, in the matter of marriage, are controlled by authoritative figures. In the story “Wang Tao-p’ing’s Wife Restored to Life,” for example, Fu-yu’s parents marry her off to Liu Hsiang, despite her love for Tao-p’ing (Kan 774). Even the sharp-tongued Ts’ui-lien, known as The Shrew, has an arranged marriage (“The Shrew” 873). But, in a conversation between two thinkers, one human and the other fox, the fox states, “Most [vixens] can choose their own mates” (Ji quoted in Huntington 81). Not only can vixens choose their spouses or lovers, they can easily end a relationship. Ji Yun captures the mobility of foxes in his tale:

A young man ... was seduced by a fox.... His energies became so depleted that finally he was not able to satisfy her when the two were in bed together. Putting on her clothes the fox made ready to depart.... When reprimanded for her lack of feeling, the fox retorted in anger, “There are no marital obligations between us; I came for the specific purpose of getting spiritual nourishment.... With nothing more to gain, why should I not go? This is like liaisons built on power and influence that are broken when there is no more power or influence. Previously didn’t you ingratiate yourself with so-and-so, whom you now no longer care about? And I am being reproached! (Ji quoted in Chan 203–204)

Ji draws parallels between the business-like transactions of men and the relationship between a vixen and mortal. The vixen’s interpretation of her relationship resembles that of a corporate agreement gone awry rather than a romantic bond, where women are submissive to men. Bereft of benefits, the fox can leave freely without making a compromise. Moreover, stories of vixens integrated into human families do not usually include children. “As transient beings in human society, they violated conventional expectations by refusing to have children” (Kang 90). The birth of a son or daughter would further solidify the agreement between a husband and wife; but, lacking a child, fox-women are not tied to a family. On the other hand, human women are burdened with societal expectations. The breaking of vows has inevitable consequences. Fu-yu, for instance, escapes marriage at the cost of her life (Kan 774). Ts’ui-lien leaves her husband and becomes a nun, ostracized by society (“The Shrew” 893–984).

In literature and culture, foxes have a reputation for contesting against official power.

While the mass of humankind follows the law, foxes demonstrate their affinity for deviance through their well-known natural aversion to government decrees and bureaucracy. Kang explains, “Foxes troubled officials because they were associated with lawbreaking” (165). Rather than follow rules, foxes tend to take the law into their own hands. In *Yuewei caotang biji* (Notebook from the thatched cottage of close scrutiny), Ji Yun writes about two vixens that are caught by a group of young men.

They threatened them, wielding knives, “Since you can change your forms to become human, serve wine for us, and you will buy your lives”.... The foxes barked and hopped as if they did not understand. The evil young men ... stabbed one ... to death. [The other] turned into a fine woman.... The mob was delighted and took turns dishonoring her without restraint....

Heading home ... [they saw that] many homes had been burned to ashes, and a daughter of the man who had killed the fox had been incinerated. (Ji quoted in Huntington 62–63)

Karmic retribution, an eye for an eye, is standard vulpine procedure in the interaction of foxes and humans. It is in their nature to execute a “righteous vengeance” that is “swift and violent” (Huntington 69). However, they may overstep boundaries when retaliating, and vengeance becomes too swift and too violent. Ji recounts another tale in which a male fox takes advantage of his revenge. His wife has an affair with a man, so he sleeps with the man’s wife. The fox’s affair lasts longer than the man’s affair. The Daoist priest, acting as a judge, states, ““Since your revenge was excessive, the fault again lies with you. If you don’t leave, I’ll report you to the Bureau of Thunder”” (quoted in Huntington 64–65). The Daoist priest’s disapproval of the situation represents tension between an authoritative figure and the fox. The Bureau of Thunder, used as a threat, further emphasizes the fox’s natural aversion to governmental regulations. Once he hears this warning, the culprit admits his crime and leaves (quoted in Huntington 65).

The fox is not only a subversive character in literature, but also a symbol of insurrection in real life. “In 1622, a so-called White Lotus uprising by a millenarian sect broke out in

Shandong.... [Religious preacher] Wang Sen ... was arrested for organizing heterodox groups, attributed his initial success to a fox spirit, who first taught him the magical arts” (Kang 167). The fox cult, associated with “social dangers” such as lawbreaking, prostitution, and religious uprisings, has had a strained relationship with official power (Kang 162).

With the social mobility of vixens and a certain degree of lawlessness, the fox is an enemy of harmony. Chinese society values order in family and state. Such emphasis placed on a stable family and government has been influenced by Confucian ideas. “The bonds that men in Chinese society were to observe and promote ... those that bound father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife ... were overtly concerned with the maintenance of China as a *guojia*, literally, a ‘state-family’” (Kutcher par. 1). Harmony and regulation in home and state are interlocked, and the fox represents a deviance from both, thus from society as a whole.

Isolated Fox

Fox deviants enjoy freedom from the organizations and expectations of the general public, and they can be antagonists to governmental or familial institutions, yet because they act contrary to mainstream culture, foxes tend to be solitary individuals. Authors often present vulpine characters as detached or physically isolated beings. Miss Hong approaches the old soldier at night, when few people are present (He quoted in Huntington 36). Both Qingfeng and Jiaonuo in *Liaozhai* live with a large family, but these groups of foxes reside in a secluded manor, separate from human contact. Biological factors play a role in distinguishing a fox’s solitary mannerism as they “hung alone, not as members of a pack. They are nocturnal, but often glimpsed in the transitional hours of dawn or twilight. Dwelling easily on the edges of human habitation as well as in the wilderness gives them a marginal place” (Huntington 7).

In certain cases there exists a psychological barrier between human and fox. Yingning, a half-fox, has the charm of a talented girl, yet she possesses a mysterious and incomprehensible nature. Her blatant lack of experience is shown when she needs her suitor Wang to explain the love between a husband and wife (Pu 82). Her incessant laughter thwarts Wang’s attempts to have a serious wedding and a relationship (Pu 86). After an incident occurs, Pu reveals:

Judging from her persistent mindless laughter, she seemed wholly lacking in sensibility, and what could be more deviously cunning than her wicked prank beneath the wall? But her sorrowful yearning for her ghostly mother ... lead one to think that laughter was merely a mask for the real Yingning. (Pu 89)

The author implies that Yingning's true emotions are hidden from the audience, as well as from her suitor and husband, Wang. Such tales explore the lack of understanding and communication between foxes and humans, as both species carry different agendas. Wang concerns himself with the matter of love and marriage, while Yingning's motivations are unknown until the very end, when she reveals her sorrow. However, Yingning's elusive nature results in public scrutiny and suspicion. Wang's neighbor exposes the girl as a witch, and Yingning is threatened with the prospect of an arrest and interrogation (Pu 87). Public misunderstanding of the quirks and habits of foxes is dangerous, as people are quick to believe that such beings are evil and must be persecuted. The fox is thus only safe in the private sphere of life.

Foxes Influence Individuals

It goes without saying that fox-men and fox-women are not the movers and shakers of the world. As deviants and outcasts, these supernatural beings have the ability to affect the lives only of individuals. In all the vulpine stories of He Bang'e, Ji Yun, and Pu Songling, foxes always interact with people on a one-to-one basis. From the human-vulpine romance and house hauntings to philosophical discussions and licentious liaisons, a supernatural creature can develop a deep personal connection with an individual human. In situations where one human encounters a clan of foxes, the human usually forms individual relationships with select members of the extended family. When a vulpine family moves in to live with a school instructor, the instructor becomes the paternal figure of the old fox's two sons and three daughters (He quoted in Huntington 56–57). Many of Pu Songling's stories focus on the intimate relationships of mortal men and vixens.

Furthermore, the unconventional roles played by fox characters are the source of much

discomfort for human characters. Huntington asserts, “Its frequent violations of [established boundaries around the human and the ordinary] reveal the anxieties of late imperial culture. The borders it crossed were the most jealously guarded ones,” including religion, romance, and sexuality (4–6).

Foxes give exclusive attention to a character and touch the subjects bordering the individual’s most private concerns. The relationship created is so personal and sensitive that it strongly affects the human’s emotions, empowering the fox to greatly influence that person. Such potent ingredients create a catalyst that drives the human protagonist to act. Maintaining the tradition of preserving order, human characters become proactive in order to maintain their values and bring back harmony. Lack of action or irresponsibility leads to their downfall.

A major topic in fox literature is the dangers of excessive and unrestrained sex. The parasitic vixen character interacts with men on the most delicate physical and psychological level. It is the ultimate private disturbance in his life. Consumed with desire, the male character is at the mercy of a vixen. Influenced by religion, stories offer pseudo-medical explanations of why indulgence in sex is hazardous, as Ji Yun explains, “Men who are bewitched lose their *yang* to replenish the fox’s *yin*. They fall ill and die when the *yang* is exhausted” (quoted in Kang 91). The emotional threat vixens pose is equally significant as they can fulfill repressed needs. Huntington explains He’s account of the protagonist Ding and his repulsion towards a vixen, “Despite all his aspirations to spiritual self-sufficiency, Ding’s need for a woman is his weakness.... One cause of Ding’s anger is the realization that he is neither self-sufficient nor fully in control of himself” (Huntington 53). These threats from sex capture the uneasiness males feel towards the empowerment of females and the corrosion of order. As a result, the irresponsible man who fails to restore his dominance (thus restore balance) and succumbs to his desires often faces a grim fate. It is common for those who carry out licentious affairs with foxes to die. The death of an indulgent man serves as a warning to the audience against the dangers of sexual affairs in reality, as wicked vixens are closely linked to prostitutes.

On the contrary, men who act to restore order are praised by authors. He’s story of the old school instructor and the family of foxes exemplifies the importance of human responsibility. An old fox by the name of Hu asks the school instructor to look after his clan (He quoted in

Huntington 56). The beginning of the tale establishes Hu as the patriarch of the fox family; he is the leader and guardian of the clan, yet by entrusting his young ones to the instructor, he essentially gives his powers and duties to the man. During the visit, the instructor and his son form platonic friendships with certain foxes while they resist the mischievous sexual advances of the vixens in the family (He quoted in Huntington 57). The plot reveals that the emergence of foxes into the instructor’s life represents disorder entering the human household. By maintaining the nurturing relationship of friends rather than the consuming affiliation of lovers, the instructor and his son preserve a formal balance of host and guest with the foxes. In the end, they are repaid handsomely by Hu (He quoted in Huntington 56).

The happy ending of this tale plainly implies that the instructor is a moral man. The fox’s karmic reward is equivalent to the instructor’s fair judgment and handling of the situation. At the end of the account, the author reflects upon the story, incorporating universal themes that not only apply to characters who encounter the strange, but also to ordinary people and their day-to-day lives.

Those Who Defined the Fox

How did the fox come to form a personalized relationship with humans in literature? Who decided that fox tales should serve as allegories or contain moral lessons? Pu Songling, Ji Yun, and He Bang’e, Qing dynasty authors who created highly notable fox depictions, produced works that belonged to the *zhiguai* and/or *chuanqi* category. Consequently, the strong *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* tradition influenced each author’s execution of his fox tale.

Leo Tak-Hung Chan explains that the “centuries-long orthodox Confucian attitude towards the supernatural ... made writing *zhiguai* a dubious enterprise. Well-known to the traditional scholar was Confucius’ injunction against talking of prodigies ... and spirits” (19). In a literary society that considers the fantastical and strange superfluous, *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* authors needed certain justifications for writing. To an extent, Pu, Ji, and He “claimed, like Confucius, to be ‘transmitting but not creating’” (Huntington 16). Rather than describing themselves as creators of fiction, writers of the supernatural saw and compared themselves to historians and biographers. Pu Songling, for example, called himself the “Historian of the

Strange,” a title that some scholars believe was modeled after the Grand Historian of Sima Qian (Zeitlin 1). If one assumes that the name Sima Qian can evoke respect, then one can understand how Pu Songling’s title implies that to record the outlandish is also a legitimate task.

Pu’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* is a collection of short stories that seem to blend historical accounts and fabrications, the unusual (though not supernatural) and the unnatural (ghosts, fox-spirits, and so forth). In the introduction of his work, Pu states that ““what I have heard, I committed to paper, and so this collection came about. After some time, like-minded men from the four directions dispatched stories to me ... what I had amassed grew even more plentiful”” (Pu quoted in Zeitlin 44). Although it is agreed that Pu fabricated a good portion of his work, the author’s intended similarity to a historian results in a rich compilation of tales, diverse in scope and yet personal, like biographies; most stories focus on a specific protagonist. And like reality, Pu’s tales are unpredictable and often ambiguous. The progression of *Liaozhai* tales feels like a journey down a meandering path with unexpected discoveries, rather than a typical didactic anecdote. As elements of *Liaozhai*, the fox characters also share many of his tales’ traits. Vixens, vulpine families, and the humans who encounter them are never portrayed in a black and white manner. Huntington states that “authors like Pu Songling present the [vulpine archetype] unapologetically, simply concluding that there are many kinds of foxes” (77). He Bang’e also wrote elaborate hearsay accounts in his work, *Yetan Suilu*, but unlike Pu, He’s fox characters are inclined to act in a clear-cut manner by rewarding good-doers and punishing the wicked. Additionally, as an imitation of *Liaozhai*, *Yetan suilu* “include[s] many romances that attempt to improve on *Liaozhai*,” but with “a strain of bloodiness and scatological humor foreign to its model” (Huntington 28–29).

Of course, it is common for Chinese fiction to serve as allegories or contain moral lessons, because the “eighteenth-century *zhiguai* compilers ... discovered in moralization the best means of removing the stigma attached to this genre” (Chan 19). Pu inserts comments at the end of his stories, often delivering social commentaries. Ji Yun’s *Yuewei caotang biji* (Notebook from the thatched cottage of close scrutiny) also conveys moral messages. Concisely written, Ji’s fox tales explore the concept of morality, judgment, and fairness. Unlike Pu’s work, Ji’s stories have tidier endings, with characters repaid according to their actions. Chan points out that *Yuewei caotang*

biji “exemplifies most vividly the dynamics of didacticism in the eighteenth century *zhiguai*” (4–5). His foxes seem to serve the purpose of teaching other characters or the audience a lesson.

Authors write with various intentions, so it is no surprise that the fox story should have become so wide-ranging. However, the *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* practices can help explain the motivations and inspirations behind each author’s rendering. Such traditions connect the foxes that appear in all such collections, and they lead to a greater understanding of the vibrant vulpine makeup.

Conclusion

The supernatural fox genre is unique because authors present the battle of contradictory elements: chaos and harmony, deviance and tradition. A fox’s powers depend not on deliberate magic spells, but on the ability to affect the desires and fears of humans. Vulpine fiction and culture present a plethora of peculiar situations; no fox character is exactly the same as the other. One could suggest that for every human, there is a supernatural fox, a mysterious and elusive being that allows people a deeper glimpse into the mind. Often such exploration results in the discovery of forbidden and frightening possibilities. The unease that a fox story unearths is countered in literature by the socially acceptable actions of a human or the critique offered by the author. Order prevails at the end of a fox tale, conveyed either through the storyline or the moral lesson, yet readers will remember vividly the glimpse of the unconventional conveyed by the magical foxes.

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Shrew Stories: Social and Moral Commentary on Women in Society

by

Yukwah Kwok

Introduction

Women in traditional Chinese society were bound by social and physical controls that prevented them from achieving their potential in society. Socially, Confucianism dominated Chinese thought: women were to be seen and not heard, and they were expected to obey their husbands' every command. In fact, a woman had to obey the man in charge at every stage of her life: her father prior to marriage, and her husband in matrimony. Women were also seen as polluting individuals and were excluded from rituals and religious events (“Inversion of Marital Hierarchy” 364). A physical emblem of such control was foot binding, which impeded women's movement. Due to the painful process and the resulting malformed feet, women could not run and could only take small steps. Women's status in society was low and difficult to ameliorate. It is for this reason that the shrew stands out as a distinctive character in pre-modern Chinese literature.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a shrew as “a thing of evil nature or influence; something troublesome or vexatious” (“Shrew” def. 2) and “a person, especially a woman, given to railing or scolding or other perverse or malignant behavior, frequently a scolding or turbulent wife” (“Shrew” def. 3a). In traditional Chinese society, where so much control is exerted on women, the shrew is a unique character in that she rebels against conforming to the difficult norms set by men. Thus it is not surprising that the shrew often has a bad reputation; not only is she troublesome and vexatious, but she is also known as a “demonic woman,” one who attempts to subdue men by stealing men's *yang* essence (McMahon 13). In traditional Chinese literature, the shrew most often appears as a jealous wife who attempts to monopolize her husband's affections. She can be loud or cunning, and she often overpowers her husband until she reforms. However, the shrew character is not limited to a woman who is a wife; she can be a rebellious

daughter, an insubordinate daughter-in-law, or a scolding mother-in-law. No matter what form she takes, the shrew defies convention and reverses traditional gender roles (“Inversion of Marital Hierarchy” 365).

There are several types of shrews, according to Yenna Wu’s model: she categorizes them into the cunning, the violent, and the petty. The cunning shrew plots and schemes behind the scenes while appearing to be in harmony with her husband and his concubines. Wu claims this is the most vicious type of shrew, because of her hidden intentions. The violent shrew uses force and physical abuse to intimidate her husband and his concubines, but she may not be as sneaky, and she can be gullible. Finally, the petty shrew is usually from the upper class; she is well bred, but often infertile. As a result, she tries to block her husband’s attempts at obtaining a concubine until she is enlightened by someone or something.

These three types of shrews usually appear in satirical pieces of work (“Inversion of Marital Hierarchy” 369). Oftentimes in literature, the shrew appears with several different personality traits that allow her to be placed into multiple categories. In reading the shrew stories, I noticed that, while it is convenient to categorize shrews, there is not always a correct classification for individuals. Thus, I refrain from categorizing shrewish behavior in this paper, as it may not be accurate and constricts the character into a specific stereotype where she does not belong.

Wu also argues that the shrew is most often placed in literature as a character that provides satirical-comical relief (“The Chinese Virago” 4). It is true that the shrew is satirical through role-reversal; she often becomes the head of the family and the brute, while the man is timid and overpowered. However, I argue that the shrew stories translated in Wu’s anthology, *A Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China*¹ provide more social and moral commentary regarding women’s role in society than satirical-comical relief. This paper will be

¹ Wu’s translations include Li Yu’s “A Jealous Wife Becomes a Widow While Her Husband Is Still Alive,” “Jie Zhitui Traps His Jealous Wife In An Inferno,” by Aina Jushi, the first chapter in *Idle Talk Under the Bean Arbor*, five classical tales from *Strange Tales from Liao-zhai*, by Pu Songling: “Ma Jiefu,” “Jiangcheng,” “Woman Shao,” “Shanhu,” and “Hengniang.” The final story is entitled “Curing Jealousy,” by Yuan Mei, taken from his collection of tales, *What Confucius Refused to Speak of*.

divided into two parts: the first will analyze the role of women in shrew stories compared to that of traditional Chinese society, and the second will analyze the moral messages of karmic retribution and forbearance within the text used to promote the control of fierce women.

Shrews as Social Commentary on Women in Society

When one begins to read shrew stories, one might think that such a strong female character would have feminist undertones. After all, the shrew seems powerful — she does not listen to anyone’s desires but her own, and she does whatever it takes to get her way. However, upon closer examination, shrew stories actually convey the opposite message and contain more anti-feminist messages. Shrew stories often promote the idea that women can and should be controlled and subjugated. In addition, the stories seem to say that a woman is weak, and her main desire in life is to marry a man and have him by her side forever.

The shrews in “A Jealous Wife Becomes a Widow While Her Husband Is Still Alive,” by Li Yu, are quite fierce, but each nevertheless reforms and becomes a perfect wife who lives in harmony with her husband and his concubines. The Vinegar Queen, who had caused the death of her first husband for committing adultery, remarries Fei, a famed “jealousy tamer.” Sure enough, the Vinegar Queen submits to Fei for two reasons: the kindness that the other concubines show her make her realize her own awful traits, and she fears being banished to the cold palace, as she was on her wedding night. Thus, the Vinegar Queen, however fierce she is, is still just another typical woman. She would like to be in a man’s arms at night rather than listen to him fooling around with the other concubines. She is fearful of being alone and isolated in the cold palace.

Madame Chunyu is a cruel shrew in another of Li Yu’s short stories. She chases her husband around and beats him until he screams. When she beats her husband to the ground, a flock of men from Fei’s jealousy-taming cult comes to his rescue. Her confidence and boisterousness disappear quickly as she runs back into the house and locks herself inside. While she pretends to be tough and chastises the men, she is fearful for her life. One can see that although Madame Chunyu is a tough character, she is still cowardly and not a heroine who is willing to stand up to a gang of men. She clobbers her own husband, but when other men are

involved, she is fearful and helpless. Once again, the author shows women as weak, powerless, and unable to overcome men.

Madame Chunyu can be seen as an example of everything that women should not be. She dares to marry not long after her husband “dies” in Fei’s scheme to control her shrewish ways, she mistreats her husband and his concubines, and she is loud and unruly. Her lust motivates her to search for a new husband, and in traditional Chinese society, this is unacceptable. Female virtue has always been subject to scrutiny and policing in Chinese culture, and women were often condemned for remarrying (Theiss 44). In contrast, in this story, it seems that, no matter whether upper or lower class, if you are a man, you should have the right to a concubine and the right to be a polygamist. While it is a right for men to have more than one wife, it is immoral for a woman like Chunyu, who believed she was a widow, to obtain a new husband. One can see the major differences in what is deemed acceptable behavior for the two sexes and how it is skewed favorably towards men.

“Curing Jealousy,” by Yuan Mei, is very similar to Li Yu’s “A Jealous Wife Becomes a Widow” in plot structure and social messages. Both women are led to believe that their husbands are dead, and both women try to remarry. In the end, they both marry the husbands that they thought were dead, which leads them to reform. In “Curing Jealousy,” Madame Zhang remarries due to her desire for a stable family and food on her table. She is shown as a figure who is lost and vulnerable due to legal and monetary problems, and can turn nowhere but remarriage. Thus, she wants to remarry for practical reasons rather than lust, in contrast to Madame Chunyu. In the end, however, this woman too is once again shown as hopeless without a male figure in her life.

“Jie Zhitui Traps His Jealous Wife in an Inferno,” by Aina Jushi, portrays the same kind of pitiful woman. Madame Shi is married to a man named Jie Zhitui, who is very loyal to his country. Zhitui spends nineteen years apart from his wife in order to bring the rightful ruler, the prince, back to China. When he finally returns to his wife’s side, she binds him to herself with rope and prevents him from seeking office. When Zhitui’s comrade searches for him in the mountains, Zhitui commits suicide with his wife by setting fire to their home. Wu comments that Madame Shi has a redeeming quality in that she was willing to live in the mountains as a recluse with her husband, rather than allow him to seek office and become wealthy (“The Lioness

Roars” 6). While this may seem to be a redeeming quality, the author implies that shrewishness will bring about a man’s demise — Madame Shi is willing to waste their lives living in the mountains rather than allow Zhitui to attain significant achievements in his life. The woman in this story only bars him from success, and even leads to his death, furthering the idea that women are petty and cannot live without men.

“Ma Jiefu,” by Pu Songling, also provides commentary on women and their expected roles in society. The story revolves around an extremely despicable shrew named Madame Yin. She deprives her father-in-law of food and shelter, beats her husband and servants, and even causes her brother-in-law to commit suicide. This is in stark contrast to the traditional roles of women promoted by Confucian values and obviously provides sociological commentary on how women should act. Women were expected to treat their parent-in-laws as their own family and cater to their every desire, while extending the patriarchal line (“Inversion of Marital Hierarchy” 365). Madame Yin, on the other hand, treats her father-in-law poorly and does not produce a male heir for the family. In addition, she refuses to allow her husband’s concubine to bear a son — Madame Yin beats the concubine when she is five months pregnant. Madame Yin is obviously a character who is condemned by the author, and against whom people should rally.

“Woman Shao,” by Pu Songling, is a tale about a concubine, Madame Shao, who possesses great patience and perseverance. Her role in this tale is somewhat pathetic. She accepts her “fate” as a concubine who will be beaten by the principal wife and takes all her beatings without uttering a word. She is the exemplary woman — she is learned, knowledgeable, and accepting of fate. She does not try to fight back, and she does not mind being mistreated. This story promotes the mistreatment of women and the idea that women should not rebel against male hierarchy and maltreatment. Women should stay silent and obedient, and they will be commended and rewarded for doing so, as Woman Shao was in the end.

“Hengniang,” by Pu Songling, is structured differently from the traditional shrew story. Madame Zhu’s jealousy transforms her into a shrew who frequently quarrels with her husband, but the fox spirit Hengniang puts a stop to this by teaching her ways to be more charming and appealing to her husband. There is no role reversal; rather, there is plotting and planning behind the scenes, which is the reason Madame Zhu is classified as a shrew. This story tells of a shrew

who tries to repair relationships, rather than one who tears them apart. Yet “Hengniang,” while different in structure from other shrew stories, offers sociological messages similar to theirs.

As the Historian of the Strange states at the end of the story, human nature tends to detest the old and delight in the new; women are like disposable toys, as men can obtain concubines whenever they please once they grow tired of their wives. Madame Zhu is like any other woman — she will attempt to do anything, even associate herself with a fox spirit, to prevent her husband from falling for another woman. The author of this particular shrew story seems to admire Madame Zhu, as she is able to reclaim her husband’s love without resorting to violence. Thus, the author would rather all women be faithful and quiet, as traditional Chinese women are, instead of boisterous and loud like the shrew. However, one wonders why Wu decided to include “Hengniang” in his shrew anthology, as Madame Zhu is truly far from the “normal” shrews otherwise chronicled.

“Shanhu,” by Pu Songling, is a tale involving a tyrannical mother-in-law who drives away her perfect, filial daughter-in-law, Shanhu. The son, Dacheng, always sides with his mother because of his filial nature. Although Shanhu never does anything wrong, her mother-in-law is always discontented with her and abuses her at every chance. Dacheng reacts by saying that Shanhu can no longer fulfill her duties as a daughter-in-law and thus sends her back to her parents’ home. The author portrays Shanhu as a woman who can be disposed of. Dacheng obviously has to choose between his mother and his wife, and he chooses to listen to his fierce mother rather than his perfect wife. This is seen as a great virtue, and he is praised as a loyal and filial man; one can see that filial piety is deeply entrenched in peoples’ thoughts and decisions. Shanhu is so ashamed of being sent back to her parents’ home that she attempts suicide, though she has done absolutely nothing wrong. A woman in traditional Chinese society values her family and other peoples’ opinion of her more than the justice she deserves as a person. Confucian ideas contribute to this mentality by diminishing women’s sense of self worth, and authors use moral messages to promote the continuation of this norm.

Shrews as Moral Commentary on Women in Society

Authors use shrews to provide social commentary on what women should and should not

be like, and within their stories are moral messages about and inferences concerning the presence of shrews in society. After informing the reader about the problematic woman, the author attempts to coerce the reader into subjugating women by illustrating the consequences that might occur if these women were allowed to control society and families. For example, the themes of karmic retribution and forbearance are prominent in many shrew stories. Karma is a transpersonal chain in which future situations are affected by, and possibly result from, past deeds (Keown 330). In many of the stories, the evil ways of the shrews create bad karma, which returns to haunt them in the future, while those who are patient and forbearing, usually the filial woman or man, are rewarded in the end.

The theme of karmic retribution is apparent in “Ma Jiefu,” by Pu Songling. Madame Yin’s horrid deeds against her father-in-law, brother-in-law, and her own husband lead her to be remarried to a butcher ten times as fearsome and horrible as she was. Not only does she suffer physical abuse from being hung upside down from the roof through a hole in her thigh, she also suffers psychological abuse. She is scarred from the entire experience; the mere sight of the butcher causes her to shiver in fear. The bad karma she created by the poor treatment of those around her has returned to haunt her. Her bad marriage is the consequence of her appalling behavior. Thus, the author attempts to utilize moral messages to promote filial behavior and the Confucian ideal of women. He even implies that shrew women deserve violent treatment so that they may endure what they wreaked upon other people.

The evil shrew is also punished in the story of “Shanhu,” by Pu Songling. Shortly after the filial Shanhu is sent back to her maternal home, Madame Shen, the shrewish mother, becomes henpecked by her second son’s wife, Zanggu. Zanggu is “twice as haughty, fierce, mean and sharp-tongued as her mother-in-law” (“The Lioness Roars” 109). The pain Madame Shen inflicted upon Shanhu is repaid to her. Zanggu takes over the household as Madame Shen becomes bedridden and loses all independence and self-reliance. Karmic retribution is not only suffered by Madame Shen; in the end, Zanggu watches her children die one by one, while Shanhu and Dacheng live into old age. Thus, evil behavior is punished, while filial piety and patience are ultimately rewarded.

“Shanhu” is also different in that there are two shrews: a tyrannical mother-in-law, and a

sharp-tongued daughter-in-law. It is ironic that the loud and controlling mother-in-law ends up being subdued by the same type of character. In a sense, she is subdued by a mirror image of herself, as Zanggu develops into a fiercer version of her mother-in-law. It is through forbearance and patience that Shanhu is reunited with her husband and mother-in-law. She weaves baskets to make extra money, sending Aunt Yu to give presents to Madame Shen and Dacheng, even though they treated her poorly. It is through these kind acts that Madame Shen is persuaded to reform her shrewish ways. In contrast, Zanggu never truly reforms until it is too late. She attempts to steal Dacheng's rightful land, and even after divine intervention in a dream, she refuses to believe that there will be consequences for her behavior. It is only after her sons begin to die, one by one, that she believes that there is karmic retribution for her deeds. However, her reformation is too late, since all ten of her sons die, forcing her to take a nephew as a godson.

“Jiangcheng,” by Pu Songling, also attempts to advise readers to collect good karma. The story tells of a woman, Jiangcheng, who beats her sister, husband, and in-laws. She reforms her ways after she comes upon an old monk who is preaching. After he is done speaking, he chants to Jiangcheng: “Be not wrathful, be not wrathful! Your previous existence wasn't illusory, nor is your present life real,” and spits water all over Jiangcheng's face (“The Lioness Roars” 91). By a religious miracle, she becomes aware of her awful behavior. As in other shrew stories, Jiangcheng is subdued by some sort of miraculous divine intervention: when a Buddhist monk chants several words and spits water on her face, she is rid of the malice that was in her heart. Even Jiangcheng herself states that she thinks the Bodhisattva in the monk changed her for the better.

Wu suggests that Jiangcheng may have been sent to Gao Fan as karmic retribution for an evil deed he had done in a past life, and that no amount of human intervention could have cured her shrewish behavior (“The Lioness Roars” 8). This story takes a different approach from that of the other stories that have been discussed thus far. This story's moral is essentially that, if a man commits bad deeds in his past life, then a shrew may be called upon in this life to give him what he deserves. This no doubt attempts to frighten readers into believing that if they are not filial and good in their present lives, then their next one will be full of disharmony and unhappiness with shrews.

The husband in “Jiangcheng” is fearful of his wife. His love for her overshadows everything, which contrasts with the case of the other men in shrew tales, who would do anything to make their wives submissive. Gao Fan might be commended, perhaps, for loving his wife for who she is, even though she is very violent and rude. However, Gao Fan is presented as an example of over-forbearance for one’s wife’s misdeeds. He fails to act to control Jiangcheng because of his love for her, and when he finally does take action, it backfires. Thus, there is a fine balance between action and inaction that determines the fate of the characters in shrew stories. Nevertheless, his patience with his wife is repaid in the end, as she reforms after an intervention by a Buddhist monk.

“Woman Shao,” by Pu Songling, discussed earlier, is a tale about a concubine, Madame Shao, who possesses great patience and perseverance, and the shrewish principal wife, Madame Jin. Madame Shao marries into the family knowing that she will be mistreated, but she claims that this is her fate in life, and suggests that the situation is predetermined. Her acceptance of her fate brings good results. She indeed endures Madame Jin’s beatings, but eventually the latter falls ill. As a result, in order to recover, Madame Jin is required to endure the torture that she has inflicted upon Madame Shao. Moreover, a divine being informs her that, since Madame Jin pricked Madame Shao with a needle more than twenty times, she would have to endure the same treatment. Ironically, it is Madame Shao who treats Madame Jin for her illness, since she has knowledge of acupuncture. Thus, people’s evil deeds return to haunt them.

Conclusion

From the discussion of the many different shrews from Wu’s anthology, it is apparent that, while shrew stories may be satirical in nature, they actually have a serious undertone regarding women and their societal roles. Shrews are fierce women, the complete opposite of Confucian ideals; they are unfilial, loud, and controlling. However, they are not truly strong, as they all repent and reform their ways at the end of each story, and their petty malice is exposed in the process. Authors use this comical character to promote the idea that women should be kept to the Confucian ideals and dominated by men for society to function harmoniously. Thus, the shrew stories’ moral and social commentary, together with the sociological and ideological confines of

traditional Chinese society, further degraded women and prevented them from advancing in society.

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The Influence of Maidservants on Courtship and Marriage as Portrayed in
Li Yu’s *Tower for the Summer Heat* and Selected Works

by

Hadi Kaakour

The period during which the Ming dynasty was transitioning into the Qing is a frequently studied part of Chinese history, because it was a critical crossroads during which a great deal of social change took place. Yet there were certainly many aspects of society that successfully survived this transition and remained largely unchanged, particularly in the area of courtship and marriage between Chinese couples. Although many factors that went into making decisions regarding marriage have been examined, one that has largely been overlooked is the influence of maidservants — and women similar to them in their access to households — in the process of marriage-making, as well as in established unions.

Li Yu, a writer who reached mid-life at almost exactly the year of the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties, wrote many short stories dealing with life and marriage in this period. In the West, this collection is entitled *A Tower for the Summer Heat*. Interestingly, Li Yu includes a number of substantial references to the negative impact of maidservants on marriage and courtship, and he supports the widely held position that the maidservant was an overall destabilizing force in the marriage process. In his tales, Li Yu reveals the ways in which treacherous maidservants forced courtships and upset marriages, often leading to the downfall of honorable women — and even resulting in their deaths.

It is perhaps best to start with a sociological perspective before delving into social roles in Ming–Qing era China. One of the most important points, briefly alluded to above, is the fact that many women who suffered a downfall due to the nefarious scheming of maids ended their lives in unfortunate deaths — typically suicide. It is important to examine the reasons a woman who had lost her chastity would prefer to commit suicide rather than to go on living her life. Based on modern logic, despite the emotional scarring, this would not be an issue of tremendous

proportion, and the adulterer would be tried for his crime. But to apply this logic to Ming–Qing-era China would be erroneous. It is crucial to keep in mind that the social standards by which women were evaluated as “good” or “bad” centered on the issues of chastity and fidelity, standards with implications during many periods, perhaps, but never more dour than during the Qing dynasty (Ropp, 1976: 5). The fear of having any doubt at all cast upon one’s sexual morality acted as a considerable constraint on women, for even to draw male attention suggested a lack of feminine modesty and virtue. Where Qing society assayed men on an array of criteria, for women the measure was based almost solely on sexual chastity. Hence, spoiled chastity invariably meant a severely blemished social image and an insurmountable stigma that a woman and her family would carry for the rest of their lives, which is why the most honorable solution was suicide.

In one of Li Yu’s best-known works, *A Tower for the Summer Heat*, a collection of six stories that share a common theme of courtship and marriage in Chinese society, maids are present in almost all of the stories, and Li Yu does not fail to portray accurately their significance in courtship and marriages. In one of the tales, titled “The Cloud-Scraper,” Li Yu begins with a caveat, stating that “The story’s aim is to alert heads of households to the danger and induce them to take precautions and check on their maid’s activities, lest their womenfolk suffer dishonor through inadequate segregation” (118). He later describes the unfortunate situation of a widow who protects her chastity with an iron resolve, but who was sullied in her sleep due to the treachery and plotting of her maid. The maidservant, who had been spending her nights with an adulterous man, fears that her mistress will find out and chastise her, so she conspires to tarnish the lady’s honor. Providing the lecher with all the necessary details, she informs him that “To succeed, all you need to do is get inside her. Even if she does wake up, she’ll be far too embarrassed to call the constables and have you arrested” (Li 119). True to these ill-intended words, the widow did not raise a scene, and upon realizing that for over twenty years she had protected her chastity — and in an instant those twenty years meant nothing due to the conniving of a maid — she promptly hung herself. This is but one of many similar instances in which a maidservant was the downfall of her mistress, ultimately resulting in the latter’s death.

After the tale of the widow, Li Yu then begins the story of “The Cloud-Scraper,” and

introduces the main plot of his tale — a story in which a maid acts not only out of the selfish intention of advancing her own sexual desires, but also plays the role of matchmaker. Surprisingly, she manages to betroth *both* the young maiden of the household and herself to a man (Septimus) — who happens to be the last man the girl’s parents would otherwise have considered. Although the maid succeeds in assisting the marriage of the maiden to a good man (which in itself seems like a proper act), one must not forget the means through which it is achieved. The saying has been attributed to Confucius that “everybody in the world may serve as a matchmaker *except* a maidservant,” because such women are said to be cast of the same mold from which traitors to the country are produced (Li 120)!

The maid in this story uses all kinds of immoral means to manipulate the relationship between the man and the maiden, providing a breadth of examples of treachery. The maid Nenghong takes outrageous advantage of her relationship with the proposed bride, Miss Wei, and of the favor she enjoys with the master and mistress of the household (Mr. and Mrs. Wei). By feigning ignorance in conversation, utilizing blatant lies, bribing officials, and surrendering herself to her own passions, she successfully marries Miss Wei *and* herself (as Junior Wife) to a man of money — a great success for a maid in that time period, as she would most likely otherwise finish out her life in servitude to the Wei family, or, if she had left the house to live with a man, she would probably end up as a concubine, without a dowry or position in the world (Watson and Ebrey 185).

In this story, Nenghong feigns ignorance many times over; for example, when Mrs. Wei asks her whether or not to accept Septimus, Nenghong “put[s] on a pained expression” and replies without providing any clues to her true opinions and intentions (Li 149). Li Yu even goes on to say that, “This shows just how devious Nenghong could be. Although it was her own private interests that were at stake, she acted as if for the general good” (154).

Strategic and blatant lies were also an integral part of the maid’s arsenal. Nenghong sends messages as though from Miss Wei, when in fact they are her own words, and the Weis, blindly trusting their maid, “assumed that what Nenghong told them really had come from their daughter [...]” (Li 147). Even bribery is not beyond her, as the respectable astrologer upon whom the Weis depend heavily is paid by her to foresee that Septimus is the only acceptable suitor.

Finally, in the most treacherous act of all, Nenghong even has sexual relations with Septimus before he sleeps with his lawfully wedded wife, Miss Wei! Surely, this complete betrayal could only have been performed by a perfidious woman such as Nenghong, whose story is additional evidence that maidservants were a force to be reckoned with and a reason for the masters of households to be vigilant.

At the beginning of the short story “The Cloud-Scraper,” Li Yu places a short poem that reads:

Who first contrives to a young girl’s ruin?
A treacherous maid will arouse her feeling.
With flashing glance she’ll hold the stranger
And send, like the oriole, news of spring.
From the boudoir steals a whiff of blossom
That quickens the beat of a butterfly’s wing.
Without Hongniang there to unravel the clues,
Would Zhang have ever been found by Ying? (117)

There are two points to be noted about this poem, the first of which is derived from examining the last couplet of this verse. The names Hongniang, Zhang, and Ying, are all names of characters from a very famous Chinese play, *The Romance of the West Chamber*, and the story that it is based upon, “The Story of Ying-ying.” In this play, Zhang is a young scholar who wishes to win the hand of Cui Yingying, a young maiden. As the plot progresses, Zhang and Yingying eventually wish to be together, but they are forbidden to, as Ying-ying’s mother expressly wishes them to refrain (Chen 851). As the poem by Li Yu foreshadows, Ying-ying has a maid named Hongniang, who serves as Zhang’s inside source (as women in these positions often do), transmits messages between the two, and ingeniously arranges to bring them together in a secret rendezvous. These hidden meetings amount to adultery, since this is an extra-marital affair, and it is put into motion by the treacherous maid. She thus assists in the seduction of her mistress and the betrayal of her chastity to Zhang. “The Story of Ying-ying” is certainly a story

that fills in the characteristics and actions of maidservants who act with selfish intention to dishonor their mistresses.

A common thread in the actions of the maids is their unique ability to serve as liaisons between the inside and outside environments of the household. Li Yu informs us usefully about the history of the naming of maidservants in Chinese. The term *meixiang* (plum-blossom fragrance) has been used since antiquity to refer to maidservants, but Li Yu argues that the ancients were *not* using it as a term of endearment or a flattering title, but rather as an admonition to the masters of households. The use of the word *mei* (plum blossom), Li Yu explains, triggers an association with *mei* (matchmaker), and the term *xiang* (fragrance) is a homonym for *xiang* (hither and thither). Li Yu then articulates the inevitable conclusion for us:

The plum sends the message of spring, and its fragrance drives the bees wild. But when the message of spring is inside the house and the bees are outside, how are the twain going to meet unless she goes hither and thither and brings them together? The ancients gave maidservants this name to remind people of the danger and put them on their guard. (118)

In this remarkable scholarly note, Li Yu summarizes the actions and power of maidservants very concisely and aesthetically, while warning that even a single slip may end with trouble that is ruinous to a mistress's reputation — but leaves the maid completely untarnished.

As one studies the role of maidservants, it becomes apparent that it is crucial to define and understand what characterizes their role in dynastical China. Besides the traditional application of the term — a woman inside the home who is responsible for tending to the wife (or wives) and the household's needs — it is possible to extend this definition to several other occupations of women. After all, there are other sorts of women who fit into the role of the individual who has extensive access to a family. Most notable of these types were the serving-girls and oftentimes, the nuns, whose function often included serving as religious advisors to many ladies in China. As much literature details, these nuns were frequently as sinister as the maids the families kept. In fact, the nun could wage a greater war of moral defamation than a

housemaid, who could not hide from her masters for long, whereas a nun could come and go as she pleased, needing only to effect a pretense of righteousness outside her living quarters. The author Ling Meng-ch’u said, regarding treacherous women, that,

Among their ranks, perhaps the most malignant is the nun. Using the Heavens of Buddha as a leaven and the sacred cloisters as a store of grain, she can induce women of good family to come to light incense, while she invites young men to come to take their pleasure (910).

In fact, as Louise Edwards asserts, there was an “established and often obvious connection between the symbolic place of purity and the symbolic place of pollution. Many are the tales where nuns use their cloisters as fronts for brothels” (424). In this way, the power of the nun is almost exactly the same of that of a maidservant, as detailed previously.

In one short tale found in *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, titled “Wine within Wine: Old Nun Chao Plucks a Frail Flower; Craft within Craft: The Scholar Chia Gains Sweet Revenge,” a man who catches a glimpse of a respectable woman and falls madly in love with her, seeks the assistance of a nun to help arrange the affair (Ling 909). Initially, the nun is unreceptive to the man’s idea, but she later embraces the dark side of her nature and arranges a tryst between the two individuals, while fully aware of the implications of her actions. She brings the man with a lecherous gleam in his eye into the household of the respectable woman as a pearl dealer (the nun knows very well that Madam is interested in pearls), and he, with the villainous scheming of the nun, is able to seduce the lady and carry on an adulterous affair with her, effectively attaching her to himself. After the first extramarital act, Madam confronts the nun, whose perfidious demeanor manifests itself once again, as she pleads, “Pray, your grace, do not think ill of me ... I [am] a poor nun acting from the roots of compassion, ... and [hoping] thus [to] gain merit surpassing that to be gained through the construction of a seven-tiered pagoda” (Ling 917). Obviously, the nun’s actions are of the same strain as the evils maidservants commit against their mistresses, ultimately causing their downfall. In fact, in this particular tale the immoral romance lasted nearly two years, until the

husband caught wind of it and placed his wife under strict surveillance, eventually bringing about her tragic death.

Not all tales end in the downfall of a woman due to the actions of treacherous females such as nuns, however. In fact, in another tale by Ling Meng-ch’u, an honorable lady (Lady Wu) falls prey to the venomous wiles of a nun (but in this case, it is the nun who suffers a most dishonorable death). Before the main plot even begins, we are familiarized with just how vile this nun is. Though her primary occupation is as a member of the clergy, her secondary occupation happens to be as a panderer for a “notorious libertine” of Wu-chou city, named Pu Liang (Ling 918). It was in this way that this libertine — a regular patron of the nun — schemed with her to have Lady Wu in bed for his own immoral pleasure. During their session of plotting, the nun is seen to be so wicked that she not only arranges for Lady Wu to fall prey to this debauchee, but that it will even be entirely against the lady’s will. She intends for this profligate to rape the good woman while she is drugged and drunk. By giving out that the nun and Lady Wu are going to pray for fertility in the convent, the nun instructs Lady Wu to fast for two days, then intentionally gives her “winecakes” to break her fast with, so the effect of the alcohol is both potent and immediate. Lady Wu is unable to remain conscious, so the nun and Lady Wu’s maid carry the poor woman off to bed to “rest.”

It is important to note here, that, though Lady Wu’s maidservant is not a direct conspirator in the immoral plot, nevertheless, upon seeing that her mistress is resting, she seizes her chance to take the day off to eat, drink, and partake in her own pleasure. Had this maid been completely loyal in her duties, she might have been able to avoid the terrible harm that was about to befall her mistress. Therefore, the maid was indirectly involved in the dishonoring of Lady Wu, through shirking her duties.

At this point in the story, the nun displays her loathsome nature by calling Pu Liang out of hiding as the lady sleeps, and says, “The bitch sleeps upon the bed; do with her as you will” (Ling 924). After the sordid act is completed, Lady Wu storms home, as one might imagine, and the nun begins to feel neglected. Thus, later that evening, she indulges in her own carnal pleasures by accepting Pu Liang’s gratitude — adding to her own résumé of disreputable characteristics “cupidity” and “lechery.” In this way, one can see exactly how befouled women of

this sort were, such as the nun, and how they sought actively to bend others to their will with an utter disregard for the sanctity of marriage and chastity.

As we began on a sociological note, perhaps it would be prudent to end with a similar analytical view. Let’s try to illuminate the motives that fueled such perfidy as was committed by maids in Ming–Qing-era China. As Watson and Ebrey relate, “Wives took out their frustration, their boredom, and their jealousies on their servants because propriety forbade striking relatives or even children” (220). This would naturally plant and nourish a seed of ill-will that would continue to grow within the hearts of servants, until they could exact their revenge at the right moment.

This seeming manifestation of the adage that warns “You reap what you sow” is only one of the motivations that might kindle a maid’s revenge. The fact that these maids were sold by their often poor families into servitude took an enormous psychological toll on the maid, especially once they realized that they now would not have a life of their own anymore, as they lived with and were under the watchful eye of their mistress’s family. Not only that, but the possibility of marriage for a maid often died the day she was sold into servitude, and as mentioned earlier, she would most likely never be able to marry a man of good social standing (unless it was arranged by their own trickery, as portrayed in “The Cloud-Scraper”). All these factors created an insurmountable obstacle in the lives of maidservants, who felt that the best way to gain some justice in their lives was by trying to “play” the system — and utilize trickery and enact “insurance” methods to ensure that, when they fulfilled their desires, there would be no severe reproach to follow.

As demonstrated above, though the Ming–Qing dynasty transition era was among the most critical of crossroads and included a great deal of change in society, the courtship and marriage of Chinese couples was among the traditions that survived the transition. Similarly, through the works of Li Yu and his contemporaries, a great deal of the literature (including short stories) dealing with life and marriage in this period were written. It certainly appears that the maidservants of this era had an extremely negative impact on courtship and marriage, undoubtedly cementing the widely held belief that the maidservant was an overall destabilizing force in the marriage process. As shown above, these women caused the downfall of a many

honorable ladies — sometimes resulting in their unfortunate deaths. Furthermore, Li Yu and his contemporaries demonstrated that the treachery of maidservants and their conspiracies against their mistresses forced courtships and/or upset marriages, proving maids to be a force to be reckoned with and necessitating vigilance in Chinese households.

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Prison or Power:
Feminine Sexuality in *Jin Ping Mei* and *Mudan ting*
by
Shu-min Wee

The novel *Jin Ping Mei* (Golden Vase Plum) and the play *Mudan ting* (Peony Pavilion) were both written and released in about the same period in the late Ming dynasty; David Roy goes so far as to propose that Tang Xianzu, who wrote *Mudan ting*, was also the author of *Jin Ping Mei*, which was published under a pseudonym.¹ Even a cursory examination of the ways in which the key female characters of each novel, Pan Jinlian and Du Liniang respectively, are treated, however, undermines any major claim to similarities beyond the historical time period to which they belong, and possibly their authorship.

Pan Jinlian is reviled as a nymphomaniac (*yinfu*), the epitome of insatiable female desire, who is held responsible for a series of deaths in the novel. Du Liniang, by contrast, is regarded as a great romantic heroine, idolized by generations of young Chinese women, whose love is so great that no barrier, even death, is insurmountable.² Yet sexuality and desire, the characteristics that condemn Pan Jinlian, are not exclusive to her. Du Liniang, the romantic heroine, is herself no innocent: she is deflowered in her dream and pines to death soon after; as a ghost, she engages in sexual relations with her lover, Liu Mengmei.

This contrast appears to present a troubling set of double standards, and it raises the question of how it is that, while Pan Jinlian meets a bloody death at the hands of her brother-in-law and nemesis, Wu Song, Du Liniang is granted a happy ending with Liu Mengmei. This essay argues that there exists a tenuous balance between power and oppression in feminine sexuality as

¹ David T. Roy, “The Case for T’ang Hsien-Tsu’s Authorship of the *Jin Ping Mei*,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 8, No. 1/2 (July 1986): p. 31.

² Tina Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds: Identity in Peony Pavilion and Peach Blossom Fan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 49.

it is regarded in Chinese literary tradition, and that upsetting this balance has precisely the consequence of condemnation as a *yinfu* in posterity that Pan Jinlian suffers. I will be looking at the way in which expectations of women and feminine sexuality in Chinese society set up the diametric of the chaste woman versus the *yinfu*. This is in turn reflected and upheld to a large extent in literature, even though the reality of feminine sexuality may not have fallen neatly into two clear and opposing categories. Through the process of examining how both Pan Jinlian and Du Liniang measure up to these standards of sexuality, with a close reading of the texts informed by literary and historical scholarship, I attempt to answer the question: How much sexuality is permissible, and at what point does one fall into the category of the *yinfu*?

The Role of Women in Late Ming China

Integral to the understanding of the discourse of feminine sexuality, which will be defined here as the condition of being characterized by a sex, sexual character or potency, and an interest in sexual activity in the texts, is the treatment of the issue in society. Prevailing social views provide the context and foundational intellectual preconceptions with which literature is written — a lens, so to speak, which indelibly colors the author’s work, regardless of whether he chooses to support or attack the paradigm. Surely, this relationship works both ways, with literature also shaping and reinforcing popular norms, but for the purposes of this essay only the former is of interest. I will thus attempt to give a brief overview of the reigning attitudes towards the role of women and feminine sexuality in Chinese society during the late Ming, with which understanding we can get a handle on how these issues come into play in *Jin Ping Mei* and *Mudan ting*. One clarification to be made, however, is that these attitudes and expectations are merely a normative standard, and not necessarily truly descriptive of social realities.

Confucian thought heavily influenced both elite and popular cultures in Ming times. The Confucian canon emphasized family ethics; family was analogous to the state, but on a smaller scale, and filial piety was seen to translate into loyalty to one’s ruler.³ The feminine ideal in this

³ Katherine N. Carlitz, “Family, Society, and Tradition in *Jin Ping Mei*,” *Modern China* 10, No. 4 (October 1984): p. 388.

androcentric society was one of a good wife and mother, her sexuality elided;⁴ the first of the six desirable virtues in the *Lienüzhuan* 列女传 (Biographies of Women) is maternal rectitude 母仪 (*muyi*).⁵ Even though the importance of female sexual pleasure is acknowledged in medical texts, it is simply as a function of successful procreation.⁶ While the *Lienüzhuan* also argues that feminine beauty 色 (*se*) can be useful to draw male attention, it needs to be linked with virtue to keep this attention constant. Sexuality in and of itself, therefore, is not an aberration, merely heavily dependent on the simultaneous presence of virtue to legitimize it. The terrifying consequences of a woman with beauty but not virtue, which are expounded upon in the final chapter, “The Vicious and Depraved” 孽嬖 (*niebi*), range from broken families to fallen states, all the result of men bewitched by vicious self-serving vixens into neglecting duty for erotic fulfillment.⁷ Hence, we see a pair of antithetical images of women — the ideal of the virtuous wife and mother, and the *yinfu*.

Keith McMahon describes the feminine ideal in greater detail:

the civilized and respectable woman keeps to her inner chambers; she has bound feet; she is discouraged from practical education; if a widow, she ought to stay chaste and never [re]marry.⁸

So prized was chastity, which was defined as a woman’s absolute sexual loyalty to her

⁴ Dorothy Ko, “Rethinking Sex, Female Agency, and Footbinding,” *Jindai Zhongguo Funüshi Yanjiu*, No. 7 (August 1999): p. 95.

⁵ Robin R. Wang, “Virtue 德 (*de*), Talent 才 (*cai*), and Beauty 色 (*se*): Authoring a Full-Fledged Womanhood in *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳 (*Biographies of Women*),” *Confucian Cultures of Authority*, Peter D. Hershock and Roger T. Ames, eds., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 94. The others are sagely intelligence 贤明 (*xianming*), benevolent wisdom 仁智 (*renzhi*), chaste obedience 贞顺 (*zhenshun*), pure righteousness 节义 (*jièyì*), and rhetorical competence 辩通 (*biantong*).

⁶ Ko, pp. 95–96.

⁷ Wang, pp. 109–110.

⁸ Keith McMahon, “Eroticism in Late Ming, Early Qing Fiction: The Beauteous Realm and the Sexual Battlefied,” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series, vol. 73, Livr. 4/5 (1987): p. 220.

husband, that the Ming legal code had an intricate series of laws surrounding widows governing their rights, treatment and property, and the most common yardstick determining judiciary decisions was whether the women were chaste or unchaste. In fact, by the late Ming, the state had begun to honor, with official monuments and state-sponsored burials, chaste women who had died (either by assault or suicide) without being penetrated in the face of threat of rape; all chaste widows were eligible, if nominated by their neighbors, to receive imperial testimonials of merit and their households made exempt from the *corvée*.⁹ These legal provisions reveal the extent to which chastity was desired in women, and by extension, how much the *yinfu* might have been feared and detested.

Pan Jinlian: Pursuing the Predator

As one would expect of a character who is one of the most iconic archetypal *yinfus* in Chinese literature, Pan Jinlian's sexuality is not a foreign topic in academic literature and many scholars have described the power she wields with her insatiable desire. The fifth of six wives in Song dynasty merchant Ximen Qing's harem, McMahon introduces her as Ximen Qing's "most formidable opponent ... , whose constant efforts to monopolize him culminate when she accidentally rides him to death."¹⁰ Indeed, the precise form in which the power of her sexuality seems to take shape is distinctly venomous. In addition to causing Ximen Qing's gruesome death by over-stimulation and excessive sexual activity, she also poisons and suffocates her meek and uninspiring first husband Wu Da in order to be with Ximen Qing, with whom she has been having an affair. The men in whose households she has served as a bondmaid, Imperial Commissioner Wang and Mr. Chang, also die upon prolonged contact with her,¹¹ building the

⁹ Matthew H. Sommer, "The Uses of Chastity: Sex, Law, and the Property of Widows in Qing China," *Late Imperial China* 17.2 (1996): p. 80.

¹⁰ McMahon, p. 240.

¹¹ Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, vol. 1, David T. Roy, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 26–28. While the circumstances of Imperial Commissioner Wang's death are a mystery, Mr. Chang specifically dies of venereal chill after an adulterous relationship with Pan Jinlian, the implication being that she literally and figuratively sucked his life-force away from him.

impression of her as dangerous, if not fatal, woman. Although these observations are insightful, a greater point of interest in this essay is how exactly Pan Jinlian harnesses her sexuality as a source of power. There are two main ways she accomplishes this in the novel: first, she exploits the stereotypes and ideals of her gender, and second, she offers the promise of sexual gratification to retain Ximen Qing’s affections.

There are several instances in which Pan Jinlian relies on beauty and talent to achieve her ends. The first chapter of the novel sees her seducing Wu Song:

Brother and sister-in-law happen to meet
like floating duckweed;
With a seductive air she insists on
flaunting her beauty.
In her heart she only wants him
to make love to her;
With deceptive words she sets out
to inveigle Wu Sung.¹²

The poem reveals her amorous — and adulterous — intentions, as well as her *modus operandi*. She struggles to entice the righteous Wu Song with her alluring smiles, which are notably mentioned multiple times in the descriptions of her brief interactions with him, always before she launches into an attempt to arouse his interest with a pointedly flirtatious comment.¹³ The beauty of her body is also an important tool, and during her failed seduction of Wu Song with wine and a brazier, she makes sure to expose her “creamy breasts” and “cloudy locks.”¹⁴ Beyond the physical, however, there are also her “deceptive words,” which refers to her “protesting her own virtue.”¹⁵ Her efforts to please him include offering him the tastiest snacks, waiting up for him to

¹² Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, p. 33.

¹³ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, pp. 32, 34, 36, 38, 39.

¹⁴ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, p. 39.

¹⁵ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, p. 33.

return from work with a warm meal prepared, and cleaning his room, all done with shows of modesty and cordiality. These fall neatly into the category of chaste obedience, one of the aforementioned prized virtues in the *Lienüzhuan*, which a quick contrast to Pan Jinlian’s verbal abuse and derisive thoughts of Wu Da shows that she does not naturally embody. She is thus appropriating the ideal of her gender and, rather than just showing blind obedience to a man, is using obedient behavior to accomplish her ignoble goal.

While her seduction of Wu Song is unsuccessful, her chance meeting with Ximen Qing in the following chapter has a very different result. This encounter parallels that with Wu Song — the setting behind the bamboo blind is the same (in fact, Pan Jinlian is awaiting Wu Song’s arrival when she meets Ximen Qing); the outfits of Wu Song and Ximen Qing both consist of a green silk jacket; and once again, we observe Pan Jinlian’s reliance on the same feminine wiles of physical beauty, the “ingratiating smile,”¹⁶ and a demure disposition. The line in the opening poem, “Displaying her talents, P’an Chin-lien/flaunts her beauty,”¹⁷ also recalls the poem in the previous chapter, except the reader is now aware that these “talents” are not so much actual celebrated feminine talents of obedience, cooking or embroidery (all of which she appears to possess), but rather her ultimate talent for manipulation and seduction by using her sexuality to assert her will.

The second method by which Pan Jinlian exercises her sexuality to her advantage, the actual act of sexual intercourse to keep Ximen Qing’s interest in her rather than in any of his other wives and sexual partners, is evidenced in Chapter 27, “Li P’ing-erh Communicates a Secret in the Kingfisher Pavilion; P’an Chin-lien Engages in a Drunken Orgy under the Grape Arbor.” Pan Jinlian’s jealousy and bitterness upon discovering Li Ping’er’s pregnancy are reflected in acerbic comments about her old age and childlessness.¹⁸ In retaliation, she entices Ximen Qing into drinking games and subsequently, sex in the grape arbor through a mixture of coquetry and blatant nudity:

¹⁶ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, pp. 48, 50.

¹⁷ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 1, p. 43.

¹⁸ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 2, pp. 136–137.

She had stripped herself so that not a stitch of silk remained on her body, above or below, and was reclining face-up on the mat, wearing scarlet shoes on her feet.... When Hsi-men Ch'ing came back and beheld this sight, how could it help but stimulate his lecherous desires?¹⁹

Her naked body, described as white on many a previous occasion, draws attention to the sharply contrasting scarlet shoes that enclose her feet, which are the epitome of her sexuality and for which she is named. Naked feet were taboo because of the decay and violence associated with them, but, when bound and clad in shoes, female feet provoked erotic desire by simultaneously concealing and suggesting the prohibition beneath.²⁰ The image is thus a titillating combination of exposure and concealment, a luscious invitation to enjoy her femininity. It is also an aggressive, calculated move by Pan Jinlian to reaffirm her sway over Ximen Qing, and in this instance she succeeds in using sexual gratification to sustain his desire for her.

However, sexuality is not simply a source of power that Pan Jinlian wields at will — she is also a victim of it. Naifei Ding argues that the encounter with Ximen Qing discussed above is more his seduction of her than the other way around, and that the perspective of the narrative is predominantly male, with the female Pan Jinlian as the object to be conquered instead of the conqueror.²¹ While Pan Jinlian's initial observations of Ximen Qing's person are purely superficial, not a detail escapes Ximen Qing's gaze, which penetrates clothing to take in the flesh beneath, finally culminating in a teasing reference to her vagina. The extensive description of Pan Jinlian's person, which might be seen on the one hand as the full extent of her sexual desirability and power, also serves on the other hand to objectify her:

¹⁹ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 2., p. 144.

²⁰ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 4.

²¹ Naifei Ding, *Obscene Things: The Sexual Politics in Jin Ping Mei* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 161.

In a way, Pan Jinlian is reconstructed here for the first time (each such literary stripteases [*sic*] would enact this reconstruction of “woman,” as if for the first time): from a variety of “name-objects” — raven, moon, almond, cherry, jade, flower, scallion, willow, and finally plain flesh — most of which are edible and quite worn with metaphoric use. “Woman” is at most a pastiche or collage, composed of the most mundane things.²²

In the eyes of the men who dominate this late Ming world and the world of the novel, the feminine is a mere sum of parts for consumption and enjoyment.

Indeed, in the incident in the grape arbor, despite Pan Jinlian’s success in luring Ximen Qing into her bed, there are a number of disturbing instances and images that reveal her sexuality to be an avenue for her own oppression, in addition to an instrument of power. Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing engage in a tug-of-war for power in the naming of each other — Pan Jinlian begins by condescendingly addressing Ximen Qing as “child,” but soon reverses the roles and accedes to his request to call him “my own daddy” to coax him into having sex. By the end of the chapter, she is reduced to “inarticulately [calling] out ‘Daddy!’ unceasingly,”²³ begging him to “get inside” through pleas for forgiveness for her previous peevishness over Li Ping’er’s pregnancy,²⁴ a far cry from the imperious seductress. She seems unable to guide the course of her own sexual desire, and while she might be fully capable of seducing Ximen Qing with the prospect of erotic pleasure, she is critically dependent on him to derive her own pleasure.

Pan Jinlian’s feet are suspended from the grape arbor, and her legs form the shape of a vase that ends in her vagina, which is used as a pot for Ximen Qing to pitch plums into. Roy explains that these imperial damson plums represent sons that she is symbolically being impregnated with, but since none of them remain there to take seed, it is a cruel exercise in

²² Ding, p. 162.

²³ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 2, p. 145.

²⁴ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 2, p. 146.

denying her the heir she craves.²⁵ In fact, the entire episode is a product of her being threatened by Li Ping'er's pregnancy. In this way, we see that she, too, cannot escape the trappings of her sexuality and the necessity that a woman must become a mother to be validated. Without a child, she is reduced to a mere ornament to be toyed with, a vessel for fruit and sperm. This image is made even more sinister by the fact that she is tied to the grape arbor, leaving her subject to Ximen Qing's whims and fancies, by her own foot bindings; the means by which her powerful sexuality is derived, which define her identity so thoroughly that she is even named for her golden lotuses, is paradoxically what oppresses her. She is literally and figuratively bound by her own sexuality.

Ding observes that what is misogynistic about the grape arbor incident is

how Ximen punishes Jinlian (for daring to step on the toes of his favorite, the mother of his child, in his presence) through precisely those techniques of “pleasure” whereby she had derived power from (servicing) him — by threatening to “fuck her to death.”²⁶

I would like to go one step further in suggesting that it is because Pan Jinlian is ultimately prisoner to her sexuality, for all the power it affords her, that this punishment is possible. Even though she seems to emerge victorious in the protracted power play between them throughout the novel by stimulating him to death, causing his member to explode and spill the precious sperm that failed to impregnate her, the demise of her main sexual competitor only serves to throw her into a world where she is fatally vulnerable to her enemy, Wu Song. This thread links back to the very opening of the novel, and we recall that it was a failed seduction of Wu Song, an unsuccessful exercise of sexual power, that sparked the chain of events that ends not just in death for Pan Jinlian, but the mutilation of her body as the “fragrant soft whiteness of her breast” is

²⁵ Xiaoxiaosheng, vol. 2, p. 509.

²⁶ Ding, p. 193.

ripped apart, and her heart is torn out.²⁷ Ringing with karmic retribution, Pan Jinlian’s sexuality, for all its tempting pretensions of power, traps her in a fateful circle she cannot escape.

Du Liniang: Defining the Damsel

Scholastic work on the sexuality of Du Liniang is much less rich than that surrounding Pan Jinlian. This is not necessarily surprising — in comparison to Pan Jinlian’s vigorous and vicious character, Du Liniang is mild and unassuming, and she does not immediately spring to mind as a sexual heroine. Yet she is intriguing because unlike many of the heroines of the *chuanqi* genre to which *Mudan ting* belongs, she defies the tenets of feminine decorum by being unequivocal in her erotic interest in Liu Mengmei.²⁸ If there exists a dynamic between agency and oppression within Pan Jinlian’s sexuality that leads to an unspeakable end, it stands to reason that there exists a different dynamic within Du Liniang’s, one that results instead in the happily-ever-after of conjugal bliss.

At first glance, it appears that sexuality is nothing but a prison for Du Liniang. Nearly all the key characters echo the view that her death was brought about by unfulfilled sexual desire. Her maid, Chunxiang, warns her against taking any more strolls in the garden, which is the symbol and catalyst of sexual passion, saying, “Do you think it can be the disturbance of the spring that is causing you to pine and grow thin?”²⁹ Madam Du wails on her daughter’s deathbed that they should have had her “‘mount the dragon’ of a successful match”³⁰ a long time previous, thus recognizing that it is pent up sexual frustration that is the cause of her death. The Flower Spirit affirms at the court of Hell that “Passionate longings brought about her death;”³¹ Du

²⁷ Ding, p. 194.

²⁸ Carlitz, p. 398.

²⁹ Tang Xianzu. *The Peony Pavilion*, Cyril Birch, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 66–67.

³⁰ Tang, p. 100.

³¹ Tang, p. 130.

Liniang herself refers to her body as “wilted,”³² as if it were a flower dying with the passing of spring. She is unable to control her burgeoning passions, and she wastes away from it.

Yet it appears that it is sexuality that drives several key moments in the plot, which culminates in the reunion of the couple with Du Liniang’s parents by decree of the Emperor. It is a combination of her beauty and sweet demeanor — the very strategy employed by Pan Jinlian to ensnare her men — that wins over Liu Mengmei. In her dream, he proclaims that he has traversed space and even waking reality to meet her, “dying of love for ... / ... the flowering of [her] beauty.”³³ The fleshly Liu Mengmei falls in love with her portrait and its suggestions of a lady

Delicately nurtured, demurely shy,
Modestly elegant, daughter of honored house³⁴

and his cries of “My gracious mistress! Lovely lady!”³⁵ draw her roaming spirit to him. Tina Lu points out that even after becoming familiar with the ghost and the portrait, Liu fails to equate them.³⁶ The fact that he so willingly enters a romantic and erotic relationship with her in spite of this is evidence that he is drawn in afresh by her magnificent beauty; this love later compels him to disinter her grave to bring her back to life, even at the risk of being accused of grave robbery. Liu Mengmei is not the only one to be struck by her beauty — even in hell, it is Du Liniang’s feminine charms that first catch the Judge’s attention and inspire his interest in her case.³⁷

Furthermore, comparably to Pan Jinlian, Du Liniang also offers the promise of intercourse to reaffirm Liu Mengmei’s love for her, both as her dream and ghost selves, albeit in a much less obscene fashion. The Flower Spirit explains that the passionate stirrings of spring are

³² Tang, pp. 59, 100.

³³ Tang, p. 48.

³⁴ Tang, p. 156.

³⁵ Tang, p. 153.

³⁶ Lu, p. 37.

³⁷ Tang, pp. 128–129.

so strong that “she has summoned the graduate Liu into her dream.”³⁸ This choice of phrasing is interesting because *she* is the active subject bringing him (and his unabashedly amorous intentions) into her dream, which seems to have the almost singular purpose of bringing about the “play of clouds and rain.” This is indeed not just a fulfillment of lustful desire but an affirmation of his love for her, as he entreats her to remember the tenderness of his embrace.³⁹ Once again, as a ghost, Du Liniang invites him even more bluntly to enjoy carnal pleasures:

This body, “a thousand gold pieces,” I offer you without hesitation. Do not disdain my love. My life’s desire is fulfilled if I may share your pillow by night.⁴⁰

In response, he reassures her of his faithfulness and love, inviting her to come every night without even making clear her identity or realizing her ghostly nature. Certainly it seems that Du Liniang’s sexuality, though not in precisely the same way as it is for Pan Jinlian, is also an instrument of power.

What complicates this reading of the play is two points: the fact that Du Liniang is resurrected as a virgin, and the issue of destiny. With regard to the first, we note that Du Liniang vomits a lump of silver, which symbolizes semen and by extension, the lovemaking she engaged in as a ghost, so as to restore her chastity.⁴¹ Similarly, she avoids the fate of becoming a swallow or oriole in Scene 23, because her amorous encounter took place in a dream, and is therefore immaterial.⁴² This is problematic because, if she has to deny or purge her sexuality in order to be granted legitimacy as a rightful human member of society, it then seems that feminine sexuality must be the shackles that would impede this happy ending. On the second point, it is emphasized

³⁸ Tang, p. 49.

³⁹ Tang, p. 50.

⁴⁰ Tang, p. 164.

⁴¹ Lu, p. 115. This is actually mercury, which is *shuiyin* 水银, or liquid silver, in Chinese; it is also referred to as silver by Scabby. (See Birch, p. 202)

⁴² Tang, p. 133.

in the play that Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei share a marriage affinity that must be fulfilled,⁴³ which explains the development of the whole affair in the first place. The description of their first dream sexual encounter in karmic terms,⁴⁴ as well as the Moebius strip of their identities, with the one giving rise to the other's,⁴⁵ also lends their relationship a distinctly Buddhist sense of predetermination. This element of fate removes any claim to deliberate or meaningful control that sexuality might offer; when the course of events is already set, endogenous in the actions of the individuals involved, then sexuality becomes devoid of either empowerment or restriction, and is merely a matter of circumstance.

Becoming the *Yinfu*

Despite these ambiguities, I believe that there is a rationale for the judgment the narratives accord to Du Liniang, on one side of the scales, that which is given to Pan Jinlian, on the other side. Sexuality for Du Liniang is mostly a source of empowerment because, unlike Pan Jinlian, she is able to disentangle the sex and the feminine that constitute feminine sexuality, sacrificing the former in order to make the latter all the more empowering in achieving her desires. Pan Jinlian is all beauty without virtue; her feminine talents are all channeled towards the goals of sex and power, and whatever virtues of subservience and shyness she occasionally exhibits are merely a pretense to serve the same ends. She fails to redeem herself (or perhaps, the narrative denies her this opportunity) by producing a child, and she is neither pure nor chaste in that she is not just an adulterous woman, but, worse still, an adulterous widow several times over. She is thus condemned to the category of the vicious and depraved *yinfu* according to the standards of the *Lienüzhuan*.

On the other hand, Du Liniang possesses a plethora of desirable feminine virtues — she is filial, obedient, bashful, modest, and adept at embroidery and poetry. Although she is not a widow, she complies with the laudable criterion of absolute sexual loyalty, in this case, to her

⁴³ Tang, p. 49.

⁴⁴ Tang, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Lu, p. 71.

lover, and takes this devotion to an even more rarefied level by coming back from the dead for him. Arguably, although her erotic transgressions are conveniently committed in dream or as a specter, the crux of the matter is that when she is resurrected and her identity legitimized, it is she who vomits out the symbolic silver. It is not forcibly wrenched from her by a male authority in the way that the damson plum is forcibly removed from Pan Jinlian's vagina; she chooses chastity and purges the semen from her being. She thus renounces sexual fulfillment in favor of the expectations of her gender, and it is this that gives her the leverage to be granted validation by the Emperor and a permanent identity and place in society within her family. It is ironic that Pan Jinlian, who spurns the expectations of her gender and attempts to disturb the Confucian hierarchy by using sexuality as a weapon, ends up almost completely victim to it, while Du Liniang, who initially seems to be shackled by the stifling expectations (so much so that she dies from them), works within the system to bring about her happy ending, and she ultimately is the more successful sexual feminine character. In this way, by buying into the male-determined doctrine of her gender when it counts, so to speak, she escapes castigation as a *yinfu*.

Conclusion

The differences between the portrayal of Pan Jinlian and Du Liniang in the Chinese literary tradition do not stem from the existence of sexuality in one and the absence of it in the other. As I have shown, sexuality is common to both of them, both as power and prison. What determines the assignment of the *yinfu* label is the flagrant sexual power of Pan Jinlian, which oversteps the boundaries and expectations of her sex and eventually locks her into a vicious cycle of insatiability that leads to her downfall. In contrast, Du Liniang renounces her erotic encounters in favor of the traditional roles of mother and wife, accepting society's ideal of feminine sexuality and thereby achieving the fulfillment of her desires. One might speculate about how probable the circumstances of Du Liniang's sexual agency are, because it is not available to all to expunge their sexual history with the simple expulsion of mercury even if they want to. Perhaps *Jin Ping Mei* is the more realistic portrayal of the consequences of a feminine sexuality that lacks the guiding hand of a benevolent authority. Nevertheless, the conditions under which one becomes a *yinfu* in literature remain unchanged. Any radical attempt to upset

the balance of prison or power within feminine sexuality, which are subject to the dictates of society, is a double-edged sword. By this token, Pan Jinlian goes down in history as a *yinfu* whose sexuality poisons those around her and at the very end, herself.

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Exploration of the Chinese “Dangerous Woman”:

Femme Fatale or Anti-Heroine?

by

Diana Zhou

This study explores the femme fatale archetype in Ming dynasty fiction, specifically in three short stories from Feng Menglong’s *San Yan* anthology, as translated and introduced by Anne E. McLaren in her book *The Chinese Femme Fatale*. These tales of average, everyday women are the result of a literary revolution that occurred during the Ming, a product of the literati’s newfound interest in “*qing*” and realism during the peak of creative development in traditional Chinese literature.

Although the coupling of strict Confucian social order with the crippling practice of foot binding may have psychologically and physically bound the common woman to the domestic sphere, where sexuality was her only source of power, the realism imbued in Ming literature is not enough to render the “dangerous women” in these stories as femmes fatales. Instead, these women fit within the broader umbrella of the anti-heroine, sharing with the femme fatale an insatiable sexual appetite and ill-fated destiny but lacking her fundamental motives.

Does the Chinese femme fatale truly exist?

The “femme fatale” is an archetypal character of literature and art that withstands the test of time, bringing her destructive power to nearly every culture in antiquity. Her trail through Western literature has been well-documented and studied, from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar to Judeo-Christian Delilah. As the seductive enchantress whose love proves to be fatal, the femme fatale punctuates the annals of history with the downfall of all who encounter her. Often the femme fatale herself is caught in the path of her destructive power, her fate irrevocably tied to that of her victim. This is often the case in occurrences of the “dangerous woman” in Chinese myths, stories, and history. A typical story line may involve a beautiful concubine who seduces

her lover into neglecting his duties and behaving frivolously, at the cost of a doomed nation. The people hold her responsible and execute both the femme fatale and her male victim.

The French phrase “femme fatale,” meaning “deadly woman,” aptly describes the best known albeit stereotypical version of the femme fatale archetype. She is exceptionally well endowed with the feminine wiles of beauty, charm, and sexual allure, and her weapon of choice is frequently poison, apropos given her poisonous nature. I was particularly intrigued to come across the Chinese version of this she-demon in Anne McLaren’s book, *The Chinese Femme Fatale*, which contains her analysis of three short stories about femmes fatales from Feng Menglong’s *San Yan* anthology. I began to wonder if it was possible for the femme fatale to thrive in Chinese literature when women held such a wretchedly weak social position in the strongly patriarchal system of traditional China. McLaren wrote that, “The stories in this selection from the seventeenth century reflect a particular strain of misogynistic thinking; that women who pursue their own sexual desires have a catastrophic effect on family and society.” Beyond the cautionary tales of their Western counterparts, these femme fatale stories are particularly noteworthy because they attempt to apply the archetype to ordinary women. “[T]he age-old femme fatale stereotype was adapted to lower-class, realistic settings in which the characters were necessarily accorded plausible motivation for their actions. An ironic result of this is that the heroines then become less figures of iniquity than strong, passionate women with recognizable frustrations.” (McLaren 1–2) These women are found guilty of being femmes fatales not just for abusing their sexuality but for having any sexuality at all.

While the definition of a femme fatale is quite vague and thus broad in nature, I doubt that this archetype can be applied to the average woman. I question the emphasis on the errant woman’s motive, for while a femme fatale may self-destruct by due process of her sexuality, this does not imply that any woman destroyed by her own sexuality is consequently a femme fatale. The traditional Chinese term for a dangerous woman is “*qing guo qing cheng*” or “one who ruins city and state,” and while the women in these three short stories certainly wreak havoc on the unlucky few who enter into their net of cosmic retribution, it is quite a stretch to compare their behavior to that of the fictional Empress Chao Fei-Yen or the historical Empress Wu Zetian. In fact, McLaren’s statement itself seems to suggest that these women are not femmes fatales, but

rather a new category of anti-heroine that shares with the femme fatale an uncontrollable sexual urge and its ill-fated consequences, yet lacks the wicked motivation behind her destructive finesse. In this essay I examine the cultural underpinnings of the male-female relationship in the Ming dynasty, paying particular attention to the factual history behind McLaren’s theory that the popular use of realism is enough to render these three women femmes fatales. Should I find this evidence does not support their being so labeled, I will then proceed to demonstrate that the term “femme fatale” has been misappropriated to fit the female protagonists in these three short stories. And if the women in a selection called *The Chinese Femme Fatale* are not true femmes fatales, then perhaps she simply does not exist in Ming culture.

Background and central themes in *The Chinese Femme Fatale*

“The Calamitous Golden Eel” is a highly superstitious tale from the early Ming period (pre-1450). In this story, “a supernatural event frames the chain of calamity which will engulf seven people.” (McLaren 17) Ultimately, the sexual nature of female protagonist Qingnu causes the death of six others because “this band of people were tied to the same destiny and belonged to the same group of ghosts, the golden eel merely introduced them to the scene.” (McLaren 36) Yet, it seems that the entire chain of events is initiated by the accidental consumption of a magical eel; it is hardly Qingnu’s fault so much as her ill-fated destiny.

“Lovers Murdered at a Rendezvous” is from the middle period (1400–1575) and opens with a prologue tale about a female poet, Bu Feiyan, who is whipped to death by her brutal husband when he uncovers her affair with a young scholar. Although Feiyan’s lover escapes punishment, the storyteller warns that “young men must beware of these *femmes fatales* whose moth-brows are really ‘enchanted blades.’” (McLaren 39) In the main tale, a beautiful and skillful girl named Shuzhen is “pricked by secret desire” and sets off the death of several men in her search for sexual satisfaction. Again, the concepts of fate and destiny, especially in a supernatural context, play a large role in the story’s conclusion. The vengeful spirits of Shuzhen’s victims prophesize, “We will leave you free til the fifth day of the fifth month. We will await the one who accompanies you and with the aid of the ‘long bow’ we will see you again!” (McLaren 53) On that fated day, her suspicious husband Zhang Erguan feigns a business

trip in order to surreptitiously spy on his wife. After catching the lovers in the act, Zhang Erguan slaughters both with his broad sword and fulfills the prophecy. Shuzhen’s spirit is accompanied by her lover Zhu Bingzhong (McLaren 56), while husband Zhang’s surname 张 is comprised of two components, one “bow” (弓) and one “long” (长). (McLaren 53) Interestingly, the educated males in both these tales remain unscathed by the femme fatale’s wiles; the husbands get revenge on their wives and even the lover from the prologue tale (a scholar) escapes death.

“A Squabble Over a Single Copper Cash Leads to Strange Calamities” is a late Ming (1550–1627) story of moral allegory, and the femme fatale character acts less as a centerpiece of the story and more as a plot lubricant. In the story, the adulterous Wife Yang is forced by her husband to hang herself on Wife Sun’s door as a sign of the latter’s innocence. Unfortunately, she commits suicide at the wrong house and the unfolding tale of her corpse leads to the death of thirteen others. Here the central theme is clearly greed, not sexuality. The two possible femmes fatales appear only in the beginning and end of the story, and their sexual endeavors are barely mentioned. These two women exist only to move the plot along, not as harbingers of evil.

Ironically, McLaren chooses three stories from different stages of the Ming dynasty to display the evolution of the femme fatale tale, yet I find that each story is progressively less and less like the classic archetype. The third tale is strikingly similar to “The Canary Murders,” a story from the Song dynasty that was also edited by Feng Menglong and included in his 1620s collection *Stories Old and New*. In that story, the calamitous chain of events is brought about not by a woman, but by a bird, and is clearly driven by capricious circumstance, not intent.

What does history say about the “dangerous women” of China?

I begin my analysis by examining the cultural heritage of strong women in the Ming dynasty. The legacy of femmes fatales in history was well-preserved up through the Ming dynasty, and tales of Tang Empress Wu Zetian, the only true female emperor to rule China, were known by all, especially the Confucian literati who used these examples to induce obedience to the Confucian principles of social order. Consort Wu was a petty concubine of the former Emperor Taizong, recruited by Empress Wang to distract the new Emperor Gaozong away from his favored Consort Xiao. Consort Wu then proceeded to beat both Empress Wang and Consort

Xiao in the struggle for Emperor Gaozong’s affection, and eventually had both ladies executed. Empress Wu became the de facto ruler of China from 665 to 690, when she made an unprecedented move and established her own dynasty, the Zhou dynasty, and ruled directly until 705. Confucian historians widely criticized her rise to power and ruthless endeavors to maintain control, yet she was also recognized as a just ruler, lowering oppressive taxes, raising agricultural production, and strengthening public works to help the peasants. (Reese, “Empress Wu Zetian”) However, during her reign, a plethora of fox tales were published and literary allusions to this sole Empress of China spotlighted a woman who inappropriately overstepped societal bounds and acted viciously in pursuit of power. Certainly this cautionary advice was not without its merit, for a half century later, prized Consort Yang proceeded to beguile the Tang emperor Xuanzong and provoke the An Lushan Rebellion. (Li 102)

Unfortunately the true histories of strong Chinese women were frequently embellished by the literati to protect the patriarchal order of their time. For example, of the legendary Four Great Beauties of China, three brought kingdoms to their knees and destroyed themselves in the process. These Four Great Beauties lived in four different dynasties, each hundreds of years apart, yet their infamous allure captivated rulers in such a way that they were forever documented in the annals of Chinese history for their deadly beauty. Xi Shi of the Spring and Autumn Period was said to be so entrancingly beautiful that fish would forget to swim and sink away from the surface when she walked by. Wang Zhaojun of the Western Han dynasty was said to be so beautiful that her appearance would entice birds in flight to fall from the sky. Diaochan of the Three Kingdoms period was said to be so luminous that the moon itself would shy away in embarrassment when compared to her. Finally, Yang Guifei of the Tang dynasty was said to have a face that put all flowers to shame. These descriptions seem to suggest that their exquisite beauty was unnatural, overpowering the true beauty of nature itself.

Of these Four, the one that best captures the femme fatale persona is Diaochan. While there is no historical evidence of her existence in the official records, she is forever immortalized in the well-known classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In the novel, the tyrannical warlord Dong Zhuo, with the help of his god-son Lu Bu, holds a deadly grip over the Han dynasty. Upon meeting Diaochan, Lu Bu is immediately captivated by her beauty and decides to marry her.

However, Diaochan also charms Dong Zhuo and soon both men are fighting for her affection. Jealousy turns into hatred, and Lu Bu finally kills Dong Zhuo. Diaochan (Yuan “Diao Chan”) best symbolizes the power of seduction typical of a femme fatale, but she may have been a purely fictional character, concocted by the literati to falsely chronicle the wickedness of a woman’s sexuality and fabricate a precarious relationship between beauty and danger.

Outside the cautionary Chinese femme fatale stories of concubines and courtesans who distract otherwise competent rulers and ambitious scholars, McLaren insists that this archetype can be applied to the common, everyday woman in the literature of the Ming dynasty. Since the root of Chinese misogyny is ultimately derived from the traditional cosmology of the yin/yang dynamic, ordinary women were certainly not excluded from prevailing gender stereotypes. While early Chinese Daoism exalted the female principle as “the root of heaven and earth,” the canons of Confucianism attributed disaster to the yin or female principle. Once a union of interacting and complementary opposites, this relationship became a hierarchy in which the yang dominated the yin. Early songs expressed this misogynistic hierarchy: “Disasters are not sent down from Heaven, they originate in wives.” (McLaren 6) As this cosmological belief developed into the established and ruling ideology of China, a woman’s place in patriarchal society became more and more obscure. Although women were essential to carry forth the familial line, their role in the family was marginalized. A woman was never fully considered a member of either her natal family or her groom’s family. She was completely dependent on her husband and sons for economic protection, and she would never be given land rights or her own unique identity. (Watson 620)

The most apparent means for female subordination was the dominant use of pious, ideological mechanisms. *The Book of Rites*, compiled in the second century AD, stated that “to be a woman meant to submit.” And according to *The Nu’er Jing (Classic for Girls)*, published during the Ming, the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues said that:

A woman was subject to the three authorities of her father and elder brothers when young, of her husband when married and of her sons when widowed. The four virtues composed, first, a ‘general virtue’ meaning that a women should

know her place in the universe and behave in every way in compliance with the time-honored ethical codes; second, she should be reticent in words, taking care not to chatter too much and bore others; third, she must be clean of person and habits and adorn herself with a view to pleasing the opposite sex; and fourth, she should not shirk her household duties. (Croll 13)

In addition to women's subordination in these popular advice books, female debasement was even extended to visual representations of the Chinese language. In an investigation of a modern Chinese dictionary for words containing the radical 女 (female), the results could be divided into four semantic categories: 1 - words relating to marriage or giving birth, 2 - kinship terms and terms regarding family relationships, 3 - words referring to beauty, and 4 - derogatory words or words with negative connotations. Approximately 20% fell into this fourth category of negative meaning. (Ettner 34)

Still, a woman's sole power in producing offspring inspired both fear and awe in the heart of men. In practice, there was nothing more representative of this sexual paradox than in the symbolism of the bound female foot. “The bound foot was the chief erotic symbol in the Ming,” but men would only look at it when contained within a perfumed, decorative shoe because, “as an emblem of sexuality, it was an evasive emblem, suggesting a euphemism for the sexual.” Binding a woman's feet gave her a sense of desirability and sexuality, and yet it simultaneously disfigured her natural beauty. “Central to the significance of the broken arch was the notion of deviance, for the distortion of the arch and the subsequent distorted gait suggested the subhuman.... Through this practice, the sexual was located at the bodily extremity. The fractured arches helped construct sexuality as both alien and feminine.” (Cass 104) By changing ideals of feminine beauty to include the bound foot, men created an erotic symbol that could strip women of their physical mobility and circumscribe their role in society. The physical constraints of bound feet were instrumental in reinforcing the prevailing social ethos of women's inferiority and confining them to the domestic sphere. The custom was first practiced among the upper classes, but, as a sign of wealth and status, eventually became “an essential prerequisite to an advantageous marriage and any form of social mobility.” (Croll 18) Stripped of their

independence, women became mere objects of conspicuous consumption, valued based on the size of their mangled feet. The smaller her feet, the more useless the woman was, and thus the more valuable to a man as a symbol of *his* power and wealth.

Bound feet became a distinctive symbol of Han beauty and reached its pinnacle during the Ming dynasty because it was outlawed during the previous Mongol rule. Interestingly, even Mongol women wanted to emulate the crippled Han women and designed platform shoes to mimic their swaying gait. The practice of foot binding was welcomed back with a flourish during the Ming because “[t]he Great Ming had restored China to its own ‘Han’ people; it had thrust the nomads from the civilized world and sent the Mongols back to their yurts. Even the word ‘Ming’ reflected a proud self-assertion, its claim for Han glory; it connotes in Classical Chinese the ‘radiance of great virtue.’” (Cass 1) Yet despite their stability and wealth, the men of the Ming were still anxious about the security of their women. Since a woman with bound feet had limited mobility, she was irreversibly dependent on her husband and family. As such, the bound foot was an alluring symbol of chastity, which was a veritable cult during the Ming dynasty.

The term used for a filial woman reflected her impassioned sanctity, for although she was often referred to in English as “chaste,” a term that means simply “sexually innocent,” the Chinese terms are far more radical. The pious woman — the female suicide and strict mourner — was termed *lie*, which means “martyr” and connotes the meaning of “fierce”; or she was termed *zhen*, which means “sacred.” ... the Imperial government, through its omnipresent Bureau of Rites, subsidized piety in women. The Bureau collected and verified local reports of “filial women,” gathering them from villages and towns throughout the Great Ming. (Cass 5)

For so-called virtuous women, marital fidelity consisted of observing lifelong widowhood, committing suicide at the death of a spouse or fiancé, or preserving their chastity in refusing to submit to rebels. Of all recorded cases of virtuous women, 73% were documented during the Ming dynasty. (T’ien 39)

The devastating subjugation of women during the Ming — whether psychologically

through the Confucian principles of yin and yang or physically through foot binding — leads me to question both the acceptance and existence of a femme fatale description based on the common woman. With its strict laws governing a wife’s virtue and its high regard for chastity, Ming society could have hardly been plagued by such rampant female sexuality as to compel authors to alter the femme fatale stereotype to fit the common woman. In fact, the well-documented popularity of brothels during the Ming is evidence that men expressed their sexuality outside the home, perhaps because they did not find nor *want* to find the same sexuality in their wives. This explains why femme fatale stories featuring a ghost or fox fairy, whose terrifying sexual nature *could* entangle men, seem to fit the archetype better than these stories of regular women.

How did shifts in intellectual thought affect the femmes fatales of Ming literature?

In the Ming, a thriving and experimental publishing industry exploded with works for “an inquisitive audience eager for the new.” (Cass 13) The Ming dynasty was “an epoch of accelerating change characterized by enormous socioeconomic dynamics, irrepressible intellectual daring, and cultural upheaval.” (D. Wang 6) An ever-increasing audience of literate readers, including the burgeoning bourgeoisie, used their leisure time to explore new forms of literature. This era was the high point of ghost stories, featuring ravenous female ghosts who fed on the semen of their male prey, due to three primary reasons:

First, because of the well-documented publishing boom in this period, many older ghost tales and plays were printed, often for the first time.... Second, ghost literature in this period stands out not only in terms of abundance and circulation but also in terms of quality and sophistication.... Third, fueling much of the literary energy of the period was the widespread idealization of *qing* — love, sentiment, desire — as a passion capable of surmounting the gulf between life and death. *Qing* came to manifest its power above all through the figure of the female revenant, whose ... undying passion leads to her resurrection or rebirth, usually through the sexual agency of her male partner” (Zeitlin 6)

This period was also the most productive period of creative (original) writing, and the peak in the development of vernacular fiction. During this period, some scholar-artists grew tired of writing polished poetry for a uniformly elitist crowd of literati. “Moreover, there were signs of the glorious Ming dynasty drawing near its end.... Some reacted to this fin-de-siècle ... in a feverish quest for new excitement, and gave themselves over unreservedly to a life of dissipation ... they wrote the most obscene novels, using the erotic slang of the street, and interspersed that coarse prose with the most elegant erotic verse.” (Gulik 313)

Readers became advocates for an ideology of the passionate and the personal, an ideology that revolved around one word: *qing* 情, which meant passion, love, feelings and romance. (Cass 15). “[T]he cult of *qing* and the ambiguities associated with this concept are the consequences of a new attitude toward desire that emerged during that period as well as a result of the deliberate attempts at appropriation on the part of some disenfranchised literati struggling to (re)assert their elite status by reinventing themselves.” (Huang 153) Feng Menglong was one such pioneer. In the preface to his collection of *qing* stories, *A History of Love*, Feng Menglong wrote, “It has always been my ambition to write a history of *qing*, and ever since I was a young man, I have prided myself on being a *qing* fanatic.” (Huang 161) For *qing* advocates like Feng Menglong, *qing* should be considered a fourth pursuit of every aspiring literatus, in addition to the three commonly accepted kinds of cultural immortality: achievements in moral self-cultivation, in public service, and in writing. (Huang 165) The late Ming writer Wei Yong depicted *qing* as “that for which the living could die and because of which the dead could be resurrected.” For Feng Menglong, even men who romanced prostitutes could turn out to be great heroes, for “*qing* and heroic actions are by no means mutually exclusive.” (163)

If Feng Menglong considered himself this type of hero, so rich in emotion, then one might interpret his usually sympathetic portrayal of female characters as a desire to advance the status of women. Feng Menglong was primarily an editor and not a writer, but he so extensively edited and re-wrote so many of the pre-existing stories that he may well be regarded as the true author. “[H]e appropriated meaning to his own purposes not so much by ‘creative writing’ (in its narrow sense) but by revising pre-existing source materials, by speaking through others’ words ... Feng deliberately manipulated and subverted elements of popular literature.” (quoted

in Idema 303) In the three short stories in McLaren’s collection, Feng Menglong made editorial changes to the original stories that often indicate ambivalence on the question of feminine morality, and the women who fail to live within the sexual confines of the Ming era. In the “Lovers Murdered at a Rendezvous” tale, in particular, “he waxes indignant at the iniquity of the heroine and on the other hand he has softened the harsh moralism of his original source.” (McLaren 4)

Unfortunately, it would be wrong to classify his literary treatment of women as anything more than a selfish, romantic quest for *qing*. Feng Menglong received his licentiate degree in his twenties but was not offered an official position until several decades later, as a fifty-six-year-old stipendiary student. This position of assistant county instructor led him to an appointment as magistrate in a remote county in his sixties, a lowly position of the seventh grade. (Huang 162) In *Feng Menglong and the Chinese Vernacular Story*, “Yang interprets this preference for positively portraying female victims as the translation into narrative of the long tradition in literati poetry of assuming the persona of an abandoned woman in order to vent one’s frustration over lack of recognition.” (Idema 303) Thus Feng Menglong’s seemingly compassionate understanding of a woman’s plight was more likely the mere expression of his desires and anxieties as a marginalized scholar. While *qing* gave Feng Menglong a new beginning in the literary world, it could not erase years of patriarchal conditioning. Perhaps in his revision of the original three tales, Feng Menglong purposefully expanded the sexual power of the femme fatale to include the natural desires of ordinary women, in order to extend the power of male domination.

McLaren herself believes that “a major audience for texts such as the *Sanyan* was the growing body of examination candidates and merchants in urban areas. This group was by definition male. The *Sanyan* stories could thus be considered as familiar tales dressed up by a man of letters for an audience consisting largely of his educated peers. This largely male audience could also account for the misogynistic tone of the stories.” (McLaren 4) Certainly this explains, at least somewhat, how the “proper men” in these three stories — such as Qingnu’s third husband and the two male leads in “Lovers Murdered at a Rendezvous” — manage to escape death despite their entanglement in the femme fatale’s web of cosmic retribution. The

women in McLaren’s selections, in contrast to their Western counterparts, demonstrate weakness rather than power. Her Chinese femmes fatales are always caught by the wise and unerring husbands, disposed of in a manner befitting her sins, and the educated gentlemen of these tales — regardless of how evil they are themselves — are freed from the consequences.

McLaren, however, was correct in highlighting the importance of realism in Ming literature. During the publishing boom of the Ming, readers with a rudimentary education pushed for entertaining stories over intellectual treatises. From tales of soul mates to heroic love tales, escapism and fantasy beyond the arranged marriage, and a frank (often pornographic) exploration of the sexual relationship, the popularity of romantic literature was unbridled. In an effort to satisfy this growing audience, disenfranchised literati made the impetuous departure from the customary abstract to the new realism, treading their newfound creativity through an unfamiliar literary realm. In fact, realism may have guided Feng Menglong’s editing more than *qing*. “For Feng, the vernacular story’s most important aspect was its folk origin. Because it was believed to come from the people, it carried, as did its sister genre the folk song, the legitimating aura of general sentiment.” (quoted in Idema 303). The concept of realism was equally glorified by *qing* advocates as a reaction against the “falsehood” and “hypocrisy” prevalent in contemporary literary circles. By insisting that “genuineness” could only be found in ancient literary genres like folk songs, outside the realm of contemporary literati and among the culture of the common people, “Feng Menglong and his like-minded peers were actually claiming that they were the sole saviors of the literati culture by ridding it of falsehood.” (Huang 165)

The immensely popular book *Jin Ping Mei*, for one, was published during the Ming dynasty. *Jin Ping Mei* “is distinctive in using streets, brothels, and a merchant household as the main stages for its characters, who are by no means historical personages or larger-than-life heroes.” (Wei 63) By offering a comprehensive and detailed representation of daily life, the book has one of the first and best utilizations of realism in the Ming dynasty. “Although novels predating *Jin Ping Mei* occasionally include episodes drawing on urban life and family scenes, these are merely interludes in their heroes’ adventures. Compared with former vernacular novels, the vernacular stories of the Ming Period are more often set in the ordinary world, including Feng Menglong’s work.” (64) *Jin Ping Mei* has also been classified as a femme fatale story, a

label that even McLaren negates, using a quotation from Patrick Hanan in which he says, “As a femme fatale story the *Chin P’ing Mei* is hopelessly miscast. But this was evidently the only remotely comparable story to the new kind of work which the author was creating.” (quoted in McLaren 15) While realism turned *Jin Ping Mei* into an extraordinary piece of literary innovation, it also made it impossible to compare the novel to previous genres of Chinese fiction. To evaluate the female characters in *Jin Ping Mei* against the femmes fatales of fox fairy and ghost tales would be to completely misconstrue the term femme fatale. In fact, by revising his stories to stay true to the realism of contemporary Ming fiction, Feng Menglong may have destroyed all concrete evidence of the femme fatale’s existence in his stories.

Are these “dangerous women” truly “femmes fatales”?

The female protagonists in these three stories *do* offend the austere sexual code of Neo-Confucian ideology, but McLaren seems to suggest that *any* female that violates the oppressive gender boundaries of Ming life can be called a femme fatale. In reality, these women are simply lashing out against their oppressors through the only means available to them: sex. The sexual power of a woman (her ability to yield offspring) is the groundwork for man’s repressive orthodoxy — a psychological and physical imprisonment in the inner, domestic sphere — and thus a woman’s freedom in the sexual realm demonstrates her suppressed feminist alternative, the “subversive paradigm” of immoral women. (McLaren 1) The femme fatale is “an explosively mobile, magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her.” (Auerbach 1) She was constructed from man’s fear for her equality, and her imagery has long been associated with the growth of feminism. “The years during which the femme fatale acquired her essential attributes were also the years during which the female emancipation movement gathered strength. The femme fatale, independent of male control, and threatening men, reflects the fears of generations of social thinkers. She was produced by men who felt threatened by the escape of some actual women from male dominance.” (Allen 191)

Traditionally, the self-willed and self-determined femme fatale, “wholly unlike her lady-like contemporaries, was seen to possess neither heart nor conscience.” She signifies the connection between female independence and ambition, on the one hand, and fatality on the

other. (Allen 3) The extreme popularity of this imagery was carried up into the feminist movement and idealized by women themselves.

Women adopted the appearance and demeanor of the femme fatale without necessarily adopting the lethal attitude. They were aspiring as much to the icon's independence as to her erotic power. She offered one of the few role models for women in the nineteenth century that combined freedom with fascination and erotic intrigue. By imitating the femme fatale, women could imagine that they acquired more than her attractions: her freedom, her sexual independence — and considerable enjoyment. (Allen 191)

Yet I do not believe that this Victorian feminist “paradigm” can be applied to literature produced in the Ming dynasty; after all, the feminist movement in China did not even start until after the Chinese Communist Party took over control in 1949. Even then, the Marxist theory emphasized the significance of class struggles and not gender or ethnic differences. “Male feminist activists wrote about women primarily from men's perspectives, using women's problems as their weapon to condemn Confucianism and the feudal system, ideas and institutions, which were the main targets of the New Cultural Movement ... women's subjective perceptions and the roles they played in constructing the society were overlooked.” True “feminism” and women's studies were not introduced into the study of Chinese social history until the mid-1980s. (S. Wang, “New Social History”) As a result, my examination of the femmes fatales in McLaren's three story collection must take into account the *purpose* of the archetype from the viewpoint of a *male* author during the Ming, an author who would seek to extend the reign of male domination, not further the feminist cause. Although McLaren argues that Feng Menglong unknowingly blurred the lines between the femme fatale and the common woman for the sake of realism, the result of this ambiguity has been the expansion of female subjugation, ergo his works did not empower women to the femme fatale ideal but instead weakened them.

The conventional definition of the femme fatale identifies her as an otherworldly creature with a lethal motive for seduction. “She is immortal, queen, goddess, and therefore separated from ordinary men and women — by a vast gulf.” (Allen 4).

The [female predator] is a social deviant, epitomizing the darkest of human desires; she is willful and overwhelming, atavistic in her impulses, vindictive and cruel when thwarted. She has great destructive powers, powers sufficient to bring down families and dynasties.... In this lore a woman is barely human, a subspecies, a type of primitive, resembling lower animals such as snakes, eels, and snails. Nor is she a solitary character in the theatre of the erotic; she is paired always with her natural victim: the innocent male. (Cass 87)

The symbolism of the eel is of particular interest, given that Qingnu, from “Lovers Murdered at a Rendezvous,” was conceived after her parents consumed a magical eel that cursed their entire family to tragedy. However, the femme fatale is typically a stock villain, a scapegoat for political failure “invented by the scholarly few of the Bureau of History; [though] the crude convenience of the role did not diminish its currency.” She is an anarchic destroyer of the state, infamously found in politics as the “sexual adventuress who gains access to the Imperial realm through intimacy and ... was the predicable cause of fin-de-siècle chaos, suitable for all dynasties; like an ominous punctuation mark, she announced the downfall of a Court.” (Cass 88–89) Add to this list of descriptors the word “barren,” which occurs over and over again in femme fatale literature. “The femme fatale, no matter how amorous, does not conceive. Sin alone may feed at her luscious breast.... She was — and is — the diametric opposite of the ‘good’ woman who passively accepted impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, the control and domination of her sexuality by men.” (Allen 4) Even though Wife Yang’s son is described as slow and simple-minded, perhaps as a punishment for her sins, her status as a femme fatale in “Squabble Over a Single Copper Cash” should be invalidated by this qualifier of “barren.”

Unfortunately, it is rather difficult to *disprove* the existence of the femme fatale since the conventional definition, for the most part, only *proves* the existence of the archetype. “Although archetypal narratives endure through the centuries because of the perennial dilemmas they express, the exact nature of these dilemmas can be lost sight of through the process of retelling and transmission. The links between episodes that render them true plots — motivation and causality, for example — are often eroded during the long process of honing and simplification.”

The challenge in this paper, of course, is to determine how disparate a character can be from the standard archetype and yet still remain within the boundaries of its definition, particularly when motivation and causality rely so heavily on the cultural context of each piece. “This tendency of archetypes to vary in interpretation from culture to culture and author to author makes the archetypal critic’s task complex. She must also be very careful to avoid letting her own situation and biases distort her interpretation.” (Pratt 4–5) Although typically villainous, femmes fatales do appear as anti-heroines in a few Chinese stories, and some even repent and become heroines by the end of the tales. The concept of the femme fatale as a victim is best represented by the story of Chen Yuanyuan, a famous late Ming courtesan credited in various historical records with a pivotal role in the fall of the Ming dynasty. Chen Yuanyuan, one of the so-called “eight beauties of Qinhuai” (eight famous late Ming courtesans), is a clear exception to the stereotypical, kingdom-toppling femme fatale. “The focus on her role in the dynastic transition is fortuitous and avoidable, tied to willful passions and accidental obsessions. The cliché of a femme fatale bringing about the fall of a dynasty suggests the command of necessity. Perhaps this is why she is an inadvertent femme fatale, indeed, almost a victim.” (Li 94–103) As a hapless “victim of dubious vindication,” the line “But she was wrong to blame the ruthless wind for scattering fallen blossoms” calls to mind Ouyang Xiu’s poem on Wang Zhaojun, one of the Four Great Beauties:

Wild wind rises with the setting sun,
Drifting, homeless, where will it fall?
Beauties who excel others must suffer a sad fate —
Blame not the east wind, you should just lament your own fate. (Li 108)

In the three stories of *The Chinese Femme Fatale*, the females are neither good nor evil, simply victims of their innate sexuality. As femmes fatales, “[t]hey provide by implication a counter-model to the Neo-Confucian paragon of passivity and submission,” but their calamity is seemingly fatalistic, and not the consequence of some ulterior motive to cause destruction. In all likelihood, the meager growth in women’s literacy and power during the Ming dynasty generated counterproductive forces to put her back in her “rightful” place in society. Alongside the growth

of foot binding, the use of the femme fatale archetype further diminished women's place in traditional Chinese society. McLaren describes these women as “active participants in their own destiny. They take the initiative in seduction, show considerable ingenuity and strength of mind, and often dominate their husbands and lovers.” (McLaren 1–2) Though this is true, defining these women as femmes fatales would be to use a definition that is erroneously lax. This indistinct distinction, for all intent and purposes, was likely propagated by the literati themselves, for though the common woman could not be accurately defined as a femme fatale according to the conventional definition, they could spin tales so similar to femme fatale stories that even the slightest hint of sexuality from a common woman could evoke the same fear and simulate the same cosmic consequences as a true femme fatale. Thus, the literati allowed men to further subjugate women because *even without motive*, any woman who followed her sexual urges would bring the same devastation that a femme fatale *with motive* would bring.

Just as critics have miscast *Jin Ping Mei*, so has McLaren miscast the three stories in this collection. Her assertion that Ming realism altered the fundamental concept of a femme fatale falls short, for in the very story that best captures the late Ming cultural development of realism, “Squabble Over a Single Copper Cash,” the actions of the “dangerous woman” are hardly the focus. “At the center of the action is a distinctly dead female body.... As this body circulates through the district, disaster follows just as surely as in the two earlier tales, but this time there is no hint of sensuality, much less vivacity; there is only hard, grasping greed, and a pitiless eye for the schemes by which evil-doers create their own undoing.” (Kingsbury 208) Not only is the main female protagonist (if she can even be referred to as a protagonist when her corpse, no longer in her control, leads the plot) a *mother*, a feature uncharacteristic of the femme fatale, she willingly submits to the demand of her husband to commit suicide. Even if proven guilty of adultery, what femme fatale would ever kill *herself* first? Of these three tales, the one *most* inspired by realism is the one *least* like a traditional femme fatale story. Thus, McLaren's excuse of realism fails as a justification for why these stories fit the femme fatale mold.

I believe that McLaren's lenient application of the term “femme fatale” to the female protagonists of these stories is mistaken. Her misappropriation of the term reveals a naiveté about the literati's true intention: to blur the line between sexuality and danger, incorporating the

common woman to complicate the already ambiguous distinction of “femme fatale” and strengthen the patriarchal system of traditional China. The male literati committed themselves to protecting the social order and keeping women at the bottom. They destroyed a woman’s sole source of power, and turned female sexuality into a sin. The women in these stories have no motivation to cause rampant destruction, not even a misguided desire to reject conformity to societal rules; they merely follow a natural, inborn sexual craving. In fact, all three stories are heavily reliant on superstition and fatalistic destiny. Magical eels, ghosts with prophecies, and chance circumstances drive the plot and each death is prefaced with the narrator’s commentary, “had it not been for this, then that would not have happened, but...” — revealing the omnipresent guidance of fate. These women are born with internal defects, or so the male authors would describe them, but the true source of devastation lies in the cosmic union of external circumstances. These women are not the rulers of their own fate, but rather “fallen women” who defy traditional feminine virtues and thus suffer the wrath of a punitive society. They are not femmes fatales; they are anti-heroines whose sexual flaw takes predominance in their destinies. Their rejection of traditional values in order to follow their hearts reveals their pathetic powerlessness in the shackles of physical and psychological captivity within the domestic sphere of Ming existence. Their lack of identity and power in traditional, patriarchal China renders them all too vulnerable to the human frailty that we all share. But instead of being the victims of fate, these unfortunate women are labeled the villains.

Although it is uncertain if a true femme fatale exists in Ming literature, the “dangerous woman” will certainly remain a unique icon of traditional Chinese culture that continues to defy Western stereotypes.

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The Courtesan and the City in
Han Bangqing's *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*

by

Madeleine Wilcox

A cosmopolitan icon both worshipped and condemned throughout the twentieth century, the city of Shanghai has been interpreted and imagined through a variety of perspectives and ideologies, foreign and local, political and apolitical. In the context of Chinese literary history, Shanghai is associated with the rise of modern culture and politics, the setting for some of its most definitive works, and home to its most influential authors. While later Shanghai writers can be seen to exhibit various traits of Occidentalism in their appropriation of Western literary movement, this is hardly the case for the late-Qing author and publisher Han Bangqing (韓邦慶). His reading of the semi-colonial city through modified but still indigenous literary forms in the novel *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* provides the reader with a perspective on the city lost to the Chinese literary revolution.

This study will examine the relationship between the courtesan house and the city in *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, specifically focusing on the role of setting and material objects in the narrative in the chapters that introduce Shanghai and courtesan culture. The contrast Han presents between the deceptive familiarity of the courtesan house and the dangerously strange city streets calls into question the hegemony of Shanghai's form of modernity and the presence of an underlying tension unique to the historical moment.

***Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* and the Chinese Literary Tradition**

Haishang Hua Liezhuan (海上花列傳) is more commonly known in English as *Flowers of Shanghai* or by its translator, Eileen Chang's, preferred title, *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* (in this discussion it will henceforth be referred to as *Sing-Song Girls*). The sixty-four chapter novel depicts the lives of over one hundred courtesans and clients in the city of its title. The first thirty chapters of work originally were published in installments in Han Bangqing's literary journal

during its brief eight-month run in 1892. It was then completed and published in full novel form in 1894, shortly before Han's death.¹

Han Bangqing's biography is representative of the emergence of a new style of writer and intellectual during the late Qing. Born in 1856 to an official's family, Han is credited as one of the first modern professional writers. As he was unable to pass the increasingly competitive and soon-to-be-obsolete civil service examination, Han turned to writing and publishing fiction in Shanghai and in his spare time was said to have frequented its courtesan houses. His journal *Haishang Qishu* (海上奇書), or *Book of Shanghai Wonders* (in which *Sing-Song Girls* was published), is considered to be the first literary magazine in China and part of the late Qing rise of installment fiction.

The significance of *Sing-Song Girls* and Han's approach to writing has been discussed by Chinese literary critics since the earliest days of modern Chinese literature. The wealth of scholarship on the novel has thoroughly complicated its classification. *Sing-Song Girls* has been used as model for nascent modern literature, as an exemplar of late Qing fiction, and as a late incarnation of traditional tropes. Instead of creating dissonance, these three approaches clarify the novel's place at the crossroads of Chinese modernity and tradition, providing yet another illustration of the impossibility of such clear-cut delineations.

Han's novel, while not commercially successful, initially had been singled out by a number of literary giants as a pre-cursor to modern Chinese literature and one of the few bright spots of late-Qing fiction. The critiques that most shaped later scholars' approaches to the text are that of Hu Shi and Lu Xun. In his analysis of what he titled “depravity fiction,” Lu Xun praises *Sing-Song Girls* for its depiction that neither glorified nor demonized courtesan culture as he claimed other courtesan novels did, but instead presented a balanced and realistic portrait of life at the time.² Hu Shi's preface to the novel commends Han for applying the same approaches

¹ Steven Cheng's article “*Sing-Song Girls* and Its Narrative Methods” provides a biographical sketch. In Liu Ts'un Yan ed., *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction: from the Ch'ing to the Early Republican Era* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1984), 111–12.

² Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 319.

he advocates in his famous “Eight Don’ts” essay, most notably Han’s use of the local Wu dialect in the novel’s dialogue.³ Finally, Eileen Chang’s translation of the dialogue into Mandarin and the work into English has made it accessible to a wide modern audience.

Although the contemporary critic Fan Boqun praises Han’s innovative literary techniques, he focuses the bulk of his analysis on the subject matter of *Sing-Song Girls*, such as the work’s urban setting and its focus on businessmen and migrants as central characters.⁴ Based on the above commendations, it is tempting to consider *Sing-Song Girls* as a peerless exemplar of proto-modern Chinese literature. However, the designation of the novel as the sole harbinger of modernity has been challenged on both stylistic and thematic grounds. These challenges serve to enrich our understanding of the period in which the piece was written rather than to denigrate its literary value.

While the praise for *Sing-Song Girls* has not diminished over time, the reevaluation of late-Qing fiction has changed our understanding of its place in the literary tradition. In the past few decades many scholars have taken the study of courtesan novels and other so-called “depravity fiction” seriously. Patrick Hanan champions earlier works such as *Fengyue Meng* (風月夢) or *Illusions of Romance* that also excel at the use of foils and provide intricate details of courtesan culture later praised in *Sing-Song Girls* to argue for subset of “realistic” courtesan novels.⁵ David Der-Wei Wang’s more critical assessment focuses on the decadence in both language and substance that he claims arose from the excesses at the end of the dynasty.⁶ Their efforts have enabled the reader to understand some of the defining features of *Sing-Song Girls* as a shining example of its age and not just as a literary anomaly.

³ Hu Shi 胡適, “Haishang Hua Liezhuan Xu 《海上花列傳》序” in *Hushi Wencun* 〈胡適文存〉: 3.6 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai Shudian 上海書店, 1989), 709.

⁴ Fan Boqun, “*Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*: Pioneering Work of Modern Popular Fiction,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 2.3: 472–490 (September 2008), 473.

⁵ Patrick Hanan, *Chinese Fiction of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44–45.

⁶ David Der-Wei Wang, *Fin de Siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities in Late Qing Fiction 1849–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 54.

Instead of treating the courtesan novel as a literary form unique to the Qing, Chloe Starr’s recent survey has demonstrated that it should be considered as a continuation of the scholar–beauty stories, within the lineage of works arising from Feng Menglong’s collection of popular tales.⁷ In addition, Starr’s analysis of the novel’s narratorial strategies and methods of characterization illustrate that innovation and experimentation were inherent, rather than simply present in the genre. Specifically, she posits that the use of framing techniques at the beginning and end of the novel, overlooked by modern critics (including Eileen Chang, who edited these sections out of her translated edition of *Sing-Song Girls*) as a simple means of ensuring objectivity can actually be seen as a way of questioning reality and reflecting on the process of writing and transmission.⁸

New studies of late-Imperial texts have demonstrated a longer tradition of literature concerning women and the city to which *Sing-Song Girls* belongs. Paul Ropp’s examination of late Ming and early Qing courtesan works uncovers a rich variety of themes previously thought only to have arisen with Han’s novel. These include depictions of urban life and commerce as well as viewpoints at once sympathetic to the plight and exploitation of the courtesan and praising her ability to interact with her literati clients as an intellectual peer.⁹

In the few comments left by Han about his own work, he acknowledges both traditional influences and his own literary innovations. In his preface to the novel, Han presents *Sing-Song Girls* as part of the dominant literary canon by comparing it to Wu Jinzi’s early Qing dynasty novel *Rulin Waishi* (The Scholars). Han previously had written a number of stories inspired by Pu Songling’s *Liao Zhai zhi Yi* (Strange Tales From Make-Do Studio), also from the early Qing.¹⁰ Han’s chapter headings, which summarize the ensuing drama, and his chapter endings,

⁷ Chloe Starr, *Red Light Novels of the Late-Qing* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 29.

⁸ Starr, 123.

⁹ Paul Ropp, “Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China,” in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and Kan-I Sun, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 20, 27, 30.

¹⁰ Steven Cheng, 112.

which urge the reader to continue, are reminiscent of the structure of the great novels and of vernacular fiction’s origin in storytelling.

Furthermore, the novel’s title evokes an even longer and more official tradition. By using the literary classification for biography, or *liezhuan*, Han references the historical precedent of documenting the lives of eminent public figures. Biographies of exemplary women, known particularly for their chastity, were also included in this category and are relevant to our understanding of the work. One of the few literati present in the text planned to write a set of biographies like these for the fictional courtesans.¹¹ We can assume this fictive text is the source of the title for the novel. However, despite the fact that the novel follows the lives of a multitude of courtesans, it differs significantly from a collection of biographies. The narrative is episodic and vacillates between plot strands in no particular order. The reader knows little about the background of the women or their place in Shanghai society outside of their relationships with a handful of clients, who are presented with an equal, if not greater, amount of attention.

Han’s innovations go beyond a liberal interpretation of the literary canon. He was explicit in describing a personal approach to storytelling that shaped his style, which he described as “*chuancha cangshan zhi fa*” (穿插藏閃之法), translated by Alexander DesForges as “techniques of interweaving and hidden flashes.” He claimed these to be unprecedented in fiction.¹² Techniques such as these allowed for the suspense and continuity necessary for the success and popularity of installment fiction.

As the above catalog of interpretations has shown, *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, like most great works of literature, is difficult to categorize. The coexistence of innovation and tradition should not be surprising considering the period in which Han was writing. Unlike later

¹¹ Han Bangqing *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* trans. Eileen Chang and Eva Hong (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 259. The Chinese editions referenced for this paper are *Han Bangqing* 韩邦庆, *Haishang Hua Liezhuan* 《海上花列傳》 (Taibei 台北: Guiguan Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsi 桂冠圖書股份有限公司, 1984) and Eileen Chang’s mandarin version, *Haishang Hua Kai Haishang Hua Luo* 《海上花開海上花落》 (Taibei 台北: Huangguan Wenxue Chuban Youxian Gongsi 皇冠文學出版有限公司, 1992).

¹² Alexander DesForges, “Building Shanghai, One Page at a Time: The Aesthetics of Installment Fiction at the Turn of the Century,” *Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62.3: 781–810 (August 2003), 793.

writers, Han did not forsake the existing literary heritage. Furthermore, despite Han’s relatively realistic approach, the novel is above all a work of fiction, a space for invention and interpretation. The text does serve as a lens into Shanghai society of the late Qing, but the reader and the scholar cannot pretend that Han was a completely objective observer even if he set out to act as one. He is responsible for shaping not only the development of his protagonists but also the space in which their stories unfold.

Therefore, instead of simply viewing the novel’s thematic and stylistic innovations as a justification for the novel’s positioning at the vanguard of modern Chinese literature, a claim that can be complicated by the discovery of earlier texts on similar subjects, it is more illuminating to think about how the ways in which Han as a late innovator of Chinese traditional literature interpreted the newly emerging modern city in relation to the more established and native culture institutions. Han draws on the familiarity of traditional aesthetics to create a world at a similar crossroads as represented by the city and the courtesan house. Courtesan culture may be inherently urban, but because Shanghai’s urban culture was so distinct from all other Chinese cities, one must consider these two spaces as separate entities. By treating them as such, one is able to better understand how change and continuity impacted Han’s vision of the semi-colonial modern city.

Courtesan Culture in *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*

Sing-Song Girls may meander through the relationships that occur at various courtesan houses, but the story begins and ends with members of the Zhao family, recent newcomers to the city who eventually lose their fortune and reputation as they are drawn into courtesan life. The novel opens with Simplicity Zhao’s arrival in Shanghai and his introduction to courtesan culture through his uncle, Benevolence Hong, and his friend Rustic Zhang.¹³ Their introduction to the customs and etiquette of the courtesan houses is intended for the reader as much as it is for Simplicity. The courtesan house is presented as a highly structured and complicated place. In

¹³ I am using Eileen Chang’s translations rather than a direct transliteration in order to illustrate the symbolism inherent in the characters’ names.

response to Simplicity’s suggestion of visiting a courtesan house with his friend Rustic comments, “Naturally you don’t know the rules of the game” and proceeds to explain the distinction between the classes of courtesan houses.¹⁴ Over the course of the first few visits, seating arrangements, the order of the dishes, and the process of inviting courtesans are all delineated in detail surprising for a novel supposedly about romance and sex.

The details sound as if they are part of the many guidebooks to the city of Shanghai and its courtesan houses published during the nineteenth century and studied by Catherine Yeh. Yeh argues that not only were tradition and ritual appropriated by the courtesans, but also that courtesan etiquette was created and changed more frequently than has been acknowledged. It was through the cultural embedding of rituals in a reinvented tradition that the courtesans were able to subtly assert control over their environment while at the same time providing the guests with a familiar setting.¹⁵ I am not arguing that Han did not demystify courtesan culture — he did. But in doing so, he made it navigable in ways that the city around it was not.

While arguing for the importance of sensuality and desire in Han’s depiction of courtesan life, David Wang briefly touches on the familial structure of the courtesan house, a characterization in agreement with Samuel Liang’s analysis of gender relations inherent in courtesan terminology.¹⁶ Courtesan houses adopted the use of family terms such as “brother,” “house,” and “wife” in order to subvert Confucian ethics. The resultant reversal of the household situated the man as an outsider while still presenting an image of feminine domesticity and subjugation.¹⁷ In one of many such exchanges, Rouge says to Lotuson Wang, “I’m your real mother, don’t you know,” in an attempt to prevent him from seeing Constance, her rival for his

¹⁴ Direct quotes come from Eileen Chang’s definitive translation. Han, 9.

¹⁵ Catherine Vance Yeh, “Reinventing Ritual: Late Qing Handbooks for Proper Customer Behavior in Shanghai Courtesan Houses.” In *Late Imperial China* 19.2:1–63 (1998), 2.

¹⁶ Wang, 95.

¹⁷ Samuel Liang, “Ephemeral Households, Marvelous Things: Business, Gender and Material Culture in Flowers of Shanghai,” *Modern China* 33.3: 377–418 (2007), 395.

attention.¹⁸ As Liang indicates, the familiarity of the courtesan houses is just as intoxicating, if not more, than the allure of passion in Han’s depiction. Still, it is more than just the adoption of family terms and the re-creation of domestic space that give the courtesan world its familiar feel.

Even the most standard etiquette is presented in minute detail, yet another example of the sense of familiarity Han associates with courtesan life. For instance, a passage on a banquet at the courtesan Jewel’s house reads as follows, “They all wiped their faces. Lifting the wine kettle high, Simplicity Zhao respectfully indicated that Bamboo Hu should take the seat of honor, ... all others took their places after brief attempts at offering precedence to one another.”¹⁹

The richness of detail given to material objects in the courtesan house, especially in a novel known for the descriptive power of its dialogue, also creates the sense of comfort and security. Wang suggests that excess was emblematic of the style of the times, but I also wonder if the unique spatial setting imbues them with greater significance. The objects given by the client to the courtesan cement their social bond. “She would make her homelike boudoir and sexuality available to her client” in exchange for “the elevation of her social status.”²⁰ These objects can be argued to carry even greater psychological significance than just creating warmth and the sense of plenty. In Halbwachs’s treatise on collective memory, he reasons that objects of the home function as part of society, reflect the individual’s tastes, and recall “a way of life common to many men,” while “the continued presence of these objects makes the observer doubt that so much time has passed and that we have changed so much.”²¹ The specific objects in the courtesan houses do not carry individual significance because they do not belong to the clients, but the aesthetic they create gives the client and the contemporary reader a sense of cultural continuity reminiscent of an earlier golden age.

In addition to his descriptions of courtesan daily life, Han utilizes of a number of other

¹⁸ Han, 43.

¹⁹ Han, 22.

²⁰ Liang, 399.

²¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (Philadelphia: Harper and Row, 1980), 129

narrative techniques that enhance order and predictability in the novel. He relies on archetypes of traditional fiction, including his depiction of maids as matchmakers and comedians, as well as the traditional conventions mentioned previously in this study. He also makes numerous allusions to the classic novel, most notably through a subplot that mirrors *Dream of the Red Chamber* and references famous operas and tunes that are played at every courtesan banquet. “Rustic Retreat” and its bamboo groves, pavilions, and rock formations are the setting of a handful of chapters in the middle of the novel. Resembling the gardens of Ming novels, the space temporarily divorces the characters from their urban lives.²²

Also consistent with the courtesan culture defined by the guidebooks, Han details the courtesan’s adherence to rituals both old and new. These rituals, like courtesan etiquette, served to legitimize the courtesans as part of elite culture and link them to a longer tradition. It is the courtesan, not the clients, who observe and stage religious and seasonal rites such as the dinner given by Constance “to mark the rituals honoring the money gods.”²³ They have even created their own elaborate rituals, such as one for moving from one courtesan house to another. Constance’s moving ceremony consisted of musicians playing on a stage and formal greetings by the manservants.²⁴

Regardless of whether or not Han’s emphasis on the familiar and the traditional aspects of courtesan culture was intentional, the sense of continuity that these spaces provided to the clients was certainly part of their appeal in Han’s fiction as well as reality. As the next section shows, the stability of courtesan life functioned as a counterpoint to the new type of urban society developing around it.

²² Han, 318.

²³ Han, 225.

²⁴ Han, 39.

The City of Shanghai in *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*

Han’s detailed mimicry of a highly ritualized and fictively traditional courtesan culture serves as a contrast to and a sanctuary from the chaos and irrationality of the version of Shanghai constructed in *Sing-Song Girls*.

One of the first novels set in Shanghai, *Sing-song Girls* is notable for its specificity in setting. The use of the names of streets, theaters, and parks allows the reader to pinpoint exactly where the action occurs, adding to the novel’s realism. However, for an urban novel, the amount of space dedicated to the characters’ adventures in city spaces pales in comparison to the episodes occurring within the courtesan houses. Furthermore, while courtesan houses and courtesan fashions are described in decadent detail, actual descriptions of the city itself remain rather sketchy outside of the well-defined courtesan district. In many cases, the reader must rely on the verbal testimony of the characters to get an understanding of the city’s atmosphere. The image that emerges is one of dangerous and imposing foreignness.

Again, it is Simplicity Zhao and his uncle Benevolence Hong who provide the introduction for the reader. As Simplicity explains, “there’s nothing for me to do at home,” and, even though the living expenses in the countryside are cheaper than in Shanghai, “we also have to pinch and skimp much more than before.”²⁵ The countryside is a place of economic downturn from which Shanghai provides a means of escape. This is true to the novel’s historical circumstances. Shanghai was the destination for waves of internal migration due to famines and the Taiping Rebellion. At the same time, success in Shanghai is not a given, a theme recurrent in Benevolence’s lectures to Simplicity. Benevolence warns Simplicity a number of times about the nature of the city in which he scolds, “you have to be on your guard in Shanghai,” and “it’s no easy task finding a job in Shanghai.”²⁶

The brief physical descriptions of the city corroborate Benevolence’s warnings. While the novel is replete with place names, there are practically no descriptions of the city’s unique

²⁵ Han, 2.

²⁶ Han, 102–103.

architecture and industry that were in the process of rapid development. Han’s focus on setting is limited to the actual street, which is depicted as dirty and dangerous. One of the first glimpses the reader is given comes when Simplicity wanders out of his guesthouse alone. Nearly sprayed by garbage tossed by workers in “all directions,” he heads to the alley of courtesan houses.²⁷ In another scene, Cloudlet, uneasy after witnessing a fire, walks through the silent, dusty, and smelly streets where he is startled by “an eerie figure standing bolt upright in a dark corner,” who reveals himself to be an Indian policeman. As the action in the novel primarily occurs at night, the city’s new gas and electric lamps figure prominently in Han’s description of the clients’ journeys to and from the courtesan houses. The resulting contrast between light and dark to creates a sense of suspense and mystery.²⁸

At the same time, the city is an intoxicating place that ensnares the newcomer. Even when he can no longer afford to visit the courtesan houses, Simplicity Zhao stays on in the city, “pulling the rickshaw, he could take in all the sights and sounds around him.”²⁹ The rest of the family, failing in their attempt to bring him home, is similarly enraptured by the charms of the city. Upon their arrival, Simplicity’s sister and her friend visit storytelling parlors and dancehalls (which the reader hears about only upon their return to the guesthouse), one of the rare mentions of these emerging social spaces in the text. Amidst the mixed and uncontrolled crowd, they meet the men whose false promises of marriage lead them to become courtesans, thus marking these spaces as gateways to vice.

Han’s attention to material objects provides an opportunity for contrast between the local and the foreign. Sitting in Pine Wu’s foreign-style office waiting to discuss his financial troubles, Simplicity is startled as, “the sound made by their leather shoes frightened Simplicity so much he sat bolt upright, held his breath and broke out into a sweat.”³⁰ This is far from the only description of the sound of feet, clients arriving at courtesan houses are frequently greeted by the

²⁷ Han, 13

²⁸ Han, 87.

²⁹ Han, 239.

³⁰ Han, 103.

“clakkety-clak of bound feet,” a familiar sound in contrast to one that inspires dread and unease.³¹

Foreign objects are presented as alluring but incomprehensible. When Lotuson and Constance visit the store Hope Brothers, “they were greeted with strange and fantastic things that their eyes were dazzled and their heads spun.” The items they found in the passage are all clockwork toys, and the guests buy none of them. Elan Ge “just picked only what he needed.”³² Although the customers are mesmerized, the objects are superfluous even beyond the luxury goods the courtesans covet and are not anything they feel they need to incorporate into their lives.

Han’s different approaches to the interior and exterior spaces create two distinct worlds. Thus the courtesan house provides a safe vantage point from which to observe the wonders and dangers of Shanghai. One evening, the party observes a policeman on a neighboring roof during a raid on a gambling den. Peering out the window at him, they see he “had a steel sword in his hand that glittered in the electric light.”³³ Sequestered in the house, they don’t participate in the hubbub of the crowd below but can observe at a distance. Foreign goods are present among the courtesan’s possession, but they are described in the midst of a litany of indigenous objects, domesticating them and stripping them of their foreign appeal. Unlike the sword or leather shoes of the outside world, they do not have much impact on the characters’ mental states.

Like the mechanical toys, the city is also alluring, but in a way totally distinct from the lull of courtesan house. In his warnings to Simplicity, Benevolence also acknowledges the city’s cosmopolitan appeal stating, “coming to this international city of Shanghai and having a bit of fun is OK even if it means spending a bit of money.”³⁴ The international flavor of the city is important to Han’s depiction of Shanghai. While it is incorrect to call *Sing-Song Girls* the first “urban novel,” it is one of the earliest pieces of literature to address the unique conditions created by Shanghai’s semi-colonialism, a term appropriated and redefined by Shih Shu-mei to mean the

³¹ Han, 14.

³² Han, 44.

³³ Han, 229.

³⁴ Han, 99.

“specific effects of multiple imperial presences in China and their fragmentary colonial geography (largely confined to coastal cities).”³⁵ The division of the city into international and native jurisdictions has been studied intensely by many historians and cultural critics of the Republican era, and the cities’ mishmash of laws and legal boundaries is credited with the development of the city’s notorious vice trades, not least of all the courtesan house.

This distinction between the Shanghai urbanity and the rest of China is clearly evident in Hong’s comments on the city’s unique nature. It is also what separates his depiction of urban courtesan culture from that in the earlier courtesan novels. As mentioned earlier, Paul Ropp’s analysis of early courtesan novels emphasizes the connection between the city and the courtesan. According to Ropp, the courtesan house is an integral urban institution, and it represents, particularly in the more nostalgic works, the affluence and success of a Chinese urban society. While *Sing-Song Girls* is part of a larger tradition of urban courtesan works, the courtesan’s place in urban society is quite different from that of those in late Ming and early Qing texts.³⁶ The courtesan houses are certainly a part of Shanghai’s urban culture, but Han’s contrast indicates a different type of relationship.

In Yeh’s more comprehensive study of Shanghai courtesan culture, she emphasizes these women as precursors to the modern celebrity and among the earliest female public figures. Successful courtesans were those who participated in public entertainment and were featured in the new serial publications. In fact, at the time of the novel’s publication, competitions among courtesans, known as “flower competitions” occurred multiple times a year.³⁷ The courtesans in *Sing-Song Girls*, while frequently going on carriage rides with their patrons, do not participate in public entertainment at all, nor is there any indication that the nascent press is covering them.

³⁵ Shih Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 31.

³⁶ Paul Ropp, “Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China,” in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Christina Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesan Culture: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 220, 227–229.

The only instance in which their lives seem to be recorded is in the traditional-style biography that one of the few literati characters in the work is attempting to write.

Addressing the courtesan's role in Shanghai culture, we note that these women are primarily interpreted as symbols of the city's emerging modernity or at the least emblematic of its complex nature. Yeh connects the public role of courtesans in Shanghai to their roles in fictional literature, linking Han's descriptions of unique characteristics of the city to his exposition on the etiquette of the courtesan house as a city guidebook. In other novels this connection is quite explicit. In one entitled *Dreams of Shanghai Glamour*, published four years after *Sing-Song Girls*, Shanghai's most famous sites serve as chapter headings and settings for the interactions between courtesans and clients.³⁸ This approach contrasts with that employed by Han in *Sing-Song Girls*, which confines the majority of drama to interior or traditional spaces such as gardens, and only depicts courtesans in public spaces when escorted by their clients. By ignoring the courtesan's public role and interaction with the urban space, Han further emphasizes courtesan culture's allusion to tradition and clearly separates it from the rest of Shanghai culture.

For better or worse, it is undeniable that the foreign presence in China was impacting Chinese culture and society in a way that was distinct from the many centuries of exchange that had preceded it. Han's portrayal of Shanghai's public spaces in contrast with the more regulated and inviting space of the courtesan house positions these arenas in opposition to each other.

The City's Intrusion on Courtesans and Clients

Midway through the narrative, the distinctions between the two spaces begin to blur. The description of foreign goods in the courtesan houses increases, and the foreign dishes, initially an exotic and expensive treat for the elder Script Li's birthday, become integrated into ordinary banquets. At the same time, the fortune and health of the clients become increasingly threatened, in many cases by their involvement in the city's other vices such as gambling, opium, and lower-class prostitutes, events that begin to replace the banquet scenes in the text. It is also around this

³⁸Yeh, 252.

point that the female members of the Zhao family are introduced and the story of their tragic fate begins.

These developments follow the new conventions for fiction appearing at that time. The impact of installment fiction is once again helpful in understanding the construction of the novel. Literary strategies of installment fiction, DesForges posits, emphasized the importance of temporal specificity and progression and thus provided a sense of continuity necessary to keep readers engaged in ways that mere anecdotes or disconnected episodes would not.³⁹ If one applies Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova’s classifications for plot structures dominant during the late Qing, the narrative progression in *Sing-Song Girls* most resembles what is called the “cyclical plot.” A “cyclical plot” is defined by the decline and eventual triumph of evil over good and exemplified by the downfall of the bureaucratic institution in the novel *Guanchang Xianxing Ji* (官场现形记), or *The Bureaucrats*, written by his contemporary Li Boyuan (李伯元) in 1903.⁴⁰ The courtesan house, like the bureaucracy, is an institution with its own customs, aesthetic, and sense of long tradition. Like the earlier novel, *Sing-Song Girls* traces the downfall of the courtesan house through the failed relationships and financial troubles of the courtesans and clients.

The novel ends with an attack on Zhao’s sister Second Treasure by an unsavory character and uninvited guest named “Lai the Turtle” after she ignored his advances in order to care for her ailing mother. In his rage, he beats her and destroys everything in the room except a pair of paraffin lamps. Compounding the tragedy, she learns her intended fiancé has died, before the manservants turns into monsters and she wakes up in a sweat.⁴¹ Where and when she awakes, and just what parts of the novel were in her dream is left unanswered, leaving the reader to question Han’s intricately constructed world. Although I would hesitate to impose an allegorical reading onto this scene, the attack is the most violent assault in the work and a culmination of the

³⁹ DesForges, 787.

⁴⁰ Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova, *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 50.

⁴¹ Han, 524–527.

many individual tragedies that have befallen the novel’s characters. Lai’s uninvited intrusion and disrespect for family responsibility are a blatant violation of the courtesan’s home-like environment. The belief that he will escape prosecution by the foreign courts is evidence of the little hope placed on the institutions that Han’s fellow intellectuals champion even as foreign technology (the paraffin lamps) are able to outlast the destruction of all the other material objects. The deconstruction of courtesan culture and its infiltration by foreign objects and violent actions imply that its preservation of traditional aesthetics is unsustainable and ultimately a fantasy.

To conclude, I would like turn to one recurring motif that also complicates our perception of the world of the Shanghai courtesan. In a number of scenes, and twice in the first three chapters of the novel, various courtesans are depicted gazing at their reflections through a “foreign mirror.”⁴² In traditional Chinese fiction, David Rolston argues, mirrors represent “a desire for objectivity.”⁴³ But Starr, in her in-depth analysis of characterization and narration in courtesan texts, posits that mirrors are one of the many “framing devices” used to indicate a convoluted textual frame and the impossibility of a straightforward reading.⁴⁴ In either case, the addition of the foreign objects presents an intriguing twist on a classical trope and raises questions regarding how Shanghai’s emerging cosmopolitanism impact the way its residents reflected on themselves and the city around them.

Conclusion

The wealth of dialogue, material descriptions, plot development, and literary allusions in *Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* provides endless options for interpreting the text and the world it depicts. Studies of either the city or the courtesan house in the novel could constitute books in their own right and probably will someday. In this cursory analysis, my modest goal is to understand how Han, a cultural pioneer inspired by nascent literary forms, approached the

⁴² Han, 9,14.

⁴³ David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Commentary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 169.

⁴⁴ Starr, 104.

interaction between local and foreign, innovation and tradition. Han’s interpretation of the Shanghai courtesan house challenges the notions that the Shanghai culture was inherently new or exotic and that every urbanite sought out these aspects of the city. By emphasizing the traditional and ritualized aesthetics of one of its most definitive institutions, Han explores the competing desires for the familiar and the novel. Depictions of the courtesan house as a safe space slowly infiltrated by a dangerous and unpredictable urban environment uncover an anxiety and uncertainty about the city’s foreignness absent in works of later writers who looked to the West for inspiration and salvation. The underlying tension present in the work seems to portend the crisis of Qing imperial power in the few short years following the novel’s publication, bringing as they did defeat in the Sino-Japanese War and the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion.

Tang Tragedies: Men and Love in the Tang Dynasty

by

Jennifer Jen

Introduction

There is no denying that women suffered many hardships and were greatly oppressed during the Tang dynasty. They were often abused, abandoned, and cast aside by the men in their lives, not to mention, that their feelings were ignored and their voices silenced. If we assume that Tang fiction accurately represents the men and women of the time, it is safe to say that men enjoyed significantly more independence and indulgence than women. This paper, therefore, is not going to suggest that Tang women suffered *more* than men since that seems extremely unlikely and difficult to prove. Instead, it will propose that there is little acknowledgment of Tang men's sufferings even when they did indeed experience suffering as well. *The Dragon King's Daughter: Ten T'ang Dynasty Stories* contains ten stories from this era that depict the celebrations and frustrations of love and romance. This paper will explore these more pitiable aspects of the lives of Tang men, as reflected in the literature of the time, keeping in mind that the suffering of women was as great, if not greater, than theirs.

Background

Before we begin our discussion of men and love, we should closely examine the daily lives and interactions of men and women during that period. In this way, we can find out if literature correctly mirrored reality or if it was an escape from reality. For instance, if many stories chronicle the suffering of women, they are most likely reflecting the norms of the time. On the other hand, some stories are elaborate and fantastic, probably representing the wishful thinking of the literati men who wrote the tales. What exactly were the norms during the Tang dynasty then?

Primarily, romance and marriage were two separate concepts. The families arranged

marriages for the most part, and neither husband nor wife had a say in who they were going to spend the rest of their lives with (Hou, 1986). Solely based on the interests of the families, marriages were like trades and transactions — no love or desire was usually involved. Therefore, people were marrying others that they didn’t truly love or even know, making marriages void of romance and passion. Instead, a marriage was an act of duty that one endured for the purposes of gaining advantageous alliances.

After entering their marriages, husband and wife had clear division of labor. Men took care of everything outside the home and women took care of everything within their domestic abode. More specifically, a woman had to fulfill three major responsibilities: performing household duties, caring for her husband and elders, and bearing a son (Hou, 1986). They rarely had permission to leave the boundaries of their homes except to visit temples or relatives.

This idea of restricting women was present throughout women’s lives and manifested itself in the practice of foot binding and in the lack of educational opportunities for females (Hou, 1986). Although we do not encounter foot binding in the Tang dynasty or in any of its literature, it was a prominent theme in other parts of Chinese history. As we have read in “The Romance of the Flowers in the Mirror,” foot binding was an extremely painful process that severely curtailed the physical movement of girls starting at a young age. Women were forced to go through the tortures of foot binding in order to please men and satisfy their fetishes. In addition to restricting women’s physical actions, society also restricted the intellectual advancement of women by significantly reducing their chances of receiving education (Hou, 1986). Since 90% of China was comprised of peasants, artisans, or merchants who were illiterate, only in the other 10%, the elite class could families afford to cultivate learning in their daughters (Hou, 1986). The young girls were sometimes sent to school with their brothers, or they learned musical instruments, chess, calligraphy, or painting at home. All girls learned to sew, weave, embroider, and supervise the household as well (Hou, 1986). Thus, we see a disparity in the amount of education and the types of education that men and women received. Boys learned intellectual subjects in school that would benefit them in future civil examinations, while girls learned domestic arts to help them as future wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law.

Foot-binding and female illiteracy may not have impacted the Tang dynasty as strongly as

other dynasties, but the roots of restricting women’s advancement are found in Confucianism, which heavily influenced the Tang dynasty. Confucianism played a significant role in society as it governed the actions and beliefs of many. One thing that Confucianism emphasizes is order and relations in society. For instance, women were ignored in ancestral lineages, they received harsher punishments, and they rarely received any inheritance (Hou, 1986). Another Confucian belief concerning Yin and Yang stressed that men were Yang and women were Yin. While Yang was responsible for taking care of matters outside of the home, Yin complemented Yang and took care of matters within the home. Clearly, Confucian ideals of male-dominance and female compliance were deeply engrained in their society.

To summarize, marriage in the Tang dynasty was not a symbol of love, but rather a strategic arrangement bringing affluence and status to the respective families. Because of these arranged marriages, men and women were forced to engage in life-long commitments devoid of love and romance. Inside the home, the women did everything and were confined to doing so by the physical boundaries of footbinding and the intellectual limitations of illiteracy. This was grounded in Confucian ideas of a male-dominated society in which virtuous women were pure and submissive. Therefore, women had no outlet to experience romantic passions in any way since they were confined to their loveless marriages. On the other hand, men in the Tang dynasty were immersed in the flourishing courtesan culture, which allowed them to explore and seek love outside of the home.

Courtesans became a large part of the culture during the Tang dynasty after the An Lushan rebellion, which prompted a crumbling of the old standards. This led to the emergence of a new liberality and encouraged fascination with and respect for women (Hsieh, 2008: 15). As a result, courtesan culture became embedded as a romantic ideal in the literati culture. *Wenren*, or scholars, who had wives at home could experience moments of passion, flirtation, romance, novelty, and attraction by pursuing affairs with courtesans outside the home. In this way, men’s emotional and physical desires were satisfied, while their social and domestic needs were taken care of by their wives. C. S. Lewis explains that, “adultery is inevitable in a society in which marriage is purely utilitarian” (Hsieh, 2008: 18). Therefore, the courtesan culture was brought

about in the Tang dynasty by the An Lushan rebellion, but it was also supported by contemporary society's views on marriage.

It is obvious that men enjoyed more liberties outside of the home than women and also had more opportunities to make themselves physically and emotionally happier. Nevertheless, were the lives of men in the Tang dynasty free of romantic frustrations? Did they find true love because they had more outlets to meeting women? I propose that men actually had a difficult time struggling to fulfill their desire for true love, even though they were involved in multiple arenas of companionship. Two major things that were likely to have restrained men from experiencing true love were society and Confucianism. The pressures, expectations, and norms of society as well as the ideals of Confucianism played inhibiting roles in men's love lives. Through literature, though, male literati were able to create a world where true love was possible and where one woman could satisfy all areas of a man's life.

Men's Desires

Given the courtesan culture, many may perceive Tang men's desires as strictly physical and emotional, but most men probably desired more than that. Instead, they wished for one person that would complete them in every aspect — soul, spirit, and mind. Love is something that Chinese men in the Tang dynasty could not help but desire. We know this from Chinese stories such as “The Spendthrift and the Alchemist,” in which a man is offered immortality if he stays silent through a series of trials. Through thick and thin, the man never falters, even when the monk tests him with physical pain and torment. However, when the monk tests him by nearly killing his child, the man's love for the child finally leaves him with no choice but to speak out in protest (Yang and Yang, 1954: 81–87). Although this is not romantic love, it does prove that love is something innately present within men as well as women. It is logical, then, to conclude that men desired love, whether in the form of parental love or, in this case, consummate love.

Men were sometimes so eager to discover and foster true love that they would even allow themselves to be taken advantage of by women. In “Story of a Singsong Girl,” the main character is so mesmerized by a seductive young lady that he is manipulated into spending all his money on her, ignoring his friends and selling all his property and horses (Yang and Yang, 1954:

61). This talented and competent young man throws away everything, including his education, upbringing, status, and money, all in order to be with the woman he loves. Eventually, he is abandoned by her and is left for dead with nothing. It is pitiful to see how a man with a promising future can be brought to such low levels of morality by being under the spell of a female. This demonstrates that even in a male-dominated society, individual males can be controlled by their desires to pursue what they believe is true love.

Also, as mentioned before, literature sometimes acted as a mode of wishful thinking of the literati who wanted true love in their lives. For instance, in “Wu Shuang the Peerless,” a man fights courageously for the woman he loves and does not give up until he wins her back (Yang and Yang, 1954: 72–80). This is a fairytale story with a happily-ever-after ending — representing the desires of Tang men. Not only did they desire true love from one woman, but from this story we can also see that they desired to pursue their desires and win the woman in the end. Unfortunately, Tang men could not usually pursue their desires for love in a free manner due to social and Confucian values.

Men’s Limitations

As previously stated, social and Confucian values were responsible for the suppression of desires in men. First, society set a strict pattern that marriageable men and women had to follow. Men from the elite class married women from good families, who were dutiful and virtuous. Good wives had their duties strictly set out. They were starkly different from the promiscuous, yet skilled women who entertained and pleased men. Because of this clear definition of the “good wife” in contrast to the courtesan, men were expected to wed someone from the first category. If not, the man would not be following the social orders prescribed. Courtesans, after all, were for playing with, while wives were for marrying. When men tried to defy this social order, they were always put back into their place by other external forces in society. For instance, in “Story of a Singsong Girl,” a bright young scholar loses everything he has to be with a beautiful singsong girl, ending as a beggar, close to death (Yang and Yang, 1954: 57–71). Although this is not how the story ends, this is the realistic portion of the story, since, in reality, singsong girls could never become the recognized wives of scholars (Yang and Yang, 1954: ix) .

Secondly, even if the man fell in love with a woman who wasn't a courtesan, society still deemed their relationship inappropriate as long as it does not benefit the families. For instance, in the story “Prince Huo's Daughter,” the main character, Li, falls in love with a prince's daughter and their relationship is “untrammelled by false respect for social status or conventions” (Yang and Yang, 1954, ix). However, their relationship still crumbles under pressure from his family for the man to marry one of his cousins, because of an agreement that had already been made. Clearly, society was made up of families that tightly regulated the marriages between one another's children. After he is forced to marry the girl his mother chooses, Li never returns or corresponds with Prince Huo's daughter again, causing her to become gradually more ill and eventually to die. Li's faithlessness is often blamed for the breakdown of their relationship and for her death. However, though it may seem that he heartlessly abandons her and deserts her with an empty promise, that is not at all his intention. When his mother demands that he marry the chosen girl, “Li, though hesitating, dared not decline” (Yang and Yang, 1954: 37). Being raised in such a society had instilled reverence, honor, and obedience to his parents, rendering him almost unable to refuse them. Furthermore, the fact that he hesitates proves that he did not *actually* want to marry the girl, but rather that he still had feelings and loyalty for the prince's daughter. It is only a shame that he was forced to leave her behind — an unwanted and unfortunate situation for both of them, not just her.

Not only did society regulate marriages and spousal selections, but it also put many pressures on the clear division of labor and the strict gender roles deemed appropriate for men and women. We already know that men were responsible for everything outside of the home, and women were responsible for everything inside of it, but what exactly did men of the elite class do? One of the most honored and respectable things was to pass the civil service examinations and acquire an official post. However, this often took men into the public domain, where women did not belong. In stories like “The Story of Ying-ying,” the classic scholar love story ensues; the young man, Chang, falls in love with a girl named Ying-ying. They engage in a close relationship, but when he has to take his examinations, abandons her, and does not return. (Chen, 1994: 851–253). His examinations take him away from their romantic tryst, but this again is not the man's fault. Society placed a great deal of pressure on men to pass the examinations successfully and

Chang was simply one of them. He did not *want* to leave Ying-ying. Through all these stories, we see how societal norms defined the actions that men carried out — forcing them to leave their loved ones regrettably. If this was the case in Tang reality, it is not surprising that the literati expressed these pitiful situations through literature.

Many of the societal norms that regulated marriages were based in Confucianism, which played a large role in suppressing love in men. “Confucianism stressed morality and duty to family and state. Love and desire were seen as dangerous temptations that could divert a man from his true ambitions and ideals and thus had the potential to ruin man and state” (Hsieh, 2008: 5). Since this was the view on love of this time, it is hard to imagine how love could ever delve to a deeper level. In fact, it was very difficult for women to enter the lives of men, as shown by fox fairy stories. Fox fairies appear to men in stories, seduce them, and sometimes even marry them, but whenever the men enter officialdom, the women revert back to their fox forms. In their fox forms, they return to the margins of society, harming no one (Hsieh, 2008: 97). In “Jen, the Fox Fairy,” for instance, a man named Cheng falls in love with a fox fairy named Jen, but when she accompanies him to his official post, she reverts back to fox form and is hunted down and killed by dogs (Yang and Yang, 1954: 6–16). This motif of fox fairies demonstrates that women could enter into only certain levels of the lives of men, but in the end, the woman need to fade away in order to avoid ruining the man. In this way, Confucianism limited how far desirable women could enter men’s lives. This concept also manifested itself in the form of civil service examinations as discussed before. In both cases, Confucianism does not allow women and state to mix at all, in order to protect the state and the man.

Men had no control over how far women could enter their lives, nor did they have much control over how much they expressed their emotions and pursued their desires. Due to Confucianism, though, men usually suppressed what they truly felt and rarely ever went after what they truly wanted, in terms of love. Confucianism stood for things that were correct, socially in order, and morally upright, while it was against indulgence, succumbing to temptations, or trivial things such as love and emotions. It argued that *qing* could be pushed aside for more important things such as filial piety, loyalty, hard work, etc. (Hsieh, 2008: 4). With these beliefs deeply woven into the fabric of their society, men were brought up learning to

suppress any trivial desires that they had, such as for love. In “The Dragon King’s Daughter,” Liu Yi rescues the princess and is then rewarded when her uncle offers her to Liu as his wife. Given the Confucian mindset, however, Liu turns down the offer with no hesitation and represses his desires for a relationship with her (Yang and Yang, 1954: 17–31). Liu acts in a way that is likely representative of the men at that time — strictly adhering to the Confucian values held by society. Society already limited their choices of those whom men could love, but especially because of Confucianism, men rarely pursued their desires. Instead, they knew their limits and stopped there. It is pitiful that men could not pursue for themselves what they really desired, and that its link to Confucianism ran too deep for men to run against it.

To summarize, men were limited by society and by their families, which were individual units of society. Society decided whom men could marry, based on class and other factors pertaining to family. Even when these factors showed no obvious conflict, men still weren’t allowed to choose their wives because that was arranged for them by their parents, whom they had to obey. Public officialdom and Confucianism also limited how deep their relationships with women could go and often just ended these or prevented them from happening. Fox fairy stories illustrate these limitations. With all these things in the way, the male literati of the time devised a way to escape from all this control: literature.

Transformations

In reality, men had deep desires for true and romantic love, but they were suppressed and prevented from becoming reality by society and its Confucian undertones. In literature, though, everything can be expressed and freely pursued, and so that is exactly what men did. They used literature as an escape from reality — a reality full of pressures, unattainable desires, and realistic limitations. As a channel of escape from the real world, literature allowed people to change miraculously from one extreme to another, in order to fit the mold of an acceptable and possible lover by society’s standards. In the familiar story “The Story of a Singsong Girl,” the female protagonist shifts dramatically from a femme fatale, who takes advantage of the man and takes all his money, to a nurturing and dutiful wife (Yang and Yang, 1954: 57–71). Although this would never happen in reality, it occurs in this story because the literati wished that a man could

find a woman who pleased him as much as singsong girls do, but would also help them in the home as well. It is their idea of a perfect life partner and, through literature, they express their desire for this impossible and fantastic transformation. Without this kind of transformation, the lasting relationship would be impossible, and no happy ending would be reached. Either the man would have entered public officialdom, leaving the singsong girl behind, or the relationship would not have got as far as it did, since their social statuses did not match.

Another instance in which a miraculous transformation takes place is in “The Dragon King’s Daughter.” Liu Yi, the hero in the story, begins as a character with strict Confucian values, but changes over the course of the story to someone with Daoist tendencies and behaviors. After rescuing the Dragon King’s daughter, Liu is thanked with a banquet and is offered her hand in marriage, but his Confucian conscience suppresses his true desire and he firmly refuses the offer. However, by the end of the story, the girl returns to find him and they leave the world for another where they enjoy their love freely (Yang and Yang, 1954: 17–31). Unlike Confucianism, Daoism stressed natural longings and transcending one world to enter another (Hsieh, 2008: 180). In the story, it is clear from the ending that Liu finally accepts his natural longing for the girl and gives in to his feelings, following them into another world. As Confucian limitations became too overbearing, literature slowly started shifting towards more Daoist goals, where suppressing desires is not as important as realizing that desires are a natural part of human beings. Only in this mindset could “happy endings” exist and allow two lovers to escape to another world.

Conclusion

Very few happy endings, or *tuanyuan*, exist in literature of this period, probably revealing its rarity in reality as well. The only happy endings occurring in literature involved two lovers escaping the world, which is ironic because their story is already an escape from the real world of the authors. Therefore, the rest of the endings were unfortunate — for both genders. It was without a doubt, difficult for women to survive under the conditions of a male-dominated society and the courtesan culture, but even so, there should also be an acknowledgment of the men’s struggles. Men could not find or have true love because romance was not a part of their arranged marriages, which were regulated by society. However, if they did find a femme fatale to love,

their Confucian consciences prevented them from pursuing anything long-term or serious. Even if a man did pass through all of these obstacles to be with a woman he loved, his family or public officialdom could easily force him to leave. Some sympathy should be spared for these men who can never get true love; they can get physical, emotional, and romantic love from courtesans and extramarital affairs while they also get dutiful and obedient wives. Although it may seem like the best of both worlds, it is sad that their desire to have one entity with all aspects of love combined could never be met. Ultimately, the attainment of finding true love for men, and a “happy ending” for all was inevitably out of the question in the Tang dynasty. It existed only in literature.

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Magical Weapons, Adorable Exotica:
Imperial Fetishism in a Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel

by

Yuanfei Wang

This discussion concerns the Ming dynasty novel *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三保太監西洋記通俗演義, or *The Adventures of Eunuch Sao Bao in the West Ocean*, written by an obscure author named Luo Maodeng 羅懋登 and dating most likely to 1568. True to its title, the novel deals with an historical event that took place some one hundred years previously, when Admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433) explored the Indian Ocean and the southeastern Asian countries, from the third year of the Yongle reign 永樂 (1405) to the twenty-eighth year of the Xuande 宣德 reign (1433). As the last two lines of the prologue lyric state, “Now my gray hair is nine thousand meters long, but I still remember eunuch San Bao’s expeditions into the Western Ocean.”¹ 而今白髮三千丈，還記得年來三寶太監下西洋，² the literary and fictive assimilation of the historical incident formulates a retrospective narrative on the myth of the Chinese treasure fleets’ odysseys for mercantile and political purposes.

The novel’s linear and sequential description of the Chinese armada’s maritime arrivals and departures from one foreign state to another resembles an imaginary journey sojourning in an archipelago of exotic cities and towns. The armada has been to eighteen major countries and a variety of minor states and villages in the *xifan* 西番 region, called in the novel “the Western Continent of Ox” 西牛賀州, following faithfully the historical itineraries of Zheng He’s thirty-some stops in

¹ All translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise noted.

² See Luo Maodeng 羅懋登, *San Bao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義 (Beijing: Wenlian chubanshe, 1998), p.1.

the Indian Ocean. The furthest places the fleets have been are the seaports Hormuz and Aden on the Persian Gulf and the littoral city Mecca on the Red Sea.³ Some other countries, such as the Country of Women 女兒國 and the Country of Silver Eyes 銀眼國, are fabricated.⁴

Upon almost every landing, a war will be initiated between the aboriginal and the Chinese, both of whom implement magical weapons and devices in their campaigns. Victory unexceptionally goes to the Chinese, with the indigenous rulers then offering precious tributes and a written statement of submission, and acknowledging the Chinese emperor as the predominant ruler in the world. The fundamental source of power of the invincible army lies in its ability to grasp objects, in particular to discern, employ, and procure “treasure” or *baobei* 寶貝, and it is this ability that powers the warships across the tempestuous ocean. It is therefore crucial to diagnose the conspicuous notion of “treasure” in the fictional narrative, since it is the hinge of the dialogical confrontation between the imperial China as the subject and her aliens as the object. Fundamentally, it poses questions about what is an object and whether and why a subject such as an empire needs objectification.

The English word “treasure” designates material valuables: “wealth or riches stored or

³ The thirty-one cities are: Campapura (佔城國 or 金蓮寶象國 in the novel), Panduranga (賓童龍國), Siam (暹羅國 or 儼斛國), Pulo Condore (崑崙山), Java (爪哇國), Jangala (重迦羅), Timor (吉裏地悶國), Palembang (舊港國 or 渤淋國), Pulau Aur (東西竺), Mait (麻亦凍), Malacca (滿葛刺國), Aru (啞魯國), Sumatra (蘇門答臘國), Nakur or Battak (那孤兒國), Deli (黎代國), Lambri (南淳里國), Maldives (溜山國), Silan (錫蘭國), Calicut (古里國), Kulam (小葛蘭國), Big Kulam (大葛蘭國), Cochin (柯枝國), Hormuz (忽魯謨斯國), Aden (阿丹國), Mecca (天方國 or 默伽). See Fei Xin 費信, Ma Huan 馬歡, *Sanshi bianliao: Xingcha shenglan, Yingya shenglan, Gaizheng Yingya shenglan* 三史編料星槎勝覽瀛涯勝覽改正瀛涯勝覽 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju youxian gongsi 1967).

⁴ The fantasized countries to the best of my knowledge are: the Country of Women (女兒國), the Country of Golden Eyes (金眼國), Baida State (白達國), Wusili State (勿斯裏國), Jicini State (吉慈尼國), Maliban State (麻裏板國), Lifa State (黎伐國), Safa State (撒髮國), Xigela State (吸葛刺國), Mugu State (木骨國), the Country of Silver Eyes (銀眼國), and the Infernal Hell (艷都鬼國).

accumulated, esp. in the form of precious metals; gold or silver coin; hence in general, money, riches, wealth” (*OED* “treasure” 1.a). The Chinese word *baobei*, originally signifying “rarely seen seashells,” implies a person/subject’s perception and emotion on the object — the object is particularly endearing and rare to the viewer. Hence it seems that the idea of “treasure” in the Chinese language is already imbued with subjective feelings. Three categories of things are called *baobei* in the novel: the magical weapons; the foreign indigenous products exchanged as tributes, and the two cultural political antiques: an imperial jade seal and a courtesan’s jade paperweight. I accordingly construct a model for the imperial system that consists of the triadical categories. In this model, the jade seal and the paperweight represent the autonomous and self-enclosed imperial subjectivity, the exotica embody the external other, and the weapons are the mediating means for the imperial absorption of foreign territory.

This new three-fold fictional model of imperialism has its roots in the historical controversy of Zheng He’s maritime expeditions. First is the public opinion circulated in Luo Maodeng’s time, evidenced in the miscellaneous writings of the literati such as Gu Qiyuan 顧起元 (1565–1628) and Yan Congjian 嚴從簡, that commented negatively on the emperors’ greed in collecting *baowan* 寶玩, or treasure toys from the Western ocean, at exorbitant prices. Second, the scarcity of historical documents, which is attributed to intentional destruction and unintentional slackness in preservation, blurs the clarity of the historical reality.⁵ Zheng He’s assistants’ travelogues — Ma Huan 馬歡’s *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽, Fei Xin 費信’s *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽, and Gong Zhen 鞏珍’s *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志 — could have been the major textual resources and guides to Luo Maodeng’s fictional composition. Their records of local geography, religions, languages, technologies, calendars, food, costumes, earthly products, penalty, social customs, and, especially, international trade, cargo goods, currency, and the states’ commercial and tributary relationship with China, are incorporated into the fictional space. However, these written data are condensed and relatively confined from the major elaborative and imaginative narrative of the individualistic battles characterized with oral performance. Seen

⁵ For further discussion of the documentation of and controversy regarding Zheng He and his treasure fleets, see Chan Hok-lam, “The Eunuch Connection: Some Reflections on Zheng He’s Maritime Expeditions to the Western Oceans, 1405–1433,” *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu suo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報, 2008:48, pp.166–169.

in this light, Luo Maodeng’s invention of the imperial jade seal, the paperweight, and the magical weapons functions to legitimize and reconstruct the historic event with minimum documentation of the exotic information, an event whose reoccurrence after a hundred years in the Wanli reign was already out of the question. Thereby, the tentative questions concerned in this paper tackle the problem of how such narrative wallow in exotic and magical objects relates to the absence of the jade seal and in what way this absence might or might not be compensated by equivalent things.

1. The Sinocentric World System

The system of the world, the only cosmos to be imagined, its creation, structure, and elements, is first delineated in bi-syllable linguistic forms in the preamble of the novel.

粵自天開於子，便就有個金羊、玉馬、金蛇、玉龍、金虎、玉虎、金鴉、鐵騎、蒼狗、鹽螭、龍纏、象緯、羊角、鶉精，漉漉醺醺、攘攘稜稜。(1)

Ever since the heaven was created at the *zi* moment, there have been a gold Goat, a jade Horse, a gold Snake, a jade Dragon, a gold Tiger, a jade Tiger, a gold Crow, an iron Horse, a white Dog, a *chi* Dragon, an intertwining Dragon, an Elephant, a Goat Horn, a Red Phoenix. The universe was wet, murky, damp, and freezing.

The various ideas of the beasts in the terms translated above are normally interpreted as the nomenclature of astronomy in ancient China. The Goat, the Horse, the Snake, the Dragon, the Tiger are listed in the order that remind us of the twelve animal zodiacal signs (*shengxiao* 生肖), representing the twelve Earthly Branches, referring to the Chinese conception of time. The Elephant signifies a wide range of heavenly bodies including the sun and the moon. The gold Crow and the white Dog both refer to the sun. The peculiar wordplay of listing different phrases to signify the same heavenly body highlights the origins of using traditional animal images in the Chinese ancestors’ attempt to identify and articulate astronomical phenomena. It also seems that the phrases that turn the disembodied cosmos into specific commonplace images take on a

semantic urgency to comprehend the universe through the *object* agents, as opposed to the human agents.

Then a mixture of geographical, political, and religious signifiers of the world are thrown together and arranged numerically by the digits shown in the phrases: Three Altars 三社 and the Three Interiors 三内 fix the space of the ruler. Ten Bounds 十望 and Ten Tights 十緊 refer to the ten administrative zones in the political map of the Tang 唐 dynasty. Four Boundaries 四履 reflects the limits of four directions. Four Ethnicities 四裔, Five Garments 五服, and Six Barbarians 六狄 categorize aliens. Three Bounds 三界 indicates the realms of ghosts, men, and gods. This cluster of nomenclatures with its use of numbers from one to ten imprints a familiar textual world of totality, the sphere that excludes the *terra incognita*.

This idealistic Sino-vision of the cosmos or *tianxia* 天下 through the mediation of commonplace images and their semantic terms contrasts with the tributary system embodied by the exotic beasts paid by the foreign ambassadors to the Chinese emperor. Assuming that the world is an expanding flatland rather than a globe, the Sinocentric tributary system resembles a satellite, in which a variety of noted kingdoms surrounding China from four directions serves as the reference points in mapping out the spatial dimension of this network, with abundant nondescript states dispersed around the domains. Hamashita observes that this satellite tributary system existed in history (Frank 114). The exotic animals that characterize the regions of their origins proffers information from the unknown space for the Chinese emperor whose steps are presumably never beyond the royal palace. The narrator counts the rare species brought by the big foreign nations one by one clockwise in terms of their relative geographical locations in reference to China proper: Hormuz offers a pair of dark blue lions, Khmer brings four white elephants; Samarkand (the second largest city in Uzbekistan) delivers ten purplish scarlet horses with black mane and tail (*ziliu ma* 紫溜馬); the Tatars give twenty ibexes; and the Ryukyu Islands pay a pair of white parrots.

However, the euphoria of the greatly pleased emperor is immediately dispelled by the loss of a unique jade seal whose political value far exceeds the exotica. Brought into being by the first Chinese emperor and passed down to generations of kings from Han 漢 to Yuan 元, the royal jade seal was taken outside China's borders by the last emperor of Yuan, who vanished on a

white elephant in the western region while escaping pursuing generals. Seeking the tremendously important imperial seal thus ratifies the Chinese warships’ incursions into foreign territory.

The relationship between the Chinese jade seal and the exotic objects recapitulates the duality of the Sino-center and the periphery other in the imperial world system. The emperor’s inscribed signature as the commonplace emblem of central political power symbolizes the dominant subject since its value lies in its political hallmark rather than in its craftsmanship. To look for the seal is hence to look for the “true” identity and subjectivity of the encroaching imperialism. The Chinese phrase *xiaoxi* 倣璽 (hand in the jade seal), commonly used ever since the Spring and Autumn period, conveys the meaning that the lesser states surrender their own seals to prostrate themselves in front of the more powerful state. The seal’s inscription, “receiving the mandate from Heaven, prosperity and longevity are perennial” 受命于天富壽永昌 (82), asserts the Chinese emperor as the son of the Heaven and thus the sanctioned ruler of his land, even though the phrases sound completely customary and clichéd. The tributes, on the other hand, epitomize the lesser states’ sign of political respect, allegiance, and submission to the suzerain state. Tracing the royal jade seal lost by the Mongolian emperor and collecting the tributes from the Southeast Asian nations fit perfectly into the framework by which the Chinese empire intended to retrieve and re-consolidate the subjects of its empire, following the Mongolian usurpation of them.

However, the conflation of the two goals, obtaining the seal and gaining the tributes that imply the political goal, is never realized in the fictional reality but rather is rendered as problematically ambiguous. The forever-missing jade seal brings into sharp relief the split of the autonomous subject and the object conjoint together in the imperial model. The idea that the “supreme treasure” is the ability to restore the unified and autonomously controlled empire, embodied in the missionary slogan “*fuyi qubao*” 撫夷取寶 (conquering the barbarians and seizing the Chinese jade seal) cannot be realized; it can only be translated into the other stated goal, i.e., the “treasure tributes” and the “treasure weapons.” Although the theoretical presence of the jade seal demands in great anxiety the imperial subjectivity, the seal’s physical absence implies that such internality depends on the externality. The narrative penchant for the magical

and technological weapons further highlights the objects as the site of envisioning an imperial world system.

2. Treasure Weaponry

At this point I will analyze two episodes in the novel by concentrating on the notion of treasure weaponry to approach the subject-object relationships. The first story is about a cross-cultural combat based on two parties' different conceptions of objects. The second story tells how an object assumes its autonomy turning into a subject. Altogether the two incidents summarize three aspects of the “treasure weapons”: magic, technology, and the subject/owner's social relations.

Instead of concentrating on characterizing the fighters, the narrator takes great interest in individualizing their military equipment. Every weapon is the unique signature of its owner. From the names of the arms such as the Magical Spear of Nine Meters 丈八神枪 and the Sword with Phoenix and Swan Feathers 綉鳳雁翎刀, one can immediately relate them to their only user. All the faith that the characters have in their personal weapons labels them as “treasure” and makes them part and parcel of their possessors. To defeat a rival is therefore to destroy his weapon. As a Chinese soldier brags, “He claims that his weapon is a treasure, we then must ruin his treasure” 他說道是個寶貝，我們偏要壞他的寶貝 (222). Nonetheless, the characters' attachment to their military apparatus corresponds to the devastating power and magic innate in the materiel. A pair of swords can fly like shooting stars; a bell can sabotage human bowels; a monastery receptacle can contain all the water of the sea, and a flag can overthrow the cosmos.

The story tells that Campapura is no different from China in terms of moral and ethnic values and ideologies. With the advent of the treasure fleet to Campapura, a few local spies are dispatched to investigate the army's configuration. Upon hearing the incredible strength of their leaders, Daoist Heaven Master Zhang 張天師 and the monk of Gold Blue Peak 金碧峰和尚, the barbarian king 番王 postulates, “Since they are men out of the family, beyond the three boundaries, outside the five phases, how can they be fierce in battle?” 他既是個出家人，已超三界外，不在五行中，他有個甚麼本領高強 (216)? But he is panicked when he learns that the Daoist is the Heaven Master and the monk is the state advisor of the emperor of the world, Khan,

tiankehan 天可汗 (216). Like a Chinese ruler, the barbarian king can differentiate what lies inside and outside in terms of territorial division and ideology. Although a religious believer like the Daoist or the Buddhist disavows the mundane world and hence should no longer be considered a menace to any polity and nationality, the king knows about a much larger yet unifying world beyond any such diversity. It is the heaven that eventually rules everybody, everything, and every society on earth. Campapura, like China, not only worships heaven, but also the Khan. The name that signifies the ruler of all national and ethical states was historically employed by the Northwestern aboriginal tribes on the borders to address the emperor Taizong 太宗 of the Tang dynasty, and was famously used by the Mongolian emperors.

While the king still hesitates, considering surrender, his intrepid third prince, no less than a filial Confucian son and a loyal subject, goes out to defend his people. His subject, Old Star Jiang 姜老星, pledges to defeat the Chinese with the Halberds with a Painted Pole 畫桿方天戟, a fantasy weapon that appears in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三國演義, in which Lü Bu 呂步 famously utilized it. That the celebrated Chinese weapon can effortlessly sweep across the national boundary to fight against the country of its origin without being berated as a “traitor” demonstrates the wider latitude objects have than do human beings. In the battlefield, it is also the heavy clubs that are most fatal to the fighters. After a Chinese general arranges his soldiers into a matrix to encircle Old Star Jiang, he proclaims that his halberd will compensate for his ignorance in unraveling the matrix and endow him with triumph. He ejects the Flying Dagger of Nine Blades 九口飛刀 at once to repel the attacks and flees. Similar tricks succeed several times until the military champion Tang Ying 唐英 shoots the dagger down with an arrow. Old Star Jiang thinks to himself, “The barbarian with a dagger is still inferior to the Chinese with none” 夷狄之有刀不如諸夏之無也 (230). The parody imitates the famed sentence from the *The Analects* 論語, “Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them” 夷狄之有君不如諸夏之亡也 (19). Replacing the “dagger” with the “ruler,” the parody subverts the subject and highlights the power of weaponry, and objectifying the aliens in turn strengthens the superiority of China as the “true” supreme subject.

The point of the episode is precisely concerned with differentiating the Chinese from the aliens by means of their dissimilar treatments of objects. The duel comes such that Tang Ying

and Old Star Jiang each shoot out three arrows towards the other party to determine the winner. Old Star Jiang is able to bring down Tang Ying's three arrows by the force of his eyes, the act of which is comic. Pretending that every Chinese soldier has known this technique since childhood, Tang Ying brags that his first arrow can make the heaven cry. Astonished at this unknown skill, Old Star Jiang promises to yield if a further demonstration proceeds. Shooting a specially made arrow called *putou jian* 扑头箭 or “jumping head arrow,” whose abrasion through the air produces a stentorian sound, Tang Ying plays a trick that dumbfounds Old Star Jiang, who believes that it is a real scream from heaven. While he is still staring upwards at the sky, his head is scooped off.

The narrator describes Old Star Jiang as a barbarian who still has some “childishness” 稚氣. Childishness literally means a simple and straightforward way of thinking as opposed to the cunning manner promoted in basic Chinese military theory in *The Art of War*: “All warfare is based on deception” 兵者詭道也 (66). His downfall is not imputed simply to his naivety and gullibility, but more pointedly to his dependence on objects, especially his faith in the magic of objects. His herald, his dagger, and the arrow are all truly *fetishized*. *Oxford English Dictionary* has the following definition for the word “fetish”:

- a. Originally, any of the objects used by the Negroes of the Guinea coast and the neighbouring regions as amulets or means of enchantment, or regarded by them with superstitious dread.
- b. By writers on anthropology used in a wider sense: An inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples on account of its supposed inherent magical powers, or as being animated by a spirit. (OED, “fetish” I: a, b)

The English word “fetish” created by Western anthropologists to indicate the Oriental primitive people's enchantment with the innate power of material things, which is different from the usual concepts of commodities and idolatry, seems itself already to mark the incomprehensibility of the phenomenon from a cross-cultural view. Anthropologist William Pietz summarizes this as, to depend on the “material things” is to invalidate the autonomy of the individual. Tang Ying's quickly made-up lie about a magical arrow registers him as the individual disengaged from

materialization. The childish Old Star Jiang, on the contrary, is not a self-sufficient individual.

Moreover, William Pietz notes that the concept of the fetish is a concept developed on the boundaries of capitalism since an individual refuses to rely on external objects.⁶ Whether or not capitalism is the causality of the two fictional parties’ different epistemological views towards objects is an indecisive but haunting factor in this paper, but the trans-cultural phenomenon signals that the Chinese hold a more technological and scientific perception towards objects than contemporary aliens. Further, Karl Marx’s commodity fetishism also suggests that merchandise out in the marketplace can alienate the users from their social relationships. Old Star Jiang’s temporary amnesia regarding his role in the battle — he is supposed to shoot rather than to let his inimical rival shoot the extraneous fourth arrow — is derived from his holding onto the object. Tang Ying’s comprehension of his opponent’s vulnerability, evidenced in his audacious move, suggests that his success is based on his knowledge and acknowledgement of three aspects of the object: the object as a technological thing; the object impregnated with magical power, and the object alienating the subject from its social relations.

The object replete with a new concept of “magic” by means of technology and commercialization is as threatening as the overarching imperialism. The narrative continues as Old Star Jiang’s filial daughter Gold Fix Jiang 姜金定 comes to avenge his death. She takes out four flags to effectuate consecutively a mountain maze, an ocean, a dark forest, and a fire pit to enmesh four Chinese generals. Unable to decipher these tricks, the soldiers inquire for solution from Heaven Master Zhang. On his altar lies a small book containing a list of the names of all kinds of gods and demons whose territory extends over China’s border provinces, such as Guangxi 廣西 and Chaoyang 潮陽. Being asked whether he administers foreign demons (*haiwai yaonie* 海外妖邪), the Master answers that “connecting to the heaven and reaching the earth, exiting from the darkness and entering the infernal, how is that I do not take care of the overseas” 通天達地出幽入冥豈有海外不管之理 (244)? Hence he calls upon Guangong 關公,

⁶ Peter Stallybrass has incorporated Pietz’s theory into his analysis of the transformation of English cultural view of things from feudal to modern times. See “The Value of Culture and the Disavowal of Things,” *Culture of Capital: Property, Cities, and Knowledge in Early Modern England*, ed. Henry S. Turner (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 275–292.

the god of warfare and universal justice, to help save the four generals from the entrapments. The foreign space is thus again asserted as being embedded within the all-encompassing framework of the cosmos.

One of the four traps is a hollow rock whose existence predates the chrysalis of the cosmos. An otherworldly object of Gold Fix Jiang’s teacher Goat Horn Moral Immortal (*yangjiao daode xianjun* 羊角道德仙君), who was conceived inside and born synchronically with the universe, the rock is detached from the Chinese macrocosm, resembling nothing on earth. By contrast, in *Journey to the West* 西遊記, the rock from which the Monkey King was born belongs to this world, because his birth is the result of having absorbed natural energy for millions of years. The curious existence of the otherworldly rock and Goat Horn Moral Immortal are further played out in their paralleled images — one of his disciples is named Maw (*wudi dong* 無底洞), for his birthplace is a boundless grotto in Singapore (*Longya men* 龍牙門) (256). The disciple named by an object/location is no more than an external organ and further identity of his mentor. They both pose questions about boundary: whether there are some spaces and some things that the imperial power cannot reach.

In order to make the Chinese yield, Goat Horn Moral Immortal transforms Maw into a blue-faced, red-haired, bucktoothed fiend of three heads and four arms, because he believes it necessary to send a harbinger of bizarre appearance to appall the enemy (256). The colloquial phrases used to describe his look, such as *guguai* 古怪 and *qiqiao* 蹊蹺, convey the sense of eccentricity and abnormality. Originally, the description of the Singaporean sounds completely like the Chinese — “he was three *chi* tall, his bangs reached the eyebrows, his cleverness was unmatched, and his manners were proper” 身長三尺髮長齊眉聰俊無雙舉止端重 (256). But he is turned into an outlandish piece of work for the purpose of defamiliarization, the effect being to differentiate the two parties in the arena. Though his strange looks indeed horrify the opponent viewers, he appears excessive in front of the Heaven Master. “If I say you are a human, you are not like a human; if I say you are a god, you are not like a god; if I say you are a demon, you are not like a demon either” 好說道你是個人你又不像個人好說道你是個神你又不像個神好說道你是個鬼你又不像個鬼 (277). Thus he calls him “no-name ghost” (*wuming gui* 無名鬼) (277), lashing him with an iron ferule.

What is lacking in this exceptional ghost is precisely aura. Earlier, a short conversation regarding the earthly statues in a temple is conducted. Zheng He, puzzled at the demonic looks of the deities of three heads and six arms, a blue face, buckteeth, red mustache, and scarlet hair, inquires why these ugly-looking figures can be made into gods but the current day’s handsome men cannot. An official explains that it is the “heart” that matters. Ancient people have a demonic appearance but a human heart (*shoumian renxin* 獸面人心), but modern people, on the contrary, have a human face and a devil heart. “Human heart,” in the orthodox Confucian meaning of benevolence or humanity, seems to explain why, beneath the surface of Maw, there is no aura.

Defamiliarization, according to the Russian School Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, is about making things strange, different from what is familiar and known. He writes, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known.... Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important” (Cuddon 213). The evident artfulness or magic, seen in Maw as devoid of sublimity and divinity (which is represented as having four arms rather than six arms of deities), is artificial and superficial, a mere mechanical technique, rather than having the real aura that is gained through obtaining the proper Way in the Chinese universe. Goat Horn is thus signified as outside of that cosmos.

Besides his artifice, Maw, with his magical devices, especially the stone as his otherworldly identity, must be destroyed. His four weapons stolen from the heaven, i.e., a sword, a flag that can summon souls, a bottle that can both absorb and melt human bodies, and a mirror that reveals a person’s true self are gravitated to the Treasure Gathering Basin 聚寶盆 lent by Goat Horn’s teacher in heaven, the Primary Heavenly Honorable 元始天尊. Though it is a very mundane folk artifact in the marketplace, symbolizing wealth and prosperity, the Treasure-Gathering Basin in the narrative is capable of pulling to it all magical weapons. In its gravitation, the legendary stone undergoes a strange mutation described thus: “one saw that flame was bursting and burning all over the rocky loop. Pop! It broke into two halves” 只見井圈兒渾身火爆撲的一聲響響做了兩半個 (295). It is striking to see how a transcendent piece of solid crude rock whose value lies precisely inside itself, can be vulnerable and volatile, divested of aura so effortlessly, breaking into halves of a worthless ring-shaped stone.

The Goat Horn's return to his Daoist teacher and Maw's continuing study of Daoism ensure that they will become ordained in the Chinese temple. In addition, the weapons stolen from the heavenly storage house are quintessentially Chinese images. The mirror *de facto* refers to the Chinese vision of history that can reflect truth; the jug appears in *Journey to the West*, the sword and the flag are hackneyed Daoist tools. Furthermore, the mystical boundless cave in Singapore that marks the being of Maw is shown to be also a metaphor for his insatiable appetite for carnal pleasure and material gain, when Maw confesses his past as “a stealer of money and happiness” (298). The Treasure-Gathering Basin, a popular cultural image displayed in the marketplace, counterbalances the materialistic self of Maw. The cross-cultural magical combat is only remembered as a short-lived carnival of masquerades whose backdrop is but a corner in the marketplace with a painted façade of a Neverland.

In the first story, the narrative promise and its subsequent eradication of another world are conducted through transformation between the ethereal magic and the malleable materiality, demonstrating the subjugation of the transcendent and mystified by way of artifice, technology, and secularism. In the second story, on the contrary, the weapon is charged with the invincible magic/power of the subjective will.

In this episode, instead of the aboriginal tribe mirroring the Chinese, it is the Chinese who imitate the barbarians on Java Island. When the armada lands on Java Island, they learn that its nickname, Country of Ghosts (*guizi guo* 鬼子國) is imputed to a historical flesh-eating demon of red hair and blue face. What's worse, a Chinese traitor named Xie Wenbing 謝文彬, who acts as the military general in Java, has slaughtered a Chinese emissary to Sanfoqi 三佛齊 and 170-some servants of a Chinese mission en route to the Eastern Kingdom 東國. Enraged, the Chinese determine on revenge by executing a comparable massacre and cannibalism.

The Java general Gnash Sea Dry (Yaohaigan 咬海干) sends out millions of sea eels to attack the fleet, but the crew bombs the Java boats. Unlike the Red Cliff battle in *Romance of the Three Kingdom* 三國演義, in which fire is the best strategy for a combat on the river, flames do not cause a calamity, because the islanders are good swimmers. Then, fearing that they are their ships are going to sink because of leaks below the waterline, the Chinese manufacture two types of weapons, namely, seventy-two Subduing-Tiger-Vanquishing-Dragon-Eight-Hook Iron

Pawls 俘虎降龍八爪抓 of great flexibility in extending and folding, and the Aqua Mice 水老鼠, underwater ordnance that can chase their targets. Five hundred Javanese swimmers are killed. In triumph, the Chinese slaughter and cook the flesh of three thousand soldiers from the island. Apparently, very practical and highly technological military instruments can greatly enhance the image of an empire.

The Chinese expertise in military weaponry contrasts with the indigenous folks’ strength in witchcraft. The narrative continues: Gnash Sea Dry asks Witch Wang 王神姑 for help. Like Old Star Jiang, Witch Wang promises, relying on her faith in her equipment: “Assisted by my horse running like lightening and wind, assisted by my sword flying like the sun and the moon, even across the vast West Ocean, I will make a road through; even if there is a silver mountain of iron fruits, I will thrust through” 憑著我坐下的閃電追風馬，憑著我手裡的雙飛日月刀，饒他就是西洋大海，我也要蕩開他一條大路；饒他就是鐵果銀山，我也要戳透他一個通明 (360). In her rivalry with Wolf Teeth Zhang 張狼牙, she creates many illusory selves to bewitch him. Many times he thinks he has decapitated her, but the head turns out to be either an earthen statue or a trunk root. The dramatic moment comes with the appearance of seventy-two identical Witch Wangs, the number of which corresponds with the seventy-two Iron Pawls.

The encircling, bewildered audience debates whether the women are real or not. Two officials with a spear poke the legs of a couple to test whether they have flesh-and-blood bodies: they both bleed; a connoisseur of antiques sings a love song to test their romantic desire, since that is part of being human: all seventy-two react passionately. Neither standard the audience applies to the women can accurately testify, however, that the seventy-two women/objects are human beings/subjects, underscoring the deficiency of such criteria for identifying an individual, a unified and self-enclosed self.

Nevertheless, one contrast should be noted. Whereas the officials suppose that only one is possibly real, the connoisseur of antiques proposes the possibility that all the seventy-two women are authentic. His sensitive response makes the seventy-two identical women a metaphor for the commercialization of works of art in early modern China — mass production, in fact. Lothar Ledderose notes that instead of losing its aura during mechanical production, as observed by the Western thinker Walter Benjamin, the Chinese works of art, through the process of a modular

system in which motifs and brush strokes are reproduced, means the return of individualistic creativity and spontaneity. The idea of valuing every piece of art deserves more consideration, for it seems to point to another estranged world where each member of an identical population are considered real.

The possibility of this wonderland where everything is physically and mentally identical is confirmed in the words of the seventy-two Witch Wangs:

You Chinese within five hundred years gave birth to seventy-two sages; we Western ocean dwellers do not read and do not understand the principles, so within five hundred years, we seventy-two female warriors came into being. Your seventy-two sages gathered together to follow Confucius's teaching; we seventy-two female warriors are born from the same egg. You and we follow the same principle.

彼此你中國五百年生出七十二個賢人；我西洋不讀書，不知道理，五百年就生出我們七十二個女將。彼此你中國七十二賢人，聚在一人門下；我西洋七十二女將，出在一個胞胎。彼此俱是一理。(379)

“The same principle” shared between the two societies indicates the existence of a universalism, such as the search for a presumed universal measurement of the individual. In this case, the universal rule is that seventy-two talents will be born to every society in every five hundred years. The figure 72, as an auspicious number, seems to have teleological repercussions in the world history, as Victor Mair demonstrates (70–72), but this universal number cannot prevent these women from spontaneously considering themselves as external others who are inferior to and different from the Chinese subject, evidenced by the contrast between them as mere physical entities and the Confucian apotheoses produced through intellectual cultivation.

However, such a wonderland is denied once again. The women warriors are all paper cuts out of Witch Wang's sleight of hand. She consequently puts Heaven Master Zhang under her spell, and he finds himself hanging on a precipice, grabbing a vine where two mice are gnawing at the wood, and four dragons and three snakes underneath are emitting venom, awaiting for him

to fall into their open mouths. This perilous setting, originating in *Aesop's Fables* and the Dunhuang 敦煌 transformation text *Sutra of the King of Law* 法王經, soon fades from the stage, when Witch Wang collapses under the successively heavier beads of that *deus ex machina*, the Buddhist necklace.

The idea of the magic weapon bound up with his owner/subject is highlighted by the Heaven Master's monastery bowl. Learning that the Chinese have eaten human flesh, the Fire Mother 火母 is convinced to let out fire dragons to ambush the treasure fleet. Flame domes the earth, evaporating all seawater; the Cloak of the Dark Lady of Nine Heavens 九天玄女罩 confines the Heaven Master. But soon the Gold Blue Peak Monk releases him and constrains the Fire Mother with his monastery bowl. This bowl, so familiar a Buddhist device to a Chinese reader, becomes an unmovable and impermeable entity. Unable to move it herself, Witch Wang's teacher Old Mother of Li Mountain 驪山老母 travels to many places on another continent *Nanshan buzhou* 南膳部州 to invite the unicorn, the dragons, Aqua Spirit 水母, and all kinds of legendary immortals such as Chen Zhuan 陳搏 and the Eight Immortals 八仙 for help, but no one succeeds. Only after the Old Mother of Li Mountain declares she will yield is the bowl lifted.

Both the beaded necklace and the bowl are unique, charged with invincible power, representing their owner, the Heaven Master, and by implication, the empire. The story begins with a Chinese betrayal and ends with a barbarian betrayal; the karmic retribution is thus made even. Witch Wang is cut into pieces, and a spy is disguised as her to convince the Java king and the officials to submit to China. Witch Wang is forever remembered as a traitor because people believe that she can be resurrected, using her powerful talisman. The importance of her individuality, her essence of being, being differentiated from her many counterfeits, is obviated, since it eventuates that it is real and natural for the characteristics of such an exotic self to be assumable. It is expected that another physical entity always can act like her, be her, and make the narrative continue to a satisfactory denouement.

Indeed, in this strange overseas space, what is privileged are the Chinese military strategies, physical features, civilized demeanors, Chinese gender hierarchy, Confucian philosophy of humanity, erudition, and divination. It is the typical practice of an imperial nation to imagine itself to be the ideal model to which all others should conform. “Because the

imperialists universalize themselves, they regard any insurgency against them as necessarily provincial” (Said 128).

Nevertheless, a kind of universalism in terms of social relations eliminates the boundary between the individualistic empire and her unidentifiable doomed aliens. A circular and single world is evidenced in the Java islander’s association with all Chinese immortals and their equipment. Circulating the weapons/immortals helps the world in that good people are released from a Cosmos Bag 乾坤袋 borrowed from Buddha. The relater exclaims, “Now, the world finally has some good people, albeit a few. Otherwise, they are all lousy subjects and rotten sons, not loyal, not filial, more and more unlike a world” 到如今世界上才有好人，只是少些。不然卻都是些亂臣賊子，不忠不孝，愈加不成個世。 The world in this context signifies a unified community and society — that is why traitors figure prominently in the plot.

Both the incidents elucidate three facets of the treasure weaponry, i.e., magic, technology, and the subject/social relations, as the repercussion (or the causality) of the imperial world system. The mediating role that the weapons play suggests that the category is the fusion of the subject and the object. First, individuality as the *sine qua non* of the subject is channeled into every one-of-the-kind weapon, the external organ of its owner; second, the weapons are evaluated as priceless treasure and technological objects; third, the social-political inscribes its importance onto the body of the weapons. The volume of “magic” is subjective to the position of the owner in the Sino-centric imperial system. In this sense, the technological weapons and the extreme “magical” weapons function as the metonymy of the military power of the Chinese empire. Moreover, it seems that the incident concerning the empire’s massacre and cannibalism that has been recorded in history functions to rationalize its causality. That is, the brutality of the empire must be understood as an emulation or revenge of the original act of the other. Such self-objectification or re-presentation of the self illuminates the difficulty of separating the subjective motivation from the outer circumstances, and this passive self works well to legitimize the historical cannibalism. The weapons, hence, can be viewed as the site of testifying the unity of the social-political power and monetary profit, exemplified by the great luck of two merchants named One Thousand Name Harmony 千名和 and Ten Thousand Name Gathering 万名合. They are invited to obtain the Seven Star Flag and two other treasure weapons from the evil ones

because they are always lucky at earning money. The travelers/merchants have been successfully making money from every business, so much so that that they want to put their luck to the test by seeking a profitless business. However, their gains grow tenfold every time they try to sell normally undesirable merchandise. They vend caps in a scalding summer, but it happens that the place in which they are selling is suffering from a frost. They put *melaphis chinensis*, a Chinese medicine, on sale, but by coincidence the local families need it urgently to dye fabric into indigo to meet the demand of the royal court. Effortlessly, without exception, the treasure weapons, like money, flow into their hands. The weapons are equalized with lucrative things, showing not only that their value arises from conveying them a long distance, which can earn great profit — for if they stick to one place, such magic cannot happen, as Tina Lu observes⁷ — but that producing, manipulating, and obtaining the treasure weapons can accumulate great political power as well.

It is apparently a slanted heaven. As long as the treasure fleet continues cruising on the West Ocean, it is profit-bound.

3. Tributes

The treasure fleet collects tributes at its every stop. Tributes are a form of political commodity, since they are exchanged for political alliance and protection, as the means to link the local mini-systems to the larger imperial framework. Obsession with exotica blends the economical and political with the aesthetic. Such empathy with the exotic products is shown in Zheng He’s “whole-hearted delight” 滿心歡喜 (316) when reading the tributes’ names on the submission statement, evoked by his recognition of the “indigenous treasure” 道地寶貝 (316). Tributes and their signifiers hence work as the material and semantic sign of the political triumph. Obtaining these foreign things, even merely having their exotic names written on the submission letters, consolidates the imperial tributary system, a multi-cultural system maintained by way of the empire’s external connections.

Hence tributes in the novel represent at once the externality of the Chinese nation and the

⁷ Tina Lu also explores the relationship between space and profits in her book *Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism, and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center 2008).

internal network of the imperial world system. The tributes’ dual characteristics of externality and internality can be demonstrated first through the aesthetic exoticism and universalism and second through the commerce and the social-political in the novel. In comparison with the jade seal and the treasure weapons, the tributes are much more fetishized or animated because their exotic appearance stimulates sensuality empathized by the pressing imperial anxiety.

First, the tributes received in Campapura are the following: one Treasure Mother 寶母 (a gemstone that attracts other kinds of precious things when placed on the seashore on the fifteenth night of a month); a pair of Sea Mirrors 海鏡 (a kind of clamshell that accretes tiny red crabs, whose shells reflect the sunlight); four big Fire Pearls 大火珠 (a crystal ball used for making fire); ten Crystal Water Balls 澄水珠 (balls that can clean out murky water); two cold-defying rhinoceros horns 辟寒犀 (the golden horns, when placed on a gold plate, can emit heat); two quilts made of ivory, ten bolts of cloth made of Erythroxyton coca, a box of Strange South Incense 奇南香, a box of white crane incense 白鶴香 (its smoke can turn into a pair of white cranes shooting into the sky), a box of thousand steps herbs 千步草 (a strongly aromatic incense), a plate of chicken-tongue incense 雞舌香 (a kind of penetrating incense), a plate of Sea Jujubes 海棗 (trees resembling palm trees producing sweet fruits every five years), and a plate of How-So 如何 (trees that are like palm trees but produce fruits every nine hundred years) (316).

Besides the White Crane Incense, the How-So, and the Treasure Mother, which are fabricate by the author, the above exotica are real and can be found in other historical textual sources mostly composed in the Ming dynasty. Besides *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593), which records most of the above exotica, the Sea Mirror has an entry in *Lingbiao luyi* 嶺表錄異 in the Tang dynasty; the fire Pearls have an entry in *Bencao gangmu* and *Shuyu zhouzi lu* 殊域周諮錄 by Yan Congjian 嚴從簡 in the Ming. The Crystal Water Balls are recorded in *Dongxi yangkao* 東西洋攷 by Zhang Xie 張燮 (1574–1640). The cold-defying rhinoceros horns are widely noted since the Tang, in books such as *Yunxian zaji* 雲仙雜記 by Feng Zhi 馮贇 in the Tang and *Kaiyuan tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 by Wang Renyu 王仁裕 (879–956) in the Five Dynasties. The Sea Mirror, for instance, has an entry in *Bencao gangmu*:

It is named Mirror Fish, or named *suojie*, or named Medicine Cream Plate, born in the Southern Sea. It closes its two shells to form the shape. Its shells are as round as a mirror. What is inside is very clear and smooth. In the sunlight it looks like isinglass. Its tiny flesh inside is like that of clams. A worm lives in its belly, sized like a bean, shaped like a crab. When the Sea Mirror is hungry, it goes out to eat. After it returns, the Mirror is full too. *Suojie*, belly crabs, and *shuimu muxia* mentioned in “Rhapsody of Guo Pu” signify this creature.

一名鏡魚，一名瑣蜆，一名膏藥盤，生南海。兩片相合成形，殼圓如鏡，中甚瑩滑，映日光如雲母。內有少肉如蚌胎。腹有寄居蟲，大如豆，狀如蟹。海鏡饑則出食，入則鏡亦飽矣。《郭璞賦》雲瑣蜆腹蟹，水母目蝦，即此。

The novel says:

The Sea Mirror is like the Chinese clams. Inside its belly there is a small red crab. If the Sea Mirror is hungry, then the crab will go out to eat. After the crab is full and returns, the Sea Mirror is also full. Its shells can reflect sunlight. That is why it is called Sea Mirror.

海鏡如中國蚌蛤一般相似，腹中有一個小小的紅蟹子。假如海鏡饑，則蟹子出外拾食，蟹子飽歸到腹中，則海鏡亦飽。其殼光可射日，故此叫做海鏡。
(316)

The Sea Mirror signifies the original meaning of *baobei*: rarely-seen seashells. While the medical book’s list of the many names of the creature tries to relate it to familiar terms, the novel’s primary purpose is to estrange it, making it the foreign counterpart of the Chinese clams and mussels.

The exotic herbs, gemstones, incenses, and sea products possess extraordinary features that normal logic cannot find explanations for — a pearl that can create fire, a ball that can clean water, a horn that can warm up in the cold weather, a quilt made of ivory, and a chicken-tongue that is a kind of tree. These strange features contrast with the Chinese jade seal, a commonplace

object formed in the discourse of Chinese history. The aesthetic exoticism is channeled through the five senses: they are sparkling, blazing, translucent, polychromatic, fragrant, and infinite. In the discourse of aesthetic exoticism, phrases such as “crystal and adorable” 澄澈可愛, “warm and lovely” 暖氣烘人可愛, “the textures and colors are lustrously dazzling” 文采燁然, “every slice is aromatic” 片片是香, “the fragrance is smelt from a thousand steps afar” 香聞千步之遠, “every hair is perfumed” 毛髮俱是香的, indicate how the remarkably unusual sensual consumption of the foreign things could be relevant and familiar to the Chinese reader, channeling the universal and yet Sinicized parameter of aesthetic judgment.

Second, the tributes and the precious treasure serve as the metonymy of international commodity and social-political power, demonstrated by Zheng He’s penultimate stop at Aden 阿丹國. The story goes that, after the long voyage, the armada is out of silver and gold. Yellow Narcissus 黃鳳仙 hence pledges to Zheng He to get a million tales of silver. She makes an earth hill with yellow soil on the ships, draws a city gate on a paper and pastes it at the foot of the earthy hill, so that she is able to create an entrance into the treasure storage house of Aden and load the ship with mountains of bullions. But when she enters the storage house again, a group of inspectors come to look for the thief. She then hides in a porcelain jug and lies to them, saying that she is the Mother of Silver and Gold and hopes they will present her to China as part of the tribute. The king is awed by the fact that even the God of money will go to China. While a jar cannot talk and a person cannot be a jar, the animated porcelain amalgamates an apocryphal but assumable god of mines with a piece of Chinese commodity. The bizarre juxtaposition being returned back to China reminds us of the undeniable fact that the Chinese empire inevitably leverages the economy and politics of the rest of the world by her hegemony.

My claim is that these tributes and treasure function as the fetish par excellence in the early modern Chinese empire. Fetishizing these real or unreal exotica imply that things can transcend boundaries of time, numbers, and species. They are the index to infinity and the momentum promised by imperial hegemony and ambition.

4. The Paperweight and the Jade Seal

The endpoint of the maritime journey is the infernal hell in which reside all the Chinese

and foreign ghosts whose future is subject to the exclusive Buddhist rule of reincarnation. What the armada obtains in this backward-looking space is a jade paperweight in the shape of a lion 臥獅玉鎮紙, a love token given by the courtesan Xue Tao 薛涛 of the Tang 唐 dynasty to her lover Meng Qi 孟齊 following their poetry exchange. The King of Hells gives it to Zheng He as a *gift* after having *tribute* demanded of him several times. The memento is preserved in Hell because the ghost of the person who stole it “for its rarity” 看着希奇 (925) is punished there.

The unusual appearance of the memento exchanged as a gift, not as a tribute, elucidates a system of displacement. This highly privatized and enclosed object, which embodies the cultural and the intellectual circulated in the Tang legends, clashes with the imperial model in the Ming novel, in which objects are public and animated. Further, this memento, stolen for its preciousness, seems to hint that it is treated as a cultural antique in the marketplace, highlighting the way in which a love token originally devoid of materiality is already being perceived as a material thing in a renewed system.

The physical absence of the jade seal in the novelistic reality contrasts with its theoretical presence in the literary imperial model. Eventually, the sum of every foreign state’s tributes cannot amount to the value or the priceless-ness of the imperial signature. The emperor disperses the seemingly trivialized collections, dismissing them as worthless and useless. Similarly, the established tributary system and imperial hegemony are trivialized as insignificant. Therefore, there exists the unbridgeable breach between the theoretical autonomous subjectivity and the objectified subjectivity that needs the agency of thing-ness for re-presentation.

This preliminary study is concerned with the idea of “treasure” or *baobei* in the novel *Eunuch San Bao’s Adventures into the Western Ocean*. The three categories of the treasure, i.e., the jade seal and the paperweight, the weapons, and the tributes, altogether constitute the imperial system model built on the cornerstone of the highly commercialized and transnational tributary economy. The three aspects of the weapons, magic, technology, and the subject/social relations, indicate that the thing-ness and the subjectivity are sutured together. The tributes’ duality of exoticism and universalism underlines again the unity of the economic and the politic. My argument is that the weapons and the tributes function as the fetish par excellence of imperial China. They are a way to imagine and commemorate a hegemonic empire bolted together by

international trades and conquests, but driven by a pressing imperial anxiety. At first the novel showcases a system of displacement in the transnational space by constantly featuring fantastic lands loaded with exotic treasure and magic, where the barbarians are populous and fetish-conscious, and the Chinese intruders hold a materialistic and technological view towards objects. But these lands are recurrently fused with the Chinese world, generating the idea of universalism. The empire also fetishizes magical weapons and tributes, in that they promise a sparkling dream of infinity and momentum, but this dream crumbles after one hundred years. Therefore, the imperial fetishism gestures the fragmented and fading memory of a once glorious universal system.

This imperial fetishism strikingly contrasts with the autonomous subjectivity evidenced by the theoretical presence but physical absence of the jade seal in the model. The gap between the two has its origin in history, but nonetheless it is the index to the late imperial map of the sixteenth century.

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The Paradox of Wang Mien: The Conflicts of Eremitism in *The Scholars*

by

Belle Eberhart

Wu Ching-tzu's *Julin Waishi*, commonly translated as *The Scholars*, is a famous satire of the Qing dynasty. In the pantheon of great Chinese novels, it is generally less visible, seen as outside the “four great novels” — *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* — most familiar to the Western reader. There is even debate as to whether or not *The Scholars* is a novel at all — the episodes described over the course of fifty-five chapters are often linked so weakly as to make *The Scholars* seem more like a collection of anecdotes than a full-fledged novel. Novel or no, however, *The Scholars* has been the focus of many a literary discussion. It was variously lauded by the Marxists, who saw it as an exposure of the “feudalistic ruling class,” by the nationalists, who saw it as a rebellion against “the foreign rule of the Manchus,”¹ and by other literary movements of the twentieth century.

Most of these movements, with the exception of the Marxists, hold *The Scholars* to be a Confucian novel.² An examination of Confucian values as set forth in the *Analects* shows this to be the case. The *Analects*, a collection of the sayings of and historical incidents regarding the philosopher Confucius, has deeply influenced Chinese thought since the text's first appearance over two thousand years ago. But it is almost impossible to distinguish a coherent moral code within *The Scholars*, due in part to tensions within Confucianism itself. According to Timothy Wong, Confucianism in *The Scholars* “should better be looked upon as a complex system of tensions which was itself the source of internal disputes.... It is in this light that the morality of the *Ju-lin wai-shih* becomes most intelligible”.³ This paper will attempt to examine these

¹ Wong (1998): 64.

² Ibid.: 69.

³ Wong (1998): 70.

tensions in *The Scholars* in light of two central Confucian values, filial piety and loyalty to the state.

The Scholars is notable for the vast amount of biographical information available regarding its author, quite unlike the situation for most other Chinese novels. Wu Ching-tzu, born in 1701, was a scholar of the Qing dynasty and shares many traits with the characters he satirizes throughout the pages of the novel. Unlike most of the corrupt, inefficient, and ignorant scholars who populate *The Scholars*, however, Wu Ching-tzu abandoned the examination system in 1737.⁴ He was disgusted with such individuals and also with the nature of the system itself, which he believed rewarded unprincipled and unenlightened behavior. Examinations at the time centered around the *baguwen*, or eight-legged essay, a stylized format which dictated precisely how, in eight parts, the examinee should present his ideas.⁵

The examination system was based around the Confucian classics, and the government it served purported to be devoted to the values expounded therein. Wu Ching-tzu was himself originally a proponent of the system; his father and grandfather were both officials who had sat through examination after examination in order to receive their appointments.⁶ And he remained, throughout his lifetime, devoted to Confucian principles⁷ such as filial piety (*xiao*) and loyalty (*zhong*).⁸ His abrogation of the examination system, then, was based on his objection to the officials and scholars who spouted Confucian philosophy in order to pass the examinations, but whose own lives contradicted these ideals at every turn. Such hypocrisy is exposed in the character Ma Chun-shang, who absurdly remarks,

Even Confucius, if he were alive today, would be studying essays and preparing for the examinations instead of saying “Make few false statements and do little

⁴ Ropp (1981): 71.

⁵ Ibid.: 95.

⁶ Wong (1998): 17.

⁷ Wong (1998): 34.

⁸ Nikkilä (1997): 41.

you may regret.” Why? Because that kind of talk would get him nowhere: nobody would give him an official position.⁹

Ching-tzu’s objections to the examination system and the type of society it engendered are best understood by considering key Confucian values as set forth in the *Analects*, then studying these same values as they appear in *The Scholars*. It is difficult to discern a coherent moral code throughout the pages of the novel, but the author bookends the novel with five “moral paragons” — one at the beginning, four at the end — who are meant, as the title of the first chapter states, to “point the moral of the book.”¹⁰ Superficially, these characters, particularly Wang Mien, to whom the author devotes the most time, exhibit the Confucian values to which the author was so devoted, leading many to claim that Wang Mien is “morally and intellectually above [the rest of] society.”¹¹ But a closer examination of Wang Mien’s behavior finds actions that conflict with the notions set forth in the *Analects*. And so while Wang Mien and his four compatriots are often viewed as the moral ideal of the novel, readers must look beyond them, to the ordinary characters buried within its pages, to gain a complete understanding of the morality of *The Scholars*.

Xiao, or filial piety, is a central notion in both the *Analects* and *The Scholars*. Though there are different interpretations of the specific *analects* pertaining to *xiao*, one oft-cited one in the second book says that filial devotion means “Your father and mother should have to worry only about your falling ill.”¹² Other sections of the *Analects* make it clear that filial piety ought to go beyond merely providing for ones parents’ material needs, as “we do that much for dogs or horses as well. If there is no reverence, how is it any different?”¹³ These basic tenets of the notion of filial piety, and Wu Ching-tzu’s respect for them, are in evidence in the very first pages

⁹ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 204.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 33.

¹¹ Wong (1998): 71.

¹² Confucius, trans. Watson, (2007): II.6.

¹³ Ibid.: II.7.

of *The Scholars*. Wang Mien, one of the five ‘paragons’ of the novel, exhibits the highest ideal of filial piety. Whenever he has money, he uses it to care for his mother, while remaining in comparative poverty himself.¹⁴ Later on, when, because of his learning and intellect, he is often offered official posts, Wang Mien goes out of his way to avoid taking them, and so fulfills his mother’s dying wish:

Of course, being an official would reflect credit on your forefathers. But the officials I have seen have all come to a bad end.... Listen, son, to my dying wish: Marry, have children, and care for my grave; but don’t become an official. Promise me this and I shall die in peace.¹⁵

Thus, despite repeated entreaties from his rulers to assume high office, Wang Mien refuses, retreating from society entirely in order to avoid the “bad end” his mother describes. The first chapter of *The Scholars* lays out the opinion that those who do not attempt to gain office, an idea central to *zhong* (loyalty to the state) can still adhere to Confucianism. The conflict between loyalty to one’s parents and loyalty to the state is evident throughout the entirety of *The Scholars*. A potential for conflict has been recognized by many scholars of Confucianism, and is explained by Pertti Nikkilä in the following manner: “For Confucius, the ethical choice is not a calculus ... [he] recognized the existence of plural values.”¹⁶ The *Analects* in no way proposes a mathematical formula to the Way.¹⁷

A strong Confucian motivation for becoming an official, as Wang Mien’s mother points out, would have been to reflect credit on one’s ancestors. One of the author’s missions throughout the novel is to discredit this idea, and thus justify his heroes’ (and perhaps his own) renunciation of the examination system. Early on, Wu Ching-tzu gives the reader a specific example of how one scholar’s desire for high office leads him to forsake his duty to his parents.

¹⁴ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 37.

¹⁵ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 45.

¹⁶ Nikkilä (1997): 53.

¹⁷ Watson (2007): 9.

Scholars whose parents died were expected to go home for a period of mourning, and for Hsun Mei, his mother's death comes immediately before he is scheduled to sit for an exam that is held only once every three years. Because he is desperate to take the exam, he attempts to cover up his mother's death until after the exam is administered, an abandonment of the Confucian values he is meant to be serving.¹⁸ Wu Ching-tzu was by no means the only one of his generation criticizing such a negative outcome of the examination system. As Ku Wen-yu, his contemporary, points out, officialdom at the time produced a “careerist mentality” that “undermined such Confucian values as respect for the aged.”¹⁹

One might argue that the moral failure is on the part of the individual Hsun Mei — after all, no system can account entirely for personal deficiency. However, when Hsun Mei's request to cover up his parent's death is denied by his superiors, it is not on the basis of affront to the values upon which the system is based but rather because Hsun Mei's “official rank is too low for this. Permission to suspend mourning ... is ordinarily granted only to very high officials.”²⁰ Hsun Mei is sent home to wait another three years for the next examination which will further his rank. Instead of denying his request because it contravenes the ideal of filial piety, Hsun Mei's superiors merely give him more incentive for self-advancement by any means. Thus Hsun Mei's pursuit of an official position is not guided by any Confucian morals at all.

Despite this kind of behavior, the government service was at least superficially considered to be consistent with the teachings of Confucius in the *Analects*, which, as Burton Watson phrases it, emphasizes the “belief that wisdom and moral stature ... are what qualify one for rulership.”²¹ In *The Scholars*, the various members of the bureaucracy often see their officialdom as proof of their inner worth, rather than seeing their inner worth as the means of achieving officialdom. Service to the state was seen at the time as the embodiment of the Confucian value of loyalty, or *zhong*. “The Master's Way consists of loyalty and reciprocity

¹⁸ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 129.

¹⁹ Ropp (1981): 98.

²⁰ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 130.

²¹ Watson (2007): 8.

alone,”²² and the logic went that this loyalty in turn demanded service to the state. While the *Analects* does indeed encourage officialdom, it does not demand it — Confucius himself did not hold an official position and offered the following justification: “Filial, only be filial, a friend to elder and younger brothers — this contributes to government. To do this is in fact is to take part in government.”²³ In this interpretation, a man of high stature did not need to serve in the government in order to prove his worth. The *Analects* still encourages public service, but the corrupt officials in *The Scholars*, and the system they inhabit, seem to show that in Wu’s time, public service and morality had become mutually exclusive pursuits. The stark contrast between the moral paragons of the novel and the officials suggests that the only way to live a virtuous life is to withdraw from society completely. An exploration of the doctrine of Confucian eremitism, which advocates seclusion from social life, supports this theory.

A notable section of the *Analects* supports forgoing officialdom in the case of bad government — “When a state is without the Way, to receive an official stipend is shameful.”²⁴ The Confucian eremite takes abdication of official responsibility a step further — he withdraws from society entirely “as an ethical reaction against the political or moral order of the times ... [in order to] transform the world by example” according to Alan Berkowitz.²⁵ And indeed, under this doctrine, Wang Mien’s decision to become a hermit is entirely justifiable, and indeed, laudable. The official corruption that *The Scholars* goes on to portray supports his decision to first refuse an official position, as he does multiple times, and ultimately to withdraw from society altogether.

But a passage in the *Analects* discourages this motivation. “If you fail to serve the ruler, you lack rightness.... You want to keep yourselves unsullied, but you bring confusion to a much greater relationship.”²⁶ This portrays such seclusion as selfish. Those who serve in government

²² Confucius, trans. Watson (2007): IV.15.

²³ Ibid.: II.21

²⁴ Confucius, trans. Watson (2007): XIV.1.

²⁵ Berkowitz (2000): 3.

²⁶ Confucius, trans. Watson (2007): XVIII.7.

make sacrifices — the biggest of which may be moral sacrifices. “Keeping yourself unsullied” morally is thus a luxury, and one that those who wish to serve their government cannot always afford. The *Analects* recognizes that social order is dependent upon public servants who will carry out orders from above with which they do not always agree. Viewed in this light, making moral compromises in order to uphold the greater good is distinctly commendable.

Aat Vervoorn, another scholar who explores eremitism in depth, addresses this moral tension. “Remaining in retirement merely to avoid improper looks or expressions cannot really be justified at all,” he notes, and cites a passage in the *Analects* (14:37) that indicates that one must withdraw from society “only when the whole world is without the Way.”²⁷ That is, the ethical citizen should move from state to state until he finds a ruler or system of government that embodies the Way, thus whose orders he will feel no compunction in carrying out. Confucian society, however, retained a great deal of respect for intellectual hermits who withdrew for the purpose of self-cultivation (some of whom, presumably, had not exhausted all of the surrounding governments looking for an ethical leader). Vervoorn does question how this would be justified under a strict interpretation of Confucianism, and answers with a passage from the *Analects* that is often cited in discussions of eremitism.²⁸ In it, Confucius describes seven hermits who withdrew from society, and says of them, “They never lowered their aims, never let themselves be disgraced.”²⁹ Vervoorn and other scholars show that this passage was used to justify the eremitic ideal.

Equally worthy of discussion, however, is the rest of this passage, in which Confucius goes on to say of the hermits that their “withdrawal accorded with expediency. I myself differ from these men. I have no hard and fast dos and don’ts.”³⁰ This is not an explicit criticism of the hermits themselves, but it does show that their moral inflexibility was at times more convenient than sullyng themselves with the messy business of government. Confucius understood that

²⁷ Vervoorn (1990): 30–31.

²⁸ Vervoorn (1990): 122.

²⁹ Confucius, trans. Watson (2007): XVIII.8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: XVIII.8.

while such men might be important as moral examples, good government would be impossible were every morally upright man to follow their example. This is not to say that Confucius advocated loose, or even flexible morals in an individual; even a cursory reading of the *Analects* would refute that. But the “plural values” explained by Nikkilä certainly leave room for serving a government — even one which is not always in accordance with one’s moral code — in the hope of contributing to the overall good of society. Strength of character is often revealed when one is faced with making the best of two bad choices. Those who withdraw from society preclude facing these choices altogether. For the true Confucian — one who was not in pursuit of fame or riches, but rather was interested in self-cultivation — serving the government was more of a sacrifice and more of a challenge than becoming a hermit.

Wang Mien and the four other hermits at the end of the novel are widely held to be the moral paragons of the novel, the exemplification of the author’s ideals, “ideals violated in one way or another by the dunces who troop across the pages of the *Ju-lin Wai-shih*.”³¹ But these ordinary dunces are faced with a multitude of difficult situations, the likes of which Wang Mien and his four compatriots never encounter in their morally upright isolation. Towards the end of the book, Chuang Shao-kuang, an upright man, receives a summons to the capital to receive a position on the basis of his erudition, similar to Wang Mien’s frequent invitations to join the government. Chuang accepts the summons, but before he goes, his wife questions his decision, pointing out that he had never before been willing to accept such a post. “We are not hermits,” he replies, and “it is my duty as a subject to go.”³² It is evident that Chuang goes against his own better judgment. Indeed, once he arrives, he is caught up in the political schemes of the court. He encounters a shady minister who wishes Chuang to become his student. Chuang tactfully declines despite the political backlash he may encounter. He advises the emperor to the best of his abilities, writes a detailed policy recommendation on education, and requests that he be allowed to return home.³³

³¹ Wong (1998): 71.

³² Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 467.

³³ Ibid.: 476.

This reader found Chuang’s behavior infinitely more admirable than that of the supposed paragon Wang Mien, who, when his counsel is similarly requested by a local magistrate, leaves town to avoid the meeting. He leaves his elderly mother alone to turn away a persistent and vindictive magistrate.³⁴ He justifies his behavior to a friend, asking him “haven’t you heard me tell the stories of the two ancient sages who refused to see their rulers?”³⁵ Wong explains the significance of the two sages, Tuan-kan Mu and Hsieh Liu. They are recorded in the *Mencius* as having also refused to see a ruling official who wanted their advice, avoiding the meeting by respectively climbing over a wall and bolting the door. Their reasoning for doing so was that they did not hold office in the official’s jurisdiction, and Mencius concedes that they probably went overboard in their attempts to avoid the meeting. Wong holds that “nevertheless ... Wu Ching-tzu is clearly advocating those values associated with a Confucian recluse.”³⁶

But it is easy to remain a paragon when one does not have to make choices or meet confrontation. Throughout Wang Mien’s life, he picks up and moves at the first sign of trouble, from Tsinan to Chekiang to an isolated mountain, where he dies in obscurity. Shang Wei goes so far as to describe his life as “a series of escapes” from confrontation with officials.³⁷ After his mother dies, he has no family — “he did not even have any friends”³⁸ — and he abandons jobs and neighborhoods shortly after arriving at them. He may be a paragon of virtue, but he offers the common man little in the way of a concrete example to follow.

The true heroes of *The Scholars* are those who, like Chuang Shao-kuang, accept the moral difficulties of public service and attempt to reconcile their values with the challenges of officialdom. Another official in the novel worthy of praise is one Dr. Yu, who is described as being “reluctant to advance, glad to retire.”³⁹ He tells a friend how he was previously a poor

³⁴ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 41.

³⁵ Ibid.: 40.

³⁶ Wong (1998): 73.

³⁷ Wei (2003): 109.

³⁸ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 37.

³⁹ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 607.

scholar, but, at his current post, has saved enough so that he and his wife “needn’t starve.”⁴⁰ He is courteous to all, a good judge of character, and a good father and husband. In short, Dr. Yu achieves what Wang Mien does not even attempt — he remains an integral part of society, his surroundings, and the government, while staying as true as possible to his own ideals. As Confucius says, “One cannot simply live with the birds and beasts. If I am not to join with my fellow man, who am I to join with?”⁴¹

We learn about Dr. Yu’s and Chuang Shao-kuang’s characters through the course of the narrative — their admirable behavior is revealed through details in their lives and the words of others (it is another character who praises Dr. Yu as “reluctant to advance”). By contrast, we learn that Wang Mien is a “remarkable man”⁴² directly from the author — it is explicitly stated in the narrative, along with other biographical details indicating his genius and his other impressive traits. The same is true regarding the four other paragons at the end of the novel, who are introduced as “outstanding figures.”⁴³ The narrator’s insistence upon their morality contributes to the sense of Wang Mien as a “lifeless stereotype,”⁴⁴ a virtual model who resides in a world far removed from most of his time. Indeed, Ropp notes, though the authors is perhaps attached to the idea of eremitism, his portrayal of Wang Mien indicates an “ultimate pessimism regarding the efficacy of [that ideal] in his day.”⁴⁵ That ideal is desirable purely in the abstract, if at all — the image of the scholarly recluse is clearly one to which the author is attached — but it offers no solution to the problems posed by the book. Wang Mien’s escapist behavior does nothing to cure the ills afflicting society that the novel exposes. Rather, it is men like Dr. Yu and Chuang Shao-kuang who offer the best solution. They are believable characters who make changes in the many lives they touch, by embracing society and their fellow men.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 607.

⁴¹ Confucius, trans. Watson (2007): XVIII.6.

⁴² Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 34.

⁴³ Wu Ching-tzu, trans. Yang et al. (1957): 706.

⁴⁴ Ropp (1981): 209.

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 209.

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History vs. Fiction in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

by

Steven A. Vaughn-Lewis

“History is written by the victors,” said Winston Churchill. This makes intuitive sense, because we know that the winners of any major conflict are in control, at liberty to recount past events as they see fit.

But what happens when history turns into legend? Let us take a look at the Three Kingdoms period of China, a tumultuous era that encompasses the fall of the Han dynasty. Many heroes rise and fall during this time, some glorified and others vilified. The historical events of this period were recorded officially in *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* by the historian Chen Shou, but that is not the only source in which this historical period was interpreted. It also was told through the rich oral storytelling tradition of the people over centuries, which culminated in the writing by Luo Guanzhong of the historical novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. C. T. Hsia reports, in *The Classic Chinese Novel*, that “its major characters and events had been romanticized by poets, storytellers, and playwrights so that their influence could not but be felt in his work” (Hsia 35).

I attempt in this study to reconcile Luo Guanzhong’s fictionalization with the actual historical records of the Three Kingdoms period by comparing *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* with the historical account written by Chen Shou (in the translation by Achilles Fang). In making this comparison, I found three main points of interest: biases toward certain characters in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* arise from actual historical biases present in *The Chronicle of the three Kingdoms*; some fictional accounts in *The Romance* serve to reinforce the historical accuracy of *The Chronicle*; and some parts of *The Romance* have no historical backing whatsoever.

It is interesting to note the biases that are present in both the historical account and the novel. In *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao and his kingdom are portrayed as the

main antagonist, while Liu Bei is seen as the hero and legitimate ruler of the Han. *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* is very similar in its bias against Cao Cao, but when comparing the historical account to Luo Guanzhong’s novel, one realizes that the historical bias is much more subtle. Let us examine the scene in *The Romance* when the current ruler of the Han dynasty, Emperor Xian, is approached by the officials of Cao Pi (Cao Cao’s son):

Accompanied by a delegation of civil and military officials, Hua Xin entered the court and addressed Emperor Xian: “Reverently we observe that since the new king of Wei has come to the throne, his virtue has spread throughout the land to the benefit of all. Not even the sage founders of our civilization, Tang and Yu, surpass the king. The assembly of the court, after collective consultation, now deeming that the sacrifices of Han have come to term, beseech Your Majesty to emulate the ancient sage-king Yao by ceremonially relinquishing the mountains, rivers, and dynastic shrines to the new king of Wei. This will fulfill the will of Heaven and satisfy the minds of men and also will enable Your Majesty to secure the blessings of untroubled leisure, a boon to your ancestral clan and the living souls of the realm. Our conclusion having been reached, we come to deliver this formal appeal.”

The Emperor listened in fear and shock. After a long silence, he turned his gaze to the court of officials and began to sob... “Small though my talent be, what offense have I committed, what fault have I that justifies abandoning my ancestral right?” (Luo 604)

According to *The Romance*, Emperor Xian is incensed at the injustice that he must endure at the hands of the king of Wei. It is clear that this is not a voluntary abdication, but that the Emperor is being coerced into forfeiting the throne. The novel continues to describe the Emperor’s reaction to this act of usurpation. He is portrayed as a helpless victim, one who has no power to resist the overwhelming support that Cao Pi enjoys. There is not much that he can do but withdraw from the court and weep. When he finally does come forward finally to officially turn over the throne. He is literally shaking and he trembles violently as he tearfully addresses

Cao Pi’s armed men

This is a huge difference from the way in which the entire episode is portrayed in *The Chronicle*. In the historical account, the scenario plays out in this fashion:

The Commandant of the Left Guard Li Fu and the Assistant Court Astrologer Hsü Chih memorialized the King that they had discovered ample evidence in prognostic records in favor of the Wei’s replacing the Han. Thereupon the officials sent up a memorial to him, advising the King to comply with the wishes of Heaven and men. But the King withheld his assent.

Winter, tenth month. On the day *i-mao* (Nov. 25), the Han Emperor reported to the temple of his ancestors and had the Acting Supervisor of Works, Chang Yin, carrying the Ordinary Plenipotentiary Tally, bring to the King the imperial seal and a rescript announcing his voluntary abdication of the imperial throne in favor of the King of Wei. The King sent three letters to the Emperor, in which he declined the honor out of modesty. He had an altar [for the abdication ceremony] built at Fan-yang. (Fang 10)

If one read only this, there is absolutely no way that one could glean that the throne was being forcibly wrested from the Emperor. Quite the contrary, one would get the opposite impression, that the Emperor, upon being informed of the appropriate astrological signals, voluntarily heeded the celestial signs and abdicated the throne in favor of the King of Wei in order to appease Heaven. Still further, the history avers that the king rejected the offer three times out of modesty, not feeling worthy to assume such a lofty position. Here, Cao Pi is portrayed as a humble servant of the Han dynasty.

The Romance has a completely different interpretation of Cao Pi’s declining the imperial throne:

When the edict had been read, Cao Pi was anxious to accept the decree, but Sima Yi warned him, “That would be wrong. Even though the edict and seal were brought here, let Your Highness decline in due modesty so as to forestall criticism

in the outside world.” On this advice Cao Pi had Wang Lang prepare a memorial which declared his virtue too meager to assume the throne and advised searching elsewhere for someone of true worth.” (Luo 606)

His advisor Sima Yi blatantly reveals the true motive for declining the offer when he reveals that he “still fear[s] that the world as well as future generations will condemn the usurpation” (Luo 607). If the fictionalization of events in *The Romance* has any truth to it, then the advice of Sima Yi (the eventual founder of the Jin dynasty) was correct — because as history recorded this episode, it found no fault with Cao Pi. The novel points out two more times that the Emperor offers the throne, and twice more Cao Pi rejects the offer, not out of modesty, but out of concern for the opinion history would record of him. Even the building of the altar of abdication was an attempt to get history to see this transition of power in a favorable light.

Another interesting event in *The Romance* that contrasts with *The Chronicle* is the inauguration ceremony itself. During the ceremony there occurs a bizarre scene in which everything goes wrong:

As the new emperor began descending to prostrate himself, a freak storm sprang up, driving sand and stones before it like a sudden downpour. All went dark; the altar lanterns blew out. Cao Pi collapsed in fright and had to be carried down, regaining consciousness only after a long while.... Cao Pi did not completely recover, however, and he began to suspect that the capital buildings were haunted. He therefore moved from Xuchang to Luoyang and built a palace complex there. (Luo 608)

It appears that heaven itself is against Cao Pi’s ascending the throne to become the Emperor. It is as if all of these supernatural events are sending a signal that a grave injustice is occurring — surely that is what the storytellers and the novelist are trying to convey. *The Chronicle*, however, does not mention any type of divine intervention and simply states, “The imperial palace was being built in Lo-yang. On the day wu-wu (Jan. 27) the Emperor went to Lo-yang” (Fang 12). Based on the differences between the historical records and the novel, it would

seem that Sima Yi’s advice to Cao Pi (assuming that he actually did give this advice) worked, and history does indeed favor Cao Pi. But is this true?

One must examine *The Chronicle* closely in order to detect its bias, because it is much more subtle than *The Romance*. There do exist passages in *The Chronicle* that hint at Cao Pi’s illegitimacy. For example, during the eleventh month of 220 A.D., *The Chronicle* explains the administrative changes that the newly enthroned emperor makes, including making the previous Han emperor the duke of Shan-yang. One entry states:

At this time the court officials all lauded the virtue of the Wei and many disparaged the previous dynasty. The Chamberlain Wei Chen stood alone in that he, having a clear conception of what the voluntary abdication of the imperial throne signified, praised the excellence of the Han. (Fang 11)

Here, the historical account speaks of a lone Han loyalist praising the excellence of the fallen dynasty despite being in the midst of usurpers and their compatriots. This man, Wei Chen, is placed in a positive light and is exalted over the other court officials in that he has a “clear conception” of the situation; he knows the truth about the new dynasty and can see through the plots and schemes of Cao Pi.

The subtle bias against the Wei kingdom that arises in the historical account has, through the storytelling conventions and prevailing opinions of the time, turned it into the tragic melodrama of *The Romance*. While the details may be fiction, the main idea remains intact: Cao Pi, the son of Cao Cao, forced the abdication of the emperor of the Han dynasty and assumed the throne, declaring himself emperor.

When comparing the biases of *The Romance* with those of *The Chronicle*, the character Liu Bei presents an extremely interesting case. In *The Romance*, he is portrayed as a kind, benevolent ruler who is unsurpassed in graciousness and humility. Whenever lofty titles are offered to him, he graciously declines them. For example, when Liu Bei is given an offer by Liu Biao to rule the city of Jingzhou (a crucial strategic stronghold) if Liu Biao were to die, Liu Bei (Xuande) refuses it:

“The years weigh on me,” Liu Biao said. “My ailments multiply. I cannot cope with the affairs of this province. Worthy brother, if you come to assist me, you will become ruler of Jingzhou after I pass away.” “Elder brother,” Xuande cried out, “do not say that nor imagine that I would presume to undertake such a responsibility.”

“...My lord,” Kongming said to him, “Liu Biao was ready to put the province in your hands. Why did you decline?” “The protector,” Xuande replied, “has treated me with consummate consideration and etiquette. To exploit his moment of peril by seizing his estate is the last thing I could bring myself to do.” “What a kindhearted lord,” Kongming said with a sigh. (Luo 300–301)

Liu Bei’s chief strategist Zhuge Liang (Kongming) is a witness to this scene and is puzzled as to why he did not accept such an offer, especially considering how strategically advantageous it would be. Liu Bei emphasizes that he does not want to take advantage of Liu Biao’s misfortune and profit from it. Later in the novel, Liu Bei is pressured to declare himself emperor of the Han dynasty. Just as before, out of modesty, he absolutely refuses.

And so Kongming, together with Xi Jing, led a general assembly of officials to petition the king of Hanzhong [Liu Bei] to take the imperial throne. The king read over the memorial and said in astonishment, “would you urge on me a course both disloyal and dishonorable?” Kongming addressed the king: “Not at all! Cao Pi has usurped the Han and taken power. As a kinsman of the Han, Your Majesty should by rights succeed in the line so as to maintain the ritual sacrifices.” The king of Hanzhong, his countenance altered, said angrily, “Shall I emulate the conduct of renegade traitors?” Flicking his sleeves, he arose and retired to the rear of the palace; the assembly dispersed. (Luo 609)

Once again, Liu Bei takes the virtuous stance and refuses to take on an honor that he does not feel he deserves. Despite the fact that the power of Cao Pi is illegitimate and that he is of imperial ancestry, Liu Bei’s overwhelming humility restrains his ambition yet again. Eventually,

Liu Bei does declare himself emperor of the Han dynasty, but only after his advisor Kongming goes to great lengths to persuade him.

However, the historical account in *The Chronicle* shows an entirely different picture of the humble Liu Bei. Let us examine the historical account of Liu Bei and his declaration of himself as emperor:

“The Shu courtiers were all busily talking of prophecies and auspicious signs, and advised the King of Han-chung [Liu Bei] to assume the title of Emperor. The *ch’ien-fu ssu-ma* Fei Shih memorialized: “It is because Ts’ao Ts’ao and his son have coerced their sovereign and usurped his throne that Your Highness is wandering in this land ten thousand *li* distant [from the capital] ... now the arch-enemy is not yet put down, and you would first proclaim yourself Emperor. I am afraid that the people will become suspicious of you.... Now, Your Highness has not issued out of the narrow limits of your domain; yet you would proclaim yourself Emperor! This is not what I, stupid though I am, should recommend you to do.”

The King was displeased and demoted Fei Shih to be *ts’ung-shih* of Yung-ch’ang in his jurisdiction. (Fang 44)

According to the historical record, the courtiers advised him to assume the imperial throne. One courtier, Fei Shih, advises him not to, however, because he wants to retain the confidence of the people (this is similar to Sima Yi’s advice to Cao Pi, except Fei Shih’s motives are pure and it would not be a ruse the way Sima Yi’s advice to decline the throne was). Here, we do not see the same humble Liu Bei that had to be coerced by Kongming to take the throne — we see a man who hears sound advice and, due to his displeasure, actually strips a courtier of his rank because of his dissenting opinion. What an entirely different portrait of Liu Bei!

This discrepancy makes one question Liu Bei’s reputation. He has obviously been immortalized as the virtuous king, the hero who fights for what is right and not for his own gain. However, this completely contradicts what the historical record says about him as he assumes the throne. This makes me question the previous benevolent deeds that Liu Bei has done over the

course of *The Romance*. Did he really decline Liu Biao’s offer out of good will, or was there some other reason that he did so? Since I am not able to read classical Chinese, I cannot examine that particular record (the historical translation that I based my research on starts only at 220 A.D., after the death of Cao Cao). Nonetheless, this is still a very interesting discrepancy that provides evidence that *The Romance* does indeed hold biases toward different characters. These biases can be so strong that they seem to be the opposite of the historical records.

As Luo Guanzhong wrote *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, he did more than just take into account biases for and against certain historical figures; he elaborated on their personalities and attributed many fictional deeds to certain characters that are in line with the way in which they are remembered in the historical account. Zhang Fei, the sworn brother of Liu Bei and Guan Yü, is a prime example. After Guan Yü is killed by Sun Quan, both Liu Bei and Zhang Fei swear to avenge their fallen brother. Before the attack can be carried out, Zhang Fei is killed by two of his subordinate generals, as payment for his harsh treatment of them. The historical account of *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* explains his death and gives a concise description of his personality:

Chang Fei was brave and martial, second only to Kuan Yü. Kuan Yü treated his rank and file well but was arrogant towards the gentry; Chang Fei loved and respected superior men but was harsh towards his troops. The Sovereign of Han always admonished Chang Fei, “You are extraordinarily severe in sentencing your men to death; furthermore, you daily whip and beat soldiers and order these very men to wait upon you. This is simply courting disaster.” Still Chang Fei did not mend his conduct. When the Sovereign of Han was about to attack Sun-Chüan, Chang Fei was to lead ten thousand men from Lang-chung and join him at Chiang-chou. On the eve of his setting out, Chang Ta and Fan Ch’ian, who were his subordinate generals, killed Chang Fei; carrying his severed head, they sailed down the river and fled to Sun Ch’üan. Hearing that Chang Fei’s *yüing-tu-tu* had sent a memorial to him, the Sovereign of Han said, “Alas, Chang Fei is dead.” (Fang 50)

There is enough information available here to accurately discern how and why Zhang Fei was killed.

The Romance takes this information and creates an entire episode out of it. While the historical account sums up Zhang Fei's death in one paragraph, the novel devotes a substantial section of a chapter to his downfall. The story begins like this: When Zhang Fei hears of his brother's death, he immediately goes into a frenzy and prepares a large scale invasion, with the approval of his elder brother (who is also seeking revenge). He orders that the preparations necessary to go into battle be ready in three days — a completely unreasonable demand. When his commanders, Fan Jiang and Zhang Da, inform him that three days is inadequate, Zhang Fei has them flogged relentlessly and decrees that if the preparations are not complete by the next day, he will kill them. They realize that there is no hope, since it would be physically impossible to prepare the necessary banners and armor in three days, let alone by the next day, so the two subordinate generals hatch a plan to murder their superior. Taking advantage of the fact that Zhang Fei is prone to drunkenness, they calculate that he will drink himself into a stupor while mourning his fallen brother — it is then that they will sneak into his tent and kill him. The plan goes off without a hitch.

None of these details can be found in the historical record. Despite that, the account given in the fictionalization actually serves to reinforce the historical accuracy of the description of Zhang Fei's character. If Luo Guanzhong was influenced by oral literary traditions, we can see where this scenario originated — we have a general who severely mistreats his underlings and is eventually killed by them; that is historical fact. It is easy to construct a scenario in which this event would seem feasible. The fictional construction actually serves to reinforce historical fact at this point. C. T. Hsia puts it best when he says, “The slight fictional elaboration of history has restored for us the actuality of history” (Hsia 35).

Zhang Fei is one example of fictionalization reinforcing history. But, for the most part, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* diverges from the history by elaborating on, exaggerating, and even creating events that did not happen. This is very evident in the case of Liu Bei's chief advisor, Zhuge Liang (Kongming). C. T. Hsia points out, in *The Classic Chinese Novel*, that Kongming is portrayed as having supernatural ability, due to “certain myths that were too well

entrenched in the popular mind to be rejected” (Hsia 40). Through the agency of the storytelling tradition, Kongming achieved legendary status, and his exploits became more and more godlike as time wore on. One example of this exaggeration of history occurs in 230 A.D., when Kongming decides to lead an expedition to invade the Wei kingdom. He informs his generals that they will need only one thousand men to hold a strongpoint against four hundred thousand Wei troops. Of course, the generals are skeptical, but Kongming, as always, has a trick up his sleeve:

“How ignorant you are!” Kongming answered with a smile. “I am sending you with a specific purpose in mind. Yesterday I inspected the patterns in the sky and saw the star mansion Net circling toward the moon. During the month there is sure to be a major rainstorm, and that will keep the Wei army from coming through these rough mountains, their four hundred thousand notwithstanding. That’s why with only a few troops you’re still in no danger.” (Luo 767)

Sure enough, ten days later, it begins to rain for thirty days nonstop, just as Kongming predicted. In the historical account, however, the entire scenario is summed up in one line: “It happened that heavy rain fell for more than thirty days and the plank roads were cut off” (Fang 317). It is easy to see that this was a lucky coincidence for Kongming, because the continuous rains halted the enemy advance. However, he is given credit for accurately predicting this weather more than a week in advance through supernatural means and planning accordingly.

In one of the most memorable of Kongming’s feats in *The Romance*, in 228 A.D., he sits upon the wall of a completely undefended city and plays the lute as his enemy Sima Yi approaches. Sima Yi sees this and, thinking that it is an ambush, turns right around and flees (Luo 734). This is completely fictional, but the events that lead up to it are historically accurate.

The city, Jieting, is undefended because of a blunder caused by Ma Su, a man of whom Kongming is especially fond. Ma Su petitions to be in charge of defending Jieting. Kongming is at first hesitant because he has more experienced generals at his disposal, but he relents and lets him take up this important task. Ma Su overestimates his own ability, and he disobeys orders, leaving Jieting undefended. The enemy is aware of Ma Su’s incompetence and uses this opportunity to defeat him soundly (Luo 730–731). Everything about this battle as portrayed in

The Romance is historically accurate up to the point that Kongming plays the lute on the wall (which is absent from *The Chronicle*, of course). Once again, Kongming’s role in these historical events, while based on reality, is greatly exaggerated.

In the previous examples, Kongming’s military exploits are greatly exaggerated, but there also exist sections of *The Romance* which are entirely missing *The Chronicle*. For example, in 225 A.D., Kongming successfully defeats the Man barbarians and attempts to lead his army home. In *The Romance*, Kongming attempts to cross the Lu River but is impeded by evil spirits. Kongming arranges a sacrifice to appease the spirits so that he can cross the river. Knowing that this could not possibly have been true, I attempted to locate the historical account on which this story is based. After spending much time attempting to find some reference to the Lu River, I looked at the date given in the fictional account: Kongming appeased the spirits of the Lu River on the “first day of the ninth month of the third year of Jian Xing of the great Han” (Luo 695). I then examined the historical account to find the corresponding date, but to no avail; it goes straight from the eighth month to the tenth month. There is not even any mention of a Lu River in *The Chronicle*.

It is extremely interesting to examine an actual historical account and to then compare it to a popular, fictionalized version that has been influenced by hundreds of years of storytelling traditions. One would think that *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* would have been so distorted in content that it is a completely unreliable source of historical fact. In fact, C. T. Hsia pointed out in *The Classic Chinese Novel* that this indeed was the case for certain fictionalizations of the Three Kingdoms period. He says:

The Three Kingdoms period had been a major subject for historical storytellers at least since the late T’ang. Though they followed the main events of the period, in catering to their unlearned audience they must in time have exaggerated the traits of certain beloved and detested characters and added a wealth of fanciful and interpretative fiction until the retold cycle of stories departed quite far from official history. There is an extant compilation of such stories dating from the Yuan period entitled *San-kuo-chih p’ing-hua*. This version is atrocious in style

and often transcribes the names of places and persons in wrong characters. Events are narrated most sketchily and history itself is reduced to a contest in magic, cunning, and prowess (Hsia 35–6).

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms does not fall into the same trap as the *San-kuo-chih p'ing-hua*. While there are certain biases in the novel, these biases are based on historical biases. While some events are fictionalized, they are based on depictions in history of the characters that they encompass. Finally, some events are purely fictional, but Luo Guanzhong does a fairly good job of balancing the fictional aspects taken from storytellers and actual historical facts. Reading *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* against the background of history, one can gain a sense of this period of Chinese history, both factually and in terms of the biases and stories that have accrued around it.

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The Dichotomy between Popular Opinion and the Novel:

Morality in *Water Margin*

by

Lei Kang

I: Introduction

Water Margin, one of the four great classical Chinese novels, tells the story of a band of outlaws, first following the individual bandits as they gather under the leadership of Sung Chiang, then, once all 108 men have assembled, chronicling their exploits as a group. In the following discussion, I will critically analyze evidence of the bandits' sense of morality and compare their portrayal with popular opinion, traced over time from the period of the story's inception to its publication in Chin Sheng-t'an's seventy-chapter novel.

I begin by giving an overview of the novel's development, to illustrate contemporary popular opinion of the bandits. Then I will consider the distinctive ethical codes the bandits follow in their interactions with three separate groups of people: their fellow bandits, the government, and the common people. I will explain each code by considering the actions different bandits take in similar situations, judging these actions based on their motivations and consequences, and comparing their portrayal in the novel with popular opinion. Finally I will present an overarching analysis of these moral codes, by generalizing from the bandits' individual interactions, and then compare this judgment with popular opinion.

The popular view of the bandits as inherently good characters resisting a corrupt regime is shown to be both over-simplified and flawed. Tradition has it that they were a band of brothers, loyal and unified, that they suffered greatly under a corrupt government, so that they were driven to banditry, and that they came to the aid of the common people. In fact, however, there exist within the novel contradictions regarding these beliefs: the bonds of brotherhood between the bandits are not as they seem; the bandits do not suffer from government repression to the extent

that popular opinion believes them to; and they harm the common people they are supposed to be protecting.

The bandits of *Water Margin* are very loosely modeled on an actual band of outlaws, led by Sung Chiang, that was active during the last years of the Northern Sung dynasty, a period of harsh government characterized by banditry and even rebellion.¹ Although these historical bandits shared very few exploits with their fictional counterparts, and they never wielded as much influence on the empire as the novel has it, their story remained popular throughout the Southern Sung dynasty, appealing “to a patriotic audience nostalgically attached to the inglorious reigns of Hui-tsung and Ch’in-tsung,” the two last emperors of the Northern Sung.² This popularity manifested itself in Sung oral storytelling: the bandits’ legends had spread among the people, who “looked wistfully toward those defenders of the common man who had proved a match for the hated officials.”³ The story’s popularity continued into the Yuan dynasty, when the Chinese were under Mongol subjugation, and thus they appreciated tales of heroes thwarting a corrupt bureaucracy.⁴ Yuan drama maintained and expanded the Southern Sung view of the bandits as defenders of the common people: they were now “heroic figures, champions of the common man against oppression, a positive force on the side of moral order.”⁵

The novel’s appearance at the beginning of the Ming dynasty, and its subsequent evolution throughout most of that dynasty, maintained the image of the bandits from the Southern Sung and Yuan dynasties as protectors of the weak against tyrants, while adding

¹ Richard Gregg Irwin, *The Evolution of a Chinese Novel: Shui-hu-chuan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 9.

² C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 76.

³ Irwin, *Evolution of a Chinese Novel*, p. 25.

⁴ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 76.

⁵ Irwin, *Evolution of a Chinese Novel*, p. 38.

significant sections chronicling the unjust situations that forced bandits such as Lin Ch’ung and Ch’ai Chin to join the band in the first place.⁶

Only the version by Chin Sheng-t’an, which appeared at the end of the Ming dynasty, departs from this view, by eliminating the latter part of the novel, in which the bandits redeem their crimes by working for the empire. Chin Sheng-t’an’s changes to the story arguably can be attributed to two things. The first is his outrage at the widespread banditry of his time, “sapping the strength of Ming rule and laying it open to the overthrow which soon followed”; the second may have been his artistic sensibilities, in that he viewed the last chapters of the novel as inferior stylistically to the earlier ones.⁷ Since his changes were a reflection of his own beliefs rather than those of the wider public, however, we can safely ignore them when evaluating popular opinion of the novel.

Thus, three major points, in order of ascending importance, arise when characterizing popular opinion of the Liang-shan bandits as the novel reached maturity at the end of the Ming: the bandits were a virtuous brotherhood, they were taking a stand against corrupt government, and they were doing so as defenders of the common people.

II: Morality in interactions with fellow bandits

At first glance, the moral code governing the Liang-shan bandits’ interactions with one another seems to be a positive one, reflecting the popular idea that they were a close-knit band of brothers. They hold the bonds of friendship above all else, protecting each other from enemies, supporting one another in their labors. When Sung Chiang finds out that Ch’ao Kai is about to be arrested for stealing birthday presents intended for Grand Preceptor Ts’ai Ching, he decides to warn him, and thus Ch’ao Kai is able to escape. However, a flaw in this emphasis is immediately apparent: by its nature, emphasizing friendship above all else means that other bonds must be

⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷ Irwin makes the argument for political motivation; see *ibid.*, p. 115. He also argues for an artistic motive. Neither of these points apply, however, for the purpose of comparing the novel to popular opinion, since they are Chin Sheng-t’an’s personal views rather than a response to popular opinion. See James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-errant* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 110–1.

ignored. Sung Chiang upholds his bond to his friend, but he is betraying his bond to his superiors.⁸ Furthermore, his actions also indirectly cause the deaths of hundreds, when the party sent in pursuit is decimated.⁹ Although neglecting other bonds does not directly contradict the popular opinion of their friendship, it does temper the blind belief that the bandits are virtuous in their brotherhood. Here, in terms of cost to life, Sung Chiang commits a greater evil: he may have saved the life of a single brother, but in doing so, takes the lives of a hundred others. Thus, while his actions have an honorable motivation, and thus are not wholly immoral, the consequences mean that neither are they inarguably good.

I follow C. T. Hsia in making a distinction when considering the bonds of brotherhood between the Liang-shan bandits: there is a significant difference between the acts of the bandits in the individual hero cycles and the acts of the band as a whole.¹⁰ Interactions between bandits during individual hero cycles, especially when neither of these bandits has yet joined the band, usually have positive motivations, even if the results are less than desirable. It is only once Sung Chiang joins the band and later becomes its leader, that the imperfections in these bonds are revealed. The first of such flaws is seen in the factional frictions within the band, the most significant being the rivalry for leadership between Ch’ao Kai and Sung Chiang. Ch’ao Kai insists on defending his position as head of the band, wary of Sung Chiang’s popularity. Sung Chiang does not do anything overt to wrest leadership away from Ch’ao Kai, but the threat of his popularity and skill are felt keenly enough that Ch’ao Kai attempts, time and time again, to flaunt his own skill in order to prove himself superior to “his chief contender for supremacy.”¹¹ It is here that the bonds between bandits are weakest; their vow to hold each other in the highest esteem and to view each other as allies falls apart once they begin seeing one another as rivals

⁸ Pearl S. Buck, trans., *All Men Are Brothers* (New York: The John Day Company, 1937), pp. 289–91. Hsia uses the same example to argue this point; see Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 86.

⁹ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 301–9.

¹⁰ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 93.

¹¹ Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel—Ssu ta ch’i-shu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 341.

for power. Although we cannot judge the morality of Sung Chiang and Ch’ao Kai’s actions, since neither of them takes any overt measures to secure power, their claims of brotherhood, believed and esteemed in popular lore, here ring hollow.

The most glaring violations of the Liang-shan bandits’ code of brotherhood occur when they attempt to recruit new members. The most heinous of these is the recruitment of Ch’in Ming and Chu T’ung. To recruit Ch’in Ming, Sung Chiang orders a soldier to disguise himself as Ch’in Ming and pretend to command an attack on the city of Ch’in Chou. As a result, Ch’in Ming is denounced as a traitor, and his wife and children are put to death. The author glosses over this injustice by claiming that Ch’in Ming’s joining was fate, by appealing to the friendship and courtesy the band has shown him, and by having Sung Chiang immediately offer Ch’in Ming a new bride.¹² Ch’in Ming, “seeing how deep and tender was the friendship of these men for him, could but give up grieving for anything.”¹³ However, this line is exceptionally weak; the fact that his family was massacred cannot be dismissed so easily. By making Ch’in Ming acquiesce so quickly, the author is brushing aside the injustices dealt to him. If the bandits held friendship above everything as they claimed to do, if they were as virtuous as the public believed, they would not have stooped to such levels to recruit a fellow warrior. Another example of this perfidy is the bandits’ recruitment of Chu T’ung. Here, Sung Chiang orders Li K’uei to murder a four-year-old child, the magistrate’s son, whose safety has been entrusted to Chu T’ung, to force him to join. His anger at this treatment, felt so keenly that he demands a fight with Li K’uei, reflects the injustice dealt to him.¹⁴ Once again, the novel is only paying lip service to the ideal of brotherhood: Chu T’ung may not have been harmed physically, but true friendship and a decent moral code would have left him in peace, rather than forced him to enter the band.

Thus, we find that the moral code by which the Liang-shan bandits govern their interactions with one another is much less upright than one would have expected. For one thing,

¹² Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 594–6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 596.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 920–6. C. T. Hsia and Andrew Plaks both mention the unjust recruitment of Ch’in Ming and Chu T’ung; see Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 94–5; and Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, p. 343.

their upholding of the bonds of brotherhood above all else leads to unintended and disastrous consequences: saving one brother at the cost of a hundred other lives is not the most virtuous of actions. There are positive interactions between bandits during the individual hero cycles, where there are many instances of bandits helping one another, but once the bandits begin to act as a gang, their claims of brotherhood begin to disintegrate, as individuals begin to view one another as rivals for power, rather than as allies.

The final nail in the coffin of the bandits’ claims to brotherhood appears in their recruitment methods: the brutality shown here in bringing an “ally” into the fold is indefensible. From this we can infer the moral code that governs the bandits’ interactions with one another. On the surface, they claim to view each with respect, as allies. When the bandits are operating independently and freely, their behavior follows this claim closely. However, once some semblance of order among them is required, the claim degenerates, as the bandits’ suppressed feelings — jealousy and pride — are revealed by the factional frictions, and by the brutal recruitment methods: the bandit puts himself first, rather than his “brothers.” Here we not only see the first cracks in the image of the Liang-shan bandit as a virtuous individual, we also see the extremely tenuous ties that hold the band together.

III: Morality in interactions with government

The moral code governing the Liang-shan bandits’ actions against those in power appears more positive: here, generally, their behavior is more virtuous, less colored by pride and jealousy. Under Sung Chiang’s leadership, the bandits spend the last forty or so chapters of the 120–chapter version of the novel serving the empire; first they attain amnesty, and then they join the imperial forces in four expeditions against the true enemies of the state: the Liao dynasty and the Fang La rebels. The bandit group is constantly hounded by the emperor’s four evil ministers, however, culminating in the last campaign, which costs most of the bandits their lives, and in the poisoning of Sung Chiang by the ministers’ treachery at the end of the novel.¹⁵ Thus, we feel a

¹⁵ This summary of the last forty or so chapters is based on Irwin’s synopsis of the 120–chapter version of the novel. See Irwin, *Evolution of a Chinese Novel*, pp. 150–201.

sort of pity for the bandits: they served their empire loyally — C. T. Hsia aptly identifies Sung Chiang as “the prime symbol of Confucian service to the throne”¹⁶ — yet were ultimately betrayed. The positive moral code exhibited in this relationship by the patriot–bandits reflects the popular idea of them as essentially good. Chin Sheng-t’an’s version of the novel, however, excises this section. The longer version contradicts this view, while Chin Sheng-t’an’s version reinforces it. Since Chin Sheng-t’an’s changes to the novel were politically motivated,¹⁷ however, a reflection of his own beliefs rather than of popular opinion, we can disregard the changes and give our consideration to the earlier, longer version of the novel as more important for our purposes.

This does not mean that there are no instances of antagonism against officialdom. One of the more disturbing scenes of sadism in the novel occurs with the capture of Huang Wen-Ping, an official who earlier informed against Sung Chiang. The act of vengeance is not limited to Huang Wen-ping himself — the gang also kills his entire household: “outside and inside, old and young, forty or fifty people, they killed them all clean.”¹⁸ Once Huang Wen-Ping has been captured, Li K’uei immediately volunteers to mete out punishment for Huang Wen-Ping’s crimes, and he does so brutally: Huang Wen-Ping is carved up and eaten alive by Li K’uei. He is then cooked and made into a broth, to be consumed later by the rest of the band.¹⁹ C. T. Hsia makes a very compelling argument, in relation to this event, that it is a common thirst for extreme vengeance that ties the bandits together.²⁰ We will see later that this desire for revenge will be a deciding influence on the bandits’ interactions with ordinary people. Although both the massacre of Huang Wen-ping’s family, and the bandit’s cannibalism does not reflect well on the bandits’ morality — no crime would justify cannibalism, and the family, especially the children, should not be held responsible for his crimes — it does reflect popular opinion. To a public suffering under

¹⁶ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 107.

¹⁷ Irwin, *Evolution of a Chinese Novel*, p. 115. See also Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, pp. 110–1.

¹⁸ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, p. 722.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 726. See also Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 103.

²⁰ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 97.

corruption and misrule, the brutal punishment dealt to a member of the guilty class must have been acceptable and even pleasing.

Another dichotomy arises here: popular opinion views the Liang-shan bandits as being forced unwillingly into their unlawful life because of official injustice. However, it is really only Lin Ch’ung who fits this image: his wife is coveted by the son of Commander of the Bodyguard, and as a result, Lin Ch’ung is gotten rid of — flogged, branded, and exiled.²¹ Lin Ch’ung is thus “forced to climb Liang-shan,” a proverbial expression usually taken to represent heroes suffering under extreme persecution, compelled to join the bandit group as a last resort.²² Here, Lin Ch’ung’s actions are arguably moral: he is a passive victim of corruption, an upright citizen with no crimes to his name. He turns to outlawry because he is forced to, not because he wants to. On the other hand, the other bandits turn to outlawry for less upright reasons: either they must escape justice, because of violent outbursts, acts of vengeance, or coercion from other rebels, or they join willingly, because they are attracted to the bandit group’s fame.²³ In this case, it is much more difficult to argue for their morality. Since the alternative, to live within the law, was never denied to them as it was to Lin Ch’ung, their joining the band is significantly less praiseworthy.

In looking at the Liang-shan bandits’ interactions with officialdom, we find a generally more positive and less contradictory moral code than that governing their interactions with each other. Although there are individual instances of sadism, such as Li K’uei’s cannibalism of Huang Wen-ping, that mar the bandits’ interactions with officials, the last section of the novel, spent in earnest support of the empire, serves as a sort of redemption. It is ironic, then, that their support of the empire, here held to be a very moral cause, nevertheless contradicts the popular belief that the band was an anti-government force. The band’s other interactions with officials,

²¹ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 126–41. The fact that L’in Chung is notably the only bandit to suffer in this manner is mentioned by C. T. Hsia and Wai-ye Li: see Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 93, and Wai-Yee Li, “Full-Length Vernacular Fiction,” in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 629.

²² Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 93.

²³ Li, “Full-Length Vernacular Fiction,” p. 629.

however — Li K’uei killing an official, the persecution of Lin Ch’ung, and Sung Chiang’s death at the hands of the ministers — reflect the more usual ideas about the band: that they suffer under a corrupt regime much as the common people do. In fact, the greatest similarity between popular opinion and the novel’s depiction — the portrayal of government as corrupt — appears here. Lin Ch’ung is forced into exile because of official corruption. Wu Sung is unable to obtain justice for his elder brother’s murder by his wife (because the magistrate had been bribed by her lover).²⁴ Sung Chiang dies, poisoned through the treachery of the emperor’s ministers. In fact, these four ministers — Ts’ai Ching, T’ung Kuan, Yang Chieng, and Kao Ch’iu — become a symbol for the “corruption and weakness in the national life ... sound government cannot be restored without their ouster and punishment.”²⁵ The bandits here are as much the victims of official corruption as the common people. The novel ends on a poignant note: even the bandits are powerless, at the last, to force the government to change for the better.

IV: Morality in interactions with the common people

While popular opinion and the novel agree in the portrayal of government as corrupt, the view of the Liang-shan bandits as defenders of the common people against this government is the most difficult to reconcile with the novel. They are not the protectors they are boasted to be, because they cause harm more often than good. Of course, there are instances where individual bandits protect the common people. For example, Lu Ta kills the butcher who was oppressing an elderly man named Chin and his daughter Jade Lotus, forcing her to become his concubine and extorting their money. Lu Ta is protecting the weak from the strong: the butcher is aptly named “Cheng, the Bully of Kuangsi.” Lu Ta’s protection of the weak continues in this fashion, as he also saves an old man’s daughter from being forcibly married to a robber chief, and he also rescues Lin Ch’ung from the guards bringing him into exile, as they are plotting to kill him. Here, both Lu Ta and Lin Ch’ung are shown to be extremely virtuous: Lin Ch’ung requests the guards’

²⁴ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, p. 454.

²⁵ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 110.

lives be spared, and Lu Ta complies.²⁶ Using these actions, James J. Y. Liu aptly describes Lu Ta as a knight-errant, a beacon of chivalry: someone who did what was “necessary to redress wrongs and help the poor and the distressed.”²⁷

As discussed earlier, one of the main urges driving the bandits’ code of ethics is vengeance: exacting an eye for an eye, with a tendency to take justice into their own hands.²⁸ In some cases, the vengeance is arguably moral. For example, Wu Sung, following the murder of his elder brother by the latter’s wife, P’an Chin-lien, he first attempts to obtain justice by appealing to a magistrate. When this fails, because the magistrate has been bribed by her lover, Hsi-men Ch’ing, he forces P’an Chin-lien to confess to the crime in public, before killing her and her lover. He then turns himself in, confessing to his crimes and accepting his punishment.²⁹ He “only resorts to violence to avenge his brother’s death after having failed to obtain justice from the law,” not only doing everything openly, but also accepting the punishment for his crime, which was itself a virtuous action.³⁰

In other cases, the vengeance meted out is far from noble. Two examples of this are Sung Chiang’s murder of Yen P’o-hsi and Lei Heng’s murder of the singing girl Pai Hsiu-ying.³¹ In

²⁶ James J. Y. Liu argues the case that Lu Ta is a knight-errant using these three episodes; see Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, p. 113.

In Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, these three episodes occur on pp. 54–60, pp. 93–101, and pp. 151–2 respectively.

²⁷ Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, p. 1.

²⁸ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 97.

²⁹ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 455–70. Liu compares Wu Sung’s actions here with Shih Hsiu and Yang Hsiung’s murder of Yang Hsiung’s adulterous wife in Wu Sung’s favor, but makes no mention of Wu Sung’s later massacre, see Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, pp. 112–3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³¹ Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 332–56, and Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, pp. 909–15. Li uses these two examples to illustrate violent bursts of anger driving bandits to Liang-shan; see Li, “Full-length Vernacular Fiction,” p. 629. Plaks uses the example of Yen P’o-hsi to develop the ironic undercutting of Sung Chiang as a heroic figure; see Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, pp. 330–1.

Sung Chiang's case, the murder is instigated by Yen P'o-hsi's threat to reveal his relationship with the bandits. He murders her in a fit of anger and then runs away from justice. Lei Heng murders Pai Hsiu-ying in a similar fit of anger when she strikes his mother, and he also flees from justice. The actions of Sung Chiang and Lei Heng here are inarguably immoral: the provocations were slight, the retaliation was disproportionate, and more importantly, in stark contrast to Wu Sung, they were not willing to accept punishment for their crimes. Although Wu Sung acted virtuously in his killing of P'an Chin-lien, his vengeance in an ensuing episode is far from admirable. When Wu Sung is attacked by Commander Chang's men, in support of Chiang, “the Gate God,” Wu Sung's revenge is not limited to the instigators: he kills Chang's wife, his children, their nurse, and many other innocents.³² The massacre here reflects extremely poorly on Wu Sung's character: not only does he ignore pleas for mercy from the servants, he also decides to steal some silver and gold from Commander Chang's mansion.³³ Thus, while some sort of retaliation may be justified by the attempt on his life, the degree of retaliation — the indiscriminate and merciless killing, augmented by the ignoble casual theft, precludes any argument for the virtue, or chivalry, of Wu Sung.

The flaw in viewing the Liang-shan bandits as defenders of the common people is emphasized further by the bandit group's attack on the villages of Chu-chia-chung and Tseng-t'ou-shih. C. T. Hsia makes a striking observation here, noting the distinction between the actions of individual bandits and the band as a whole. The actions of individual bandits may fall on both sides of the moral divide, but in this episode the actions of the band are inarguably wrong. The two villages have committed no crime: in fact, they are peopled by individuals of the same independent spirit as the bandits themselves. They are annihilated only because their hostile independence is a threat to Liang-shan. In a display of stark brutality, the bandit group, rather than making peace with the clan leader of Tseng-t'ou-shih, takes the opportunity to wipe out the

³² Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 526–9. Hsia uses this to present his case for that the bandits were bound by a common thirst for extreme vengeance; see Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 97.

³³ Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, p. 322.

whole clan.³⁴ There can be no argument for just vengeance here. The two villages are not a real threat to Liang-shan, and they have committed no crime, certainly none that could justify the massacre of a whole clan. The bandits are killing the very people they are supposed to protect.

The most incriminating example of immorality on the part of the Liang-shan bandits in their interactions with the common people is the streak of misogyny that runs through the novel. An incident concerning P'an Ch'iao-yun, Yang Hsiung's wife, is an example. Shih Hsiu has accused her of adultery, and at first Yang Hsiung does not believe it. When Shih Hsiu produces proof, however, Yang Hsiung kills her, to “cement his bond with Shih Hsiu in a blood ritual” confirming their brotherhood.³⁵ Although her adultery warrants some sort of punishment, the murder is an astonishingly savage one — Yang Hsiung rips out her tongue before disemboweling her and then hangs her vital organs on a tree.³⁶ These two men think nothing of the murder, even going so far as to remove all of her jewelry to use in their escape from justice. No argument can be made here to justify their actions: the two did not even consider appealing for justice, as Wu Sung did. The punishment they imposed in no way matched the degree of the crime, and neither did they show remorse for their actions. Yang Hsiung's murder and Shih Hsiu's cooperation in it are unquestionably immoral, contradicting once again the popular notion of the bandits as gallant protectors.

It is in examining the Liang-shan bandits' moral code governing their actions towards the common people, however, that we see the most disturbing deviations from the popular opinion of them. In this aspect, both individual bandits and the band as a whole have a very negative impact on the common people they are supposed to be protecting. Early in the novel, we see some instances of virtue, such as in Lu Ta's adventures. However, the darker interactions far outweigh the good, both in scope and frequency: the extreme violence and thirst for vengeance that drives most of the bandits' actions manifests itself in senseless, uncalled-for murders and massacres.

³⁴ Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 95–6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87. Liu also mentions this episode in judging Shih Hsiu's chivalry; see Liu, *Chinese Knight-errant*, p. 113. For the episode itself, see Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, pp. 812–28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 828–9

Especially in the cases of misogyny, and the bandit group's purging of several villages, the provocation is slight, almost non-existent, and it cannot justify the bandits' actions. Thus, we cannot reconcile popular opinion with the bandits' actions as they are portrayed in the novel: they are supposed to be protectors of the common people against the government, yet they seem to inflict more harm on the people than does the government itself.

V. Conclusion

In the end, a clear difference emerges between the popular view of the Liang-shan bandits, from the Southern Sung to the late Ming dynasty, and their portrayal in *Water Margin*. Their bonds of brotherhood are not as strong as popular opinion believes; they cause more harm than good; and they are ignored in factional frictions and recruitment drives. Similarly, their relationship with the government is not as confrontational as generally thought, as evidenced by their eventual support of the empire and by the fact that the majority of the bandits are not forced into the band because of the government's corruption. Finally, and most importantly, the image of the bandits as protectors of the common people is shattered by the extreme violence, in all but a few cases, that characterizes their interactions with them.

The dichotomy between popular opinion and *Water Margin* can be attributed to the novel's evolution in the hands of the late Ming literati, especially evident in Chin Sheng-t'an's edition. Representing as it does literati culture, it is a reflection of the views of the elite rather than of the commoners, as were the dramas, shorter stories, and oral stories that preceded it.³⁷

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³⁷ Plaks makes a very convincing argument that *Water Margin* is representative of late Ming literati culture and a significant evolution of material preceding it, in *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*—Ssu ta ch'i-shu.

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Incoherence and Intoxication:
Alcohol as a Rare Source of Consistency in *Outlaws of the Marsh*
by
Josh Vittor

If a reader were to turn through the pages of the classic Chinese novel *Shuihu Zhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh),¹ he might gather that the novel depicted the adventures of various outlaws or bandits, all of whom had a penchant for violence. He might wonder why there seems to be so little coherence in terms of plot or character development from chapter to chapter, despite leading directives at the end of each chapter that seem to attempt to connect them. In fact, a first-time reader might be surprised to find him- or herself tracking the presence of copious amounts of alcohol in the novel, simply because it seems to be the only thematic entity that consistently appears.

The notion that alcohol, and its implications for the main characters, could play a central role in what is considered one of the greatest novels in Chinese might seem a bit silly. Still, it is difficult to deny its prominence when a perusal of the first hundred pages of *Outlaws of the Marsh* yields far more mentions of alcohol and drunkenness than it does of any one character! Our reader would soon discover that this massive tome is often disjointed and unpredictable; this variability is part of what makes it such an exciting and popular novel, but it also can be somewhat alienating and confusing. As it turns out, the repeated consumption of alcohol is one of the few elements on which our reader can count, providing a rare source of consistency in the novel and a starting point from which to discern the novel's more lofty thematic aspirations.

Outlaws of the Marsh is over 1600 pages long and has 108 protagonists. They are, collectively, *the* outlaws of the marsh, the members of a band of bandits, exiled heroes, and bloodthirsty criminals who refer to themselves as the “gallant fraternity.” While the novel

¹ *Shuihu zhuan* (水滸傳) has been translated into English several times, under several different titles. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to the novel as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and to the translation by Sidney Shapiro.

assuredly focuses primarily on a select few of these outlaws, it is still, even for the most diligent and focused reader, quite a daunting task to keep the names, places, and stories straight. The abundance of characters and plotlines has the effect of isolating specific stories in the novel — the respective accounts of Lu Da’s transformation into the monk Sagacious Lu and Lin Chong’s being framed for a crime and subsequent exile, for example, are completely distinct and separate stories. Yet they occur within pages of each other. This lack of a single, coherent plot makes *Outlaws of the Marsh* rather hard to read, hence the need for the leading questions at the end of each chapter. Just as a modern television drama lures viewers into tuning in next week with tantalizing scenes of the upcoming episode, the chapter-ending questions serve as a narratological ploy, providing artificial cohesion to consecutive chapters that may not have anything to do with each other.

While these questions perhaps provide a relatively accessible bridge between chapters for the reader, they do little to help us in our natural scholarly pursuit of discerning the themes, character development, and takeaway messages of the novel. It is hard, in other words, to conduct an effective and useful literary analysis on a novel so disjointed and complicated. This difficulty translates into a bizarre repertoire of analytical literature on the novel — without coherent and consistent plotlines and thematic material that transcend the entire novel, how ought scholars effectively digest the plentiful material into a concise commentary? The problem is exemplified by C. T. Hsia, whose *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* provides six short essays, one on each of what Hsia considers “historically the most important landmarks of [Chinese literature].”² His essay on *Outlaws of the Marsh* (he refers to the novel as *The Water Margin* or simply *Shui hu*), is a forty-page essay offering very little in terms of an underlying thesis or argument. He discusses a variety of topics and themes, including but not limited to the historical accuracy of the plot, the evolution of the book’s authorship, the role of the heroic code held by the novel’s heroes, and a character study of Song Jiang, the leader of the bandits in most

² C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 1.

of the novel.³ Hsia’s essay, although a fascinating and informed introduction to this daunting novel, is nevertheless a disjointed analysis that itself adds to the unwieldiness of *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Elements of the novel are elaborated, but the essay does not help the reader get a grasp of the work as a whole.

In light of the inconsistent nature of *Outlaws of the Marsh*, as evidenced by Hsia’s thesis-less essay, I shall try, in the following pages, to illuminate just one element of the novel that actually does offer some consistency and coherence. I will focus on the role of alcohol in *Outlaws of the Marsh*, its prevalence, and the way in which it helps to define and distinguish the bandit protagonists. I will show how (or that) alcohol plays a remarkably important role in the novel, often serving as a signal for a looming fight or conflict. The heroes consume vast quantities of “wine,”⁴ which, as Hsia suggests in his essay and will be discussed below, becomes an extension of their masculinity. From the very beginning of the novel, alcohol is a visible and active motif, which transcends the otherwise divergent plotlines and myriad characters.

This is not to say that alcohol’s role in the novel is salient *only* because it is pervasive. The extent and particulars of its widespread presence in the novel have several significant thematic and symbolic repercussions. In addition to those mentioned above, Hsia associates the bandits’ relative lack of sexual interaction with their penchant for drink. There are very few women in the novel, and even fewer who actually have physical contact with the male heroes. “The heroes compensate,” Hsia argues, “for their sexual abstinence by their gross delight in meat and wine.”⁵ This notion — that alcohol represents an alternative outlet for demonstrating masculinity — as well as other potential explanations for its prevalence will be explored below.

I’ll first discuss the predominance of alcohol in *Outlaws of the Marsh* and then examine *why* it plays such a visible role. One place to start is before the novel even begins — that is, in

³ Hsia, “The Water Margin,” from *The Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 75–115.

⁴ “Wine” is actually a misleading translation of the Chinese character 酒, “jiu,” which simply means “alcohol.” Grapes, the source of what we traditionally refer to as “wine,” didn’t appear in China until well after the events of the novel. Thanks to Dr. Victor Mair for his insights on this question, April 16, 2009.

⁵ Hsia, “The Water Margin,” p. 89.

the table of contents, which already demonstrates its dominance. One of the distinguishing features of Chinese novels is their chapter titles, the majority of which are two-line couplets describing, some in a fair amount of detail, what will happen during that chapter. This characteristic applies to each of the hundred chapters in *Outlaws*. (In addition to the plot-spoiling chapter titles, each chapter in the original Chinese version of *Shui Huzhuan* was prefaced by poems which even further ruin the suspense of what is to follow. In his translation of *Outlaws*, Shapiro cuts these poems, referring to them as “little better than doggerel.”⁶).

Of the first thirty-two chapter titles, *four* contain the word “drunk,” used to describe the protagonist of the chapter. The first of these is Chapter 5, which is called “Drunk, the Little King Raises the Gold-Spangled Bed Curtains; Lu the Tattooed Monk Throws Peach Blossom Village into Confusion.”⁷ The chapter describes Sagacious Lu, one of the first bandits we meet, who has become a monk, been sent away from his first monastery for — surprise! — disruptive behavior due to his consumption of alcohol. On his journey, he spends an evening at a manor house at which he receives the hospitality of an old man named Grandpa Liu. Lu is treated to dinner, during which he consumes multiple “pots of wine and platters of meat,” to the amazement of Grandpa Liu.⁸ In exchange for the meal and drink, Lu agrees to save Liu’s daughter from a forced, unwanted marriage, which involves Lu getting even drunker before physically beating the supposedly brutish suitor senseless. This scene, predicted aptly by the descriptive chapter title, follows a formula that becomes routine as the novel continues. Lu, the chapter’s protagonist, is seen drinking profusely, after which he fights the bandit suitor. Throughout the novel, the consumption of alcohol tends to lead directly to physical altercation, linking drinking directly to physicality and, often, brutality. In our search for consistency, therefore, in this long and complicated novel, alcohol serves as a reliable signal that conflict is coming.

Making up the rest of the four “drunk” chapters mentioned above are Chapters 21, 29,

⁶ Sidney Shapiro, “Translator’s Note,” *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 81.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 83.

and 32. Their names are, respectively, “Drunk, the Old Bawd Beats Tang the Ox; Song Jiang Slays Poxi in a Fit of Anger,”⁹ “Wu Song, Drunk, Beats Jiang the Gate Guard Giant; Shi En Once More Controls His Mengzhou Establishment,”¹⁰ and “Pilgrim Wu, Drunk, Pummels Kong Liang; Elegant Tiger Chivalrously Frees Song Jiang.”¹¹ It isn’t necessary to relate the plots of these three chapters in as specific detail as Chapter 5, as the chapter titles are sufficient. Crucially, each of these chapters follow the same blueprint as described above — the protagonist drinks copious amounts of wine and subsequently gets into some form of physical battle, almost always resulting in victory for our hero. Often, the pattern will occur twice in one chapter — in Chapter 21, for example, Song Jiang drinks with Poxi’s mother before becoming enraged with his wife, subsequently killing her (more on this later). Furthermore, this drunken rage motif is not simply restricted to the chapters with the adjective “drunk” in the title. For at least the first half of the novel, alcohol plays a crucial role in nearly every chapter, almost always leading to bloodshed and death.

Although no chapter after Chapter 32 happens to have a title that contains the word “drunk,” there is still plenty of alcohol consumption during the second half of the novel. The drinking similarly tends to lead to fighting, but the emphasis, at least based on what the authors deemed important enough to offer the readers as chapter titles, isn’t placed as heavily on the actual inebriated state of the protagonists. For example, in Chapter 53, Li Kui is shown drinking wine, before brutally attacking an old man with an axe. This appears to follow the progression discussed above, but there is much less, if any, emphasis on Li Kui’s physical state of inebriation.

Without belaboring the point, there is an interesting potential explanation for this sudden deviation in chapter titles. In the middle of the novel, Song Jiang, arguably the most central and important of the 108 heroes, unifies the bandits of Liangshan Marsh unequivocally under his leadership. Although the Gallant Fraternity had existed previously, under different leaders, the focus of the narration was entirely on the individual heroes, and how they eventually found

⁹ Ibid, p. 318.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 451.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 490

themselves a part of the Liangshan band. After Song’s unification of them, the focus shifts to the band itself. As Hsia argues, “With the prominent exception of Song Jiang and Li Kui, most of the heroes are memorable only for their pre-Liangshan career. Once they join the band, they tend to lose their identity and become less distinguishable from one another in their uniform capacity as military commanders.”¹² Therefore, while the protagonists continue to drink, and their drunkenness continues to lead to violence, the emphasis on their inebriation is perhaps diminished because they are doing so as part of the Gallant Fraternity. After all, before Li Kui attacks Luo the Sage in Chapter 53, he announces himself: “I am Black Whirlwind¹³ from Liangshan Marsh. I’m under orders to invite Gongsun Sheng...”¹⁴ The violence that ensues isn’t directly due to being drunk, as it seems to have been earlier on. Rather, it is in the name of the Liangshan Marsh bandits. There is a subtle shift in thematic emphasis, which justifies the change in chapter headings.

There are countless fascinating examples of alcohol’s prevalence in the novel. Rather than enumerating them further, I will turn to the question of *why*, exactly, alcohol is so important in *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Hsia offers one answer to this question, with the notion that our heroes use the excessive consumption of food and alcohol as an alternative means to demonstrate their masculinity in the absence of sexually attractive women. The bandits don’t see the few women that do exist in the novel as objects of potential sexuality or physical attraction — they are, strangely perhaps, asexual beings. To be impervious to sexual temptation is, as Hsia points out, one of the most crucial tests for a hero of Liangshan Marsh.¹⁵ For example, Song Jiang briefly has a wife, Poxi, though he never is shown to have anything short of contempt, let alone sexual desire, for her. In fact, she is depicted as more of an annoyance than anything else, ultimately

¹² Hsia, “The Water Margin,” p. 85.

¹³ Most of the heroes of the Gallant Fraternity had epithets like this one. Some, like Song Jiang, had multiple sobriquets.

¹⁴ Shapiro, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, p. 858.

¹⁵ Hsia, “The Water Margin,” p. 88.

prompting Song, “in a fit of [drunken] anger,”¹⁶ to kill her! Women are simply afterthoughts, at best, for the heroes of the novel. However, this “sexual puritanism,” as Hsia calls it, is not accompanied by an equally powerful rejection of indulgence in food and liquor, as one might expect.¹⁷ Rather, the bandits binge on both food and drink, as if it to make up for whatever masculinity they lose in forgoing women.

One can glean a further suggestion of liquor’s embodiment of masculinity in *Outlaws* from the heavy correlation that the heroes place between alcohol and physical prowess in battle. We have already seen that there is a perceptible connection between the presence of alcohol and physical confrontation in the novel. What is even more striking than the mere temporal relationship between alcohol and fighting is how the bandits themselves relate the two activities. During the scene between Sagacious Lu and Grandpa Liu discussed above, Liu tells Lu to not “drink [himself] into a stupor,”¹⁸ after calling for wine to be brought to the table. Lu’s response is quite notable, as well as quite humorous: “When I’m one-tenth drunk,” he assures Liu, “I can use only one-tenth of my skill, but when I’m ten-tenths drunk I’m at the top of my form.”¹⁹ This hilarious statement is said in complete sincerity, and represents a remarkable further juxtaposition of alcohol and its impact on physical skill. In a similar scene later in the novel, Shi En worries that by the time he and Wu Song reach their destination, where they will meet an antagonist Wu has agreed to fight, Wu will have drunk himself into a stupor. Wu responds, “You’re afraid I won’t be able to fight? Actually, I’m no good without wine. The more I drink, the better I am. It’s only when I’m really drunk that I have my full strength.”²⁰ For these bandits, alcohol is like spinach for Popeye. They honestly believe (and it is a warranted belief, in the terms of the novel) that their success in battle is directly related to their level of inebriation.

¹⁶ Shapiro, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, p. 318.

¹⁷ Hsia, “The Water Margin,” p. 89

¹⁸ Shapiro, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, p. 89

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 455

The outlandish and often funny statements of Wu and Lu help prove that the tendency for the consumption of alcohol to signal impending physical conflict in the novel is not merely coincidence. Not only do the bandits often fight drunk, they actively seek to do so. The alcohol is simply an extension and enhancement of the demonstration of masculinity embodied by their violent behavior. In one of the most famous anecdotes in the novel, Wu Song, with his bare hands, kills a giant tiger that has been terrorizing a village. It should come as no surprise that before Wu’s famous encounter with the tiger, he is depicted drinking, copiously, at a nearby inn. In addition to supposedly fueling his admirable prowess as a fighter, Wu’s tolerance for alcohol is itself a demonstration of his strength. The Chinese commentator Chin Sheng-t’an underlines this idea, by pointing out in the beginning of the chapter that “the next few chapters from here on all describe Wu Song’s supernatural valor. The wine drinking here should be read as one section, the fight with the tiger as another.”²¹ His ability to drink so much wine is not simply tied to his valor in battle, it is a demonstration of his strength in its own right. Despite the innkeeper’s warning regarding the wine’s potency, Wu demands to drink far more than “ordinary” people would be capable of tolerating, to which Chin points out, “All this [demonstration of Wu’s drinking] is to show his valor.”²² After leaving the inn, as Wu crosses the ridge toward the territory in which the tiger lurks, his drunkenness is consistently emphasized as an omen for the impending fight. He “walked up the ridge heedlessly on the strength of the wine,”²³ now, apparently, drunk enough to summon the necessary strength necessary for the impending battle. This famous excerpt of the story is remembered primarily for the exciting and evocative depiction of Wu’s confrontation with the tiger. By paying heed to the initial scene in the inn, however, it can also serve as a fascinating and appropriate microcosm of the underlying relationship between alcohol and violence for our heroes.

²¹ “Wu Song Fights the Tiger,” excerpt from *Shuihu Zhuan* (Chin Sheng-t’an commentary), from *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 998.

²² “Wu Song Fights the Tiger” (Chin Sheng-t’an commentary), p. 999.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 1001.

While modern readers might not admire the heroes’ penchant for either intoxication or violence, it is interesting to note how, despite these rather deplorable tendencies, we still “root” for the bandits. One would think, for example, that Song’s murder of Poxi, an outrageous display of brutality, particularly towards a woman, would serve as an irrevocable blemish on Song’s character. To the contrary, however, Song Jiang stands out as the unifier and leader of the Longshan bandits. He is inherently a “good guy,” and despite the most abhorrent actions, we still for some reason hope he and his brethren succeed.

Another corollary that extends from the realization that we actively cheer for Song Jiang and his brethren despite their deplorable actions is a potential commentary on how society perceives the consumption and the violence it incites. In contemporary society, both Chinese and Western, the superfluous consumption of alcohol is, for the most part, frowned upon. One would be hard pressed to find a piece of contemporary literature (aside from “frat-boy” humor of the “Animal House” ilk) that depicts binge drinking in a positive light. Yet *Outlaws of the Marsh*, one of the most popular and beloved classic Chinese novels, not only consistently describes its characters drinking themselves silly, but celebrates the behavior, and implies that they would not be nearly as successful at their vocation (violence) were they sober. Perhaps Chinese society in the twelfth century, when the events of the novel take place, was far more liberal in its tendencies towards both inebriation and, often, the violence it induces.

The prevalence of alcohol and violence in the novel, and the close relationship between the two, leads us to this somewhat disturbing question of why we hope for and expect the best for these heroes. Perhaps it is simply because they are the driving forces behind an exciting and compelling adventure to which we become emotionally attached as we view events from their perspective. Hsia calls the portrayal of the bandits’ binge drinking (and eating) as a “depiction of rude humanity heartily indulging its appetite.”²⁴ He qualifies this classification by suggesting that it represents the “most endearing trait of the Chinese novel.”²⁵ Readers, both Chinese and Western, enjoy reading about what may be socially taboo. These heroes aren’t heroes at all —

²⁴ Hsia, “The Water Margin,” p. 89

²⁵ Ibid, p. 89

they are drunken brutes who savagely murder men, women, and children without discretion. And yet, we like them. Perhaps *that* is the real literary reason for the prevalence of alcohol here. It, like the violence to which it is so closely related, adds a certain pizzazz that appeals to readers, both centuries ago and today. Or perhaps we find it acceptable simply because the novel depicts a world so far removed from ours in both time and place that we might assume such outlandish behavior would be okay.

It is indeed strange to think that out of one of the most cherished and famous novels in Chinese literature, alcohol has emerged as a salient theme on which one can base an analysis. The myriad characters and storylines make the novel unpredictable and daunting. At the very least, the relationship between alcohol and violence offers readers not only the excitement discussed above but a measure of predictability as well. When we see a bandit drinking bowl after bowl of wine — and we see this in almost every chapter — we can assume that a fight is not too far off. In a story with over 1600 pages, and nearly an equal measure of characters and plotlines, the consumption of alcohol provides a bit of necessary coherence and reliability. But it is not simply the consistency of alcohol that merits our attention. Because it is so pervasive, it has led us to some of the more serious thematic elements — masculinity, the social perspective on inebriation, and drinking’s enabling relationship with violence — that might have otherwise been difficult to discern.

The Values of the Mountain Liang Outlaws and of Contemporary Gangs

by
Jin Guan

Water Margin, one of the four great Chinese classical novels, describes the lives of 108 “good fellows” (*haohan*, 好汉). The key questions many readers contemplate are: What qualifies the 108 to be members of the Mountain Liang *haohan*, and how do they compare to contemporary Chinese gang members? To help answer these questions, examples of several major *haohans* in the first two parts (43 chapters) of John and Alex Dent-Young’s translation of Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong’s 120-chapter version of *Water Margin* are examined in this study.

The main characteristic of a *haohan* is adherence to a code of honor (*yiqi*, 义气), and this ultimately serves as the members’ entry ticket into the Mountain Liang. While the Mountain Liang *haohans* share with contemporary gang members the characteristic of abiding by a code of honor, they are nevertheless drastically different. *Haohans* from the *Water Margin* are able to maintain their identities after joining the Mount Liang outlaws because either they were forced by the treatment of corrupt government officials to join, or they could not tolerate injustice. On the margin of the society, these *haohans* still practice their values and hope to have a positive influence on society by fighting against injustice.

On the other hand, modern gang members are opportunists driven by desire for money, power, and status. They join gangs of their own free will and do not care about their society’s well being as long as they benefit from their activities. Careful examination of the two groups reveals that the differences between them are a result of differing values born of different social and political environments.

The leader of the Mount Liang *haohan*, Song Jiang, was a Confucian who imposed those values on his group, so that the members became a positive force for society. Because of Song’s

strong Confucian beliefs, he eventually persuaded his fellow *haohans* to surrender to serve the government in order to bring honor to their family names.

Mountain Liang Values

The *haohan* values are defined in five different categories: sense of honor, generosity, sexual abstinence, sense of justice, and outstanding physical ability. Among these categories, honor, generosity, and justice are the most crucial in terms of the qualifications for being accepted into Mountain Liang society. Why are sexual abstinence and outstanding physical skill not as important? Because the men that the *haohan* oppose usually also possess good skill in the martial arts and can use various weapons as well as they. For instance, Instructor Hong, originally the martial arts master of Chai Jin, was overconfident about his own skills in using a staff. He deemed Lin Chong to be an imposter and challenged him to a fight (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 192). However, when the villains fight against *haohans*, they are usually outmatched. That is the case during the scene in which Lin Chong easily defeats the real imposter, Instructor Hong. There are plenty of examples of the *haohans*' amazing physical strength. For example, Lu Da plucks up a willow tree with ease, and Wu Song kills a tiger with his bare hands while drunk.

Haohans believe sexual activities weaken one's health and fighting skills. They perceive sexual abstinence as a test of the *haohan*'s spiritual strength (Hsia 1996, 88). Most *haohans* consider women either a source of trouble or a burden. For example, when Li Kui is bragging about his feats to Song Jiang, Magic Messenger, and White Eel in a restaurant, a young girl appears and interrupts his stories by singing. Infuriated, Li Kui “thrust his parted fingers into the girl's face” (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 2, 331). Because of his strength, the girl collapses and faints. As a result, the owner of the inn detains all of the *haohans* and threatens to report the affair to the police. All because women cause trouble.

Every *haohan* of Mountain Liang possesses a sense of justice. None would ever tolerate unfairness regardless of who is experiencing it. They would not hesitate to involve themselves at the first sight of injustice. For example, Lu Da, the primary *haohan* in *Water Margin*, becomes a monk and then an outlaw because of his zero tolerance for injustice. As soon as he learns that the

Butcher Zheng’s bullying behavior has prevented a girl and her old father from returning to their hometown, Lu Da readily stands up for them. First he gives the helpless victims some money for their traveling expenses (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 72–73). Then he ensures that the two can safely leave Weizhou for their hometown in the eastern capital by staying at the inn in order to prevent the waiter from interfering with their escape (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 74). After they leave, Lu Da is ready to teach Butcher Zheng a lesson. He first pulls a prank on the butcher by making him cut meat for an hour, then throws all the neatly packaged meat in Butcher Zheng’s face. Greatly angered, Butcher Zheng tries to attack Lu Da with his knife, but Lu Da kills him with three blows (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 76–79). For this crime, Lu Da is forced to flee from Weizhou and loses his official position as commandant in the army. To escape government pursuit, he becomes a monk; that is how he gets his name, Lu Zhishen. He gets into this great trouble for two complete strangers.

Most *haohans* of Mountain Liang, like Lu Da, fight injustice without considering even the most severe consequences. The *haohans* go to an even greater length for revenge when they themselves suffer injustice. For example, Li Kui goes home to escort his mother, but on the way he encounters a false Li Kui, who attempts to rob him. Li Kui spares the impostor’s life, out of consideration for the latter’s old mother, and gives him some money to begin again. When Li Kui finds out that the impostor was lying, and the impostor later tries to kill him, Li Kui slits the impostor’s throat and eats his leg for a meal (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 2, 425–427).

Another *haohan* characteristic is generosity. The *haohans* are generous not just with money and possessions but also with their willingness to sacrifice jobs, families, social status, and life itself. Song Jiang is the best representative of this generosity. He meets one of the other *haohans*, Xue Yong, in fact, because of his generosity with money. When Song Jiang first arrives at Jieyang, Xue Yong is demonstrating his skill in martial arts. But when he asks for donations after his performance, no one donates even a cent because a big boss from the city has intimidated everyone. Song Jiang, then a convict, defiantly gives five taels of silver to Xue Yong. Xue Yong greatly appreciates this act of benevolence and says, “I humbly bow down to you, sir. I beg to inquire your name, that I may proclaim it whatever I go” (Dent-Young and Dent-Young

1994, vol. 2, 287–288). Song Jiang gets himself in a great deal of trouble for his action, as the big boss threatens later to take his life. He acquires the nickname Opportune Rain, because anyone in trouble can rely on his support. He truly lives up to that title when he rescues his friend, Chao Gai, and his men from being arrested by government troops. Song Jiang had been a registrar of Yuncheng, but he loses his job and becomes an outlaw because of the generous act he commits for Chao Gai. Inspector Ho had an order directly from the governor to command Yucheng’s magistrate to arrest Chao Gai immediately. Inspector Ho tells Song Jiang everything concerning the case before he delivers the order to the magistrate of Yuncheng. As soon as Inspector Ho is out of sight, however, Song Jiang rides his horse to Chao Gai’s manor and informs him of the government’s plan (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 337–339). Chao Gai could not have got away and joined the Mountain Liang group without Song Jiang’s opportune information. Song Jiang’s predilection for aiding the criminals later comes back to haunt him. He is forced to kill Poxi, who threatens to disclose his secret ties with Chao Gai. As a result, he becomes an outlaw. Song Jiang loses his job and is forced to leave his family, all in order to help his friends.

The *haohan*’s sense of justice and his generosity are both driven by the code of honor (*yiqi*). C. T. Hsia defined *yiqi* as “dictates of friendship,” in which a *haohan* would put his duty to friendship above everything (Hsia 1996, 86). For instance, when Song Jiang rescues Chao Gai, he was being disobedient to his superior and unfilial to his father. His action was considered a crime that would implicate his father. However, W. J. F. Jenner argues that *yiqi* is more than friendship; it is defined as the principle on which a *haohan* would go to any length to get a friend or complete stranger out of trouble or avenge him. Jenner cites the example of a *haohan* treating a stranger the same way that he would treat his friends. Shi Jin was touched by sense of honor shown by the trio of minor bandits when two of them were willing to give up their lives for the third, in order to fulfill their oath of dying on the same day. Shi Jin returns the captured bandit and becomes good friends with the trio merely out of *yiqi* (Jenner, 1996, 10–11).

The ideal expression of *yiqi* is the willingness to make a complete sacrifice of oneself when no normal obligation requires it (Jenner 1996, 11). An example is the behavior of Wang Lun, who was the original chieftain of Mountain Liang. When Chao Gai and his company first

arrive in Mountain Liang seeking refuge, Wang Lun tries to use the same excuses that he used with Lin Chong to turn away Chao Gai and his group. Unable to bear Wang Lun's jealousy of someone more capable and his inability to keep the *haohans*, Lin Chong kills Wang Lun and insists that the more generous and honorable Chao Gai take the chieftain's position (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 1, 368–371). He himself settles for the fourth-ranking post. Lin Chong did not gain anything from killing Wang Lun: he did it for the sake of *yiqi*.

After examining the five *haohan* values, there is one conclusion that can be drawn about the *haohans*. They all share the honorable social responsibility to fight against injustice. Their leader, Song Jiang is a Confucian scholar who values honor and justice and encourages his fellow members to do the same. As Wu Song states, “there is no way that heroes would want to harm people” (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 2, 118). On the contrary, most *haohans* on Mountain Liang “got a flair for searching out injustices and beating up bullies” (Dent-Young and Dent-Young 1994, vol. 2, 316). Most of them were forced either by corrupt government officials or their own intolerance for injustice, to join the Mountain Liang banditry in order to continue to maintain their identities. Therefore, their individualities were very much intact after joining the brigand. For instance, Song Jiang, Gong Sunsheng, and Li Kui continue to be filial sons after joining Mountain Liang. Nevertheless, Mountain Liang *haohans* are still considered a group of bandits. How do they compare to modern gang members in China?

The Values of Modern Chinese Gangs

In contrast to gang members in the novel, actual modern gang members do not call themselves *haohans*; they refer to each other as mates (*gemen*, 哥们). Just as there are *haohan* values, there are *gemen* values, and the *gemen* values are almost completely different from those of the *haohans*. Modern gang members do not believe in sexual abstinence, for instance, but rather have multiple sexual partners, and this represents their power within the group (Jenner 1996, 29). According to W. J. F. Jenner, female gang members win respect by sleeping with several male gang members as well as by introducing new girls to the gang.

Gemen values certainly omit the motivation of seeking justice, since most join the gang for the purpose of acquiring personal fame, power, and status through illegal means. Also, the

expectations for the gang members to share their wealth with fellow members are much lower. Jenner argues that gang members are expected to share only when they are actually spending money to purchase goods.

Although gang members and *haohan* do not have many values in common, they do share two important ones: “outstanding skills” and *yiqi*. Modern gang members do not appear to possess excellent martial arts skills — but they do have some other skills to compensate. One is networking: the size of their networks (*guanxi*, 关系) is a mark of status. *Guanxi* is a standard value in Chinese culture that puts personal relationships and commitments above everything else, including the law. According to Ming Xia, Chinese gangs are most accurately compared to a network of criminals who rely on each others’ skills and connections, and the leader of any given group can shift depending on personal connections or the task at hand. One gang member may have deep connections into local politics, another may have connections to local industry, and another may be the gang leader who can offer “physical” strength by gathering many followers to intimidate those who get in the group’s way (Ming 2008, 6).

According to Jenner, the other “physical” skill that the gangs want from their members is a criminal background. Potential gang members have to earn their way into the group by breaking the rules. Being in a prison, or being a former convict, clearly qualifies an applicant for a gang, as long as the crimes are compatible with the nature of the particular gang’s criminal activities (Jenner 1996, 27). For example, a gang known for its skill in burglary would recruit a burglar instead of a robber.

In the contemporary *gemen* value system, Jenner defines *yiqi* as the value that requires a *gemen* to be ready to take a knife in the ribs for a mate. He argues that *yiqi* is the cement that holds gangs together. *Yiqi* makes loyalty to fellow members a higher priority than virtually any other obligation. The members would forget the demands of family or government authority in order to stand by a mate in trouble, even if it means taking a very serious risk. The members are prepared to fight, to be beaten up, to be arrested, or even to die. The absolute “can’t-do” is to sell a *gemen* out by snitching or abandoning him. Such a violation of *yiqi* would enrage other *gemen* into settling the score with the “traitor” (Jenner 1996, 29).

However, the biggest difference between the *gemen yiqi* and *haohan yiqi* is that *haohan*

would carry out all these actions even for a complete stranger. Further, *yiqi* is not honored one hundred per cent by modern gang members, whereas the *haohans* uniformly avowed *yiqi*. A study cited in Jenner’s article is revealing: two groups of five hundred youths were surveyed, one group consisting of young offenders and the other of control subjects (with no criminal backgrounds). The survey was designed to find out the percentage of subjects in each group who approve of the notion of *yiqi*. Not surprisingly, the young offenders’ group scored nearly 50% while the control group scored about 13%.

There are two other major differences between the traditional band of outlaws and the modern real one. One difference is diversity of background. The *haohans* were from various socio-economic classes before they joined Mountain Liang. Modern Chinese gang members tend to have the same socio-economic background. For example, Wang Shuo, cited in Yao Yusheng’s study, and his gang members were “the products of the big compound culture” (Yao 2004, 435–436). Big Compound culture refers to the military compounds constructed as residence quarters for employees of government and military institutions. The parents of Wang Shuo and of his gang members, therefore, must have been powerful government officials.

Another, more important, variance between the two groups is that the *haohans* chose the road of fighting against the corrupt government. According to a recent on-line article on the subject, however, many criminal networks operate legitimate restaurants, factories, and shops, but use criminal tactics to get ahead (“Shanghai’s Dark Side”). Like more traditional organized criminal groups, they use gangs to intimidate rival businesses or garner political favors from local officials who offer an umbrella of protection for the criminal groups. Thus they work *with* the government, not against it.

Reasons for the Differences between the Two Groups

The contrast in values between the two groups must be attributed to the different social and political environments in which they exist. According to Ming Xia, organized gang crimes in China virtually disappeared under Mao’s rule because any rival to the central government was unacceptable. Therefore, most experienced criminals fled China and started operating on its periphery. The opium trade dried up, gambling was outlawed, and subversive groups were

disbanded under the threat of death (Ming 2008, 7–8). China under Mao closed up and removed itself from depending on foreigners. According to Professor Avery Goldstein, by 1975 starvation and economic stagnation led to plummeting living standards. The stability that Mao had intended to impose on China from the center through various isolationist measures began to unravel and produce destabilizing forces. Poverty and starvation became the major threat to the government.

Toward the end of 1979, Deng Xiaoping regained power for the central government and initiated a series of economic reforms that led to the opening of China. His pragmatic ideology drove him to do what he considered best for Chinese people, introducing capitalism into China under the cover of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Deng’s reforms relegated economic decisions to the local level, letting states and townships take responsibility for their own economic activities. The result was an economy less regulated by the central government, but still very connected to politics on the local level. Furthermore, the special economic zones (SEZ) encouraged more individuals to set up their own businesses. According to Ming Xia, entrepreneurs and local politicians saw the opportunity to make money and quickly started enterprises in anything they could. The economic opening provided Chinese criminal groups with a way to capitalize on increasing domestic wealth. These groups could control criminal activity in townships by relying on corrupt local politicians. In addition, the Chinese legal code was convoluted and contradictory; as long as politicians and party officials were making money from the dubious enterprises, laws to control them were largely unenforced.

The biggest reason organized crime in China takes place largely with the cooperation of local politicians is that the conditions in township governing councils encourage corruption. According to Ming Xia, Chinese local officials are poorly paid, yet they are expected to meet quotas for economic growth and employment, and they largely control the information that gets passed from the local level to the central government. This means that local officials have to be creative in order to fund local services such as police and fire departments as well as to ensure that economic growth continues along at the expected breakneck speed. There are cases in which organized criminal groups have purchased equipment, such as cars and radios, outright for local police forces or paid their salaries. Presented in the form of a gift, these donations serve as a tool for organized criminals to purchase the cooperation of the police. Local officials go along with

this because it means they have more money for economic development projects. As a result, the local power brokers are not necessarily tied to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but instead are most likely attached to an organized criminal network in order to make ends meet.

According to Ming Xia, political efficiency and fluidity are the biggest reasons for the local politicians to partner with a gang. Criminal groups linked to politicians can provide muscle to deter opponents and provide a measure of deniability when an opposition group gets roughed up by the organized gang. When protests over sensitive issues such as land reform and water pollution come up, local officials often send organized criminal groups instead of the local police or military to shut down the protests, thus allowing the government to sidestep the potentially incriminating situation. At the highest level of political corruption is the practice of selling government posts to criminals, in addition to outright actions by government officials to protect criminals. Wealthy townships in particular might sell the position in charge of economic development to the highest bidder, which in many cases will be a criminal who can use the post to strengthen business operations and persecute rivals. Because organized crime has such a grip on local politics in China and because local politics controls law enforcement and communication to higher-ups in the Chinese bureaucracy, the central government has found it difficult to crack down on criminal groups hiding behind local protection.

How could organized gangs not flourish in China when Deng Xiaoping was advocating their power? According to an article written by Fredric Dannen in 1997, in early October 1984, only days after the handover agreement restoring Hong Kong to China had been reached, Deng made remarks about the triads in the Great Hall of the People that were surprisingly and pointedly positive. On each occasion, he promised that China would allow Hong Kong to govern itself as long as its administrators were Chinese “patriots” who cherished the mainland, and each time, he spontaneously brought up the subject of the triad societies, whose power in Hong Kong, he pointed out, was “very great.” Dannen reports Deng’s mumbling, “Not all triads were bad. Many of them were good. Many of them were patriotic.” Deng apparently reasoned that the triads were too significant a power in Hong Kong to be ignored, and that their traditional ties to Taiwan made them unpredictable. But fortunately, they could be bought. So he bought them: the

Sun Yee On, the largest Hong Kong triad society, no longer requires initiates to pledge allegiance to Taiwan; now they swear allegiance to the People’s Republic of China.

Solutions to Modern Criminal Activities in China

The local criminal activities have indirectly caused social unrest in most areas of China because they corrupt the local government officials and serve as government hit men. Immediate actions need to be taken before national social unrest takes over. First of all, the central government needs to raise the salary of all local officials and establish harsher punishments for those local officials taking bribes from the gangs. These two steps will de-incentivize the local officials to partner with the criminals because they are no longer economically dependent on the criminals and do not want to risk their lives over monetary gains.

Second, the central government should learn from the *haohans* of Mountain Liang in *Water Margin*, to encourage those marginalized criminals to develop a sense of social responsibility by bringing Confucianism back to China. The leader of the Mountain Liang, Song Jiang, a firm Confucian, agrees to surrender to the government and persuades every other Mountain Liang *haohan* to do so as well, in order to serve their country and to bring honor to their family names. Serving one’s country and bringing honor to one’s family are all Confucian values. Chinese gang members today still share a sense of honor with the *haohans* from Mountain Liang; they called it “face” (*mianzi*, 面子). Most Chinese people are proud. They feel honored when they can brag to others about their own or their relatives’ achievements. Seeing this as an “evolved” Confucian value, the central government should certainly look into ways of providing a better environment for alienated criminals who could be brought to contribute positively to their country or communities.

The economic development policy that has dominated Chinese politics since the beginning of 1980 has created much local unrest. The policy should be balanced with current President Hu Jintao’s new initiative of “constructing a harmonious society,” which offers the vision of “featur[ing] democracy, the rule of law, equality, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality.” President Hu’s policy contains a strong Confucian root. He states, “Without equality and justice, people won’t feel happy. It is important to balance different interests, and properly handle the

people’s internal contradictions in order to ensure social equality and justice for all” (Hu 2005).
Isn’t justice what the *Water Margin haohans* were fighting for their whole lives?

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