
*Red-light Novels of the Late Qing* is a study of six novels written between 1840 and 1910 which focus on the relationships between patrons and prostitutes. It is a learned and idea-packed book full of expert readings of sources and wide-ranging references to scholarship both within and outside China studies. Starr’s main premise is that we can best understand fiction only if we consider “the textual context of the writing as well as its literary one” (p. xix). By textual context she means the various aspects of the text’s material production and framing, including how the text was made public, the very layout of the text, preface, and commentaries in various editions, and also the way in which authors construct their narrators, how characters are presented, and to what degree the novel conforms to, or departs from, the narrative modes of earlier Ming and Qing fiction (such as the simulated context of oral storytelling). Starr calls attention to the nature of the different editions of a novel, and how each potentially presents a new reading because of the way it arranges the text on the page, the sequence of prefaces, and in many cases rearranges, adds, or deletes prefaces and other material.

Textuality is a central concern of the book, and the way she defines it is worth understanding. It has to do with self-reflexivity about the fictional nature of the text, for which *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Red chamber dream) provides the main legacy to the red-light novels. Textuality has to do with the hybrid nature of these works, that is, the combination of multiple genres of poetry and song, and the multiple voices of author, narrator, commentator, and others, including the editors and publishers who freely abridged and modified texts, with the result that we as contemporary readers must considerably qualify our expectations of the authority of authorship in the red-light novels before the very end of the Qing. We need also to combine these considerations with the fact that there was no financial gain from writing novels prior to the 1890s. To Starr this means that one should be extremely careful about reading correspondences between lives of authors and statements of narrators, and between authors and texts in general. She especially argues for close attention to the way narrators narrate and how they implicate themselves in the writing. They can be complex figures, she says (p. 74). A recurrent pattern is for a narrator at the beginning of the novel [such as *Fengyue meng* 風月夢 (Dream of windy moonlight)] to find a book which contains the main contents of the novel, which then has its own narrator. The first narrator offers wisdom and analysis; the second is more neutral. Both should be distinguished from the author; no one to one correspondence between them should be ascribed. Readers should keep in mind the self-questioning effect of the “migrating author-narrator figure, whose identity is both evoked and concealed by the narrative” (p. 83). She posits that the migrating narrator is an effect of dialogic exchange between the self-revelation and concealment that is inherent to the novel’s treatment of men’s obsession with courtesans or boy actors.
Another concern of the book is tracing the trend toward greater authorial involvement in novel writing toward the end of the Qing. This change is related to advances in printing technology in the 1890s which turned books into a “cheap, instant medium” (p. 64). Authors could earn money from writing novels, especially by installment. The result was a greater focus “on dialogue and direct description” (p. 128). Late Qing novels like *Haishang hua liezhuan* (Exemplary biographies of flowers of Shanghai) and *Jiu wei gui* (The nine-tailed tortoise) did away with the “explicit narrator-commentator” of earlier red-light novels (p. 128); poetic interludes disappeared; and characters represented themselves more directly to the reader, especially through dialogue.

Starr offers particularly fine readings of some of the novels she studies. She notes that the narrator of *Pinhua baojian* (The precious mirror for judging flowers) differs from the one in *Fengyue meng, Qinglou meng* (Dream of green houses), and *Huayue hen* (Regrets over flowers and moonlight), in that he is almost completely absent from the narrative (in Gerard Genette’s terminology, the narrator is “as close to an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic model as may be found in red-light literature before the 1890s,” p. 107). The narrator’s voice sometimes merges with a character’s voice, and does so in an imperceptible fashion that Starr treats in an experimental way, providing excellent examples in which third person and first person narration become virtually indistinguishable (pp. 108-09). Her readings and translations of a passage in *Qinglou meng* about a poetry exchange between man and woman shows her expertise in deciphering the subtle interaction that takes place in such a scene (141-42; though I cannot agree with her when she puts Jin Yixiang and Mei Ziyu in the same category of *qing* (emotion) narcissism reaching its apotheosis; Jin Yixiang yes, but Mei Ziyu no, p. 144). She provides an excellent explication of *Huayue hen*’s skillful dramatization of the interaction of multiple voices during the gatherings of clients and courtesans playing drinking games (219-23).

She ends with a critique of contemporary editions of red-light novels which fail to note variant readings and modifications the editors have made in the texts. It is a case of a general “downplaying of textuality,” which results in the contemporary editor presuming an excess of authority and a concurrent over-emphasis on the biography of the author as “the single most determinate explanatory factor for a given novel” (p. 272). I agree that contemporary editions are often dangerously irresponsible in terms of the recording of variants, inclusion of original prefatory and other material, and abridgement and censorship. I wouldn’t go as far in downplaying the coherence of authorial input, though as always readers need to be aware that Ming and Qing novels are hybrids of many voices. Still, the novels Starr studies are each distinct in ways that resemble the distinctions between individual personalities, even if for the most part we know little about the authors, and regardless of the fact that the notion of faithfulness to an original text is untenable and impractical. Nevertheless, Starr’s attention to textuality goes