
At first glance, Keith McMahon’s latest book would appear as the direct sequel of his 1995 monograph *Misers, Shrews and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction*,¹ as it extends the scope of investigation of gender relationships into the nineteenth century; this assessment, however, would not do full justice to the present book. This volume monitors important changes in the concept of polygamy (or polygyny) which the author considers the institutionalized form of male promiscuity. McMahon situates his own study of polygamy in a recent series of “revisionist” studies of other Chinese cultural practices, such as foot binding and opium smoking which at the threshold of modernity had been devalued as decadent and degrading, but which now are reassessed as repositories of “cultural essence” that faced extinction due to the coming of a Western-defined value system. Correspondingly, the sexual regime of polygamy was under threat in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, well before its official abolition by the Republican government.

McMahon bases his study of shifting polygynous configurations, arrangements and attitudes primarily on a carefully chosen set of vernacular novels about passionate attachment and interdependence between men and women. He takes as his departure point the classic narrative about the polygamist in which a man has sexual encounters with a number of women all of whom he ultimately unites in a grand polygynous household. He counterpoises this ideal fantasy of the polygamous man with two “counter narratives” he found in nineteenth century novels: the story of sublime love, on the one hand, and the narrative about “passive polygamy,” on the other. While the former is deeply informed by *qing* (emotion) aesthetics, the latter appears as a reconfigured variant of the classic narrative. McMahon emphasizes repeatedly that he studies narrative “as [an] historical and socially symbolical act.” From the fictional representations of the “sexual fantasy” of polygamy, he seeks to uncover “the conscious and especially the unconscious structure of sexuality” in China at the verge of modernity (p. 7). He mobilizes elements of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory in order to identify the repressed elements in the discourse of polygamy, such as the “inherent split” he diagnoses in the polygynist who would, if he could, seek to possess all women, but necessarily remains subject to arbitrariness and contingency.

The prominent man in premodern and early modern China, McMahon argues at the outset, was expected, and hence also believed that he deserved, to have more than one woman, either as the master in a polygynous household, with a main wife and one or several concubines, or as a long-term patron of a house of courtesans (or, more profanely, a brothel). For the superior man (definitely fewer than

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ten per cent of the male population), such polygamy formed a core element of his male identity and an important source of prestige. The polygynous constellation was construed in a way as if it benefited the women as much as the man. McMahon shows that the women in this gender order indeed commanded a certain degree of agency, since they often managed to control the man. One instrument of control employed by these women was to let the man indulge in fantasies about their power as qinü 奇女 (remarkable women). Especially in times of crisis, the man depended on the autonomous woman emotionally and psychologically.

In Chapter One, the author unfolds the basics of qing aesthetics, with its components of radical subjectivity and egalitarianism, which from the late Ming, and emphatically again in the late Qing, exerted a profound influence on idealized conceptualizations of gender identities and relations, and which also contributed to the shaping of the fantasy figure of the remarkable woman, particularly the courtesan. In order to explain the category of the remarkable woman, the author makes recourse to a set of tales from Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異 (Notes on strange matters from the Studio of Idleness). In Chapter Two, he presents an outline of qing aesthetics by referring not only to the inevitable Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (The dream of the red chamber), but also to its understudied sequels. I found the section on Honglou meng sequels (pp. 37-44) a particularly impressive, densely written part of the book. In this section McMahon points out how the nostalgic Honglou meng reception throughout the nineteenth century “de-radicalized” qing subjectivity, while it bent the irresolvable constellations of Honglou meng toward pragmatic solutions. The most obvious solution was to have Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 become a polygynist, while deemphasizing his (as well as Lin Daiyu 林黛玉) inclinations toward qing aesthetics, and generally enhancing their functionality in life.

From Chapter Three onward, the author turns toward the courtesan’s “other world” which dominates the bulk of the book. He identifies the mingji 名妓 (famous courtesan) as a variety of the remarkable woman. He also writes about the benevolent patron who loved to style himself as a mingshi 名士 (famous scholar), and appreciated the lofty courtesan as a soul mate. She, unlike a wife, remained untainted by the profanities of married life and reproduction. Nevertheless, a core motive for the courtesan to develop a long-term relationship with a patron was her hope that, at some point, he would purchase her and make her his concubine. Moving on to texts of the fin-de-siècle period, the author replaces the term “courtesan” by “prostitute”, implying that by then little more than a myth had remained of the courtesan as a cultural institution.

The impressive sample of novels set primarily in the demi-monde of the brothel, studied by McMahon throughout Chapters Three to Eight, spans from Fengyue meng 風月夢 (Seductive dreams, 1848), as an early prelude to the Shanghai brothel novel, all the way to Jiuwei gui 九尾龜 (Nine-times cuckold, 1906-10). In Chapter Six he includes a very substantial discussion about the now famous novel Haishang hua liezhuan 海上花列傳 (Biographies of the flowers of Shanghai, 1892-94), but he also covers less frequently reviewed texts such as Hua yue hen