READING THE SWORDSWOMAN'S TALE: SHISANMEI AND ERNÜ YINGXIONG ZHUAN

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Recent Western scholarship on Ming and Qing vernacular fiction has given us a number of valuable studies of gender as it functions both within fiction's represented universes and in the production and interpretation of the novel more generally.¹ This article offers a reading of the late Qing novel Ernū yingxiong zhuàn. Its aim is to add to the discussion of Qing fiction further consideration of the figure of the female warrior—one of the more striking instances of the subversion of normative gender roles (in vernacular fiction as in Chinese imaginative culture more broadly), and yet one which has received relatively little examination.² It argues that in Ernū yingxiong zhuàn the trope of the warrior woman is interwoven with another significant strand in Qing literati fiction: the overt manipulation of fictional rhetoric and the boundaries of the diegetic world.³ The article first reviews traditional


² The outstanding exception is Edwards, “Domesticating the Woman Warrior: Comparisons with jinghua yuan,” Chapter 6 of Men and Women in Qing China.

³ By “diegesis” I mean the story, the events of the universe portrayed within the fiction; “diegetic world” or “diegetic level” thus implies the narrated universe as distinct from the level of the narration proper. The usage is adapted from discussions in Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford:

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understandings of Ernū yingxiong zhuan, beginning with the novel’s role in a later work of fiction, Tixiao yinyuan. It then suggests that readings of Ernū yingxiong zhuan as a simple tale of chivalric adventure are subverted by the author’s manipulation of the narratorial voice; it argues further that these same manipulations also imperil what many readers have seen as the work’s ideological agenda, the vindication of orthodox social values.

1. Ernū yingxiong zhuan in Tixiao yinyuan

In Zhang Henshui’s 張恨水 Tixiao yinyuan 嘟笑因緣 (Fate in Tears and Laughter), one of the most widely-read novels of the Republican period, the bookish male protagonist Fan Jiashu 樊家樹 makes the acquaintance of Guan Shoufeng 關壽峯, a doughty old gentleman who makes his living as a martial artist in Beijing’s Tianqiao 天橋 district. Guan Shoufeng happens to have a handsome young daughter, Xiugu 秀姑. When Shoufeng falls ill, Jiashu arranges for his care in a modern hospital; and finding Xiugu whiling away the hours at her father’s bedside with little volumes of guci 鼓詞 (drumsong romances), he promises to bring her something better to read. “I’ll bet you like knight-errantry (wuxia 武俠)” [4:58]. His first present is a copy of Wen Kang’s 文康 late Qing

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4 The novel was originally serialized in the “Kuaihuo lin” 快活林 supplement of Shanghai’s Xinwen bao 新聞報 in 1929-30. Its first publication in book form appeared within a year; film, stage-play, opera, and drumsong versions of the story soon followed. Accounts of the novel and its popularity can be found in Perry Link, Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 29-39; and in Sally Borthwick, “Translator’s Preface” to Fate in Tears and Laughter [excerpts], in Chinese Middlebrow Fiction from the Ch’ing and Early Republican Eras, ed. Liu Ts’u-yen (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), 255-87. A standard modern edition of the text can be found in v. 14 of Zhang Henshui quanjì 張恨水全集 (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1993); references to the novel in this article will be keyed to this edition, citing chapter and page number.