
In this illuminating study, Keith McMahon analyzes male-female sexual relations in Chinese fiction from the late Ming to the late Qing, with most emphasis on the mid- to late nineteenth century, when Chinese civilization was visibly in decline and threatened by aggressive military, economic, and cultural forces from the West. McMahon concentrates on what he calls the ideal male polygamist-philanderer (man with wife and concubines who also patronizes high-class courtesan-prostitutes) as he appears (mostly) in Chinese fiction. McMahon rightly notes that perhaps only ten percent of Chinese males could afford these multiple sexual partners, but he also stresses the importance of this cultural-sexual ideal for the very definition of successful Chinese manhood.

In his introduction, McMahon briefly cites the Lacanian theory of four discourses of subjectivity (master and university [masculine pole] and hysteric and analyst [feminine pole]) as important to his study. In McMahon’s application of Lacanian terms, the Confucian master assumes his universal authority and denies any split subjectivity, and his followers (“the crowd”), in what Lacan calls university discourse, follow his rules and his educational pedagogy, religious teachings, and laws. The feminine discourse of the hysteric includes signs of alienation and resentment, feelings of confusion and meaninglessness. In gender terms, the feminine hysteric doubts, resents, and protests the master, but remains ultimately bound by his rule. The feminine analyst (which McMahon likens to a “Zhuangzian Daoist”) appears in periods of paradigm shifts from one social formation and one discourse to another, as in China in the 1890s, to expose “the arbitrary and self-enclosed nature of the Confucian master’s discourse” (p. 11).

McMahon argues that since the master’s dominance is always completely arbitrary, men and women can both occupy the master’s dominant position in any social/sexual hierarchy, and he cites many examples of Ming-Qing fiction where the master Confucian polygynist actually becomes the consort of a remarkable woman who usurps his exceptionality (as with Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 and Ximen Qing 西門慶 in Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅). And conversely, he finds feminized males who wholly identify with the female and share in her hysteric discourse, doubting and protesting the dominant and widely assumed Confucian master discourse and doubting the male superiority even while still having to submit to it (as with Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 in Honglou meng 紅樓夢). By the late Qing, the dominant form of family life that McMahon sees in fiction (i.e., male fantasy) is what he calls passive polygamy, in which the male is manipulated and led by his many female sexual partners so that jealousy is not a problem and all are content in their harmonious enjoyment of each other.

McMahon devotes one chapter to late-Ming and early-Qing fiction where he highlights the importance of qing 情, the notion of radical subjectivity, or what he translates as “sublime passion.” In this era, McMahon sees qing as an equalizing...
force which reverses traditional gender hierarchies and in fiction produces remarkable women heroines who surpass men in their purity and transcendence of traditional gender constraints, whether as famous courtesans or prominent foot-bound gentry women poets. In such works as Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異 and Honglou meng, the female is superior to the male in her ability to share the subjectivity of others and to commit herself to a cause beyond herself and embody heroic action. McMahon cites real women in the Ming and Qing who fit this model as well (e.g., Liu Rushi 劉如是, Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介, and Shen Shanbao 沈善寶).

In chapter 2, McMahon analyzes Honglou meng as the key bridge between the late Ming and the late Qing interpretations of qing as sublime passion. By placing qing in the mythic realm of an unrepayable debt of tears, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 placed the ideal subjectivity of qing in failed opposition to the dominant social and political trends of his time. The sublime passion shared by Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu can never be spoken of directly, and is completely frustrated. By contrast with Cao Xueqin’s tragic vision, Xia Jingqu (1705-1787) 夏敬渠, in Yesou puyan 野叟曝言, deradicalized qing by identifying it with Confucian orthodoxy and masculine energy, by proclaiming the priority of filial piety over marital love, and by identifying the radical subjectivity so praised in the late Ming and in Honglou meng as nothing more than indiscipline and dissipation. The many sequels to Honglou meng evince nostalgia for Cao’s masterpiece, but share with Xia Jingqu a craving for stability and safety. They turn Baoyu into a virtuous polygynist devoid of passion, Daiyu into a strong supporter of Confucian patriarchy, and the tragic triangle of Honglou meng into a happily married trio.

In chapter 3, McMahon moves to the era of the Opium War (1839-42), where he notes a distinct shift in focus in many works of Chinese fiction, away from the gentry woman’s stabilizing moral authority to feature instead courtesans and prostitutes. He highlights what he calls the otherworldliness of the upper-class courtesan who is so enticing that she often sets the terms of her relationships with men, while the man frequently becomes dependent on her and becomes, in effect, her consort. Lest one think that such affairs are only male escapist fantasies, McMahon begins this chapter with a discussion of Gong Zizhen 孔自真 (1792-1841), one of the great scholar-officials and outspoken social critics in the mid-nineteenth century, who had just such an affair with a courtesan, Lingxiao 靈蘿.

The 1848 novel by Hanshang Mengren 邊上蒙人, Seductive Dreams (Fengyue meng 桐月夢), portrays the decadent world of prostitutes in the city of Yangzhou 扬州, where opium addicted clients seek out abused prostitutes and both are victimized by the brothel owners and mafia type gangs who control the city. The sublime passion theme of Honglou meng is now seen only in fashion motifs and popular songs, and the ubiquitous opium-smoking in brothels and opium dens alludes to the new era of social decadence and humiliation at the hands of Western merchants and armies.

A novel that more openly affirms the world of qing or sublime passion is the 1849 homoerotic novel, Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses (Pinhua baojian 品花