
Richard Wang’s Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption, and Religiosity in Cultural Practice is the first full-length English-language study devoted exclusively to the study of the Ming erotic novella. By carefully focusing on eight of the extant fifteen novellas, taxonomizing their linguistic and literary features, investigating the circulation and evolution of the different editions, and parsing the potential reader and authorship of these texts, Wang provides a useful introduction to this neglected genre. By furthermore placing the novellas in a variety of Ming cultural contexts, most notably the sexual hygienic practices associated with the pursuit of Taoist immortality, Wang offers an interpretation valuable for the way it differs from the Confucian and Buddhist models that have thus far guided our understanding of late-imperial erotic fiction.

That, until Wang’s study, the genre of the Ming erotic novella has languished due to scholarly neglect is not entirely surprising. Sexually explicit in content and language, the Ming erotic novella remains a disreputable genre; though listed in bibliographic works such as Sun Kaidi’s Riben Dongjing suojian xiaoshuo shumu, these novellas are not mentioned in standard works such as Lu Xun’s Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe or the more recent Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, and till this day many scholars remain reluctant to give these sexually suspect works their due attention. Moreover, as a genre written in the classical language during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period generally associated with the rise of vernacular literature, the erotic novella has additionally suffered the usual neglect of scholars more interested in works of vernacular literature, supposedly the predecessor of modern baihua fiction. Finally, as any reading in these novellas soon makes abundantly clear, one would be hard pressed to count the Ming erotic novellas as good literature. Or as Wang himself repeatedly states, the Ming erotic novella is best described as “anonymous non-great literature.”

Yet as this study shows, even if the Ming erotic novella is unlikely to make its way into the canons of Chinese literature, the genre remains valuable to consider, both in the diachronic context of Chinese literary evolution and the synchronic late-Ming practices of Taoist religion and sexual self-cultivation. In terms of literary development, Richard Wang, building on earlier work done by the likes of Wang Zhongmin and Lin Chen, shows in his first chapter how the Ming erotic novella provides an important link in the development from the classical Tang dynasty tale to the early-Qing vernacular scholar-beauty romances. If in terms of language the Ming novella mostly resembles the classical tale in its use of terse classical diction, it does couple this use of the classical with a tendency toward plenitude and exhaustive description, a feature more readily associated with vernacular fiction. In terms of structure, the novella incorporates both a greater number and a greater variety of poetry than the Tang dynasty classical tale, clearly prefiguring the kind of poetic profusion more readily associated with vernacular
masterworks such as *Jin Ping Mei*. Finally, the novellas differentiate themselves from earlier (and later) classical tales simply in terms of length, offering narratives that are roughly ten times longer than the average Tang dynasty tale. And, perhaps more importantly, owing to this length, these novellas are divided into discrete sections, again a precursor to the multi-chapter vernacular novel.

In terms of the diachronic cultural context of the Ming, Wang provides a variety of frameworks that allow us to recognize the significance of these erotic tales. In terms of the print-cultural context of the age, Wang employs the second chapter of his study to show how these novellas, though originally published as separate tales, were quickly included in the popular miscellanies, printed products considered typical of the late-Ming dynasty’s increasing rise of literacy, the broadening of reading audiences, and generally the commercialization of textual consumption and production. Indeed, as Wang shows in the third chapter, rather than read these novellas as self-sufficient literary works existing independent from the fashions of the age, it is better to investigate them as objects that circulated in a variety of guises during the late-Ming age: as sections of literary miscellanies wedged between excerpts of operas and selections of lyric poetry, as gifts tastefully exchanged between like-minded literati, or, given the numerous love letters that dot the narratives of these novellas, as models for epistolary exchange. Such letters, which eventually found their way into letter writing manuals, may have, as Wang argues, inspired actual correspondence with lettered courtesans. More importantly, these letters and the novellas that featured them contributed to the broader late-Ming fascination with and commodification of the culture of intimate sentimentality or *qing*.

In the fourth chapter, Wang explores the significance of these novellas in terms of the broader erotic culture of the age. Here Wang’s greatest contribution lies in offering an alternative to the more conservative neo-Confucian and hygienic strictures against erotic indulgence familiar from later vernacular novels such as *Jin Ping Mei*. Whereas in *Jin Ping Mei* the protagonist’s infamously voracious erotic appetites represent a clear lack of self-cultivation and moral decrepitude, an erotic novella such as *The Three Beauties* unproblematically couples sexual indulgence with Confucian morality; the novella’s women may be licentious but they also practice *geng* (the feeding of one’s own flesh to one’s elders for medicinal purpose) and commit suicide when their singular devotion to the male protagonist is threatened. Similarly, the unbounded sexual pursuit of male protagonists in novellas such as *The Three Beauties* and *Scholar Li* does not result in death and infertility (as it does in *Jin Ping Mei*), but rather in immortality and innumerable offspring. Such multiple happy endings may point to the novellas’ penchant for having one’s cake and eating it too, but it also suggests a Taoist-inspired model of erotic practice that stands in clear contrast to the usual Confucian prohibitive and Buddhist redemptive models. Indeed, as Wang demonstrates in his final chapter, some of these erotic novels drew on popular Taoist myths and imagery, thus neatly combining the plebeian pursuit of erotic fulfillment with a more transcendent search for immortality.