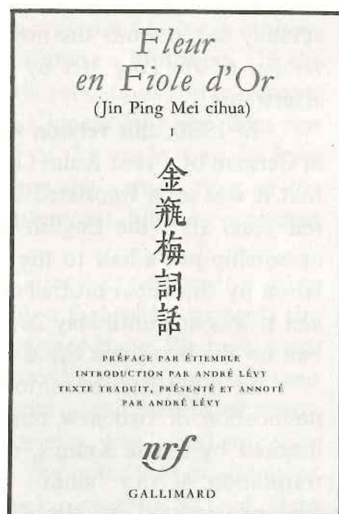
Introduction to the French Translation of *Jin Ping Mei cihua*

By André Lévy
Translated by Marc Martinez



IS THERE ANY need to re-introduce readers to the novel *Jin Ping Mei*? French readers may have first learned about the book around the year 1800 (when according to an earlier romanization it was known as *Kin Ping Mei*) through the *Mémoires des missionnaires de Pékin*, which described the earliest official proscriptions against the novel. Some years later, they may also have come across it in the pages of *Le Livre des récompenses et des peines*, translated in 1816 from the Chinese by Abel Rémusat (1788-1832), which contained a footnote concerning the umpteenth sin from which one has to protect oneself: "giving birth to desires by casting one's eyes on women who belong to others"—a note that appears again on page 97 of the 1839 edition. The relevant passage is worth quoting in full:

> Despite the severity of the laws and the endless ranting of moralists and sectarians, moral corruption is as widespread in China as in any other country. In fact, most writers carry modesty in expression to the point of ridiculous affectation. But there are also a great many books in which the most outrageous cynicism prevails. Here we have a book of tales which can be classed in this respect next to Petronius and Martial. Yet I must admit that herein married life is never the target of sarcasm or derision. One might draw some favourable conclusions concerning national customs, if indeed they are identical to

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> those described in *Kin-p'hing mei*, a famous novel, which is said to be above, or rather below, anything licentious produced by decadent Rome or modern Europe. I know it only by repute, and although it was condemned by the court in Pékin, it did manage to find a translator, one of the brothers of the famous emperor Kangxi [reigned 1662-1722], and this prince's version in the Manchu language is regarded as a masterpiece of elegance and uprightness.

The curiosity this aroused among readers had to wait another century to be satisfied, that is, until the second half of the nineteenth century, when a translation appeared of one passage from the first chapter by Louis Bazin in *La Chine Moderne*, although the passage in question was actually taken from the novel *Shuihu zhuan*. It was only much later, in 1912, that a condensed version of *Jin Ping Mei* by Soulie de Morant was finally published, appearing in English shortly afterwards.

In 1930, this version was superceded by a longer and more accurate rendering of the novel in German by Franz Kuhn (1884-1961). This too was an abridgement, though it was such a success that it was soon translated into most European languages. The French version, published in 1949, ten years after the English one, aroused the interest of the censors. In Nazi Germany, harsher censorship put a halt to the publication of the first two volumes of an unabridged German translation by the Kibat brothers in 1933. Franz Kuhn's earlier version met with the same fate in 1938, and it was not until May 20, 1944, on the occasion of the publisher's seventieth birthday, that the ban on the book was lifted by Hitler's Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda.

In the otherwise unfortunate year of 1939, the English reading public was treated to the publication of two new renderings of the novel: the first, in a rather limited edition, a version inspired by Franz Kuhn's, duly cleansed of objectionable passages, which was in fact the first translation of this famous novel worthy of the name. The second was the work of Clement Egerton, assisted by the Chinese novelist Lao She, who was then a lecturer at the School of Oriental Studies in London. The text of this version was two to three times as long as that of the German adaptation, and it was larded with passages in Latin accessible only to highly educated members of the Catholic clergy. Though considerably abridged, Egerton's version was virtually complete insofar as the narrative was concerned. The verses were as often as not left out, and the coarseness of the original Chinese text tempered. In all, one quarter of the original text had been pruned: too much, or not enough perhaps, to compete with Franz Kuhn's "belle infidele", which was reissued in numerous languages and has sold over two hundred thousand copies.

Finally the complete German translation by Otto and Arthur Kibat was published, but only after the brothers' death.

In any case, it was time the French public had an opportunity to read a complete version of a masterpiece that has been equally praised and despised for centuries. But the time had not yet come.

In China in the 1930s a single copy of a longer and less expurgated edition of the novel entitled *Jin Ping Mei cihua* was discovered. *Cihua* literally means "a story mixed with verse", though the term actually implies nothing more than "romance". The critics were unanimous in considering this text the most authentic of the extant original manuscripts. Since then, two more copies of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* have been discovered in Japan, thereby enabling us to establish a complete text.

Japanese and Russian translators were the first to take the *cihua* edition into account. The publication in 1959 and 1960 of the nearly unabridged version by Shinobu Ono 小野忍 and Kuichi Chida 千田九一 was a landmark, since none of their predecessors had worked their way through to the end of the novel. Victor Manoukhin devoted some twenty years, his entire career in fact, to his Russian version which remained unfinished at his death. Unfortunately, the shortage

of paper in the USSR for publications of this type resulted in only one third of his work being released, a fact cleverly commented upon by Boris Riftin. It is for this reason that we have decided to offer to the French public yet another attempt at an unabridged version.

Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (ca. 1650-1690), the remarkable critic and annotator of the revised version, which plunged the previous version into oblivion for three centuries, wrote in the conclusion to his *Golden Compass of Hot and Cold* 冷熱金針 that "if it is difficult to write such a book, it is even more difficult to read it". While avoiding a temptation to assume that the critic is superior to the writer, no translator can possibly hide the difficulties encountered while navigating his course through this novel; thus it will be left to the reader to decide whether this translation has overcome them. Between the Charybdis of pedantry and the Scylla of prolixity, we have decided to place a greater emphasis on making this translation as pleasurable to read as possible. This is the reason for the few cuts in chapter 40, which are in any case shorter than those in the revised seventeenth-century version, and which have been relegated to footnotes. On the other hand, the conventional form of the oral narrative, peppered with evocations and comments in verse, has been preserved in its entirety. The conciseness of the Chinese language does not generally allow for translations of verse to retain every single word of the original, so we have not even attempted to do this. It seemed more important to follow the natural flow of the narrative and maintain the novel's original texture, with its lyrical counterpoint, hitherto neglected by most translators.

Jin Ping Mei is probably the "spiciest" novel in the corpus of Chinese literature. It is often deliberately vulgar, in the best as well as the worst sense of the word, a fact which presents the translator with the problem of whether to employ old-fashioned or current slang. We have tried, to the best of our ability, to maintain the original flavour of the proverbs and expressions used along with all their ambiguity, incredible richness and fearsome obscurity—and have listed nearly a thousand of them in the footnotes, mentioning briefly, when necessary, the varied solutions given by the exegetes—with no pretense of erudite scholarship since the notes are not addressed to specialists but to the willing reader, with a view to making the book a pleasure to read. Here conciseness has been sought at the possible expense of clarity, though in general the translation aims at being easy to understand without footnotes.

Surnames, first names and literary styles *(hao)* raised a problem, and we have sought a solution without devising a formal system. Since the novel has hundreds of characters, it was decided to reduce the number of Chinese words in order not to clutter the reader's memory. Women and lower-ranking characters' names are generally translated, often shortened, especially if they occur regularly. Styles generally derive from family hierarchies, with shades of meaning hard to render into Western languages. We had no choice but to simplify and modify them so that the reader could make sense of what was taking place, while still conveying the mixture of respect and intimacy that these terms of kinship imply. As for complex official titles, we only gave up the traditional equivalents when their ponderousness made rendering them in literary terms impossible.

More must be said about the title of the novel and the problems of its translation. The original preface mentions that *Jin Ping Mei* alludes to three of the female characters—Golden Lotus (Jinlian), Flask (Ping'er) and Plum Blossom (Chunmei), in the order in which they appear in the text. But because of French syntax, the order must be reversed: the three words can lend themselves to a play on words, "*blossom* in a *flask* of *gold*", a phrase which appears with this particular meaning in various parts of the novel (with variants), especially in chapters 10, 31 and 68. It seems difficult to believe that this is mere coincidence, and as legend has it, the author, invited to produce an erotic novel, improvised the title upon seeing blossoms in a metal vase. In Chinese, one has simply to juxtapose the three words with no syntactic marks. Gold *(jin)* is also metal in general, an element associated with the west, autumn and death; *ping*, a narrow-necked vase, recalls the receptacle of fecundity; and *mei*, the plum tree blossoming in winter or

early spring, is obviously "steadfastness" but also sexuality out of season. In short, the title lends itself to a series of highly varied interpretations.

Among the possible solutions, our choice took into account first the name of the feminine characters alluded to, and then the dominant texture of the novel whose title is, as it were, the label. A legend, to be mentioned below, presents this work as being literally "poisoned". That is what the word "flask" (French *fiole*), more feminine than "vase" (French *vase*), implies, since the Chinese word *ping* means any long container, from a bottle to a flask or a decanter. It is also, metaphorically speaking, the female sexual organs, so that the title may also be rendered "plums in a golden vagina", as is illustrated in chapter 27.

To conclude these remarks on the text, I would like to point out that we have chosen to offer a translation of one edition of the novel in its entirety, including prefaces, postfaces and introductory poems, without attempting to correct any of the apparent inconsistencies or clumsy turns in the text, except for obvious *lapsus calami*, indicated in the footnotes, with reference to the oldest revised edition.

Jin Ping Mei is a self-contained work, and Chinese novels are similar enough to their Western counterparts for the reader to enter directly into *Jin Ping Mei*'s disenchanted world, though at the price of a certain amount of bewilderment. But let us put his mind at ease: he will need no crutches to hobble his way through it. If he finds this introduction too annoying, let him rush right into the book; he may lose his way but is sure to find it again, feeling that lump in the throat which rises whenever one is confronted with a masterpiece.

The Greatest of the "Four Extraordinary Books"

THAT *Jin Ping Mei* was circulating as an incomplete manuscript among a small circle of writers, painters and scholars at the end of the sixteenth century is evident by references to the work in the corpus of intimate fiction, diaries and letters which was produced in the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644); we also know that the novel was a frequent topic of discussion among this coterie and that it was acknowledged as the finest work of its genre ever produced. To my great surprise, during a recent journey to Peking I heard the same judgment from Sun Kaidi (born 1899), one of the most distinguished historians of the Chinese novel.

It was Feng Menglong (1574-1646) who was attributed with originating the designation for the four fictional masterpieces of the time as "the four extraordinary books" *si da qishu*, in imitation of the *Four Books* of the official Confucian canon, compulsory reading for every educated person. The "four extraordinary books", to wit, *The Three Kingdoms*, *The Journey to the West*, *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*, all attained their final form in the hands of scholarly publishers around the year 1600.

We will not enter into the controversies of the time regarding these novels' respective merits and vastly varied characteristics, nor attempt comparisons with major works of dramatic literature which are not available to French readers. We must, however, note the appearance of the "reader" of novels.

It should hardly be necessary to remind contemporary readers that the Western novel, in the modern sense of the word, was born in the sixteenth century with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This new literary genre is widely regarded as the product, if not the vector, of a new phase in the history of mankind, the age of capitalism. As a matter of fact, there are only two civilizations in which the novel exercised such a wide influence, ours and the sinicized cultures of East Asia. One can thus easily imagine the puzzled reaction of the Marxist-oriented critic, when confronted with the curious mixture of modernism and archaism to be found in *Jin Ping Mei*, the product of a supposedly "feudal" society, and one that is in fact better described as feudal-bureaucratic.

Let us attempt to simplify a complex problem. First, the novel fits precisely, in China, the

etymological meaning of the French term *roman*, since it is written in vernacular Chinese as it was actually spoken, rather than in the literary language which was at least as remote to it as the Romance languages are to Latin, though in the case of Chinese the logographic writing system obscures phonological evolution. It is important to remember that at the time the book was written, the literary language was still the *lingua franca* of official culture, whereas the vernacular was the medium of expression for the marginal literary genres; a parallel situation could be imagined in Europe if the Roman Empire had remained intact until the twentieth century, with Latin retaining the same position in society as classical Chinese did in China.

The ultimate source of narrative fiction, *homo fabulator*, is no doubt universal. But we are still a long way from the novel. China's earlier start in this field was enhanced by the spread of printing and the low cost of paper in the Song dynasty (960-1279). Since the tenth century, almost any work could be printed because there was both a demand and the means for satisfying it. In the case of the development of the novel, one less tangible though crucial element should be mentioned: a popular taste for entertainment and verbal acrobatics, as well as a love for history and historical tales, with their corollary, the professionalization of story-telling.

To be sure, the fortuitous discovery of the fabulous library at Dunhuang containing tens of thousands of scrolls proved the existence of a corpus of narrative texts in a somewhat hesitating popular language, dating from before the invention of printing. The decisive period seems to extend from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, the most significant period of urbanization in Chinese history, so brilliantly recorded by Jacques Gernet in *Daily Life in Ancient China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion.*

The most obvious characteristics of Chinese novels derive from the story-tellers of the Song dynasty. Their activities are only known through laconic descriptions, and their repertory through much-debated texts, but we know enough to believe that the most despised of their kind, the improvisers of the shorter genres who drew their material from everyday life, were innovators, the inventors of a realism full of true-to-life detail.

The "popularizations" of history, which the Chinese literati tradition presented in fragmented entries gathered together in dynastic annals, organized their materials into long, colourful and highly detailed stories, which they presented in one session *(hui)* after another. *Hui*, incidentally, was a term more often used for the chapters of printed narrative texts.

The establishment of written texts on the basis of an oral tradition could not have been achieved without some hesitation. The contrary thesis cannot stand up to the onslaught of recent critics. We have testimonies, albeit fragmentary, of a popular demand for entertaining books. Some, which were more than just mere prompt books, seem to have been more or less successful attempts at evoking oral performances, indeed at reproducing them on paper.

Let us not pursue these questions any further. When they came to China in the thirteenth century, the Mongols found there what they have long been credited with supplying to the Chinese: drama and novels. But there is little doubt that China's new masters contributed to the development of these arts with their taste for entertainment, their lack of knowledge of classical Chinese culture and their contempt for scholars. The age of *pinghua* seems to have inaugurated a new stage of the development of fiction in the fourteenth century. Many questions remain unanswered concerning the meaning of this term, which etymologically means "serialized (or simplified) historical tales". We might mention that *Jin Ping Mei* is referred to once as a *pinghua*, in chapter 70 of the novel. Three of the "four extraordinary books" were in existence during the age of *pinghua*, although this is mere supposition in the case of *Shuihu zhuan*, which may also have been called a *cihua*. The long novels are unrelated to the historical sagas, which are divided into fasicules *(juan)* or volumes, and sometimes subdivided into sections *(ce)*. The division into sessions *(hui)* appears much later, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, by which time writing more closely approximated the spoken language, to the point of reproducing the story-teller's interruptions.

The minute depiction of everyday life so characteristic of *Jin Ping Mei*, the themes of crime, lucre and sinful sexuality, are also to be found in the shorter genres; for example, in such thrilling tales rendered into French by this translator as "Sept victimes pour un oiseau" and "L'Antre aux fantomes des collines de l'ouest", and in his *Études sur le conte et le roman chinois*. It is certainly no coincidence that such works are woven out of the same material as that of the longer novels.

It seems that by the sixteenth century, Chinese fiction had entered a third phase, which in the seventeenth century led to the creation of most of the great novels, those now regarded as true "classics". By this time, the essential characteristics of Chinese fiction were well established: the story-teller is still present, but only as the narrator of a story which "tells itself", and of which he is by no means the inventor. Also, the action, as well as the characters, are viewed "from the outside". The imitation of a street performance, reminiscent of our own beggar's opera, places great importance on dialogue in realistic prose which often gives way to lyricism in passages of evocative description. This is generally a rather conventional, often disjointed, lyricism, yet one which is nonetheless necessary for balancing the narrative, which is thereby punctuated and commented upon.

This is certainly enough to puzzle the modern reader, were he to set this novel full of parodic, surrealistic and super-naturalistic effects against Balzac's realism or Zola's naturalism.

Nevertheless, *Jin Ping Mei* broke new ground in the history of the traditional Chinese novel. For instance, consider the lyrics in which the characters reveal their moods, sometimes underlining unconsciously or involuntarily the irony of the situation at hand. The apostrophes to the reader-audience are hardly innovations, but the mere number of them—over fifty in all—gives them an innovative significance. Likewise the foretelling of future events, though these predictions do not always come true, as in chapters 24 and 82. But the most important contribution of *Jin Ping Mei* to the art of the traditional novel lies elsewhere.

The technique of foreshortening time and space is employed to an unprecedented degree. The action of the novel extends only for a ten-year period, yet two-thirds of the book, nearly half a million words, is devoted to describing the events of two or three years. Minute descriptions of homes and gardens are imbued with a narrative function, and as Mary Scott demonstrated in an unpublished lecture, the huge garden laid out by Ximen Qing is a prototype for the Prospect Garden in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The long chapters in the middle of the novel devoted to the official activities of Ximen Qing must have been a source of inspiration for the author of *Rulin waishi (The Scholars)*. If *Jin Ping Mei* sometimes carries parody to the point of burlesque, it can also handle satire with irony so allusive that it becomes positively impalpable for modern readers.

And yet *Jin Ping Mei* is nothing but a cancerous growth upon chapters 23 to 28 of *Shuihu zhuan*, though a huge and malignant tumour indeed: yet in its new setting, the manly story of an outlaw turns into the tragedy of women's lives, in short, into a tale of the failures of the penis. Wu Song, who had slain the accomplices in his brother's murder, must now kill a woman, the pitiful Golden Lotus, but this only takes place in the final fifth of the novel.

To be sure, the vigourous style of the novel is inherited, to a point, from *Shuihu zhuan*, but it attains in this gloomy context a breathtaking richness. Could such a book be produced by anyone but a writer of genius? For centuries, scholars have tried in vain to identify some famous literatus as its author.

The Unknown Author

IT MIGHT BE useful here to open a parenthesis and go back in time. Anonymity was the rule for writers of vernacular literature in China for centuries; only as late as the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) did the first authors identify themselves or were recognized as such. In the fourteenth

century, respectable scholars, some of them from noble families, were not reluctant to demean themselves by writing in these shameful genres.

Playwrights could achieve some respect, but novelists, tainted by their vulgar products, could never bring themselves to sign their works openly. The idea that there could be no great works of literature without some craftsman of genius was already deeply rooted in the Chinese critical mind as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, an apparently obvious statement that we will examine further.

Each of the "four extraordinary books" was assigned an author "of genius": *The Three Kingdoms* to Luo Guanzhong; *Shuihu zhuan* to Shi Nai'an; *Journey to the West* to Wu Cheng'en (ca 1506-1582); and *Jin Ping Mei* to Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590).

Luo Guanzhong is widely identified with an obscure playwright of the fourteenth century, and Shi Nai'an is said to "have really existed"; on the latter point the reader should refer to Jacques Dars' learned introduction to *Shuihu zhuan*. The case of Wu Cheng'en is similar to that of Wang Shizhen, in the sense that it is not their existence which is questioned but their imputed authorship. Wu Cheng'en, however, a scholar of local fame, remains the most likely candidate for the authorship of *The Journey to the West* in its definitive version. Wang Shizhen, a writer of national fame, could not possibly have written *Jin Ping Mei*. The historian Wu Han 吳晗 (1909-1966)—better known for his role in launching the Cultural Revolution before becoming one of its first victims—demonstrated this brilliantly in the early 1930s. The recent efforts of Zhu Xing 朱星 (ca 1902-) to re-establish this questionable paternity have failed to disprove Wu Han's thesis.

Yet for all these authors, another question is raised: that of redaction versus creation. Here *Jin Ping Mei* should be distinguished from the three other novels which are, indeed, the product of material that underwent the phases mentioned above over the course of several centuries to a millenium.

Jin Ping Mei's *terminus a quo* is the novel it is derived from and from which it reproduces many passages. This evaluation is based on an edition which is now lost but whose relationship to the oldest ones we know can be ascertained. Besides, it is the only of the "four extraordinary novels" that cannot be qualified as "episodic"; despite a great many digressions, it has a main plot and a sense of coherence unrivalled by other traditional Chinese novels. The conclusion drawn by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958), the most distinguished historian of Chinese literature in the 1930s, seems therefore to be irrefutable: *Jin Ping Mei* is the best of the modern sagas created by the pen of a single author.

After all, the critics of the Ming and Qing dynasties left us with a few convictions that more recent researchers still question, though without providing us with any reliable alternatives. Is it just a matter of time? Are we on the verge of a complete reassessment of the question of authorship? There are, in fact, two problems, obviously linked: the identification of the author and the assessment of his role, which relates to the novel's mode of composition; and the organization of the material.

Although *Jin Ping Mei* draws its plot and its main characters from another work, we are tempted to regard it as a *roman à clef* for reasons immediately obvious to anyone who reads the book. In fact, we have evidence of this predating the publication of the novel. In a diary entry from the eighth moon of the year corresponding to 1614, Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1570-1624) recalls a discussion he had (ca. 1596) with the scholar-painter Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) about the novel which was then in the form an unfinished manuscript. The author appears to be an elderly scholar from Shaoxing, the secretary of a captain of the guard named Ximen, who lived in Peking; the scholar ostensibly spent his spare time recording the events which took place in his employer's home. It must be assumed that the identity of the captain's surname with that of Ximen Qing in *Shuihu zhuan* is merely conicidental. It is true that Yuan Zhongdao's judgment on the novel was better qualified and more prudent than that of his elder brother Hongdao 宏道 (1568-1610), the most famous of the three Yuan brothers, who in 1606 praised *Jin Ping Mei* as

Yuan Hongdao wrote in his "Drinking Games" that Jin Ping Mei *was an extension of and a companion volume to the famous novel* Shuihu zhuan. *I am very sorry that I have not been able to read it. When I visited Hongdao at his residence in the capital in 1606, I asked him if he had a complete copy of the book. He told me at that time that he had only read several chapters of it, and that he found them quite extraordinary . . . . However, three years later, when Hongdao's brother Zhongdao came to the capital to sit for the* jinshi *examination, he brought a complete copy of the book with him, which I borrowed and copied for myself. My friend Feng Youlong was so impressed and delighted when he read it that he approached a bookstore with the suggestion that they purchase it from me at a high price and publish it. Another friend of mine, Ma Zhongliang, Superintendent of Taxation in Suzhou at the time, also tried to persuade me to accept the bookseller's offer, explaining that it would alleviate some of my financial difficulties. I told him, "A book of this nature will sooner or later find its way into print. But once it becomes available, it is certain to be widely read, and people are bound to be corrupted by it. When I am brought to trial in the court of the King of Hades, how shall I answer the charges put to me? Is it worthwhile suffering the tortures of hell, in exchange for the petty profits to be gained from having it printed?" Ma was in entire agreement with me, and so I kept the book securely locked up in my cabinet. Before long, however,* Jin Ping Mei *was enjoying brisk sales in Suzhou . . . . (from* Guqu Miscellany 顧曲雜言 *by Shen Defu)*

The texts for this and the following boxes are taken from Jiang Ruizao 蔣瑞藻 (1891-1930) ed., *Xiaoshuo kaozheng* 小說考證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1984 reprint) pp. 71-75, and are translated by Yang Qinghua.

a "classic in a class of its own", and recommended it as essential reading for every cultivated man. In any case, Yuan Zhongdao did not find it necessary to attribute *Jin Ping Mei* to any great writer.

Several years later two authors provide a more elaborate, albeit political, solution to the problem of authorship. Sometime before 1618, Tu Benjun 屠本畯 (ca 1542-1622) suggested that the novel was an attack on Lu Bing 陸炳 (1510-1560), who was guilty of hastening the future novelist's disgrace by taking advantage of his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guard and the favour he enjoyed with the Jiajing emperor (reigned 1522-1566).

Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578-1642), who seems to be saying more than he actually knows, or knows more than he actually says—both theses have been advanced—gives us the same solution, but applies it also to ministers in power during the Jiajing reign: Lu Bing could be the alter ego of Zhu Mian 朱勔, whereas Cai Jing 蔡京 and one of his sons could represent Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480-1565) and his son Yan Shifan 嚴世蕃 (1513-1565).

Besides, according to Tu Benjun, Wang Shizhen was said to have a complete manuscript copy of the novel. From here it is but a short step to claim that Wang's mere possession of the manuscript of *Jin Ping Mei* proves his authorship; all that is missing is a suitable motive. Wang Shizhen's father, Wang Yu 王忬, was executed in 1560 after the military defeat of 1557, at a time when Yan Shifan wielded great power; Yan could have saved his life, and the unofficial chronicles tried to show how the Wangs incurred the enmity of the Yans. Of all the reasons which might have provided an explanation, the least reliable historically is the one that has stuck: that which claims that Wang's eventual demise involved a faked painting.

The earliest form of the tale surrounding Wang's fate is found in the works of Shen Defu. In short, the Yans, passionate collectors, were trying to obtain the famous twelfth-century "Life on the River during the Qingming Festival" *(Qingming shanghe tu)*, by Zhang Zeduan 張擇端, which depicts a scene on the fifth day of the fifth moon, China's All Souls Day, when the people

sweep their ancestors' graves. We have several replicas of this long scroll, the best of them displaying the fascinating scene of urban life in Kaifeng with phenomenal realism. A man named Tang 湯, a mounter of scrolls, supposedly seized an opportunity to please the powerful minister by affirming that Wang owned the painting in question and would be only too pleased to offer it to him. But being unable to obtain it from Wang Yu in the end, Tang commissioned a well-known painter from Suzhou, Huang Biao, to make a copy of it.

Huang Biao's copy was the gem of Yan Shifan's collection, and he proudly showed it to every one of his guests, until one day a certain jealous guest proved it to be a fake. Mortified, Yan Shifan held Wang Yu responsible for the deception. Some chroniclers assert that it was the scroll-mounter himself who used this incident to take revenge on Wang Shizen for some slight.

This legend appears again in a play entitled *A Handful of Snow* 一捧雪, written in the mid-seventeenth century by Li Yu.

Gu Gongxie 顧公燮, an eccentric eighteenth-century scholar from Suzhou, also makes use of the story while embellishing it with some useful details. In Gu's version, Wang Yu actually owned the original painting but was unwilling to part with it. Gu relates this to the origin of *Jin Ping Mei* in the following manner: Wang Shizhen tries in vain to find some means of avenging his father's death, and Yan Shifan's passion for saucy novels eventually gives him an opportunity. When Yan asked him if he had any new books to recommend to him, Wang Shizhen, caught unprepared, answered as he glanced at some blossoms in a golden vase, that he had discovered a novel entitled *Golden Plums in a Vase (Jin Ping Mei)*, and after some thought, developed an episode from *Shuihu zhuan* into a novel of his own. Gu asserts that the name Ximen (literally West Gate) Qing is a discreet allusion to Yan Shifan, whose style *(hao)* was Donglou 東樓 (East Pavilion). Wang Shizhen then bribed Yan's pedicurist to help him in his task. The pedicurist cuts Yan's foot while Yan is engrossed in reading the book. The cut becomes infected, preventing Yan from going to court to look after the interests of his aging father, Yan Song. Hence the doddering old man is unable to prevent the denunciation which will ruin his family from reaching the imperial ears.

In another version of the legend, the noted scholar Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507-1560) is taken to be indirectly responsible for the death of Wang Yu by having disclosed the fake to Yan Shifan. In desperation, Wang Shizhen resorts to poisoning to get his revenge, and makes clever use of the licentious novel. Tang Shunzhi has a brush dipped in strong poison that he had used to do away with an assassin commissioned by Wang Shizhen. Wang conceived the idea of mixing the poison remaining on the brush with the ink used to print the book. Wetting his fingers as he thumbed through the novel, the eager scholar died at dawn as he reached the last chapter.

If we replace Tang Shunzhi with Yan Shifan, whose style Donglou (Eastern Pavilion) is the exact opposite of Ximen (West Gate), we come up with a complete version of the legend of the novel's origin. But it is a legend easily dismissed, for Tang Shunzhi died six months before Wang Yu, and Yan Shifan, executed by imperial order, could not possibly have been killed by ingesting poison impregnated in the pages of a novel in the manner described above.

The attribution of authorship to Wang Shizhen or one of his close relations is presented as "without a doubt" in the 1696 preface by Xie Yi 謝頤 in an edition of *Jin Ping Mei* which overshadowed all others for the ensuing two and a half centuries. In this same edition, Zhang Zhupo gives further substance to the legend by placing a "discussion on bitter filial devotion" *(kuxiao shuo)* at the beginning of his critical apparatus.

The scandalous nature of the book was rationalized in Zhang's eyes by Wang Shizhen's noble and pious purpose: his revenge on a tyrant. But even Zhang Zhupo seems unconvinced of Wang Shizhen's authorship, preferring to regard the "author" as anonymous. This contradiction can be accounted for by the fact that the critic's work was published posthumously.

Wang Shizhen's authorship is in fact highly unlikely, first since he died too early and secondly because he was known to be uninterested in marginal literature. In the early 1930s,

It is generally believed that the novel Jin Ping Mei *is from the pen of Wang Yanzhou (Shizhen), and that it was written to criticize Yan Shifan. The character of Ximen Qing in the novel is a faithful image of Yan Shifan. Yan's childhood name was Qing, the same as that of the character in the book. Shifan's courtesy name was Donglou [eastern pavilion] while that of the character in the book is Ximen [western gate]. The two names are exactly antithetical.*

Others say that the novel was written by a filial son to avenge his father's death. The son was aware that his father had been murdered by an influential personage whom he knew. He tried to wreak vengeance upon that man repeatedly, but with no success. Then, through secret inquiries, he learned that the man had the habit of turning the pages of whatever book he was reading with a finger moistened with saliva. The filial son spent three years writing the novel, and when it was finished, put poison on the corner of every page. He then hired a man to offer the book for sale in the market-place at the very moment when that influential personage was passing by in his sedan chair. The hired man cried out, "This is the most extraordinary book in the whole world." The influential man took the book and began to read it in his sedan chair, and by the time he got home, he had finished it. He was so impressed that he wanted to find the person who sold it to him and enquire about its price, but he was nowhere to be found. At this point he suddenly realized that he had been the victim of a plot, and attempted to save himself. But it was too late. He had already been fatally poisoned, and died soon after.

Examining this matter now, both of the remarks above appear to be correct. The filial son was really Wang Fengzhou [Shizhen] and the influential personage Tang Jingchuan. Wang Shu, Shizhen's father, died as a result of the scheming of the Yans [Yan Song and his son Yan Shifan], though Tang Jingchuan's slandering was the underlying cause of the entire affair. In Yao Pingzhong's Essential of the Chronicles *[an abridgement of Sima Guang's* Zizhi tongjian*], mention is made of the death penalty imposed on the imperial inspector Wang Shu. The following is found in a note: Yan Song was eager to acquire an ancient painting in the possession of Wang Shu. Since Wang was reluctant to part with it, he gave Yan a copy of the painting. When a connoisseur pointed this out, Yan Song became enraged and put Wang to death on the grounds of a false charge that he hed leaked an important military secret. Though the name of the connoisseur is not revealed, someone with knowledge of the event said it was none other than Tang Jing-*

Wu Han, relying on the recent discovery of the *cihua* edition, made an attempt to demonstrate that Wang could not possibly be the author. Did he succeed? Today we are less confident of Wu Han's conclusions, but any thorough discussion of his arguments requires delving into technical details which would be inappropriate here.

The fact remains that once we reject Wang Shizhen as the author of *Jin Ping Mei*, the field opens up for new candidates. In his 1939 preface to the English version of the German adaptation by Franz Kuhn, Arthur Waley gives an excellent summary of the legends of the novel's origin and suggests that the author is Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593). This is no wild guess, since this rebellious and eccentric playwright was interested in vernacular literature and involved in the coterie quarrels of the time, wherein he stood among the defenders of the "modern", while Wang Shizhen supported the "ancients". But nothing more has been discovered to back up this theory. If Xu Wei were the author, it is more than likely that one of the Yuan brothers would have given the game away, since Xu Wei was one of their intellectual mentors.

Once the search for the author of *Jin Ping Mei* began in earnest, there was no lack of can-

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chuan, and that the painting in question was the celebrated scroll "A View of the River at the Qingming Festival". Harbouring bitter and deep-seated hatred for Tang Jingchuan, Wang Shizhen swore his revenge. He sent his men several times to spy on Tang, but Tang guarded himself carefully against all attempts on his life. One evening, Tang was reading alone in his room when an assassin grabbed him by the hair from behind. The assassin was just about to stab him when Tang said, "Though I cannot escape my bitter fate, please allow me to write a letter to my family." The assasin stood by his side as Tang penned a few lines. Suddenly the tip of his writing brush became detached from the stem. Making out as if to repair it, Tang held the stem near a candle. The stem actually concealed a miniature crossbow fitted with poison arrows. The heat of the candle released the trigger, and the assasin died instantly as one of the arrows pierced his throat. The news of this left Wang in deep despair. One day, he met Tang while waiting for an audience with the emperor. Tang said, "Since I have not seen you for a long time, you must be busy writing something." Wang replied that he was engaged in writing a novel called Jin Ping Mei, *but in fact he was not writing anything, and was only trying to deceive the other man. Tang Jingchuan pressed him for a look at his new book, so when he went home, Wang hired a great corps of workers to carve the woodblocks, and as he wrote the novel, each chapter was carved as soon as he had finished it. Wang had the book printed with a mixture of ink and poison, and delivered it to Tang when it was completed. Tang immersed himself immediately in the book and read it in great haste. Since it was freshly printed and the ink particularly sticky, some of the pages were stuck together, and Tang had great difficulty separating them. In order to read it, then, he separated the pages with a finger moistened with saliva. By the time he finished reading the novel, he had ingested so much poison that he passed away. Some claim that the victim of this poisoning was actually Yan Shifan, not Tang Jingchuan. However, Yan Shifan was executed after receiving the death sentence, so that the poisoned man must have been Tang. The details pertaining to "the dutiful son spending three years writing the novel" and "the influential personage reading the book in his sedan chair", are merely different versions of the same story. It is hard to understand why an outstanding scholar like Tang Jingchuan would be willing to serve the base needs of the Yans and be forced to pay for all the trouble he caused with his own life. (from "Jottings in Hanhua Cottage"* 寒花盦隨筆*)*

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didates. In fact, there are now nearly twenty. Here we will only cite the more likely possibilities.

Pointing out the inconsistencies of Shen Defu's own argument, Wei Ziyun 魏子雲 concludes that he was indeed the author of the cursed novel, though not clever enough to hide the fact. The recent discovery by Ma Tai-loi 馬泰來, in 1979, of a colophon to *Jin Ping Mei* written by Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567-1642), has made this theory untenable.

Li Kaixian's 李開先 (1502-1568) candidature for authorship, first suggested and then abandoned by Sun Kaidi, is defended by Wu Xiaoling 吳曉鈴. Li, a playwright, was interested in vernacular literature, and his plays are often quoted in the novel. This theory, however, seems more acceptable in its presentation by Xu Shuofang 徐朔方, wherein Li Kaixian is thought to be the editor of the final version.

In a recent unpublished lecture, David Roy collected an impressive number of arguments in favour of the famous playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) being the author. It is doubtless that Tang belonged to the circle of literary men which was first exposed to *Jin Ping Mei* at the end of the sixteenth century. We cannot begin a discussion here of the arguments which make Tang's

authorship plausible but uncertain.

Relying on Xie Zhaohe's testimony in the colophon he discovered, Ma Tai-loi offers a suggestion which is worthy of notice, mainly because it follows several other contemporary testimonies (perhaps earlier than that of Yuan Zhongdao). In short, the novel is thought to be the work of a secretary of Liu Shouyou 劉守有, Liu Chengxi's 劉承禧 father, who was said to possess a complete manuscript of the novel; in this case, the target of the novel was said to be a cousin of his by marriage, the writer Mei Guozhen 梅國楨 (1542-1605). The title *Jin Ping Mei* can thus be interpreted as being a pun on "now I criticize Mr. Mei". *Si non e vero, e ben trovato.*

If it is true that *Jin Ping Mei* was completed between 1587 and 1595, as Wu Han attempted to prove, and if the author, the Master of Laughter (Xiaoxiao Sheng), was born in Lanling 蘭陵, Shandong, believed by some to be present-day Yixian 嶧縣, none of the candidates satisfy the requirements of authorship, for they either die too early or too late, or were born in places other than Shandong. On the other hand, it hardly seems possible for an important writer to have produced such a considerable work without leaving us any clues with which to identify him, or even dropping hints among his intimates. Therefore we wonder whether Zhang Yuanfen 張遠芬 did not eventually succeed in discovering the author in the person of Jia Sanjin 賈三近 (1534-1592), a native of Yixian. What we know about Jia's career and literary activities makes his authorship totally plausible, according to an article published in the Xuzhou Teacher's College journal.

All these conjectures are based on the generally accepted notion that the novel is the work of a single author. Taking the revised edition as a starting point, Zhang Zhupo analysed the composition of the novel, its tempo and its double entendres and, based on the theory that the novelist is always in complete control of his material, postulated a level of symbolic meaning in the novel. Earlier, Li Kaixian had compared the subtle organic unity of *Shuihu zhuan* to that of the human circulatory system. On this point, he regarded himself as the successor of a long line of scholars who admired popular literature and felt it superior, in terms of originality and authenticity, to the literary imitations of the ancients.

Nobody will dispute that *Shuihu zhuan* is the product of several centuries of elaboration; Luo Guanzhong merely penned the prototype of the definitive version. It remains difficult to take seriously the attempt of the critic and commentator Jin Renrui 金人瑞 (Shengtan 聖歎 1610-1611) to restore another version that the then obscure Shi Nai'an had supposedly written as a mere literary exercise.

As for *Jin Ping Mei*, in the 1950s, Pan Kaipei 潘開沛, who apparently did not survive the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, created quite a storm by maintaining that the origins of *Jin Ping Mei* did not differ very greatly from those of the other great "classical" novels. Pan claimed that in *Jin Ping Mei*, too, the art of the story-teller was the starting point. This might be a just argument, but it was poorly defended, since the imitation of a story-telling performance, a technique used by many Chinese novelists, cannot prove the oral origins of a work. The counter-arguments, however, are not much better, the main one being that erotic descriptions could not be conveyed to an audience in an oral performance. Folklorists and ethnologists know for a fact that many types of early entertainment were bawdy and crude, since they were supposed to be linked with fertility and fecundity rites. On this point, one cannot rely on revised and bowdlerised texts approved by the authorities, past or present.

Zhu Xing's recent theory that the original *Jin Ping Mei* was of virginal purity has no factual basis whatsoever. It can easily be refuted by quoting three or four testimonies from the period when the manuscripts of the novel were being circulated.

Pan Kaipei's thesis was better received in Japan than in China. Japanese scholars are unique in their detailed textual research. Rightly or wrongly, it seemed entirely unlikely to them that a single man could be responsible for a verbal monument of such richness as *Jin Ping Mei*. The few preliminary studies that were made using diachronic linguistics—such as that published in 1979 by Teramura Masao 寺村政男—tend to conclude that sections of the novel date from different

periods. No scholars, however, have investigated the linguistic borrowings from Mongolian, even though they can be accounted for as an imitation of the style of drama popular in the Yuan, or Mongol dynasty.

The notion that *Jin Ping Mei* is written in the Shandong dialect has been generally accepted for some generations. But nobody has specified which particular sub-dialect is used, for Shandong is a province of great linguistic diversity. On the other hand, it is not difficult to show that examples of the language and customs of southern China are numerous in the novel—not only from chapters 53 to 57, interpolations though they may be—this is one of the brilliant results of the iconoclastic research carried out by Wei Ziyun. In fact, the reader sometimes gets the impression that the author is trying hard to make the language sound even more northern by mixing in words and expressions from the Peking dialect, though he fails to make it totally northern in character. One may prefer to think that the novel is stylistically homogeneous;

Jin Ping Mei *is one of "four great extraordinary books" of Chinese literature. It is said that it was written by Wang Shizhen as a way of avenging his father's death at the hands of the Yan family . . . . Some say that the perpetrator was actually Tang Jingchuan, who, while holding the post of Imperial Inspector of Jingyou, framed a charge against an innocent person which led to this person's execution. The innocent man's son then tried every possible means of taking his revenge, but to no avail. At this time Tang retired from his official post and returned to his hometown. He was a great collector of curious books which he took great relish in reading. When the dead man's son learned about this, he wrote the novel* Jin Ping Mei *in a very short time, applied arsenic to the pages of the manuscript and presented it to Tang, since he knew that Tang had the habit of turning the pages of his books with a finger moistened with the tip of his tongue. Tang finished reading the entire book in one night. The next morning, his tongue felt numb and sluggish, and he saw in a mirror that it had turned a dark colour. Realizing that he had been poisoned, Tang summoned his son and said, "People are plotting against me. After my death, you must allow no one except our closest relatives to enter my room." Sure enough, Tang died shortly afterwards, and within a matter of hours, a man wearing a white mourning gown rushed into the Tang's home crying loudly in lamentation. The man fell to his knees before Tang's son, and told him that he owed the deceased an inestimable debt, and hoped that he would be allowed to pay his last respects to his benefactor before the coffin was sealed. Tang's son, moved by the man's sincerity, gave his permission, and the visitor entered Tang's room and cried bitterly over his corpse. After making repeated bows, he left. When it came time to dress the corpse for burial, it was discovered that one of the arms was missing, whereupon they realized that the "mourner" was actually the author of the novel. One surmises that since his own father had been beheaded, the author would not rest content with poisoning Tang, but disguised himself to facilitate his maiming the dead man. Both of these stories are in circulation, yet it is hard to say which is true. In Yuan Hongdao's [Zhonglang] book* Jinfan ji [The Embroidered Sail Collection] *one comes across the statement: "I read* Jin Ping Mei *in bed, and found it full of vivid descriptions. Even the famous essay 'The Seven Exhortations' by Mei Sheng cannot vie with the book in terms of excellence."* Jin Ping Mei *has been well-known for ages, but it is actually an indecent book, full of trash, with little merit. It is not only a matter of the absurdity of its concluding scene, wherein all the main characters in the book are reincarnated. ("The Notebook of an Anonymous Scholar"* 闕名筆記*)*

The biography of Tang Shunzhi [Jingchuan] contains the following information about his death: In the 39th year of the Jiajing reign [1561], during the flood season, Tang made a trip by boat on the Yangtze River despite his declining health. He got past Jiaoshan, but when he reached Tongzhou, he expired at the age of fifty-four. I received notice of his death and attended his funeral. Like myself, Tang was a native of Wujin prefecture, and enjoyed a fine reputation as a scholar. At the same time it was rumoured that an enemy of Tang's acquired the original copy of the novel Jin Ping Mei *by paying a fabulous sum. This person had dipped the pages of the manuscript in liquid arsenic and then presented the book to Tang. Tang was an avid reader, and finished the book in a short time, turning the pages with a finger moistened with saliva. By the time he came to the end of the book, his tongue was stiff and numb, and he soon after died of poisoning. When one compares these two stories, it becomes obvious that the rumour circulating among the people cannot stand up to the official record. The latter includes the following: "Tang Shunzhi was a man of broad learning. He was well-read in the fields of astronomy, music, geography, military science, archery, geometry, mathematics and the black arts." This remark is not unfounded. A story has been handed down in my hometown to the effect that Tang's home in Qingguo Street was called the Pangu Tower, and contained winding staircases so confusing to the uninitiated that it was very difficult to gain access to the central part of the building. Tang had concealed crossbows placed among his furniture and on his desk from which arrows could be released to prevent potential assassins from causing harm to his person. The residence now belongs to the Lin family. Whenever I walk past it, I fondly recall the great scholar who is now no longer among us. (from "Notes from Qiushui Studio"* 秋水軒筆記*)*

however, recent studies, although sketchy so far, prove this to be far from the truth. Thus the verdict that the author is from Shandong just because he declares that he comes from Lanling has been irrevocably undermined. It has been pointed out that there was also a town named Lanling in the province of Jiangsu, yet the selection of this place in Shandong could be a way the novelist chose to show his support for the philosophy of Xunzi, a disciple of Confucius who lived at the beginning of the third century BC.

Yet this may simply be a case like that of *Sanxia wuyi (The three righters of wrongs and the five dispensers of justice)*, the famous swashbuckling novel of the nineteenth century. The extant documents tell us that its creator was Shi Yukun 石玉琨, a learned story-teller from Tianjin, who was famous during the third quarter of the last century. The written version of the story was greatly reworked with a view to publication (in 1879), in order to satisfy the cultured reading public.

Had this also been the case for *Jin Ping Mei* three centuries earlier? The Linqing 臨清 region in north-west Shandong, a centre of commercial activity on the Grand Canal, was certainly an entertainment centre as well, and must have supported an active group of professional story-tellers. Could there be anything more natural than for them to borrow material for their repertoire from the popular novel *Shuihu zhuan*, set as it was in Shandong? It is no surprise that chroniclers have made no mention of this. If such were the case, all questions regarding the author would have to be rephrased, and many problematic aspects of the text might be more easily addressed. For example, how were the most incongruous traces of the oral stage eliminated in the revised edition?

Only the chance discovery of a manuscript dating from before the novel's publication will be able to lead us out of the realm of conjecture. This is all the more reason for utilizing all the

materials at our disposal, starting with the long-banned text itself which has traditionally been neglected by scholars. It is for this reason that the the testimonies of those who might have actually seen the novel in manuscript form—now lost—remain invaluable.

Both the accounts of Yuan Zhongdao and Xie Zhaozhe seem justified in placing the period of composition of *Jin Ping Mei* about fifty years earlier than its date of publication (1618). The criteria given for a later dating can therefore be regarded as subsequent interpolations.

One does not have to be an exceptionally attentive reader to be aware of the many inconsistencies in the novel's chronology. A close examination of the book will reveal numerous loose ends and missing episodes. While the novel progresses slowly, the numerous plots of the epilogue seem to move too quickly. This is likely a result of over-pruning in an attempt to reduce the novel to a neat one-hundred chapters, rather than the impatience of an author anxious to complete his work.

If we accept the single-author theory, we cannot avoid concluding that *Jin Ping Mei* is a posthumous work left upon its author's death in the form of disparate and incomplete manuscripts, with traces of different drafts. In any case, there must have been an editor who put all of these discontinuous texts together, either altered or complete. Thus whatever theory one accepts, a single person could not possibly have written the novel in its present form. Although the single-author thesis has the advantage of being simple, it remains riddled with contradictions; while the multiple-author theory leaves open the possibility of a complex "collaboration", the details of which we are unable to determine due to the great number of unknowns.

To be sure, these two theories necessarily imply diametrically opposed interpretations of the novel. In the first case, one is forced to suppose that the author—undoubtedly a man of genius—has thought of everything and spiced his text with cryptic allusions, thus leading us to dismiss the most obvious incoherencies in the book as intentional and full of significance. In the case of multiple authorship, however, one has to recognize and clarify the superimpositions of various levels of meaning, assuming that each writer dealt with the text in his own way.

What is the Meaning of the Novel?

THE ANSWER to this question can be twofold: either the work is totally ambiguous, or it has one specific meaning. The oldest prefaces to the novel suggest the latter. Works of art have no utilitarian function; rather they are a uniquely individual expression of a way of understanding the world. The creation of this novel must have been inspired by a deeply-felt passion, yet the author must have had a specific purpose in mind. Such is the conclusion found in the postface of the *cihua* edition, which goes so far as to imitate the calligraphy of Yuan Hongdao in order to encourage the reader to identify "Nian Gong" 廿公 with the famous writer.

Whatever the origins of the novel, the prefaces insist on giving a new meaning to and laudable motivation for its publication: to the edifying function of popular literature is added the notion that such writing can purge the passions, first by expelling "the sadness of the world" by giving the reader pleasure, and secondly by providing the reader with the satisfaction of seeing a corrupt society denounced. The novel is meant for those who can understand this message: one scholar, the author, addressing other scholars, the readers of novels.

In China during the last thousand years, the cultural enrichment resulting from the confluence of official and popular literature was similar to that in the West, where the appearance of diverse national literatures followed on from the linguistic fragmentation that occurred on the European continent.

The question of who constituted the audience for texts printed in the vernacular in China is still being debated. Common sense suggests that books were written solely for the entertainment of the leisured classes. But why should such enjoyment be limited to one stratum of society?

Illiteracy seems to have been less widespread in China than in Europe before the French Revolution. The merchant class, including shop assistants and bookkeepers, could read, as could the minor functionaries in the bureaucracy. Nor can women be excluded, even those who were not born into wealthy families. In the novel, Ximen Qing's first wife is illiterate, while his concubine Golden Lotus is not. This phenomonon must be understood within the context of economic progress and the urbanisation which took place in China during the Dark Ages in Europe. Inexpensive books are a Chinese invention. But in China, as much as and perhaps more than anywhere else, the question of literacy is one of considerable complexity. *Jin Ping Mei* contains at least one good example: whenever he ventures beyond simple classical language, Ximen Qing runs into difficulties. In fact, ability and knowledge among the leisured classes never corresponded to the degree posited by Confucian theory. Flights of the imagination, conveyed through the vernacular language, exercised a great fascination. The copiously illustrated bulky editions of historical sagas indicate the existence of a varied reading audience and a certain social mobility. The very world described in *Jin Ping Mei* provides an explanation of how such a novel could be produced and circulated.

This world, with its portrayal of the mores of the times, is lineated by the historical framework of *Shuihu zhuan*. We will not enter into an account of Chinese history here, but refer the reader to *Le Monde Chinois* by Jacques Gernet (English translation: *A History of Chinese Civilization*) and again to Jacques Dars' introduction to his translation of *Shuihu zhuan*. The first chapter of *Shuihu zhuan* is set in 1058 and the epilogue in 1124. The narrative of *Jin Ping Mei* opens in 1112 with the famous episode in which the giant Wu Song kills a man-eating tiger with his bare hands, and ends in 1127, exceeding the historical framework of the earlier novel by only a few years. Such asynchronisms are irrelevant since this was a period of dynastic crisis exacerbated by both internal and external factors which led, after the fall of the capital Kaifeng, to peace at the cost of the division of the country and the retreat of the Song court to the south. Official incompetence, a corrupt administration, laxity of morals, the aggravation of external threats are all part of a recurring pattern, typically Chinese. The same troubles reappeared at the end of the Ming dynasty and lend *Jin Ping Mei* a prophetic dimension, except that the Ming forces in the south failed to withstand the Manchu advance for long after the fall of Peking in 1644.

It is unnecessary to list the numerous, though discreet, anachronisms in this novel, which is ostensibly set in the twelfth century. Unworthy of the great scholar reputed to be the author, they can be explained as reminders to the reader that the target of the novel's satire was the author's own age. The Chonghe reign, which spans a good part of 1118, is simply ignored in some chapters (71, 96) but mentioned specifically in others (30, 76, 78); and some characters age too slowly or too quickly.

When a person's age is calculated in China, neither the day nor the month of birth are taken into account. A child is simply one year old on its day of birth, and two years old the next year, which can make a person anywhere from one day to two years older than he would be according to the Western system of calculation. We therefore chose not to modify any of the figures as they appear in the text, so as to allow them to retain some symbolic and literary meaning. No present or past critic has managed, by viewing these figures as subtle allusions, to give a convincing account of the intentional or accidental errors which they reveal, but which as often as not elude the attention of the average reader. In any case, the enduring qualities of the Chinese social structure make it meaningless to read *Jin Ping Mei* as a critique of the present couched in terms of the past. Is it only because of its licentiousness that the authorities have continued to ban this firebrand among novels?

The "Pearl Player" 弄珠客, whether or not he is identified with Feng Menglong asserts straightaway that *Jin Ping Mei* is an obscene book, although obscene for a just cause. Zhang Zhupo takes up this theme in the fifth section of his introduction to the annotated edition of

1695, where he states: "The first of the 'extraordinary books' is not licentious."

This sort of moral justification is so common, even banal, that there is little point in examining it. Yet Zhang Zhupo's assertion is more than merely rhetorical. After all, *Jin Ping Mei* is not an "erotic" book, nor, curiously enough, is it classified today as "pornographic". Descriptions of sexual encounters are carefully distributed throughout the text, often omitted and rarely repetitive. They are hardly ever gratuitous, and are an intrinsic part of characterization. It is through detailed and uncensored descriptions of sexual behaviour that the novel differs from the conventional examples of the genre, and its more daring scenes could only have been published as recently as the last ten or twenty years in the "advanced liberal" countries—with the exception of Japan, where certain passages in the Japanese version are still left in Chinese and relegated to footnotes. As Patrick Hanan remarked, the erotic passages are written in two levels of language, the classical and the vernacular. Those in classical Chinese are as often as not imitative of an earlier book mentioned in the preface, *Ruyi Jun zhuan* 如意君傳, *(The chronicle of the gentleman who does as he pleases)*, a novel about a court favourite who satisfies the sexual needs of Empress Wu Zetian (reigned as emperor 684-705). It is an apology for sexual pleasure, part of a tradition which dates back to the aristocratic literature of the Tang dynasty (618-907).

The sections of the novel written in the vernacular are innovative while harking back to parodic sources or tales and short stories of the "thriller" type, with their negative vision of some all-consuming sexuality which leads to damnation. As far as we know, *Jin Ping Mei* predates the relatively short licentious novels which were common at the end of the Ming period. Sociologists will gather very little new material for their catalogues of "perversions" from *Jin Ping Mei*, except for the collection of mechanical and chemical stimulants that Ximen Qing came to rely on; the unique "plum darts" in chapter 27; and Golden Lotus' "urophilia" in chapter 72, later imitated by Wang VI. Ximen Qing's voyeurism is as banal as his predilection for fellatio, acceptable for his concubines, servants or the occasional mistress to practise, but an indecency to which his legitimate wife could not possibly descend. The total absence of cunnilingus in the novel can be explained by Ximen Qing's need for domination. This leads him to brand the exterior sexual organs of his mistress with burning moxa, and to over-exert and finally exhaust himself through sexual activity due to a maniacal desire to satisfy a growing number of women, while at the same time denying himself sexual satisfaction by avoiding ejaculation. The absolute power of the master is tempered by the complacency of his partners, but they have their own limits: wives and courtesans refuse to engage in group sex, though Ximen Qing ventures to ask for it. His bisexuality is only tolerated with disgust. Sexuality is one of the realities of life. Revealing the dangers of sex is not the same as rejecting it altogether, but rather an avowal of its importance. For the first time in Chinese fiction, the title of a book provides a pattern, one which is to be often imitated, of puns with reference to the characters in the novel. Thus it is no coincidence that the title only refers to women's names, because women are the *sine qua non* of sexuality.

The word *hua* 話, which generally means "speech", designates both the story itself and the penis, so that *Jin Ping Mei cihua* could be interpreted as *The Memoirs of a Penis*, its feats, its failures and its death. If this were so, the reader could justily criticize the novel for its long digressions on the way the racketeer Ximen Qing worms his way into the bureaucracy, his busy social life, his drinking bouts, his generosity and pettiness and, in the middle of the novel, the details of the intrigues which put him in possession of a huge fortune. The mandarin in Ximen Qing supplants the lover and encroaches upon the mainstream of the narrative. Disingenuous male friendships appear in the foreground, and the satire displays a bookish taste for a brand of sensuality appropriate to the merchants who dominate the first part of the novel.

We can thus understand the propensity of scholars to see in the story a political allegory. The postface attributed to "Nian Gong" already alludes to this, and Wei Ziyun and others have recently taken it up again and elaborated upon it. The first chapter and prologue of the *cihua* edition could obviously refer to events which shook the court of the Wanli emperor (reigned

1573-1622), who was reluctant to appoint his eldest son as heir. The detailed descriptions of Ximen Qing's debauchery could be a way of recalling the moral decrepitude of the reigning emperor, who was as stout as the novel's protagonist, and his six women could allude to the Six Boards *(bu)*, their intrigues and corruption. But *Jin Ping Mei cihua* could not have been published during the Wanli emperor's lifetime. It is for this reason that the revised edition must have come earlier, according to Wei Ziyun, which means that the date of the preface by the Pearl Player cannot coincide with that of the novel's actual publication.

Is it conceivable that a great writer would waste his talents and his time reporting gossip and the quarrels of women and servants? In his essay on the meaning of *Jin Ping Mei*, Zhang Zhupo tried to develop a theory based on a network of underlying allegories and symbols from graphic, semantic and phonic associations, which are in fact as subtle as they are unconvincing. We will cite one example, concerning Chen Jingji, Ximen Qing's son-in-law: "Chen means 'old', and therefore 'ruin'. Jing is a homophone of *jing* ('stem', probably confused here with *jin*, 'gold' in Zhang Zhupo's dialect); *ji* is the name of a plant (in the lotus family). It thus follows that Golden Lotus will be ruined by Chen Jingji."

If the Prime Minister Cai Jing were not a historical character, we could produce our own evidence to further Zhang Zhupo's argument by suggesting that since Cai is a homophone of *cai* "wealth" and Jing of "semen", then "Cai [+] Jing" sums up the entire novel. Plays on words and puns are often used consciously in the novel, especially when the tone changes to parody or burlesque. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* certainly imitated *Jin Ping Mei* on this point, much to the despair of its translators. Among Zhang Zhupo's modern disciples, if we may venture a compliment on their work, David Roy and Katherine Carlitz set out to prove, with undeniable success, that such allusions do exist in *Jin Ping Mei*, but it is also much to their credit that they chose not to push this learned approach too far.

The apologist trend in criticism seeks a guarantee of the "seriousness" of the novel by pointing out its vast scope, artistic mastery and superb conception. The adherents of this school have actually scored quite a few remarkable successes. But will they ever achieve their goal of confirming the lofty moral purpose of the work? If we are sceptical, it is because the text is meaningful without our having to search for hidden meanings: it dares to say things that serious people would never say. This so-called futility is one of the main features of the novel. Would it not be better to ask why *Jin Ping Mei* remains unrivaled as a novel of manners? Soviet editors expurgated essential parts of the novel when they cut passages from those sections from Manoukhin's translation that deal with women's quarrels. This is absurb, since such a many-faceted work cannot possibly be reduced to a novel about the condition of women. And yet the adage quoted in chapter 12 keeps echoing throughout the story: "A wife it is not wise to be; For your joy or pain depends not on thee."

Clement Egerton, following Soulie de Morant, entitled his nearly complete translation of the novel *The Golden Lotus*, as if he could sense intuitively the significance of the title in the earlier edition which he did not know, that is, the story of a devastating woman dying a poor wretch, dismembered by Wu Song, the most manly of all the male characters in the tale and the only one not interested in women. But between chapters 1 and 88, the diversified material carrying along the flow of the narrative could more appropriately be called *The Horrors of a Polygamous Family*, if Jean Dutourd would allow this improper borrowing from *The Horrors of Love*. This brings us back to the lord and master, Ximen Qing, who inspired C. T. Hsia to imagine a new epilogue which he cleverly entitled "Sixfold Murder in a Bedroom". The unifying Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian interpretations which have successively been put forward by scholars only serve to demonstrate the great diversity of points of view and changes in perspective which the novel is capable of inspiring. In the Buddhist epilogue, fictional illusion is likened to the illusory nature of karma and transmigration. The Taoist ritual, described at length, is inefficacious, because Ximen Qing's behaviour has divorced him from the Way, and the detachment which is a pre-

requisite to its attainment. He neglects all the normal duties of the Confucian paterfamilias. He is both brutal and weak at the same time, and a hoarder of women, abandoning those he possesses in favour of fresh adulteries, often tainted with incest. His generosity is prompted solely by a desire for domination rather than out of sympathy for others, as described in the sequel to the novel written by Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1620-1691), translated into French from the German adaptation by Franz Kuhn as *Femmes derriere un voile* 隔簾花影. In this novel we discover Ximen Qing as a disconsolate widower of Madam Chen, the only woman who would have been able to keep Ximen Qing at home and manage his affairs properly.

Ximen Qing is blamed not so much for his hypocrisy as for his lack of decency and the bad example he sets for his inferiors. His excessive sorrow at the loss of Flask may move us, but from the Confucian point of view there is something indecent about it, since in mourning her loss he disregards the proper hierarchy of his wives. Ximen Qing dies for his sins in chapter 76, but at the hands of Golden Lotus who, as it were, poisoned him, just as she poisoned her previous husband. Yet his absence weighs so heavily on the succeeding events that the revised edition which puts him at the very beginning of the book with his gang of parasites could be re-named *A Man of Despicable Qualities*.

Actually, this title suits *Jin Ping Mei* perfectly, since this vast composition can be divided into three acts starring Golden Lotus, Flask and Plum Blossom respectively. Where should we insert the intermissions? The threads of the narrative become entwined to the point of obscurity, and in the end get tangled up in paradoxical plots. What does the puzzling figure of Plum Blossom stand for? This proud maid, who becomes a lady, is the very model of Confucian loyalty despite her violent temper and, like Ximen Qing, she dies mysteriously of excesses which are not made explicit. Many of the keys to this Chinese *roman à clef* have yet to be cut. Can we not gain sufficient satisfaction from plunging into the novel's alluring depths, where we may discover ourselves, and perhaps even the vanity of all things?

In 1620, the author of the preface to *The Pacification of Demons* 平妖傳, thought to be Feng Menglong, compared *Jin Ping Mei* to a daily account book kept by a clever maid who becomes a housewife despite her ignorance of household management. This is why *Jin Ping Mei*, examined afresh, can teach us so much about life, as Feng Menglong acknowledged in the revised preface of the same novel. One should not forget that Marxist critics, following Mao Zedong's example, have been anxious to exorcise the powers of the imagination associated with sexuality and never tire of reiterating that *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is "an encyclopedia of the declining feudal world" rather than a novel about love. Written two centuries earlier, *Jin Ping Mei* offers us a better documented treatise on the subject of feudal China, describing "middle-class" Chinese society with its women with bound feet rather than the exclusive world of the Manchu aristocracy.

The Editions: Problems Unsolved

LET US begin with the earliest printed text: for a long time it was generally accepted that *Jin Ping Mei* was first published in 1610, as stated by Lu Xun in his *A Short History of Chinese Fiction* in 1926 and 1930, and since then quoted in almost every other book on the subject. This date is based on Shen Defu's testimony in his *Marginal Notes on the Wanli Era (Wanli yehuo bian)*, published long after its author's death, and was accepted as true prior to the discovery of the *cihua* edition. A close examination of the passage in question proves Lu Xun to be incorrect, and that the text of the testimony itself is unreliable; in short, if there was such an edition, it came out after 1613.

According to more authoritative sources, no printed text actually appeared before 1614 or 1615. Shen Defu's statement and that of Feng Menglong mentioned above point out that the

book was circulating in 1619 or 1620.

A preface dated 1618 in the *Jin Ping Mei cihua* discovered in 1932 makes it logical to assume that this was the original edition. A comparison with other texts seems to confirm this, especially as this version was longer and not as well organized. But a number of unsolved difficulties remain.

The later editions replace the prologue, revise most of the chapter headings and the introductory poems, shorten the digressions, reduce the number of lyrics, correct the *lapsus calami* and seek to adjust the faulty dates. These variants, which add up to several tens of thousands of words, could be explained by some direct filiation. But these later "abridged editions" contain some passages not to be found in the supposed original edition. For example, chapters 53 and 54 are radically different, and less satisfactorily written in the derived editions, while the opposite is true for chapters 55 and 56. On this point, Shen Defu argues reasonably that chapters 53 to 57 are interpolations.

It thus appears that the two texts are not linked by direct filiation, and so it must be assumed that a third text served as the source of the other two. In an unpublished dissertation completed in 1964, James Wrenn reached the same conclusion by examining the texts using another method. But the generally accepted conclusion regarding the original text is not irrefutable, for it is more likely a manuscript than an entire edition which is missing. In any case, it must be a version closer to *Jin Ping Mei cihua*.

The discovery, in 1979, of Xie Zhaozhe's postface both clarifies and complicates the issue. The first question, insoluble at present, is whether it was written for the yet unpublished novel, and whether this was the so-called missing edition discussed above. We learn from Xie that the novel was divided into twenty fasicules; that it was still in the form of a manuscript comprising several million words; and that three-tenths of it were supplied by Yuan Hongdao and half of it from a person named, in various places, Qiu 丘 and Zhucheng 諸城. This is most likely a reference to Qiu Zhichong 丘志充, a literatus who obtained the *jinshi* degree in 1613. It is likely that while living the life of a recluse in anticipation of "better times", when he could take up his official duties, he reworked the disparate manuscripts and filled in the lacunae; and it is also likely that the most complete and best text was in the possession of Wang Shizhen's family.

In other words, Xie Zhaozhe was missing one fifth of the text, and was anxious to complete it before having it published, fearing perhaps that others would get there before him. This of course is pure conjecture: we must admit that we simply do not know. It is quite likely that rumours of imminent publication put pressure on several of the people involved and that two or even three different editions appeared in the same year.

Some of the oldest revised twenty-fasicule editions retain the 1618 preface by the Pearl Player. But while Xie Zhaozhe mentions twenty fasicules, the *cihua* edition is divided into ten. At least on this point the revised edition corresponds more closely to the manuscript prepared by Xie. For this reason we cannot be sure that the publication of the *cihua* came later, even though the critics' testimony following their examination of the text still holds true: that the *cihua* text can undoubtedly be traced to some older version of the novel. With the exception of three or four chapters, it seems to have originated in a practically identical manuscript which must have existed in at least two copies. What about Xie's own copy, which he states consisted of several million words? Was he exaggerating? Xie specifies that he left out parts of the text that he thought were not definitive. Did he reduce a text which was much longer than any of the then known editions? Again, we can only guess at the answer.

We will mention once again that the revised edition is believed to date from the Chongzhen reign (1628-1644) on the strength of a few engravers' signatures found on the corner of the full-page illustrations, two of which accompany each chapter. (These were only brought together in later editions.) The woodblock engravers, whom we know through their illustrations of other works, saw no need to conceal their participation in the production of the work. However, we

have yet to prove that their work was done before 1628; they are only known to have been active as early as 1614. This point requires further investigation, as do the illustrations themselves, because their creators sometimes take great liberties with the text. Comparisons between these and other sets of illustrations, and their relationship to the narrative, can offer us additional topics for future research.

This is the sort of sleuthing that could clear up the mystery surrounding the origins of the novel, a work to which every history of Chinese literature either assigns a sacred niche or puts on a pillory to be reviled. *Jin Ping Mei* is without doubt a formidable book: making it readily available will corrupt the fragile minds of the young, or so the ruling gerontocracy in China used to declare, though few of them can deny having read it in their youth. Mao Zedong was among them, and Jiang Qing proudly confided to her biographer Roxanne Witke that she had read *Jin Ping Mei* in an unabridged version. But the authorities of the People's Republic have still failed to publish an abridged version of *Jin Ping Mei* as promised.*

Jin Ping Mei has yet to benefit from the concern lavished upon *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the only "classical" novel, along with *Shuihu zhuan*, to be honoured with a critical edition worthy of the name. For over half a century, the work begun by Zheng Zhenduo has remained incomplete beyond chapter 33.

Let us hope that this noble task will be realised before the twenty-first century, with the impetus coming from the revival of "Golden Studies" 金學, as the Chinese would say. We also eagerly look forward to the publication of the fully annotated American translation undertaken by David Roy. Until then, it is hoped that this modest French version will make its own contribution to the field.

Jin Ping Mei was written to serve as a warning against obscene conduct. Only those with obscene minds will consider it an obscene book . . . . (editor's note by Jiang Ruizao)

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: An expurgated critical edition of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* in 1,492 pages was published in China in 1985 by the Renmin wenxue chubanshe in Peking, and reprinted in Hong Kong by the Zhongguo tushu shukan she in 1986. The editor of this excellent contribution, Dai Hongsen, states with admirable precision in his preface dated 1980 that a total of 19,161 Chinese characters have been excised, and rumour has it that a 19,161-character supplement was being sold on the black market in China. The Peking edition of ten thousand copies was not available to the general public, copies having been "assigned" to various "units concerned". The fixed price of this three-volume soft cover edition was twelve yuan, but it was reported to have been selling for as much as one hundred yuan on the black market.