

BOOK REVIEWS

Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature. By Tina Lu. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008. Pp. viii + 306. \$39.95/£29.95.

At the heart of Tina Lu's provocatively but somewhat misleadingly titled *Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* are interlinked questions about the changing views of empire, genre, social order, and self, during the transition from late Ming to the Qing. As she argues it, before the cultural shock wrought by the fall of the Ming, narrative structures took an optimistic view of the cosmic and imperial order. Within this world view, the loss of order was a temporary anomaly, and imperial subjects were as confident as theatre audiences that time would bring about a proper resolution to dramatic conflict with a new and improved establishment of order. After the fall of the Ming, however, faith in the totalizing imperial vision waned, and with it, a belief in the narrative promise of karmic retribution to return people to their proper social places and to reward the good and punish the bad.

The main thread that links together the seven chapters of this ambitious monograph is the ongoing analysis of the intersections between *chuanqi* 傳奇 (dramas), *huaben* 話本 (short stories), *xiaoshuo* 小說 (novels) and the narrative vision of empire. Each chapter takes up, from different angles, questions about mapping, border crossings, exchange, narrative form, and predetermined fate. Traditional Chinese narratives are remarkable for the extent to which coincidences and doubling create a closed narrative world that seems structured by an almost mathematical logic or reciprocity. Lu asks to what extent the conventions of each genre allow for individual action to be free from overdetermined narrative and imperial moral codes of meaning. Under what conditions does the conceit of the Chinese empire as boundless (*wuwai* 無外) inspire confident imaginings of infinite possibility, and when does it provoke nightmarish visions of a world from which there is no escape? Since traditional dramatic and narrative forms tend to prize orderly patterns over the introduction of random or unique events, individual qualities tend to get diminished in the construction of predetermined patterns of meaning. From a modern Western reader's perspective, this erasure of the autonomous and the individual is quite striking since our worldview teaches us that meaning lies in the individual and not larger patterns of order.

Accidental Incest uses the consideration of genre to get at the very broad question of narrative form and meaning. The study takes the Ming-Qing transition as a template for its rough periodization of genres. The first chapter starts with the golden age of *chuanqi* as reflecting the optimistic prelapsarian state before the fall the Ming, when it was still possible to reproduce the triumphant orthodox message that order is possible and everyone will be returned to his or her proper place by the end of the play. Chapters Two and Three

explore the way *huaben*, as a commercial genre, embody the values of the market place in which exchange is everything. Those *huaben* texts produced after the fall of the Ming take a more pessimistic view of exchange than the optimistic texts produced during the Ming. The final chapters take up *xiaoshuo* and their tendency to deconstruct the imperial fantasy that personal fulfilment is coterminous with service to the state. As Lu shows, each genre, according to its function and readership, allows for a very different vision of the relationship between the individual and the polity. The question of to what degree these different views of the polity are determined by generic convention or historical change, however, is never clearly addressed. For example, *Accidental Incest* periodizes *xiaoshuo* as representing Qing postlapsarian views, but literati *xiaoshuo* produced during the Ming have an ironic edge that precedes the knowledge that the fall of the dynasty was imminent. As Lu writes in the epilogue, “Historians have noted that by the end of the Ming there was a widespread sense that earlier ways of making sense of knowledge—we might call them modes of coherence—no longer seemed to hold” (p. 261). But as she does not analyze changes in each genre according to a rigorous historical framework, she overemphasizes the pessimism she finds in Qing texts as being a result of the political change in empire rather than considering that it also reflects a more gradual disillusionment with the totalitarian Ming state and its embrace of Cheng-Zhu 程朱 neo-Confucian ideology.

What excites me most about *Accidental Incest* is its engagement with very large questions of intellectual history and world view. Lu discusses the relative value placed on the individual or communal, and degrees of faith in the moral vision of karmic retribution. The answers to these questions are culturally and historically specific, and, as Lu makes clear, contingent on genre of writing. To my historically-attuned tastes, however, the weakness of the book is that even though it take the Ming-Qing transition and the changing notions of empire as a watershed moment, the research is only loosely grounded in political and intellectual history. In addition to linking changing views of the totalizing imperial vision to the shift from Ming to Manchu, Lu would have done well to consider the more gradual epistemological shift from the neo-Confucian interest in ideal systems to a consideration of the individual and unique under evidential scholarship, as discussed by John B. Henderson in his *Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*¹ and Benjamin A. Elman in *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*.²

What her approach lacks in tight historical engagement, Lu makes up for it in her philosophically-inclined readings of a wide range of works of late-imperial literature. *Accidental Incest* is methodologically grounded in approaches developed in the social sciences, including notions of mapping and boundary, symbolic exchange, and kinship. At

¹ New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

² Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984.

times the forays into social science theory can be somewhat puzzling such as the discussion of the natural size of human communities and its relationship to the number of characters depicted in novels as diverse as *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 and *La Comédie humaine* (pp. 241–50). What might seem as an unlikely pairings of theory and text (in this instance, Habermas's public sphere and the pornographic novel *Rouputuan* 肉蒲團), however, sometimes lead to brilliant insights, as in Lu's discussion of the prostituted wife of the protagonist in *Rouputuan* as a public space that connects all the men in the novel. Lu playfully writes what has become one of my favourite lines of academic prose: "The vagina is not an eighteenth-century English coffeehouse where people can read newspapers and speak freely and truthfully" (p. 251).

The first chapter, "The Play as Map of the Empire," shows how *chuanqi* highlight the perfect symmetry between family and state. It is perhaps not surprising that the political vision in *chuanqi* is so conservative given its public and communal nature as a performance genre supported by patronage, and the roots of drama in ritual opera. Taking her cue from Benedict Anderson's classic *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of nationalism*,³ Lu describes *chuanqi* as imagining the empire as a unified and knowable whole. Within this "imagined empire," simultaneity of time connects vast spaces, as in her description of the flight of angry ghosts from Suzhou to Beijing to seek vengeance in the play *Qingzhong pu* 清忠譜 (Registers of the pure and loyal, c. 1644; p. 3). As evidence of the Chinese interest in mapping in order to create a unified imperial vision, Lu cites the Kangxi 康熙 emperor's commissioning of the Jesuits to map the empire (completed in 1718), and the compiling of the *Da Qing tongli* 大清通禮 (Complete Qing rites) and the monumental *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete library of the Four Treasuries) under the leadership of the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor.

The optimistic Ming imperial vision conceived of China as "without an outside" (*wuwai* 無外) and encompassing "all under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下). Within the narrative form of *chuanqi*, this infinite world was linked together by a finite network of acquaintances and coincidences that strain belief (p. 8). By following the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's definition of politics as "what creates the link between exchange and value" (p. 9), Lu is then able to segue into the primary questions she explores throughout the monograph concerning kinship and exchange: What ties individuals together into communities? To what extent are these ties permanent, or are they contingent and circumstantial? And what transforms individual families or couples into a society? At the centre of Lu's exploration of the notion of community is the Chinese concept of the five human relationships (*wulun* 五倫); her readings crack open the easy fantasy that they are all mutually parallel. *Chuanqi* in particular focus on exchange in their mapping of the parallel circulation of people and goods, through trade, gift exchange, kidnapping, and exogamic marriage.

³ London and New York: Verso, 1991.

The focus of Chapters Two and Three is the tight, overdetermined “abacus-like” narrative/ geographic/ economic logic of exchange used in those commercial *huaben* published during the genre’s heyday of 1620–1670. The perfect reciprocity and infinite possibility of resonances and doubling illustrated in these stories point to a closed and comically fruitful world. After 1670 due to the fall of the Ming, the faith in cosmic coherence was replaced by irony, and narrative, economic, and geographic mismatches. Stories about the separation and reunion of family members function as an allegory of the loss and reestablishment of dynastic order. Significantly, as Lu points out, the early Qing collections *Zuixing shi* 醉醒石 (The sobering stone, late 1640s) and *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 (Idle talk under the bean arbor, c. 1668) contain no stories about separated families reuniting. It was no longer conceivable to put the lost world back together again. Chapter Two uses Marcel Mauss’s classic essay on gift exchange to look at the way the circulation of goods and people enhances and extends community. Without exchange, social networks would be reduced to the insular acts of incest and cannibalism from which the monograph takes its title. Lu argues that in classic Ming *huaben*, losing and then being reunited with a family member works like gift exchange in enlarging and strengthening social bonds. I would have liked her to look more closely at the historical context to question the way these stories of exchange occlude the cultural obsession with women’s sexual purity which is largely absent from these stories. It could be that *huaben*, as a commercial genre produced in and reflecting the values of commercial urban landscapes, had a great deal invested in the notion of trade as the mechanism which enables a new and improved order. It might have been useful for Lu to have gone further in exploring the notion that *huaben* naturalize a cosmic and moral logic built on trade in contrast to the Confucian ethical system that demands absolute loyalty and resists substitution. As Lu comments in her discussion of the pornographic novel *Rouputuan* in the Epilogue, women in that text are aliens to the human community, and function as chits to mark value that passes through men’s hands (p. 260). The clash of value system between ethics and economics is foregrounded in a *huaben* story from Li Yu’s 1657 collection *Shi’er lou* 十二樓 (Twelve towers) and a *biji* 筆記 story written by Zhou Liangong 周亮工 (1612–1672); as Lu discusses, in both texts a character’s search for a missing family member is stymied when running into military figures who think of people as commodities with a fixed market value.

A close reading of the story “On a Journey to Vietnam a Jade Horse Miniature Is Exchanged for Crimson Velvet” from *Zhaoshi bei* 照世杯 (The cup that reflects the world; 1660s) in Chapter Four allows Lu to ask if the empire is a closed or open text. Is the empire truly, as it liked to see itself, without borders and able to absorb the “other” into its totalizing narrative? In this story, a young man is forced by an unscrupulous official to travel to Annam 安南 to obtain some “scarlet velvet,” a precious cloth dyed with the blood of apes. The apes are trapped by hunters who trap and kill the apes by taking advantage of their desire to drink alcohol and wear high-heeled clogs. The story is a study in trade, relativism, and border crossings: it contrasts the relative morality of

official and commoner; China and Annam; human and ape. Even though the story concludes with the typical happy ending associated with *huaben*—the protagonist returns to China and his wife safely, richer than he was when he left—the fact that his success is predicated on the commodification of the lifeblood of the apes, suggests the degree to which predatory violence underpins economies of exchange. The story questions what it means to be human and Chinese: China is not necessarily morally superior to Annam, and humans are not necessarily superior to the apes. Although Lu reads the story as an allegory of colonial power, as in the other chapters, she keeps her readings focused on the symbolic. I would have liked to see her read the colonial relationship between China and Annam illustrated in the story within the historically specific frame of the Manchu colonization of China.

In the fifth chapter, “The Arithmetic of Filial Piety,” Lu argues that the logic of exchange works very differently in the closed narratives of filial piety since, in contrast to marriage, relationships with sons or parents brook no substitution. Unlike other narratives of loss and reunion that play out over the entire geography of the empire, filial piety narratives are more spatially contained and tend to be apolitical and atemporal. Since in the texts she analyzes the personal bond of filial piety overshadows loyalty to the state, Lu does not try to frame her discussion historically. However, as Norman Kutcher has argued in *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State*,⁴ a work Lu cites, filial piety took on particular resonance during the early Qing as a form of resistance to the Manchu state. Since many of the narratives Lu discusses are dated to the early Qing, the insular construction of these filial piety narratives could easily have been used to support her broader historical argument about how the fall of the Ming led to a loss of faith in the optimistic and expansive views of empire and narrative.

This chapter is full of rich insights into filial piety narratives. Lu points out the symbolic parallels between spending and fertility in that children and silver are both investments in the future, and the way that anxieties about money are frequently bound up with anxieties about paternity (pp. 149–51). Self-sacrifice for a parent, a foundational Confucian virtue, is ultimately sterile and self-destructive. As Lu points out, the economics of selling a family member or committing flesh sacrifices (*gegu* 割股) for a parent are parallel to selling or eating one’s seed corn (p. 166). While I applaud her attempts to understand the symbolic logic of filial piety, I think the analysis would have benefited from more rigorous examination of what filial piety meant within the values of late-imperial Chinese culture. For example, midway through the chapter, Lu takes up Rousseau’s theory of the need for language to bring exogamy and family order into existence (pp. 156–57). It would have been more direct to reference the concept of rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名) as the Chinese philosophical expression of the need to establish proper familial order. The lack of attention to grounding her discussion

⁴ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

of filial piety in a specific historic context is reflected in a certain sloppiness in the endnotes. For example, the references to changes in imperial attitudes toward *gegu* during the Qing lack proper citations (pp. 154–55), and on page 163, the comment that the greatest of all unfilial acts to leave no issue is ascribed to Confucius instead of Mencius (IV.A.26).

The third section of *Accidental Incest* takes up the genre of *xiaoshuo*, expansive works that lack the tight and neat narrative logic of *chuanqi* and *huaben*. Despite the comparative freedom offered by their broad narrative scope, *xiaoshuo* create fictional worlds that are strikingly claustrophobic. The imploding, incestuous central fictional world spun around Ximen Qing 西門慶 in *Jinpingmei* offers no escape. In contrast to the seemingly endless number of sexual partners promised in *Jinpingmei*, the fictional stage in *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 is claustrophobic due to the Jia family's avoidance of exogamy and practice of marrying kin (*qin shang jia qin* 親上加親). Lu suggests a connection between this enclosed quality of the fictional world in *Honglou meng* and the Caos' anxiety in response to the Manchu court's efforts to construct genealogies to track and monitor banner populations (pp. 207–8). Although this fits well with the monograph's interest in empire, not enough evidence is provided to persuade me that fears about the Manchu census motivated the confusion of identities so central to Cao Xueqin's artistic vision for *Honglou meng*.

The epilogue, "The Public and the Populace, or Thoughts on Genre," is a reading of the pornographic classic *Rouputuan* (Prayermat of flesh) that takes up many of the questions raised in earlier chapters concerning the relationships of self, society, and fate. Lu links the emerging popularity of the novel in sixteenth-century China to the rapid growth of population during that period. In Lu's view, the expansive fictional worlds of *xiaoshuo* enable the genre to explore tensions associated with large populations, such as anonymity and populousness, responsibilities to group and individual freedom, questions of uniqueness, and the possibility that someone else out there may be just like you (pp. 239–40). In *Rouputuan*, the protagonist Weiyang sheng 未央生 thinks the empire is big enough that he can escape the karmic implications of his own lechery; after all, karmic retribution a statistical unlikelihood (p. 240). In yet another claustrophobic turn, by the time *Rouputuan* ends, the expansive space of empire that should properly accommodate the travels and activities of the entire fictional male community has been reduced to the body of Weiyang sheng's wife. As Tina Lu aptly puts it, spatial boundaries have collapsed and Weiyang sheng's prostituted wife "is not merely the public space that connects all these men together but at the same time the most private space, to be occupied by only one man at a time" (p. 250). Final score? Karma 1; individual autonomy 0.

As I have tried to represent, *Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* offers an intellectually ambitious consideration of genre and empire, the narrative and ideological tensions between a closed world view that prizes an unchanging sense of order and one that allows for radical change and exchange, and the place of the individual within them. By weaving together a

diverse selection of methodological approaches to the questions of empire, exchange, family and community to rethink questions of genre, Tina Lu presents new and sometimes brilliant readings of works on late-imperial fiction and drama. While readers may not agree with all of its points, there are more than enough truly original insights in *Accidental Incest* to provoke and delight even those scholars long familiar with the late-imperial literary field.

MARAM EPSTEIN
University of Oregon

Mencius. Translated by Irene Bloom. Edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp. xxii + 174. \$29.50.

As Philip J. Ivanhoe explains in his “Editor’s Preface” (p. vii), Columbia University Press asked him to edit and complete Irene Bloom’s draft translation of the *Mencius*, which illness prevented her from finishing. The resulting work is accurate and very fluid; in addition to their other strengths, Bloom and Ivanhoe are both gifted writers of English, and have produced a translation that can be consulted profitably by all classes of readers, from novices to specialists. As but one example of a felicitous passage, take the translation of 1B.6:

Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi, “Suppose that one of the king’s subjects entrusted his wife and children to his friend and journeyed to Chu. On returning he found that the friend had subjected his wife and children to cold and hunger. What should he do?”

The king said, “Renounce him.”

“Suppose the chief criminal judge could not control the officers. What should he do?”

The king said, “Get rid of him.”

“Suppose that within the four borders of the state there is no proper government—then what?”

The king looked left and right and spoke of other things. (p. 20)

This ably captures the understated rhetoric of the Chinese original, which, in its very terseness, invites the reader to contemplate the patent analogy between the king and the commoner’s friend, and thereby work out independently the moral import of the dialogue.

I have two general concerns about this translation, however. The first has to do with this statement in Ivanhoe’s preface:

I have done my best to preserve not only the meaning but also the spirit of Professor Bloom’s translation, making only a few minor changes in passages