

Andrew M. Plaks: *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.)

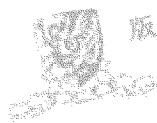
A pervasive sense of inadequacy debilitated intellectuals at the end of the Ming dynasty. On the one hand, Neo-Confucian doctrines imbued them with a sense of action as a moral imperative and identified the individual as the proper agent of effective change. This affirmation of action was, however, undercut by a sense of futility; the traditional patterns of behaviour offered little in the way of guidance to contemporary needs. Intellectuals, with their ingrained penchant for social responsibility, were troubled by the awareness that something needed to be done to rectify Chinese society, but that their options were limited.

This dilemma has been neatly described by Thomas Metzger in his book, *Escape From Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). In an attempt to answer Max Weber's assertion that China did not develop the symptoms of modernity because it lacked the inherent tension between intention and fulfillment that had motivated the West, Metzger argues that China had its own form of the "Protestant Ethic": a Neo-Confucianist ethic that placed value on positive action even as it despaired that such action would have much effect in a recalcitrant world. In Metzger's view, this paradox provided the rationale for a search for new answers. It was, then, the inception of a long process of dissociation which gradually separated Chinese intellectuals from absolute faith in their tradition and resulted in the iconoclasm of the early twentieth century.

The book under review describes this sense of predicament in richer and more subtle detail. Andrew Plaks differs from Metzger in limiting himself to intense scrutiny of the four novels — *Jin ping mei*, *Xi you ji*, *Shuihu juan*, and *Sanguo zhi yanyi* — which emerged in their redacted form at the end of the sixteenth century. He also avoids the shortcoming for which Metzger has been often and justly criticized, that is, using his analysis of intellectual life in the late Ming to validate a teleological scheme of modernization. Nevertheless, Plaks accurately reflects Metzger's essential insight that intellectuals at this time were handcuffed by simultaneously accepting and distancing themselves from the Confucian tradition.

Plaks argues his position with critical acumen and theoretical inventiveness. His detailed "close reading" of the four novels in question is intended to capture, as nearly as possible, their meaning for intellectuals at that time. To achieve this end, he turns to the extensive contemporary commentaries which analyzed and interpreted these works. Although these commentaries have often been denounced for their unreliable and idiosyncratic interpretations, Plaks finds them a valuable guide to determining what these four novels might have meant to their contemporary audience.

In his frequent and technical forays into literary criticism, Plaks intends to reveal the structural and stylistic similarities among these books. Thus, his elaborate analyses of "figural density" and "intertextuality" are employed in support of the thesis that each of these works represents a sophisticated and self-conscious reworking of narrative materials by elite intellectuals. In co-opting these popular traditions, the editors adapted them to



reflect their own concerns, from sexuality to selfhood. This elite interpretation resulted in a text with an ironic surface; the elite editors were making use of these materials while being careful to indicate their distance from them. The detachment necessary for such irony was a sign that the system of values that had integrated and ordered Chinese society was in a state of collapse.

Despite Plaks' assured and erudite presentation, it is possible to take issue with some of his central points. He assumes, for example, that these four books offer a complementary and mutually supporting representation of intellectual life at the end of the Ming. However, this contention is undermined by the fact that they existed previously in the oral tradition, and traces of this uncertain and obstinate past could not easily be erased or re-interpreted. Thus, it cannot be summarily stated that they constitute a "map" of single period of time.

A second criticism of Plaks' approach is his assumption that these works were shaped by elite editors and therefore reflect the preoccupations and problems of that elite. It is true that these novels appeared in expensive editions and found many uppercrust readers, but there is no certainty that their readership was restricted to this educated class. In fact, there were many young readers, and, as we know, there was also a large readership in organizations that predated the secret societies. The ethos of these societies was in many ways determined by these novels, and the hold that the fictional characters and incidents had on the popular imagination argues against a simple correspondence with the gentry official class.

The final misgiving has to do with Plaks' emphasis on the ironic tone he finds permeating these works. Irony, perhaps, is in the eye of the beholder, and certainly there have been many readers of these books over the past four hundred years who have understood them literally and even accepted them as positive models for behaviour. These narratives played a major role in shaping the consciousness of a generation of radicals, from Qiu Jin, the famous female revolutionary, to Mao Zedong. For these readers, the four novels under examination presented alternative values and role models, and in this capacity contributed to their iconoclastic rejection of the elite culture.

Plaks' theories are bold and provocative, and his technical expertise impressive. That there may be misgivings about several of his presuppositions does not detract from his achievement, and this book is certain to instigate controversy in scholarly circles. Those who seek a guide to the novels themselves would do best to look elsewhere; but those readers who are seeking an understanding of Chinese intellectual life, not only at the end of the Ming dynasty but up to the present as well, will find much to ruminate on and argue with in this stimulating book.

Craig Moran