

Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction. By Daniel Hsieh. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008. Pp. 331. \$49.00.

Daniel Hsieh's *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction* explores changes in the depiction of romance between men and women in tales from the Tang dynasty, focusing chiefly on works from the late eighth and the ninth centuries. In broadest terms, he sees a shift from relative reticence about love and romance early in the dynasty (and prior to the Tang), to a brief flowering of stories depicting those themes in a positive light in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, followed by a renewed ambivalence by the late ninth century on the part of the élite men who wrote these tales. Throughout Hsieh ties these changes to changes in the political and social climate, suggesting that romance flourished as writers questioned traditional values in the post-An Lushan rebellion period; later in the ninth century as writers lost confidence their attitude toward romance also became more conservative. Hsieh's goal as stated in the introduction is to trace the early emergence of themes that were also prominent later in the literary tradition: "the dangers of female sexuality, fantasy and desire, the puzzle and dilemma of woman, celebrations of love and the feminine, the nature of *qing* [情], and the ultimately tragic vision of love" (p. 32). His book builds on the substantial recent scholarship on women and *qing* in the late imperial period, and he makes frequent comparisons to the treatment of similar themes in late imperial works such as Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 and Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 *Honglong meng* 紅樓夢. A second theme that informs Hsieh's discussion is differences between the portrayal of love in Tang works, and in the Chinese tradition in general, with its depiction in Western literature from the medieval period and thereafter; he writes, "The recurring idea in the Western tradition that love between man and woman can be spiritual, even holy, is largely absent in the Chinese mind" (p. 135).

The introduction gives a brief survey of the treatment of love and women in classical literature, positing a major shift in the mid-Tang with the rise of *ci* 詞 (song lyrics) and especially, elaborate Tang tales (*chuanqi* 傳奇). Women were a rare topic in élite (*wenren* 文人) literature before the mid-Tang because they were perceived as a dangerous distraction that could divert men from their proper duty to the state and society. Though love was a more prominent topic in early "folk" poetry such as the "Guofeng" 國風 from the *Shijing* 詩經, and the "Nineteen Old Poems" 古詩十九首, in élite literature love was treated as something to be controlled and denied (as in the "*Fu* on stilling the passions" 定情賦 by Zhang Heng 張衡 and others in that genre), and women were objects of erotic interest (as in sixth-century palace-style poetry 宮體詩) rather than true love or passion. Hsieh argues that a "breakdown in decorum and boundaries" (p. 12) in Tang society after the An Lushan rebellion, along with a concomitant expansion of courtesan culture, permitted love and women to gain new prominence as literary themes when writers lost faith in the state's authority. *Chuanqi* and (to a lesser extent) its sister genre *zhiguai* 志怪, genres which had always focused on the marginal, became important venues for writers to explore these topics. It is these stories that are the focus of the rest of the book. Hsieh

concludes the introduction with a brief discussion of *chuanqi* and its place in Chinese literary history. He divides the history of Tang *chuanqi* into three periods: early (pre-780s), “high” (780s to 830s), and late. It was during the “high” period that love received the most nuanced treatment, and most of the stories best-known today date from these several decades. Hsieh makes the important point that *xiaoshuo* 小說 did not refer just to fiction when these tales were written; instead he rightly suggests that in many ways these stories were akin to modern “urban legends,” with the key difference that the Tang stories were elaborated far more than most urban legends are, “turn[ing] them into literature” (p. 26).

The remainder of the monograph focuses on five main modes of depicting women, and romantic love between men and women, in Tang tales: dangerous love, male fantasies about women and love, male writers’ attempts to explore and understand women’s inherent nature, successful (i.e. happy) romance, and failed romance. Chapter One, “Dangers and Temptations,” examines what Tang stories reveal about the fears men had about women, in particular fears of the temptations female sexuality posed to men. Hsieh again begins with a brief sketch of earlier literary treatments of these themes, discussing images of the *femme fatale* and the “proper woman.” The heart of the chapter draws on a number of stories of fox- and ghost-encounters to draw a composite picture of a very common theme in Tang stories, an ordinary man’s unexpected meeting with a woman who turns out to be not what she seems. Hsieh notes that the frequent depiction in stories of women as ghosts or animal spirits who take on human disguise reflects the writing males’ belief that women were wilder, more natural, and less civilized than men. Stories of (living) men’s encounters with ghost women—which generally involved sexual intimacy—illustrated the supposed intensity of female desire as the women came back from the dead to indulge longings unsatisfied during their lives. Hsieh argues that the marginality of *xiaoshuo* gave writers more latitude to explore the nature of women than other genres, allowing more ambiguity (i.e. less censure) in the depiction of women and desire; *xiaoshuo* writers displayed an ambivalence towards these topics that contrasts sharply with what Hsieh portrays as a more straight-laced traditional attitude that characterized other genres. This tolerance grew over time until in the late Tang we find examples in which rejecting love in the form of a beautiful woman who offers herself to a man is not always the right choice (as in the mid- or late-ninth century tale “Feng Zhi” 封陟). Hsieh concludes that this ambiguity reflected the tensions between the “Confucian conscience” (p. 55) and the private desires and hopes of the élite men who wrote these texts.

Chapter Two, “Desire, Fantasy, and the Ideal Woman” explores how male desire is depicted in Tang stories. Though he does not define it explicitly, Hsieh appears to use “fantasy” to describe romance stories in which the man and the woman remain together at the story’s conclusion, rather than having a transitory affair: this is “fantasy” because it would not ordinarily be possible in the real world. (At times he also uses the term more loosely to describe men enjoying affairs with women). He suggests that such fantasies were particularly appealing to élite men in medieval China because they were enticed to indulge their desires (e.g. by courtesans) and yet expected not to act upon such desires,

leading them to seek an outlet in literature. The bulk of the chapter is an examination of several different categories of male objects of desire and the different ways in which desire is played out. Thus affairs with goddesses and fairies most frequently end in separation, yet are portrayed positively insofar as the man is allowed to enjoy himself with a beautiful, often wealthy woman without any negative consequences to himself. (Here a gloss indicating what Hsieh is translating as “fairies” would have been useful.) Hsieh gives a detailed reading of the late Tang tale “Dugu Mu” 獨孤穆, in which the title character meets and marries a dead Sui princess, eventually dying to join her; he suggests that the fact that Dugu Mu shows no fear upon realizing that the Sui princess is dead and willingly goes to her is symptomatic of an increasing openness to “the other” in the mid- and late ninth century. In discussing fantasies about palace women Hsieh focuses on stories in which a literatus and a palace woman exchange poems inscribed on leaves placed afloat in a stream flowing into and then out of the palace grounds. He argues that the differences between the treatment of this topic in ninth-century tales and in an example from the Song dynasty highlight a shift towards greater sentimentality and celebration in the treatment of romance that occurred after the Tang. Finally Hsieh examines a selection of tales in which ghost- and fox-women, both of which are often portrayed as dangerous to men, are depicted in fully positive, non-threatening terms. He notes that in both types of story, for the woman to be a wholly positive figure, it is necessary that she conform closely to the ritual norms prescribed for human women.

Chapter Three, “Sympathy, Admiration, and the Puzzle of Women” discusses a variety of themes in which, Hsieh argues, writers explore “women, their place in society, their true nature in all its aspects” (p. 152). The bulk of the chapter focuses on stories in which female characters are portrayed with some sympathy for the difficult situation of women in medieval China rather than simply as objects of desire. Hsieh sees the emergence of such a sensibility in some Tang stories as “part of the re-evaluation of the culture and its values” (p. 112): while earlier literature tended either to depict unhappy women as objects of desire or to use them as an allegory for the plight of the misunderstood official, some Tang stories show a more sensitive understanding of women’s situation. Thus he suggests that stories in which human women are paired with non-human sexual partners, while rare, reflect an understanding of the sexual frustration many women may have experienced because they were unable to choose their own mates (lacking the opportunity to take concubines and visit courtesans that were given to men); likewise stories in which women are cast as transformed flower-spirits also tend to depict them sympathetically as “innocent, delicate, and natural beings” (p. 120). Hsieh’s discussion of tales in which transformed animal-spirit women ultimately flee their human families and revert to their animal forms, despite apparent contentedness in their human roles, draws on discussions of the “swan-maiden motif” in folklore studies. He sees these and other stories of female flight as explorations of the dissatisfactions—and desire to escape—that would be only natural to a woman married off and subject to the control of

her family-by-marriage. In the final section of the chapter Hsieh changes course to examine tales in which the female characters are somewhat sinister or even terrifying, in tales of female knights-errant or of women who turn out to be *yaksha* 夜叉. In aggregate, Hsieh argues, the tales discussed in this chapter suggest that women are inherently torn between the desire for family and the desire for freedom.

Chapter Four, “The Celebration of Love,” discusses stories in which romance is depicted positively. Hsieh shows that before a romance becomes permanent (i.e. through marriage) within the human realm, the passion that begins a romance is most often tempered by concessions to social norms. Thus in tales such as “Li hun ji” 離婚記 and “Li Wa zhuan” 李娃傳, the various characters are all reconciled with their respective parents before the stories can end. More often in these tales as in reality at the time, romantic relationships were temporary; the ideal female lover recognizes that romance should not be indulged to excess and willingly limits her time with a man. (Hsieh builds on this point further in Chapter Five when he argues that, in “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳, though the male character Li Yi 李益 is hardly an exemplary character, it is Xiaoyu’s own refusal to recognize that their parting is necessarily imminent that is the true root of the tale’s tragic ending.) As a result many stories adopt a wistful or nostalgic tone in describing affairs that come to a close. The more common path to a happy ending to a romance is for the man to depart with the woman for another world from which she originally came, such as a Daoist realm or the dragon realm to which Liu Yi and his dragon-wife retire in “Liu Yi zhuan” 柳毅傳. Hsieh concludes the chapter with an exploration of stories of love between married couples.

The final full chapter, “The Tragedy of Love,” examines stories in which romance fails. Hsieh argues that after the “advances” of the mid-Tang period in which romantic love was briefly depicted more positively than theretofore, we find a return to negative depictions of love and women in which, in many cases, women are increasingly demonized. Thus a tale like “Yingying zhuan” 鶯鶯傳 hinges on the differences between men and women in how they react to love and how it affects them; the student Zhang 張 is drawn to Yingying because of her difference from him (“Yingying’s moody, unpredictable nature, her mysterious femininity” [p. 207]), yet he ultimately drops her because her hold on him is too strong for him to be able to maintain his own essential character and “Confucian conscience.” Still more extreme are stories in which the action of the story seems devoid of moral logic, as for example in the late Tang tale “Wang Zhu” 王諸 in which an innocent woman dies for a crime (the jealous murder of her husband’s concubine) that she did not commit. Hsieh attributes this shift first to the social conditions in a “culture [that] had always worked against romance” (p. 197) and second to a growing conservatism and loss of confidence as a result of the dynasty’s political instability.

This book’s great strength is the breadth of tales it covers. Discussions of Tang tales often focus on a standard set of common anthology pieces without acknowledging that the scope of extant tales, and the themes they cover, is much larger. Hsieh has read widely in

the surviving sources and provides useful synopses of many stories that are obscure today (as well as those that are well-known). At times however the book reads as if Hsieh has not yet clarified for himself how he wants to present this very rich set of materials, and a number of points are made repeatedly without being illuminated further in later iterations. More frequent and longer quotation from the texts would make his arguments more persuasive. For example, in the discussions of both “Cui shusheng” 崔書生 (p. 86) and “Zhao Xu” 趙旭 (p. 90) Hsieh notes that certain scenes are “striking” but does not give the reader the chance to be convinced of this by actually quoting the scenes.

A number of important concepts might also have been approached in more depth. Thus Hsieh suggests that “Confucian values” were an important factor shaping the attitudes of the men who wrote and read these tales, but if so a more thorough exploration of what “Confucianism” meant to these men would have been helpful; as it is “Confucian” is frequently used simply as a near synonym for “conservative.” The dichotomy between “*élite*”/*wenren* and “folk” literature is also more complex than Hsieh’s treatment allows it to be here; his discussion of the “Guofeng” or “Gushi shijiu shou” as true “folk” poetry—and the suggestion that many of the “Guofeng” may have been composed by women—is problematic given that they were recorded and transmitted by members of the scholar-*élite*. The popularity of later “imitations” of the “Old Poems” also suggests that to some extent, what we read now as “folk”-style poetry was simply the way the *élite* wrote about these topics.

A finer distinction between social reality and literary representation would have allowed for a more nuanced approach to these materials (for example when Hsieh says that “love in China has a history” [p. 3], when in fact his focus is on love as depicted in a very specific type of writing). Hsieh’s argument is a useful reminder that literature is indeed influenced by real social conditions, but his one-to-one mapping of life to literature at times underestimates the literary sophistication of these texts. “History” broadly conceived undoubtedly had a significant effect on the beliefs and ideas of these writers, and thus on their works, yet literary norms and expectations also played an important role. Thus the shift towards a “gothic” sensibility that Hsieh sees in some late ninth-century tales may reflect not simply a direct response to political history, but also writers’ desire to find new ways of developing a familiar plot to keep it interesting.

At the same time, given the close link that Hsieh does see between the literary treatment of love and women on one hand, and political and social history on the other, a more detailed exploration of social and political developments during these periods would also have been helpful, in place of the generalized claim of a post-An Lushan “breakdown in decorum” (p. 12). David McMullen’s *State and Scholars in T’ang China*,¹ still the defining book on changes in the intellectual and social milieu of the scholar *élite* whose stories Hsieh studies, might have been useful here given Hsieh’s close mapping of trends

¹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

within the stories to political and cultural history, but the book does not appear in his bibliography.

More careful editing would have solved many of the book's problems, such as the occasional internal contradictions. For example, on p. 127 Hsieh writes that "versions [of the swan-maiden motif] with monkeys or tigers are not pure swan-maiden tales since there is no actual theft" of the animal/woman's pelt which forces her to stay in human form and marry the man who steals the pelt; then on p. 133 he discusses the tale "Tianbao xuanren" 天寶選人, in which, as Hsieh himself notes, the story begins with precisely such a theft. There are also a number of mistakes in the synopses of stories, such as when he describes the female character in Shen Yazhi's 沈亞之 "Xiangzhong yuan jie" 湘中怨解 as a goddess when in fact she is a dragon (p. 173); similarly Hsieh writes that "Zheng takes a wife after beginning his affair with Ren" in "Renshi zhuan" 任氏傳 (p. 226) when actually Zheng had been married prior to meeting Ren.

Love and Women brings together a fascinating set of materials and asks provocative questions about them. While readers may wish for a more in-depth exploration of many of the issues raised, the book nonetheless provides a valuable introduction to works that are seldom covered in scholarship on this period, and should prove to be a useful resource for those interested in medieval history and literature or in the treatment of romance in Chinese literature.

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Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China. Edited by Nanxiu Qian, Grace S. Fong, and Richard J. Smith. Leiden: Brill, 2008. €109.00/\$162.00.

The twelve chapters in this volume bring together an impressive array of scholars from around the world in an exploration of the dynamic years of the late Qing and early Republic. While there has been copious research published on both of these periods separately, only very few have explored the connections between the two and how people living through these years negotiated the transition from Imperial subject to Republican citizen. Even fewer studies have grappled with the gender dimensions and their considerable impact on the creation of new knowledge and cultural products. Qian, Fong, and Smith have provided us with an invaluable insight into this period and reveal the importance of exploring the interactions between the often arbitrary borders of historical periods. The editors note from the outset that the volume seeks to look behind the conventional division between "tradition" and "modernity."