

Transmutations of Desire: Literature and Religion in Late Imperial China

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Transmutations of Desire: Literature and Religion in Late Imperial China is a wide-ranging book. It crosses genres, though it is most interested in drama and novels. While Ming- and Qing-dynasty literature is the primary focus of the book, a variety of Western authors are invoked to help us think through the problems of desire and renunciation. Li shows the complicated interplay between *qing* 情 and renunciation in the specific Chinese texts he writes about, but his invocation of authors from other traditions reminds us that desire and renunciation are not local problems. Both desire and renunciation are situated in time and space; they have histories. Li carefully delineates the changing ways that the concept of *qing* functions over the course of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The book consists of seven chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue. The first chapter, “Transmutations of Desire,” defines and describes the concept of *qing*. Subsequent chapters focus on particular texts or bodies of work. The chapter titles are: “*Mudan ting*: The Theater of the Mind,” “Between Union and Separation: *Xixiang ji* and the Tragic,” “*Changsheng dian*: *Qing*, Death and Redemption,” “*Taohua shan*: The Inadequacy of *Qing* and the Metaphysical Solution Revisited,” “Jiang Shiquan and Xu Xi: Justifications of *Qing* and Metaphysical Frame,” and “*Honglou meng*: *Qing* and Visions of the Tragic.” The epilogue touches on how the dynamic between desire and renunciation plays out in more modern times.

One of the contributions of the book is the way it traces this history of *qing* from its heyday in the late Ming, where it is unselfconsciously invoked in dramas like *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭, to the Qing dynasty, where it still held sway, albeit more tenuously and in a more conservative climate. Li writes that, in the Ming, conversation about *qing* was robust; an author like Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) saw *qing* and renunciation as two sides to the same coin. But in the Qing, playwrights spent more time justifying *qing* than had earlier authors and plots revolving around *qing* seemed to have become more formulaic (pp. 183–84). He writes that later authors seemed to lack what he calls the “faith in *qing*” that we see in a writer like Tang Xianzu or Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1704) (p. 182). He does not suggest that concern with *qing* vanishes, but rather

that it changes. And he shows ways in which the resolution of *qing* in *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, for example, is tragic.

Another contribution of the book is its detailed discussion of some works which have not been translated into English and are, thus, lesser known to Anglophone audiences. Li does a terrific job of providing the reader with details which make it possible to follow his argument. A particularly interesting example is Jiang Shiquan's 蔣士銓 (1725–1784) *Linchuan meng* 臨川夢 (1774), which takes the life of Tang Xianzu, the author of *Mudan ting* (the subject of an earlier chapter in the book) as its subject. Jiang must come to terms with Tang's vision of *qing* and its impact on readers, especially women readers. As Li tells us, some readers kept a copy of *Mudan ting* in their sewing boxes, connecting their work as virtuous and industrious women with their recreational, and slightly scandalous, reading (p. 8). One of the young women readers, Yu Ergu 俞二姑, is featured in *Linchuan meng*. We know something of the historical Yu Ergu. Zhang Dafu 張大復 (1554?–1630) was a contemporary who wrote about her: she was a “young and sickly maiden” (p. 194) who was obsessed by *Mudan ting*, wrote commentary on it, and perhaps died of her obsession with it. Li refers to her as the female protagonist of the play. She dies young and is told that her death is because she seduced Tang Xianzu; her fate is to be reborn and live the life of Du Liniang 杜麗娘, the heroine of *Mudan ting*. Li writes, “The character Yu Ergu is, in the end, quite problematic: is her death a kind of martyrdom in the Confucian sense, or a form of retribution?” Li goes on to talk about how the role of Yu Ergu in this play represents Jiang Shiquan's attempt to come to terms with the female readership of the play (p. 197).

This brings us to the problem of the ending more generally: How does desire end? Li's book is about desire and renunciation: the ending of the play (or novel) is critical to the ways in which desire is (or is not) renounced. *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 is a particularly interesting case here. The source story (or stories) ends not with reunion, but separation. Li quotes Katherine Carlitz as saying that the Tang-dynasty story was about the “elusiveness of passion rather than the satisfaction of passion” (p. 116). But the Ming, play *Xixiang ji* (in five sections, which Li refers to as “plays”), has the lovers unite and marry at the end, concluding with the rousing and optimistic statement, “May lovers [all those who possess *qing*] of the whole world all be thus united in wedlock!” (p. 119; brackets in original) The ending (the fifth “play”) of *Xixiang ji* has been

much debated and discussed; much scholarly opinion holds that it is not in fact by Wang Shifu 王實甫 (1260–1336), but is rather by Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (p. 120). The fourth play ends not with the marriage of the lovers, but rather with Zhang 張, on his way to take the civil service exams, dreaming that Yingying 鶯鶯 is eloping with him (p. 120). But he awakens before the play ends with his ruminating, “That lovely and dainty jade person—where is she now?” The Ming play is clear on where the happy ending lies, but Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 (1608–1661) is much less so.

The problem of the ending is also present in the final text Li writes about—*Honglou meng*. Li writes that when Qing-dynasty writers turned to the theme of *qing*, it was “incomplete, fraught with uneasiness and uncertainty, hesitation and tentativeness” (p. 234). Even if we accept Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹 (1715–1763) authorship of the final forty chapters of *Honglou meng* (and many scholars do not), it is clear that they are in a different mode than the first forty. One of the most innovative characteristics of the novel, according to Li, is that it creates a set of characters who seem to live outside the realm of Confucian morality. Li writes, “One of the most innovative features in *Honglou meng* is this theory about a group of individuals who populate the novel, a metaphysical justification of them in cosmological terms, an understanding of them in terms ‘beyond good and evil’” (p. 220). But, of course, they do not live entirely in a world of their own making, and that world is also portrayed in the novel. *Qing* in *Honglou meng* defies fulfilment. In an interesting and provocative statement, he sees Baoyu 寶玉 as a kind of counterpart to Du Liniang and suggests that in some ways it is the immateriality of desire in *Mudan ting* that allows Liniang to fulfil her desire (p. 233). Baoyu is located in a very material novel and while Cao may have intended for us to understand him beyond Confucian moral norms, the world he inhabits is not beyond those norms. I would suggest (though Li might not agree) that Baoyu’s renunciation when, after finally passing the civil service exams, he does not return home but becomes a monk, is also unsatisfactory and in some ways unconvincing. Here again, we see that *qing* remains an interesting problem, but its resolution is more complex than it had been in earlier times.

Historical plays present a particular problem in thinking about desire and its culmination—the playwright is not free to invent an ending which is to his liking. Or, to be more precise, there are restraints on the ways in which endings can be manipulated. The source story of *Changsheng dian* 長生殿 by

Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1704) is well known—it is the love story of the Tang Emperor Minghuang 明皇 (r. 712–758) and his consort, Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (719–756), also known as Yang Guifei 楊貴妃. Hong Sheng has cleaned up what he regards as the lewd bits of the story; for example, in the play *Yang Yuhuan* does not have a scandalous affair with the rebel An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757), as she does in some earlier versions of the story. Hong Sheng also modifies it in more fundamental ways—in this play Yang Yuhuan commits suicide to save the emperor—her sacrifice shows the purity of her *qing* and the lovers are then reunited in death. In the preface to the play, Hong Sheng writes:

Those in times ancient or modern who lead extravagant lives and satisfy every desire they could have will inevitably meet calamities and destructions; they all repent. [Yang] Yuhuan toppled the state and her physical body perished. In her consciousness after death, how endlessly must she have repented? How could she have joined the ranks of immortals, but for her deep remorse and repentance? (p. 149)

The remorse and repentance are what enable the posthumous reunion with the emperor. The posthumous reunion is the happy ending, which seems to be possible only when there is what Li calls a “robust faith” in *qing* that he sees in texts like this one.

But *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (1699) is somewhat stickier kind of history. It recounts the fall of the Ming dynasty, and the fate of two lovers, the virtuous courtesan, Li Xiangjun 李香君 (1624–1653), and her lover, Hou Fangyu 侯方域 (1618–1655), is intertwined with the fate of the dynasty. As Li writes: “In *Taohua shan*, *qing* is entangled in the intricacies of personal life and national history and destiny, and proves to be inadequate in itself” (p. 172). He goes on to write that the events of the Ming-Qing transition in the play make *qing* seem inadequate, even superfluous. He writes: “The poignancy of this shift lies in the fact that *qing* is not merely glossed over; rather, *qing* becomes powerless when it is juxtaposed with history, which forms such a contrast with the plays [such as *Mudan ting* and *Xixiang ji*] written at the height of the culture of *qing*” (p. 176). It is perhaps no coincidence Li finds that this play marks a transition in representations of *qing*. *Qing* falters in the face of history.

But Li does not confine himself to Ming-Qing literature in his discussion of desire and renunciation. Desire has a history but it is not geographically

bounded. The comparisons, implied by the citations, to Western literature are not developed in any systematic way. They are quick flashes, which suggest that in fact the concepts of desire and renunciation are what really interests Li; the ground of his interest and expertise is Ming and Qing literature, but he finds echoes of the things that interest him in other literatures. The list of Western authors quoted is impressive—Friedrich Hebbel, Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Luce Irigaray, Andreas Capellanus, Balzac, Ezra Pound, Calderón de la Barca and others. The quotations clearly demonstrate that issues of desire and renunciation, dreamworlds and real worlds, are not particular to China in the Ming and Qing dynasties. They are fundamental to the human literary and religious imaginations. The quotations are evocative; Li does not expand upon them or talk about ways in which particular times and places that produced them are reflected. He places the passages there for his readers to reflect on, to provoke our thinking about desire and renunciation and dreamworlds, and to stimulate the imagination of readers trained in Western literary traditions.

There is so much in this book that it seems greedy to wish for more. Desire (*qing*) is clearly delineated; but one might wish for a stronger delineation of the varieties of renunciation. Buddhist and Daoist modes of renunciation are discussed in regard to Jin Shengtan's discussion of *Xixiang ji* and Daoism in *Taohua shan*. But the relationship between *qing* and renunciation is very problematic in *Honglou meng*: in that novel, *qing* is complex and unsatisfactory, and so is renunciation, as is evidenced by the problem of the ending, discussed above.

There is much to think about in this book, and it is presented in a lively and readable fashion. Much of the literature Li talks about is well known, even in the Anglophone literature. Works that are lesser known are presented with enough context so that it is easy to follow the line of argument. Li builds on the growing literature, in both Chinese and English, on the issue of *qing* and sentiment in Ming and Qing literature, and he is generous in his citation of that work. The ways in which Li presents the prominence of desire and the ends of desire are stimulating and provocative. Readers interested in Ming-Qing literature and those issues of desire and renunciation will find much that is of interest in this book.

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