

**A CASE FOR CONFUCIAN SEXUALITY:  
THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL *Yesou Puyan***

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*Introduction*

Some books are not necessarily good literature but are all the same unique in marking extremes of creative determination. *Yesou puyan*, or *A Country Codger Puts His Words out to Sun*, is just such a book, written by an eccentric polymath who never amounted to anything in what counted in China, official life.<sup>1</sup> In his novel China is being threatened by demons, barbarians, and forces of Buddhist and Taoist perversion, which only a thorough Confucian revival can eradicate. The hero is a latter day Confucian superman who (like the author) never passes the official exams, but manages to rise to a position of advisor to the emperor, conquer the forces of evil and even to eradicate Buddhism from the earth. The novel combines a strict orthodox moral vision with extensive descriptions of bizarre, unorthodox behavior which often take sexual form. The author portrays scenes of bestiality, sexual vampirism, and genital acrobatics. Throughout pages of erotic danger and adventure, the hero displays superhuman sexual control and unswervingly preaches that sex is for procreation only: "... the two ways of *yin* and *yang* are only meant to proliferate Heaven and Earth and to continue the descent of the ancestors. They are in no way meant for lustful enjoyment." The genitals should be looked upon as "ordinary, tiring things—only then are they like treasures" (ch. 68, 8b).

At one-hundred and fifty-four chapters<sup>2</sup> *Yesou puyan* is one of the longest Chinese novels ever written. Twentieth-century specialists have placed it in a group of Qing works called novels of erudition or scholar-novels.

<sup>1</sup> Two editions of the book are used in this essay: the 154-chapter Shijie shuju version (Taipei, 1975, fourth edition), which deletes sexually explicit passages, and the 152-chapter edition at Beijing University Library with a date of 1881, published by the Piling huizhen lou, which provides the erotic passages but has lacunae elsewhere. Page numbers refer to the Taiwan edition if in simple Arabic numerals, and to the Beijing University Library edition if like this: la, lab, etc. Chapter numbers, if given without page references, refer to the Taipei edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> According to Hou Jian (1974), the book is over one million characters long; see p. 11.

The author is Xia Jingqu (1705-1787), a *zhusheng* and native of Jiangyin in Jiangsu Province. Like other scholar-novelists, he has chosen the novel as a form into which he can pour his vast erudition: besides the usual core of Confucian learning in history, poetry and moral thought, he is fluent in mathematics, astronomy, military science, and medicine. But he is unlike the other erudite novelists in his imaginings and/or observations of sexual behavior. For this reason C. T. Hsia has dismissed the author: "Despite his Confucian orthodoxy, Hsia Ching-ch'ü ... has a licentious imagination and places his hero Wen Pai *tzu* Su-ch'en, a supreme genius in all civil and military arts, in every kind of improbable adventure."<sup>3</sup> Using Freudian analysis, Hou Jian writes of the "abnormal psychology" exhibited in *Yesou puyan* and refers to the hero's "neurosis," "Oedipus complex," and "mother fixation."<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Xia's penchant for describing peculiarities or aberrations of sexual and excretory body functions would cause many readers to wonder how "decent" or "normal" he was. But for now I prefer to take Xia at his word and to resolve the tension between "licentious" or "abnormal" imagination and strong, self-styled Confucian orthodoxy as a clean-cut division between "licentiousness" outside in the world and "correctness" inside the mind. I will view him not as a "subconsciously" perverted orthodox writer, but as an orthodox moralist who for once chooses not to repress the consideration, in unsparing terms, of the problems and fantasies of sexuality. In this view, Xia challenges readers to find one instant in which he is actually enjoying his lurid descriptions. He wants his "pornography" to be taken not as vicarious indulgence, but as a test of virtuous self-control.

The central message of *Yesou puyan* is the call for the restoration of a pure Confucianism. Xia makes his case in a number of ways: by showing the decadence of society and chaos of government, and by creating a hero who uses both vast learning and great martial and moral strength to correct social wrongs. The sexual themes contribute to Xia's case for restoration by portraying the victory of virtuous male energy. Thus, in addition to military and mental prowess, his hero exhibits supreme sexual potency, which is tested in numerous dramatizations of temptation. The intricacy of detail and strangeness of erotic description, unparalleled in Chinese fiction known to me at this date, are part of a "scholarly" project: to present a complete and objective view of society, of which sexuality is portrayed as one of many important parts, and to assert that integrity and

<sup>3</sup> C. T. Hsia 1977:270. Hsia gives incorrect dates for Xia's life.

<sup>4</sup> Hou Jian: 17, 18.

control are possible even in the most provocative and compromising situations, which the hero frequently encounters. *Yesou puyan's* message is of special interest in contrast to that of the far more famous novel of the same period, *Honglou meng*, in which it is a question of the decline of a household and the resignation or abdication of male energy. The presence of these two extremes in such lengthy novel form (154 and 120 chapters respectively) sets up a framework for future and deeper study of the history of literary representations of male centrality in China.

### *The Author and His Text*

The "novel of erudition" or "scholar-novel" are terms used by scholars from Lu Xun to C. T. Hsia to refer to a group of Qing dynasty works in which the narrative is interspersed with learned discourse or is written in high literary language. These works, mostly written before the Opium War, are lengthy and elaborate celebrations of traditional art and knowledge. Dense even for most native readers, none is likely to be translated in entirety into a foreign language (in *Yesou puyan's* case, a complete edition is difficult to come by unless one lives near a specialists' library). As C. T. Hsia suggests, after the Opium War scholar-novelists disappeared, apparently no longer able to engage in such purely self-contained pastimes.<sup>5</sup> Novels from the rest of the nineteenth century are less ambitious in scope; many are devoted to satirical exposé of the dynasty's corruption and of general social decay. From the perspective of the mid-Qing, Xia Jingqu also observes decay, but he still has a vision—albeit a fantastic one—of China's grand-scale, self-generated renewal.

*Yesou puyan* was not published until about one-hundred years after it was written. Perhaps it was because of the author's poverty, often referred to in his poetry—such a long novel would be expensive to print. Certainly the presentation of a messianic Confucianist who has numerous sexual encounters would make such a book dangerous to print. Lu Xun thought that the author wished to write it only for himself and friends.<sup>6</sup> Its earliest extant edition was that of 1881 in 152 chapters, which had a very detailed interlinear commentary and critical comments at the end of each chapter, but contained many lacunae. An uncut version in 154 chapters by another publisher followed in 1882, without the interlinear commentary

<sup>5</sup> Hsia notes a partial exception in *Ernü yingxiong zhuan*, a mid-19th century novel which is non-scholarly but still wholly in favor of Confucian ideology; see p. 275, note 19.

<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun 1959:317.

but containing identical critical comments at the end of each chapter.<sup>7</sup> After these editions, the novel gradually became well known and was reprinted and revised several times up to the 1930s. Later editions usually were cut and there is even a version in one-hundred chapters. The preface to the Taiwan Shijie shuju edition (originally Shanghai, 1937), which censors the obscene passages, contrasts with earlier abridged editions which deleted the learned discourses and kept the eroticism.<sup>8</sup>

The novel attracted the attention of a number of Republican scholars such as Qian Jingfang (1912), Lu Xun (early 1920s), Sun Kaidi (1931), Tan Zhengbi (1935), Jiang Ruicao (1935), and Zhao Jingshen (1937). Zhao finally compiled the most authoritative biography of the author by travelling to Jiangyin and consulting the Xia family genealogy.<sup>9</sup> The book was a favorite of the historian Wu Han in pre-war times;<sup>10</sup> and, according to C. T. Hsia, in the early 1940s in Shanghai it was popular fare in operatic form, in which the famous actor Zhou Xinfang played the hero Wen Suchen.<sup>11</sup> But since the 1940s, as far as I can see, no Chinese scholars have touted the novel or made a study of it, except for Hou Jian in his 1974 article in Taipei.

Xia Jingqu (*zi* Erming) was widely travelled in China, like the officials for whom he served as secretary, his main form of employment. Despite his vast learning, he did not even pass the test to become a *xiuca*i, the lowest level in the examination hierarchy. But he was known and respected by men of repute, and at least one of them, Yang Minshi,

<sup>7</sup> The 1881 edition lacks later parts of the Taiwan edition's chapter 2, all of 3 and 4, part of 5, and the end of chapter 31; it collapses chapters 65 and 66; and lacks all of chapters 134-7 and most of 138. The lacunae are random as to their content. The Taiwan edition is heavily abridged, particularly in erotic passages of chapter 68-71, which correspond to chapters 65-69 in the 1881 edition. The 1881 edition has an excellent commentary taken from a yet earlier version of the book, but this commentary is occasionally missing, especially in the highly erotic passages. I have not seen the 1882 edition, which Sun Kaidi, Lu Xun, and Zhao Jingshen consider to be unreliable because it was probably finished by another author (see reference to their articles in footnote 9).

<sup>8</sup> Shijie shuju edition preface by Zhao Tiaokuang:3.

<sup>9</sup> Qian Jingfang, *Xiaoshuo congkao* (Collected Research on Fiction), Taipei, 1979, 1st publ. 1912:162-167; Lu Xun, *A Brief History*: 317-321; Sun Kaidi, "Xia Erming yu *Yesou puyan*" (Xia Erming and *Yesou puyan*), in *Cangzhou houji*, Beijing, 1985:238-47; Tan Zhengbi, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo sada shi* (The Development of Chinese Fiction), Taipei, 1978, 1st publ. 1935:411-15; Jiang Ruicao, *Xiaoshuo kaozheng* (Textual Research on Fiction), Shanghai, 1984, 1st publ. 1935:239; Zhao Jingshen, *Xiaoshuo congkao* (Collected Research on Fiction), Jinan, 1980:433-47; also see, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi* (History of Chinese Fiction), no author, Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 1978:305-6 and other literary histories.

<sup>10</sup> This information was related to me by Mary Mazur, who is doing a biographical study of Wu Han.

<sup>11</sup> Hsia: 210, note 7. Scholars in China have also told me this.

appears in his novel. Xia also left works on history, poetry, and medicine, portions of which also found their way into the novel. His father died when Xia was a boy, as did Wen Suchen's, and his mother, surnamed Tang, is perhaps seen in Wen's venerated mother, Shui Furen (the water radical of Tang becomes Shui). His first wife died and was succeeded by a second, by whom Xia had a son and a daughter. Here, the author was unlike his hero, who is the father of dozens of children by six women.<sup>12</sup> A few scattered events in Xia's life are known. In 1736 in Beijing he met Yang Minshi (1661-1736), also of Jiangyin, who was a Confucian scholar, official (once the Governor-general of Yunnan-Guizhou), and, as his last position before death, tutor to an imperial prince. Yang's death scene figures briefly in the novel (ch. 11).<sup>13</sup> In 1739 Xia met Sun Jiagan (1683-1753), Governor-general of Zhili and a learned Confucianist.<sup>14</sup> In 1747 Xia suffered a serious illness and was cared for by his younger sister, who from his poetry appears to have been a close sibling. Similarly, in chapters sixteen and seventeen of the novel, Wen suffers major illness for many months, and is intimately cared for by a woman, not his sister, however.<sup>15</sup> In 1750 Gao Bin (1683-1755), a prominent official and a specialist in river control (at the time, Director-general of Grand Canal and Yellow River conservancy in Jiangsu and Anhui), invited Xia to lecture on "nature and principle" (*xingli*). Some of Xia's poems refer to his relationship with Gao Bin.<sup>16</sup>

Zhao Jingshen suggests that *Yesou puyan* was finished in the 1770s when Xia was in his 70s. He bases this on the fact that the novel portrays a special celebration for Wen's 76th birthday, but no more solid evidence exists.<sup>17</sup> Reports of people who knew Xia directly or indirectly have it that in 1786, when he was 82, he tried to present one of his works to the emperor, who was then travelling in the south. One story says the work in question was a commentary on history, but others say it was *Yesou puyan* itself and claim that either his wife or daughter coaxed or tricked him out of fulfilling his wish, to his great frustration.<sup>18</sup> Xia died in 1787 at age 83.

<sup>12</sup> See ch. 143, pp. 527-30, for the list of Wen's family members.

<sup>13</sup> Zhao Jingshen: 441. Lu Xun also refers to this relationship (p. 320) and reports that Yang was a student of Li Guangdi (1642-1718).

<sup>14</sup> Zhao Jingshen: 442-3; also, for a biography of Sun, see Arthur W. Hummel 1943:672-3. Like Wen in the novel, Sun once was condemned to execution for remonstrating with the emperor but then pardoned.

<sup>15</sup> Wen later has two illnesses in which he temporarily loses his mind due to demonic influences, the first time for more than three years, the second for about six years.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao Jingshen: 444; see Hummel: 412-3, for a biography of Gao.

<sup>17</sup> Zhao: 445.

<sup>18</sup> Zhao: 446-7.

Of the many connections between the novel and Xia's own life, some of the more interesting are in word plays between the names of the hero's concubines and some of the author's personal possessions. In the novel Wen's ambition is to have a bevy of concubines who are his *zhiji*, "bosom friends," each of whom specializes in one of four areas, mathematics, poetry, medicine, and military science (ch. 8, p. 57). The names of these women were also those Xia gave to favorite objects of daily use. Xuangu, Wen's mathematics specialist, was the name of Xia's abacus; Xiangling, Wen's poetry connoisseur, was the name of Xia's sleep-mat; and Su'e, the medical consort, was the name of Xia's armrest for taking pulses. Much later in the novel Nan'er, presented to Wen by the emperor, becomes Wen's fourth concubine (ch. 119); Nan'er was the name of the bar of the door to Xia's study. In addition, Hongdou, also presented to him by the emperor, becomes Wen's second wife (ch. 122); Hongdou was the name of Xia's seal.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, a note on the significance of the book's title: There is a proverb that originates in the *Liezi*, "*yeren xianpu*," which means: "the rustic recommends sitting in the sun to get warm." A poor farmer who had never seen palaces or rich clothing found pleasure in warming himself in the spring sun. He thought to recommend this activity to the ruler and thereby gain reward.<sup>20</sup> *Pu* by itself means to "sun" or "expose to the sun," which, attached to *yan*, may mean "words that expose." But without the sun radical, *pu* becomes the character *bao*, which means "violent" or "hot-tempered" (although *bao* is also pronounced *pu*, which means to "expose"). Thus Xia's book is his humble but pure gift to the emperor, but may contain a more piercing or "scorching" intent as well.

### *Confucian Superman in a Lascivious World*

*Yesou puyan* takes place in the Ming dynasty between the years of 1465 and 1519.<sup>21</sup> The "Confucian superman" is Wen Suchen, whose name, Suchen or "Unappointed Minister," is an allusion to one of the titles given to Confucius, Suwang, "uncrowned king." Suchen is born under an auspicious omen and has the early genius of a prodigy. His father dies young

<sup>19</sup> Zhao: 445, quoting from earlier document by someone who apparently knew much about Xia.

<sup>20</sup> See the Yangzhu chapter of *Liezi* in *Liezi jishi*, Beijing, 1979:237, and Qian Jiangfang: 162.

<sup>21</sup> As Hou Jian notes, the passage of time is studiously recorded throughout the book; events are given dates and every year can be accounted for. The author takes liberties with some historical events such as the beginnings and endings of Ming reign periods.

and leaves the boy with a mother who is "a great Confucian among women" (*nüzhong daru*). When little he is asked if he wants to become wealthy: he wants to study; if he wants to test first in the official examinations: he wants to become a sage (ch. 1, pp. 2-3). As a youth he sets out on a journey to expand his horizons, and all along has an ambitious goal: to eradicate heterodoxy—especially Buddhism—from the empire. His first encounter with evil is at West Lake in Hangzhou, when a water monster overturns his boat. Human evil soon emerges in the form of monks and their patrons who are part of a complex scheme to depose the emperor. Suchen begins the long quest of opposing the plotters and on the way gathers concubines and starts his family, throughout always practicing proper filiality to his mother. He eventually becomes a confidant of the emperor (ch. 113); begins his eradication of Buddhism (ch. 135); and, as a side product, effects the conversion of Europe (*Ou-luo-ba-zhou*) to Confucianism (ch. 147).<sup>22</sup> When Wen dies there will be a spirit seat for him among the sages of the Confucian tradition.

### *Healthy Sexuality*

It attributes Wen Suchen stands out most as an upright (*zhong*) man in a lascivious (*yin*) world.<sup>23</sup> He has extraordinary physical strength, yet appears gentle and slight. He is broadly learned, but does not take the accepted path of seeking office through the examination system. He is also extremely potent sexually, but, except for once when he goes mad and exhibits symptoms of licentiousness (ch. 132), has sex only for the sake of begetting children, who are born in waves once he starts his family. The narrator's introduction to Suchen says: "He is not a philanderer, yet he is a man of passion" (ch. 1, p. 2).

A philosophy of proper, healthy sex, what one might call *Yesou puyan's* case for a Confucian sexuality, can be assembled from several passages in the book. Suchen advises the imperial prince: "Curb desire and sons will be plentiful. Accord with the menstrual period of the wife or concubine and sleep with her only once a month" (ch. 88, p. 88).<sup>24</sup> But despite such

<sup>22</sup> The replacement of Christianity is not narrated at length; Europe is recognized for its exquisite inventions and realistic art works, but Europeans hardly appear. When they do, they are objects of curiosity: do their bodies function in the same way as ours? On the inventions, see chapter 147, p. 564; on the artwork, see ch. 149, p. 575. The curiosity about body functions (pulse) is in ch. 148, pp. 566-7.

<sup>23</sup> For example, with one angry stare he causes the image worshipped at a festival of homosexuals (*longyang hui*) to fall to pieces and the revellers then to disperse (ch. 67, p. 493-4).

<sup>24</sup> Ming-Qing medical treatises on begetting identify the woman's fertile period with the first one or two days after the end of the menses, and imply that male potency increases with continence. Personal communication from Charlotte Furth.

limitations upon genital sex, Suchen does allow for the pleasure of the kissing and caressing before intercourse.<sup>25</sup> In an explanation of love to his first concubine-to-be, Suchen says, "To begin with, the joy between man and woman only resides in the moments before coitus. When their passion is at its height, then their desire is infinite. But when they have already had coitus then all wanes and dissipates." She is made to see that "the clouds and rain and the dream of Mt. Wu [euphemisms for intercourse] are actually nothing but feet added to the snake: superfluous" (ch. 6, 11b). Later, he explains to another woman that "The flash of ecstasy is all over in another second" (ch. 68, 8b).

Like a number of Chinese novels and stories containing erotic description, *Yesou puyan* presents sexual themes in a didactic fashion. The book dramatizes both healthy and aberrant examples of sexual behavior in order to prescribe what is correct. Wen Suchen is, of course, the healthy model, as when he is shown resisting improper sexual opportunities in three situations, each more inviting and challenging than the last. In all this, it is as if Xia Jingqu wants to go further than the usual scholar-thinker who, for example, writes a commentary on Zhu Xi or describes the logic of the *Doctrine of the Mean* and instead to show in concrete terms how the self is to maintain equilibrium in the enticingly sensual world.

In Wen's three temptations it is not a question of resisting the "sin" of sex in the Christian sense of sin of the flesh, but of avoiding sex when not condoned by parental authority. Two of the three women later become his concubines and all three are seen as "good," but nevertheless it would be unfilial for Suchen to consummate unless his mother gave her blessing. The nature of his "resistance" or "refusal of sex," *qese*, is shown in the following account of his second ordeal by temptation.<sup>26</sup>

Some friends want to present their sister, Xuangu, to Suchen as his concubine, but they know he will refuse. Without telling him of their wish, they put him to sleep by making him drunk and then have her get into bed with him. In his drunken slumber he slips into intimate embrace with her, but when he wakes delicately refuses to go any further and withdraws. The next day he at first rejects the offer, but then agrees to accept since it is clear that the affair has gone too far: both the establishment of the intention to marry her to him and the occurrence of nude proximity make

<sup>25</sup> As if to illustrate this point, the author provides an instance of a long kiss without intercourse between two lovers who begin at the end of one chapter and are still kissing at the beginning of the next (chs. 51-2 in the uncensored edition).

<sup>26</sup> *Qese* is the expression used by the chapter-final commentator, ch. 5, 11b-12a.



her in effect lose her virginity. Besides, he is already fond of her.

The second night, after spending the day talking mathematics, he consents to go to bed with her.

They washed their hands and feet. Then Xuangu helped him into bed. She took off her hair jewelry, then her outer clothes, and hid the silk kerchief under the mat. When she climbed into bed, Suchen raised the embroidered quilt and let her get under. He stretched out his arm to pillow her powdery neck. With the other hand he undid the buttons of her chemise and took it off, then loosened her belt and slipped off her lower garment. She didn't dare resist Suchen's undressing her. At this moment he was absorbed in his pleasure and could give her nothing but affection. He gently cradled her powdery neck, nestled against her fragrant cheek, and began to caress and fondle her. Xuangu was at the point of delirium, her fragrant soul as if drunk. But suddenly something seemed to startle him and his hand abruptly shrank back. After a short while he put his arm around her slender waist and inserted his leg between her thighs. Resting thus entwined, he moved no more. Xuangu was like a bird felled by the sound of an arrowless bow [*jing gong zhi niao*]. (ch. 5, 11ab)

Full of shame and confusion, not knowing what this second rejection means, she begins to cry. The chapter ends at this dramatic point.

In the next chapter he finally explains that only after reporting to his mother and receiving her permission can they consummate. Xuangu now understands model Confucian behavior, and they go to sleep. The next morning, in what ought to be considered a famous scene of Chinese literature, he wakes to find her slender jade finger drawing circles on his back—she had been dreaming of arcs and circles from their previous day's discussions. He is delighted by her desire to learn and proceeds to —

draw a great circle on Xuangu's stomach, saying, "Let this be the circle of the sky, 360 degrees all around." Pointing to her fragrant navel, he said, "Let this be the earth. The area around inside the navel is the surface of the earth, and the center of the navel is the center of the earth. Now if we measure from the surrounding area of the earth to the surrounding area of the sky, and if we measure from the earth's center to the surrounding area of

the sky, aren't the measurements going to be different? Thus in computation there is what's called the 'difference between the earth's center and [points in] its surface.' This is as far as we got yesterday at dark [i.e., measuring areas of triangles, circles, etc.]."

Xuangu laughed, "The sky and the earth are called the Two Greats, but in fact the Earth fitting into the Sky is but a small thing. Obviously the wife is by far smaller than the husband." Suchen replied, laughing, "And the concubine is even smaller." Xuangu said, "Of course she is ..."

and proceeded to ask more technical questions (ch. 8, pp. 54-5).

Besides according with the morality of filial piety, sexual values in *Yesou puyan* conform to a standard of rationality and hygiene. By Suchen's definition, hygiene is arrived at through natural capacity to begin with and continence thereafter; he will have nothing to do with artificial methods such as "internal" or "external" alchemy (*neidan* or *waidan*), which only Taoists, Buddhists, and other "deviants" are seen to perform. He asserts that healthy practices guarantee the proper flow of life energy, in particular, the continuation of ancestral *qi* in the form of offspring. The reason for rejecting homosexual love, as Suchen explains in a discourse on the principles of intercourse, is that the fertilizing *yangqi* (male energy) has nowhere to go inside the anus (ch. 71, 9b). Suchen's very body gives off therapeutic, fertility-enhancing effects. He once cures a sterile woman, a *shiniu*, (literally, "stone-woman,") who is unable to menstruate. Her breasts are even smaller than his and her skin is a pale white. But simply by lying next to him, she begins to be "steamed" (*zheng*) by the *yangqi* he emanates. She takes his hand and "first massages her breasts, then her abdomen, and then her vagina. She feels even more stimulated and excited, all over her body. She is numb in every spot and can't stop moaning and cooing" (ch. 94, 9a). Eventually, her menses begin to flow.

In this and other encounters involving nudity without sexual contact, Suchen's role is strictly therapeutic. For example, he is delirious from an illness and has no one to nurse him but the woman Su'e, who must undress him and even sleep with him to keep him warm (ch. 16). On another occasion, Suchen suddenly begins ripping the clothing off a young woman; it turns out that she is on the verge of an illness the deadliness of which can be averted only by causing her a sudden cathartic fright; he perceived the illness in her unhealthy color and took the only expedient course of action (ch. 19). In all these cases, expediency over decorum is the rule when it comes to the health of the body.

### *The Lascivious World*

Suchen's glorification of procreation is behind his attacks on Buddhism and other heterodox thought or behavior. The Buddhist monk or nun is a sterile, unattached person, not contained by the filial family structure. The Confucian system attempts to achieve a virtuous society through universal marriage and parenthood, and to link everyone in the vertical chain of service to parents and ancestors above and descendants below. To one young nun who falls sick because of the repression caused by celibacy, Suchen prescribes the cure of "sexual desire" (*seyu*, ch. 11, p. 79): she should return to normal life and take a husband.<sup>27</sup> As Suchen argues in one of many debates with a Buddhist, Confucianism favors light and life, while Buddhism stands for darkness and death (ch. 2, pp. 8-9).

If the Buddhist celibates represent sterility, other deviants in the lascivious world possess monstrous sexual vitality, which they nourish by theft from other human bodies. In the most grotesque scenes of sexual activity in the novel, the author uses the topos of "stealing essence," where for the individual to succumb to desire is to risk sexual exhaustion and death at the hands of the "thief." Like Xuanzang in *Xiyou ji*, who was a victim of male and female demons desiring his flesh as an aphrodisiac for immortality, Suchen and others become victims of humans looking for aphrodisiacs in the form of aborted fetuses (ch. 14, p. 111) or, in the case below, Suchen's semen. The "therapeutic" virtues of Suchen's body make him the target of a harem-master who takes advantage of the hero's health to appropriate medicine for his own sexual strengthening.<sup>28</sup>

Suchen urinates in the snow one day, little knowing that he is about to be trapped. A man and his harem set urine buckets by the side of the house, then spy on the men who urinate and kidnap whoever has the largest penis:

Suchen's *qi* energy was rich and full and his *yang* circuits mighty and powerful. He was no ordinary one. So when he took a piss it needed a good bit of time. This session of pissing made a bucket of snow melt to the last crystal. The steam billowed up like smoke, like mist. And it was all seen from a window above

<sup>27</sup> Suchen argues against Buddhist and Taoist interlocutors a number of times. In one major encounter he uses the argument that Buddhism has long died out in India and has been replaced by Islam. He then asks why China should still have this religion, extinct elsewhere (ch. 2, p. 14; see also ch. 10).

<sup>28</sup> The master is the second and more extreme of two such harem-masters in *Yesou puyan*; the first is in chs. 26-32.

the snow curtain by a beauty who was watching to her heart's content. (ch. 65, 4b-5a)

In the ensuing scenes the author seems to be testing even further his capacity to write about nudity or sex without allowing his hero to give way to lust. After Suchen is seen from the window, he is invited inside and then drugged so that he is mentally aware but unable to control his limbs. The harem-master's goal is to make Suchen ejaculate as many times as possible, to drink all his semen, and thereby to become more potent himself. In one of the most notorious scenes in the novel, the women arouse Suchen to the point of ejaculation and then position his body so that his penis fits through a hole in the wall, on the other side of which awaits the master's mouth. The climax of many such "ordeals" by involuntary arousal is a great orgy (*jiaogou hui*) in which the harem-women strip and perform gymnastic tricks. What now follows is one of the more bizarre episodes in Chinese erotic literature.

When the day for the orgy arrives, the women enter his room, disrobe and perform highly skilled genital acrobatics. They are capable of making various parts of the abdomen jump up and down, causing the navel to protrude in and out (ch. 67, 7ab). They can insert the big toe into the vagina (8b), or the vagina into the mouth (9a). The final exhibition is by the ninth concubine, who is the most *yin* or lustful of the women:

The ninth concubine laid herself on the bed face up, opened her legs out and exposed her vagina. With an effort she pushed it out and surely as that made the "flower room" protrude. She raised her buttocks to her neck and delivered her vagina into her mouth. Sucking and mouthing it, she was all of an ugly sight. Then she followed by extending the two petals of her "flower heart," which she fanned with air from her mouth to produce a swishing sound. They all bent their ears and listened carefully: there was the sound of spring silkworms eating leaves, then autumn insects fluttering their wings, now fragrant dew dripping onto flowers, a hidden spring flowing through rocks, frozen dew scattered over a window, a gentle breeze stroking bow strings, a baby sucking at its mother's breast. They were exquisite sounds, gurgling and rustling, that had everyone in the room looking with amazement, listening with surprise. They oohed and ahed, utterly stupefied, and bravoed to no end. (ch. 67, 9b)

Again, as in much of *Yesou puyan*, a "cold" eye (here paralyzed and involuntary) regards "hot" things; disapproving judgement—Suchen's or the narrator's—accompanies exotic description.

The ninth concubine wins the prize given for the best of these performances and gains the privilege of engaging in sexual "combat" with the hero, prone and paralyzed except for his penis. Just as his supreme control is about to break down and he is on the verge of ejaculation, he suddenly looks at her and realizes she is a fox demon. Somehow regaining strength, he flips over and wrestles her down until she cries out, expels a putrid gas and dies. The episode concludes when Suchen escapes and brings about the execution of the harem-master and the dispersal of his enormous household (sixteen concubines and dozens of singing girls, maids, and servant boys; ch. 86, p. 77).

The events of the harem episode belong to *Yesou puyan's* inventory of deviant sexual practices, which consist of grotesque or demonic extremes that diverge from the center held by Suchen. The sexual acrobats are examples of what might be called lyric grotesque, especially as dramatized in the scene of playing music with the vagina. Other episodes portray more macabre types of demonic departure, from the monks who prey on fetuses or steal essence from kidnapped women to the subhuman tribe of snake-monsters in the southwest who rape and kill their human victims—the monsters represent the most frenzied divergence from the civilized norm in that they literally rip their victims apart. The semi-human creatures living on the periphery of China recall the similarly located subhumans described in the *Shanghai jing* and other repositories of ancient myth. In creating his inventory of sexual deviants, Xia Jingqu seems to have drawn from both actual and fictional accounts, since he would probably have heard about the practices of sexual alchemy and vampirism, which still existed in his day, but he could hardly have heard reports of the snake-monsters kidnapping humans in the eighteenth century (or could he have?). It remains a moot point whether or to what degree he, a learned Confucian, believed in any of what he so realistically portrayed.

### *The Rule of Expediency*

The above several pages have described the philosophy of sexuality that Wen Suchen recommends, the nature of the healthy sexual being that he is, and have ended with some of the examples of unhealthy or aberrant sexuality that *Yesou puyan* catalogues. The question must now be raised: How can Xia Jingqu be justified in his use of such obscene and lurid imagery? How orthodox is he, despite his relentless claim to propriety?

The answer will be that he ignores conventional standards of decency of portrayal in order to be more precise about the limits of orthodox correctness in the "real" world.

Justifications can be found in authorial statements that are meant to forestall accusations of obscenity, such as the third of the "general principles" (*fanli*) at the beginning of the uncensored edition: *Yesou puyan* will cover a multitude of topics, reason (*li*), classics, history, filial piety, loyalty, military science, medicine, poetry, mathematics, emotions, moral learning (*daoxue*), sexuality (*chuntai*), and the comic (*xiexue*, p. 1a). In other words, sexuality is one legitimate topic among others. The fourth principle directly addresses the issue by stating that although the "obscene" (*huixie*) seems improper, it is nonetheless included for the purpose of didactic "admonition" (*quanjie*)—the word that many writers of obscene fiction in China used to defend themselves.

The main defense, I think, can be found in the application of a well known quote from Mencius:

Ch'un-yu K'un said, "Is it prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other?"

"It is," said Mencius.

"When one's sister-in-law is drowning, does one stretch out a hand to help her?"

"Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute. It is prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other, but in stretching out a helping hand to the drowning sister-in-law one uses one's discretion [*quan*]."<sup>29</sup>

*Quan* may also be translated as "expediency," a word already used above to describe Suchen when he rips the clothes off a woman in order to save her from a deadly illness. Although it is improper to touch a woman who is not your wife, if she is in danger, it is right to do whatever is necessary to save her. Xia Jingqu takes "discretion" or "expediency" to the limits of decency to portray a hero performing correct actions in extreme situations; the extremes prove the integrity of the hero.

The quote from Mencius is alluded to directly in *Yesou puyan*, although not in a centrally thematic position. When Suchen travels among the

<sup>29</sup> D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, London, 1970:124. In Lau, 4a, 17; in *A Concordance to Meng Tzu*, Pei-ping, 1941:29, it is 4a, 18.

non-Chinese Miao of the southwest, he encounters customs which allow touching and kissing between a wife and a male visitor to the house, sex without the consent of the parents, and one's own choice of marriage partner (ch. 93). A "local wise man" *tushenglao* defends these practices and criticizes the Chinese for "taking so many precautions that the desires and longings men and women have for each other have no way to be let out" (ch. 94, p. 135). In China, "Man and woman cannot touch each other when exchanging objects [*nan-nü shoushou buqin*];<sup>30</sup> when the woman goes out she must cover her face. All this isolates man from woman and blocks them up from each other." Suchen expresses curt disagreement with this critique; another character later says the wise man's words are nonsense (p. 138), as does the commentary at the end of the chapter (ch. 92, 14a); otherwise there is no debate.

Although the scene among the Miao may be seen as merely another part of *Yesou puyan's* inventory of sexual practices in the world, the Mencian quote as cited by the wise man is perhaps a key to what the novel's case for Confucian sexuality is about: how to conform to the social rule, passed on for centuries, of sexual segregation. To ignore that rule is to be uncivilized, unChinese, and unfilial. For Xia Jingqu, one way of proving unswerving loyalty to that rule (as well as testing its precision) is to make every attempt to portray the most intimate contact between man and woman without admitting them as sexual partners and, in most cases, without admitting the man, Suchen, i.e., the son, as willing or intentional participant. "Expediency," which is invoked when there is an accident or something beyond the subject's control, is the excuse that absolves Xia or Wen from accusations of "unsegregated," unfilial behavior; it is the rule that applies when normal rules would be inappropriate.

Another sign of the importance of expediency and its relation to filiality is that none of the scenes of sexual intercourse in the novel are of the orthodox, procreative, and "mother-approved" relationship; all are of deviant sex. In other words, explicit description does not include sex between Suchen and his consorts because they are healthy and in no need of an expedient hand; it would be unfilial, not to mention superfluous, to portray them. To be sure, by portraying Suchen urinating or defeating the fox demon, Xia manages to get around this rule and hint at what Suchen's sexual performance must be like. But in general only the unhealthy or the aberrant call for explicit treatment, which is necessary for the exposure

<sup>30</sup> Or, as Lau translates Mencius, "In giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other."

and then cure of illness or correction of evil. Whatever the judgement of his efforts might be—however paranoid and voyeuristic his orthodoxy might be—one certainly finds a "method" in Xia Jingqu's "madness."

***Yesou Puyan, Honglou Meng,*  
and Other Fiction of the Ming and Qing**

From the point of view of the history of sexuality in China, what does *Yesou puyan* say about eighteenth-century fiction's portrayal of male-female relations? If we set up a dialogue between *Yesou puyan*, which affirms the supremacy of patriarchal potency, and *Honglou meng*, which takes its critique of patriarchy to the point of rejecting male sexuality as ordinary Confucians understood it, we could say that such extremes of glorification and attack suggest profound problems in the polygamist family as well as in the social function of sexuality, especially male. At the same time, although the two novels diverge in their portrait of the male ego, they do share two important conclusions about sex and women: one, that sexual pleasure is superfluous, not to mention detrimental to morality and health; and two, that the ideal female partner is a companion who shares the hero's intellectual and spiritual life and is above being an object of sexual sport.

The diverging treatments of the Confucian "family crisis" in these two novels as well as the similar conclusions about lust and ideal male-female relations can be examined in light of earlier Ming and Qing fiction. The sixteenth-century *Jin Ping Mei* will be the starting point because it is possible to see the works of domestic fiction written afterwards as reacting to and attempting to address (and redress) the wrongs committed by *Jin Ping Mei*'s polygamist-tyrant Ximen Qing, for whom sexual pleasure was not superfluous and to whom women provided an endless opportunity for sexual abandon.

*Jin Ping Mei* is similar to *Yesou puyan* in that its explicit descriptions are mainly of immoderate sexual behavior. Its theme is the insatiable nature of desire, a condition that its main character is unable to escape. Ximen Qing uses aphrodisiacs and sex tools to maintain his strength with an ever increasing number of women and frequency of bouts; in the end he dies of priapism. Two harem-masters like Ximen Qing appear in *Yesou puyan*, the first and less harmful of whom eventually repents (ch. 26-32), the second of whom vampirizes Suchen and finally meets his doom. In the second case, *Yesou puyan* seems to echo *Jin Ping Mei* in the scene where



Suchen, like Ximen Qing, lies drugged and prone while the most lustful woman of the harem rides him to the point of ejaculation. However, Ximen Qing is a lecherous polygamist whose energy finally gives way; Suchen is the chaste polygamist who conquers the *yinfu* by his innate *yang* strength. Where *Jin Ping Mei* only admits a negative sexual hero, *Yesou puyan* compensates and "proves" a positive one can exist.

Other earlier works of erotic fiction fall into two broad categories: one portrays robust sex, but between illicit, often adulterous partners who are punished or separated in the end. The characters in these works are generally more "positive"—i.e., less "insatiable"—than Ximen Qing or Pan Jinlian. The didactic theme is that the illicit affair, however appealing, leads to disastrous ends or is impossible to make permanent. Often didacticism is a token apology for titillating portrayal. The main examples of this first category of works are found in the late Ming, especially in the story anthologies *San Yan*, *Er Pai*, *Huanxi yuanjia*, and *Yipian qing*, and in the early Qing novel *Rouputuan*. The second category of erotic fiction tends to portray conjugal rather than adulterous relations; the focus is on sex enjoyed by a man and his wife and concubines, many of whom find refuge in him from danger or loneliness or sometimes help him out of difficulties. Examples of these are found in early to mid-Qing (up to early 19th century) romances such as *Taohua ying*, *Xiuping yuan*, *Xinghua tian*, and *Shenlou zhi*. All have "positive" polygamist heroes who find contentment in a life of domesticity, drinking and composing poetry with their wives and concubines. In some of these works, the man and his women all get in bed together in a final celebration of unity. The affirmation of the polygamist hero in these novels and in *Yesou puyan* sets these Qing works apart from *Jin Ping Mei*, while their conjugal focus sets them apart from other Ming erotic stories.<sup>31</sup>

A notable shift from Ming to Qing, along with the turn to "happy" polygamists, is that women are portrayed mainly as sensual partners in Ming erotic works, but become romantic and even intellectual companions in the Qing. Even Qing erotic romances portray a love more sentimentalized than before and may have man and woman discussing and composing poetry as well as making love. In *Yesou puyan* and *Honglou meng*, of course, the woman is especially viewed as a *zhiji*: bosom or

<sup>31</sup> The men in the second category of works usually start out mischievously, but then mend their ways. Polygamy is criticized in these late Ming erotic works: *Chanzen yishi*, ch. 21, and *Chanzen houshi*, ch. 33 (both by Fang Ruhao); and *Erke pai-an jingqi*, story 34 (by Ling Mengchu).

spiritual companion. Many scholar-beauty romances (*Haoqiu zhuan*, *Dingqing ren*, *Yu Jiao Li* and others), pointedly portray lovers who avoid illicit sex. Poetry rather than sex becomes the vehicle for love's emotions. *Honglou meng* refers to the stereotypical quality of the scholar-beauty romances, but nevertheless also insists on characters whose love is more than of the flesh. In part these shifts must reflect changes in what was considered permissible. Qing laws against pornography as well as the widespread condemnation of late Ming decadence may have played a role in this de-eroticization of the ideals and representations of love and marriage.

In both *Yesou puyan* and *Honglou meng*, lustful sex occurs among those who are peripheral to or less refined than the main characters. But *Yesou puyan* at least refers to sex between Suchen and his wives, although it gives no portrayals. In *Honglou meng* examples of ideal sexual conjugality are not to be found. The garden, which represents Baoyu's ideal world, is a place that, for the most part, is clean of sex and of adult sexual roles. *Yesou puyan* is about the vigor of the patriarchal system, which has polygamy as a central feature. But *Honglou meng* is about the decay of that system, whose adult male members, except for Baoyu's stern father, are mainly interested in philandering and other socially "unconstructive" pursuits such as alchemy. *Yesou puyan* extols male energy in the form of its hero; *Honglou meng* portrays a hero who rejects the entire male sex, which he perceives as base and made of "mud" in contrast to the female, which is made of "water." Suchen is a confirmed polygamist; Baoyu, although also a lover of more than one woman, is a polygamist mainly in the sense that custom and class status allow, not by commitment.

The two novels are as if in critical or revisionist opposition to each other. Wen Suchen is like a cured Baoyu; he is rarely beset with frustration or indecision and is never *chouchang*, a word highly emblematic of Baoyu which means melancholy, depressed, vaguely missing something or someone. From *Honglou meng's* perspective, Baoyu's awareness of the suffering of women, who are, for example, forced into marriage or concubinage, is a form of male apology for the fact that women are treated as expendable. Baoyu is a more sensitive and therefore immobilized version of Suchen; Baoyu takes the depraved state of men to heart and is unable to re-assume command, as does Suchen. They are alike in that they surround themselves with women, who receive from them respect and good care. Both treat women as *zhiji*. But Baoyu's life in a garden otherwise inhabited only by women is an attempt to sever himself from the society of men and through women cleanse himself of base male reality. Suchen

treats his home, which consists of a great garden inhabited by his mother, wives, concubines, and children, as the place to which he returns or retires after constructive excursions into the world. Baoyu has few male friends, and those he has tend to be gentle or effeminate like he is; Suchen has a number of close male friends, but they are like comrades and none are effeminate or dandy. Baoyu has a homoerotic liaison with Qin Zhong (ch. 15); Suchen would revile such an act.

Aside from the personalities of the heroes and their positions vis-à-vis men and the system of polygamy, *Yesou puyan* and *Honglou meng* most differ in their treatments of love. In *Yesou puyan* love is removed from the romantic framework found in many plays and novels of the Ming and Qing, including *Xixiang ji*, *Mudan ting*, the early Qing scholar-beauty romances, and *Honglou meng*. The romantic story exalts sentiment (*qing*) and evokes a myth of predestined attachment. The lovers in these works, the forbidden ones Baoyu reads, secretly fall in love and then endure great travail before they publicly unite in the end. *Honglou meng* and others project a mythical framework in which two spirits or deities fall in love in heaven but can consummate only by being reincarnated on earth, in *Honglou meng* called the land of "red dust" *hongchen*. That is, they must live and die in order to experience love; they cannot love in heaven because love cannot be that good. The novels that lack this idea of heavenly pre-existence still retain the sentimentality and the notion of pre-destination. A word that applies to this mythic love, but not to the more practical version of love in *Yesou puyan*, is *qianquan* (also, *chamian*), to be "intertwined and inseparable" in a fashion oblivious to the rest of the world (*Honglou meng*, ch. 5, p. 91), like Romeo and Juliet or like Werther would like to be with Lotte. In the end in *Honglou meng*, the "entanglements" cause signals to be crossed and the lovers to miss their chance; they cannot even unite on earth and Baoyu marries the socially acceptable woman instead of the one he loves.

The argument between novels could be carried further, but for now suffice to summarize that *Yesou puyan* insists upon rationalizing or desentimentalizing love. The central principle is hygienic in the sense that one is to maintain the health of the ancestral *qi*. The rule for controlling desire is that a man should not cohabit with women unless he has parental blessing and intends to have offspring, especially sons. At the same time, of course, he can have as many sons as he wants: Wen Suchen has two dozen and lives to see a great-great grandson. In real life, such procreative success was the privilege of royalty, like the Kangxi emperor, under whom the author lived part of his life, who had thirty-six sons, twenty of whom

lived to maturity.<sup>32</sup> Outside of reproduction, the woman is a *zhiji* to the man, a term usually reserved for friendship between men. *Yesou puyan's* position, then, is that men and women should renounce genital pleasure and discipline orgasm.<sup>33</sup> The novel expresses a contempt for lust, but for celibacy as well. That, to my mind, is another Confucian attempt at the middle way of moderation and equilibrium, this time with important qualifications about "expediency" broadened and made more explicit.

### *Conclusion*

Compared with other fiction of the Ming and Qing, *Yesou puyan* fits in with Qing works that are about "happy" and "normal" polygamists, and is unlike Ming and Qing novels and stories that are in some way critical of men or of polygamy. But its de-mythicization of love places it apart from most other Qing novels about love, whether or not they are about "happy" polygamists. Xia's refusal to portray conjugal sex puts him in line with writers of non-erotic scholar-beauty romances, but his excursions into explicit bodily and sexual detail otherwise place him in a category of his own: he even goes beyond the other authors of Ming and Qing erotic fiction, who primarily write of robust, lustful sex, whether illicit or conjugal.

Seen in an intellectual context, *Yesou puyan* advocates an enthusiastic return to China's "original" Confucianism, shorn of Buddhist and Taoist influence, and explores new territory by offering a uniquely detailed and precise cataloguing of orthodox and unorthodox forms of sexuality. As such it belongs to a genre of learned discourse which has something in common with the exhaustive and precise scholarship of Qing evidential research of the same period, as described by Benjamin Elman.<sup>34</sup> This is a novel that one would have to study for years in order fully to appreciate the intricacies of plot weaving, the nuances of learned debate, and the possible connections with historical currents. But however impenetrable it may be, and however improbable and rejected a path it may represent, its "cold" observation of "hot" detail represents a marriage of the traditions of Confucian orthodoxy and erotic literature that is unprecedented in scope.

<sup>32</sup> Kangxi had fifty-six children by thirty consorts. Of thirty-six sons, eighteen had sons in turn, making 123 grandsons altogether. He had twenty daughters, of whom eight lived to maturity and married. See Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China*, New York, 1974:122.

<sup>33</sup> The main theme of the Chinese *ars erotica*, only very glancingly referred to in the novel (ch. 29, 3a) is that men learn to withhold ejaculation.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Elman 1984. It is also true that the New Text view of Confucius was "as a messianic sage in his own right, an 'uncrowned king' (*suwang*)," like the "unappointed minister" Wen Suchen (see Elman: 23). Just how much common ground there is between New Text thinking or evidential research in general and *Yesou puyan* is a question for further consideration.

## Glossary

bao 報

Gao Bin 高斌

chanmian 纏綿

Haoqiu zhuan 好逑傳

Chanzen houshi 禪真後史

hongchen 紅塵

Chanzen yishi 禪真逸史

Hongdou 紅豆

chouchang 惆悵

Honglou meng 紅樓夢

chuntai 春態

Huanxi yuanjia 歡喜冤家

daoxue 道學

huixie 穢褻

Dingqing ren 定情人

Jiangyin 江陰

Erke pai-an jingqi 二刻拍案驚奇

jiaogou hui 交媾會

Erming 二銘

Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅

Er pai 二拍

jing gong zhi niao 驚弓之鳥

Fang Ruhao 方汝浩

li 理

fanli 反例

Li Guangdi 李光地

Liezi 列子

qese 却色

longyang hui 龍陽會

Rouputuan 內浦團

Mudan ting 牡丹亭

San Yan 三言

Nan'er 難兒

seyu 色慾

nannü shoushou buqin 男女授受不親

Shenlou zhi 秦樓志

neidan 內丹

shiniu 石女

nüzhong daru 女中大儒

Shui Furen 水夫人

Ouluobazhou 歐羅巴洲

Suchen 素臣

Piling huizhen lou 毗陵彙珍樓

Su'e 素娥

pu 曝

Sun Jiagan 孫嘉淦

qianquan 纏綿

Suwang 素王

qing 情

Tang 湯

quan 權

Taohua ying 桃花影

quanjie 勸戒

tushenglao 土聖老

waidan 外丹

Wen Bai 文白

Wu Han 吳晗

Xia Jingqu 夏敬渠

Xiangling 湘靈

xiexue 諧謔

Xinghua tian 杏花天

xingli 性理

xiucai 秀才

Xiuping yuan 繡屏緣

Xixiang ji 西廂記

Xiyou ji 西遊記

Xuangu 璇姑

yan 言

Yang Minshi 楊名時

yangqi 陽氣

Yangzhu 楊朱

"yeren xian pu" 野人獻曝

Yeshou puyan 野叟曝言

yin 淫

yinfu 淫婦

Yipian qing 一片情

Yu Jiao Li 玉嬌梨

Zhao Tiaokuang 趙苕狂

zheng 蒸

zhiji 知己

Zhong 中

zhusheng 諸生

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