

Aesthetic Beauty in the 18th Century Chinese Novel *Guwanyan* (Preposterous Words)

Key Words: *Aesthetic, fiction, sexual descriptions, yin-yang metaphysics*

This paper explores the tension between the radical sexual description and orthodox rhetoric in 18th century Chinese vernacular narrative. My research focuses on a *xiaoshuo* fiction, *Guwanyan* (Preposterous Words), authored by Cao Qujing and composed in 1730. This novel pictures the domestic lives of four families in Nanjing from the end of the 17th century to the early 18th century, including many explicit sexual descriptions. I argue that the author projects the ethic concern through the structure and characterization, while presents the anxiety towards desire in graphic sexual descriptions in the novel. The contrast and complementarity of the structural frame and content make *Guwanyan* as an important text to study in order to analyze and understand the changing meaning and uses of sexual explicit material in Chinese novels. My argument includes three parts: first, I will introduce the literati's reading and response to erotic novels in the morally conservative Chinese society of the 18th century. Second, I will demonstrate how the novel is systematically structured by karmic retribution, sexual competition and *yin-yang* numerology. Third, I suggest that the author of *Guwanyan* adopts *yin-yang* fluidity idea to manipulate the characterization, balancing the portrayal of the lewd women, libertines, female heroes and chaste men in the whole narrative. I conclude that although this novel includes several graphic descriptions of sexuality, through *yin-yang* metaphysics the author always attempts to contain the representation of lust and desire without at the same time disrupting both the self and the social order.

Qing Ye

University of Oregon