

**Pornographic Modes of Expression and Nascent Chinese Modernity in Late
Imperial China**
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The concept of modernity appears to be particularly problematic when applied to China—not least because China’s urbanizing agrarian civilization found itself unprepared for the rapidity of Western imperial expansion.¹ Nor is the question of what modernity “is” any more easily settled when we move outside China into its putative European homeland.² Broadly speaking, for work on China it is possible to identify two “schools” positing either an earlier onset or a later onset of modernity.³ The later onset school tends to view modernity as a technological achievement associated with the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and therefore describes China’s modernity in terms of late-nineteenth and (early-) twentieth century industrialization.⁴ The earlier onset school tends to see signs of intellectual modernity taking shape in crises situated in established bureaucratized urban centers of the late Ming and early Qing (approximately 1650 to 1700) and which brought on redefinitions of subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness, doubt and an aspiration to personal autonomy.⁵ The changes are usually related to the rise of commerce and literacy, expanding to include specifically urban phenomena, such as fashion and distraction, which eventually contributed to the popularity of the novel.⁶ In viewing specific elements of the intellectual landscape of the late Ming as engendering a shift toward broad cultural experiment this paper can be understood as a contribution to this early onset view.

Sexuality (as opposed to reproductive conceptions of “sex”) is also a notoriously difficult term to employ across cultures and historical periods.⁷ Joseph Lichtenburg, for

example, draws a distinction between *sexuality*, as prohibited or circumscribed forms of pleasurable body sensations and accompanying fantasies, and *sensuality*, as encouraged forms of pleasurable body sensations and accompanying fantasies.⁸ Culturally and socially speaking such a definition of sexuality is linked to questions of shame, and thus with culturally defined realms of public and private behaviour. Adoption of his approach also assists with arriving at a working definition of pornography as public representation of sexual acts, founded on the assumption that sexual acts (which Lichtenburg opposes to sensual acts) are already prohibited or shamed into the private realm. This way of defining pornography sidesteps modern definitional concerns with levels of explicitness.⁹

The linkage between sexuality and the public/private divide makes pornography an important element in the story of modernity and the democratization of culture.¹⁰ As was the case in Europe, the shock of sex was instrumental in the late Ming as a means of testing the boundaries and regulation of decent and obscene behaviors and representations in the public and private spheres, a shock that included conscious challenges against the guardians of orthodoxy via the subversion of social-sexual norms.

Pornography and Cultural Reevaluation in the Late Ming

The tension between temperance and abandon evident in the literature of the late Ming was an expression of a general cultural anxiety, an anxiety that stemmed from a crisis of confidence, or a sense of overreaching, of passing beyond familiar boundaries. Late Ming anxieties, brought on partly by Ming prosperity, have been well documented in several major studies of the period's material culture and literary production.¹¹ The contemporaneous philosophical developments around Wang Yangming (1472–1529), his

followers, and their “learning of the heart-mind” (*xinxue*) can equally be seen as a consequence and as a contributor to cultural anxiety. Their recentering of Neo-Confucian thought from a focus on *dao* (the way) or *tian* (heaven, or natural order) toward a greater focus on the heart-mind (*xin*) signalled a departure from the restrictive heritage of Song dynasty (960–1279) rationalism toward a focus on an individual’s “innate knowledge” (*liangzhi*) and even the body and its needs (*zunshen*, “deferring to the body”).¹² It was a current of thought welcomed by many underemployed graduates of the examination system, while at the same time creating anxiety and reaction within the ranks of the literati and administrative elite. Luo Zongqiang has described this diverse cultural effect as “the ambiguous space of desire exposed by Wang Yangming’s learning of the mind,” yet it could also be argued that this revision of Neo-Confucian thought reflects a space within Ming life that was already inviting a reassessment of the subject in relation to desire and self-fashioning (the commonly invoked “Ming subjectivism”).¹³ Despite their different histories of desire, the late Ming opening up of Chinese thought reveals a number of remarkable parallels with the Enlightenment and libertinism witnessed in Europe a century later.

It is difficult to say whether the emergence of a libertine sensibility in the late Ming was a product of the anxieties described above, a source of their aggravation, or both. It may even be the case that the source of anxiety is earlier, latent in the influence of the conservative Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and his concern with self-control, the denial and suppression of desire, and the firm foundation of human life in the Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Unchanging Principles (*sangang wuchang*).¹⁴ Certainly there seems to have been a heightened nervousness

around pleasure in the late imperial period, a nervousness informed by a critique of desire and selfishness going back to the beginnings of Chinese moral thought.

The imaginative writing of the late Ming period itself provides ample evidence that something of a reformulation of the place of desire was taking shape, a feature of the period often summed up in the phrase “the cult of *qing*” (*qing*, feeling, love, passion). In his *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (2001), Martin Huang importantly interprets the rise of vernacular fiction during the late Ming as debating the place and role of desire. With few exceptions, prior to the late Ming, Chinese thought and literature had scripted the problem of desire predominantly in terms of the desires of men and the threat desire posed for the welfare of men and their patrilineal clans. The cult of *qing* and libertine philosophical currents of the late Ming thus constituted a thoroughgoing challenge to “Confucian conscience and fears,” questioning not only the role of men’s desires but also those of women (who had been previously positioned largely as a trap for unconstrained men rather than as desiring subjects).¹⁵ As a result, late Ming *xiaoshuo* (approximately “novels”) are very different from Tang *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* (“tales”), not just in terms of their form and language, but also in their candid and/or ironic treatment of carnality in both male and female guises.

Pornography and libertinism reimagine desire and rigid social power in the Ming and Qing periods, even as they remain rooted in conservative social values. As Keith McMahon has shown, the erotic fiction of the late Ming and early Qing was predominantly misogynist in inspiration, revealing a need to portray the character of woman as *shuixing* (watery, unstable), a source of threatening instability to the extent that “if let out or indulged, she is bound to become dangerous or overwhelming.”¹⁶ Likewise,

Ding Naifei's analysis of the "gendered structure of reading" around the infamous late-sixteenth century novel *Jing ping mei* also establishes the importance of misogyny and the "licentious woman" in the construction of the late-imperial male reading subject.¹⁷ In this view, then, the late Ming literary archive is not just a looking-glass held up to reflect late Ming times; rather, many of the cultural debates of the time take place in and through literature.¹⁸ The new role literature was claiming (invent rather than document) reflected and enacted the values of a newly emergent cultural (and social) paradigm.

Pornography and Social Stratification

The late Ming period witnessed an explosion of pornographic and erotic literature across a variety of forms—fiction, popular song, drama, as well as painting. These works also explored diverse expressions of sexuality in a panoply of social circumstances, challenging long centuries of moralism, and in the process moved to include voices from the lower classes, drawing on urban commoners' pragmatism and common sense in order to circumvent or even challenge the neo-Confucian morality then pervading elite literary invention. In contrast to earlier periods, when expressions of licentiousness were largely limited to court elites, iconoclastic cultural developments in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries encouraged widespread interest in the body and desire.¹⁹ For the last half-century of the Ming in particular, pornography became a staple of the book publishing trade, a situation we now know continued beneath the strict gaze of the high Qing censors.²⁰ Interest in imaginatively representing private experiences in public discourse could be both radical and conservative, high and low, and pornographic dissent was both diffuse and culturally diverse. It is now possible to understand pornography as

having played an important role in shaping the industrialization of cultural production and urbanization in the Yangtze Delta, and further, in China's early modern history—a vernacular history, it should be noted, that caused moral dismay among early twentieth century critics as differently predisposed as Lu Xun and Hu Shi.

In the literary realm at least, most modern analysis of this phenomenon has been dominated by a focus on libertine cultural rebellion associated with sections of the privileged literati or scholar-official class.²¹ Other social-historical dimensions surrounding transgressive forms of pornographic expression in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been largely left neglected. This lopsidedness in recent scholarship may in part derive from an elite view, widespread in the twentieth century, that pornography was best limited to elite consumption and not be allowed to fall into the hands of the lower classes, a view that is not in harmony with what is currently being revealed about publishing and culture in late-imperial China. In any case, more attention needs to be given to less well-known and less studied works of pornographic fiction and erotic woodblock prints if we are to gain insight into the sensual lives and ambitions of early seventeenth century urban commoners and their habits of literary consumption.²² Pornography is important not only because of its relative prominence in this key period in Chinese cultural history, but also, in the words of Catharine MacKinnon, because sexuality is “that social process which creates, organises, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society.”²³

Even while forcefully censored and disappearing from view—or in many cases disappearing entirely—during the Qing dynasty, there is little doubt that anti-

establishment pornographic expression had considerable impact on late-imperial Chinese social and literary life. Within this strand of literary expression we find collections of medium length fiction, dramatic works, and folksong, all of which explore or question the bounds of morality through enacting social relocations of sexual representation and sexual pleasure.²⁴ Most of these works had been lost or unknown in the last century of the Qing dynasty, in part a consequence of imperial censorship, in part of their being undervalued compared to the deluxe publications prized by the elite. Thematically related to collections of short fiction such as Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* or Ling Mengchu's *Erpai*, this sub-genre tends overall to break free of storylines from history to focus on the everyday lives and passions of contemporary urban commoners.²⁵ Similar works also include Lu Renlong's (ca. 1600-1644) collection of vernacular short fiction, *Tales to Mould the World (Xingshiyan)*. The period also produced at least one volume (which has only recently come to light) combining diverse genres that resembles an adult magazine. *Springtime Inspirations for the Bedchamber as Transmitted Secretly by the Capital Publisher (Jingyuan michuan dongfang chunyi ce*, ca. 1644-1655) contains erotic fiction, woodblock prints of erotic album illustrations, as well as recipes for aphrodisiacs on the last pages. All of the works so far mentioned were produced in the prosperous Lower Yangtze region inland from the East China Sea, and as a result they reflect contemporary life and practices in that region. While the trend declined in this and other former centres of power after the consolidation of Manchu rule in the second half of the seventeenth century, new examples did emerge in relatively remote locations—as appears to be the case for the monumentally grotesque *Preposterous Words (Guwangyan)*, which is

currently identified as originating in northeast China in the early eighteenth century (and which has its own Lower Yangtze associations).

In contrast with more fashionable and longer individual works of pornographic fiction—such as *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (*Ruyijun zhuan*, mid sixteenth century), *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinpingmei*, late sixteenth century), *Adventures of the Rake* (*Langshi*, early seventeenth century), and *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rouputuan*, mid seventeenth century), wherein the protagonists are all distinguished by their social or economic power—the plebeian short fiction sub-genre involves a very different imaginaire located in busy urban streets and public spaces, where the struggle to maintain a livelihood is the setting for longed for love and relationships. Weighing up questions of love, morality and money, the mass-consumption publications represent a different kind of cultural reaction from the heroic mode that tends to characterise elite-centered works, even in their pornographic manifestations.²⁶ The cheaper forms of printing, binding, and layout evident in plebeian works also speak of an interest in quickly responding to cultural markets, another sign that such items met the needs of a lively reading public that had a different kind of interest in racy publications than did the literati connoisseur. These works also developed a modern sensibility of their own which began to consolidate in Lower Yangtze cities toward the end of the Wanli reign (1573-1620), transforming urban life in the process.²⁷

As an example of the new type of salacious story introduced above we may take “Drawing water from the well Ma Yuzhen makes the acquaintance of a lover” (*Ma Yuzhen ji shui yu qinglang*), the fifteenth story in *Enemies Enamoured*, a mid-seventeenth century collection of short fiction. Ma Yuzhen is a pretty young widow remarried to a

beadle in the service of the local magistrate. Wang Wen, an alcoholic, often abuses his wife, and she seeks affection with a gentle, lonely young man she meets at the well. Not taking a single thing from Wang's house, she runs away with Song Ren to the metropolis of Hangzhou. When they are unable to make a living, Yuzhen turns to prostitution and finds a ready clientele among the city's young scholars, but soon the young couple (Song Ren is complicit) are arrested by the police and sent back to their hometown, Wenzhou, where they are punished by the magistrate. Yuzhen should properly be sold as a servant or banished to live as a nun, but the heart of her husband is moved by the fact she took nothing from him. Surrounded by onlookers he confesses regret for beating her and pleads with the magistrate to allow him to take her back. Explaining that she would never have left him had he not beat her, Yuzhen agrees to return home, and they henceforth live happily together.

Plebeian pornography depicted the love and sexual lives of urban commoners across a broad spectrum, including marriage, adultery, remarriage, and prostitution. Protagonists often include housewives, tradesmen, soldiers, go-betweens, good-for-nothings, prostitutes, catamites, pimps, licentious monks, unsatisfied wanton women and lonely widows, and lumpen rascals. Most notably, as just recounted, portrayals of "good" adulterers and even "good" unchaste women were introduced into the literary landscape by works which were less interested in applying traditional Confucian morality than in applying the law of what might be called exchange equivalences, or what struck ordinary men and women as fair dealing. Weighing up the relative value of love, morality, and money, the mass-consumption stories represent a different kind of argument from the heroic heterodoxy (or orthodoxy) found in elite-centered works, electing instead to

identify with the circulations of the everyday from which the new measure of value was to be taken, circulations and measures which were renewable and therefore unfixed and unstable—modern.

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¹ Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Culture, Modernity and Nationalism: Further Reflections," *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (1993): 207-26; Prasenjit Duara, "The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China," *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (1998): 287-308; Wei Zhang, *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010).

² Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³ There are also other positions, including those that don't consider attempts to find a fit between China and modernity meaningful, for example, R. Bin Wong, "Confucian

Agendas for Material and Ideological Control in Modern China,” in *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, ed. Theodor Hutters, R. Bin Wong and Pauline Yu (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 303-25, 323; Tu Weiming, “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality,” *Bucknell Review* 38, no. 2 (1993): 19-29.

⁴ For a good range of papers covering 1900-1950, see Wen-hsin Yeh, ed., *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). In relation to sexuality, see Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (London: C Hurst & Co, 1995), and Hsiao-yen Peng, *Dandyism and Transcultural Modernity: The Dandy, the Flaneur, and the Translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁵ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Charles A. Laughlin, *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

⁶ Shang Wei, “*Jin Ping Mei* and Late Ming Print Culture,” in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asian Center, 2003), 187-238. For comparison with European cultural developments see Franco Moretti, “The Novel: History and Theory,” *New Left Review* 52 (2008): 111-24.

⁷ Gail Hershatter, "Chinese Sexuality: A Survey of Recent Writings," *Trends in History* 4, no. 4 (1990): 43-69; Liela Rupp, "Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (2001): 287-302.

⁸ Joseph D. Lichtenberg, *Sensuality and Sexuality Across the Divide of Shame* (Hoboken: Analytic Press, 2007).

⁹ This argument and the link existing between the spatial production of sexuality and the spatial production of pornography were first suggested by Mark Stevenson, "Sound, Space and Moral Soundscapes in *Ruyijun zhuan* and *Chipozi zhuan*," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 12, no. 2 (2010): 255-310, 261-62, 264n.27.

¹⁰ Francis Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); see also the essays in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

¹¹ They include Luo Zongqiang, *Mingdai houqi shiren xintai yanjiu* [The literati mind in the late Ming] (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2006); Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001); Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001); Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things*.

¹² The body (*shen*) was associated with self and subjectivity, as was the heart-mind.

¹³ See Luo Zongqiang, *Mingdai houqi*, 265-73.

¹⁴ The ruler is the fundamental bond of the subject, the father the fundamental bond of the son, and the husband the fundamental bond of the wife; the five unchanging principles are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity.

¹⁵ Daniel Hsieh, *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008), 35.

¹⁶ Keith McMahon, *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 65.

¹⁷ Ding Naifei, *Obscene Things: Sexual Politics in Jin Ping Mei* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Further analyses of “wanton women” in late-imperial China can be found in Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun, eds., *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Vladimir Maliavin, “Love Unto Death: Passion and Reason in Late Ming China,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (1999): 265-94.

¹⁹ Wu Cuncun, “Putongren, dangdai tici yu yuwang: Huang Fangyin Mohuaxian zaju zhong de dangfu xingxiang yu wan-Ming xiqu zhong de xiandai shuguang [Ordinary People, Contemporary Themes, and Desire: Images of Wanton Women and Intimations of Modernity in Huang Fangyin’s *Short Plays from the Studio of Wayside Flowers*],” *Zhongguo wenhua* [Chinese Culture], 38 (2013): 128-36; “Cong Huanxi yuanjia zhong de tongjian gushi kan wan-Ming chengshi putongren de jiazhi guan he daode guannian de jueqi [Tales of Adultery in *Enemies Enamored: Images of Urban Life and Questions of Value, Morality and Erotics in late Seventeenth Century Jiangnan*],” *Zhongguo wenhua* [Chinese Culture] 40 (2014): 1-11.

²⁰ Katherine Carlitz, “Chastity, Pornography, and ‘Early Modernity’ in England and China, 1500-1640,” paper presented at the conference *Comparative Early Modernities: 1100-1800, University of Michigan, April 17- 18, 2009*.

²¹ Robert E. Hegel, “Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Ch’ing Vernacular Literature,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 112-142.

²² Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

²³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory” *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 515-44, 516. For late-imperial China and pornography as an important “rich narrative body,” see Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine’s Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 93.

²⁴ Important examples from fiction include *Forgotten Tales of Longyang* (*Longyang yishi*, 1632), *Enemies Enamoured* (*Huanxi yuanjia*, 1640), and *Expanse of Passion* (*Yipian qing*, ca. 1650). On the first, see Wu Cuncun, “The Plebification of Male-Love and the Positioning of Catamites (*xiaoguan*) in Late-Ming Fiction: *The Forgotten Tales of Longyang*,” in *Changing Chinese Masculinities: from Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, ed. Kam Louie (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2016). On the second, see Wu Cuncun, “Cong *Huanxi yuanjia* zhong.” Examples from drama include the plays found in *Short Plays of the Wayside Flower Studio* (*Mohuaxuan zaju*, ca. 1610); see Wu Cuncun, “Putongren”. Feng Menglong’s *Mountain Songs* (*Shange*, early 17th century) is the prototypical Ming collection of folk songs; see Wu Cuncun, ““It

Was I Who Lured the Boy’: Commoner Women, Intimacy and the Sensual Body in the Song Collections of Feng Menglong (1574-1646),” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 12, no. 2 (2010): 311-343.

²⁵ Hegel, “Distinguishing Levels.”

²⁶ Patrick Hanan, “The Fiction of Moral Duty: The Vernacular Story in the 1640s,” in *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, ed. Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 189-213.

²⁷ Shang Wei, “The making of the everyday world: *Jin Ping Mei cihua* and encyclopedias for daily use,” in *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation: The Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond*, ed. David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 63-95. It is this strand of fiction that Moretti (“The Novel”) overlooks in his comparison of the development of the novel in Europe and China, and which would probably be the more “modern” by his criteria (had he been aware of it).