

Hu Siao-chen's *Cainü cheye weimian*: Contributions and Questions

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Siao-chen Hu's work on "women's *tanci*," or "*tanci xiaoshuo*," has been accumulating for more than a decade. Written in English, her doctoral dissertation (Harvard University, 1994) has circulated widely among those who study the history of women's writing, and it has received attention among scholars of Ming-Qing fiction more generally. Her developing body of articles in Chinese are another important contribution. Although there is other scholarship on the subject in several languages, Hu's is certainly one of the

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leading voices in this sub-field.

The current volume builds on but goes well beyond Hu's previous efforts. In a series of seven chapters, it introduces the genre, focuses on ten major *tanci* by women of the Ming and Qing, and links this material to questions of women and narrative. Some of the chapters have been published elsewhere, but this new volume allows the author to formulate a more far-reaching vision than was possible in her earlier and smaller-scale studies. The collection begins with the earliest known published example, *Tianyu hua* 天雨花 of 1651, and continues through what Hu identifies as the early part of the "late Qing" (1840-1895) ending up with the latter part of that era (1895-1911). This temporal sweep allows her to introduce and discuss such masterworks as *Tianyu hua*, *Yuchuan yuan* 玉釧緣 (eighteenth century?), *Zaisheng yuan* 再生緣 (roughly 1770), and *Bisheng hua* 筆生花 (1857), but also to include the much less familiar *Jinyu yuan* 金魚緣 (1871), *Liuhua meng* 榴花夢 (1841-1935), *Mengying yuan* 夢影緣 (1843), *Jingzhong zhuan* 精忠傳 (1895), and *Huang shuangfei* 凰雙飛 (1898). (Hou Zhi's 侯芝 *Zai zaotian* 再造天 of 1828 completes the set of ten.) It also provides the opportunity to link this series of literary works to historical changes across the Qing.

Hu's study divides into two sections. The first is less historical in its emphasis. Its four chapters raise such important thematic questions as the intertextuality between *tanci*, or in the case of *Tianyu hua* the rather puzzling lack of impact (until perhaps the late Qing) of this seemingly seminal work of a much earlier period. Other issues include the establishment of a tradition of women's writing in this genre; the relationship between writers and readers; the role and importance of the autobiographical passages characteristic of the form; and the "secret garden," Hu's metaphor for women's creative space and time.

The second section takes up the relationship between *tanci xiaoshuo* and history. The first of three chapters builds a case for accepting the date of

publication of *Tianyu hua* at face value, despite some evidence to the contrary, and discusses the ramifications of this stand. The second interprets three lesser-known *tanci*—*Liuhua meng*, *Jingzhong zhuan*, and *Huang shuangfei*—as a stream leading into the political uses of *tanci* by late-Qing reformers, even though some were written well before that time. Finally, the third chapter presents the seemingly apolitical *Mengying yuan* as obliquely connected to political turmoil, despite its otherworldly tone.

Overall, this set of studies is richly informative about the evolution of an important body of writings by women, while carefully noting lacunae in our knowledge of them. In cases where the author is known only by a pseudonym, publishing information is lacking, or rhetorical uncertainties abound, we are presented with the best available hard knowledge, followed by what is likely, followed by what is plausible or at least possible. The portrait Hu draws is thus trustworthy, despite all the problems of excavating a somewhat marginal and (until recently) little studied genre. A second important asset is the freshness of the approach. Hu uses these materials to challenge commonly held assumptions. One example is her skepticism that the late Ming was a halcyon time for women writers. Hu queries this assumption in two ways. First, she points out that what emerges in the late Ming is hardly individualism or feminism in the Western sense, but rather a blend of admiration and fear of female talent. On the one hand, talented women are praised for helping the dynasty during a “crisis of masculinity,” a time when men were too weak to come forward. But, second, she notes, the rhetoric of a work like *Tianyu hua* seems to attach the fall of the Ming, in part, to the newly “lax” conditions that gave rise to an “excess” of feeling, as well as to active women, a concern that continues well into the Qing. In other words, the goal of the seemingly feminist late-Ming moment was to put men back in charge. She further points out that the slogan “lack of talent in a woman is a virtue” dates from the late Ming. Hu’s wide reading in women’s poetry and western literary scholarship

helps her to formulate this challenge to commonly held views. This is just one of the many ways in which *Cainü cheye weimian* shakes up conventional understanding. No doubt challenges will be raised to this and other interpretations, but the book as a whole will have a major impact, thanks to breakthroughs of this kind.

Beyond its insights into women's literary culture, another important strength lies in the area of narrative. It is well known that *tanci xiaoshuo* present autobiographical material at the beginnings and ends of chapters. Hu uses this material in several interesting ways. Above all, she suggests that it should not be rejected as autobiography simply because it is intermittent, rhymed, unsigned, and lacking in retrospection. Given the dearth of feminine autobiography in the Ming and Qing, Hu's focus on these passages is a welcome assertion of their importance. She also reflects productively on the narrative complications of having an author's running commentary on the text, of watching the text grow as the author grows.

Finally, Hu uses this commentary to draw a more generalized portrait of the daily lives of women during the Qing. A contrast between Qiu Xinru's 邱心如 *Bisheng hua* and Sun Deying's 孫德英 *Jinyu yuan* frames a discussion of the different attitudes women took toward writing, the ways they justified the time spent, the spaces in which writing took place, and the reasons so many *tanci* involved cross-dressing. To focus on just one piece of this argument, Qiu Xinru's autobiographical commentary gives the impression that her long work, composed over twenty years, was regarded as a kind of hobby, something to be taken up when other responsibilities had been attended to. A young girl when she began writing, Qiu had married by the time her narrative ends. Although she infuses *Bisheng hua* with the hope of immortality, it was never her "main job" the way family obligations were. Not coincidentally, her cross-dressed heroine changes back to a feminine role once the problem that led her to her mission in the first place (a marital crisis) has been resolved. In

contrast, *Jinyu yuan* was written over 6-8 years by a woman who, most unusually, refused to marry. After the death of her mother, the author had no pre-established womanly role to play within the family, and her *tanci* became her main job.

Both of these *tanci* deal with women who cross-dress and leave the seclusion of the women's quarters, but only one, *Jinyu yuan*, refuses to return the heroine to feminine garb once her crisis has been revolved. Rather, this heroine takes a "wife" and continues in a masculine role. Hu links this unusual move to the author's unusual attitudes toward gender and family. Yet she sees continuity to *Bisheng hua*, in that both of these *tanci xiaoshuo* were the products of feminine boredom with excessively isolated private lives. Even Qiu Xinru would agree that not much out of the ordinary ever happens in the women's quarters and that the world of cross-dressed masculinity is more stimulating and more fun. Imagining a cross-dressed heroine, it turns out, is a way for women to leap out of feminine confinement and pursue a more active life style. In contrast, male writers who use cross-dressed females in their work are less concerned with boredom or with changing society and less ambivalent about returning the cross-dressed heroine to her domestic role. Like many other pieces of analysis in Hu's study, this one is highly imaginative, subtle, and persuasive; and it enlarges our understanding of daily life in the women's quarters and the flights of fancy to which it gives rise.

When Hu turns her attention to historical change she comes up with equally striking formulations, as when she brings in the famous revolutionary Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907), emphasizing her program to alter the consciousness of women readers in the very last years of the Qing. Hu links this program to the political orientation of *Tianyu hua* in its pro-Donglin stance, among other rhetorical emphases. She further connects it to a practice developed by Hou Zhi (1764-1829), whose *tanci* were the first to understand readers as lesser beings in need of a lecture. In contrast, Hu notes, the author of *Zaizheng yuan*

was worried about ignorance of a more basic sort, fearing that readers might fail to grasp her meaning. Nevertheless, in later nineteenth-century works like *Liuhua meng*, *Jingzhong zhuan*, and *Huang shuangfei*, one senses that women writers yearned both to enter the public realm, at least in fantasy, and to convince other readers (usually female but sometimes male) of a broad need for change. *Liuhua meng*'s focus on helping China, *Jingzhong zhuan*'s stance against the Qing, *Huang shuangfei*'s use of vulgar language and outreach to male readers are variants on old *tanci xiaoshuo* patterns, this time in response to such dynastic crises as Western invasion and the Taipings. If only in the sense that they move away from old models, these works anticipate a future in which *tanci xiaoshuo* would lead, not follow, social change. Invoking Raymond Williams, Hu finds that these works are not necessarily radical or prescient but rather mixtures of old and new; yet they make sense as harbingers of a future in which women will actively enlist in the project of reform.

Zheng Zhenhua's 鄭貞花 (1811?-1860) *tanci Mengying yuan* is another interesting case study. One of the most literate of *tanci xiaoshuo*, this work would seem on the surface to promote a very conservative way of life for men but especially women. Probing under the surface, Hu finds reason to suspect that its very conservatism betrays the author's fear of the future, even her reluctance to resolve such major issues for women as conflicting loyalties (to family versus state, to natal versus marital family). She also seems reluctant to bring her narrative to a close. The fact that the author's daughter, Zhou Yingfang 周穎芳 (?-1895), authored the more overtly political *Jingzhong zhuan* allows Hu to project a second teleology: the daughter's *tanci* takes up where the mother's ends off and resolves the mother's hesitant rhetoric with a more decisive wrap-up and a more this-worldly view.

A full account of all of Hu's insights would be impossible in a brief review of this kind. Suffice it to sum up her accomplishment by saying that it

adds considerably to our understanding of narrative, women, and the relationship between them from the late Ming on.

A work this bold and complex cannot help but raise questions as well as win applause. What I have to offer in this regard are not criticisms but areas in which further research might be undertaken or a fuller discussion might ensue. Except for the final chapters, most of the book tends to ignore developments on the novelistic side of the fence, unless it be late-Qing fiction. In fact, Hu is eager to show that *tanci xiaoshuo* are a category of *xiaoshuo*, so that a distinction like the one I am making between *tanci* and *xiaoshuo* might seem irrelevant to her concerns. But there are several ways in which a fuller invocation of *xiaoshuo* that are not *tanci* might be a productive next step for Hu's general pattern of analysis, particularly if she is indeed writing about "the rise of female narrative," as she claims.

For example, there is some evidence that a small handful of women sought to write *zhanghui xiaoshuo*. Few succeeded, or if they succeeded, few of their works survive. Yet a case can be made for a continuing effort in this area throughout the nineteenth century. Hu's work could be enriched through extension to this material, for example Gu Taiqing's 顧太清 (1799-1877) *Honglou meng ying* 紅樓夢影 (preface 1861, pub. 1877), which is the only known, extant premodern novel by a woman. Gu was a Manchu. Is this the only reason that she chose not to write a *tanci*, which is essentially a southern form and which (as with *Jingzhong zhuan*) could take an anti-Manchu stand? Or were there other reasons why a woman interested in narrative might wish to avoid the *tanci* route? Was it, perhaps, discouraging rather than encouraging to some women that *tanci xiaoshuo* were so much a women's genre—perhaps a kind of ghetto? Is there any evidence from *tanci* themselves that authors might (upon occasion) have yearned to write a *xiaoshuo* had society allowed? To put all of this another way, might there be a means of claiming the prestige of novels for *tanci xiaoshuo*, quite properly part of Hu's agenda, and still

accommodate the possibility that this was not the only kind of *xiaoshuo* women wrote or wanted to write?

Moreover, what of the influence of *Honglou meng* and *Jinghua yuan* on the plots that Hu describes? Sleepless nights were not confined to *tanci* readers but included readers of these novels too. Evidence abounds that these two in particular were enjoyed by women even though their authors were men. Such influences come up in Hu's chapter on *Mengying yuan*, but one might also ask whether they affected other *tanci*. For example, what effect might *Jinghua yuan*'s cross-dressed heroines have had on nineteenth century *tanci* in which cross-dressing occurred, and to what extent were *Honglou meng*'s more languid heroines seen as negative examples by *tanci xiaoshuo* writers in the more political climate of the late Qing?

More specifically, I would like to know more about the interrelation of *Honglou meng* sequels with the *tanci xiaoshuo* tradition. For example, if *Mengying yuan* operates around a division into heavenly and earthly spheres, could this reflect the influence of the 30-chapter *Xu Honglou meng* 續紅樓夢 (1799) or *Bu Honglou meng* 補紅樓夢 (preface 1814, pub. 1820), which divide the fictional landscape in the same way? Similarly, might the marriage of this *tanci*'s Baoyu-like character (Mengyu 夢玉) to twelve beauties, reflect similar arrangements—and an identical name for the hero—in *Honglou fumeng* 紅樓復夢 of 1799? Or is *Honglou meng*'s influence sufficient to explain these arrangements as Hu claims (p. 345)? Also, how might Zheng Zhenhua's and Gu Taiqing's fear of the future be compared? Whatever the answers to these questions, were *tanci xiaoshuo* to be set in juxtaposition with *zhanghui xiaoshuo* involving women, a productive new chapter in Hu's work might emerge.

Finally, do we have any evidence of poetic responses by women to the literature Hu describes? The ten *tanci xiaoshuo* on which Hu builds her case add up to a tradition, as Hu has demonstrated, but the only written responses

by women we are told about in her work come in the form of new *tanci* or hand-copied versions of old ones. Is it the case that women never or only rarely thought to comment on *tanci xiaoshuo* in their poems? If so, this would be an important contrast with *Honglou meng*, which not only generated many poetic responses by women but also had an effect on women's writing in *ci* and other genres. Could there be differences of class or literacy involved?

The point is not to find fault with the current study but rather to explore some implications of Hu's richly interesting observations about women, narrative, and political change, which bring a whole new continent of writings into better focus. The ramifications of this project are far reaching, and it would be unfair to ask that still more be done. Nevertheless the map of women's readings and writings before the end of the Qing could be productively extended in some of the ways suggested above, a point with which Hu herself would certainly agree.

One other very minor reaction is stylistic. The series of seven chapters is far more than the sum of its individual parts. In subtle yet compelling ways, each chapter builds on the discoveries of the ones before. Yet there is, in the end, no conclusion. A few concluding pages could have wrapped up the package in even more satisfying fashion, though this is hardly a major concern. In sum, from the points of view of women's studies, narrative, and Ming-Qing literature this is a first-rate contribution. One can only look forward to the waves of discussion it will generate in years to come.