

A Political Fantasy: Female Images in the Late Ming-Dynasty Chinese Erotic Paintings

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INTRODUCTION

TANG YIN'S *TAO GU PRESENTING A POEM*

Tao Gu Presenting a Poem painted by Tang Yin (1470-1527), one of the most renowned artists from middle Ming dynasty (1368-1644), illustrates a popular story from the Song dynasty (960-1279). (Fig.1) Tao Gu, a scholar of the Latter Zhou kingdom (951-960), was sent to Southern Tang dynasty (937-976) capital Jinling, nowadays Nanjing, as an official envoy. His condescending attitude at Jinling's court angered the emperor of the Southern Tang. The Southern Tang court then came up with a trick to embarrass Tao Gu. They sent a court courtesan Qin Ruolan to seduce Tao Gu using a fake identity as an innkeeper's daughter. Qin Ruolan successfully attracted Tao Gu using her beauty and received a love poem written by Tao Gu. The next day, the Southern Tang court held a banquet where Tao Gu saw Qin Ruolan again. She revealed her real identity by playing a song based on the love poem that Tao Gu had written to her. Tao Gu was humiliated and left the Southern Tang court very soon.¹

Tang Yin's painting depicts a scene of secret night meeting of Tao Gu and Qin Ruolan. Tao Gu is patting his leg while he is looking at Qin Ruolan playing the musical instrument *pipa*. Inscription written by Tang Yin himself in the upper right corner suggests the romantic affair that Tao Gu and Qin Ruolan had during this secret meeting:

A one-night love affair takes place on the journey.
A short lyric is just enough to make an acquaintance.
If I were Tao Gu of the old days,
Why should I blush before the Son of Heaven!²
(Translation from *The Double Screen*, p.196)

¹ Wen Ying, *Yuhu Qinghua* ("An unofficial history of the jade jar"), Song Dynasty: Chapter Four.

² Wu Hung, *The Double Screen* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 196.

The composition is carefully structured for this scene. Two characters were enclosed in a semi-private setting by luxuriant plants, rockeries and two screens. Wu Hung claims in *The Double Screen* that these two screens “respond to each other” and “link scattered images in the painting into a dynamic whole.”³ Thus, the standing screen behind Qin Ruolan and the folding screen behind Tao Gu reinforce a sense of communication between the two characters. The rockery was painted with heavy and dark colored ink, occupying the foreground to create a closed and secured space. The willow extends its faintly painted branches above Tao Gu and reflects its shadow onto the folding screen behind him to create an enclosed atmosphere and to secure characters’ intimacy. However, there is a servant boy hiding behind the rockery and listening to their conversations. What is more, viewers of the painting are standing from an omnipotent perspective. Not only can viewers see the two main characters’ intimate meeting, but also they can notice the hiding boy servant at the lower corner.

Wu Hung believes this painting can be seen as a self-portrait of Tang Yin that reveals his insecurity.⁴ Robert Thorp and Richard Vinograd in *Chinese Art and Culture* consider the painting as both a reference to historical anecdote and to Tang Yin’s contemporary life.⁵ Tang Yin projected himself onto Tao Gu, an isolated scholar who is falling in love with a courtesan. In fact, the sense of isolation and insecurity was a constant theme in Tang Yin’s painting. Tang Yin was born in a rich merchant family in Suzhou, an economically prosperous southern city in the late Ming dynasty. Based on the neo-Confucian principle, merchant class, although was

³ Wu Hung, *The Double Screen* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵ Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture* (New York, Harry N, Abrams, 2001), 321.

materially wealthy, had a low social status. One way of breaking such social boundaries was to take *keju*, an examination system to select government officials. Tang Yin, with his academic abilities, received the first place in the exam at the provincial level in 1497. He was then able to go to Beijing and take the final round of the exam at the state level, the highest level in 1499. However, Tang Yin inadvertently was involved in a scandal: He and his companion were suspected of bribing officials for the exam questions. His companion confessed under the harsh torture. Whether or not Tang Yin was actually an accomplice, he lost the opportunity to take the exam to become a government official and to attain a place in higher social class. Tang Yin returned to Suzhou area after the scandal and lived in an eccentric life. Regardless of his lifestyle, Tang Yin was a talented artist. In his paintings, we often see elements from earlier masters of diverse artistic styles. Painting was a tool that Tang Yin used to cross the boundary of social regulations. As James Cahill commented in his book *Parting at the Shore, Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580*, Tang Yin was “educated for an official career but fails somehow to pursue or achieve one and who takes to painting instead as a means of winning for himself a respected and economically secure position in society.”⁶ Yang Xin considers paintings such as *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem* represent Tang Yin’s life attitude. “Through these paintings, he mocks life and worldly matters, lashes out at the hypocrisy of moralists, and expresses his sympathy of courtesans and prostitutes.”⁷ *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem*, therefore, cannot be seen as a simple portraiture of historical event. It is a painting that reflects Tang Yin’s anxiety and solitude with erotic elements.

⁶ James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore* (New York, Weatherhill, 1978), 195.

⁷ Yang Xin, “Ming Dynasty,” in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. Richard M. Barnhart (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997), 223.

The connection with eroticism in *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem* is seen from the poem, the lavishly decorated garden, the two symmetric and opposing screens as well as the servant boy hiding behind the rockeries. Such patterns appear frequently in the Ming Dynasty erotic paintings. It is said that Tang Yin was also an excellent painter of erotic paintings, although there are no surviving erotic albums that we know for sure was painted by Tang Yin.⁸

Erotic paintings in China have a long history both as commercial products and as private collections. According to *Bi Zhou Zhai Yu Tan* (it translates as “Notes from the humble bloom cottage”), written by the Ming-dynasty (1368-1644) scholar Defu Shen (1578-1642), erotic images in China first appeared in Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE).⁹ Yet it was not until the late Ming Dynasty (1579-1644) that erotic paintings reached their peak both quantitatively and artistically. Late Ming-Dynasty erotic paintings often appear in the form of handscroll or albums, which provide the paintings with a sense of narrative and enable a more sophisticated visual expression. Scenes painted in the albums or handscrolls are often accompanied by erotic poems or are referring to plots in Ming erotic literature such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (1610) by the pseudonymous author Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng. Ming erotic albums and handscrolls were mostly produced in the economic prosperous southern cities such as Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou and reflect artistic conventions of the areas.

We do not know exactly who the viewers were for these erotic paintings. However, based on the content of erotic painting and erotic literature, we can glimpse into the potential functions of these paintings. *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, an erotic literature written in 1657 by Li Yu (1610-1680), reveals that erotic paintings can be used both as educational material and as consumer

⁸ Defu Shen, *Bi Zhou Zhai Yu Tan* (“Notes from the humble bloom cottage,”) Ming Dynasty, <http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=103839>.

⁹ Ibid.

products. (Fig.2) In chapter three, the main character Wei Yang Sheng, or Vesperus as translated by Patrick Hanan, bought an exquisite album of erotic paintings by the famous Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) painter, Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), from an art dealer in order to teach his wife how to participate actively in their sexual relationship.¹⁰ In this case, erotic paintings are both commercial products that strive to meet buyers need as well as exquisite works of art that reveal that time period's artistic conventions and social backgrounds.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Not many scholars have chosen to study Chinese erotic paintings either because of the lack of image sources or because of social constraints. One of the first scholars to study eroticism in Chinese culture is a Dutch scholar, Robert van Gulik. In 1951, van Gulik published *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* in Japan. Ten years later, he published *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. Till 1644 A.D.* In this book, van Gulik examined the erotic traditions of ancient China from the Shang Dynasty (c.1600-1046 BCE) to the end of the Ming Dynasty. Despite scholarly critiques on his “voyeuristic Orientalism,” the book gave a comprehensive insight into Chinese eroticism based on social, philosophical, and historical backgrounds of each time period, and became an informational reference for later works.¹¹ However, among these 359 pages of a thorough investigation of eroticism in Chinese culture, only ten pages were dedicated to Ming erotic paintings, with hardly any visual references. James Cahill, on the other hand, took a more art

¹⁰ Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans. Patrick Hanan (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 42.

¹¹ Bret Hinsch, “Van Gulik’s *Sexual Life in Ancient China* and The Matter of Homosexuality,” *Men, Women & Gender in Early and Imperial China*, Vol. 7 Issue 1 (Mar. 2005): 81.

historical perspective, and posted eleven chapters of his writings on Qing dynasty (1644-1912) erotic paintings on his personal website, with one chapter focused on printed erotic albums of the late Ming. Both van Gulik and Cahill made insightful observations of the late Ming erotic paintings and my thesis relies on their works. Van Gulik and Cahill not only provided valuable discussions about Ming erotic paintings, but also reproduced several erotic albums with originality and high-quality aesthetics such as erotic albums *Hua Ying Jin Zhen*, or *Variegated Battle Arrays of the Flowery Campand*.¹² My thesis is mostly based on van Gulik, Cahill, and the Bertholet Collection's images with a particular focus on female figures.

CHUN-GONG ETYMOLOGY

In order to explore the role of female figures in erotic paintings, one have to understand what Chinese erotic paintings are. The Chinese term for erotic painting is *chun-gong hua*; *hua* means “paintings” and *chun-gong* literally means “spring palace”. The earliest mentioning of the word *chun-gong* is found in the *Verses of Chu*, or *Chu Ci*, an anthology of poetry attributed to the Warring States period poet and minister, Qu Yuan (c. 340-278 BCE).¹³ In *Chu Ci* he writes, “forthwith I rambled to this palace of the Spring; And broke off a branch of the *Qiu* tree to add to my girdle”¹⁴ where the “palace of the Spring” was referring to the place where the mythological spring god *Qingdi* lived. Since the Northern Zhou dynasty (557-

¹² James Cahill, “Preface and Introduction.” *Chinese Erotic Paintings*, access Mar. 28th, 2017, <http://jamescahill.info/illustrated-writings/chinese-erotic-painting/preface-and-introduction>

¹³ *Hanyu Da Cidian* (“Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary,”) ed. by Luo Zhufeng, accessed Mar. 28th, 2017. <http://www.jiaodui.com/bbs/simple/?t31761.html>.

¹⁴ Qu Yuan, *Li Sao*, trans. James Legge. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, “The Li Sao Poem and its Author”, 857.

581), the word *chun-gong* has been used to represent the place where the crown prince lives. It was not until the Song Dynasty that *chun-gong* was used to symbolize erotic images.¹⁵

Why and how did the meaning of *chun-gong* transform from the palace of the crown prince into erotic images? The etymological history for *chun-gong* suggests a connection between politics and eroticism. In order to have a glimpse into the late Ming society and to further explore the connection between politics and eroticism, I choose to focus on the images of women in late Ming erotic paintings. Women, often regarded as a subordinate in such a strictly hierarchical and patriarchal society, were nevertheless protagonists in Ming erotic paintings. One would assume that women in the erotic paintings were idealized ladies under male artists' brushes. Female images in erotic paintings, however, seem to depart from the strict doctrines of this patriarchal society. They were not simply the mirroring images of women, but rather fantasized figures produced by male artists to mediate space between private and public as well as to convey the hidden idealization of late Ming literati. While the artists from merchant classes in economically wealthy southern cities were popular, their social status was lower than that of the elite class and government officials. Artists did not have the ability to comment on the politics. Similarly, gender was constructed hierarchically as well. Such social and gender structures positioned female and merchant class artists in the same situation. Therefore, artists' anxieties of the turbulent society and dissatisfaction with corruption in government were often reflected in the themes, settings, body structures, and particularly, female images of erotic paintings.

¹⁵ Neo-Confucianism was originated in Song Dynasty. It is a time period when gender and eroticism became strictly politicized. See Chapter two for detailed discussions.

Chapter one of my thesis is dedicated to legitimizing late Ming erotic paintings as works of art. Scholarships from Roger Scruton and Kenneth Clark will be considered within the context of late Ming society. Once we recognize the artistic quality of the late Ming erotic paintings, we need to look at the paintings from an art historical perspective. Chapter two looks at the paintings through the lens of body and sexuality. By using Judith Butler's gender theories and by considering the Neo-Confucianism and Daoism ideologies, I aim to show that gender structures in the late Ming erotic paintings are blurry. Lastly, Chapter three aims to explore the reason for the deliberately made blurriness between genders by examining the recurrent spectating themes in both erotic paintings and erotic literatures such as *Jin Ping Mei*.

CHAPTER 1: IS MING EROTIC PAINTING ART OR PORNOGRAPHY?

As James Cahill touched upon in his writings on Qing dynasty erotic paintings in his personal blog, whether we can fully distinguish these erotic paintings from pornography is debatable.¹⁶ However, just as we cannot deny the commercial or educational functions of erotic paintings, we also should not ignore their artistic values. This chapter will study erotic paintings from the Bertholet Collections in terms of their representational content, imaginative manners and the artistic traditions in which they were created. By using these theories developed in a western art historical context, I wish to show that these erotic paintings are much richer than pornography content-wise. Artists created a fictional world that represent the unstable and turbulent societies. If one can understand Tang Yin's solitude and insecurity in his *Tao Gu presenting a Poem*, then one should treat Ming erotic paintings in a similar fashion for these images share so many similarities with *Tao Gu presenting a Poem* painting. In order to fully understand and investigate the potential implications of Ming erotic paintings, it is important to distinguish them from pure pornography and to recognize that erotic art and pornography are not mutually exclusive in this context.

REPRESENTATIONAL CONTENT

In the book *Art and Pornography* by Hans Maes, he suggests a few popular ways in which scholars used to mark the difference between art and pornography.¹⁷ The first factor that scholars such as Roger Scruton and Luc Bovens always use to distinguish erotic art from

¹⁶ James Cahill, "Preface and Introduction." *Chinese Erotic Paintings*, access Mar. 28th, 2017, <http://jamescahill.info/illustrated-writings/chinese-erotic-painting/preface-and-introduction>

¹⁷ Hans Maes, *Art and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18.

pornography is the representational content. While pornography inevitably depicts sexually explicit content, erotic paintings tends to conceal these anatomical parts and to provide an amorous and affectionate atmosphere instead. As Scruton and Bovens point out, graphic representations in pornography only invite viewers to focus on the sexual organs while erotic artist deliberately avoid such straightforward gazes by inviting the viewers to explore the characters' mindsets instead of physical features.¹⁸ Erotic art at its core is depicting the sexual desire of characters in the paintings instead of arousing the audiences.

In Ming erotic paintings, sexual organs were never the emphasis of the work. Indeed, some sets in erotic album leaves depict couples that are not engaged in sexual activities. They are even clothed. Instead, they appear with a strong erotic reference by symbolism or poetic allusions. "Two mandarin ducks" is the first picture in so-called "the *Wang Sheng* album" after the name of the attributed author: this ten-leaf album, now in the Bertholet Collection in Netherlands, is signed on the last leaf by artist Wang Sheng from Suzhou area. (Fig. 3) Each leaf depicts a couple having an intimate and romantic date in their house, except on the eighth leaf. Each painting in the album is accompanied by an erotic poem written and signed by different people.

Although there is no survived painting by Wang Sheng, we know from *Wu Sheng Shi Shi* (it translates as "A history of silent poems"), written by Late-Ming scholar and government official Jiang Shaoshu, that Wang Sheng was an artist famous for female portraiture. The book *Wu Sheng Shi Shi* recorded around four hundred reputable artists in Ming dynasty and briefly

¹⁸ Roger Scruton, "Flesh from the Butcher: How to Distinguish Eroticism from Pornography," *Times Literary Supplement*, Vol. 15 (2005):11; Luc Bovens, "Moral Luck, Photojournalism and Pornography," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol.32 (1998): 215.

introduced their biographies and specialties. As Jiang Shaoshu described, female figures portrayed by Wang Sheng are elegant, demure and rich in emotions. His female portraits are among the best in his time period.¹⁹ Perhaps by claiming these images were painted by Wang Sheng, the art dealer revealed his goal as presenting paintings with elegant women. Although we do not know for sure whether the Bertholet *Wang Sheng* album is actually painted by Wang Sheng, despite the fact that it is signed as Wang Sheng, the paintings in the albums do show some features of Wang Sheng's portrait paintings described by Jiang Shaoshu in *Wu Sheng Shi Shi*.

The first painting in the albums is relatively conservative compared to the rest nine. A couple is portrayed in the foreground using fluid and delicate brushstrokes. The woman gently leans close toward the man. He is touching her hand. Their slender bodies sway toward the tree, so do their heads and eyes, both gaze down in the lower left corner. Although the two attires differ by their gender, the robes drape drawn in the same direction which creates a harmonious and amorous echoing between the two figures. In the background, the natural setting consists of rocks or rockery, peach blossom tree and river. The brushstrokes here are slightly stronger and drier than that of the figure in order to emphasize on the landscape setting in the background. In fact, poems and paintings are complementary. Although we do not know whether the painting or the poem was created first, viewers in Ming dynasty accustomed to read the poem and to appreciate the painting at the same time.²⁰ We have also seen previously in Tang Yin's *Tao Gu*

¹⁹ Jiang Shaoshu, *Wu Sheng Shi Shi: 7 juan* ("History of silent poems,") China (1961): Chapter Four.

²⁰ Ding Ning, "Verbal Above Visual: A Chinese Perspective," in *Visual Cultures*, ed. James Elkins (Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2010), 72. Ding argued in this article that inscriptions and colophons are seen as part of the painting to convey the poetic sentiment. Poems written beside the paintings always have important allusions that cannot be neglected when reading a painting.

Presenting a Poem that the poem written by Tang Yin himself indicate an even more intimate relationship of Tao Gu and Qin Ruolan than that was depicted in the painting. The poem accompanying the first painting in Wang Sheng's album reads:

Red flowers perfume the steps;
Two mandarin ducks --- small, so small----
And glad to see the spring sun dawn.
What does it matter that autumn winds too arrive early!²¹

The picture itself can hardly be seen as erotic. There is no explicitly depicted sexual organs or iconic symbolisms for sex. However, the poem involves various sensual experience, thus added the sense of eroticism to this painting. Mandarin ducks symbolizes the lover and each part of the poem matches with the painting. The perfume of peach blossoms, the gentle touch from autumn wind and the rising spring sun together create an amorous atmosphere that coordinate with and enhance the visual representations. In terms of representational content, this painting never explicitly depicts any sexual intercourse. Instead, the sense of eroticism is created by visual and literal references that require viewers to imagine.

ARTISTIC CONVENTIONS THEORY

Hans Maes also suggests that artistic quality is another way scholars often use to distinguish art and pornography despite the representational content.²² One important way to recognize the artistic quality of painting is to see if the painting can fall into the frame of their contemporary artistic conventions. Kenneth Clark makes a distinction between “nude” and

²¹ Ferdinand M. Bertholet, *Gardens of Pleasure* (Munich, Berlin, London and New York: Presetel, 2003), 59.

²² Hans Maes, *Art and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 21.

“naked” in his book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Beauty* by stating that a “naked” body is simply one without cloths while “nude” is balanced, beautifully shaped, and is “an art form” invented by Greeks.²³ Roger Scruton then took Clarks’ claim of “naked” and “nude” bodies to state that pornography is only comprised of naked bodies yet erotic art depicts the “nude” that does not objectify people.²⁴ To Clark, the difference between “nude” and “naked” is based on the study of Greek convention of art. The Greek belief that body should be kept in perfect shape and should be measured ideally is the base for Clark’s argument. Therefore, using the distinction between nude and naked body to identify erotic art and pornography needs adjustments when apply to works from non-Western culture. In China, human’s body was never regarded as an idealized form.²⁵ However, Clark and Scruton have shown that the distinction between erotic art and pornography is that erotic art follows the artistic conventions of that culture while pornography hardly do so. While there was barely a culture of human body in Ming-dynasty China, how could we study these erotic paintings and distinguish them from pornography? It turns out that, despite the human bodies, these paintings have followed the artistic conventions in Ming from many other perspectives such as compositions and brushstrokes.

WU AND ZHE SCHOOL

Wu school and Zhe school were two major schools of painters that dominate the early to middle Ming dynasty art scene. The name of Wu and Zhe school indicate that this two-school

²³ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, (New York: Garden City, 1956), 25.

²⁴ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.

²⁵ Liu Chengji and Lei Yongqiang, “The Body and Its Image in Classical Chinese Aesthetics,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Dec., 2008): 579.

theory is based on the geographical location of artists. While *wu* represents Suzhou, a city in Jiangsu province, *zhe* represents Hangzhou in Zhejiang province. However, the interconnection between Wu school and Zhe school theory and the Southern and Northern school theory is significant. Dong Qichang (1555-1636) categorized the two Wu school masters Shen Zhou (1427-1509) and Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) into the Southern school. Zhe school, on the other hand, was led by Dai Jin (1388-1462), a Hangzhou-based artist who was known for his exquisite brushstrokes and Southern Song (1127-1279) academic style. Note that though some later artists who were categorized into Wu and Zhe schools were not necessarily from these two areas, their styles were more or less in accordance with their peers in the same school.

By the late Ming dynasty, Chinese artists were already conscious of art history. As James Cahill said in his book *The Distant Mountains*, late Ming painters responded to the theoretical issues of art history more than ever before.²⁶ Late Ming scholars such as Dong Qichang wrote a great amount of comments on Song, Yuan and early Ming artists and paintings. One of the most famous and influential theory that created by Dong Qichang is the theory of Southern and Northern school. Since Northern Song dynasty (960-1126), the division between professional and scholar-amateur, or literati, paintings began to be clear. The “northern” and “southern” term did not refer to geographical area but was rather appropriated from Zen Buddhism. In Tang dynasty (618-907), Zen Buddhism separated into two schools. The Southern school, led by Huineng (638-713), was traditionally associated with sudden enlightenment. The Northern school, on the other hand, teaches gradual enlightenment. Dong Qichang used “northern” to denote the professional and trained artists at the Imperial Painting Academy (hence called

²⁶ James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1982), 3.

“academic painters”) such as Ma Yuan (1160-1225) and Xia Gui (1195-1224). On the other hand, Dong Qichang used the word “southern” to denote the scholar and amateur artists, categorized as “literati painters,” such as Wang Wei (699-759), Mi Fu (1051-1107), the Four Great Masters of the Yuan, Huang Gongwang (1269-1354), Wu Zhen (1280-1354), Ni Zan (1301-1374) and Wang Meng (1308-1385), and down to Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming from the mid-Ming dynasty.

Artists in the Northern school, or the professional and academic painters, served the imperial court and sold paintings for living. Their paintings usually emphasize on the extremely decorated graphic surface with brushstrokes that are highly precise and accurate. Artists belong to the Southern school were mostly well-educated government officials who painted for avocation. Literati paintings, however, emphasize on the inner state of artists’ mind. Their paintings, therefore, often lack of exquisite brushstrokes and techniques. Rather, they chose to use “imperfect” brushstrokes and compositions to create a poetic sentiment in paintings that reflect their inner state.

After hundreds of years of developing, the techniques of professional and literati paintings have been well-studied by Ming artists. Late Ming-dynasty artists were aware of the division between Wu school and Zhe school. They were also quite attentive to the southern and northern school theories created by Dong Qichang. The boundary between professional and literati paintings became blurry. While most Wu school painters like Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming tend to follow the literati traditions and Zhe school painters preferred professional painting’s delicate style, both Wu and Zhe schools have inherited characteristics from the Northern and Southern school traditions. Rivalries between Wu and Zhe, literati and professional, also appear in late Ming erotic paintings. The previously mentioned *Wang Sheng*

album and the *Gardens of Pleasure* that I will discuss in the following paragraph are two series of erotic paintings with distinct styles. While *Wang Sheng* album was attributed to Wang Sheng from Suzhou area, it represents some aspects of Wu school. These paintings accompany with corresponding poems, which elevate the drawings to a higher artistic and literate level by poetic sentiments. *Gardens of Pleasure*, on the other hand, reveals Zhe school's stylistic elements. The compositions are formulaic, reminding viewers of the academic paintings. Nevertheless, both erotic albums share a same feature: the male characters in the paintings are scholars, or literati. Since erotic paintings were commercial products, they would never be considered as literati paintings according to Dong Qichang's theories. Perhaps the depiction of literati in the painting serves as a reference to the literati paintings, the Southern school and the Wu school, a trendy and widely accepted style in the late Ming period.

GARDENS OF PLEASURE

The *Gardens of Pleasure* series consists eight paintings formerly in the collection of C. T. Loo, and is currently in the Bertholet Collection. Similar to the *Wang Sheng* album, each painting in this series depicts a love-making scene in a scholar's house, either in the room or in the garden. However, brushes were so finely controlled that we can hardly see any brushstrokes in this series.

"Love games in a flowering garden" is the first painting from *Gardens of Pleasure* series. (Fig. 4) The background of the painting indicates the location as a garden in a scholar's house. The winding corridor recesses in the space with a zig-zag shape. Wu Hung discusses the zigzag shape partitioning the picture plane in his book *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* by looking at Ming dynasty Nanjing artist Du Jin (1465-1509)'s work

Enjoying Antiques. (Fig.5) He claims that the zigzag outline contributes to the division of space, transforming two triangular spaces into a concrete foreground and an empty background. Such composition enables the figures to appear on a distant terrace from viewers.²⁷ This claim can also be applied to “Love games in a flowering garden.” Inside the corridor, there is a vermilion tea table with flower and cloud shaped white patterns. On the tea table stands an incense burner and instruments for raking embers. A scholar and his wife or concubine are having a sexual intercourse in the garden of their house. The man leans backwards on the trunk of the magnolia tree while the woman holds his face and leans toward him. Her body faces toward the man while her head faces the opposite direction as if she is worrying someone would see them. Both wear robes with exquisite designs. The man wears a tan color robe with light grey embroideries of various shaped butterflies, a symbolism for romantic love in Chinese culture. His wife wears a coral pink robe with blue and white embroideries of phoenix. There are white and turquois, probably cloisonné, headwear in her hair. Her delicate dark red lotus shoes and blue bandage of the bound feet echo the strings of jade or ivory pendant in color.

While this couple occupies the lower left corner of the painting, the rest of the space is packed with still life. Right behind the couple is a magnolia tree with blooming white magnolia flowers. At the lower level is a cluster of peony flowers with yellow and purple colors. Between the peony flowers and the magnolia tree is a rockery, an essential component in Ming dynasty garden design, depicted in green and blue antique style following the Tang and Northern Song traditions. Another rockery appears on the right side of the painting. This standing rockery reflects the shape of the embracing couple. The composition of the painting is balanced for the

²⁷ Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 24.

rockery appears at the other side of the magnolia tree's bridge-shaped branches. Such deliberate composition enables a connection between human and nature, the reality and the fantasy. As Wu Hung observed in *The Double Screen*, unlike the Renaissance's visual mode of the re-representing the nature, in Chinese paintings, the dominant mode is "asymmetrical and emphasizes the metaphorical linkage between painted images and the observed world and between painted themselves."²⁸ The *Gardens of Pleasure* series tend to build the sense of fantasy following the professional Zhe school's style by using delicately arranged compositions and abundant details. Paintings in *Wang Sheng* album, on the other hand, create this idealized realm by leaning to the Wu school style, using poetic sentiment to arouse the sense of unrealistic.

"Love besides a rockery" is the second painting in *Wang Sheng* album. (Fig. 6) The man sits on a wooden bar stool hugging his arm around the woman. The woman sits on his lap and twisting her body so that she can face him. The disheveled robe of the gentleman implies that they are having an intercourse although no sexual organ is explicitly depicted. Their garments are not exquisitely decorated but rather simple. The woman is wearing a lilac robe with no decorated pattern. The only jewelry she has is her flower-shaped headwear, indicating her identity by appearing in eight out of ten paintings in this album. Her husband's beige robe is undecorated as well. Viewers can tell from the rockery, or *tai hu* stone, that the setting of the painting is the garden in a scholar's house. The rockery is positioned so closely behind two figures, reflecting their embracing shape. Another rockery appears in the background. This rockery appears just partially because half of it is cut by the edge of the painting. Viewers can also see tree branches with red flowers extending from the back of this rockery. Artist used brushstrokes so rough to render the flowers that viewers can hardly tell the breed of the flower.

²⁸ Ibid.

Both the background rockery and the tree branches are not portrayed as integral but rather fractions cut out by the edge. The fragmented depiction not only diminishes these two objects in size but also undermines their significance in the composition, creating a sense of emptiness in the painting by leaving the two figures in a desolate environment. This deliberate composition enables the poem to create emotions in the painting. In fact, the poem with this painting delivers an intense eroticism by depicting the woman in a sexually excited status:

For her love tryst she dresses simply,
Hair loose, eyes bright, on the stone leaning
A spring flower, majestic, full-blown;
Few stars in the sky, rough on her lips...²⁹

This painting from *Wang Sheng* album uses loosely controlled non-professional brushstrokes and desolate compositions to create the sensual experience together with the accompanied poems. “Love games in a flowering garden” from *Gardens of Pleasure* series however, follows the Zhe school and the Northern professional style, exploiting abundant symbolic details, such as the anthropomorphic rockeries, with highly controlled brushstrokes in order to render an amorous atmosphere. (Fig. 4) Note that in both paintings, artists, although took different approaches, did not depict eroticism by directly portraying the sexual organs. Rather, they followed their contemporary artistic conventions in order to meet the taste of their contemporary consumers.

QIU YING

Paintings in the *Gardens of Pleasure* album did not just follow Zhe school styles, but also reveal elements from Qiu Ying’s painting. Qiu Ying, who was born in Taicang, Jiangsu, is

²⁹ Ferdinand M. Bertholet, *Gardens of Pleasure*, 60.

twenty-four years junior to Tang Yin. Different from Tang Yin, Qiu Ying has never received literati education. He worked as a lacquerer for living and sometimes helped painters to copy old paintings to sell. His talent attracted Zhou Chen (1460-1535), a famous painter active in the middle Ming period, who invited Qiu Ying to become his student. Qiu Ying learnt painting under Zhou Chen and become a painter who painted for living under the support from patrons.³⁰ Unlike Tang Yin who constantly exhibited his eccentric personality in his paintings, Qiu Ying on the other hand, always concealed his individuality. He often rendered the atmosphere of the painting by carefully positioning refined and decorated physical elements in settings instead of using expressive techniques.

His famous painting *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* reveals such personal characteristic clearly. (Fig.7 and Fig. 8) This handscroll illustrates the famous story of Zhaojun. (Fig.8) Despite the narrative feature of the painting, *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* is full of vivid details. (Fig.7) In fact, details such as court ladies, rockeries, flowers in the garden, and the complicated architectural designs distract our attention from the narration. One can hardly find the emphasis in this long handscroll. A disconnected feeling is created when viewer looks at this overtly rich painting. Both the constructed gardens and the carefully decorated paintings from Qiu Ying created an artistic realm that is within but detached from the realistic world. The *Gardens of Pleasure* album, similar from Qiu's painting, contains abundant graphical details so that viewers will detached from the paintings. In this way, a fictional world, or a sense of fantasy, is constructed when viewers encounter the image.

³⁰ Although Qiu sold paintings for living, he was categorized as Wu school painters because he learnt his painting skills in Suzhou from Zhou Chen.

IMAGINATION THEORY

Another received way to assess the artistic quality of an image is to look for trace of imagination in the painting.³¹ However, we should distinguish the difference between imagination and pure fantasy. Scruton argued in his article that, although constructing a fictional world can be a strategy in both erotic art and pornographies, erotic art connect the fictional world with reality while pornography only creates a pure fantasy that satisfy its viewers sexual desire.³² According to Scruton, the fictional world created by artist enables viewers to better understand the reality they live in.³³ Matthew Kieran supported Scruton's idea by examining Gustav Klimt's erotic drawings such as *The Bride* and *Danae*. Kieran stated that the formal artistic techniques in highly imaginative manner, such as the isolated outlines of the figures, raise viewers' awareness of "sexual self-absorption."³⁴ In this way, imagination is connected with the reality. Artists aims at reveal certain aspects of reality through the lens of imagined fictional world. Based on both the representational content theory and artistic convention theory discussed above, we are now able to claim and legitimize that late Ming erotic paintings should not fall into the pure pornography category.

In Ming erotic paintings, we have seen in both the *Wang Sheng* album and the *Gardens of Pleasure* series a sense of fantasy or fiction. In the *Wang Sheng* album, such impression is given by a desolate background and course brushstrokes. In *Gardens of Pleasure* series, on the other hand, artists create a fictional sense by using exceedingly abundant plant, furniture and colors as

³¹ Matthew Kieran, "Pornographic Art," *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 25 (2001): 31.

³² Scruton, "Flesh from the Butcher," 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ Kieran, "Pornographic Art," 39.

well as parallelism between figures and anthropomorphous rockeries. Why did these erotic paintings contain fictional or fake senses? In other words, what is the fantasy created by the artists? Recognizing these erotic paintings as works of art instead of pure pornography, we are now able hypothesis, according to Scruton and Kieran's arguments, that there exists an imaginative manner in Late-Ming erotic painting such that artists reveal a certain aspect of reality in this fantasized world. What kind of reality, then, was projected into these fantasies? The following chapters, therefore, dedicate to investigate the reality that artists represented and reinterpreted in the fictional world of erotic paintings.

CHAPTER 2: GENDER AND BODY STRUCTURE

HUA YING JIN ZHEN

Hua Yin Jin Zhen, or “Variegated battle arrays of the flowery camp,” is a 24-leaf woodblock-print album of erotic images, which was reproduced by van Gulik from the original late-Ming woodblock he bought in Japan.³⁵ According to van Gulik, there existed colored copies of this album.³⁶ The reproduction of the album in van Gulik’s book *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Dynasty* (2004), however, is monochrome. This monochrome album contains a badly damaged Preface and 24 leaves. Each leaf has an erotic image on the verso and a thematically matched erotic poem on recto side. These 24 leaves depict 24 love-making scenes with distinct positions in different settings, mostly in a scholar’s house or garden. The medium of woodblock print disabled us to discuss the brushstrokes of the painting. However, this album shares a lot of similarities with paintings in *Wang Sheng* album and *Gardens of Pleasure* series compositionally.

As in a Dream is the first image in Van Gulik’s version of this album.³⁷ (Fig. 9) A couple is having an intercourse on a padded quilt. The man is completely naked while the woman wears her thin outer robe with a four-leaf clover shaped button loosely fastened in front her chest. Different from female figures in *Wang Sheng* albums and *Gardens of Pleasure* series, she does

³⁵ The album’s name was translated by James Cahill in his online blog, <http://jamescahill.info/illustrated-writings/chinese-erotic-painting/chapter-3>.

³⁶ Robert Van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch’ing Dynasty, B.C. 206 – A.D. 1644* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 205.

³⁷ None of the original woodblocks was numbered so we do not know the original sequence of images.

not have any headwear, let alone jewelries. Their clothes are discarded and thrown away on both ends of the quilt. The man's shoes are placed right beside the quilt. Behind the couple is a standing screen with rocks and flowers, probably peonies, suggesting a garden or natural scene. Beside the standing screen is a table with an incense burner and a vase. On the reversal side of the image is a poem named *As in a Dream*. Van Gulik translated the poem as,

All night long these two have fought the intense battle of love but ardent passion does not keep count of time;
When the Dew moistens the Heart of the Peony, her limbs grow powerless for melted by lust they can hardly move;
What a burning love, burning love!
All like a dream of Hua-hsu [Huaxu]!³⁸

The poem added to the sensual experience in the painting as in the case of *Wang Sheng* album. Its content also offers a clear connection between dream and reality in erotic paintings.

Human bodies occupy at least half of the composition in every image of this album. The love-making couples are undeniably the focus of the paintings. The close-up of human bodies, however, do not offer viewers abundant anatomical detail. Rather, male and female bodies resemble with each other, except for the women's bound feet. In the *As in a Dream* image, the position of the couple conducting the sexual intercourse enables viewers to see their connected sexual organs. However, such depiction also causes a confusion at first glimpse. None of the sexual organs are clearly depicted. The sex of each character, therefore, is not clear by simply looking at this part of the diagram. Their torsos also do not have any distinctions. The woman's upper body is half covered by robes so that viewers cannot see a distinct shape of her breast. These bodies appeared as a form of nudity discussed by Anne Hollander in her book *Seeing Through Clothes*. Hollander claims that nude is the body appeared in the shape of its normal

³⁸ Ibid., 209. The word *Huaxu* is a Chinese surname originated from an ancient mythology.

covering expect unclosed.³⁹ The most significant physical difference between these two figures is that the woman has bound feet. According to Defu Shen, the tradition of foot-binding was probably originated since middle Tang Dynasty.⁴⁰ Thus, by late Ming dynasty, the foot-binding tradition was already established that artists would take that as an undeniable physical difference between male and female other than sexual organs.

The idea of the confusion between sexualities is reinforced by the fourth leaf in this album. *The Way of the Academicians* depicts a homosexual love-making scene. Two figures conduct an intercourse on a bamboo table. The books and handscroll placed on the table indicate the owner's identity as an academician. (Fig. 10) The older man with beard wears an official's hat, indicating he is the academician, the master of the house. In fact, the genders of two figures are not quite clear at beginning. The other figure, which at first glance is a female, turns out to be a man. Although he has hairstyle and garment similar to that of the woman in the first leaf, his feet are not bound, signifying that he is a man. While the two figures have the same sexuality, their body depiction, on the other hand, seems to involve a contrast between masculinity and femininity. The academician is leaning his body towards the boy with a sense of control and aggressiveness by putting his hands on the boy's shoulder. Besides that, these two bodies also vary in scale. The academician's body is depicted bigger than the boy's body. Thus, the academician seems to have a stronger, or in this case masculine, power in this relationship.

Does the similar depiction of female and male bodies indicate a gender equality? Of course not. It seems that different biological sexuality may not result in a significant power

³⁹ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), 87.

⁴⁰ Defu Shen, *Bi Zhou Zhai Yu Tan*, Ming Dynasty.

pattern on bodies. However, sometimes bodies of the same sex can lead to obvious difference in body depictions in terms of power structure.

JUDITH BUTLER'S THEORY

Judith Butler made her famous claim of gender in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) that a person cannot be claimed to *be* a gender. Instead, gender is created when a person is *doing* a sequence of acts.⁴¹ Such claim also means that gender is performative, we are acting, using our biological bodies, under the social conventions where our bodies were born. According to Butler, we are “existing” in our bodies.⁴² She claims that “as a locus of cultural interpretations, the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations... ‘existing’ one’s body becomes a personal way of having to take up and interpret that set of received gender norms.”⁴³ Although Butler’s arguments are far more complicated than I can state in this paper, we have already noticed from Butler’s theory that social context can determine one’s performativity on bodies. What was late Ming dynasty’s social background that formed the body constructions in *Hua Ying Jin Zhen*? Also, while we are just performing in our biological bodies, is it possible for one to exist and exercise the gender performativity in another body? To answer these two questions, we will look at two dominated ideologies in Ming dynasty, Neo-Confucianism and Daoism.

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

⁴² Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*.” *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND DAOISM

In Confucianism, sexuality is always politicized.⁴⁴ Confucianism sees the society in a hierarchical order. As a result, women were categorized into lower social status. Pedagogical books such as *Admonitions for Women* from Han Dynasty, *Women's Analects* from Tang Dynasty and *Domestic Lessons* from Ming Dynasty were studied by upper class women in the Ming dynasty. These books teach women how to behave in details. For example, *Women's Analects* says a woman should not move her knees when sitting down, should not go, or even look, out of the house and should not tell her name to non-relative males.⁴⁵ Neo-Confucianism, while shared the basic principle with Confucianism, went even further in creating a hierarchical ordered society. The society was divided into categories of scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant with the order of descending social status. Sexuality, thus, became even more politicized as well. In *Domestic Lessons*, a book attributed to the Ming-dynasty scholar Wang Xiang's mother Lady Liu, women were told to cherish their chasteness. If her husband was dead, she should not only never marry another man, but also try to suicide.⁴⁶

Daoism, an ideology or philosophical tradition that has its root since fourth century BCE in China, on the other hand, was significantly different from Neo-Confucianism. The *yinyang* concept in Daoism is meant to represent a macrocosmic-microcosmic world view. Seasonal

⁴⁴ Richard G. Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption and Religiosity in Cultrual Practice* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), 134.

⁴⁵ Song Rusheng, *Nv Lunyu (Women's Analects,)* Tang dynasty.
<http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=465515&remap=gb>

⁴⁶ Lady Liu, *Nv Fanjielu (Domestic Lessons,)* Ming dynasty.
<http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=938655&remap=gb>

changes, sunrise and sunset, mountains and rivers can all be seen as part of the world with *yinyang* cycles. Human beings, as part of the nature, also fit into the *yinyang* pattern. Daoism considers man as *yang*, the active, and woman as *yin*, the passive. Note that words passive and active neither have a commendatory nor have a derogatory meaning. They represent two seemingly opposite yet harmoniously interconnected forces. Daoist practitioners believe that the two dichotomous forces of *yinyang* should be harmoniously cyclic to create uniformity and naturalness. Men and women is the microcosm of the macrocosmic universe and the sexual behavior is seen as a harmonious unification between *yin* and *yang*. Conducting healthy and affectionate sexual behaviors are in fact recommended by Daoism principle. The Daoist way of viewing man and woman were mostly based on their biological sex.

These two ideologies co-existed in Ming dynasty and both influenced Ming's perception of gender. If genders were to be performed and be exercised, as Butler argued, then which ideologies were exercised in *Hua Ying Jin Zhen* album? We have encountered both the case of body similarity between two sexualities and the case of a comparative power disparity between two bodies of the same sexuality. There seems to have a sway back and forth between two distinct ideologies. It is not simply the obscurity of religion and ideologies. In fact, it is the ambiguity of sexuality if we see the authoritative and orthodox Neo-Confucianism as masculine and Daoism as feminine. The masculinity of Neo-Confucianism was never the emphasis in erotic paintings. Rather, as we have seen in previous examples, the harmonious unifications of male and female, human and nature, were highlighted in these erotic paintings. Bodies in erotic albums such as *Hua Ying Jin Zhen* do not have variations in terms of different anatomy between genders. Genders are, therefore, blurry in these late Ming erotic paintings.

LOVE IN THE GARDEN

Another evidence of the gender blurriness in erotic paintings is the frequent use of garden as settings. As mentioned above, the *Women's Analects* shows upper class women in imperial China were not supposed to go out of their house. Gardens in their house, therefore, became the only place for women to have social interactions. Thus, these gardens can be seen as a feminine domain. Placing the erotic scenes in a semi-public and semi-private garden, therefore, is to present the scenes in a place where female have control powers. Such subversion of sex structure from the orthodox and widely recognized Neo-Confucianism resulted in the blurriness of gender.

Among 24 paintings in *Hua Ying Jin Zhen* album, almost half of them have the setting in a garden. For instance, *Willow in the Wind* is the ninth leaf in this album. As the name indicates, the setting is in spring, a season of willow trees. (Fig. 11) The woman is sitting on the trunk of the willow tree and the man is standing facing the woman. A pair of birds are resting on the willow tree, serves a mirror image of the love-making couple. On the right side of the painting are rocks and flowers. Two jars of small plants appeared at the lower right corner, connecting the natural world with the world of human. It reminds viewers that the setting is a scholar garden instead of real nature. Sometimes the garden need not to be the real garden, but a garden scene depicted on the standing screen. The 22nd leaf *Fish Sporting in the Vernal Water* is an example that although the couple is staying in the room, the painting also has a love in the garden theme. (Fig. 12) The interior location for this intercourse is indicated by lotus flowers planted in a ceramic water vat. However, the screen behind them depicts the rocks, flowers and butterflies in a garden. By placing this screen behind the couple, artists were able to extend the interior space into the semi-public garden.

Wang Sheng album and *Gardens of Pleasure* series also have paintings set in the garden. *Face to Face* is the second painting in *Gardens of Pleasure* series. (Fig. 13) It follows the pattern of the first painting *Love games in a flowering garden*, piling many details into the composition. Just as the rockery resembles the posture of the embracing couple in the first painting, the willow trees present a similar shape with the two figures. In this garden scene, two willow trees in the garden and a pair of swallows flying in the sky can be seen as the couple in the nature world.

Garden is a space where sexuality's political power is overturned. It is also a place where human and nature are integrated. It is a fantasized realm created by Ming scholars. As Joseph Cho Wang summarized, "...when politics were corrupt, commerce was sordid, society was disorderly, and life was harsh, a Chinese could always seek solace in his own garden, where he enjoyed life freely, happily, and artistically."⁴⁷ In this realm, there exists no politically constructed sexuality.

⁴⁷ Joseph Cho Wang, *The Chinese Garden* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

CHAPTER 3: GAZE AND SPECTATORSHIP

One recurring pattern in Ming erotic paintings is voyeurism, or the scene of peeping. The spectators usually are women, children, servants or animals, person who usually have less power in the society. For instance, as we have seen in Tang Yin's *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem*, a servant boy hides behind the rockery and peeps the secret meeting of Tao Gu and Qin Ruolan. The servant boy not only breaks the sense of intimacy in the painting, but also emphasizes on Tang Yin's insecurity. This chapter aim to answer why peeping is a common theme in erotic paintings and why peepers, or spectators, tend to be these subordinate people.

GAZE CREATE DIMENSIONS

In "Peak through the moon gate painting," a woman is standing behind a rockery and looking into the room through a circular gate. (Fig. 14) Just inside the moon gate is decorated furniture, such as the polished copper mirror and the blue stool with cloud patterns, indicating the high social and economic status of the family. In the direction where the woman is gazing stands a mirror on the table. The mirror reflects the scene inside the room where a couple is having a sexual activity. Such spectatorship is intricate for it reflected and twisted the space both within and outside the two dimensional pictorial plan. There are three planes of space within the painting. The innermost space is where the couple stands and is a space that spectator and us as viewer cannot directly share. What it represents is the most private and probably hierarchically superior area such that only the male master and his wives were able to live in. The spectator, who represents the third and outermost stage of space in the painting, however, is able to look into the scene through the reflection of mirror, namely, the second stage of space. One famous Chinese proverb "the flowers in the mirror and the moon in the water" suggests to call something

unrealistic is to referring the object as unreachable flowers in the mirror. Hence, the use of mirror here represents the female spectator's inaccessibility towards the first and the innermost stage of space. In this case, the female spectator could be a concubine of the male master who does not have the right to occupy the male by her own. Yet based on her modest costume and hairstyle, she would most likely to be a housemaid in this family who is about to serve the food to the masters yet ran into this private space that is both emotionally and hierarchically far away from her. There is, however, a fourth stage of space, that is, the space where we as viewers of this erotic painting is living. By gazing into the painting, we are spectating the spectator. What is more, similar from the female spectator, who looks at the mirror, we are looking at an illusion, a fictional world constructed in a two-dimensional plane. The two worlds, the world of reality and the world inside the painting, are therefore mingled together by the gazes. The viewers of the painting will hence become more engaged into it as if they were the spectator of this romantic scene. One can certainly assume that the artist constructed such an intriguing structure of space in order to achieve the functional purpose of erotic painting, namely to arouse the viewers by positioning them in a risky and exciting situation. Yet we also have to admit that such composition and manipulation of space also satisfied a high level of artistic skills in that time period.

By positioning the woman at the foreground, the artist enables the viewers to engage with the painting by following the woman's gaze. When one first looks at the painting, one will be attracted by the obvious peeping position of the woman. Out of curious, the viewer will then intuitively change the direction of gaze from the peeping woman to the direction she is peeping. In this case, viewer will then look inside the room and will eventually rest the gaze upon the mirror where he or she will see the love making scene of the couple. Such composition shows the

artist's deliberate intention of leading viewers gaze around the painting. What is more, viewers' gazes in this case move from the first stage to third stage of the space and thus penetrating the two-dimensional space, psychologically helping viewers to create a three-dimensional space in their own mind.

SPECTATORSHIP IN *THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASES*

Literatures and paintings in the same time period tend to affect each other in both the content and narrative forms. While erotic albums were produced abundantly as consumer products, erotic literatures also reached its peak in the late Ming period. What is more, the scene of peeping or spectating is frequently repeated not only in paintings but also in late Ming erotic literatures such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei*, 1610) and *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou Pu Tuan*, 1657). In particular, scenes of gazing or spectating are omnipresent in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.

The Plum in the Golden Vase or *Jin Ping Mei*, written by a pseudonymous author Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, is the first Chinese novel of manners with vernacular language. Because of the extensive and explicit depiction of sexual libertinism, *Jin Ping Mei* has encountered a great deal of criticism and has been regarded as an erotic novel. The story follows the rise and fall of the late Northern Song family of Ximen Qing, a lascivious and unscrupulous merchant who acquired his wealth by bribing government officials and swindling the poor. A great portion of the book is dedicated to the domestic disputes between Ximen Qing's six wives and concubines. Three major female characters, Pan Jinlian, Li Pin'er and Pang Chunmei, whose names constitute the title of the book, are concubines of Ximen Qing. Their perverted sexual intercourses with Ximen

Qing and rivalries between each other have enabled the author to question human nature under an increasingly unstable social and political environment.

Gazing and spectating scenes in *Jin Ping Mei* often have their particular narrative purposes.⁴⁸ Although most of the time the story is narrated by an omnipotent storyteller, who knows more information than the characters, sometimes the plot is expatiated from a character in the story through the activity of gazing or spectating. One benefit of doing so is that such narrative strategy emphasizes on characters' viewpoints and perspectives. The readers will see the literature world from the perspective of one particular character and thus involuntarily to have empathy with the character. In chapter eight of the book *All Night Long Pan Jinlian Yearns for Ximen Qing; During the Tablet-Burning Monks Overhear Sounds of Venery*, the sexual intercourse between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian is narrated from the monk's perspective by his action of eavesdropping:

That morning when the company of monks beheld the spectacle presented by Wu the Elder's wife, it made an indelible impression on them. When they came back from the temple, to which they had returned for their midday repast and a rest from their labors, the woman was in her room drinking wine and enjoying herself with Ximen Qing. It so happens that the woman's bedroom was right next to the consecrated space that had been set aside for the performance of the Buddhist ceremony. There was only the single thickness of a board wall between them. One of the monks, who had arrived before the rest, went up to the basin outside the woman's bedroom window to wash his hands. Suddenly overheard the woman: 'In a trembling voice and melting tones, Sighing and moaning, panting and groaning,' just as though she were engaged in the act of sexual intercourse with someone in her room. At this the monk, pretending to wash his hands, stood there eavesdropping for a quite a while. He overheard the woman appealing in a soft voice to Ximen Qing, 'Daddy, how long are you going to keep on banging away like that? I'm afraid the monks may come back and hear something. Let me off for now and come as quickly as you can.' 'There's no need to get so excited,' said Ximen Qing, 'I still haven't burnt the moxa on the top of mons.' Who would have thought that everything they said to each other was so clearly overheard by that shaven-pated rascal that he might well have ejaculated: 'Is it not delightful?' After a while, when the whole company of monks had reassembled and they resumed their performance of the liturgy, the word

⁴⁸ Yuan-yuan Cheng, "The Narrative Art of *Jin Ping Mei*" (MA thesis., National Chengchi University, 2006), 113.

passed from mouth to mouth until they all knew that the woman was carrying on with a man in her room. Imperceptibly they began to reenact the imagined scene: ‘Miming it with their hands, and Dancing it with their feet.’⁴⁹

Buddhist monks who were supposed to be celibate now become agents of erotic behaviors. The author, although plot the story in the Northern Song period, is satirizing the society in the late Ming, where even Buddhist monks became obscene. This passage also reveals that one narrative purpose of narrating the story from a spectator perspective is to arouse sexual interest for the readers. From the beginning of the paragraph readers know that the monks were attracted by Pan Jinlian’s beauty. Thus, when monks became the agent of the eavesdropping, readers will automatically visualize the scene with a sexual lens. The monks serve as medium for alleviating the didactic sense of the story and for creating an erotic sense through the subjective narration.

Similar theme appears in erotic paintings as well. “Walls have ears” depicts a scene of a woman eavesdropping the couple. (Fig. 15) Very much like the first painting, the elegant furniture and books on the table shows that the house belongs to a wealthy and well-educated master. The eavesdropping female appearing at the foreground is wearing robes with printed floral pattern which suggests she is either the wife or concubine of the male master of the house. Eavesdropping does not show spectator the actual scene as spectating does and allows more space for imagination. Spectator will have to imagine the scene by themselves. In the previous excerpts from *Jin Ping Mei*, the monks visualize the sexual intercourse of Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing based on their dialogues. In this painting, similarly, the woman visualizes an image from what she has heard. The eavesdropper stands in the middle of the painting to catch viewers’ eyes.

⁴⁹ Lanlinxiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, trans. David Tod Roy, (Princeton: Princeton Library of Asian Translation), 166.

When viewers first look at the painting, they would notice the bizarre posture of the woman. Facing toward the viewers, the woman leans her body and stretching out her neck toward her right. Her hands, placed behind her back, indicate her moment of eavesdropping. Her mysterious smiling face, then, arouse viewers' curiosity. What did she hear? Why is she smiling? Viewers, who are led by this curiosity, would find the love-making couple at the top left corner of the painting. The couple is in a separate room surrounded by a transparent screen. The space is filled with lotus and peony flowers, both of which signify female sexuality in Chinese culture. The sexual intercourse of the love-making couple is not, however, a scene that the viewers see. Rather, it is a scene that the eavesdropper hears.

Based on the excerpt above from *Jin Ping Mei*, we have seen how the spectator imagines what he hears to what actually happens through the erotic lens. The monks did not actually see the lovemaking scene, yet he not only enjoyed imagining what actually happened by himself but also spread the words among the company of monks and as a result, lead to the obscene imitations. Thus in the painting, we can infer that there exists a narrative from the perspective of the eavesdropper. Similar from readers of *Jin Ping Mei* who are reading from the monks' perspective, viewers of the painting are viewing the painting from the eavesdropper's point of view. Everything in the screen-separated room are imagined by the eavesdropper based on what she has heard. When the character in literature or painting is spectating on other's privacy, readers and viewers are spectating or witnessing their lives as well. Viewers, thus, achieve a vicarious pleasure by seeing the visualization of eavesdropper and by imagining the eavesdropper's feelings. In fact, hearing and peeping are similar acts in erotic images. Both serve as ways for characters to acquire other's secrets.

Another narrative goal of involving the theme of gazing in *Jin Ping Mei* is to allow the spectating character to achieve power as an outcome of spectatorship. In Chapter 13 *Li Ping'er Makes a Secret Tryst Over the Garden Wall; The Maid Yingchun Peaks Through a Crack and Gets an Eyeful*, the heroine of the book, Pan Jinlian, uses peeping as a method to elevate her status in the household. In this chapter, Jinlian suspects that Ximen Qing is having an affair and thus decided to spy on him:

...and observed that, after he had sat there for some time, the same maidservant as before peeked over the wall, whereupon Ximen Qing clambered up a ladder and disappeared over the wall himself. Once there, he was met by Li Ping'er, who conducted him into her room for a rendezvous, but there is no need to describe this in detail.⁵⁰

The rendezvous between Ximen Qing and his neighbor's wife Li Ping'er has already been narrated in details by the omniscient storyteller earlier in this chapter. Therefore, this excerpt, although is narrated from Jinlian's perspective, is different from previous passage of the monks, does not serve as a medium for readers to understand the character's feeling or thoughts. Readers can hardly notice any obvious emotion in these two sentences. Nevertheless, this peeping became a narrative force that drives the story to move on. After Jinlian observed the secret of Ximen Qing, she threatens and extorts Ximen Qing with this secret in order to achieve some benefits. This is a crucial scene for us to understand how spectatorship can bring potential benefit for the spectator:

Thereupon [Ximen Qing] took off his cap, pulled them out of his headdress, and presented them to Jinlian... It was obvious from the extraordinary intricacy of the craftsmanship that they had been manufactured for imperial use and came from the palace. Jinlian was utterly delighted and said, 'Well, if that's the way things stand, I won't say any more about it, that's all. When you go over there in the future, I'll act as a lookout, so the two of you can screw away to your hearts' content. How would that be?' Ximen Qing was so delighted he put both arms around her and said, 'My precious child, if you really do that, it will prove the truth of the adage: You don't raise a child in the hope it will shit gold and piss silver; All you can hope for is that it will respond empathetically to you. Tomorrow I'll go myself and buy you a set of patterned clothing to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 268.

express my gratitude.’ ‘I don’t trust that: Honeyed mouth and sugared tongue, of yours,’ the woman responded. ‘If you want your old mother to fix things up for the two of you, you’ll have to agree to three conditions.’ ‘No matter how many conditions you impose, I’ll agree to them all,’ said Ximen Qing. ‘The first condition,’ the woman said, ‘is that you will have to give up frequenting the licensed quarter. The second condition is that you must do as I say. The third condition is that when you go over to sleep with her, when you come home, you must tell me all about it, without deceiving me by so much as a single word.’ ‘Those conditions are no obstacle,’ said Ximen Qing. ‘I’ll agree to all of them, and make an end to it.’ From this time one, whenever Ximen Qing came back after spending the night next door, he would regale the woman with an account of his adventure.’⁵¹

In this chapter, Pan Jinlian uses this secret she discovered from peeping to achieve both the material wealth and a more intimate relationship with Ximen Qing, which later become a tool for her to rivals between other wives and concubines in the family. Peeping becomes a method for female characters in the literature such as Pan Jinlian to obtain powers. Knowing the secret that others are unaware of gives the character in literature a superiority over others. In the case of *Jin Ping Mei*, both the fact that Pan Jinlian has more information than other females in the house and the fact that she achieves material and hierarchical benefits using her cunning tactics indicate how spectatorship can empower a spectator.

The fact that spectators are aware of others’ privacy is itself a symbol of achieving power. Moreover, gazes in peeping scenes are usually a symbol of masculine and forceful dominion. We then come to the question: Why does the identity of spectators in erotic paintings seem subordinate while the action of gazing usually emphasizes on the dominant power? Also, what does it mean to have this power structure constructed by gazes in late Ming erotic paintings?

SPECTATOR’S IDENTITY

⁵¹ Ibid., 271.

“Two pink butterflies” is a painting from the album *The Joys of Forbidden Love*. (Fig. 16) In this painting, we see a woman in the embellished yet disheveled garment flirting with a man with simple and undecorated robes, probably a servant. Lotus flower and chayote as symbols of sexuality and fertility appear on the table to emphasize the romanticized atmosphere. Outside the door of the room we see a pair of rabbits hiding behind the rockery and looking at the couple. Each painting from the album comes with an erotic poem describing the scene. The poem for this particular painting reads:

Her love crack has just opened up for the first time!
From her little peach, the pistil just starts budding forwards.
Through countless bushes, how many flower hearts has he already crushed,
Yielding to him the scent of boundless carnal pleasure?
So drunk! So deeply inebriated!
She bows her head, showing the powdered whiteness of her neck, her cheeks blushing carmine.
Towards his smiling eyes, she raises her fair brow full of tears.
Take pity on this night’s meeting of mandarin ducks!
His amorous arousal, however, becomes ten times stronger.
In wanton wiliness he plays the bee and the butterfly.
The little slave girl undergoes the afflictions of her origins.⁵²

The content of the painting seems innocent. It is possible that the scene in the poem is a likely consequence of the painting. As discussed above in “Walls have ears” the eavesdropping image, the illustration of the couple could be a visualization created by the eavesdropper’s imagination. (Fig. 15) In this image, similarly, what is described in the poem is the imagination of the spectator, namely the rabbits, based on its observation. Rabbit becomes the narrator of the painting. Viewers will look at the image and the poem from the perspective of the rabbit. They will first look at the image of the flirting couple and then read the poem to visualize based on the painting.

⁵² Ferdinand M., Bertholet, Michiel Elsevier Stokmans, and Bertholet Collection, *Concubines and Cortesans: Women in Chinese Erotic Art: Ferry M. Bertholet Collection* (Munich; London: Prestel, 2011), 54.

The spectator, different from the previous two images, is no longer placed at the foreground to catch viewers' eyes. Rather, the rabbit is hiding behind the rockery at the very left side of painting. A similar pattern appeared also in *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem* by Tang Yin, where the servant boy was positioned at the corner of the painting. Audiences no long follow the gaze of spectator to surveille the couples. Instead, they observe the couple first and then realize the existence of the peeping rabbit. Although the structure between spectator and couples in "Two pink butterflies" are different from that of the two paintings above, all of which enable viewers to have vicarious experiences.

In this painting, the rabbit serves as a mirror that reflects the viewers. One evidence of such argument is the reflecting willow twigs at both side of the doors. Realistically, the only explanation for this is that the wall is not sealed above with a ceiling. This is not a wall separating two rooms, but a wall between two gardenlike open spaces. However, the furniture displayed here is a typical setting of interiors in a wealthy family, thus is indicating an enclosed chamber for this secret meeting. This composition will cause an audience who is well acquainted with such interior designs to be confused and to have an illusion that such a door is not a door but a mirror because of the hanging willow twigs on both side of the wall.

If the door is a mirror, then what is mirroring the rabbit? Is it the couple in the painting? The answer is no. Instead, it is the viewers of the painting who is mirroring the rabbit in the painting. While the rabbit is hiding behind the rockery and peeping the couple, viewers tend to do the same thing as the rabbit. Viewers are hiding behind in another dimensional space and surveilling the couple in the painting. By mirroring the viewers with the rabbit, the artist is not only suggesting viewers are conducting the same spectating behaviors, but also equating the identity of viewers as rabbit, an animal that is docile and lack of force and power.

Is it a paradox that while the agent who is conducting the gazing action is considered as masculine, the spectator in this image is a rabbit that seems to represent the opposite of masculine power? As discussed above concerning Chapter 13 of *Jin Ping Mei*, gazing sometimes can become a way for spectator to obtain powers. Thus, the agents of gazing in erotic paintings tend to have subordinate social status shows a will of the artists and the class where the artists were in. That is the will of gaining powers.

A strong evidence for such hypothesis is the *Emperor and Empress*. (Fig. 17) When viewers first look at the painting, they will see the two major figures in the foreground, namely the emperor and his empress. Their decorated robes and headwear indicate their identities. The space, where the emperor and empress are, is semi-closed by a screen with bird and flower paintings and a column in the room. The column also separates the space between the couple and surveilling government officials near the window, whose facial expressions indicate their dissatisfaction with the emperor's indulgence. Similar from "Two pink butterflies" where the peeping rabbit is placed outside the door and behind the rockery, surveilling government officials are located outside the room and in a window frame. The window is, again, not just a window, but also a mirror. Government officials are the mirror image of viewers. Viewers, the Ming dynasty literati, are the ones who were concerned about the political situations. Yet by surveilling the emperors, they gain the power and transform their passive, feminine situation to a better circumstance by an active and masculine gaze.

While most of the time, the agent of an active gazing is male and the gazes are considered as masculine. In late Ming erotic art, we have seen that most spectators are those who have lower political or social powers compare to the couples who are being gazed upon—women, animals, servants, children etc. It is the uncertainty of the future that leads to the artists of erotic paintings

to hide this political message in the form of gazes or spectatorship. Their wish to gain the power and to recover the prospectus and order of Ming Dynasty has all been designated into erotic paintings. The gaze in erotic paintings was a way for them to criticize the scandalous behaviors of emperors and government officials whose social classes are higher than the artists and the viewers of the erotic paintings. The economic powers used this way to overturn the political powers.

CONCLUSION

From *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem* by Tang Yin presented at the very beginning of the paper to erotic paintings with spectating scenes, from the Suzhou-made *Wang Sheng* album to the Zhe school *Gardens of Pleasure* series, a recurring pattern is that figures' multilayered identity. Identity in late Ming erotic paintings seems quite interchangeable. Tang Yin projected himself onto Tao Gu, lovers can be paired with naturalistic objects such as rockeries and willow trees, and male artists can use female images to express their concerns and insecurities.

In Chapter one we have found that, although the criteria for art is complicated, it is at least not too hard to show that these erotic paintings are much richer than pornography content-wise. Recognizing the artistic quality of erotic paintings gives the ground base of my discussion for that only works of art have the potential to provide us more information when we dig further into the topic.

By examining how bodies and genders were constructed in late Ming erotic paintings based on both Judith Butler's theory and Ming ideologies, we find out in Chapter two that boundaries between genders are blurry. There exists a conscious avoidance toward the separation of masculine and feminine domains. We have also noticed that Ming erotic paintings always portray a somewhat unrealistic world, a fantasy. What were artists back then fantasized?

Chapter three aims to answer this question. By comparing narrations in *Jin Ping Mei* and the content of the paintings, I conclude that female spectators' images are the projection of male artists' instability. They project their concerns of the instability of society and the incompetence of the government on to female spectators, expressing implicitly their unsatisfactory. Perhaps belonging to a lower class in the society inspired him using the similarly subordinated women as the protagonists in these paintings.

In conclusion of the paper, I would like to, again, emphasize on the artistic value of Chinese erotic paintings. As I went over these erotic paintings, their settings, compositions, and brushstrokes, remind me of many masters works such as Tang Yin's *Tao Gu Presenting a Poem* and Qiu Ying's *Spring Morning in the Han Palace*. Although due to the social constraints, we hardly know any erotic paintings actually signed by famous artists, it is reasonable to believe that artists such Qiu Ying and Tang Yin had painted erotic paintings and had made a great influence on later works.

PLATES



Fig. 1

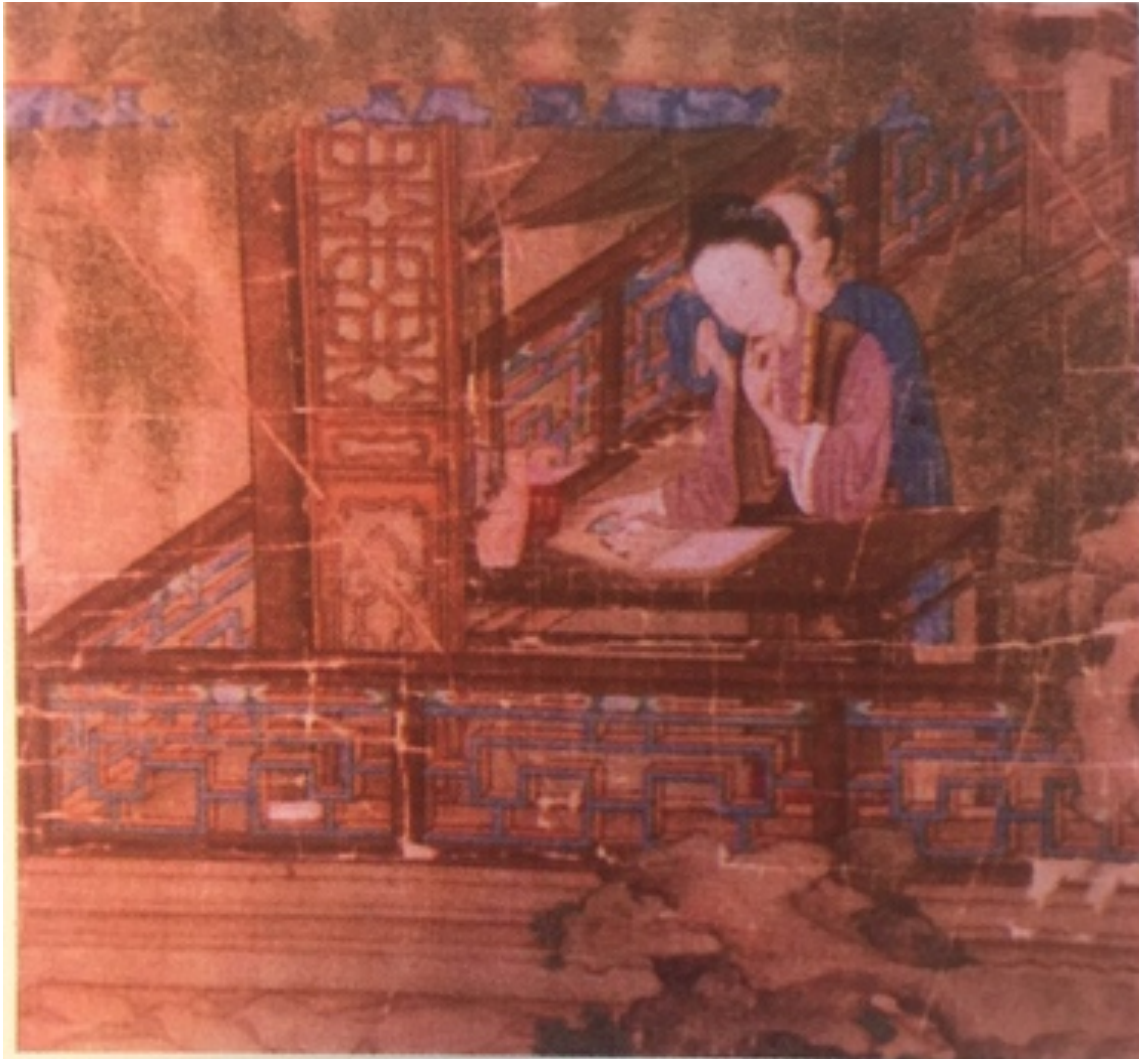


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig.5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

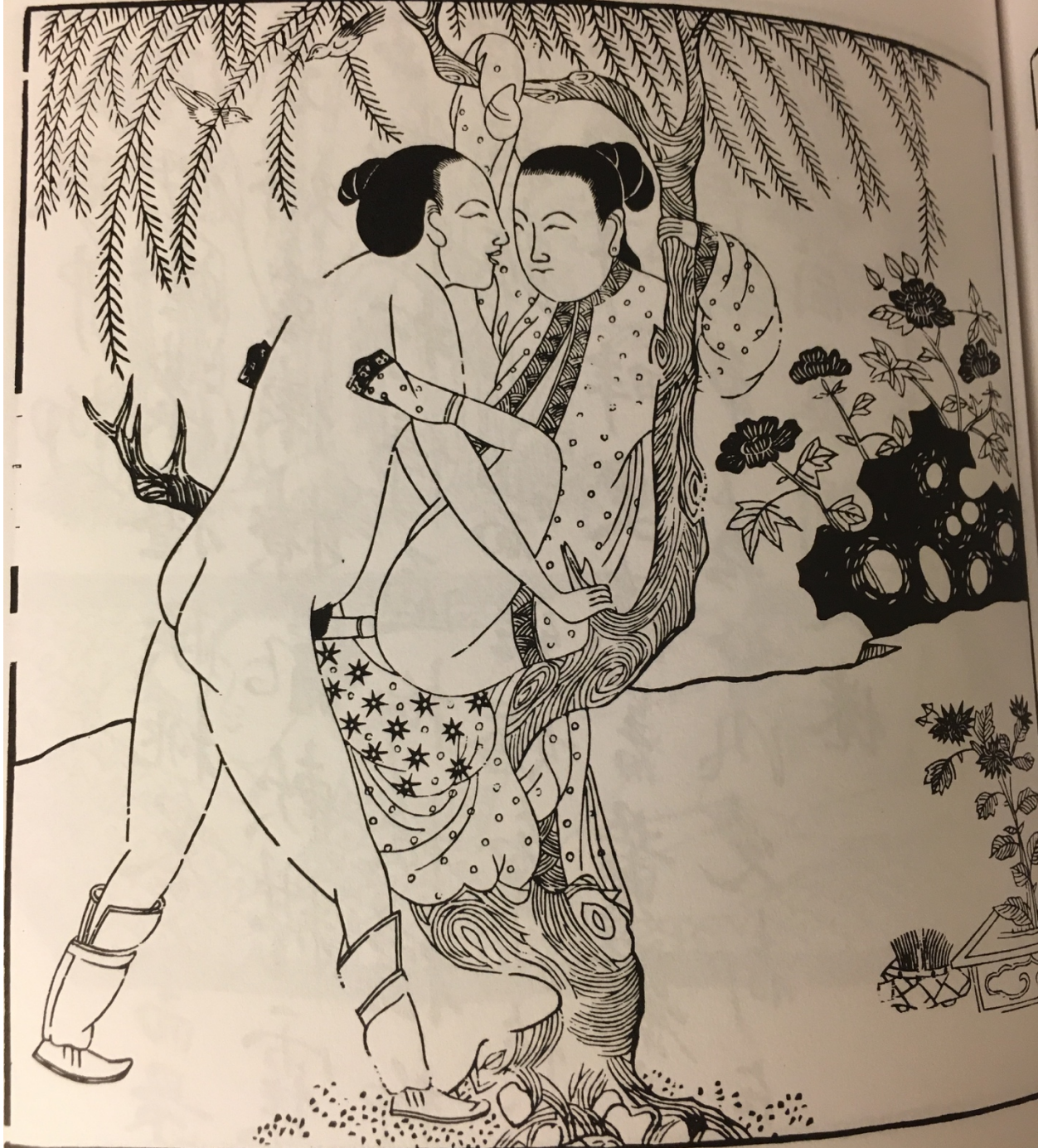


Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

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