

Emotion and Female Authority: A Comparison of Chinese and English Fiction in the Eighteenth Century¹

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Abstract: This essay considers how early modern Chinese romance novels conceive of female agency and how this conception was received by prominent cultural elites in eighteenth-century England. In his notes to *Hau Kiou Chooan*, the first English translation of a full-length Chinese novel, Thomas Percy referred to the novel's heroine as a «masculine woman», displaying a peculiar misreading of its trope of female cross-dressing. The essay argues that the increasing association of women with the private sphere in eighteenth-century English culture is a crucial context to consider when we study the initial spread of Chinese fiction in England.

Keywords: England, China, Eighteenth century, Fiction

The publication of *Hau Kiou Chooan* in 1761 as the first English translation of a vernacular Chinese novel has long been discussed. One pattern of mistranslation, however, has been paid scant attention. The Chinese novel figures a male protagonist who looks like an elegant lady and a lady protagonist with intelligence that exceeds those of all male characters. The English translation struggles to convey these details, with the editor Thomas Percy parsing them to mean that there is a lack of «gallantry» in the Chinese novel. Ironically, however, «gallantry» is a masculine ideal that steadily lost appeal in the eighteenth century in England. Despite the late-century exaltation of Gothic heritage, such cultural stereotypes as «gallant men» and weak damsels are continually reformed in English novels of the eighteenth century, culminating in Anne Radcliffe's resourceful ladies and sensible embodiment of female self-possession in Burney and Austen. This essay first discusses Percy's famous comment (and other related mistranslations in eighteenth-century England) and then traces how «strong women» who make gallantry seem outmoded function differently in eighteenth-century novels from China and England and how the differences illustrate a set of diverging cultural dynamics.

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British and Chinese Moral Fiction

In the beginning of Book II of *Hau Kiou Choaan*, the first English translation of *Haoqiu zhuan* (好逑), which came out in 1761, the male protagonist praises the female protagonist behind her back, as 闺阁中须眉君子 (translated as «who, with all the delicacy of her sex, hath all the capacity of ours»). Thomas Percy feels compelled to explain in his commentary that it constitutes «a high compliment among a people, who entertain so unfavorable an opinion of the ladies' understandings» (*Hau Kiou Choaan: or The Pleasing History* 1761, II: 10).² In making this comment, Percy seems unaware that the phrase and its variations made frequent appearances in *huaben* stories (stories based on scripts for oral storytelling) and prose romances since at least the Yuan Dynasty. That an expression sounding to Chinese ears, then as now, as a formulaic compliment should require an explanation makes one think. Percy's translation also indicates a misreading: 闺阁中须眉君子 (literally «a virtuous man within a woman's private chamber») is not a woman with masculine capacity, but a woman with as much courage and wit as an honourable man. Courage and wit, after all, are not male-gendered attributes in early modern China. *Haoqiu zhuan* falls squarely within the perimeters of *caizijiaren xiaoshuo* (the scholar-beauty romance), a type of vernacular fiction popular in the second half of the seventeenth century, at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. The male Chinese literati who authored *caizijiaren* romances by no means endorsed masculine women. They merely articulated a notion of the ideal woman as having the ability both to provide good companionship and to be a moral model for men. Authors of these scholar-beauty novels display a high opinion of women and a certain identification with the opposite sex. In his commentaries, Percy did not grasp the fact that severe patriarchal norms could coexist with a tendency to endorse the wit and judgment that some women have, though this paradox did appear prominent in the fictional and theatrical works of late Ming and early-to-mid-Qing China (roughly early seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century). Percy's misreading betrays the central anxieties and concerns beguiling the cultural context into which *Haoqiu zhuan* was translated.

Elevating a female figure by giving her «masculine capacity» strikes Percy as requiring an explanation, because a masculine woman is a sociological category that emerged and was quickly vilified in eighteenth-century England. The genesis of women as a physiological category distinct from men and the separation of public and private spheres are seminal changes defining the historical moment in which Percy was writing. Armstrong set the tone for our understanding of gender in eighteenth-century English novels with her famous thesis on how the domestic novel as a genre endows women with elevated moral authority by making them the guiding light of the domestic, and the gist of this argument remains unchallenged. Later scholarship points out that women writing towards

² This edition alters the chapter structure of the original text.

the end of the eighteenth century exhibited tremendous agency, even though they were confined to certain norms of domesticity.³ Nevertheless, domesticity played a crucial role in shaping women's writings from the mid-century onward.

Female agency was an equally vexed issue in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China. Even though, throughout his commentaries on *Haoqiu zhuan*, Percy emphasised that China was ridden with a backward patriarchy, seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century China gave rise to many literary characters, like Shui Bingxin, who share with men some of the qualities most celebrated by the literati class. Now this is not to claim that Chinese women of this period had more access to personal freedom and social resources than their counterparts in England. The point is that there was ample cultural space to render women 须眉君子, and such fantasies were wildly popular. This is also a case of elevated female authority. Here, however, female authority is not associated with the hearth or the heart, as in Restoration and eighteenth-century England, which saw the rise of domesticity and domesticated women, but rather with abilities to navigate the world of learning, politics and shady social dealings.

Shui Bingxin, who saves herself from unwanted marriage proposals and becomes instrumental in propelling the male protagonist towards political eminence, represents a character type that permeates early Qing *caizijieren* romances. Works falling under this category often involve an aspiring scholar yet to rise up the ladder of political power. And the female lead (with a few doubles in each case) is in possession of wit and judgment, romantically sensitive, though completely chaste, adhered to and defended Confucian mores governing women's behaviour, and was ready to help the male protagonists with love, loyalty and, at times, concrete assistance. Their union, just like the man's political career, is impeded by a thousand obstacles until all goes well in the end.

This is certainly not to say that late imperial China did not have a notion of women's proper place. Even though the female characters of scholar-beauty romances are often compelled to prove their worth by venturing into the world under the guise of a man, they are always brought back to the domestic sphere at the end. Here we see how this fiction exemplifies the same tension that crops up in eighteenth-century novels of sentiment in England, which also dramatise women who go out and about in the world only to end up as defenders of the conventional family.

This paper sets out to examine moments of female transgression in both contexts up until the mid- and late eighteenth century, with a focus on the theme of female cross-dressing. The cross-dressing theme prominent in *caizijieren* fiction is equally prominent in eighteenth-century England, both as a theme in fiction

³ Jane Spencer, Janet Todd, Madeleine Kahn, Dale Spender, Ros Ballaster, Margaret Doody and many other critics have investigated women's writings from the late seventeenth century and through the eighteenth century. They emphasise both women's confinement and their tactics for resistance, how they turned the sentimental novel into a new kind of novel «to discover society and history» (Doody 1980, 278). New waves of writing followed on their heels; see for example Gray (2007).

and as a social myth in essays and news writings. For example, in early eighteenth-century England, there were stories of real-life incidents of women cross-dressing as men to enlist in the army (most notably Kit Davidson and Hannah Snell). Just as the beginning of the century saw a burst of wayward female literary figures. Female and male writers alike, Elizabeth Haywood and Defoe for example, dramatised unruly women who venture outside of proper spheres for romantic or practical reasons.

What are the commonalities and divergences that make it important to investigate the two contexts in tandem? How would this comparative study help us move beyond Thomas Percy's understanding and reach a more nuanced reading of the different, though similar, ways in which British and Chinese women of the eighteenth century were associated with moral or intellectual authority in fictional narratives of selfhood? And, more significantly, how did the disparate ideas of selfhood and emotion in these two contexts inform women's writings of their own circumstances? The figure of the strong-headed, cross-dressing woman provides an inroad into a discussion of how notions of emotion and female authority become entwined in both contexts, though in different manners. Both China and England experienced a secularised cultural transformation in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, but what it may have to do with conceptions of the inner mind and selfhood remains to be explored.⁴ This essay only begins to address this very broad question. Its primary aim is to provide a schematic comparative account of the two cultural contexts as a way of building a framework for more specialised discussions in the future.

A Tale of Two Cultures

In England, the rising popularity of the modern novel in the eighteenth century is integral to the evolution of a self-constructing, self-reflexive organism in search of new forms of social cohesion. The emerging novel responded to a set of new cultural developments, including broadening commerce, the print media, destabilised class structures, the relaxation of sexual mores, and women's increasing mobility, while becoming a key instrument of social regulation. This is a body of fiction highly conscious of the use of narrative perspective, often insistent on writing «to the moment» (in Samuel Richardson's terms), adhering closely to minute-by-minute permutations of feelings and emotions. The novel's reflexivity on emotions coincided with philosophical inquiries into inner life or mental life. Descartes's *cogito* (the capacity of «I think») initiated what Charles Taylor calls the turn towards «inwardness» in Western philosophy, founding a modern subject relying on its inherent rational capacity for acquiring knowledge and self-knowledge (Taylor 1989, 109-207). This modern subject is besieged by

⁴ In the Chinese context, this is a time of dynastic transition, from Ming to Qing, but also a transition to a more secularised understanding of space, time, the political order, and scholarship. See, for example, Carrai (2019).

the «passions», changes in animal spirits communicated to the soul; but the passions are ultimately in service to the soul, allowing the body to coordinate its actions with the soul. That is to say, although the modern subject is reflexive and is thus internally divided by virtue of self-reflection, the observing and observed selves ultimately came together through the logic of analogy or simultaneity. This modern notion of selfhood was undermined by many strains of philosophical thought in the subsequent decades. Lockean materialism, which gives no transcendent ends to the self, along with the Scottish Enlightenment view that humans are naturally endowed with benevolent feelings that nevertheless need rational regulation threw the Cartesian notion of a united, self-regulating self into doubt. In other words, as emotion became a key issue when it came to envisioning a modern subjectivity and society, it presented a dual effect. It both affirms and precludes the coherence of selfhood.

Attention on the instability of the self is intimately tied to the status of women, women as authors, readers, and central characters in fiction. The late seventeenth century saw a large number of amatory novels penned by women and featuring daring, cross-dressing women, which criticised the culture of rakes, while giving voice to female desires. The late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century are populated with tales of female desire that fit poorly into the formulae of the romance. Disappointed female romantics, jilted female lovers, and lower-class female outcasts abound. Elizabeth Haywood's famous characters, such as Fantomina and Moletta in *Love in Excess*, continued Restoration drama's long string of vivacious women (like those in Behn's *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter*), cross-dressing to transgress the bounds of acceptable female desires and conduct. These figures are not subjected to the moral judgment that Defoe foists upon his low-class female outcasts like Roxana and Moll Flanders.

This exuberance was curtailed in the subsequent «cult of sensibility», which can be seen as a reaction to the unbinding of women. Starting from the mid-eighteenth century, we see an exaltation of refined, other-oriented sentiments that tame women's sensibility, laying the foundation for domestic fiction that privileges altruistic, sensible womanhood. The middle of the eighteenth century marks the culmination of a century-long concern with regulating the power of emotion in the production of modern selfhood.

The culture of sensibility and fiction reading engendered an emphasis on naturally purified feeling that affected both genders. The man of feeling became a new vogue and a new source of anxiety, as testified in debates over the figure of the «man of feeling» and reactions to it in thinkers like William Godwin. But it was women who became primarily associated with tender sensibility. We see the emergence of the notion of women's purportedly «finer, weaker nerves» as a conspiracy of medical and philosophical theories of emotion, early consumerism, and the new novel (Barker-Benfield 1992, 24). In this context, the female cross-dresser became a jarring social and narrative problem. As such heroines of sentimental fiction as Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa took pride of place, cross-dressing women became identified with overriding passions that preclude a coherent, solid subjectivity, and proper sensibility. As we see in Henry Field-

ing's *Female Husband* (1746), a fictionalised version of the story of Mary Hamilton, a woman who passes as a man is figured as masculine, «monstrous and unnatural», madly hankering after other women. What might have been fun and provocative a few decades earlier became equated with unspeakable desires and emotions. Gender ambiguities in gender identity were now rejected out of hand. Women also started writing novels castigating cross-dressing, as seen in such works as Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), where Miss Milner's ambiguous costume signals her «inability to accommodate her fully to domestic life» (Craft-Fairchild 1998, 180).

We now turn to the other side of the comparison. By the eighteenth century, China had also experienced an awakening into emotion and mental life. The School of the Mind philosophy of the late sixteenth century, coupled with the flowering of literary genres like vernacular narrative fiction and drama in late Ming, gave rise to a complex culture of emotion in China. Short vernacular tales showing passions and their consequences flourished alongside the longer *Shiqingshu* (state of society novels), a category that emerged in the late Ming referring to fiction that details the manners, patterns of social interactions among different social classes, filled with self-serving or lusty shenanigans. But the glory of vernacular narrative fiction was interrupted by the tragic end of the Ming Dynasty and the advent of the Qing. The first hundred years of the Qing dynasty (mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century) was a time of political turbulence, with severe political persecution of scholars and censorship of fiction. The literati felt disillusioned and aimless, their paths towards political advancement thwarted. Some of them turned to fiction writing to articulate their fantasies of being on the receiving end of luck. Though they were discouraged from approaching fiction as a serious, aesthetic pursuit, there remained big markets for fiction consumers by this point in imperial Chinese history, especially in the Jiangnan area (southeast China that became a centre of print culture in late imperial China, with many private imprints) and a broad readership cutting across class lines. *Caizijiaren* romances, with many ties to earlier love romances, flourished as an obvious viable commercial option. It also functioned as a depository of literati fantasies and an easy way of skirting censorship, since it consists of love romances that veer from the gritty, often sexualised styles of late Ming vernacular novels.

If *caizijiaren* romances articulate the fantasies of success on the part of disappointed scholars, then why strong, intelligent female leads? Wai-yee Li provides perhaps the best clues for answering this question. In *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature*, she outlines a historical junction little noticed by other scholars. The turn of the Qing dynasty coincided with a burst of poetry and plays authored by the male literati who pay tribute to women, either assuming a female persona or figuring strong female characters who put men to shame. The literati constructed a literary identification with women to give «indirect expression» to their own political frustrations and grief over the lost cause of the Ming or, in some cases (Wai-yee Li 2014, 5), to affirm aesthetic and sensual pleasure as a style of life that the deposed Ming represented. Therefore,

this historical moment witnessed the building of an imaginary bond between the male literati and women of mental strength and fine taste. This argument is central to our understanding of the presence of women of wit and judgment in *caizijiaren* romances. Though strong women – female swordswomen and rebelliously romantic women – appeared in earlier Chinese romances, their multiplication in *caizijiaren* romances was historically prepared by this identification cultivated between the literati and women. It was more than an imaginary identification. It also had an empirical basis. The early Qing saw an increase in educated women in the Jiangnan region from the middle Ming, many of whom no doubt inspired the superb female characters in *caizijiaren* romances. Smart and talented and faithful, these characters became, like Shui Bingxin in *Haoqiu zhuan*, ideal companions and models of personhood.

The way men and women are identified is what makes this genre so distinct from the novel of sentiment we see in eighteenth-century England. It is not only aimed at a female audience (sometimes through various theatrical adaptations more accessible to female audiences), but more importantly, such novels often use female desires as a vehicle for male aspirations. Emotional «awakenings» largely occur in the female characters, as they are made to appreciate aesthetic pleasure and actively pursue romantic/political opportunities, becoming a surrogate for the male literati. The imaginary connection between the literati and their female characters also explains why female transgressions, often in the form of cross-dressing for the purpose of increased mobility, are common. There are numerous examples besides *Haoqiu zhuan*, including the two leading examples of this genre, *Yu Jiao Li* (玉娇梨) (mid-seventeenth century, translated into English in 1827) and *Ping Shan Leng Yan* (平山冷燕) (mid-seventeenth century).

It is of course necessary to add that, despite the near interchangeability of male and female leads in *caizijiaren* romances, gender lines are ultimately drawn. By the end of the novel, the talented, strong-headed female protagonists happily return to the domestic sphere, content with a union with the male protagonist that they often have to share with other women. Their destinies mirror those of male leads, who are often guileless and naturally talented but have to depend on the court's recognition for a happy ending. *Wan Ru Yue* (宛如约), for example, spurns masculine women while endorsing a more balanced model of femininity. The female lead hates to be confined within the domestic sphere and yet is superbly suited to domesticity. In a way these writings register the awkward balancing act that the literati saw themselves doing at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. They painted fantasies of proving one's worth with a sensitivity towards aestheticised love and in the manner of a knight errant with incredible prowess, only to show that they are in fact the most fitting candidates for upholding Confucian traditions. The same balancing act can be seen in the approach to emotion in *caizijiaren* romances. *Haoqiu zhuan* contains a famous dictum: 调乎情与性, 名与教方成, «only when we reconcile feeling and nature, can we keep up the order of names and ethical teachings» (Míngjiāo Zhōngrén 1994, 114). The couple in the story choose to stay celibate in their marriage in case anyone cast aspersions on their conduct with each other before marriage. The feelings

displayed by the main characters are distinguished from unrestrained feelings driven by desires, but can sit well with Confucian morals.

Thus, although the scholar-beauty romance has a vexed relationship with Confucian orthodoxies, it ultimately seeks to restore the unity between aesthetic, amorous feelings and the conventional ethical code. We can draw an analogy between this type of narrative operation with neo-Confucianism's drive to bring the surface levels of the «heart-mind» (feeling) in harmony with its impartial, immaculate substratum (nature). Neo-Confucianism's view of feelings entailed a different approach to uniting the self than the Cartesian notion. Philosophy scholar Brian Bruya has compared Descartes's and neo-Confucianism's notions of *qing* (emotion) and emotional regulation. He points out that, in the context of neo-Confucianism, *qing* does not posit the division of soul and body. It is instead seen as the activated state of the heart-mind or the permutating surface of the heart-mind. According to the thought of neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yangming, in particular, selfish emotions (resulting from the embodied nature of all individuals) do not have to be deliberately contained or controlled. At least, in Wang's dialectical thought («numismatic» in Bruya's terms: 2001, 47), self-regulation is not the only way towards restoring the heart of Dao. Wang emphasises reaching impartiality through a kind of vigilance, a setting free of the individual's power to tap into the substructure of the heart-mind, allowing it to achieve the necessary dropping off of the extra desires. The same inclinations are necessarily registered, in a covertly politicised manner, in fiction writing, especially a literati-dominated genre like *caizijiaren* romances.

If, in the English context, the modern novel arose to regulate emotion and female authority, eighteenth-century narrative fiction from China both echoes and departs from this trajectory. On one hand, the women of wit and judgment found in *caizijiaren* romances underwent a «realistic» turn in the late eighteenth century, with *The Story of the Stone* (1754) depicting talented women from aristocratic families in quotidian scenarios who meet with tragic ends. One lesser-known response, however, comes from a set of female writers in the Jiangnan area, who created a new fiction genre, *tanci* fiction, which draws heavily on the *caizijiaren* romances' celebration of resourceful, cross-dressing women, often with significant subversive twists.

Emotion and Female Authority

The foregoing comparison shows that, in both England and China of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, female agency and authority ascended in circumscribed ways, creating significant impact on the subsequent histories of narrative fiction. In the English context, the increase in female authority was made innocuous for the male-centred society by the cult of sensibility, which mutes the history of cross-dressing «viragos» in favour of domestic women. Their masks torn off, English women of the late eighteenth century emerged as manifestations of a certain admirable nature, compassionate, intelligent, emotionally impressionable, and yet equipped with fine judgment. In the

Chinese context, the popularity of *caizijiaren* romances and other romances in the early Qing made powerful women a common literary and cultural trope. It was continued and further politicised in fictional narratives created by women in late eighteenth-century China.

In both cases, the imaginings of female authority in both contexts were closely connected to prevailing understandings of emotion and the ways in which emotion can be integrated into a unitary sense of the self, which we might describe as a kind of intellectual and cultural infrastructure. What we see here are two competing «cults of sensibility» that rely to a great extent on the production of fiction narratives geared towards female readers. And yet, while English fiction quickly became integrated into dominant social discourses that legislated how both men and women should act and to what social spheres they should be allocated, in China, fiction stayed in a much more fraught relationship with Confucian thought and at the centre of the political and social life of the literati. As English women became «authorised» and contained by the newly rising realist fiction, Chinese women found new venues for self-assertion but also, in their own limited ways, new imaginings of selfhood.

Returning to the opening of the essay, Percy's response to *Haoqiu zhuan's* depictions of strong women can be situated at the intersection of these contexts. The English translation turned a female hero into a woman with masculine capacity, failing to capture the fluidity of gender identity in *caizijiaren* romances. Percy, in turn, thought it necessary to indicate that, counterintuitively, «masculine» women were highly valued in China, revealing the anxiety over masculine women characteristic of his own cultural moment. A thorough understanding of the two different contexts is, arguably, a necessarily circuitous way of fully interpreting what lies underneath the first English translation of an early modern Chinese romance.

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