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Remarkable liaisons among the well-to-do

Fragments, marginal texts, and even ‘bad literature’ can sometimes take us further than better-known, canonical works. I was reminded of this after an unexpected find in Leiden University’s van Gulik Collection.

Wu Cuncun

My ‘find’, a pornographic novel bearing the title *Fugui qiyuan* (‘Remarkable liaisons among the well-to-do’), does not appear in any of the major catalogues of traditional Chinese fiction. It is clear from the poor quality of the lithographic printing, the cheap grade of paper, the many errors and the two roughly worked illustrations in the front pages that this small book belongs among the many similar works printed for popular consumption in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first thing to note about this work, beyond its physical signs, is that it is not original: reading through it we find that it is actually a much corrupted, unrecorded, re-titled edition of the early Qing dynasty erotic novel *Taohuaying* (‘Peach blossom shadows’). The author of *Taohuaying*, identified here by the pseudonym Yanshui Sanren (‘Unencumbered Man of Mist and Water’), is generally agreed to be Xu Zhen, a novelist whose lifespan straddled the end of the Ming dynasty and beginning of the Qing dynasty. While the characters and storyline are more or less unchanged in *Fugui qiyuan*, the latter is a much-abridged ‘edition’ and contains numerous graph (character) and grammatical errors.

Comparing it to the edition of *Taohuaying* in the modern *Siwuxie huibao* collection (published in the mid-1990s in Taiwan), we find this renamed edition is of such poor quality that it appears to have been printed without having been proofread. There are glaring errors, such as the incorrect rendering of the name of the famed early Ming artist Shen Shitian (Shen Zhou 1428-1509). And in chapter six we find that Xu Zhen’s original opening – a tightly composed passage of approximately 100 words that considers the place of homoerotic attraction in Chinese tradition (‘When even august emperors were fond of it, should we be surprised that it is so thick on the ground today’) – has been so radically abridged in *Fugui qiyuan* that the 38 graphs that remain convey little more than nonsense.

It is clear that the later ‘editor’ was interested only in preserving licentious detail. Everyday episodes, literary passages and auto-commentary have been pared down to brief, dull and insipid passages, while erotic description always remains carefully preserved. A work of this kind may be evidence that there was a readership interested primarily in titillation, a market serviced by cheaply available forms of pornography stripped of any literary pretension.

An erotic tale of its time

While it suffers from all the above deficits, *Fugui qiyuan* (and its antecedent) is perhaps not all that atypical for a certain style of erotic fiction published from the late Ming through the early Qing. The outline of the narrative and plot are quite predictable and conventional. Along the same lines as, for example, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, the novel unfolds around a young gifted scholar who pursues liaisons with a great number of beautiful women. Wei Rong is young and handsome, from a wealthy family and effortlessly attracts any ‘beauty’ he casts his eyes upon. He also excels as a talented sexual partner, and with the aid of Daoist aphrodisiacal lore he manages to establish a large household of many concubines. At the end of the tale he ascends, with his entire entourage, to a life among the immortals in the celestial spheres.

There is little here that makes this novel stand out from among the many other ‘conventional’ popular erotic tales of its period and that may be why it was largely forgotten as time went by. Nevertheless, there are a number of things worth noting about chapter six, entitled, ‘A drunken fish is robbed of its rear courtyard flower’, which revolves around male homoerotic practices between two men of high social standing. While it is often the case that something common and conventional in one era may seem unusual in another, we need not be surprised when a homoerotic episode is included in a Chinese novel that otherwise describes the licentious carryings on of men and women.

There is no doubt that Wei Rong has a soft spot for female beauty and takes every opportunity to engage in lovemaking; neither social background, age nor even marriage are ever

cause for hesitation. At the same time, an abundance of love stories or erotic tales produced in the 17th century in China included at least one or two homoerotic episodes interwoven with the main narrative threads, and *Fugui qiyuan* is only following an already established convention when it includes two such strands. In the first the merchant Qiu Munan, a wealthy landlord from Nanjing, becomes irresistibly attracted to Wei’s fine looks and proceeds to lure him into his confidence. He plies him with drink, and when Wei collapses in a drunken stupor he rapes him. What is most unusual in this episode is that, despite this insult to the young scholar’s high status, they then proceed to become firm friends, largely as a result of the merchant making his comely young wife available to Wei.

In the second homoerotic episode Wei enjoys dalliances with a young waif he has taken in as his page. As we should expect in late imperial China, in this (consensual) episode, in contrast with the first, the young scholar is the active party. What is notable, however, is that the episode with the merchant takes up the whole of chapter six and their friendship continues as a strand through subsequent chapters until the novel’s end. It is in the extensive treatment of this earlier episode, where the hero ends up ignoring the insult of penetration, that this minor example of erotic literature falls outside the run-of-the-mill homoerotic cliché found in other novels from the early Qing. However, while the episode where Wei Rong is penetrated by the merchant is somewhat outside the mould, the way in which the episode is set up, and also the way in which it is complemented (or even compensated) by his own dalliances with the page (where the direction of penetration is ‘conventional’), it actually functions as a vehicle for rehearsing and accenting the accepted status rules surrounding male-love.

The sacrosanct ‘rear courtyard’

This is made clear if we examine the episode in more detail. It is love at first sight when the merchant meets the young scholar, who has come looking for a room to rent while attending the provincial examinations in Nanjing. Qiu has a very pretty young wife (Huashi), but he is only attracted to young men (his name is a homophone for ‘adore males’). The following day he becomes increasingly frustrated because he knows that while he has a regular relationship with a young melon-seller, status rules do not permit him to approach his young tenant. Recognising Wei’s soft spot for the opposite sex, he guesses that even if he rapes Wei while he is drunk and defenceless, his anger will be assuaged if his beautiful wife is offered as an unspoken compensation. He even calculates that it would be best if this was arranged to take place as soon as Wei begins to emerge from his stupor. At this point, besotted with Wei, he determines, ‘If by any chance my love could be satisfied, and then Wei does not forgive me, I would feel no regret at losing life and property’. As it turns out, Wei is intensely angry over being raped, but his anger subsides under the unrestrained administrations of Qiu’s young wife.

What Qiu Munan has done so far is, in effect, to propose a new paradigm for deciding the propriety of same-sex relations between men. And it makes both structural and historical sense that he is a merchant. Structurally, it is clear that his model is one that makes sexual relations a ‘good’ that can be exchanged in a deal like any other. We might even call it a barter-based model, if not a ledger-based model. Historically, we know that from the Song dynasty scholar-official values and mercantile values were in a relationship of constant tension.

Qiu Munan is able to use a merchant’s guile to make an assault on the supposedly sacrosanct ‘rear courtyard’ of a scholar. Reflecting social attitudes of the time, as well as the application of the law, Ming and Qing novels usually portray homoerotic behaviour between elite men and their (sometimes shared) servants, entertainers or catamites. The inequality of these relationships was never questioned, nor did same-sex relationships within these boundaries cause any social offence; instead, they were taken as a sign of a literatus’s romantic lifestyle. Examples of same-sex relationships between upper-class men are harder to find, in either life or literature, but allusions and references to the scandal such a

union would cause are numerous; and, in particular, penetration caused intense shame for the penetrated.

Mercantile morals?

Given the accepted balances pertaining between social status and sexuality at the time, Wei’s forgiveness of Qiu, and their subsequent friendship, is quite extraordinary. There is no question that Wei feels wronged, but Qiu manages to make a deal that overrides morality. Perhaps we are meant to believe that what Qiu’s wife has to offer is so priceless it erases all debt or crime: ‘I will take you as payment for his crime...We are all open-minded people. Why should I fix upon his past misdemeanour and deny him the opportunity to reform?’

At one level the narrative provides a running ledger, and at another level a running joke. No sooner does Wei forgive Qiu than he asks him if he can continue to see his wife when he is away on business. Qiu’s reply is quite businesslike: ‘When men find themselves in such friendly agreement, why should they squabble over a woman?’ And having penetrated Wei once, Qiu’s desire appears to have been completely satisfied, and they become friends as if nothing had ever happened. The business of deal-making has united them, and in subsequent chapters they are seen doing their best to assist each other to get on in life. Qiu is happy to allow Huashi to become one of Wei’s concubines; Wei presents Qiu with his own page, Guangge. A common device for ending tales of sexual adventure, the hero achieves immortality. Before that occurs in this case, Qiu leaves to become a Buddhist mendicant, but first he presents Wei with his entire household, including maids and servants. Not long after, Wei also decides it is time to discard all fame and wealth, and he ascends into the realm of immortals with his wife and five concubines (including Huashi).

While the tendency in 17th century erotic novels to dismiss chastity, social status or sexual taboos may have been in part fed by a fashion for high-minded libertine ideals of individual freedom and expression, this strand in *Fugui qiyuan* and its 17th century predecessor suggest that models of mercantile exchange may also have contributed to thinking about moral alternatives. How much should we read into this?

Perhaps in *Taohuaying* chapter six was originally meant to be little more than the imaginative development of a homoerotic interlude in what is in the end a rather formulaic exploration of erotic possibilities. Like much erotic writing from the 16th and 17th centuries, while there is an abundance of rollicking action, *Taohuaying* places as much (if not more) emphasis on exploring social permutations as it does on describing physical contortions. When all the permutations have been explored there is nowhere left for the narrative to go, except upward into the celestial spheres (the authors were not interested in heading downward). In contrast, *Fugui qiyuan*, a later and much corrupted edition of the same tale, attempts to divest itself of everything extraneous to the bedroom scenes. Its readership may have become bored with the ‘social titillation’ that so fascinated 17th century readers. ◀

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