

MARK STEVENSON and WU CUNCUN (eds):

*Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions.*

(Women and Gender in China Studies.) xii, 213 pp. Leiden: Brill, 2017. ISBN 978 90 04 33915 6.

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Urbanization and commercialization in late imperial China caused considerable social and political transformation, some elements of which clearly were at odds with mainstream orthodox literature written by male intellectuals who actively promoted Neo-Confucian moral principles. As a result of questioning the tremendous tensions around desire, sex, subjectivity and early modernity of urban life, vernacular fictions, especially those focusing on the domestic space of families and on intimate life, became extremely popular during the Ming and Qing periods.

With its spotlight on the literary motif of “wanton women”, this collection of essays examines more colourful and unorthodox literary genres such as fiction, pornography, plays and popular songs, to shed light on common people’s moral and emotional bewilderment about the ideal and the actual worlds. In doing so, the articles seek to counterbalance the invisibility of women during this important socio-cultural transformation period, examine the interaction of (re-)writing and (re-)reading of texts with gendering order (re-)constructions, and open up fresh perspectives on heterogeneous correlations between literature models, genres, images and socio-cultural constructions.

In his general introduction, Mark Stevenson lays out the intellectual positions and clarifies the academic goals of the book. The collection of essays is divided into three sections. Part 1 (chapters 2 and 3) mainly deals with wanton women in history and fiction; Part 2 (chapters 4 and 5) examines wanton women in drama; and Part 3 (chapters 6–8) analyses women’s songs and ballads.

The contributors investigate representations of female voices and the rewriting of images of so-called wanton women. Inspired by the feminist movement, many have committed to uncover alternative historical narratives in which women were actively involved and constructed within unconventional frameworks. In this context, this book presents many meaningful explorations of the literature sphere that guide towards numerous areas for further research. Questions such as how to deal with female desire and how to assign to it a (suitable) cultural placement have, as these essays observe, prevailed in conventional and folk literature texts of the Ming and Qing. Here their own appeals to desire, sex and love are demonstrated overtly and are discernible through the analysis of women as protagonists, authors, narrators, disseminators and audiences. Consequently, the arguments presented overturn perceptions of so-called wanton women in orthodox literatures, where they are often portrayed as ambitious, domineering, jealous, with predatory sexuality, and as breakers of the patriarchal system and political order. As the authors argue, women become victims of gossip and sexual slander (Anne McLaren), and those who are brave enough to acknowledge their own desiring subjects emerge as independent, principled heroines (Wu Cuncun, Yasushi Ôki), a clear sign of positive empowerment within traditional polygynous households. The essay by Maram Epstein shows how the wanton male sexuality at the centre of elite families threatened and undermined the domestic and imperial orders which, as Joseph Lam surmises, turns into a scorching satire of institutionalized gender inequalities. In sum, these papers not only allow the reader to hear women’s voices in literature; more

importantly, they recognize women's self-understanding, self-examination and self-expression via-a-vis patriarchal authority, the gender system and social order in late imperial China.

Further to its rectification of perceptions of so-called wanton women, the way in which the contributors fuse methodological aspects of the study of literature with those of gender studies makes this book a significant milestone in the field. It demonstrates the interaction between shifts in moral principles and text production, and how these factors affect the main characteristics and subsequent transformations of socio-cultural structures and literary genres. By engaging with such matters, this book inspires fresh avenues for further investigations on gender power structures in literature and history.

In his analysis of discrepancies between official historical records and pornographic literature, Keith McMahon sketches the logic behind the images of female rulers by historians and pornographers, how their (alleged) licentiousness was intentionally exaggerated in fictional narrative elements, and how historians and pornographers arrived at producing the well-known misogynistic stereotypes of women in power. Clearly, such processes of re-writing were applied very effectively over considerable periods of time, be that in hostility to female dominance with the intention of weakening their governance legitimacy, or to reinforce the cult of widow chastity and safeguard the privileges of male elites.

In his examination of "male homoerotic wanton woman" during the late Ming, Mark Stevenson gets to the bottom of how novelists established an innovative way to harmonize the inner anxiety of re-identifying the masculine and chivalric during the process of pursuing modernity by describing the "four phrases of wantonness revealed", and by defining the young men as both heroic and wanton. This is to say that Stevenson expands Martin Huang's argument about literati's anxiety and draws attention to the link between balancing the interrelatedness of self-presentations, text creation and literary genre innovation within the context of cultural re-evaluation.

As it engages with essential topics within a highly inspiring methodological framework, *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions* is recommended to scholars and students of literature, history, and cultural and gender studies of late imperial China.

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ASHLEY EVA MILLAR:

*A Singular Case: Debating China's Political Economy in the European Enlightenment.*

(McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas.) xii, 263 pp. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. \$28.65.

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Through an examination of Enlightenment thinkers' assessment of China's social, economic, and political aspects, Millar argues that China, as a singular case, both confirms and challenges European theories of political economy during the Enlightenment, constructing Enlightenment Europeans' understanding of their