

Androgyny in late Ming and early Qing literature

Review >
China

Zuyan Zhou explores the concept of androgyny in the fiction and drama of the late Ming and early Qing, a transitional period from about 1600 to 1750 when many of the political elite were estranged from power – by factional strife and later, under Manchu rule, by Ming-loyalist sentiment. It was a period of rapid social change, apparent in the world of gender.

By Roland Altenburger

The notion of androgyny is universally understood as the characteristic or capacity of a person, of either sex, to embody both feminine and masculine traits. In some cultures, the merging of gender elements in one person has been valued as an ideal, particularly in its approximation to a mythical state of harmonious unity. In Chinese

quasi-allegorically as value positions. *Yang* came to signify superiority or centrality, whereas a position of inferiority or marginality was considered *yin*. *Vis-à-vis* the emperor, a minister was symbolically assigned a *yin* position, despite his male sex. In literary representation, an ignored or marginalized official often assumed the feminine persona of the neglected concubine, a *yin* trope. Particularly in times of political crisis or ille-

ynous' figures. He traces the significance and configurations of 'gender deviation' in the acclaimed masterworks of the period, seeing them as mirrors of the changing social, cultural and ideological climate. His discussion spans from *Plum in a Golden Vase* to *Red Chamber Dream*, with chapters on the great lyric dramas *Peony Pavilion* and *Peach-Blossom Fan* and on the minor narrative genre of scholar-beauty romance. With such an ambitious scope, the author's textual discussion remains limited to his analytical focus. While this is appropriate for specialists, it renders the book less accessible to the general reader.

The dream of androgyny

The chapter on the *Dream* forms the focus and interpretative peak of Zhou's study. He makes an important contribution to the contested, open-ended debate on the novel's interpretation and its complex world of gender. Zhou argues that its androgynous protagonists and the oasis of androgyny provided by their secluded garden were artistic illusions, to be inevitably shattered by the patriarchy of the outside world.

Zhou's book is the first study to apply the notion of androgyny to traditional

Chinese literature, and his brilliant discussion of the *Dream* succeeds in demonstrating the interpretative potential of the concept. Nevertheless, the majority of 'androgynous' characters that Zhou analyzes might more aptly be read as cases of reversed gender. As the author admits in his conclusion, gender reversal in the works under consideration is overwhelmingly one-directional, involving female characters who adopt attributes of masculinity.

However, the reverse movement of gender crossing – men who consciously assume feminine traits, such as Jia Baoyu in the *Dream* – seem quite atypical in the period's literature. This shows the limited influence of the Zhuangzian vision of androgyny within late imperial gender thought, and the largely unquestioned dominance of the patriarchal preference for masculinity. As reversed gender characteristics served as a literary trope of quasi-allegorical significance, it would not be strange if literati, who in their works fantasized about gender reversal, subscribed to mainstream patriarchal values in their own lives.

Despite the limited validity of the concept of androgyny, Zhou Zuyan's study offers stimulating textual discussion with a wealth of observations and astute interpretations. This book is a most welcome addition to the growing body of



Woodcut of Lord Bei Jing from Dream of Red Chamber

in some cultures, the merging of gender elements in one person has been valued as an ideal, particularly in its approximation to a mythical state of harmonious unity

thought, this myth has been preserved in the Zhuangzian notion of cosmic chaos (*hundun*). The central tradition of Confucianism since the Han dynasty, on the other hand, construed gender in the bipolarity of *yin* and *yang*; underlying this is the hierarchical presumption of the superiority, and therefore desirability, of the *yang* or masculine side.

Feminized men

The interpretation of *yin-yang* conceptualisation is complicated by the fact that, from early on, there existed a convention of reading *yin-yang* bipolarity

gitimate government, when major groups of the establishment were excluded from power, marginalized men tended to identify or associate with representatives and imagery of femininity.

A number of the male literati of the period developed a new, seemingly more sympathetic view of femininity, though their identification with female characters was more likely a reflection of their own state of marginalization. Nevertheless, the literature of the time, as Zhou Zuyan demonstrates in his book, abounds with seemingly 'androg-

studies on gender in pre-modern Chinese literature. ◀

· Zuyan Zhou, 2003. *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. ISBN: 0824825713, 324 pp.

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