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Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Female Melancholy as Fiction and Commodity

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MANDARIN DUCKS AND BUTTERFLIES:
FEMALE MELANCHOLY AS FICTION AND COMMODITY

The trend of the modern Chinese sentimental novel, which for many readers is the most representative of what is called "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly" literature ("*yuanyang hudie pai wenxue*", hereafter abbreviated to "Butterfly" literature), began with Wu Woyao's *Hen hai* (*Sea of Remorse* or *Sea of Woe*), first published in 1908.[1] According to C. T. Hsia, the story "depicts the rapid degeneration of a weak-willed youth and the belated attempts by his devoted fiancée to restore him to physical and moral health. He dies, nevertheless, and she bids her parents farewell to enter a nunnery."[2]

This summary of Wu Woyao's story serves as an excellent example of a persistent aporia in the interpretation of Butterfly literature. That interpretation sees Butterfly literature on "neutral" but therefore imprecise grounds, as stories about unfulfilled love relationships whereby the male and female characters equally share the narrative focus. Typically, we find descriptions of these stories such as the following: "boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl are separated by cruel fate, boy and girl die of broken heart."[3] However, the consistently ascribed "balanced reciprocity of the romantic relationship between lovers"[4] fails to account for the asymmetrical structure of many of these stories, in which female struggles take up the major part of the narrative space. In Wu Woyao's work,

for instance, the "weak-willed youth" is not merely separated from his fiancée but is absent from the narrative for most of the time; he is reunited with her in his physically and morally degenerate state only in the last twenty pages or so. Further, his conspicuous absence is brought about in the most improbable manner. Evacuating from their village during the Boxer Rebellion, the engaged couple travel in a cart pulled by a mule; but as they are not yet married, the man decides to keep his fiancée from feeling embarrassed by walking beside the cart himself while she sits in it. When they are attacked by a group of bandits, the mule runs off in another direction in fright, thus separating the couple by literally removing the man from the scene. Obviously crude and ridiculous, this device of separation nonetheless illustrates how peremptory it is for the novelist to find a way to stage the woman alone. In the events that follow, we see her as the virtuous daughter and wife-to-be, taking care of her sick mother and trying to contact her lost fiancé under the most poverty-stricken circumstances. When he finally reappears, his degeneracy remains strangely unexplained. This absence of any persuasive sense of development in the male character once again highlights the sensitive moral perceptiveness in the woman: the male becomes a mere stage prop to the melodrama of essentially female melancholy.[5]

Such an asymmetrical structure raises the question of what exactly is the significance of "love" or "sentiment" in the context of this early twentieth-century Chinese popular literature. Several levels of meanings are involved here.

First, we have already seen that, rather than being a "balanced reciprocity" of relationships, love is often a mere engagement between couples who have never met, or an arranged marriage in which the husband dies before the marriage is consummated, or the

adolescent passion of young couples who are separated for the most parts of their lives after having made a secret engagement on their own. We encounter, in the name of love, issues of morality, chastity, and social demands to resist personal passions especially from the feminine points of view. This is probably why, though it is rarely if at all commented on by critics, these "love" stories often take place in the consistent absence, or lack of participation, of the women's beloved, who may be weak, sick, dead, far away, or a foreigner beyond the grips of Confucian culture. The women are left alone to fight their fates in the main parts of the dramas. We recall Shen Fengxi's "betrayal" of Fan Jiashu in Zhang Henshui's *Tixiao yinyuan* (*Fate in Tears and Laughter*) (1929) and Liniang's resistance to Ho Mengxia's love in Xü Zhenya's *Yü li hun* (*Jade Pear Spirit*) (1912). The feminine struggles take the form of an internalized *vigilance*: the women characters are staged, watched, and scrutinized, not only in the *poetic* idealizations of their men, but more significantly in the *moral* imperatives which are inscribed in their perception of themselves.

At this level, the Butterfly love story can be seen as a form of writing which continues the oppressive *lie nü* formula in Chinese female education. As is well-known, the *Lie nü zhuan* went through a historical slippage of meaning that is pregnant with suggestions. Compiled originally as the "Biographies of Women" and then gradually transformed as the "Biographies of Virtuous Women,"[6] Liu Xiang's book not only continued to be quoted as a major text for "correct" female behavior in China, but gave rise to a popular genre in which the "courageous" deeds of women—especially those who commit suicide—are glorified. Apart from the many folk stories bearing the same title, the genre's wide acceptance by the public can also be seen in its use in the "local gazetteers" (*difang zhi*), the semi-official histories of counties whereby women's suicides and life-long chastity were frequently recorded in vivid

detail among the "significant" events that made a particular county outstanding.[7] The Butterfly love story intersects the *lie nü* tradition at two points: first, in its attention to the mundane domestic lives of women; second, in its tendency to assert didactic meanings in the mundane. What is thought of as "love" is seen here as a disaster, a means with which the moral virtues of the woman are publicly tested. Her success in passing the test, however, is often inseparable from her own physical destruction. In this way, "positive" female virtues, virtues which are central to the culture, are established only negatively, through sacrifice.

But if Butterfly love stories could indeed be read as narratives which imitate and continue the *lie nü* tradition, we would still need to ask the question why Butterfly authors and readers were so tirelessly *fascinated* with this subject of female melancholy. The male authors' unabashed attempts to focus their literary energies on the subject in a kind of writing which was traditionally belittled as "small talk" (*xiaoshuo*) suggest the working of another set of concerns which are closely related to but not identical with the feminine one. Female melancholy, being inextricably associated with "love," is at the same time the occasion for art and fiction, and thus aligned with the activities which are traditionally condemned as immoral if they are pursued in themselves for pure "play." It is in this concoction of the female, the sentimental, and the fictional that we can locate a realm of subversive doings which are unique to Butterfly literature and which have yet to be fully understood.

Unlike, say, the westernized fictional writings of the May Fourth period, Butterfly writings are not centered on protest against social oppression or on hope for change. Rather, they reproduce the oppressive ideologies *at their limits*, in a narrative mode that is usually recognized as "traditional." However, what is most striking stylistically about the Butterfly

love stories is their sense of *excess*, which takes the form on the one hand of utmost sentimental indulgence and on the other of extreme social entrapment. The manner of narration in these stories is thus often visibly split between a fascination with the spontaneity of love, which is depicted as a *discovery* by the man of his beloved's charm, *and* a concurrent reinforcement of the oppressiveness of the public world. As romantic images are juxtaposed against the most frightening and repulsive ones, or as the ornate, classical narrative language is juxtaposed against the trivial, improbable, or fantastical events, "beautiful love" does not so much compel sympathy and identification as it invokes the feelings of excess and contradiction. For the Chinese reader especially, love's overwhelming, extravagant dissonances with the "public" mean it belongs to a world which is not "private" but *fictional*.

In Li Dingyi's *Qian jin gu* (*Thousand Dollar Bones*) (191?), for example, the narrative is divided between an inquiring curiosity about the idea of love and a matter-of-fact reiteration of oppressive social norms; between crude, unbelievable events and an extremely poetic or lucid interpretation of them. The narrator's position is that of the obviously conservative, as is manifested in his overtones, his philosophical summaries of the problems he sees, and the moral conventions he follows. But why does he delight so much in the vivid descriptions of if they are immoral? The violence of the images and the morbidity of the incidents far exceed the work's overt didactic claims. In tirelessly describing to us the details of suicides, the cruel and sadistic practices at the whorehouse, the lewd, animalistic nature of incestuous, adulterous relationships, or the macabre surroundings of deserted graveyards, the narrator conjures up an entire atmosphere of disease and entrapment, whereby even accidents seem preordained. How does a reactionary worldview which is intent on the

reinforcement of Confucian ethics accomodate this artistic indulgence in the cruel and crude materiality of life? I think we need to interpret this violence—and this is not just the violence of the details themselves but the violence of the juxtaposition of the conservative ideology *against* those details—as fundamental to Butterfly writings, which require us to read them the way they read history, that is, as disjunct fragments rather than as a cohesive whole.

The subversiveness of the Butterfly love stories therefore lies not so much in their looking "out" to a world beyond the one in which they are situated, but rather in the *impossibility* of their narrative mode, that is, in their problematic attempts to force together two essentially incompatible forms of writing, storytelling and the moral treatise. The fact that Butterfly stories, in spite of their pronounced didactic intent, were held suspect by Chinese critics left and right, indicates that something is amiss in their "didacticism": not that it is not there, but that it is out of place. Their didacticism is inconsistent with their obsessive depictions of a macabre reality. Butterfly authors were also "untrustworthy" as they shamelessly regarded their own work as play (*yuxi wenzhang*),[8] as a leisurely withdrawal into the ideological leftovers of a social and political world which was collapsing but which still constituted, in broken-up forms, the materiality of a people's lives. Their fiction lacks that urgent sense of a complete break with the past, and contradicts the revolutionary optimism of a liberated and enlightened China. But through them we see a very different kind of subversion at play—a subversion that works by perverse dimensions, exaggeration, repetition; a subversion that is melodramatic, not tragic, in nature.

The fragmentary quality of these stories—"fragmentary" not only because they are episodic rather than tightly plotted, but also because they demand irreconcilably split interpretations of themselves—necessarily evokes a *critical* reponse. This critical response is not just the awareness of what social problems the stories "reflect" or "criticize," but how their modes of presentation and contradictions are interrelated with that society which gave rise to those problems and which at the same time censored their representation in this particular form. As melodrama, Butterfly love stories invite disbelief by inflating to fantastical proportions the Confucian society's addictive ideologies and are therefore "dangerous" for that society which relies on its members' *serious* involvement with what they read, learn, and study. Butterfly stories' frank operation as mere play, entertainment, weekend past-time, and distraction from "proper" national concerns meant that they *had to be* exorcized not because of their subject matter (which is much more home-spun than most of May Fourth literature) but because of their deliberately *fictional* stance, their absolute incompatibility with the modern Chinese demands for realism, personal and social. Thus these stories live on as inexplicable dreams for the enlightened Chinese minds, their images hauntingly familiar but rationally suppressed.

Finally, the questions of female melancholy and fictional subversiveness must also be understood in their interrelatedness to the urban or metropolitan conditions under which Butterfly literature was produced and consumed. I will elaborate on this by discussing briefly Xü Zhenya's *Jade Pear Spirit.*

Xü's story strikes us immediately with a certain dislocation between its language and its subject matter, which results from the narrator's attempt to record the marginal, tedious

content of sentimental love with the ornate "four-six" prose style (*pian li*) of the dying scholar-official class. While the classical, erudite prose style has lost none of its beauty, it is used here for selling "middlebrow"[9] entertainment to a rapidly growing reading public in urban centers. This dislocation between arcaneness and mundaneness, between the traditional élitism of writing and the new accessibility of popular fiction, is inscribed in the Butterfly love story through a kind of signification whose emergence coincided with the emergence of the modernized Chinese city masses: the "personal." Traditionally belittled as the merely "womanly" and therefore unfit for proper literature, personal sentimental emotions were now released to hitherto untried degrees of exuberance. The most unutterable, most "feminine" feelings were now "liberated" and put on a par with the most heroic and patriotic, precisely because *all* sentiments were made lucidly *available* for the first time through the mass practices of reading and writing, activities that used to belong exclusively to the highbrow scholarly world. But the processes of democratization were not naive but complex. In the increasingly commercialized atmosphere of treaty ports like Shanghai, the no-longer-shameful production of such "feminized" significations went hand in hand with phenomenal figures of consumption.[10] "Love" and love stories became lucrative commodities that often came in serialized forms, giving rise to unending desires in the booming urban book market. In the lure of love-as-commodity, the private individual was at once captivated and unfulfilled: while identifying emotionally with the characters, the reader was at the same time distanced from that entire world by the very things that attracted him or her to it, namely, the unattainable and impracticable spiritual and poetic endowments of the *caizi jiaren*.

It is only a grasp of this fictional and commodified significance of feminine emotions that would adequately account for the structure of *Jade Pear Spirit*, a novel in which the desires of the exquisite sentimental world are communicated through a consistent concealment of the lovers' bodies. Though living in the same household, Mengxia and Liniang rarely see each other; they have two nocturnal meetings throughout the entire work, only one of which is described in the full (Chapter XVIII: "Crying Face to Face"). In that chapter, they clear their misunderstandings brought on by Mr. Li who had tried to expose their affair, then go on to exchange poetry for the rest of the night amidst sobbing and gazing at each other. This melodramatic physical restraint on the lovers' part, just like the melodramatic excessiveness of their poetic and moral expressions, is an important *signifying* gesture in itself. Without this fundamental *veiling* of the bodily aspect of love, the excitement of the scholarly sentimental world would be completly lost. Instead of physical intimacy, the lovers engage in an endless series of masquerades: letters, books left behind in the lover's room, lost handkerchieves, photographs, flowers, the remainder of a burnt sheet of poetry, a lock of hair, inscriptions made with blood...all of which conjure up the presence of the beloved in broken, missing forms, as incomplete *traces*. This construction of "love" as a fundamentally *empty* process of signification, an artful play whereby gestures could be continuously exchanged without any positive goal, is probably what unconsciously led to the rejection of Butterfly literature as "dangerous" and "harmful." What is alarming for the morally concerned is *not* that "love" is immoral, but that it is fictional and unrealizable. For Xü Zhenya, on the other hand, the whole artistic meaning of Mengxia and Liniang's affair would have collapsed if they had allowed their love to be physically consummated.

The physical withholding of sentimental desires is thus *Jade Pear Spirit's* most crucial formal aspect. It is what ultimately explains the fragmentariness of the story: while the actual contact between the lovers is almost non-existent, there is always yet another letter or poem to be written with ever greater lucidity and abundance of emotion. The result of such "playful," self-perpetuating displacements is that every happening in this sentimental world always seems too large or too small, too much or too little, but never coherent and together. This sensitive registering of the fundamentally disjunct, dislocated nature of desire makes *Jade Pear Spirit* poignantly germane to the historical dilemma of a China which was still feudal, Confucian, and demoralized but which was also modernized, progressive, and enamored of "new and foreign" things—including the idea of a liberated China—that had become at once the source of fascination and frustration. By parading "love" and "female melancholy" as saleable items, the commercial Butterfly love stories ironically put the declining "Chinese tradition" back in circulation—this time, to compete with other commodities in the capitalistic, westernized urban market place.

Notes

1. The work is cited as the precursor of Butterfly love novels (*xieqing xiaoshuo*) in *Yuanyang hudie pai yanjiu ziliao* (*Research Materials on the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School*), ed. Wei Shaochang (Shanghai, 1962; rpt. Hong Kong: San lian shudian, 1980), p. 108; and in A Ying, *Wan qing xiaoshuo shi* (*The History of Late Qing Fiction*) (Shanghai: Commercial Press Limited, 1937), pp. 72; 264. The Chinese terms for the novel of "love" or "sentiment" are varied, but they all use the character *qing*: *xieqing xiaoshuo*, *aiqing xiaoshuo*, *yanqing xiaoshuo*, *kuqing xiaoshuo*, *canqing xiaoshuo*, etc.

2. C. T. Hsia, "Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun*: An Essay in Literary History and Criticism," *Renditions*, Nos. 17 and 18 (1982), p. 216.

3. John Berninghausen and Ted Huters, "Introductory Essay," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 8, No. 1 (1976), 2.

4. E. Perry Link, "Introduction to Zhou Shou-juan's 'We Shall Meet Again' and Two Denunciations of This Type of Story," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 8, No. 1 (1976), 14.

5. In his study of Wu Woyao's novel, Michael Egan correctly identifies this asymmetrical narrative structure when he points out the much richer psychological depiction of Dihua, the heroine, without whose reactions the tale of her beloved's degeneration would be meaningless. Egan, "Characterization in *Sea of Woe*," in *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Milena Dolezelová-Velingerová (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 165-76.

6. For a discussion of the "*lie nü* tradition," see Marina H. Sung, "The Chinese Lieh-nü Tradition," in *Women in China, Current Directions in Historical Scholarship*, ed. Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen (Youngtown, New York: Philo Press, 1981), pp. 63-74. The article points out how, as the desirable character traits possessed by "virtuous" women in earlier times gradually developed into powerful social and legal restrictions on women's behavior, "chastity" increasingly became the most important female virtue.

7. Not being a historian myself, I am greatly indebted to my friend Dorothy Ko for pointing out to me this particular instance of the *lie nü* genre, and also for the opportunity to read Susan Mann's "Suicide and Chastity: Visible Themes in the History of Chinese Women," a paper delivered at the Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, 1-3 June 1984, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Mann's brilliantly written piece has given me many insights for my own work.

8. Most Butterfly periodicals saw their tasks entirely in giving comfort, arousing interests, and making people happy. Their targets were the whims of the masses, not "profundities." For some examples, see Wei Shaochang, ed., pp. 131-36.

9. The term "middlebrow fiction" is used in the *Renditions* "Special Issue" on Butterfly literature. See *Renditions*, Nos. 17 and 18 (1982). The entire issue and two additional essays are now published as *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction From the Ch'ing and Early Republican Eras*, ed. Liu Ts'un-yan (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984).

10. Both *Jade Pear Spirit* and its sequel, *Xuehong leishi* (*Chronicle of the Great Tears of Bygone Days*), are "generally estimated to have reached a total circulation somewhere in the hundred thousands, including large-scale reprintings in Hong Kong and Singapore. Some have even estimated a total circulation of over a million, counting continued reprintings in the 1920s and later." E. Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 53.