Discourse of the Body and Sexuality: Neo-Confucianism and Eroticism in Ming Culture

Liu Kang

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the "other side," perhaps the (officially) repressed side, of Song (宋) and Ming (明) Neo-Confucianism. While the *li-xue* (理學) or "philosophy of principle" of the Song thinker Zhu Xi (朱熹) serves as apotheosis of the Confucian order by making of ethical subjectivity a metaphysical absolute, the Ming thinker Wang Yangming's (王陽明) *xin xue* (心學) ("philosophy of mind/heart") can be read as an effort to revitalize the neo-Confucian order of *li* (理)-principle by grounding it in the more fundamental and more encompassing notion of *xin*(心), taking *xin* not as (the abstract Confucian principle of) "mind/heart" but as "*physical* heart" ("feeling," "sensuality"), in close conjunction with the terms ti and shen ("body," "embodiment"). Such a reading of Wang's philosophical text is reinforced by the overtly erotic character of much popular literature and art in the Ming period, epitomized by the *Ruo Putuan* (肉蒲團), which tends to parody the sacrosanct Confucian philosophy by linking it to that baleful "lower stratum" of the body sexuality. The crucial but neglected historical link between Song *li xue* and Ming *xin xue* may be best explored through a close reading of the Ming "aesthetic" discourses of physical pleasure.

KEY WORDS

li xue
ethics
sexuality
sensibility
cultural transformation
xin xue
aesthetics
subjectivity
cultural history

TAN SITONG (譚嗣同) (1865-1898), the late Qing (清) radical reformer, made the following remarks while critiquing the Confucian concept of good and evil: "As Wang Chuanshan (王船山) pointed out, the principles of heaven (天理) lie in the desires of human beings (人欲). If there are no human desires, then the principles of heaven cannot be discovered. If one calls men and women having sex licentiousness, this is a licentious naming. If the name does not change, then people will customarily regard licentiousness as an evil act. . . . Since evil stems from the name, and the name is born out of custom, we then know that there is absolutely no evil at all . . ." (205). Tan's comment provides us with a clue to the referential chain of verbal discourse and sexual intercourse, and to the connection of textuality and sexuality in traditional Chinese culture. Such a referential chain, I would argue, has been solidified through centuries of expansion and contraction, sedimentation and distribution. It is only at the moments of social crisis, the junctures of violent rupture and discontinuity of cultural values, that one sees the breakdown of the established referential orders and hierarchies, the systems of customary naming and signification.[1]

The cultural crises and transformations in premodern China can be traced back to the Ming dynasty. If *li xue* (理學), or neo-Confucianism, which is primarily represented by the Song philosopher Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130-1200), serves as the apotheosis of the Confucian Symbolic order by setting up an ethical subjectivity which ontologizes selfhood to a transmoral level, then the Ming philosopher Wang Yangming's (王陽明) (1472-1529) *xin xue* (心學), or the philosophy of mind/heart, can be construed as a last-ditch effort to sustain and revitalize the neo-Confucian Symbolic order of *li* (理) at the brink of social and cultural disintegration.

The study of neo-Confucianism has gained new momentum since the late 1970s thanks to the promotion of the so-called "third stage" of neo-Confucianist revival by several American scholars of neo-Confucianism.

The issues of cultural stagnation, repression, and reformation during the Song and Ming periods have also been hotly debated in the 1980s in both the Chinese speaking world and in western Sinology. However, almost all the discussions have been confined to philosophical or historical circles.[2] The textual landscape that the philosophers and historians of Song-Ming and neo-Confucianism have constructed therefore leaves an obvious lacuna: Where are the more imaginative, sensuous, real hearts/minds behind the philosophical contemplations on heart/mind? Can one really find in philosophical texts all the clues to the perplexing rapidity of the transformation of neo-Confucian *li xue* to *xin xue*? There are alternatives, of course. Song-Ming period is the golden age for popular arts and literature, from the amorous tales of *hua ben* (話本) to lengthy novels like *Jin Ping Mei* (金瓶梅), not to mention the widely popular "bedchamber painting" (erotic illustrations and drawings). I would thus propose a small-scale guerrilla war, so to speak, on the high-brow, or even sacrosanct, philosophical arguments by way of linking them to that baleful "lower stratum" of the body and sexuality. In late Ming and Qing dynasties one may see the proliferation of the language of profanity going almost hand in hand with the neo-Confucian philosophers' endeavor to elevate Confucianism to a truly transcendent religion.

I also propose to look at these issues philologically rather than philosophically. By philology I mean a patient, artful reading of the classics, in an attempt to restore to words as much of their original life and nuances as we can manage.[3] In fact, sinology in its Chinese origin, or *hanxue* (漢學), is very rich in philological and textual studies, particularly in the tradition of *xiaoxue* (小學) and *xungu xue* (訓詁學). The modern scholar Hu Shi (胡適) praises highly the *Qianjia xuepai* (乾嘉學派) school of textual research, discovering in it a "scientific spirit" comparable to what he learned from the modern west's positivist and empiricist science (391). The western sinological studies of the Chinese classics have also well preserved this Chinese tradition. However, the Chinese philological tradition has often lapsed into a kind of intellectual indulgence in classics themselves, and, as a consequence, it stops short of interpreting the historical meaning embedded in the texts under question. Rather than making an elaborate critique of traditional philology and sinology I propose that we reinvent traditional philology with broad interpretive strategies of discourse analysis.

Reinventing Philology: Problems of Language in Neo-Confucian Texts

To reexamine the textual landscape of Song-Ming's neo-Confucian asceticism and eroticism, one can start with certain key terms as interpreted and widely used in the Song and Ming periods, in which the fictional text *Rou Putuan* (肉蒲團) and the philosophical texts of neo-Confucianist *xin xue* (especially Wang Yangming's work) were generated. These terms include: *xin* (心) (heart/mind), *shen* (身) and *ti* (體) (body/substance/embodiment), *se* (色) (sex), *yu* (慾) (desire), *xing* (性) (nature/sex), and *qing* (情) (feeling/desire). Such an intertextual examination may disclose certain inherent connections between the "high" and "low" genres of philosophical treatises and pornographic novels, as well as the interweaving of aesthetic visions of the body, desire and sexuality, and philosophical, religious conceptions of human nature and the universal principle.

The first term is *xin* (心)—heart/mind. As translation always uncovers the latent multifariousness of meaning, *xin* (心) presents a big problem. Wm. T. De Barry's earlier book on *xin xue* is entitled *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy* and the *Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (1981), but his later book, *The Message of the Mind in Neo-Confucianism* (1989), only retains "mind" as the English rendering for *xin* (心).[4] However, in the content of the latter book, De Barry still uses the rather clumsy but more accurate "mind-and-heart" translation. This linguistic uncertainty is not an oversight. As Tu Weiming (杜維明) puts it, the Confucian *xin* (心), which "must be awkwardly rendered as 'heart-mind,'" is connected to the issue of self-cultivation by "integrating the emotive aspects of human life with other dimensions of self-development" (23). Tu Weiming further contends: "the Confucian *xin* (心) must be glossed as 'heart-mind' because it involves both cognitive and affective dimensions of human awareness. This 'fruitful ambiguity' is perhaps the result of a deliberate refusal rather than an unintended failure to make a sharp distinction between conscience and consciousness" (32). *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), (hereafter *Shuowen*), the august dictionary of the classical language, defines *xin* as "human heart, the organ of *tu* (earth), lies in the center of the body, and resembles its form." (心人心土藏也在身之中象形) (*Shuowne* X-10). It is obvious that all other meanings that the word bears are secondary to this foremost meaning of the bodily organ of human beings. Thus, the "ambiguity" or, more precisely, the "plurality" of meanings of the word, does not seem to become a problem once we trace the etymology of the word to its unequivocal pristine meaning. The "mind-and-heart" rendering, on the other hand, seems to signal a duality of soul and body, spirit and substance that the Chinese term *xin* (心) does not imply. To simply translate *xin* (心) as "mind" and Wang Yangming's *xin xue* as "philosophy of mind" unfortunately leaves out the most critical aspect of *xin*.[5]

Closely connected to *xin* are both *shen* (身) and *ti* (體) (body, and to embody). The Confucian tradition emphasizes the body's flesh and blood ties with one's parents—the *Confucian Book of Rites* or *Li ji* (禮記) refers to the body as "the parent's remains" (身也者父母之遺體也) (323). Interestingly, *shen* also is used to refer to one's self—*Er ya*爾雅 defines *shen* as "myself" (身我也) (qtd. in *Zhongwen* 1644). Tu Weiming argues that in the Confucian tradition there is a stress on the importance of taking care of one's *shen* (身) (body) as a necessary condition for learning to be human. "Since self-cultivation in its literal meaning (*xiushen* 修身) refers to the cultivation of the body, there is a rich reservoir of body-related language in the Confucian classics" (Tu 96). How about *ti* (體)? Tu Weiming again: "Man can embody (*ti* 體) the cosmos in his heart as a concretely lived experience rather than a mere intellectual projection" (30). And: "Human beings . . . are endowed with the reality known as the principle (*li*. 理). . . . However, the uniqueness of being human is the intrinsic capacity of the mind to 'embody' (*ti*—construed by Tu as a verb) the cosmos in its conscience and consciousness" (132). The purpose of this cosmic embodiment, Tu argues, is to manifest "true humanity." In order to do so, man must get rid of his *yu*, (慾) or *siyu* (私慾) —selfish desires, because *yu* as such is a "limited and distorted expression of the self," despite the fact that yu constitutes the affective aspect of conscience, or the sensuous essentials of humanity. Hence, Tu Weiming glosses Wang Yangming: "Yangming took it for granted that what is truly human necessarily manifests the 'principle' in its most generalized sense," referring to man's ability to embody the cosmos in his heart. But, "paradoxically," Tu Weiming continues, "selfish desires—*yu*—are detrimental to the original rhythm of the heart"(31). Therefore, Zhu Xi's famous neo-Confucian doctrine of "preservation of the heavenly principle and the elimination of human desire (存天理,滅人慾)" (*Zhuzi* 31).

On the other hand, Wang Yangming's *xin xue* in Tu Weiming's view constitutes a Confucian conception of selfhood as a dynamic, open system, predicated on a strong sense of shareability and commonality. In what he understands as the Confucian self, Tu Weiming stresses "self-knowledge" as a "form of inner experience precisely because it resonates with the inner experiences of the others"(23). *Xin* (心)—heart or mind-pivotal in Wang Yangming's philosophical system, plays no small part in Tu Weiming's modern version of Confucian selfhood. But what, after all, is so essential, and so revolutionary, in Wang Yangming's transition or transformation of neo-Confucianism from the original "principle"—*li* (理)—to the more ambiguous, multifarious "heart/mind"-*xin* (心)? Time and again, Tu Weiming notes paradoxes and contradictions entailed in this crucial movement. However, his ultimate concern is to establish Neo-Confucianism as the philosophical and metaphysical foundation of the East Asian cultures. Considerations of a coherent and continuous philosophical tradition or authority thus predominate in Tu Wei-ming's exegesis of *li xue* and *xin xue* tests, while the radical ruptures and discontinuities between the two are watered down. In the case of Wm. De Barry and others, a powerful, continuing orthodoxy is emphasized from Cheng-Zhu's *li xue* School to Wang Yangming's *xin xue*. (The latter's antecedent in Lu Xiangshan (陸象山) (1139-1193) is even dismissed by de Barry to justify a continuity of orthodoxy from Zhu Xi to Wang Yangming).[6]

Despite the claims of de Barry and other western scholars of neo-Confucianism, the fundamental break between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming is undeniable. Zhu Xi established an ontology of *tian* (天) (Heaven) or *taiji* (太極) (Grand Ultimate) and a hierarchy of *xin* (心), *xing* (性), and *li* (理), in which *xin* (心) has the lowest status and *li* (理) the highest. This hierarchy is consistent with his ontological principle of *li xue*. However, in Zhu Xi's language, there is an inextricably connected referential chain linking three crucial concepts. Zhu Xi wrote: "*Xing* (nature) is *li* (principle). It is called *xing* (nature) if it lies in *xin* (heart), and it is called *li* (principle) if it lies in *shi* (things or matters) (性即理也，在心喚作性，在事喚作理)" (Li Zehou 233). It is this referential linkage that eventually leads to Lu Xiangshan's revisionist conflation of *xin* with *li*. (理)[7] Wang Yangming further reversed and finally rejected Zhu Xi's hierarchy by affirming *xin* (心) as that which contains and embraces, rather than being subject to, the principle *li* (理).

The referential continuum of neo-Confucian language is noted by Li Zehou (李澤厚), the Chinese philosopher and aesthetician. Li Zehou interprets the transformation of *lixue* to *xin xue* from historical and aesthetic perspectives. He argues that "in Song-Ming neo-Confucianism, the sensuous world of nature and the ontological world of ethics and rationality are not separated but intermingled and conflated" (Lu 236-7). However, the internal contradictions of the neo-Confucianist intermingling of natural, instinctual, and sensuous experience with ethical principles are bound to explode when the repression of that fundamental sensuous experience has reached its limit. In Li Zehou's opinion, it expolded in Wang Yangming's *xin xue*.

Wang Yangming was keen on the correlation of *xin* (心) (heart) and *shen* (身) (body): "There is no *shen* without *xin*, and there is no *xin* without *shen*. However, *shen* refers to the parts of full substance, and *xin* refers to its (*shen's*) governing center (無心則無身，無身則無心，但指其充塞處言之謂之身，指其主宰處言之謂之心)" (230). Li Zehou concludes: "Since neither *daoxin* (道心) and *renxin* (人心) are separable, nor are *shen* (身) and *xin* (心) divisible, *li* (理) and *tianli* (天理) become increasingly entwined with the sensuous body of flesh and blood, and become increasingly secularized"(246). The secularization of neo-Confucianism is precisely what makes Wang Yangming's philosophy of heart/mind revolutionary. It led to the naturalist view of humanity, which was developed later by Ming and Qing thinkers such as Li Zhi (李贄) (1527-1602), Kang Youwei (康有為) (1858-1927), and Tan Sitong (譚嗣同).

Critical to the secularization of neo-Confucianism is the great emphasis, and more precisely the daring assertiveness, of the sensuous body and its desires, which were suppressed and silenced by the Confucian orthodoxy. For instance Wang Gen (王艮) (1483-1541), a major advocate of *xin xue*, elevated *shen* (身) over and above *xin* (心): "To take care of both one's body and heart is excellent. Not to take care of one's body but only take care of heart is acceptable. Not to take care of body or heart is terrible" (209). Arguably, the most articulate critic of neo-Confuican *li xue* and champion of human desires is Li Zhi. His famous theory of *tong xin* (童心) (child heart) was based on his unequivocal definition of *xin* (心) as selfish desire: "Selfishness is the heart of man. Man must have selfishness, then the heart is seen. If there is no selfishness, there is no heart (夫私者，人之心也。人必有私而后其心乃見，如無私則無心矣)" (Vol. 32). Towards the end of the Qing period, Kong Youwei went even further to identify *yu* (欲) (desire) with *xing* (性) (nature): "Man is born with desires, which are all human nature (夫生而有欲，天之性哉)"(47).

Interestingly, the story of *xin* (心)'s metamorphosis to *yu* (欲) from the Ming to Qing periods has almost never been mentioned by the western scholars of neo-Confucian philosophy. Nevertheless, when we trace the textual trajectory of neo-Confucian philosophical discourse closely to the "inferior" and "marginal" fictional discourse of the Ming-Qing vernacular stories and novels, we notice that the latter express the cultural trend of secularization in a more audacious and libertine mode of eroticism, particularly in the novels *Jin Ping Mei* (金瓶梅) and *Rou Putuan* (肉蒲團).

Reading Rou Putuan: Discourse of the Body and Eroticism

A crucial but missing link between Wang Yangming's *xin xue* and the pervasive eroticism in the Ming-Qing period can be recovered by way of archaeological probing into the historical textuality whereby the seemingly unrelated genres actually have coexisted and become mutually imbricated. It is therefore worthwhile to continue our (reinvented) philological skirmishes, with the assistance of certain analytical tools drawn from narratology, into the textual labyrinth of Chinese erotic literary discourse. *Rou Putuan* to some extent qualifies as a quintessential erotic novel in the Chinese literary tradition: the main corpus of the novel is dedicated to nothing but an unabashed, most explicit kind of sexual treatise in a dramatic and comic vein. Unlike *Jin Ping Mei* which can still be read as some kind of thematic representation of a proto- "bourgeois domestic novel" even if the sexual scenes were all expurgated, *Rou Putuan* will become virtually nothing when such censorship is applied to it.

The textual and referential links between *xin xue* and the eroticism of Ming fiction can be sought in the arena of language, particularly in the fictional discourse which best embodies the border-crossings, transformations, and hybridizations of "high" philosophical genres and "low" genres of everyday speech and popular laughter. Comic forms and popular laughter effectively dismantle the paradoxes, ambiguities, and indeterminacies of the classic high genres of philosophical discourse. *Rou Putuan* is precisely a kind of comic novel full of crude jokes and popular laughter, gift-wrapped in serious Buddhist and Confucian moral injunctions. As Bakhtin puts it, laughter "has the remarkable power of making an object come up close," so that we "turn it upside down, inside out, peer at if from above and below, open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it" (*Dialogic* 23).

However, the implications of laughter or comic style in *Rou Putuan* cannot be fully grasped by traditional philological readings. We need to move beyond the empirical description and documentation of textual materials, as well as authentication and recovery of original and multiple editions (albeit an indispensable method). What is more interesting is the uncovering of some moments in a text and its historical context: the evolution, the mutilation and transmutation of the discursive chain that links philosophy with aesthetics, eroticism with asceticism, and textuality with sexuality.

If judged merely by the story or content, hardly anything is comparable between *Rou Putuan* and Wang Yangming's philosophical writings. While the latter deals with the serious issues of ethics, morality and knowledge, the former is full of profanity and obscenity. The heroes and heroines of the novel, whenever they laugh or curse, all speak in bodily images of copulation, defecation, and overeating. Their speeches are flooded with genitals, often grotesquely and comically described in minute detail. The comic and carnal world of the novel reminds us of the carnival world of Rabelais, as presented by Mikhail Bakhtin.[8] Interestingly, Lu Yu, the author of *Rou Putuan,* like Rabelais, who has been "least understood and appreciated" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 1), also suffers from infamy because of his liberal views on moral issues, even though he deliberately avoided using his real name as the author of the novel.[9] Moreover, despite the fact that Li Zhi, a major philosopher of *xin xue* in its radical wing, strongly influenced Lu Yu's views of life and arts, the connection between *xin xue* and *Rou Putuan* is largely ignored.[10]

Historical and biographical research is, however, not the main concern here. What I am interested in is the novel's comic style or the representation of laughter based on bodily pleasures, which are indicative of the metamorphoses of the language of sexuality, desire, and the body. As Patrick Hanan puts it, "the most important value in Li Yu's work is pleasure—aesthetic pleasure and plain instinctual pleasure," such as hunger and sex (59). The primacy of pleasure is what gives Lu Yu's work a predominantly comic mood.

Laughter, Comic Style, and Parodic Language

There are two prominent strains of comic style in the novel: the exaggerated emphasis on sexual organs and the comic descriptions of sexual intercourse. Each contains defiant and subversive overtones of varying degrees vis-á-vis the official Confucian discourse. Both strains are also predicated on some kind of parody of the official or serious Confucian language. To some extent, parody is an "artistic dominant" in the novel, to use the Russian formalist term, one inextricably connected to another main stylistic feature of the novel, namely its excessive *yilun* (議論) (discourse) and digressions.

The sexual bravado regarding genitals challenges the cultural taboo by laying bare the tightly concealed parts of the body, thereby linking the discourse of *shenti* (身體) to its primary basis in sexuality as the origin of desire—*yu* (欲) or sexual desire—*seyu* (色欲). The novel is replete with descriptions of male and female genitals, particularly the phallus. These descriptions and usually a stylistic hybrid, mingling Taoist prescriptive and anatomic discourse of the "bedchamber arts" (*fant zhong shu* 房中術) with comic slapstick making fun of Confucian learning, as well as the hackneyed descriptive verses common to Chinese vernacular fiction. The following passage, taken from a discussion between the protagonist Vesperus, or Weiyang Sheng (未央生), and his sexual mentor the Knave, or Kunlun Nu (昆侖奴), well illustrates the stylistic hybrid:

> [When the Knave jokingly derides Vesperus' sexual potency, Vesperus replied:] "You're worrying unnecessarily, my good fellow. The other day I bought myself an excellent sex tonic. I have no woman at present, so I'm a warrior without a battlefield (英雄無用武之地) . . . ."
>
> "Sex tonics can give you endurance only," said the Knave. "They cannot increase your size or firmness. If a man with a large endowment (*ben qian*, 本錢 also means "captial" in doing business) uses one, he'll be like a gifted graduate student (有才學的舉子) taking a ginseng tonic at examination time; in the examination hall his mental powers will naturally be enhanced, and he will be able to express himself well. But if a student with a very small endowment uses one, he'll be no better off than some empty-headed candidate who couldn't produce a line even if he swallowed pounds of the tonic. What's the point of his sitting in an examination cell for three days and nights if all he's doing is holding on regardless of results? . . ."
>
> [The Knave then insisted on examining Vesperus' penis.]

Confronted with such vehemence from his friend, Vesperus could only smile gamely. "My endowment will certainly pass muster," he said, "but I do find it a little indelicate to have to produce it in front of a friend, and in broad daylight too. However, since you're so worried over nothing, I suppose I have no choice but to make a spectacle of myself."

With that, he undid his belt and brought out a penis that was dainty in both size and texture. Weighing it in his hand, he continued, "Here is my modest endowment. Take a close look at it by all means."

The Knave approached and scrutinized it. This is what he saw:

> Body a pearl white,
> Head a crimson glow.
> Around the base thin grasses in dense profusion rise,
> Under the skin fine threads are faintly to be seen.
> Bounced in the hand, it makes no sound, being lighter than the hand itself;
> Touched with the fingers, it retains no trace, its muscles being so few.
> In length all of two inches;
> In weight a good quarter-ounce.
> Solid outside, hollow inside, easy to mistake for a schoolboy's brush handle.
> Sharp of head, tiny of eye, easy to confuse with a Tartar girl's pipe stem.
> A twelve-year-old virgin could accommodate it,
> A thirteen-year-old catamite would delight in it.
> Hard as iron before the event, resembling a very long dried razor calm;
> Bent like a bow when all is done, suggesting a very plump dried shrimp. (Hanan, *Carnal* 97-98)[11]

What is noticeable is the frequent analogies of Confucian scholarship and the warrior-hero with the protagonist's penis and sexual adventures. This can be understood as a deliberate mixing, in a defiant vein, of high Confucian learning with the discourse of sexuality. Structurally, the novel also parodies the epic story of a warrior-hero's or a Confucian scholar's adventurous journey. In Chapter Four, we are told that "Vesperus set out on his study tour. He had no particular destination in mind, but merely let his legs carry him wherever they would. So long as there was a beautiful girl somewhere, he thought, that was where he would settle down." Although Vesperus demonstrates his brilliance in Confucian learning (He was found of joining literary circles, had published a great deal, and was known by name to educated men for hundreds of miles around"), he considers "writing and the social life that went with it were of minor significance beside his quest for a beautiful girl" (Hanan, *Carnal* 60-61). *Rou Putuan's* structural mixing or parody of the Confucian mission with erotic misadventures has certain parallels with Petronius's mock epic, the *Satyricon*, which depicts the sexual misadventures of a rogue, parodying the epic *The Odyssey*.[12]

The comic depiction of or laughter at sexual intercourse further brings home the truth of one's bodily desires and needs as the basis of humanity, though these nevertheless were inhibited by the Confucian orthodoxy. Interestingly, such a depiction of the sexual act often goes hand in hand with discussions of textual or language problems. The episode of Vesperus's initiating his wife into sexual awakening is both hilarious and instructive. The "initiation rite" involves reading a textbook with graphic illustrations of love making, or "Spring Palace Drawings" (*chungong hua* 春宮畫):

> As she took the album from him, Jade Scent had no idea of its subject matter, but assumed it contained landscapes or flower paintings. On opening the album, she saw that the two opening pages bore a title in large script: PICTURES FROM HAN PALACE. There were many virtuous women in the Han place, she thought, and these must be their portraits; let me see what they look like, to have been able to do the virtuous things they did.
>
> But when she turned to the third page and saw a man and a woman copulating stark naked on top of an ornamental rock, her face flushed, and she lost her temper:
>
> "Where did you get such pernicious stuff? Just having it here is enough to pollute a lady's chamber. Have the maid take it out at once and burn it! . . . If you want to improve your mind, do it by looking at famous paintings or calligraphy! What's the point of looking at this sort of frivolous stuff?"

"If this were a frivolous thing," said Vesperus, "the artist wouldn't have painted it, nor the collector have paid a large sum to buy it. It is precisely because it is the most serious subject since the Creation itself that literary men have chosen to paint it, mount it on silk, put it on sale in the art shops, and preserve it in libraries—all for the purpose of advising posterity on the right models of behavior. Otherwise, in the course of time, all knowledge of the mutual reinforcement of yin and yang would be gradually lost, husbands and wives would spurn each other, reproduction would cease, and humankind would eventually become extinct . . . ." (Hanan, *Carnal* 43-44)

After a long and digressive lecture on the seriousness and significance of reading the album as a textbook, Vesperus succeeds in showing her all the pictures, thus arousing her sexual desires to peak. Vesperus then makes his advance by exchanging kisses:

> When kissing her before, he had tried to insert his tongue in her mouth but her tightly clenched teeth always prevented him. As a result, she was still unacquainted with his tongue after more than a month of marriage. But on this occasion he had no sooner touched her lips than that sharp, soft tongue of his had somehow slipped passed her teeth and entered her mouth.
>
> "Dear heart," said Vesperus, "There's no need to use the bed. Why don't we take this easy chair as our rock and try to imitate the picture in the album. What do you say?"
>
> Jade Scent pretended to be angry. "People don't do things like that!"
>
> "You are right," said Vesperus, "people don't do them. Only *immortals* do! Let's be immortals for a little while!"
>
> （玉香假意惱道：這豈是人幹的事！未央生道：果然不是人幹的事，乃是神仙幹的事。我和你權作一刻神仙。） (Hanan, *Carnal* 49)

Discussions of "improper" books, texts, and language are often the most irreverent kind of dismantling of the Chinese language long considered sacrosanct and viewed with great awe by the populace. Such discussions abound. For instance, when one of Vesperus's mistresses, Fragrance, decides to elope with him, the first thing she thinks about is the proper words for her deeds, which follows precisely the Confucian principle of rectifying names or *zheng ming* (正名), but in a mocking reversal of the values that the Confucian principle is based upon:

> ". . . If you take just one lover during your whole life and stick with him, even the words "taking a lover" (*ton han* (偷漢), literally "stealing a man") will be rectified in due course. Eventually you'll receive honors and a title and qualify as a heroine. Those weak, useless creatures who scarcely manage to consummate their love and then waste the rest of their lives on their lovers, in some cases never seeing them again and even pining to death—aren't they ridiculous? The formula for taking a lover is composed of two terms, *adultery* and *elopement*, which are inseparable. If you are going to commit adultery, you have to elope (淫奔二字，原分不開。既要淫，就要奔。) . . ." (Hanan, *Carnal* 158)

A similar "deconstructive" moment of textual playfulness occurs when a notebook entitled *Garner the Beauties of Spring from Far and Wide (Guangshou chunse* 廣收春色) is discovered and discussed by the three mistresses of Vesperus. Flora offers an ingenious interpretation of its language:

> "What a genius Cang Jie 蒼頡 (the legendary creator of the Chinese language) was, to invent the character script for out use!"
>
> "What makes you say that?" asked Cloud.
>
> "There's not a single stroke in any of the characters he invented that does not have its meaning. For instance, the character *jian* 姦 in *jianying* (姦淫) (adultery) is composed of three *nü*女 (woman) characters. Since you three are living together and committing adultery, you must surely appreciate the brilliance of the invention!" (Hanan, *Carnal* 246)

Discourse and Digression: Utterance of Sexuality

The comic effect in *Rou Putuan* is not generated by the unchecked glorification of sexual debauchery. On the contrary, it stems from a peculiar mode of narration, which employs extensive discursive rhetorical devices. By discursive I mean not in the sense of discourse, but in the primary sense of digression.

Digressive *yilun* (議論) (discourse) in *Rou Putuan* is blatantly didactic and moralistic. But upon a closer look, it is a medley of the Buddhist admonitions about the emptiness and danger of licentious indulgence, the perennial motif of retribution, and a hedonistic glorification of sensual enjoyment and libidinal wish-fulfillment. Corresponding to this thematic concoction, the novel is a complex hybrid of styles. The jostling styles and voices constitute a kind of carnivalistic language in a Bakhtinian sense.[13] However, the most noteworthy stylistic feature of the novel is not so much a carnivalization of language as a metacritical commentary permeating the entire corpus of the novel. *Rou Putuan's* narrator intervenes freely to deliver his lectures and comments, which assume the form of the narrator-audience dialogue. The kind of dialogue is abundant in the novel, intersticed in the narrative of events, in the introduction, in the epilogues and prologues, and in the section of critique appended to the end of each chapter.

Rou Putuan's metacritical commentary or *yilun* first involves a dual justification—a justification of sexuality and then a self-justification of the novel's discourse about sexuality. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator starts with a justification of sex:

> Our lives would be so filled with toil and worry as to leave no room for pleasure—had not the Sage who separated Heaven from Earth created in us the desire for sexual intercourse to alleviate our toil and worry and save us from despair. (還虧那太古之世，開天劈地的聖人，制一件男女交媾之情). In the parlance of our Confucian sticklers for morality, a woman's loins are the entrance through which we come into the world and also the exit by which we leave it. But the way wise men see these things is that, without those loins, our hair might go white a few years sooner than otherwise, and our deaths occur a few years sooner too . . . It would thus appear that the word we call sex (女色二字) is not harmful to mankind. However, because the *Materia Medica* (*Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目) failed to include it, we lack a definitive explanation. One view holds that it is good for us, another that it does us harm. But if we compare both views in the light of the above argument, we must con-

clude that sex is beneficial. (Hanan, *Carnal* 4)

Next, the narrator justifies his own discourse on sexuality or on writing the novel:

> The author of this novel has been motivated solely by compassion in his desire to expound the [Confucian] doctrine. His hope is to persuade people to suppress their desires, not indulge in them; his aim is to keep lechery hidden rather than to publicize it. Gentle readers, you must on no account misconstrue these intentions of his. (Hanan, *Carnal* 8)

The justifications neatly encapsulate a textual history of sexuality, or rather, the discourse of sexuality, that had been all but eclipsed in the Confucian orthodoxy. The narrator links sexual pleasure to the ancient Sage and the Confucian rhetoric, thus recovering a classic tradition of sexual discourse starting with the *I Ching* (易經) *or the Book of Change.* The *I Ching's* fundamental principle of the yin and yang can be said to mean primarily the harmonious relationship between the two opposite sexes or the act of sexuality: "Heaven and Earth come together, and all things take shape and find form. Male and female mix their seed, and all creatures take shape and are born. (天地絪縕，萬物化醇。男女構精，萬物化生。)" (Baynes 342) Apparently, *Rou Putuan*'s narrator invokes the Sage of the *I Ching* legacy for the justification of sexual pleasure.

Another manifest *raisons* of the novel is Confucian orthodoxy. However, the Confucian discourse of sexuality was bifurcated and ambivalent from the beginning. On the one hand, there is an affirmation of human sexuality as shown in the *I Ching* tradition. *Li Ji* 禮記 or the *Book of Rites* recognized that "food and sex are the primary desires of human beings (飲食男女,人之大慾存焉);" (*Li Ji-Li Yun Pian* 23) and Mencius reiterated that "[Desires for] food and sex are human nature (食色,性也)" (*Mengzi*.41). On the other hand, Confucius cautioned against sexual desires from both ethical and medical viewpoints: "Substitute sexual desires with the learning of virtues (賢賢易色)," (*Lunyu*.76) and "when one is young, one's blood and vital forces have not taken shape, thus abstinence from sex is necessary (少之時,血氣未定,戒之在色)" (*Lunyu*.107). This cautionary, if not entirely negative, stance of Confucius towards sexuality evolved over the years into Zhu Xi's "preservation of the heavenly principle and the elimination of human desire."

Rou Putuan's justification of sexuality therefore must negotiate between the two almost opposite standpoints within the Confucian tradition in order to work out its own solutions, in much the same way as Wang Yangming revised and finally undid Zhu Xi's *li xue* doctrines. Wang Yangming unraveled *li xue*'s inherent contradiction by himself offering self-contradictory definition of *xin*—heart/mind: the "human heart/mind is filled with selfish desires" (人心即人慾) but at the same time is "the equivalent of *ren*"-love, benevolence as the cardinal Confucian virtue (仁，人心也) (196, 223). In a similar manner, *Rou Putuan's* narrator calls forth "suppression of desires" while affirms the value of sexual pleasure by having recourse to the same Confucian legacy. The critical difference between Wang Yangming and the narrator of *Rou Putuan*, though, lies in the latter's self-consciousness of, and playfulness with, the ambivalence of language.

Not surprisingly, *Rou Putuan's* narrator claims that he draws on the discursive model of Mencius who deploys a paradoxical rhetoric in persuading the emperor to give up his evil pursuits. The narrator insists that:

> If only the entire reading public would buy this book and treat it as a *classic* or as a *history* rather than *fiction*! (但願普天下的看官，買部當經史讀，不可作小說觀) Its addresses to the reader are all either admonitory or hortatory, and close attention should be paid to their underlying purposes. Its description of copulation, of the pleasures of the bedchamber, do indeed come close to indecency, but they are all designed to lure people into reading on until they reach the denouement, at which point they will understand the meaning of retribution and take heed. Without these passages the book would be nothing but an olive that, for all its aftertaste, would be too sour for anyone to chew and hence useless. (Hanan, *Carnal* 11)

There are two points in this passage of self-legitimation that merit our attention. First, the narrator's elevation of the novel's generic status from the inferior "small talk" of fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說) to "classics and history" (*jingshi* 經史) suggests as unusual critical self-consciousness of the textual hierarchies in the Confucian tradition. Second, while defending his seriousness in writing the novel, the narrator provides a well-defined reading strategy of deciphering *fanmian jiaocai* 反面教材 (negative lessons) in order to proffer positive lessons. This is indeed an age-old technique of textual framing with distinct Chinese characteristics. Interestingly, not only Confucian but also Buddhist writings use this textual strategy. An earlier case is the erotic "court poetry" (*gong ti shi* 宮體詩) of the Liang period, which often employed a Buddhist textual strategy similar to the one that *Rou Putuan* adopts.[14] As the Liang critic Monk Zhao (僧肇) put it, "Using the lecherous woman as bait to lure the lustful men, in order to show them the way of Buddha. This is called turning desires into observance of Buddhist doctrines (反欲以順)."[15]

Textual strategies, we all know too well, are political instruments serving the need of punishment, suppression, justification, and indoctrination, particularly in imperial China. *Rou Putuan*, however, since it belongs to an unceremonious genre of xiaoshuo, does not have to conform to the dictates of an official writing scheme. On the contrary, *Rou Putuan's* language is meant to please the lowly and base interests of desire and to deride the high-flown official or semi-official discourse. Its description of sex is condemned by serious scholars as vulgar, outrageous, and abusive, and is said to bear the traits of any cheap pornographic writing. But people love to read it in spite of its vulgarity and obscenity. Why? In addition to the populace, which consisted of the bulk of its readership, scholars of refined taste find it palatable, too, because reading it yields a kind of aesthetic pleasure that is beyond pure sensual gratification, a kind of intellectual and even moral stimulation, as it were.

The aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction of reading *Rou Putuan* stems from its style and form. As I have analyzed earlier, the novel's comic and satirical style has certain carnivalistic features that are both hilarious and instructive. Reading the novel thus yields a pleasure derived from its form: travesty-parody, generic border-crossing and transgression of textual genres and conventions that regulate, normalize, and frame human discourses. The novel achieves the generic transgression by reframing the moral, didactic and cautionary narrative frame. Such a reframing or reforming necessarily entails the danger of further splitting the values of retribution and suppression of desires on the one hand, and the immanent pleasure of sexuality on the other.

Here perhaps lies the charm, or even the intention of *Rou Putuan's* discursiveness: the intricate formal play and the stylistic hybrid. It's density constitutes a "blockage," by jolting and hustling the heroes, the heroines, and the audience at each critical moment, and by suspending, holding up the climactic orgasm. One would tend to regard it as anticlimactic that almost any time the hero and heroine are about to explode in their sexual orgy, the untimely narrator, otherwise a perfect unassuming surrogate voyeur, begins to chime in with his long treatise.

However, such narrative "blockage" is not to be understood as an indication of the novel's failure to come to terms with the inherent contradiction between the sensuous experience and ethical rationality embodied in Wang Yangming's *xin xue*. On the contrary, I suspect, the novelistic discourse of *Rou Putuan* capitalizes on the deferral, or the differential slow-motion, caused by the endless digression and discourse on sexual technologies to maximize orgasm, as well as on the ethical and therapeutic dimensions of love-making. Again, take for example the episode of Vesperus's sexual initiation of his wife, after the "foreplay" of viewing together the pornographic paintings:

> Taking off her trousers, Vesperus noticed a large wet patch in the seat caused by her lecherous fluid oozing out as a result of viewing the pictures. He took off his own trousers and pulled her over to the chair, where he made her sit with her legs apart. He then inserted his jade whisk into her vagina before removing the clothes from her upper body.

At this point, instead of going directly into his usually quite graphic and detailed description of love-making, the narrator pauses, and steps outside the scene, as it were, to offer a lengthy, discursive lecture to his putative audience:

> Why did he not start at the top and work his way down instead of taking off his trousers first, you ask. You must realize that Vesperus was an experienced lover. Had he taken her top off first, despite all the agitation in her heart she would still have felt shy and indulged in all kinds of coy pretense. He chose instead to seize the key position first and let the rest of the territory fall into his hand later, a strategy that corresponds in military terms to seizing the rebel leader and destroying his stronghold. In fact Jade Scent put up no resistance, but let him loosen her gold bracelets, undo her silk sash, and strip off all her other

> clothes, including her underwear and breast-band, everything but her leggings. *Why did he take off her other clothes but leave her leggings on?* You must understand that everything a woman is wearing can be removed except her leggings. *Why is that?* . . . (Hanan, *Carnal* 50)

For all its explicit and graphic depiction of sexual intercourse, deemed by so many as indecent, the hilariously irreverent and comic-serious tone of the narrator in his sexual discourse or *yilun* does yield some kind of pleasure, a "pleasure of text" (*plaisir du texte*) as Roland Barthes calls. 16

The pleasure of reading the novel that *yilun* kindles has an important function: to release, to articulate, in a carnivalistic style of hyperbole and extravaganza, the discourse of sexuality that had long been suppressed. As Michel Foucault points out, before the advent of Enlightenment rationalism in the West, "sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit" (*History* 3). But after the Enlightenment and the reign of Victorian bourgeois puritanism, "sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home" (*History* 3). But in other cultures such as "China, Japan, India, Rome, The Arabo-Moslem societies," there has been an "*ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience" (*History* 57). Foucault, however, is not immune to the Orientalizing simplification of an unrestricted Oriental sexual discourse as Other. As a mater of fact ,the Confucian orthodoxy has long taken sexual discourse as a cultural taboo and strictly prohibited textual representation and discussion of sexuality, to the extent that the rich textual tradition of sexual arts and techniques, Taoist "bedchamber arts" or *fangzhong shu* in particular, had almost been lost over the millennia. Song Neo-Confucianism is especially responsible for the establishment of rigid sexual taboos resulting in one of the most remarkable textual ruptures in Chinese culture.

The Song Neo-Confucian repression of the discourse of sexuality and sensuous pleasure was overturned by the Ming proliferation of erotic and hedonistic cultural trends, and Wang Yangming's *xin xue*, probably a last-ditch effort to reinvigorate the Confucian orthodoxy, ironically served as a catalyst for the collapse of *li xue's* stringent moral precepts. As I have stressed, a crucial but missing link between Wang Yangming's *xin xue* and the pervasive eroticism of the Ming-Qing period can be recovered by way of archaeological probing into the historical textuality whereby the seemingly unrelated genres actually have coexisted and become mutually imbricated.

Recent American Neo-Confucian shcolars' efforts to identify either a continuous Neo-Confucian orthodoxy or a coherent, systematic philosophy in Song-Ming *li xue* and *xin xue* have been primarily motivated by a desire to justify the success of the so-called East Asian model of the "economic miracle." However, such an effort betrays its ahistorical tendency by its textual strategy of exclusion and willful neglect of a critical historical dimension. We may, if we can, seek the crucial but neglected historical link through an aesthetic and textual investigation of corporeal pleasure, manifested in the discourses of the heart, the body, and sexuality. It is a pleasure to be gained through " the art of reading slowly," which is the definition of philology given by Roman Jackson (qtd. in Watkins 25). Let's exercise our aesthetic sensibility by engaging in the artful slow reading and rereading of the texts of Wang Yangming and *Rou Putuan* once again.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of how to interpret textual transformations in the western tradition, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 4-15.

[2] See, for instance, MacFarquhar, "The Post-Confucian Challenge," *The Economist*. Also see Tu Wei-ming (杜維明), "Ruxue di san qi fazhan be qianjing wenti (儒學第三期發展的前景問題)" (The prospect of the "third-stage" development of Confucianism). *Mingbao yuekan* (明報月刊). Tu has written extensively in both Chinese and English on Neo-Confucianism, some of which are discussed in this essay. In China, Tang Yiiie (湯一介)'s Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan (中國文化書院) (The Academy of Chinese Culture) had been the most active forum for Neo-Confucian debates until June 1989. Uncannily, after the largely anti-official "wenhua re (文化熱)"(cultural fever), neo-Confucian of neo-neo-Confucian revival have become an official feat for the promotion of "patriotism" and "national pride." See Tang Yijie ed., *Lun Zhongguo chuantong wenhua—Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan jiangyan lu* (論中國傳統文化－中國文化書院講演錄) (On traditional Chinese culture—lectures at the academy of Chinese culture) (Beijing, 1988). The only exception is Li Zehou, who, though never an advocate of neo-Confucianism, sees the intri-

cate connections of the neo-Confucian philosophical arguments to aesthetic sensibilities of the Song-Ming periods. This essay owes a great deal to Li Zehou's invaluable insights into these tangled issues.

[3] For a recent debate about philology in the West, see *Comparative Literature Studies* Special Issue on "What is Philology?" Vol. 27, No. 1, (Pennsylvania State University, 1990).

[4] See De Barry, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy* and *The Message of the Mind*.

[5] See, for instance, Chung-ying Cheng, *New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, especially Chapter 16, "Unity and Creativity in Wang Yang-ming's Philosophy of Mind" 396-417. Cheng translates xin strictly as "mind."

[6] See De Barry, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy* and *The Message of the Mind,* especially the latter's "Conclusion" 230-233.

[7] See Lu Xiangshan (陸象山), *Lu Jiuyuan ji* (陸九淵集).

[8] See Bakhtin, *Rabelais*.

[9] A recent biography of Li Yu, although said to be an account of "revolutionary changes" and cultural "transformations" of the times as reflected in Li Yu's life and writings, betrays its bias by rigorously denying Li Yu's authorship of *Rou Putuan*. Notwithstanding its extensive assemblage of empirical evidence as a common Sinological practice, the authors reveal their real reason by denouncing the work as a "notorious pornographic novel" (Chang 12). It is all too often that the authorship issue serves as empirical means for ideological arguments. See Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang.

[10] See Chang 162. Since the authors reject Li Yu's authorship of the novel, there is no mention of the intertextual relationship between Wang Yangming and Li Yu.

[11] See *Ruo Putuan* (肉蒲團). I used a 1983 lithographic reprint of 1705 Qing edition. English translation see Hanan, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*. All quotations from the novel are taken from Hanan's translation with my own modifications when necessary.

[12] See Petronius*he*

[13] For a Bakhtinian notion of carnival or carnivalization of language and literature, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais* and *Problems*, especially the latter's Chapter Four, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works" 101-181. The Chinese vernacular fiction of Ming-Qing periods has exhibited certain stylistic features that bear remarkable resem-

blance to what Bakhtin described as the medieval and Renaissance European carnivalized literature, *Rou Putuan* being one of such Chinese works. Other Chinese novels with "carnivalesque" stylistic features include *The Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji* 西遊記) *and The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), just to mention two most prominent onest.

[14] For an insightful discussion of the relationship of the Court Poetry's eroticism to Buddhism, see Wang Chunhong.

[15] See Monk Zhao (僧肇).

[16] See Barthes.

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