

Sexuality and Power : A Feminist Reading of *Chin P'ing Mei*

Ying-Ying Chien

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Review of Scholarship

The *Chin P'ing Mei* 金瓶梅 (CPM), one of the six greatest classical Chinese novels, has long been neglected by scholars until the last twenty years. Due to its sensuous descriptions and erotic passages, *CPM* has been attacked as "yin-shu" 淫書 (a pornographic book) or "hui-shu" 穢書 (a dirty book) and has been censored and banned by the Chinese government.¹ This notorious book has been, however, praised by some recent scholars as the first "modern" Chinese novel² and a masterpiece of realism,³ with natural "life-size" characters and relatively complex and insightful female characters.⁴

The history of the *CPM* scholarship can be divided in general into three stages: first, before 1960; second, the 1960's; third, from 1970 until the present.⁵ From the first to the third stage, while scholarly attention focuses primarily on the text, the form, and the structure of the novel, there has been an increasing interest in the characterization, especially that of females.⁶ Considering the *CPM* as the first important domestic novel in depicting the life of Chinese women, in the present study I offer a re-reading of the novel from a feminist perspective to re-evaluate some aspects of the novel, especially in the areas of the representation of women in literature and the problem of the sexes, and to offer a new interpretation of the *CPM*.

B. Feminist Criticism

As background for such a reinterpretation, it will be helpful for us to consider some concepts which I will be using from feminist criticism. According to the feminist critic Elaine Showalter, feminist literary criticism can be divided into two distinctive types: the so-called "feminist critique" and "gynocritique" (or "gynocritics").⁷ The first type of criticism, considering woman as reader, is "a historically grounded inquiry which probes the

ideological assumptions of literary phenomena" and is essentially "political and polemical,"⁸ while the second type, considering woman as writer, studies the problem of a female language, of female creativity and of female literary careers is more "self-contained and experimental."⁹ Since the problem and debate on *CPM's* authorship is still unsolved and the candidates for its author(s) are all male,¹⁰ it is certainly more logical and appropriate to adopt the first kind of criticism which is directly related to the female reader's response, namely the "feminist critique," for the present study.

As a mode of interpretation, the "feminist critique" or "feminist reading," according to Showalter, is concerned with "woman as the consumer of a male-produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a *female reader* changes our appreciation of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its *sexual codes*" (emphasis mine).¹¹ Echoing the above idea, Andrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert, and Annette Kolodny, among others, also herald the concept of "re-reading" or "revisioning" past literary texts from the woman's point of view.¹² Rich's idea of "Revisionism,"¹³ Gilbert's "Revisionary Imperative,"¹⁴ and Kolodny's "Revisionary re-reading"¹⁵ pinpoint the importance of the prefix "re—" in the conscious action of woman's reading. Indicting literary creation and criticism dominated by man in general in the context of the patriarchal society, they assert the significance of "re-vision" — "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction"¹⁶ in the feminist criticism.

Under the proposition of re-reading literary texts produced in a male-dominated society from the feminist perspective, three areas of study have been offered for re-interpretation by the critics—first, the images and stereotypes of women in literature; second, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism; third, the ideas of women-as-sign in semiotic systems.¹⁷ Some good examples of research done in these directions are: Cornillon's *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (1972), Ferguson's *Images of Women in Literature* (1977), Heilbrun's *The Representation of Women in Fiction* (1982), and Edwards's *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* (1984), among others.¹⁸

C. Thesis

As mentioned before, some recent studies of *CPM* have revealed interest in the characterization of women and a few of them have even displayed sympathy toward their position and role in the traditional Chinese society,¹⁹

however representation of women and the problem of the sexes are still marginal issues in the essentially male-centered criticism and a full-length study of the novel from the feminist perspective is therefore still lacking. Above all, while literary critics in Taiwan have started doing research in feminism, hardly any classical Chinese literature has been re-evaluated seriously from such a point of view.

Unlike traditional critics who tend to trivialize the problem of "sexual codes," I propose here a reinterpretation of *CPM* in which I regard the problem of sexual codes or sexuality as the central issue. I therefore see three aspects of such a reinterpretation: (1) the re-evaluation of the "femme fatale" stereotype which specifically questions the validity of the interpretation of Pan Chin-lian 潘金蓮, the female protagonist, as a bad or fatal woman; (2) the study of the issue of marginality vs. centrality of the female characters particularly the position of Chin-lian in the novel; (3) the analysis of Chin-lian's death, which shall shed light on its real implications as a consequence of feminist critique.

II. IS PAN CHIN-LIAN A "FEMME FATALE"?

In the opening poem of the *CPM*, the ruination of two great historical heroes is told: Hsiang Yü 項羽 and Liu Pang's 劉邦 ruins are attributed to the beauty of two women, Yü-chi 虞姬 and Ch'i-shih 戚氏 (Ch. 1, p.1). Comparing man to iron and stone, while woman to the flower, the poem indicates that the power of the former will eventually be dissolved by the latter.²⁰ As the narrator starts introducing the subject of *ch'ing* 情 (love, passion) and *sê* 色 (carnal love, lust) immediately after the poem, the idea that woman is dangerous and destructive as the primary source of man's passion and lust becomes evident. Essentially, woman is blamed here as the cause of man's disaster or misfortune.

The stereotype of the fatal woman, or the so-called "femme fatale" in the *CPM* is first suggested by Patrick Hanan. According to him, by including the two historical characters and the story of their downfall at the hands of beautiful women in the opening poem of the novel, the author sets up a parallel between these women and Pan Chin-lian and thus reveals his intention of creating "a femme fatale heroine (Pan Chin-lian) of inordinate sexual appetite who ruins physically or financially all the men she captivates."²¹ Along the same lines, Te-wei Wang criticizes Pan Chin-lian as a "bad woman," or more specifically, the worst woman in the world of Chinese fiction.

Although Wang disagrees with the western usage of the term "femme fatale," regarding Chin-lian as the reincarnation of evil, he names her a "huo-shui" 禍水 (literally, the troubling water) from the traditional Chinese view point.²²

Indeed, for hundreds of years, the image of Chin-lian has aroused an immediate sense of dislike and shame in the mind of the reader and critic. For example, C.T. Hsia calls her "an unfeeling and insatiable nymphomaniac," and "the queen bee or black widow spider" who would sacrifice man to gratify her own sexual desire.²³ Both Catherine Carlitz and Mary Scott compare her to the cutting west wind in autumn that symbolizes sterility and brings coldness and destruction.²⁴ Shu-yu Sun adopts the Buddhist term *ch'en* 嗔 (anger), which is one of the three poisons at the root of *avidya* (*wu-ming* 無明, evil), to criticize Chin-lian.²⁵ Other Chinese critics have called her a sensualist, avenger, murderer, and used terms like evil, jealousy ruthlessness, etc. to summarize her nature.

To the feminists, however, the origins of the misogynous nature of the "femme fatale" or "huo-shui" stereotype in literature are due to the faulty assumptions about sex and gender differences. According to the traditional Freudian definition of femininity, feminine sexuality, and the idea of "penis envy," women are biologically inferior to men and are passively waiting to be fulfilled and defined by men. Women are, therefore, degraded as "the lack," "the other," or "the second sex" in a phallogocentric society.²⁶ In everyday life, they are dehumanized to men's possessions, like houses or jewelry; in the fictional world, they are not represented as what they really are and are perceived merely as objects.²⁷ Due to men's desire and fear of women, women are trivialized into two opposing stereotypes in literature — the angel and the good wife vs. the demon and the bad woman (or femme fatale).²⁸ Such a myth of the "eternal feminine" is used as one of the "moral technologies" to dominate our (especially women's) thinking and behavior in a patriarchal society.²⁹

In light of the sexually biased nature of the femme fatale or evil woman type, in the following section, I shall re-evaluate the representation of Chin-lian in the *CPM* to question the traditional criticism of her as a bad woman on both the historical and literary levels.

A. Historical Level

From the historical view point, the *CPM* is a novel of social realism which depicts truthfully various aspects of the late Ming society.³⁰ Patronized by

the government, the neo-Confucianism represented by Chu-hsi had a strong impact on the politics, philosophy, and daily existence of the people. Not only the social but the family structure was built upon the patriarchal hierarchy of the neo-Confucian ideology. Consequently, men's status was higher than that of women and they also enjoyed more "rights." The common practices of polygamy, concubinage, slavery, prostitution, and footbinding reveal such sexual inequalities of that time.³¹

Under the Confucian ideas of the "three obediences" and "four virtues,"³² women were confined to the home and their duties were to serve and be submissive. With low social and legal status, they were viewed as *sex objects* — bearers of sons and helpers to the husbands — and they were denied access to the rites of ancestor worship and the inheritance of family properties.³³ While any sexual transgressions on the women's part would result in humiliation, physical punishment, or divorce, men could enjoy the liberty of having more than one wife and were not penalized for extra-marital relationships.

Further, women were degraded into *commercial objects* readily sold or exchanged among men. In a society where only sons could earn money and continue the family line, daughters were unwelcome. As the "spilled water," a daughter, being married, "belonged to" the family of her husband. Among poor families, incidents of female infanticide were not unusual, and the selling of daughters as maids or slaves was also a common practice.³⁴ Once having been sold to rich families, the poor women had no protection from society or their original family — they could be punished, tortured, or transferred.

In the *CPM*, the Hsi-men household is the microcosm of such a patriarchal society, and Chin-lian can be seen as the representative of the women sacrificed under this unjust system. Her experiences portray a woman subjected to adversities completely beyond her control and imposed on her by the patriarchal society. Born in a poor tailor's family as the sixth daughter, she is sold three times and transferred twice throughout her life. According to the novel, Chin-lian is first sold at age nine by her mother for financial reasons when her father dies. Thus the poor girl becomes a slave/maid to the rich Wang Chao-hsüan for six years. When Master Wang dies, she is sold again by her mother to the old Chang Ta-hu for twenty liang 兩 of silver. In short, before reaching sixteen years of age, Chin-lian has already been sold like a commodity twice by her own mother.

Having been bought as a monetary object in the first place, she is further

exploited as a sex object by men. At the age of eighteen, the fully mature and beautiful Chin-lian is raped by her lascivious master. The result: she is beaten cruelly by her jealous mistress and then given away free (transferred for the first time) to a poor, ugly, dwarf as wife. Married to the cowardly Wu Ta 武大 against her will on the one hand, Chin-lian is used secretly by her old master as mistress on the other. Her bitterness and helplessness are subtly revealed through a sad song (Ch. 1, p. 8), in which Chin-lian laments that she has no freedom in choosing a husband to match her beauty and no control whatsoever over her ill fate.

Under such miserable circumstances, Chin-lian's feelings are suppressed and almost always denied since the day she was sold. In light of her great distress, Chin-lian's instinctive attraction toward her handsome, strong, and tall brother-in-law, Wu Sung 武松, the hero who just killed a tiger, is more of a natural consequence of her young, unfulfilled love than a shameful deed of seduction. In addition, Chin-lian's affair with Hsi-men Ch'ing 西門慶 results partly from her unrequited love toward Wu Sung and mostly from the trap set by Hsi-men Ch'ing and the bawd. Furthermore, Chin-lian's role in poisoning Wu Ta is forced upon her because of Hsi-men's lust for possessing Chin-lian and Mother Wang's greediness for money. Actually, Mother Wang is the one who conceives the murder consented to by Hsi-men and who carries out most of it step by step, while Chin-lian has no other choice but to follow instructions and become the scapegoat of the two evil powers.

The second transference of Chin-lian occurs when Hsi-men, the rich rogue, succeeds in taking her in as his fifth wife (or fourth concubine). Born low and poor, she is already inferior in the cruel and fierce competition among wives for their common husband's favor, not to mention that she never bears him any son. So when Hsi-men dies, Chin-lian is driven away to be sold at the order of Wu Yüeh-niang 吳月娘, the first wife. Eventually, she is sold (the third and last time) for 100 liang of silver by Mother Wang to Wu Sung, and killed mercilessly by him in the end.

Throughout her short life, Chin-lian is sold and transferred like merchandise in the market, used and exploited like a sex object by men. From childhood, she is subjected to humiliation, hatred, cruelty, disgrace, and betrayal, without any real love or caring. She is raped, tortured, threatened, despised, and eventually killed. In light of these conditions forced upon her, Chin-lian, rather than being a bad or fatal woman, is a poor victim whose miserable encounters in the novel create the picture of a degraded woman

sacrificed by an unjust world of patriarchy.

B. Literary Level

The degradation of Chin-lian can be seen not only through reevaluation of the plot concerning her life but also through literary devices employed in the novel. To begin with, the novel is told through two points of view: first, a collective male consciousness represented by poems of patriarchal morality above the narrative;³⁵ second, a male narrator who actually tells the story. Under such a double narrative device, the real Chin-lian is twice removed from the reader. In other words, the reader can only see the distorted picture of her representation through these biased perspectives. In addition to the element of point of view, the frequent use of animal imagery and sexual symbolism in relation to Chin-lian suggests the dehumanization of her character in the novel. The various animals associated with Chin-lian in the *CPM* can be divided in general into two types: the first type concerns her sexuality; the second, her nature.

In her sexual relationship with men, Chin-lian is often related to animal images. For example, in Chapter 4, she is presented as a snake when making love to Hsi-men (p. 34); in Chapter 12, she is degraded to the position of a horse while been beaten ruthlessly by the enraged Hsi-men with a horse-whip.³⁶ And in Chapter 19, she is likened to a butterfly when flirting with Chen Ching Chi 陳經濟 in the flower garden (p. 149). It is in the famous Chapter 27 that the drunken Chin-lian is humiliated as a dragon bound and hung with legs wide apart under the vine lattice by the sadistic Hsi-men (p. 229). Indeed, as an imprisoned beauty (symbolized by the female dragon), Chin-lian can never escape the net of her society (symbolized by the entangled vine lattice) and the exploitation of men (symbolized by Hsi-men himself). Associated with a snail after the sexual assault of Hsi-men in the same chapter, she is further degraded to an insect in the dirt.³⁷

The second type of animal images in the novel reveals Chin-lian's animal-like nature. For example, in Chapter 52, she is compared to a black cat (p.468), and especially to "hsüeh-shih-tzû" (The Snowy-White-Lion), the white cat with a black line on its back, which was said to cause the death of Kuan-kê 官哥 in Chin-lian's fierce competition with Li P'ing-êrh 李瓶兒 for Hsi-men's love. Compared to the rich and favoured P'ing-êrh, the poor and jealous Chin-lian is no more than the dog or the dog's dung which has stained Chin-lian's red shoes (Ch. 58, p. 528); while in the eyes of Yüeh-niang, Chin-lian is nothing but the transformation of a "nine-tailed fox spirit" 九尾狐狸

精 which should be gotten rid of as soon as possible (Ch. 75, p. 750). Above all, Chin-lian is associated with the furious tiger in the beginning of the story. Here, the tiger not only reflects on Chin-lian's character but also foreshadows her death in Chapter 87 at the hand of Wu Sung. Although she is compared to a violent female tiger which kills many people. Chin-lian is nonetheless a prey at the mercy of the male hunter.

While the frequent association of Chin-lian with animals indicates her sexuality and animal-like nature, it also reminds us of the constant struggle between woman and man, nature and culture, individual will and social norm. The subordination of the former to the latter is revealed through the trials of the degraded Chin-lian, a bare-footed animal in a hostile society full of traps and snares.

Chin-lian is not only degraded with animal imagery but also dehumanized to sex object in the *CPM*. The dehumanization and passivity of Chin-lian are best illustrated in Chapter 27, where she is seen as a "jou-hu" 肉壺 (a vase of flesh). Here, Hsi-men's act of "t'ou-hu" 投壺 (aiming at the vase or throwing things into the vase) has sexual connotations. By using the plums (symbolized by *Li P'ing-êrh* and *P'ang Ch'un-mei* 龐春梅) to stimulate Chin-lian's "jou-hu" (her sexual organ), Hsi-men is actually enjoying a metaphorical sexual orgy. In fact, his near sadistic treatment by inserting a plum into her vagina and wild invasion of her sexual organ with the help of sexual aids almost kills her.³⁸

In addition to the symbol of a vase of flesh, Chin-lian is also associated with the small, bound feet, common among women of the time, through the association of her name. The term "chin-lian" or "san-tsun chin-lian" 三寸金蓮 becomes not only the symbol of beauty and sexuality but also of inferiority and restriction.³⁹ The smaller the feet are, the more sexually attractive the woman is and therefore more popular in the market. In the novel, Hsi-men is attracted to Chin-lian primarily by her small feet, and it is through the successful scheme of touching them under the table that Hsi-men reveals his desire of possessing her (Ch. 4, p. 32). Hsi-men also shows his admiration of Chin-lian's beauty through the act of putting a wine cup in her embroidered shoes and then drinking the wine as if from the shoes (Ch. 6, p. 47). Thus, diminished into a pair of three-inch deformed feet covered by beautiful shoes and leggings, which paradoxically are the center of women's attraction,⁴⁰ Chin-lian becomes a mere sex object for Hsi-men's sexual desire and pleasure.

Chin-lian's name has sexual connotations through its literal meaning as

well—a gilded lotus flower. Throughout the novel women are frequently referred to as “hua” 花 (flower), which, among its various implications, has the sexual meaning of prostitute, vagina, or dissipation.⁴¹ Since the title of the *CPM* may be interpreted as “plums (flowers) in a golden vase,” the novel may be seen as the life of women in the rich Hsi-men household. While the lotus can also be related to the female sexual organ, having all the sexual activities carried out in Hsi-men’s glamorous and golden environment, Chin-lian, the golden lotus, is depicted as nothing but a sex object, from which the sexual joy of men, and especially that of Hsi-men, derives. As the life span of flowers in a golden vase is sure to be short, so is that of a lotus flower with gold covering.

To sum up, on the historical level, Chin-lian the woman is sacrificed by the discriminating customs of the patriarchal society; on the literary level, Chin-lian the character is degraded to animal associations and sex objects exploited by men. Far from being a bad or fatal woman as the traditional criticism claims, seen from a feminist view point, she is a mere victim.

III. MARGINALITY VS. CENTRALITY

From the traditional male perspective, the characterization of Pan Chin-lian is not only dehumanized as the stereotype of a bad or fatal woman but also trivialized as a marginal figure. Hsi-men Ch'ing is usually regarded as the “hero” the focus of the novel. Some critics have commented that *CPM* is a novel of the progress and decline of a rogue, or the adventure of a Chinese libertine.⁴² In contrast, the importance of the role of women, especially that of Chin-lian, is either distorted or neglected.

In fact, the very title of the *CPM*, which is named after three major female characters in the novel: Pan *Chin-lian*, Li *P'ing-êrh*, and P'ang *Ch'un-mei*, clearly indicates that it is a novel primarily about women. As the character of P'ing-êrh can be seen as a foil of Chin-lian and that of Ch'un-mei as a copy of her, these two heroines serve to enhance the character of Chin-lian in the novel.

Further, paralleling Hsi-men’s struggle for wealth and status in the society, the fierce competition for position among wives of the Hsi-men household and the sexual battle for the power between men and women, especially between Hsi-men and Chin-lian, are the major concerns of the novel. Instead of remaining a helpless and passive victim in the patriarchal

society, Chin-lian struggles to get power by subverting male domination paradoxically through the only means available to her — her sexuality. Although she sometimes victimizes other people in the process of power struggle, it is through her displacement of the traditional role of male and female, subject and object, master and slave, as well as husband and wife (however symbolic and temporary it may be) that from a feminist perspective Chin-lian is seen as holding the most central and significant position of the novel.

A. From Victim to Victimizer

As the narrator several times comments that it is better not to be born a woman for all her woes and joys depend solely on man 爲人莫作婦人身，百年苦樂由他人 (Ch. 12, p. 96; Ch. 38, p. 328), the author's attitude toward Chin-lian and all the women of his time may be understanding and sympathetic. Dependent upon and at the mercy of male power, Chin-lian has been sold, transferred, raped, beaten, and humiliated. She does not, however, yield totally to such a situation of inferiority and powerlessness. Instead of passively accepting the miserable fate imposed upon her from without, within the limit of her confinement Chin-lian strives to survive and even to get what she wants with ambition and utmost will, sometimes at the expense of others.

Sold to be a maid in the Wang Chao-hsüan family, Chin-lian is trained to use cosmetics and employ pretentious manners to please men and to attract their attention. Being witty and quick to adapt, the innocent Chin-lian soon equips herself for more mature adventures. It is from her experience with Master Chang that the potential power of Chin-lian's beauty and sex is gradually revealed. Although Chin-lian herself is a victim in this relationship as analyzed previously, her sexual potency is nonetheless one of the indirect causes of her master's sudden death.⁴³

If Chang's death is seen as just punishment for the rapist, Chin-lian can not be completely guiltless for Wu Ta-lang's murder. Regarding her marriage to the "three-inch dwarf with rough-tree skin," both Chin-lian and the narrator lament her ill fate. Without any freedom of choice, Chin-lian, likened to gold and the phoenix, is given away free to a loathsome match likened to copper and the crow.⁴⁴ To such a deformed and cowardly husband, it is only natural that the beautiful and lonely Chin-lian will yearn for a better match. Though she did not intend to kill Wu Ta in the first place, under the forces of Hsi-men and Mother Wang on the one hand and the prospects of a better husband and environment on the other, Chin-lian eventually yields to the evil plan of poisoning her husband. From then on, she becomes not only an adulteress

but also a murderer and sinks gradually into the dark side of the world.

Although Chin-lian is "freed" from her forced marriage by sacrificing Wu Ta, she is trapped into an even more fierce competition between women for their common husband in the Hsi-men household. To procure economic security, social status, and physical pleasure, Chin-lian is degraded to a "private possession" of Hsi-men, now the owner of her body. Since Hsi-men marries not only for pleasure but also for money — the dowry from the bride's family — poor Chin-lian from the lower class is in an unfavorable position when she becomes the fifth wife of Hsi-men Ch'ing. She has to struggle with bare hands both with other wives at home and with women outside the house for the attention and favor of Hsi-men, their common interest. As an aggressive and strong-willed woman, Chin-lian determines to do whatever she can to excel in the cruel competition for survival and position.

The practical and calculating Chin-lian employs different strategies to deal with her competitors as soon as she steps in Hsi-men's household. For her own benefit, she pretends to befriend the first and fourth wife. As the only legal wife in a traditional Chinese family, Wu Yüeh-niang has the highest status and absolute power among women at home. Though ordinary in appearance, she is a lady from a moderately rich family. Since Yüeh-niang is secure in position and finance, Chin-lian tries to flatter her to win her approval.⁴⁵ Mên Yü-lou 孟玉樓, the fourth wife, is a graceful, rich, and kind woman. She is the only wife of Hsi-men who treats Chin-lian as equal and calls her "sister" sincerely throughout the novel. As such a pleasant and unaggressive woman is far from a threat to her position, Chin-lian considers her more an ally than an enemy.

To the second and third wives who are as poor and low as she is, however, the sharp-tongued Chin-lian would use provocative or aggravating words to undercut them. Regarding Li Chiao-êrh 李嬌兒 who was originally a prostitute, Chin-lian attacks her as a "yin-fu" 淫婦 (debauched woman) in front of Yüeh-niang (Ch. 12, pp. 89-90). As to Sun Hsüeh-ê 孫雪娥 who was a maid and now a cook, Chin-lian mocks her as a "nu-t'sai" 奴才 (slave maid) and talks Hsi-men into beating her severely just for small trifles (such as not having prepared breakfast on time) (Ch. 11, pp. 82-83).

As the sixth wife on Hsi-men, Li P'ing-êrh is Chin-lian's chief competitor at home. In contrast to Chin-lian, P'ing-êrh is not only rich and generous but also tender and submissive. As the widow of the son of a wealthy and powerful eunuch, she brings enormous wealth and treasure to Hsi-men and generously gives money, jewelry, and valuable gifts away which result in Hsi-men's

good luck in business and her popularity at home. Though similar to Chin-lian, P'ing-êrh is an adultress who hurries her husband to death in order to marry Hsi-men; she is nevertheless tamed by Hsi-men and becomes a fully-devoted wife. In addition to her wealth and submissiveness, P'ing-êrh gives birth to a son, Kuan-kê (Official Brother), the first son to the Hsi-men family whose name suggests Hsi-men's ambition in politics and foreshadows his first official job immediately after Kuan-kê's birth. Thus, P'ing-êrh doubles the luck she brings and strengthens her position at home. This is threatening to other wives and especially to Chin-lian whose position is only one step above her.

Since P'ing-êrh and Kuan-kê attract Hsi-men's complete attention, Chin-lian is gradually neglected. This sudden change of Hsi-men's attitude prompts Chin-lian's jealousy and hatred. To win back Hsi-men's favor and to secure her position, Chin-lian schemes to get rid of the child. She succeeds in scaring Kuan-kê to death by creating different kinds of shrieking noise to disturb the physically weak child and by creating chances for the cats to frighten the poor sick child. If Chin-lian is the direct cause of Kuan-kê's death, she may also be the indirect cause of P'ing-êrh's death. Mocked and irritated by Chin-lian behind her back, the defenseless P'ing-êrh gradually withdraws to silence and melancholy. The loss of her child and sorrows inside revive the former disease of incessant bleeding, and she eventually dies.

In the process of securing her power and position, Chin-lian victimizes men, women, and even innocent children.⁴⁶ In a sense, her practicality, jealousy, hatred, and ruthlessness are due to the unjust marital system in which woman is exploited as either sexual or monetary object and her basic needs are slighted. Under such circumstances, Chin-lian has no other choice but to fight for her own security and benefit, sometimes at the cruel expense of others. From a victim to victimizer, the metamorphosis of Chin-lian exemplifies the evolution of a passive, helpless woman to an active, powerful one.

B. Sexuality & Power

Although Chin-lian harms other people in her power struggle in the Hsi-men household, her major goal is to control Hsi-men himself, his body and mind. Victimized by her inferior sexual identity, economic status, and social class, Chin-lian becomes the sex object, playmate, and private possession of Hsi-men. With strong will and skillful maneuvering, however, Chin-lian gradually turns the tables: by employing her physical beauty and sexual potency as an instrument and weapon, she eventually dominates Hsi-men

and completely victimizes him in the end.

As a woman endowed with natural charm since childhood, Chin-lian soon learns how to artificially make herself beautiful and attractive for men. In a male-oriented society, this is certainly one effective way for a maid to rise from her miserable situation. Both Master Chang and Hsi-men Ch'ing are attracted by her appearance.⁴⁷ After marrying Hsi-men and being placed in competition with other beautiful women, Chin-lian works harder to adorn herself: she tries different hair styles, wears shining clothes, puts on gold jewelry, and manages to get new red shoes. All her devices are prompted not only by her sense of vanity but also by her intention to catch Hsi-men's attention. To cover her relatively dark skin, she puts white powder mixed with jessamine fragrance all over her body to compete with P'ing-êrh's fair skin and to allure Hsi-men (Ch. 29, p. 245). To excite Hsi-men's lust, the witty Chin-lian dresses up in the disguise of a cute maid. With naughty behavior and heavy make-up, Chin-lian wins Hsi-men over for a night and the promise of more new clothes.

Although the concealment of identity and the excitement of changing physical appearances sometimes help Chin-lian to catch Hsi-men's wandering heart, it is through her sexuality and her willingness to engage in Hsi-men's lascivious sexual activities that Chin-lian gradually controls his body. As the very symbol of female sexuality, Chin-lian does whatever necessary to please Hsi-men and to satisfy his sexual desire (Ch. 6, p. 47). Paradoxically, it is through passivity and obedience that Chin-lian gets what she wants from Hsi-men. For example, she yields to Hsi-men's request for the sexual position of "hou-ting-hua" 後庭花 after Hsi-men promises to buy her a new yellow silk skirt (Ch. 52, p. 456). She also practices the act of "p'in-hsiao" 品簫 with Hsi-men to please him, and even humiliates herself by swallowing Hsi-men's urine afterwards to win back his heart and body.

Only after degrading herself to a passive vase for the joy of Hsi-men does Chin-lian start gaining the upper hand in their relationship. Before the death of P'ing-êrh, she is more passive and reserved; after she is sure of Hsi-men's favor again, however, Chin-lian becomes aggressive and demanding in fulfilling her own physical desire. For example, she begins practicing the position of "tao-chiao-chü" 倒澆燭 for her own sexual pleasure. Furthermore, she willfully replaces the "yin-tó-tzû" 銀拖子 used by Hsi-men for stimulation with a long piece of white silk cloth, complaining that the former is not ideal for her (Ch. 72, p. 702). In contrast to the image of a profligate named "the leader of wife-beating and womanizing" 打老婆的班頭, 坑婦女的領袖 (Ch. 18,

p. 138) in the past, Hsi-men is now seen passively led by Chin-lian. If he had received pleasure by exploiting women's bodies in the past, Hsi-men is now trapped by his over-indulgence in sex symbolized by the white silver cloth made by Chin-lian, which shall bind him and bring him to destruction.

Chin-lian not only becomes demanding in her sexual relationship with Hsi-men; she wants to monopolize him. She beats the wet nurse Ju-yi-êrh 如意兒, who almost replaces P'ing-êrh's position for Hsi-men, and she further controls Hsi-men's action toward other wives (Ch. 75, pp. 734-35). Eventually, Hsi-men even has to ask her permission for staying over-night in other women's rooms. Assured of Hsi-men's favor, Chin-lian starts arguing and fighting deliberately with the first wife in public (Ch. 75, pp. 748-49). Hereafter, Hsi-men is fully controlled by Chin-lian, whose ever increasing power and position at home are reflected in Yüeh-niang's dream in which her large red coat, a symbol of authority and power, is grabbed away by the ambitious Chin-lian (Ch. 79, p. 807).

While Chin-lian's power and desire are increasing on the one hand, Hsi-men's mind and body are deteriorating on the other. In the famous Chapter 79, Hsi-men finally collapses on Chin-lian's bed. To satisfy her sexual desire, Chin-lian first tries to stimulate Hsi-men's penis by mouth. Then she gives three aphrodisiac pills to the drunken and exhausted Hsi-men with strong wine, despite the fact that one is the maximum dose. Further, she uses the white silk rope and applies ointment to the head of Hsi-men's bulging penis for her own excitation. While the voluptuous Chin-lian greedily enjoys herself, Hsi-men's swollen and erect penis, however, will not release itself . . .

Finally a large quantity of semen squirts out. At first it was semen, and then it turned into a fluid composed mainly of blood, and there was no hope for him. Xi-men [Hsi-men] had fainted away, with his stiff limbs outstretched . . . blood had followed semen and, now that the blood supply had exhausted, his penis kept on squirting nothing but cold air until the ejaculatory motion stopped.⁴⁸

As a sharp contrast to Chapter 27, in which Chin-lian is tortured by Hsi-men and almost passes away, here the tormentor is tormented: Hsi-men is now used as a sex object by Chin-lian, whose preoccupation with dominion and sexual pleasure leads to Hsi-men's downfall. Even until the end of Hsi-men's life, Chin-lian still utilizes his iron-like "chên-ping" 塵柄 to get pleasure:

At night, Jin-lian [Chin-lian] who should have known better, would still sit astride him and have intercourse with him. And during a single night he

would faint away and then regain consciousness several times over.⁴⁹

If Chin-lian has been used by Hsi-men as a sex object and viewed as a horse before, ironically, it is Hsi-men who is now likened to a male horse mounted by Chin-lian for her satisfaction. The non-human identity of the degraded Hsi-men is epitomized in his erect penis, which is literally exhausted by Chin-lian until the last minute. By reversing the traditional male-female role and power structure through the subtle manipulation of sexuality, Chin-lian the victim succeeds in transforming into a victimizer and in controlling Hsi-men totally. The victimizer of women is victimized by a woman — the death of Hsi-men on Chin-lian's bed bespeaks Chin-lian's symbolic victory over Hsi-men in particular and over the patriarchal system in general.

IV. THE DEATH OF CHIN-LIAN

In her struggle for wealth, power, and pleasure, Chin-lian metamorphoses from a victim to a victimizer of not only other women but also men, especially Hsi-men, who is the master and provider of all her desires. As the death of Hsi-men symbolizes Chin-lian's ultimate triumph over Hsi-men's mind and body, paradoxically it also leads to Chin-lian's own downfall. Though critics claim that Chin-lian is cold and heartless, it is in fact her emotions, along with the persecution of the male power, that bring about her death.

Like a double of Hsi-men, Chin-lian is ambitious, aggressive, and ruthless. Yet, unlike Hsi-men who has many opportunities to get in touch with the outside world, to travel, and to enjoy sexual relationships with the opposite sex, Chin-lian has none of these rights and advantages reserved for men. Not only is she confined to the house but she has to endure the pain and loneliness in time of Hsi-men's negligence and absence. Without proper outlets, all of Chin-lian's energy and talent is devoted to one goal—the possession of her husband's heart and body. Nonetheless, Chin-lian is not without genuine feelings and emotions. It is the prejudice against women in the society, along with the intense competition among wives in the family, and the pressure of the dull, monotonous daily life imposed on women that gradually wears away Chin-lian's natural, spontaneous, and tender self.

In the beginning of the novel, Chin-lian tries to express her emotions with musical instruments and singing in time of distress and loneliness: she would play the *p'i-p'a* and sing songs to herself. As Hanan aptly points out, the dramatic use of songs in the novel is "the most remarkable technical

innovation"⁵⁰ revealing the psychological insight of the character's feelings. Chin-lian's singing on different occasions subtly express her hidden anguish and yearnings. For example, in the first chapter, Chin-lian laments her ill match with Wu Ta and her desperate loneliness by singing to herself alone in the tune of "Shan-p'o-yang" (Ch. 1, p.8). On another occasion, Chin-lian expresses her mixed feeling of romantic love and jealous doubt toward Hsi-men by playing the *p'ï-p'a* and singing in the tune of "Mien-ta-hsü" alone at night (Ch. 8, pp. 60-61). Through the lyrics of her song, Chin-lian is presented as a woman capable of sensitive and delicate feelings. In Chapter 38, the lonely Chin-lian plays the *p'ï-p'a* awaiting Hsi-men's visit on a snowy windy night. Mistaking the noise from the tin roof for Hsi-men's knocking at her door, the disappointed Chin-lian sings two sad songs and scolds Hsi-men for being a "fu-hsin-tsei 負心賊." Realizing later that Hsi-men is actually having wine with P'ing-êrh in the next room, the heart-broken Chin-lian cannot but shed tears for the first time in the novel and sings a sorrowful song to herself. With the lyric "My heart aches. I cannot comfort it. Sorrow and misery consume me utterly . . .,"⁵¹ we are presented the picture of a desolate, melancholic Chin-lian, a slighted concubine whose long-suppressed feelings and pathetic situation deserve our understanding and sympathy.

Chin-lian is not only talented in playing musical instruments and singing, but she also knows how to read and write. While Hsi-men is depicted as an illiterate, Chin-lian is educated: she knows how to play chess, write good calligraphy, and create poems of her own. When lonely or desperately in love, Chin-lian would write poems or letters to express her feelings. Yet her romantic tendency and individual passion are not fully understood by Hsi-men, whose communication with her is solely based on physical contact and lust.

It is in her relationship with Chen Ching-chi that Chin-lian fulfills her romantic love. As a counterpart to Hsi-men, Chen Ching-chi is handsome, attractive, and playful. In addition, he is given the power to manage the money and property of the entire household as Hsi-men's son-in-law. Further, he is young and romantic. Despite the fact that their relationship is highlighted by the sexual orgy with Ch'un-mei in Chapter 83, Chin-lian and Ching-chi's love affair is more romantic than that of Chin-lian and Hsi-men for the former are constantly expressing their feelings and yearnings for each other through poems and letters and even through sentimental gifts such as hair and a fan (Ch. 83, 846-47; pp. 850-51).

As a concubine and private possession of Hsi-men, Chin-lian is not

allowed to have any extra-marital relationship, however romantic or passionate it may be, not to mention that it would be near incestuous. The discovery of such a relationship by Yüeh-niang thus provides a good chance for getting rid of her enemies — first, she sells Ch'un-mei for 50 liang of silver; then, she asks Mother Wang to take Chin-lian away for sale which eventually leads to her death in the hands of Wu Sung.

The death of Chin-lian is inevitable for the society will not allow such a daring and aggressive woman who has attempted to express herself and has threatened the patriarchal power and the domestic hierarchy to get away unpunished. It is worth noting that the two women directly related to Chin-lian's death are instruments used by the patriarchal society: Yüeh-niang, who sells Chin-lian like merchandise to maintain her own status and domestic order, is the symbol of male power; Mother Wang, who transfers Chin-lian like a sex object to men for financial profits, is a bawd and a womanizer of her fellow sisters. While Wu Sung, who carries out his furious revenge not through justice but through deception and violence, is the very symbol of patriarchal vengeance. Pretending that he is in love with Chin-lian and would like to marry her, Wu Sung deceives the once shrewd Chin-lian and purchases her from Mother Wang. Chin-lian's sentimental attraction toward Wu Sung blinds her sharp eyes in the crucial moment for she is most vulnerable when her feelings appear.

In Chapter 87, Wu Sung mercilessly kills Chin-lian. The brutal scene of Chin-lian's death reminds us of the tiger killed by him in the opening chapter:

Wu Song [Wu Sung] took a handful of dust from the incense-burner and threw it into her mouth so that she could not make any more noise. He tugged at her hair and threw her down upon the ground Wu Song [Wu Sung] thought it possible that she might try to run away, and kicked her in the ribs. Then he stamped upon her arms with both his feet he tore her arms apart, and thrust the knife deep into her soft white bosom. One Slash, and there was a bleeding hole in her breast. Blood gushed forth [Wu Sung] took the knife in his teeth, tore open her breast with both hands, and dragged her heart and entrails from her body The blood streamed from them Then, with a single stroke, he cut off her head The blood flowed over the floor.⁵²

Transforming from a victim to a victimizer, Chin-lian fails to be a real victor. Rather than representing poetic justice of an evil woman as most critics assert, her bloody death and the disintegration of her butchered body become a

silent protest against the injustice and violence imposed by a male-centered society upon a woman struggling for expression and power.

V. CONCLUSION

From a feminist perspective, Pan Chin-lian can be seen as the focus and central figure of the novel. The Hsi-men household and its garden serve as the stage for her rise and fall; all the major male and female characters serve either to echo or contrast with her personality. She is the one who carries all the life force in the story. Even her male counterpart, Hsi-men Ch'ing, is not as dynamic, energetic, and overwhelming a character as Chin-lian.

As a central figure, Chin-lian can be seen as complex rather than just being the stereotype of a fatal woman. On the one hand, she is a victim of the social norms, economic structure, and marriage system of her time. She is used as a sex object and commodity; her tender, romantic feelings are all but smothered. On the other hand, she is a victimizer in her struggle for money, pleasure, and power. Possessing utmost will and perseverance, she is shown as strong, ambitious, licentious, and sometimes ruthless.

Although from the traditional male perspective, ambition and aggressiveness are positive attributes for the 16th-century Chinese men like Hsi-men Ch'ing, they are signs of evil and destructiveness for the Chinese women like Pan Chin-lian. As the ideas of "san-kang wu-ch'ang" 三綱五常 and "t'ien-li jen-yü" 天理人欲 are pushed to their limit by the neo-Confucianists in the Ming dynasty, the destiny of any woman who rebels against her position at home and in society is shame and death. While traditional critics interpret Chin-lian's death as an indictment of Chin-lian herself, I suggest that in light of feminist critique her death, instead, is an indictment of her society. Far from being the author's device to punish a bad woman and thereby warn the reader, her tragic downfall and resulting conspicuous silence hint at his sympathy toward P'an Chin-lian — a woman who by attempting to transcend the inferior role and the domestic boundaries assigned to her, is eventually sacrificed at the hands of a brutal chauvinistic society.

NOTES

1. Tung-wu Nung-chu-k'ê calls *CPM* a dirty book in his preface to the *Chin P'ing Mei tzu-hua*. For the censorship of *CPM*, see Wang Liqi, ed., *Yüan Ming Ch'ing san-tai chin-hui hsiao-shuo hsi-ch'ü shih-liao* 元明清三代禁毀小說戲曲史料 (Shang-hai, 1981), passim.
2. See Zheng Zhen-duo, 鄭振鐸 *Ch'a-t'u Chung-kuo wên-hsüeh shih* 插圖中國文學史 (Peking, 1957), p. 920.
3. See Li Chang-zhi, 李長之 "Hsien-shih-chu-i hê Chung-kuo hsien-shih chu-i tê hsing-ch'êng" 現實主義和中國現實主義的形成 *Wên-i pao* 文藝報 3(1965).
4. Patrick D. Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel," *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly* 30 (1961): 327.
5. For a summary of the history of the *CPM* scholarship, see my diss., *The Feminine Struggle for Power: A Comparative Study of Representative Novels East and West* (Univ. of Illinois, 1987), pp. 29-31. Hereafter references to this work will be referred to as *FSP*.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 31. For example, Sun Shu-yü, 孫述宇 "*Chin P'ing Mei tê-i-shu*" 金瓶梅的藝術 (Taipei: Shih-pao, 1981).
7. See her "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in Elaine Showalter ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 128. Hereafter references to this book will be referred to as *NFC*.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
9. *Ibid.*
10. For a discussion of the *CPM* authorship, see *FSP*, pp. 27-28. The candidates for the *CPM* author(s) are: Wang Shih-chên, 王世貞, Li Kai-hsien, 李開先, Tang Hsient-su, 湯顯祖, and T'u Lung, 屠龍 among others.
11. Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in *NFC*, p. 128.
12. Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," in *NFC*, p. 148.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Sandra M. Gilbert, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano," in *NFC*, p. 29 & p. 31.
15. Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *NFC*, p. 60.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 59. This phrase was originally from Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34 (Oct. 1972): 18.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 386-88.
19. For example, Nan Kung-shêng, 南宮生 "*Chin P'ing Mei hua-chuang*" 金瓶梅畫傳 (Hongkong, 1970); Kuo Li-ch'êng 郭立誠 "P'an Chin-lian wei-shê-mo na-yang huai?" 潘金蓮爲什麼那樣壞 in her *Chung-kuo fu-nu shêng-huo shih-hua* 中國婦女生活史話 (Taipei: Han-kuan, 1986), pp. 109-14.
20. Similarly, in the opening poem of Chapter 4, the downfall of King Chou and King Wu is said to be caused by the beauty of two famous women: Ta-chi 妲己, and Hsi-shih 西施. See Liu Pen-tun ed., *Chin P'ing Mei (CPM)* (Taipei: San-ming, 1983), p. 31.
21. See Patrick D. Hanan, "The Sources of the *Chin P'ing Mei*," *Asia Major*, NS 10 (1963): 34.
22. Wang De-wei, 王德威 "P'an Chin-lian, Sai Chin-hua, Yin Hsüeh-yian: Chung-kuo

- hsiao-shuo shih-chieh chung 'huo-shui' chao-hsing tê yian-pien,"潘金蓮, 賽金花, 尹雪艷: 中國小說世界中「禍水」造型的演變 in his *Ch'ung Liu-ê tao Wang Chên-ho: Chung-kuo hsien-tai hsie-shih hsiao-shuo san-lun* 從劉鶯到王禎和: 中國現代寫實小說散論 (Taipei: Shih-pao, 1986), pp. 77-84.
- 23 C.T. Hsia, *The Classical Chinese Novel* (Columbia Univ., 1968), p. 202.
- 24 See Mary Scott, "The Image of the Garden in *Jin Ping Mei* and *Hong-lou meng*," paper presented in the CPM conference, Indiana Univ., 1983, 10-11 and Catharine Carlitz, "Puns and Puzzles in the *Chin Ping Mei*: A Look at Chapter 27," *T'oung Pao* 67 (1981): 223.
- 25 See André Lévy, "Review of '*Chin P'ing Mei*' te-i-shu," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, and Reviews* 3 (1981): 181.
- 26 See Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), especially the section "Feminism & Freud," pp.293-355; Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, *Feminine Sexuality*, ed., Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose eds., trans., Jacqueline Rose, (New York: Norton, 1985), passim; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), passim.
- 27 See Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet eds., *The Representation of Women in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1983), pp. ix-xxii.
- 28 Nina Auerbach, *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 63-108.
- 29 See Liao Ping hui 廖炳惠, "Nu-hsing chu-i yü wên-hsüeh p'i-p'ing," 女性主義與文學批評 *Tang-tai* 當代 (Sept. 1986): 40-42.
- 30 Although the setting of CPM is in the Sung dynasty, it is, in actuality, a parody of the Ming Dynasty. The author is trying to disassociate himself from the social and political criticism toward his contemporary society in the novel. See *FSP*, pp. 37-38.
31. For a detailed discussion on the concept of sexuality in Ming dynasty, see *FSP*, pp. 12-25. See also Esther S. Lee Yao, *Chinese Women: Past and Present* (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, 1983), passim.
- 32 In *Nu Chieh*, 女節, a famous book written by a Chinese woman writer, Pan Ch'ao, 班超, the characteristics of an ideal Chinese woman are discussed in detail and the names of ideal women from history are also listed. See V.L. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), pp. 251-52.
- 33 See Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung eds., *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China* (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 140.
- 34 For a detailed discussion on the history of female infanticide, see Bernice J. Lee, "Female Infanticide in China," in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship* (New York: Philo, 1981), pp. 163-77.
- 35 For example, the opening and concluding poems of the novel.
- 36 See Clement Egerton trans., *The Golden Lotus I* (London: Pontledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1964), Chap. 1, pp. 163-65.
- 37 *Hsiu-hsien Chin p'ing mei tzu-hua* 繡像金瓶梅詞話 (CH), I, (Taipei, 198-), p. 407.
- 38 This translation is based on Peter Rushton, "The Taoist's Mirror: Reflections on the Neo-Confucian Reader and the Rhetoric of *Jing Ping Mei*," paper presented in the CPM conference, Indiana Univ., 1983, pp. 49-50.
- 39 For a feminist discussion of Chinese women's bound feet, see the section on "Foot-binding" in chapter II, part one of *FSP*, pp. 19-22.

- 40 See Howard S. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* (New York: Walton Rawls, 1966).
- 41 For a detailed discussion of the term "hua," see Carlitz, "Puns and Puzzles," p. 222.
- 42 FSP, p. 34. Or see Hanan, "The Erotic Novel, Some Early Reflections," paper presented in the CPM conference, Indiana Univ., 1983, p. 25.
- 43 Maintaining Chin-lian as a "kept mistress" even after he marries her to Wu Ta-lang, Master Chang eventually dies of "yin-han chên" 陰寒症 (a disease related to excessive sexual activity).
- 44 CPM Chap. 1, p. 8.
- 45 CPM Chap. 9, pp. 67-68.
- 46 For a detailed discussion of Chin-lian's victimization of other women and children, see FSP, pp. 60-66.
- 47 For a detailed description of Chin-lian's beauty, see CPM, Chap. 2, p. 18.
- 48 CH, III, Chap. 79, p. 202. This translation is based on Hsia, p. 199.
- 49 Ibid., p. 208; Hsia, p. 199.
- 50 See Hanan, "Sources," 67.
- 51 CPM Chap. 38, p. 329; Egerton, II, pp. 163-64.
- 52 CPM Chap. 87, pp. 883-84; Egerton, IV, pp. 193-94.

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