

Étude sur la valeur du " sentiment " dans les manuscrits et les romans de la fin de la dynastie Ming: en prenant la rébellion érotique des personnages religieux comme exemple

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Résumé : À la fin de la dynastie Ming, un grand nombre de rébellions érotiques de personnages religieux sont apparues dans les scénarios et les romans. Cette dislocation extrême des normes idéologiques et des pratiques comportementales a non seulement montré la grande tension dans la littérature, mais a également reflété intuitivement les changements dans la pensée sociale. Cet article choisit deux personnages religieux qui participent à des aventures amoureuses de différentes manières, Chen Miaochang dans *L'épingle à cheveux de jade* et l'abbesse Shi dans *Le pavillon des pivoinés*, et analyse leur comportement dans le contexte de l'émancipation de l'humanité à la fin de la dynastie Ming. Dans une société où le confucianisme, le taoïsme et le bouddhisme étaient entrelacés, les écrivains utilisent le "sentiment" pour transcender la "raison" de plus en plus rigide du code d'éthique confucéen, qui fixait objectivement des objectifs et des valeurs esthétiques pour les citoyens en pleine croissance.

Mots clés : fin de la dynastie Ming, scénarios et romans, sentiments, beauté de la nature humaine.

Study on the Value of "Feeling" in Scripts and Novels of the Late Ming Dynasty

——Taking the erotic rebellion of religious figures as an example

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Abstract: In the late Ming dynasty, a large number of religious figures' erotic rebellions appeared in scripts and novels. This extreme dislocation of ideological norms and behavioral practices not only showed the great tension in literature but also intuitively reflected the changes in social thinking. This paper selects two religious figures who participate in love affairs in different ways, Chen Miaochang in *The Jade Hairpin* and Abbess Shi in *The Peony Pavilion*, and analyzes their behavior in the context of the emancipation of humanity in the late Ming dynasty. In a secular society where Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were intertwined, the literati use "feeling" to transcend the increasingly rigid "reason" of the Confucian code of ethics, which objectively set aesthetic goals and values for the growing citizenry.

Keywords: the late Ming dynasty, scripts and novels, feeling, beauty of human nature

At the beginning of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (the first emperor of the Ming dynasty) established the guiding ideology based on Confucianism, while local Taoism and foreign Buddhism, which were constantly being localized, both developed significantly in Confucian society. In Confucianism, there was more of a humanistic, worldly philosophy and less of a reflection on ultimate meaning. Therefore, the rulers did not prohibit Buddhist and Taoist activities, and were even believers in Buddhism and Taoism themselves, seeking ultimate care from them. Thus a situation emerged in the field of thought in which Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism coexisted and developed.

The scripts and novels, as literary forms, are the perceptual manifestation of the spirit of the times. Meanwhile, they also influence people's behavior and thoughts and in turn have a certain social edification significance. In this context, religious themes became a major category, and the phenomenon of the erotic rebellion of religious figures in the late Ming dynasty cannot be ignored. This paper will take this as an entry point to look at this movement of liberation of humanity.

It should be clear that the scripts and novels with religious themes only deal with religious thoughts and figures, and are not religious dramas or religious novels in the strict sense. They were at a great distance from the orthodox idea of religion; they were clothed in religious garb, but actually, embodied the spirit of secularism.

1. The erotic rebellion of religious figures

In the scripts and novels of the late Ming dynasty, there was a collective erotic rebellion of religious characters. Under the "prying eyes" of the secular public at the Buddhist and Taoist temple, the religious figures were not as abstinent as required by the doctrine, and were even more easily involved in love affairs than the public. Xu Jinjin had conducted statistics on all the works of "*Sanyan and Erpai*"¹, "among which there are 46 works involving the image of monks and nuns, accounting for 23% of all of them."² Among them, nearly half of the works were related to love affairs. It could be roughly inferred from the proportion of love stories of monks and nuns in "*Sanyan and Erpai*" that the affirmation of love by religious figures in scripts and novels was not an exception but had a certain universal significance in the late Ming dynasty.

Among these religious figures who had an affirmative attitude toward love, there was a category of people who used the convenience of their status to cover up the fact that they were cheating on people and making money out of it. The doctrine couldn't suppress their greed, and these figures were portrayed negatively in the work. However, there was another category of religious figures who had a sincere longing for love. Thus, out of the requirements of human nature, they committed themselves to love affairs regardless of the consequences. These stories were very popular. They might have been direct participants in the love affair or maybe the promoters of a good marriage. This paper selects two representative figures who participate in love affairs in different ways, Chen Miaochang in *The Jade Hairpin* and Abbess Shi in *The Peony Pavilion*. They intervened in love affairs as religious figures, vividly reflecting the transformation of the pursuit of marital values in the society of the time.

1.1 Chen Miaochang: a participant in the love affair

*The Jade Hairpin*³ told the story of Chen Miaochang, a Taoist nun, and Pan Bizheng, a scholar, who broke through the constraints of etiquette and doctrine and bravely pursued love. Chen Miaochang was born into an official family, but she was separated from her family while fleeing the war. She was lonely and had no support, so she went to a Taoist temple in Jinling as a "Taoist nun". Although she was identified as a Taoist nun in Mao Jin's version of the story, she

¹ "*Sanyan and Erpai*"(“三言二拍”) is regarded as the representative anthology of Chinese classic short stories. "Sanyan" is the collective name of *Yu Shi Ming Yan*, *Jing Shi Tong Yan* and *Xing Shi Heng Yan*. The author is Feng Menglong(1574-1646) of the Ming Dynasty. "Er Pai" is the collective name of the Chinese novel collection *The First Moment Pai An Surprise* and *The Second Moment Pai An Surprise*. Author Ling Mengchu(1580-1644).

² Xu Jinjin, 《A Study on the Image of Monks and Nuns in "Sanyan and Erpai"》, 2012, Shanxi Normal University, MA thesis.

³ The script of *The Jade Hairpin* has undergone many changes, but the one discussed in this article is based on Mao Jin's *The Sixty Kinds of Opera*.

converted to the "Three Jewels of Buddhism": Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; The Buddhist classic *The Lotus Sutra* also appeared in later episodes. This situation was caused by multiple adaptations of the script. Unlike the Western concept of literary creation, Chinese scripts are cumulative creations in which descendants take material from the creations of their predecessors and develop it to suit their backgrounds and preferences, but the original story is still recognizable in the new one. Chen Miaochang's literary image changed through the adaptations of the script, first as a Buddhist nun, then as a Taoist nun, and finally, as a Buddhist nun dressed as a Taoist nun⁴. The reason for such adaptation might be due to the aesthetic consideration of the stage, because nuns are not allowed to grow hair, and when facing the audience, a Taoist nun with hair is naturally more in line with the general audience's appreciation of women. Chen Miaochang's religious identity had been blurred in this context. So this paper does not insist on identifying her religious identity, but focuses on the plot of her being a religious figure while breaking the doctrine of abstinence. As a Buddhist or Taoist "practitioner", she was not supposed to be in love. Her love was therefore more difficult to achieve than that of other secular women because these religions required practitioners to abstain from desire.

Although Chen Miaochang was in a Taoist temple, she acted more frankly and directly than the ladies of ordinary families. After she fell in love with the nephew of the abbess, the scholar Pan Bizheng, she did not feel ashamed of herself and even dared to defend herself in the face of reproach, because she did everything by human nature. The author's value of affirming natural human emotions and desires was also implied here, so Chen Miaochang always appeared as a positive figure, and her rebellious behavior did not bring shame to herself, but rather shined with the brilliance of humanity.

Although, due to the limitations of the times, the ending of this story was somewhat compromising. Chen and Pan went through trials and tribulations but were finally united by their unknowing "child betrothal", which was accepted by the secular society and resulted in a happy ending. This reflects the Chinese people's insistence on the "heaven-sent marriage", where there is a "heaven" above the constraints of religious doctrine and secular ethics, to give the most authoritative rationality. But this also shows the suppression of human nature in social life at that time. Chen and Pan chose their spouses, which was impossible to achieve in the social environment at that time, and therefore was particularly precious and beautiful.

1.2 Abbess Shi: a promoter of the love affair

The Abbess Shi in *The Peony Pavilion* represented another type of religious figure who affirmed love and helped young people in their pursuit of happiness. As a well-born young lady, Du Liniang had a dream of her garden at the age of 16, in which she met with scholar Liu Mengmei and enjoyed the sweetness of love. But when she came back to reality, she could not bear the pain of losing her love and died of illness. Her father buried her in a Taoist temple and asked Abbess Shi to watch over her. Three years later, Liu Mengmei went to Beijing to take the

⁴ Zhang Xiaoyan, 《Exploring the Image of Chen Miaochang in Ming and Qing Opera》, *Journal of Changsha University of Technology* (Social Science Edition), no. 6, 2013, pp. 119-122.

imperial examination, passing through the area, he happened to pick up the portrait of Du Liniang, and immediately fell in love with the person in the painting. His infatuation attracted the spirit of Du Liniang to meet him, and later, with the help of Abbess Shi, they excavated the tomb to bring Du Liniang back to life, and Du and Liu got married in reality. Although Abbess Shi was a supporting character in the story, she was an important participant in the reincarnation of Du Liniang and played a great role in promoting the consummation of love between Du and Liu. At that time, it was a capital offense to dig a tomb privately, and Abbess Shi was willing to take the risk of being punished by the government to assist Liu Mengmei. After Du's resurrection, Abbess Shi served as Du's maid and accompanied her to follow Liu to Beijing for the examination.

Abbess Shi had married before but had to give her husband a concubine because of a congenital physical defect. Later, she simply gave up her position as the principal wife as well and became a Taoist nun. Such a life seemed more comfortable for her. Although Abbess Shi was not a senior practitioner, she cured people everywhere with no real skills. Religion was a way of making a living for her, and as a physically disabled woman with no place in a family that valued fertility, she had to choose a path that was different from that of ordinary women. However, her physical disability did not bring her psychological disability. Although her lust was not satisfied, she didn't kill the happiness of young people as a result but went out of her way to help them. Moreover, she did not ask for any benefit in return for doing so. Abbess Shi had a delicate mind, with love and righteousness. After Du Liniang died, she remembered that the lady loved flowers in her lifetime, so she placed a vase on the altar and brought plum blossoms to make offerings.

The author used this character's physical handicap to reinforce her spiritual quest, appealing to the nobility and justice of normal humanity. The secular public was eager to see the realization of true love, so although Shi's behavior didn't conform to the norms of doctrine, such a sympathetic Taoist nun was more popular in the audience's mind than those religious figures who only tedious preached.

2. The Religious World in Secular Perception

What we saw in the scripts and novels of the late Ming dynasty was a secularization of religious sanctity, which was expressed through the words and actions of religious figures and the environment in which they lived. During this period, many deviant religious figures emerged, who were completely different from those required by the doctrine. Not only did they not promote the precepts, but they also transgressed the rules and violated them, generally by way of "love". There were positive characters, who had difficulty adhering to the rules and regulations and pursuing happiness by normal means, and negative characters, who killed people to satisfy their lust. These characters contained the author's attitude and were typical. Such plots, born out of real life, had become commonplace in literature, greatly satisfying people's secular imagination of the religious world, and reflecting social reality with a certain degree of universality.

2.1 The literary tension of the erotic rebellion of the abstinent crowd

In traditional Chinese society, the authors of the scripts and novels were often politically

disillusioned literati. In the social evaluation system, those with talent should go on to write theories on the governance of the country. The literati, however, could only write scripts and novels as a pastime, not as a basis for making a name for themselves in history. Most of these literati were very talented but failed in their official careers. The trials and tribulations of life made them very sensitive to the changes in social trends, so they put their talents into their words. From their works, two types of deviant religious figures were portrayed at that time, both of which were typical: one type of people pursued sincere love, and the other type was greedy for money and lust.

In fact, since the spread of Buddhism to China, the image of monks and nuns had changed several times in literature, and in the late Ming dynasty, a deviant image with a stereotype different from the traditional one was formed. At that time, the court's evaluation of monks and nuns was mainly negative and considered that "monks were inferior to the masses", which made the literati's portrayal of deviant monks and nuns without scruple, and there were even erotic novels specifically about monks and nuns' lascivious stories⁵. This trend of scandalizing religious figures was not only related to the court's evaluation but also satisfied the prying eyes of the public for mysterious people.

The social conditions of the late Ming dynasty were extremely complex, with years of foreign and domestic wars overwhelming the rulers and making the regime extremely challenging, providing the possibility for social and ideological changes. In addition, the prosperity of handicrafts and foreign trade in the southeast allowed for the emergence of production relations with the embryonic nature of capitalism. The development of a new stratum of citizens began to form values of a modern nature. At the same time, the orthodox moral ethics had become so rigid as to fetter human nature, provoking widespread discontent and challenging the ruling class's concept of edification. In this social environment, the whole society underwent a great change in the cultural field. Among them, the prosperity of scripts and novels directly set off a human liberation movement in society at large. This movement pointed to the oppressive policies in the social and cultural spheres that the Ming dynasty had pursued since the establishment of the dynasty, especially the repression of people's minds and humanity by the harsh social rituals in the ideological sphere. Of course, this repression also came from an abstinent view of human nature preached by Buddhism and Taoism, which were on the margins of society.

Thus, the erotic rebellion of religious figures was seen as more radical by the emerging citizen stratum, the main audience of scripts and novels, because their doctrines had direct rules and restrictions on human eroticism, which was essentially abstinent and contrary to the natural needs of human nature. There was great literary tension between the doctrinal precepts of the deviant religious figures and their actual behavior, a clear contrast that gradually typified them and provided guidance for the lives of citizens--if these religious practitioners could not yet modify and control their behavior through spiritual power to meet the requirements of the doctrine, there were even more reasons for ordinary people to conform to the natural needs of humanity.

⁵ For example, *Stories of Monks and Nuns Erotic Affairs*, written in the late Ming dynasty, contains 36 stories of promiscuous monks and nuns.

Consequently, people looked at these deviant religious figures with a critical eye, while at the same time finding validity in their actions.

2.2 The marginal social status of non-believing monks and nuns

Literary works come from life, and a large number of deviant religious figures had a certain basis in reality. In traditional Chinese society, religious figures were generally marginalized. The family was the most basic component of a patriarchal society, and the organization of the population was based on the family unit. Religious figures, as people who left the "family", were even regarded as suspicious and dangerous in the initial stage of their devotion.

In the secular perception, many people were "non-believers" who were not motivated by their own volition to convert to a religion, and many of them joined the monastic community because of other factors such as family changes and seeking to save their lives. Tang Yu, in *A Study of Religious Characters in Yuan Drama*, pointed out that "the Chinese people's attachment to home was far greater than their faith in religion. Under the natural economic conditions of self-sufficiency, the home was everything to the people, who were born, grew up, and worked hard for it. When they were poor, they needed the help and comfort of their family members; when they were prosperous, they were happy to share with them. Home was the faith of the Chinese people, and it was the church of the Chinese people."⁶ In traditional Chinese society, Confucianism placed great emphasis on family and ethical relationships, and each person had his or her place on the social map, which was based on the family. Neighborhood relationships were also constructed in terms of family, and people focused on family ties rather than personal friendships. Philip Alden Kuhn, in his book *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*, summarized the motivations of non-believers who became monastics when a person became "a lonely survivor of a tragedy for the whole family" or, in the case of women, in particular, was abandoned by her husband. Because of the dissolution of these family relationships, they had no one to turn to and no responsibility to others. These people were miserable in the social sense. In traditional Chinese society, the "homeless" were the most pitiful group of people. Therefore, for them, "becoming a monastic" had lost its original meaning of "letting go of everything" and was instead "returning home".

It could be said that these non-believing monks were not spiritually "de-secularized"; they might have been inspired by religion in the process of practice, but in their subconscious, religious places provided them with a sense of security and protection more similar to that of a secular family. Therefore, it was not difficult to understand their deviation from religion.

Although some monks with high social status and popularity emerged, such as the "four eminent monks in the late Ming dynasty"⁷; in traditional Confucian society, religion was only a supplement to people's spirituality, and religious figures occupied only a marginal position in social life. What is more, the high monks could only represent a very small number of monastics in the upper stratum of the religion, and the majority of the lower monks and nuns existed.

⁶ Tang Yu, *A Study of Religious Characters in Yuan Drama*, Wuhan, Wuhan Publishing House, 2011, pp. 207.

⁷ "Four eminent monks in the late Ming dynasty": Yunqi Jiehong, Zibai Zhenke, Hanshan Deqing and Ouyi Zhixu.

Because they were separated from the family unit, these monks and nuns were not included in the system of Confucian society and were marginalized in terms of social status. Although they would not be suppressed by the Confucian code of ethics, they could not be trusted by this social system as a result. For the government and the public, monastics were suspicious, even dangerous. It was not only because they were unpredictable and difficult to control, but also because of the general disdain of the "family-oriented" society for these people who did not care about their families. For example, "monk" was just a general term for people with shaved heads and monk's robes, not taking into account their level of religious conversion and education, and they were not even allowed to live in any of the big temples of status.

2.3 Religious sites as public space

In the scripts and novels, the Buddhist and Taoist temples were not a place of innocence, but even carried a hint of romance, creating the possibility for young people to meet. In the social context of the time, although the union of men and women was not prohibited, it seemed that the only purpose was procreation. As a result, marriage had become a matter of parental choice, leaving no place for free love, especially for women. Temples provided a hidden "social platform" for young men and women in those days, and as a system outside of Confucian ethics, it was almost the only gap in ritual in society at the time, thus providing the possibility for individual subjective emotions to transcend collective moral emotions. On the one hand, the temples were filled with the erotic imagination of the public for religious mysteries. Its secluded meditation hall and flickering candles provided the scene for the hidden love affair, which served to render the atmosphere and connect the plot. According to Zhong Xiaohua's research, "the number of titles in which the specific names of temples appeared in the '*Sanyan*' was 37, except for those involving only an account of the location, more than half of the titles (about 19) had the role of 'scene' narrative function"⁸. Among these temples, there were both famous big temples and general local temples, as well as simple small ones. On the other hand, in these works, some temples became places to hide secrets, acting as brothels in the name of religion, such as the Taoist temple Bixia Palace in *The Golden Lotus*. The Taoist monk was not only greedy for money and lust but also seduced virtuous women for a powerful man.

The existence of Buddhist and Taoist temples was not a purely religious phenomenon, but at the same time had a social and cultural significance. For urban life, it was a rare "public space" in the social life of the people, carrying the function of organizing festivals, sightseeing, and even commercial trade. Women had to take care of household chores, and the "family houses" were the main place for their activities. Men could go out to do official work, business, farming, etc., and intervene in social life outside the family. Women were required not to go out often, especially the ladies and wives of large families, only on festivals where they could be accompanied to visit the temple fair, or participate in worship activities, to legitimately go out of the house and see the outside world. Furthermore, many of the large temples had elaborate architectures and very

⁸ Zhong Xiaohua. «The Narrative Function and Cultural Implications of the Temple Scene from the Perspective of "SanYan"», *Studies in Ming and Qing Fiction*, no. 4, 2012, pp. 121-134.

beautiful gardens, and these gardens, courtyards, and temples were somewhat similar to the parks we have today, and were public spaces that the general public could enjoy. They usually integrated with religious activities and took the opportunity of festivals to merge with citizen fairs, forming one of the important forms of people's social and cultural life - temple fairs, also known as temple markets. During festivals such as the Lantern Festival, the temples were also crowded with visitors. The festivities gave birth to the "monastic economy", and people took the opportunity to visit the Buddha and purchase some of the commodities they needed, making commerce extremely prosperous.

There was another category of Buddhist and Taoist temples with a building that was not so grand, and a location that was also relatively remote from the city center. They were not places for major rituals or festivals, and the movement of people was not that large. However, these kind of small temples and small viewpoints also had their social value. They were often built on major transportation routes or in deep mountain valleys, providing a safe place for merchants, travelers, and scholars to stay. For example, in *The Jade Hairpin*, the scholar Pan Bizheng met Chen Miaochang when he stayed at the Taoist temple where she lived on his way to Beijing to take an examination.

It could be seen that the Buddhist and Taoist temples used religious rituals and festivals to reasonably attract people to gather in this public space, especially to provide a relatively relaxed social platform for unmarried virtuous women. This was the blank space outside the Confucian code of ethics, providing the possibility for unmarried women in traditional society to disobey their parents. At the same time, the presence of the "monastic economy" added to the complex and diverse composition of the people gathered in this area. This increased the chances of love stories. Over time, ordinary citizens had a romantic image of the temples, which made them no longer a serious place of practice, but a public space for emotional discharge.

3. The Value of "Feeling"

The emergence of many deviant religious figures in the scripts and novels of the late Ming dynasty could be seen in the context of the whole history as a reflection of the "battle between feeling and reason". That was the game between "feeling", which was in line with human nature, and "reason", which followed Confucian ethics. "Reason" was a major element of Confucian ethics, and behind it was the compulsion of social power, which suppressed the reasonable elements of human nature. Religion, on the other hand, mainly required the secular public through puritanical precepts and had a suppressive effect on the natural desires of humans. Thus, the two kinds of suppression, though different, were similar in effect. Therefore, the literati and the public in the late Ming Dynasty emphasized the justice of "feeling" at different levels, which was to appeal to the natural demands of human nature with a rebellious look.

3.1 The transcendence and compromise of "feeling" on "reason"

Before the mid-Ming Dynasty, social stability and a high degree of political centralization allowed the authoritative culture to permeate all aspects of the literary life of the people. The

ruling class intervened in the creation of scripts and novels for ideological control and imposed legal constraints. In the "Great Ming Law" formulated in the early Ming dynasty, there was this provision: "In theatrical performances, actors are not allowed to dress up as emperors, queens and concubines, loyal ministers and martyrs, the sages, if any violation, they would be flogged 100 times...the performances about gods, righteous people, virtuous women, filial descendant, and exhortations to do good deeds, are not prohibited"⁹. For the ruling class, popular literature such as scripts and novels had the most access to the public and to a certain extent could influence their thoughts and actions, thus they were dangerous. However, if they could be controlled and ideas that conformed to the ethical norms of Confucianism were included, they could be used for edification. This was a reflection of the aesthetic standard of authoritative culture, namely "reason as beauty", and the characters often embodied orthodox morality and were the embodiment of "reason".

Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind, on the other hand, greatly affirmed human desires and developed in extremes, finding value in everyday life. The Ming dynasty was a time of high political centralization when the rulers controlled the minds of the people through Neo-Confucianism, and the slogan of the times, "keep heavenly principle and destroy human desire", maintained the privileges of the ruling class, but also brought a spiritual crisis to the people. In contrast, Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind advocated turning ethical rules into people's psychological needs, thus shifting the pursuit of "reason" from the outside to the inside, objectively shaking the spiritual bondage of Neo-Confucianism. Since then, the Taizhou School had further developed this idea and found the possibility of people's daily life leading to the highest wisdom, thus discovering the value of the individual. Later came Li Zhi's humanist ideas, which opposed dogmas and affirmed the natural desires of human beings. These thoughts blossomed in various degrees of humanity and commended the value of desires, humanity, and feelings.

As a result, the Philosophy of Mind quickly became the theoretical basis for the scripts and novels. After the mid-Ming Dynasty, a wave of writing about love emerged in the literary world, and the literati raised the flag of "feeling" to oppose orthodox Confucian ethics and authoritative culture, and the standard of literary creation was transformed to "feeling as beauty". "feeling" and "reason" was not completely opposed to each other, and there must be things that were consistent with both "human nature" and "morality". But when "reason" was held hostage by the ruling class and infused with too much rigid moral content, the implementation of "reason" in real life was alienated and formed a kind of confinement to natural humanity.

Based on this, progressive literati made "feeling" their artistic statement to the world. Tang Xianzu, who founded the "literary view of feeling", advocated that "feeling" and "reason" should be opposed to each other. He said in 《Sending Da Guan》, "Where there is feeling, there must be no reason, and where there is a reason, there must be no feeling"¹⁰. The power of "feeling" could

⁹ Anonymous, 《The Great Ming Law Explained no.26》, dans Wang Liqi (dir.), *Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties' forbidden scripts and novels (Part I)*, Shanghai, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1981, pp.11.

¹⁰ Tang Xianzu, 《Sending Da Guan》, dans Kui Fu, Wu Yuhua (dir.), *Aesthetics of Classical Opera*, Beijing,

not be underestimated, and when "feeling" reached its peak, it could even make people cross the boundary of life and death. Feng Menglong, the author of *"Sanyan"*, discovered the edifying value of "feeling" and elevated it to the level of "feeling education", saying in the preface of *History of Love Stories*: "I want to educate all beings with the feeling education"¹¹. His literary ideal was to expose the hypocrisy of Confucian ethics through sincere love stories, hoping that the people would retain their true feelings rather than be alienated.

However, under the constraints of the social environment at that time, although "feeling" became a breakthrough for human liberation, it was difficult to completely escape from the control of "reason". The concept of love reflected in the late Ming scripts and novels was, in general, one in which "feeling" transcended "reason" and exalted the sincerity of feeling and the justice of human nature. However, it was not complete, and after the realization of "love", there would be "reason" to restrain it. In *The Jade Hairpin*, when Chen Miaochang resumed secular life and Pan Bizheng passed the imperial examination, the two were legally married, but it was discovered that a "child betrothal" had already been contracted. In this way, the freedom of Chen and Pan to meet and fall in love at the very beginning was greatly reduced, and the whole event seemed to be completed not by the individual's voluntary choice, but by the step-by-step arrangement of "fate". The subjectivity of human beings could not be fully realized in such a social environment.

Of course, we should not deny the value of "feeling", but from it we could realize that the literati had limitations in the social environment at that time. They could be unrestrained in their thinking and bold in their speech, but ultimately they could not escape the constraints of Confucian ethics. Because they grew up learning the Confucian classics by heart, they had the deepest understanding of ethics, the most profound criticism, and the closest recognition. Marriage sought class consistency under the demands of orthodox morality. The claim of "feeling" only made it possible for young people to fall in love, but it did not provide a solution for its sustainability. To take a common example, scholars often fell in love with ladies from an official family on their way to the imperial examination but were opposed because of the disparity in status. The fixed pattern of the happy ending was that, when the talented man achieved success and became an official, he came back to marry the beautiful woman. Thus, it could be seen that the "rationality" of love was crucial to the official position of merit, and the elevation of the class was the collective dream of the literati, and was thus naturally reflected in their works. As Guo Yingde analyzed, "the traditional culture of Chinese super-stable structure was so inert that it always suppressed, stifled, assimilated, and dissolved the variable and changeable elements to maintain the balance of feudal society to maintain the difficult and gradual factors in social relations"¹². The works produced by the literati in this culturally stable society, taking advantage of only a little of ideological emancipation brought about by the budding economic changes, were

Culture and Arts Press, 1992, pp. 123.

¹¹ Feng Menglong, 《Preface to *The History of Love Stories*》, dans Feng Jicai, Pan Jing (dir.), *Essence of Chinese Prose (Ming and Qing volumes)*, 2006, pp. 158.

¹² Guo Yingde, *Exploring Chinese Interest: Historical and Cultural Reflections on Ancient Chinese Literature*, 2017, pp. 272.

naturally not thorough. However, these works were still progressive and valuable because of their relevance to the liberation of humanity and the celebration of free love.

3.2 The combination of "feeling" and "desire"

Tang Xianzu in the 《Yi Huang Xian Xi Shen Qing Yuan Shi Miao Ji》, said in the opening chapter: "People are born with feelings. All feelings of joy and anger can be perceived and sung to achieve the effect of moving people"¹³. The human heart generates feelings, and people express their emotions through songs and dances. The "feeling" here is a genuine one that could lead people's spirits to the aesthetic realm. It is the unity of feeling and desire. The real carrier of feelings, that is, people, is in close contact with the basic needs of human desire. The sublimation of instincts, which triggers various emotions such as love and respect, embodies an ordinary and natural beauty. This beauty is based on human nature and transcends social hierarchy and historical stages, thus it has an aesthetic universality. "The combination of "feeling" and "desire" signifies ideological emancipation.

While the affirmation of human desire sometimes finds excuses for its abuse, in some literary works, the recognition of the rationality of desire inevitably led to the extremes of indulgence in hedonism. The late Ming literati raised human desire to an unprecedented level. Since individuals in society had long suffered from moral repression, they were prone to overkill once they saw the possibility of lifting their confinement. To emphasize the value of individual life, the natural desires of individuals were completely cut off from social ethics and morality, thus leading to abusive situations. When the progressive literati used feelings to remedy human desires, these works only remained at the level of portraying human desires. This situation was directly related to the value orientation and literary pursuits of the individual writers, and in the context of the works in the late Ming dynasty, it could be seen as a response to the different degrees of impact of Confucian ethics on the confinement of human nature, and we could not regard its value with the ethical concept of a certain era.

Another explanation for this situation was how the literati saved people's minds. The literati showed the deformed human nature that emerged after the advent of the commodity tide in the late Ming dynasty. Desire itself was human nature and should not be repressed by orthodox culture, but without the regulation of feelings and to the extreme of indulgence, it could also have devastating consequences for people themselves and society. The reason why the author presented it nakedly was to tell the public about the consequences of indulgence, aiming to serve as a warning to future generations. The scripts and novels were the literature of the public, which could use the most intuitive stories to exhort and edify. The numerous stories of indulgence in the "Sanyan" were intended to be a metaphor, a warning, and an awakening to the world. This was the purpose of Feng Menglong's feeling education to denounce false love by celebrating true love.

Therefore, the literati's advocacy of desire in the late Ming dynasty was significant for the times and had the value of ideological emancipation. The promotion of human desire reflected the

¹³ Tang Xianzu, 《yi huang xian xi shen qing yuan shi miao ji》, dans Kui Fu, Wu Yuhua (dir.), *Aesthetics of Classical Opera*, Beijing, Culture and Arts Press, 1992, pp. 126.

progressive literati's respect for the aesthetic ideology of the individual's true nature, and they proposed to liberate the natural attributes of human beings from ethical attributes and return them to themselves. Li Zhi emphasized the "Childlike Innocence", that is, the pure and true heart of human beings, and he believed that the rigid dogma of doctrine was the obscuration and distortion of the "Childlike Innocence". Therefore, the goal of progressive literature was to discover the "Childlike Innocence" that had been blinded by dogmas, so that human existence would be reborn with its true glory and would not be alienated by worldly righteousness. This idea inspired a group of writers to sincerely celebrate the natural and pure emotions between men and women, which was by nature. The aesthetic standard of the whole society changed, and literature moved from a moralistic aesthetic standard to one that cherished true feelings, using individualized emotional expressions to evoke empathy in readers. Feng Menglong, who wanted to teach all beings with "feeling", believed that if "feeling" could be true and natural, the truth or falsity of the plot would not be so important. Because desire was part of human nature, it was used by progressive literati to shape the new spirit of the times.

3.3 Seeing feeling as beauty

In the scripts and novels of the late Ming dynasty, the literati gave secular meaning to religious figures, treating ordinary life as an aesthetic object; and further sublimated them to the aesthetic realm through "feeling", giving them aesthetic value. This beauty was different from the transcendent beauty of religion and the elegant beauty of Confucian ethics and reflected a worldly beauty.

What religion aspires to achieve is transcendent beauty, where the practitioner can achieve eternal beauty and the ultimate experience of bliss only by surpassing the pleasures and distractions of the sensory level. Confucian ethics, on the other hand, allows people to enter the realm of grandeur and greatness through a sense of sublime morality that allows them to abandon many of the requirements of vulgar and superficial human desires. Both are transcendent and sublime beauty, and both require the suppression of natural desires to cultivate. In contrast, the scripts and novels of the late Ming dynasty reflected a kind of ordinary beauty from real life. "The so-called beauty by feeling is to make the expression of emotion and the human nature, to convey the aesthetic interest of the literati as the purpose of their works, trying to escape from the bondage of rigid dogmas and return to life, to people themselves"¹⁴. It admitted the desires of human beings and celebrated the shallow, unrefined human nature. It reflected the value orientation of the citizen class after the prosperity of the city, and the continuous aesthetic "transformation of elegance into secularism", not only not to "approach to elegance", but also to possess value because of the confrontation with "elegance". This ordinary and secular beauty, though not sublime, glowed another ideal that moved and made people long for it.

Overall, these works were a reflection of the aesthetic spirit of the citizens. With the development of the commodity economy, the emerging class of citizens continued to grow and

¹⁴ Wang Xiaoshu, *A History of Chinese Aesthetic Culture (Yuan, Ming, and Qing Volumes)*, Shanghai, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2013, pp. 216.

had a certain amount of economic power for entertainment and leisure, so the aesthetic interests of the citizens influenced to some extent the literati's portrayal of their characters. On the one hand, the citizens themselves were increasingly dissatisfied with the rigid ethical dogma due to their rising social status. At this time, once "desire" served as a breakthrough point to counteract the ethical dogma, the citizens' long-suppressed instincts were given out. Therefore, popular and interesting literature could be most recognized and enjoyed by this class. On the other hand, there was indeed a tendency for the monastic community in that era to integrate into secular life. Politically, monks had to have officially recognized documents, and some senior monks had close relations with high-ranking officials and were indirectly involved in political affairs; economically, there was the rise of the "monastic economy", and the lower monastics sought money by the guise of religion; culturally, some basic ideological concepts of Buddhism and Taoism are deeply rooted and secularized, such as good and evil, karma and retribution, etc. Monastics became more and more deeply involved in the lives of the people as propagators of religious concepts.

In turn, the fact that the secular aesthetic spirit became the mainstream in the late Ming dynasty was also proof of the rising and solid status of the citizen class, whose aspirations had become the voice of the times. They further heightened the desire for "feeling", which showed that the citizens were actively seeking ways to intervene in the construction of values. An atmosphere of affirmation of real life and encouragement of consumption and enjoyment pervaded the whole society at that time. However, materialism was not a substitute for the spiritual needs of the citizen class. Overthrowing the original ethical order without new norms would lead the whole society to the point of moral degradation and confusion in marriage, so more urgently the citizens needed a kind of literature that fit their class characteristics to express their aesthetic ideals.

Thus, under the impetus of the citizen class, the aesthetics of the late Ming Dynasty moved toward a track of "transforming elegance into secularism", and the aristocratic culture could hardly bring a real sense of identity to the citizen class, and the "elegant culture" with high moral requirements was gradually replaced by the "secular culture", and a new artistic trend was ready to develop. The general level of literacy of the citizen class was not high, and to delight them, it had to be literature that was close to real life. This established a spiritual world for them and allowed them to live as a solid stratum. Although this spiritual world was not as transcendent and grand, it was closer to life itself, reflecting people's feelings and the beauty of the world.

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