

Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Chinese Poetry. By Anne Birrell. Cambridge, England: McGuinness China Monographs, 2004. Pp. viii + 449. £13.00.

Seeing Sex Rediscovered

Introduction

A few weeks ago, I was given this book of over four hundred pages to review. It took me little time to discover the author's erudition, discernment and sensitivity that have made this critical study of the celebrated anthology, the *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (*Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠, or *Yü-t'ai hsün-yung* in the Wade-Giles system, as is used throughout the book), a literary product of remarkable quality. Using techniques of western literary criticism and theories about adult psychology, the author explains and analyses the playful mode in which the compiler's contemporaries wrote their erotic poems and the sexual symbols and connotations they used in order to titillate their readers.

Imagery

In the book, the author boldly puts her readers on the defensive by bombarding them with suggestions of sexual insinuations in the words and phrases of the more contemporary poems in the anthology, which are construed as being related either to sexual pleasures or sexual frustrations. While one might be embarrassed, if not outraged, by the fact that men's sexual fantasies could be so mercilessly bared for analysis and discussion in the book, one would nevertheless have to admit that a lot of the author's bold suggestions are not without cogent evidence, as she patiently takes her readers through the socio-political background against which these poetic works were created. And the result is a vivid description and explanation of the sexual and erotic connotations in the poems that the poets themselves were too bashful to elucidate. Despite its subject-matter, the book reflects serious research so that its content comfortably transcends obscenity. It is a fine piece of sinological work.

The book displays a host of sexual symbols and connotations at which less imaginative readers may raise their eyebrows. Examples are: "The semantically eroticized motif of the needle and thread may be read as the vagina (eye of the needle) and semen (pale silk thread). Similarly, the sexual symbolism of the weaving tools may be read as the vagina (the loom) and the penis (the shuttle), which moving together create the bonded threads of passionate love" (p. 164), "Thus the 'knees' and 'skirt front' are metonymic displacements signifying the genital area of the woman's body. The meaning of 'double needle thread' has the same metonymic function, and denotes the woman's desire for sexual intercourse" (p. 162) and "The word 'padding' carries the idea of sexual tumescence" (p. 121). While one may stand genuinely or hypocritically aghast at these erotic notions, one cannot deny the possibility of their existence in the depth of one's fantasies.

However, the author does at times take advantage of the absence of Chinese characters in her book to inject more sexual insinuations into the poems than they can hold. The following are two examples, with Chinese text provided by me for easy reference:

**Harmonizing with Court Registrar Hsü Ch'ih's Poem
"Watching My Wife Get Ready for Bed" (p. 119)**

和徐錄事見內人作臥具

Assuming "neiren" 內人 means "wife," the translation should be something like "Watching My Wife Make Bedlinen."

I Watch His New Wife

There's misty twilight lotus from the water,
Or hazy dawn sun shining on rafters,
Yet lovelier still on a night of torchlit splendour
Is her light fan hiding her red makeup,
And her lover, radiant, radiant,
And on their bed a natural glow coming.
What makes me sad is their tall coach moving on
And her waist jewels leaving the veranda. (p. 122)

看新婦

霧夕蓮出水，霞朝日照梁。
何如花燭夜，輕扇掩紅妝。
良人復灼灼，席上自生光。
所悲高駕動，掩袖出長廊。

With regard to the third couplet, the author explains, "From his viewing post near his neighbour's veranda the poet-voyeur observes the newly married couple enter the bedroom, and, although this is implied rather than stated, he witnesses their first sexual *jouissance*" (p. 124). This interpretation stems from the assumption that the term "xishang" 席上 in the sixth line means "on the bed." What it actually means, however, is "at the banquet." The poet merely praises the good looks and elegant manners of the groom at the wedding banquet after describing the loveliness of the bride.

Accommodating as I am, I am inclined to take exception to the suggestion that "jade terrace" in the title of the anthology is a sexual symbol. The author thinks that "a major connotation of *T'ai*/'Terrace' is sexual; it is a metonym for the female sexual organs" (p. 8). If "crown" is for "king," "terrace" is not for "female sexual organs" because this metonymic assignment lacks the support of historical traditions. As for "jade terrace," ever since the compound was first used in the Western Han (Xi Han 西漢), "yutai" 玉臺, or "jade terrace" has meant the residence of the Heavenly Emperor, and by extension, an earthly emperor's or prince's palace. While the author thinks that "the jade metonym is a general term for a dual-gendered sexuality" (p. 7), and while "jade terrace" may for some inexplicable reason cause sexual fantasies in some people to take off and land on the image of the female genitals, the compound itself cannot be a metonym for them in the title of an anthology that also includes non-erotic poems. Had "terrace" or "jade terrace" symbolized the female sexual organs, among other objects, including parts of the human anatomy, the "yutai ti" 玉

臺體 as a poetic style would never have been introduced or considered decent enough to be allowed to continue its existence through the dynasties.

As part of the title of an anthology of mainly palace-style poems, “yutai” is well chosen in that it symbolizes a palace. The Liang 梁 poems with their erotic themes and the earlier works with their love themes making up this collection are aptly described by the remaining part of the title, “new songs,” as opposed to the “traditional songs” considered to be “without depraved thoughts.”

Translation

No sinological works can boast flawless translations, and this one is no exception. I should add of course that the palace-style poems in the anthology are not as easy to understand as they seem because they generally lack character. It is therefore very easy to take their shallowness for some deep meaning in disguise. I shall mention a few examples where the meanings of the Chinese poems are significantly changed in translation.

Having successfully expounded the playful mode in which the Liang poems in the anthology were written, the author somehow feels that some of these poems have serious marital statements to make, and on more than one occasion invents the image of the anguished wife in her analysis of those poems, shrouding them with an air of sombre reality. Mostly to blame is the elliptical style of poetic writing. Here are some interesting examples with Chinese text provided:

**On a Moonlit Night I Compose a Poem on Officer Ch'en of
Nan-k'ang Bringing His New Mistress Home**

His twice-eight girl is like a flower,
The three-fives moon is like a mirror.

...

Ten cities is the usual asking price,
A thousand gold often makes a bargain.
Lover, your desire can focus on her as you wish,
But my heart is not inclined to compete. (p. 50)

月夜詠陳南康新有所納

二八人如花，三五月如鏡。

.....

十城屢請易，千金幾爭聘。
君意自能專，妾心本無競。

The author sees the last couplet as a lamentation from a neglected wife. Explaining that the poet in his poem questions the validity of the custom of traffic in women, the author says, “[i]n his final couplet he further subverts the custom by rewriting its effects from the official’s wife’s point of view” (p. 51), and “[t]he wife (*ch’ieh*) affirms her own constancy, throwing up an accusation against her errant husband, while at the same time indicating

with some bitterness that she is no longer interested enough to reassert her claims on him” (pp. 51–52).

The above interpretation is strange because nowhere in the poem is the wife of Chen Nankang featured. The poem goes through the routine of describing the beauty and popularity of the girl and the heftiness of the betrothal gifts for bringing her home, and ends with admonishing words from the girl to her husband and master: “You can of course be counted on to be faithful, but actually I have no intention to compete with others for your favour.” This is a playful poem and one can almost be sure that the husband is not expected to be faithful to his newly-wedded partner for long. The presence of the angry wife or even her angry thoughts would spoil the fun.

The following is another poem where a wife is thought by the author of the book to be featured, grieving over her husband’s acquisition of a concubine. But it seems to feature just an entertainer-turned-mistress who is out of favour.

Taking up My Pen I Write This Bagatelle, By Royal Command

Today, your being so considerate
Offends me, but less than had it been spring.
Candle-trickling tears I shed this night
Are not because you bring her home at dark.
Her dance mat come autumn will fold away,
Her concert fan will gather films of dust.
Since time began new love supplants the old,
So why does old love hate to greet the new?
A sliver of moon peeps into her flowery bed,
Slight chill creeps under her shawl and scarf.
Autumn will come when all things wither,
And touch her body with nature’s stealth. (p. 78)

走筆戲書應令

此日乍殷勤，相嫌不如春。
今宵花燭淚，非是夜迎人。
舞席秋來卷，歌筵無數塵。
曾經新代故，那惡故迎新。
片月窺花簾，輕寒入帔巾。
秋來應瘦盡，偏自著腰身。

The author of the book sees the poem as a “bitter story of a wife who has been replaced by a younger entertainer in her husband’s affections” (p. 77). She also explains, “First the wife expresses her sadness and anger, lines 1–4, then she projects the story of the new woman in her husband’s life to the future, when she in turn will suffer failure and will be neglected” (p. 77). The culprit here is the term “yinqin” 殷勤 / 慇懃 in the first line, which has unfortunately been translated as “being considerate.” But “yinqin” also means “being sad and anxious,” as in the phrase “cetong yinqin” 惻痛慇懃 in the chapter named “Mingyu” 明

零 in the *Lunheng* 論衡 by Wang Chong 王充 of the Eastern Han (Dong Han 東漢). This is what it means in the poem.

The poem begins with the subject soliloquizing about her predicament, “Today, I have suddenly become sad and anxious. You have grown tired of me, quite unlike how you treated me last spring.” She then goes on to mourn her fall from favour, which is testified to by the candles burning bright for no visitor and the folded dance mats and dusty seats, and by her newly-found loneliness under the gaze of the half moon and in the embrace of the evening chill. Lastly, she wonders why autumn, which causes all things to wilt, is targeting her waist in particular.

Because of the chronic omission of personal pronouns in classical poetry, identifying the “sufferer” is sometimes a problem, as can be seen in the poem just mentioned, in which what has happened to “me” has been taken as what will happen to “her” by the author of the book.

The following translated poem has a similar problem:

My Reply to T'ang Niang's Seventh Night Needlework

...
Though I admit not knowing you,
I've heard it said you are well-born.
In the past Huo Kuang halted his coach here,
Liu Hsia-hui used to call in his carriage.
... (p. 200)

答唐孀七夕所穿針

.....
雖言未相識，聞道出良家。
曾停霍君騎，經過柳惠車。
.....

The author is given to understand that the poetess is trying to protect herself “with an appeal to social hierarchy and in effect pulls rank on the singer, recounting the glorious achievements of her illustrious family over the past millennium” (p. 201). But looking at the original poem, one can see that the latter couplet describes Tangniang's “good family” in the past, not the poetess's, and serves the purpose of highlighting the singer's low fortunes at present.

The following poem contains a term which is too ordinary to be ordinarily understood:

**Submitted to His Royal Highness, Harmonizing with His Poem
“Extempore Composition”**

In the hall the many divine girls
Till now were hard to compare—
Except there's an exquisite at the window,
She has the prettiest face of all.
...

All morning she counts on her appearance
Or else she'll keep an empty bedroom.
“If only I could count on your love . . .
I wish we could be a pair of mandarin ducks!” (p. 53)

奉和率爾有詠

殿內多仙女，從來難比方。
別有當窗豔，復是可憐妝。

……

一朝恃容色，非復守空房。
君恩若可恃，願作雙鴛鴦。

The author explains, “The amount of time the female entertainer spends on her appearance is crucial to the success of her career. If she works at it ‘All morning’, it will be an investment for the future” (p. 54). Here she has been misled by the oft-used term “yizhao” 一朝, which simply means “one day (at an indefinite time in the future).” Thus, “one day, relying on her own beauty, she will no longer have to keep an empty bedroom.” This couplet describes the future rather than the present.

Dating

Lastly, I should like to comment on the anthology's date of compilation.

It has generally been accepted that the anthology was compiled by Xu Ling 徐陵 when Emperor Jianwen of the Liang dynasty (Liang Jianwendi 梁簡文帝) was still the crown prince. This is the view the author has taken. However, in a recently-published book entitled *Yutai xinyong yanjiu* 玉臺新詠研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), its author, a Chinese scholar named Liu Yuejin 劉躍進, rejects this accepted view. Liu calls our attention to, among other things, the conspicuous absence in the anthology of any poem by Xu Chi 徐摛, Xu Ling's father and an inventor and proponent of palace-style poetry. Xu Chi died in the capital before the collapse of the Liang, which was marked by a period of turbulence during which Xu Chi's works were destroyed. Liu takes the view that the anthology was compiled as a “songbook” for the palace ladies in the relative calm of the early years of the Chen 陳 dynasty, when the works of Xu Ling's late father were no longer extant. Liu also suggests that the anthology's table of contents as it now appears is by no means the original one, where the title of Emperor Jianwen was changed to “the Crown Prince” (huang taizi 皇太子) and the title of Emperor Yuan (Yuandi 元帝) to “the Prince of Xiangdong” (Xiangdong wang 湘東王), probably in the Tang 唐 dynasty, in order to comply with the popular belief that Emperor Jianwen commissioned the anthology to be compiled when he was the crown prince. Liu's book is worth reading for his critical attitude.

Conclusion

Well-researched and endowed with unusual subject-matter, the *Games Poets Play* is an

untypically inspiring book to read. I extol the effort the author has made to produce this book, which in its own way adds much to our knowledge and enlightenment.

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