Master of Heavenly Flowers Scripture:
Constructing Tianhua zang zhuren’s 天花藏主人  Three Personae as Publisher,
Commentator, and Writer of Scholar-beauty Fiction

Thesis

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Abstract

The seminal figure of scholar-beauty fiction, Master of Heavenly Flower Scripture (Tianhua zang zhuren, 天花藏主人, hereafter THZZR), assumed triple personae of fiction writer, commentator, and publisher in the late Ming and early to mid Qing period. He had at least sixteen novels attributed to him as author or commentator, and his triple roles related and mutually reinforced each other, resulting in the popularity of not only individual works like Ping, Shan, Leng, and Yan [Ping Shan Leng Yan, 平山冷燕] and Yu, Jiao, and Li [Yu Jiao Li, 玉嬌梨], but also the genre of scholar-beauty fiction as a whole. Many of these novels were among the most widely circulated fictional works during the Qing period. Moreover, due to their popularity, these novels also found their way to other countries in Asia and Europe, where they in turn were translated, adapted and reworked into other literary traditions. Hence, Master of Heavenly Flower Scripture was at least as important as the more well known key figures in that period of time such as Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 (1608-1661) and Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680).

Unlike these better studied figures who engaged in writing and commentating on works of various literary genres, THZZR focused exclusively on scholar-beauty fiction. An
examination of his triple personae will reveal the specificity of printing and targeted readership of this category of vernacular fiction. Since no conclusion on THZZR’s exact historical identity has been made due to a lack of conclusive source material, no autobiographical information about him could be used to make an argument. Hence, in this thesis I will examine THZZR’s own works as well as his prefatory commentaries on scholar-beauty novels authored by him and other writers.
Dedication

To my parents Zhou Guiqin and Li Baozheng
Acknowledgement

The completion of this thesis gives me the opportunity to express my appreciation to those who have helped me during the past two years at The Ohio State University. I am most grateful to my advisor Dr. Patricia Sieber, who inspired the original idea of this project in me when I was taking her graduate seminar one and a half years ago. As in the case of my previous research as a graduate student of Chinese literature, I have benefited a lot from her help during my research and writing this thesis. She was the reader of the first draft of this thesis, and read and commented on it more than once. I could not have done this without her patient and inspiring instructions. I am also extremely thankful to my committee member, Dr. Kirk Denton. Despite of his busy schedule, Dr. Denton carefully read two versions of the drafts of this thesis, offered very helpful suggestions, and more importantly, corrected a lot of errors. Finally, I would also like to thank all the professors in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, as well as Professor Andrea Bachner in the Department of Comparative Studies, who have helped me a lot during the my study at The Ohio State University.
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Table 1. THZZR’s Two Novels Printed in the Early-to-mid Qing Period

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The early Qing commentator Master of Heavenly Flower Scripture (Tianhua zang zhuren, 天花藏主人, here after THZZR) was active in writing, commenting, editing and publishing works of scholar-beauty fiction in the late Ming and early to mid Qing period. He is the author and/or commentator of at least sixteen novels, many of which were among the most widely circulated novels during the Qing period. Moreover, due to their popularity, they also found their way to other countries in Asia and Europe, where they in turn were translated, adapted and reworked into other literary traditions. Hence, Master of Heavenly Flower Scripture was at least as important as the better studied key figures in that period of time such as Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 (1608-1661) and Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), but he has largely been ignored by modern scholarship. The more celebrated novels attributed to him such as Yu, Jiao, and Li (Yu Jiao and Li, 玉娇梨, here after YJL) and Ping, Shan, Leng, and Yan (Ping Shan Leng Yan, 平山冷燕, here after PSLY) have attracted attention in terms of both translation and minor studies, but a more comprehensive assessment of this prolific figure is overdue.

THZZR was not the first one to assume the multiple roles of fiction writer, commentator and publisher. For example, the three earlier fiction commentators mentioned above were all involved in writing, commentary, and publication of fictional works although
Jin Shengtan didn’t present his authorial role openly and was more famous as a commentator. However, unlike other people who touched on various literary genres like Feng Menglong, who engaged in poetry editing, folk songs collecting and publishing, as well as play writing; or Li Yu, who was an important play writer and director, THZZR exclusively focused on the genre of fiction. As a seminal figure in writing and commenting on scholar-beauty fiction, THZZR had quite a few more fictional works related to him compared to other contemporary scholar-beauty fiction writers.\(^1\) At the important moment when new novels of shorter length began to be largely produced and published rather than long novels like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*, 三國演義) and *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*, 水滸傳), which had previously dominated the book market, THZZR’s writing, commenting and publishing of scholar-beauty fiction contributed to the new formal development of traditional fiction.

Moreover, THZZR also contributed to the thematic development of traditional novels by reinventing the scholar-beauty beauty genre. He boosted the status of fiction by contesting for the domain of romance. Responding to the tendency of pornographic descriptions in earlier and contemporary vernacular romances, works authored and commented on by THZZR’s are much more de-sexualized. Yet they still feature descriptions of marital sex rather than being completely “chaste” narratives. In addition, he allowed various sub-themes in scholar-beauty romances, including religious, historical, military themes and so on. These observations caution against an overly narrow definition of scholar-beauty fiction as

\(^1\) In *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shumu*, Sun Kaidi listed seventy-five works in the section of scholar-beauty fiction. Usually a typical fiction writer has only one or two works to his name, but THZZR has sixteen works related to him. See Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shumu* [中國通俗小說書目, Catalogue of Chinese vernacular fiction] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957), 133-50.
domestic romances and place its multifaceted nature center stage in the process of crafting an enduring and influential legacy of scholar-beauty novels.

THZZR’s triple roles as a writer, commentator, and publisher, are not merely a coincidence. They related and mutually reinforced each other, resulting in the popularity of not only individual works like PSLY and YJL, but also the genre of scholar-beauty fiction as a whole. Therefore, a detailed and thorough study in English of this figure will definitely contribute significant new findings to the body of research on the genre of scholar-beauty fiction.

Who is Master of Heavenly Flowers Scripture?

Traditional and modern scholarship in Chinese has tried to identify THZZR with a certain historical figure with a specific name and background. Yet no one has achieved a final verdict on his identity. Here I will summarize four opinions about THZZR’s historical identity as articulated by traditional and modern Chinese scholars.

In the section about scholar-beauty fiction of Catalogue of Chinese Vernacular Fiction, Sun Kaidi lists fifteen works related to THZZR, beginning with Brief Tale of Yu, Jiao, and Li (Yu Jiao Li xiaozhuan, 玉嬌梨小傳) and ending with The Brocade Suspicion (Jin yituan, 錦疑團). He noted that “the fifteen works listed on the right all have a preface written by THZZR. I don’t know who THZZR is. Reading the preface to YJL, it seems he is the author of the novel. His preface to PSLY is dated to “the fifteenth year of Shunzhi” (1658), so he was mostly likely active in the late Ming and early Qing periods.”2 In the entry

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2 Ibid.
of YJL, Sun quotes two earlier opinions about THZZR’s real identity and claims to be unsure which one is correct. The first opinion is Shen Jiyou’s 沈季友 (fl. 1687) argument presented in Poetic Genealogy of Zuili (Zuili shixi, 檇李詩系). Shen considers Zhang Yun 張勻, who bore the courtesy name Xuanyou 宣猷 and hailed from Xiushui 秀水 (another name of Jiaxing 嘉興, in modern Zhejiang province), to be the author of PSLY. The scholar named Sheng Bai’er 盛百二 (fl. 1768) made a different claim in his Sequel to Sketches and Notes in the Pumelo Studio (Youtang xu bitan, 柚堂續筆談). In his opinion, THZZR corresponds to a certain Zhang Shao 張劭 with the courtesy name Boshan 博山, who also came from Jiaxing 嘉興. Both Shen Jiyou and Sheng Bai’er were scholars in the early-to-mid Qing Dynasty and came from Jiaxing themselves. Shen was active during the reign of Kangxi and Sheng lived in the reign of Qianlong.3

Both writers claim that the author wrote the novel at a very young age. Zhang Yun is said to have written it at the age of twelve and Zhang Shao at the age of fourteen or fifteen. Yet Lu Xun refuted Sheng’s argument in his Brief History of Chinese Fiction (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue, 中國小說史略), saying that “(P)ossibly only because (Zhang Shao) was a talented child, contemporary people attributed this book to him. Yet the content of the book is trite and doesn’t seem to be written by a child at all.”4 Similar to Lu Xun’s doubt about Zhang Shao’s being too young to write such a novel, Hu Wanchuan also challenges Shen’s

3 For details about Shen Jiyou and Sheng Bai’er, see Hu Wanchuan 胡萬川, Huaben yu caizi jiaren xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu 話本與才子佳人小說之研究, A study on storyteller’s tales and scholar-beauty fiction (Taipei: Da’an chubanshe, 1994), 233-5.
claim about Zhang Yun’s writing the novel at the age of twelve since the novel is beyond the life experience of a twelve-year-old person.5 Nevertheless, recent scholarship has tended to agree with the first argument that THZZR is in fact Zhang Yun, including Hu Wanchuan.6 In his influential study on THZZR’s historical identity, Su Xing holds that although the problem of age mismatch is still unresolved, THZZR is more likely to be Zhang Yun or Zhang Shao than Xu Zhen.7

By contrast, other scholars have identified other historical figures with the epithet of THZZR. In his Records of Fiction Seen and Heard About (Xiaoshuo jianwen lu, 小說見聞錄), Dai Bufan puts forth the opinion that THZZR is, in fact, a man by the name of Xu Zhen 徐震 on account of similarities between Xu’s style names and THZZR’s pseudonym. Xu Zhen’s style name is Free Man of Smog and Water (Yanshui sanren, 煙水散人), a name that belonged to a well-known scholar-beauty fiction writer in the early Qing period. Dai also argues that THZZR has other style names including Tianhua zhuren (Master of Heavenly Flowers, 天花主人) and Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers, Tianhua caizi (天花才子), which are also found in some scholar-beauty novels as authors or commentators.8 According to Wang Qingping, THZZR is Man of Ink Wave (Molang zi, 墨浪子), Master of Ink Wave (Molang zhuren, 墨浪主人), and Wave Immortal (Langxian, 浪仙). Wang’s conclusion derives partly from Patrick Hanan’s observation that Master of Ink Wave is the Wave

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5 Ibid.
Immortal. In addition, the novel Complete Tale of Master Jidian the Drunken Buddha (Jidian dashi zuiputi quanzhuan, 濟顛大師醉菩提全傳, hereafter JDDSZPT) has two extant versions: one is signed to be edited by THZZR and prefaced by Master of Peach-blossom Hut (Taohua an zhuren, 桃花庵主人); the other written by Man of Ink Wake at West Lake (Xihu molang zi, 西湖墨浪子) and featuring THZZR’s preface. Based on the pseudonyms recorded in these two versions, Wang considers Master of Ink Wave and THZZR the same person. Because of the similarity between Man of Ink Wave at West Lake and Man of Ink Wave in Ancient Wu (Guwu molangzi, 古吳墨浪子), Wang holds that they are also the same person.9

These two arguments haven’t been widely accepted by other scholars. Hu Wanchuan refutes these opinions, a point echoed by Lin Chen.10 Hu provided a detailed examination of Dai’s and Wang’s arguments and pointed out many contradictions as well as the lack of sufficient and other supporting evidence.

Generally speaking, scholars haven’t arrived at a consensus regarding the historical identity of THZZR, although a considerable amount of Chinese scholarship has tried to answer the question of who THZZR is.11 The reason for this quandary mostly lies in the

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9 His argument that THZZR is Man of Ink Wave in Ancient Wu is also based on his observation that part of the collection Xihu jiahua [西湖佳話, Anecdotes of West Lake], which is authored by Man of Ink Wave in Ancient Wu, is very similar to some stories in Jidian dashi zuiputi quanzhuan. Hence, he believes that the two books must be authored by the same person. In other words, THZZR is also Man of Ink Wave in Ancient Wu. See Wang Qingping 王青平, “Molang zhuren ji Tianhua zang zhuren” [墨浪主人即天花藏主人, Master of Ink Wave is Master of Heavenly Flowers Scripture], in Caizi jiaren xiaoshuo shulin [才子佳人小說述林, Collection of essays about scholar-beauty fiction] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 196-218.
10 Hu, 1994, 227-83.
11 Besides the works already mentioned in this section, there are some articles devoted to the study of this question. For information about related articles, see Su Jianxin 蘇建新, Zhongguo caizi jiaren xiaoshuo yanbianshi [中國才子佳人小說演變史, The evolutionary history of the Chinese scholar-beauty fiction] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006), 314-40.
scarcity of relevant source materials. Zhou Jianyu notes that the recent burgeoning of the study on scholar-beauty genre is partly due to the new discoveries of fictional texts and other materials relating to these novels. But no further scholarship has been devoted to textual research of THZZR’s historical identity since Feng Weimin published his article “Zhan Yun Father and Son and Ping Shan Leng Yan” (Zhang Yun fuzi yu Ping Shan Leng Yan, 張勻父子與《平山冷燕》) was published in 1989 because of the lack of new materials about the figure Zhang Yun.\textsuperscript{12} However, rather than researching for biographical or historical sources to locate THZZR, we can choose to pursue a different methodology. In seeking to answer the previous question about who THZZR is, we can construct his social personae in the context of scholar-beauty fiction writing, commenting, and publishing in the early-to-mid Qing period.

\textbf{Novels Related to THZZR}

THZZR is associated with an extraordinarily large corpus of fictional works. In this study, most of the texts of scholar-beauty fiction I refer to are imprints collected in the series \textit{Collection of Antique Editions of Fiction} (Guben xiaoshuo jicheng, 古本小說集成), The modern versions are all facsimiles copies of early Qing editions held mostly by the world’s most important East Asian Studies libraries. They all have modern pagination and feature a preface written by a Chinese expert in the field of traditional fiction study.\textsuperscript{13} Unfortunately, I

\textsuperscript{12} Feng Weimin points out the incongruity between Zhang Yun’s age and THZZR’s age by introducing new materials as evidence. See Su, 2006, 201.

\textsuperscript{13} The libraries holding some of the early Qing editions of scholar-beauty novels include: Dalian Library, Harvard Yen-ching Library, French National Library and Library of Japanese Cabinet. Owners of some editions are not identified. For example, the modern versions of DQR and LWDXL are said to be photo copies of the edition hold by the present house, without providing information about their current owners.
cannot collect all related texts in this collection for the current research, so I combine works collected in another series entitled *Series of Unique and Rare Editions of Ming and Qing Fiction Held by Dalian Library* (Dalian tushuguan cang guxiben mingqing xiaoshuo congkan, 大連圖書館藏孤稀本明清小說叢刊) instead. Sixteen extant novels from the early-to-mid Qing period are related to THZZR, including YJL, PSLY, *Two Inverse Marriages* (Liangjiao hun, 兩交婚, here after LJH), *Predestination of A Painting* (Huatu yuan, 畫圖緣, here after HTY), *The Tale of Jin, Yun, and Qiao* (Jin Yun Qiao zhuán, 金云翹傳, here after JYQZ), *Chant of Flying Flowers* (Feihua yong, 飛花詠, here after FHY), *Competing the Red Silk Thread* (Sai hongsi, 賽紅絲, here after SHS), *The Worthy Lovers* (Dingqing ren, 定情人, here after DQR), *Jade Paperweight* (Yu zhiji, 玉支璣, here after YZJ), *Reward of the Unicorn Son* (Lin’er bao, 麟兒報, here after LEB), *Reality in Illusion* (Huanzhong zhen, 幻中真, here after HZZ), (Renjian le, 人間樂, here after RJL), *Brocade Suspension Minds* (Jin yituan, 錦疑團, here after JYT), *Romance of Emperor Wu in the Liang Dynasty from the West* (Liangwudi xilai yanyi, 梁武帝西來演義, here after LWDXL), JDDSZPT, as well as *A Sequel to Water Margin* (Hou shuihu zhuàn, 后水滸傳). Extant versions of those works provide valuable information for the study of THZZR as a significant figure in the development of scholar-beauty fiction.

Among the sixteen works listed here, the first two, namely YJL and PSLY have been widely accepted by scholars as authored by THZZR himself based on the self-expressions he made in his prefaces of them LJH, RJL, and YZJ are also claimed to be authored by THZZR in some extant versions. In the preface to PSLY, which is also the preface found in the combined version of PSLY and YJL, THZZR notes that “I want others to know my talent,
but it has proved impossible. I want to swallow my pride, but I don’t have the heart to do that. I am unable to think of a way, so I have to use fictional people and stories to express my illusory wishes and desires.” Based on the claims advanced in this preface, scholars have agreed that THZZR is the author of the two novels. Hu Wanchuan provides two other pieces of evidence. First, he agrees with the author of the entry about PSLY in *Sequel to the Catalogue Summary of Siku quanshu* (Xu Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao, 續四庫全書總目提要) regarding the argument that since the ending of this preface corresponds to the opening poem of the first chapter of YJL, Hermit of Couch Grass (*Tidi shanren*, 蒐荻山人), who signed it as the author of the novel, and THZZR must be the same person. Besides, he observes that the preface to the separate edition of YJL, which is signed with the name Master of Unofficial Politics Studio (*Suzheng tang zhuren*, 素政堂主人), strongly resonates with the end of the preface to PSLY. Second, in the version entitled *Heavenly Flowers Scripture Commented Version of Ping, Shan, Leng, and Yan* (*Tianhua zang piping Ping Shan Leng Yan*, 天花藏批評平山冷燕), there is a general comment on the whole book at the beginning of the first chapter. Hu argues that the tone of this piece is identical to that of the preface to PSLY and the combined version. In both the author refers to writing his own works, which is unusual in the context of fiction prefaces.

At the beginning of LJH, we observe that at the beginning of the novel, the author explains his intention of writing this book as follows: PSLY reveals the wonderful experiences between talented scholars and beauties, and the book LJH is a sequel to it since

stories about scholars and beauties have endless “fragrance” to spread broadly. On the publisher’s colophon (paiji, 牌記, lit. the board of record) of “the edition held by the present house” (benya cangben, 本衙藏本), the book is also claimed to be the “sequel to the book of four geniuses” (xu sicaizi shu, 續四才子書). Hence, it is also reasonable to identify THZZR as the author of this book. According to Yuan Shishuo, “all the extent versions of YZJ are inscribed as ‘narrated by THZZR’.” The publisher’s colophon of the “edition held by the present house” of RJL found in the Harvard-Yenching Library claims that the book is “composed by THZZR.” Therefore, it is highly likely that these three works were also written by THZZR.

Three works connected to THZZR, LWDXL, JDDSZPT and Sequel to the Water Margin, are not scholar-beauty novels. LWDXL is a historical novel with a strong religious flavor. The earliest extent version of this novel is printed by The Hall of Eternal Celebration (Yongqing tang, 永慶堂) in the reign of Kangxi. The publisher’s colophon claims that the version is “newly composed by THZZR.” JDDSZPT is a religious-themed novel and also

17 Paiji is the page where the information of the publisher, the publication date, the location of the publishing house, and sometimes the version of the book are recorded in an ink rim. It has been commonly observed in books published since the Song Dynasty.
18 One extant version of Liangjiao hun is the so-called benya cangben, and the book is entitled Xinbian sicaizi liang jiaohun xiaozhuan [新編四才子兩交婚小傳, Newly edited four talents brief tale of two inverse marriages].
20 Tianhua zang zhuren 天花藏主人, Renjian le 人間樂, Happiness in the human world], reprinted ed., in Guben xiaoshuo jicheng [古本小說集成, Collection of antique editions of fiction], the inside cover page.
signed as “newly composed by THZZR.” Signed as "newly composed by THZZR."21 Sequel to the Water Margin is a historical novel. It features a preface signed as Guest on the Bridge of Rainbow Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture (Caihong qiao shang ke tiyu Tianhua zang, 彩虹橋上客題與天花藏), which is also considered to be THZZR. 22

Except for YZJ, LWDXL, and JDDSZPT, the rest of the sixteen works are all preaced by THZZR, although under slightly different names. For example, the preface to “the edition held by the present house” of DQR is signed as Master of Unofficial Politics Studio Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture (Suzheng tang zhuren tiyu Tianhua zang, 素政堂主人題與天花藏); also in one version of RJL, the preface is signed as Old Man from Xishan Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture (Xishan laosou tiyu Tianhua zang, 錫山老叟題與天花藏). 23 According to Su Xing, heavenly flowers could be interpreted as the fiction writer’s boast about his own work because it is said that when the Buddhist Master Yunguang 雲光 was explaining a sutra, Heaven was so moved by his speech that flowers fell from the sky. In other words, the author of these novels uses the term heavenly flowers to show off his literary talent. 24 Dai Bufan explains “cang” 藏 as meaning to collect and store

21 Tianhua zang zhuren 天花藏主人, comp., Taohua an zhuren 桃花庵主人 comm., Jidian dashi zui puti quanzhuan [濟顛大師醉菩提全傳, Complete Tale of Master Jidian the Drunken Buddha], reprinted ed., in Guben xiaoshuo jicheng [古本小說集成, Collection of antique editions of fiction], the inside cover page.
22 Lin Chen observes that on the publisher’s colophon of the version prefaced by Guest on the Bridge of Rainbow Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture, there are also two seals belonging to THZZR and Master of Unofficial Politics respectively, leading him to conclude that Guest on the Bridge of Rainbow Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture is THZZR. See Lin, 2000, 143.
24 Su Xing 蘇興, “Tianhua zang zhuren jiqi xiaoshuo” [天花藏主人極其小說, Master of Heavenly flowers scripture and his scholar-beauty fiction], in Caizi jiaren xiaoshuo shulin, 1985, 24, 185.
Expanding on Dai’s interpretation, Su Jianxin considers the terms as relating collecting and printing books. He also echoes Han Xiduo, saying that Heavenly Flowers Scripture and Unofficial Politics Studio are names of THZZR’s publishing house. In my view, since heavenly flowers carries overtones of Buddhist tradition, the term could also be the name for Buddhist and Taoist scriptures or Canon, thus being pronounced as zang (Scriptures/Canon) instead of cang (to collect or store). As for Unofficial Politics Studio, besides Su and Han’s opinion that it is the name of a publishing house, Dai Bufan views it as a hall in Xu Zhen’s house since he holds that THZZR is Xu Zhen, and Yang Lisheng interprets it as the name of THZZR’s editorial or composing office.

Modern scholarship hasn’t paid much attention to THZZR’s activities and influences in fiction publication, yet it would appear that THZZR was also closely connected to commercial publishers. As suggested above, it is conceivable that he himself was a publisher. Chen Meilin adduces three pieces of evidence to prove THZZR’s involvement in the commercial publication of scholar-beauty fiction. The first proof is his self-reference as either Master of Heavenly Flowers Scripture Writing in Unofficial Politics Studio or Master of Unofficial Politics Studio Writing in Heavenly Flowers Scripture. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, some scholars consider both Heavenly Flowers Scripture and Unofficial Politics Studio as the name of THZZR’s publishing house. Second, in “the edition held by the present house” of SHS, the publisher’s colophon claims this version to be a “Secret

Version of Heavenly Flowers Scripture” (*Tianhua zang miben*, 天花藏秘本); The last one is that the combined version of PSLY and YJL is entitled *Book of Seven Geniuses Combinedly Printed by Heavenly Flowers Scripture* (*Tianhua zang heke qi caizi shu*, 天花藏合刻七才子書). The way the name Heavenly Flowers Scripture is used in the last two titles indicates that it is the name of the place where THZZR prints his and others’ novels. In other words, it appears to be a publishing house with its own special editions of certain texts.

Chen’s examination of THZZR’s role in publication is very helpful yet still sketchy. The lack of historical materials about THZZR is the main problem which has hindered further study of this topic. Nevertheless, as I will show, a close reading of his prefaces suggests that he had close ties with commercial publishers or even himself might have been a publisher. In his prefaces, he advertised the works he wrote or commented on through promotional language in his prefaces, indicating that his literary activities were influenced by marketing consideration. However, his promotional consciousness is weaker than other editors who developed editorial notes (*fanli*) both as a commentary tool and a forum to promote the work. Their advertisement strategies bear more similarities to modern advertising.

**Modern Scholarship on THZZR and Scholar-beauty Fiction**

As noted, THZZR’s historical identity has attracted considerable attention from scholars interested in scholar-beauty fiction. Yet it is by no means the sole or a necessary question to answer in order to advance the study of THZZR as a representative figure or of the genre as a whole. Both Chinese and English-language scholarship has analyzed novels of this genre without the attempting to interpret them by consulting the author’s biographical information.
As early as at the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars like Lu Xun and Hu Shi already evaluated the literary accomplishments of scholar-beauty fiction. Lu Xun provided brief summaries of representative works of this genre like Ping Shan Leng Yan, Yu Jiao Li, and The Tale of Making a Fine Match (Haoqiu zhuan, 好逑傳, here after HQZ) in his influential Brief History of Chinese Novel. He affirmed that the works promote free love but at the same time he felt that the plot revealed a blind faith in the imperial examination system and in imperial authority.²⁹ Hu Shi had serious reservations about the conventional happy ending in scholar-beauty romances. He viewed the “fetish of the happy union” as “the incontestable evidence of Chinese people’s weakness of willpower,” and dismissed the genre as a “literature of lies.”³⁰ Lu’s and Hu’s interpretations of scholar-beauty fiction form part of their social critique of the feudalist Chinese society rather than offering truly scholarly evaluation of fictional works. In the 1930s, another scholar named Guo Changhe comprehensively studied the genre as a whole for the first time. He considered the literary aesthetics of those works to be very low and criticized them even more harshly for their ideological incorrectness as representations of feudalism.³¹

It was only at the beginning of 1980s that scholar-beauty fiction started to attract more concerted scholarly attention in China.³² Since then, a large number of works of this

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²⁹ See Lu, reprinted ed., 1989, 192
³¹ Zhou Jianyu mentioned Guo Changhe in his review of the study on scholar-beauty fiction. My argument about Guo here is based on the information provided by Zhou. See Zhou Jianyu 周建渝, Chuantong wenxue de xiandai piping [傳統文學的現代批評, Modern critique of traditional literature] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2002), 279-80.
³² There are two isolated English-language dissertations touching on scholar-beauty fiction during the 1970s: William Bruce Crawford, Beyond the Garden Wall, Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1972; Richard C.
genre have been reprinted by major publishers in Shenyang, Beijing, and Shanghai, as well as in Taipei. Scholars offered insights regarding THZZR’s historical identity and conducted textual research on various editions of scholar-beauty novels. Nevertheless, the more aesthetically oriented study of this genre began to take place only in the 1990s. In particular, English scholarship in North America made remarkable contributions to the study of scholar-beauty novels from this perspective.

Keith McMahon’s book *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists* devoted two chapters to scholar-beauty fiction. In his discussion about chaste scholar-beauty romances of the early Qing, McMahon noted the feminization of scholar and the metamorphized woman who take “the superior and active role” by “acting and writing like a man.” He argued that “[A]n asymmetry emerges in their exchange of gender characteristics in that while she chastely engages in cross-dressing and male-impersonation, a man cannot perform the complementary opposite without... erotic complicity.” Yet this asymmetry is complemented by the phenomenon of symmetry, in which “the woman and man exchange positions, duplicate themselves, and simultaneously act in several roles—all as a part of transposition that

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33 From the beginning of 1980s, Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe in Shenyang has started to publish the collection entitled *Mingmo Qingchu xiaoshuo xuankan* [明末清初小說選刊, Selected imprints of fiction from the late Ming and early Qing]. Later three other publishers have published photocopies of extent versions of novels from that period, including *Ming Qing shanben xiaoshuo congkan* [明清小說善本叢刊, Series of rare editions of Ming and Qing fiction] published by Tianyi chubanshe 天一出版社 in Taipei; *Guben xiaoshuo congkan* [古本小說叢刊, Series of antique editions of fiction] published by Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 in Beijing; and the already mentioned *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* [古本小說集成, Collection of antique editions of fiction].

34 See scholarship mentioned in previous sections.

removes them from their normal subject-object positions in the hierarchical family."³⁶ His discussion about these scholar-beauty novels is contrasted with the erotic romances of sexually active scholars and beauties in the late Ming and early Qing. Deeply influenced by western theories of gender and structuralism, McMahon’s approach to read scholar-beauty fiction differed from previous Chinese scholarship. His work on longer took issue with the social value of these novels. Instead, he focused on the characteristics of the gender role assumed by the protagonists and its corresponding aesthetic function within the narrative.

Maram Epstein echoed McMahon’s argument in her book Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction. She also suggested that “in many scholar-beauty novels the male and female protagonists are in many ways indistinguishable.” Yet she did not mention the masculinity of the female role. Instead, she underscored the feminization of male protagonists with feminine “beauty, emotional sensitivity, physical frailty, and moral purity.” In her view, such a “feminized variations on the ‘scholar theme’ offer readers redemptive escapes from the spiritual, moral, and physical compromises demanded by more conventional Confucian roles.”³⁷

Published in the same year as Epstein’s work, Martin Huang’s Desire and Fictional Narratives in Late Imperial China features one chapter about the conceptual term of sensitivity in the context of a close reading of three scholar-beauty novels, namely, JYQZ, HQZ, and DQR. Huang echoed McMahon’s opinion by affirming his two categories of vernacular fiction in late Ming and early Qing period, namely, the “chaste romances” (scholar-beauty fiction) and the “erotic romances.” He then noted the effort in those early

³⁶ See McMahon, 1995, 124.
Qing chaste romances to desexualize *qing* as a “counter-trend” against “the tendency to promote the cause of desire by ignoring the assumed distinctions between *qing* and *yu*” in late Ming erotic romances, and the “emphasis on *yu* at the expense of *qing* in works like *Jin Ping Mei*.“ In the close examination of the three novels, he observed that “to reclaim the purity of *qing*, these early Qing fiction writers try to reinvent the content of *qing* by redefining ‘chastity.’”

Recent Chinese scholars have also provided new interpretations. Recent Chinese scholars have also provided works from similar perspectives. Trained at Princeton University, Zhou Jianyu provided insightful opinions about scholar-beauty novels from a slightly different vantage point. He examines the works of this genre in the context of traditional Chinese culture, and takes a narratological approach to look at the narrator’s function in the narrative.

Lin Chen is another noteworthy scholar in this field since he is the first to devote a whole book to the study of a specific person in the tradition of scholar-beauty fiction. His work *Heavenly Flowers Scripture and His Fiction* (Tianhua zang zhuren jiqi xiaoshuo, 天花藏主人極其小說,) published in 2001 provides a brief survey of fifteen novels related to THZZR and commences to evaluate THZZR’s works and his influence in literary history by placing them back in the original historical background. Lin’s approach is a response to the previous bias against scholar-beauty fiction in Chinese scholarship due to the ideological interference in literary study.

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38 This argument is also found in Keith McMahon’s book. See McMahon, 1995, 101-2.
39 Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge and London: Harvard Asian Center), 211.
Simplified Categorizations of Scholar-beauty Fiction

Lin Chen provides a descriptive definition of the genre in his 1988 work: “Scholar-beauty fiction tells stories about romantic love and marriage between scholars and beauties. Characteristic plot elements include love at first sight between the scholar and the beauty, the villain stirring up trouble resulting in the separation of the scholar and the beauty, as well as the scholar’s passing of the civil service examination and his happy union with the beauty.”

Zhou Jianyu echoes Lin’s definition ten years later and identifies scholar-beauty fiction as a Qing-dynasty sub-genre of fiction about love and marriage. Besides such description of the main content and plot of the genre, there has been no fixed definition of scholar-beauty fiction. Hence, there appear some problematic categorizations in defining the scholar-beauty genre in both Chinese and English scholarship, which need to be clarified before the examination of THZZR’s works.

First, there is a tendency to categorize scholar-beauty novels produced in the Qing dynasty into “atypical” and “typical” ones. For example, according to Hou Zhongyi, a modern editor of the works, LEB is “no longer typical scholar-beauty fiction.” Generally speaking, “atypical” scholar-beauty novels are different from “typical” works such as YJL and PSLY. They contain sub-plots of other fictional themes, such as historical themes, religious themes, chivalrous themes, and so on. Some scholars view these works as outside the domain of typical scholar-beauty works. It is true that these works manifest a kind of

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40 Lin Chen 林辰, Mengmo Qingchu xiaoshuo shulu [明末清初小說述錄, Essays and records about fiction in the late Ming and early Qing] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1988), 60.
literary practice in which the scholar-beauty romance is simplified into a certain plot formula. For example, in the religious-themed novel LEB, through the plot formula of the scholar-beauty romance, the union between the talented scholar and the beauty becomes a worldly reward for doing good deeds or a predestined fate instead of being a consequence of the rarity and value of their talent and beauty. At the same time, to reward good deeds and to grant someone certain luck is also interpreted as the representation of the will of Heaven. Extracted from the original context, the seemingly mechanical adoption of the happy ending challenges the importance of real talent in the whole story which is promised in THZZR’s prefaces to “typical” scholar-beauty stories.

However, in my view, it is problematic to categorize scholar-beauty romances under the two headings of typical and atypical. The modern categorization of the genre into these two groups indicates two problematic assumptions. First, it presupposes that a certain quality is peculiar to some works and not found in the majority of scholar-beauty novels. Although the main topic of a scholar-beauty novel is always the romantic love and marriage between a male scholar and one or two talented female beauty/beauties, the romance is always intertwined with subplots about political and social issues. For example, in the early work by THZZR, namely, YJL, the female talent’s father Minister Bai Xuan despises Minister Yang Tingzhao because Yang attaches himself to a treacherous collaboration of court officials. Later, after Bai rejectes the Yang family’s desire for a marriage alliance, Yang seeks to harm Bai by proposing to the emperor to assign Bai to a dangerous diplomatic mission to go to a remote foreign country. Similarly, PSLY contains a sub-plot about how the villainous Dou Guoyi framed the two talents Shan Dai and Leng Jiangxue by reporting to the emperor that the two women are inappropriately involved in a secret love affair with two young scholars.
In LJH, the author touches on the issue of the ebb and flow of power between the civil and military officials in the court. Of course, the subthemes in these “typical” works serve to enrich the main plot of the romance, while the so-called “atypical” works use the romance as a plot formula and both the author and the commentator pay special attention to the development of the religious or military subthemes. Nevertheless, the multifaceted nature is not peculiar to certain works, but rather exists in most scholar-beauty romances produced in late Ming and early Qing periods.

Second, Keith McMahon categorizes scholar-beauty fiction produced in the Qing dynasty into chaste and erotic ones. In his scheme, works related to THZZR all belong to the category of chaste scholar-beauty romances. Chaste scholar-beauty novels whose female protagonists are chaste and male protagonists marry one or two wives differ from erotic romances in which “scholars and beauties are unchaste and scholars marry three or more beauties.” “If the hero and/or heroine engage in premarital sex, if the hero has more than two wives, or if the narrative contains sexual detail, then the work leaves the realm of the so-called chaste romance.” This categorization was also used by the traditional Chinese scholar named Liu Tingji 刘廷様 (1654?-?), who classified scholar-beauty novels into four groups: those that tell of stories about scholars and beauties who admire each other’s beauty and talent but are still not harmful to the social customs; those that are closer to obscenity; those that are endless pernicious; and those that should be burnt. McMahon also mentions some works as situated between the chaste and the erotic romances, for example, Pavilion of

43 See McMahon, 1995, 100.
44 Liu Tingji 刘廷様, Zaiyuan zazhi [在園雜誌, Miscellanea of the Zai Garden]. In Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan (近代中國史料叢刊, Series of historical works of modern China), Shen Yunlong 沈雲龍 et al. eds. 100 vols. (Taipei: Wenhui chubanshe, 1966-78), vol. 38: 105.
*Brocade and Fragrance* (*Jinxiang ting*, 錦香亭) and *Awakened from the Love Dream* (*Qingmeng tuo*, 情夢柝, hereafter QMT). These works “are just outside this realm in that the hero, for example, has a minor affair with a woman other than his future wife or wives, or the novel contains descriptions of sexual acts but among characters other than the main heroes and heroines. Ultimately, even a highly explicit work can maintain some of the basic standards of what I label the chaste romance.”

In my view, this kind of categorization is oversimplified because some “chaste” novels, such as works related to THZZR, although showing relatively conservative ethics and eliminating female protagonists’ premarital sex, nevertheless portray marital sex and male protagonists’ sex with women other than female protagonists, as I will demonstrate with examples in the fourth chapter. Moreover, the standard of sexual description causes confusion in categorization. For example, the novel QMT, which contains description of sex among peripheral and villainous characters and hints at sexually suggestive confusion of gender identities, is viewed by Liu as belonging to the same chaste category as YJL and PSLY. Yet, McMahon considers it as between chaste and erotic romances. Therefore, in this thesis, I use the term “scholar-beauty fiction” to refer to works produced and most importantly published in the Qing dynasty, without labeling them as “chaste” and “erotic” ones.

In this thesis, I will take other scholars’ work one step further by examining THZZR’s role from a broader perspective. Based on the brief review of fictional works related to THZZR in

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45 See McMahon, 1995, 128.
the previous section, it is apparent that THZZR simultaneously assumed multiple roles, including those of fiction writer, editor, commentator and publisher. He authored his own works of the scholar-beauty fiction, edited novels and wrote prefaces for works by others. Hence, I will examine THZZR in these three capacities, including THZZR’s status as a professional writer involved in fiction publication, his role as commentator on scholar-beauty novels, and as a writer of his own novels. With regard to the first aspect, I will look at the popularity of his works in the early Qing period. In particular, I will explore how he managed to keep his responsibility as a literatus in literary activities in the context of the pressures attendant upon a professional writer in a commercialized book market. With regard to the second aspect, I will provide a close examination of his prefaces to his own works as well as to novels by other writers of scholar-beauty genre. In these prefaces, he reinterpreted some conceptual terms such as sensitivity (qing, 情), born nature (xing, 性), talent (cai, 才), and so on, as a response to earlier trends in fiction writing as noted by Martin Huang. At the same time, as I will show, he also sought to promote fiction as an independent literary genre. With regard to the third aspect, I will carefully analyze three of the most influential works firmly attributed to THZZR, namely YJL, PSLY, and LJH. Through a close reading of these three novels, I will show how THZZR viewed the scholar-beauty genre through defining real talent in the images of talented scholars and beauties. He attached historical significance to his talents, both male and female, and affirmed their superior intellects over ordinary officials. Thus he challenged the validity of civil service examination system in educating and selecting talents. He defined his view of scholar-beauty fiction with the de-sexualization of pre-martial female protagonists, yet he also included marital sex between the male and female talents, as well as illicit sex between the male scholar and some other female roles.
who are not qualified to be a talent. Moreover, he allowed homoerotic emotion between
gfemale protagonists and extended it to the heterosexual polygamous marriage.

In summary, this thesis seeks to provide a relatively comprehensive view of the
seemial figure in the development of the scholar-beauty genre. The understanding of the
roles he assumed and the theories he articulated will in turn allows us to better understand the
influence of the genre as a whole in the development of traditional vernacular fiction in
China and abroad.
Chapter 2: Tianhuazang zhuren 花花藏主人 and the Book Market:  
The Negotiation between the Role of a Literati Writer and the  
Profession of Writing

Introduction

Recent scholarship has identified THZZR as a representative of the first generation of professional fiction writers in Chinese history. As indicated by Chen Meilin, professional fiction writers write fiction and novels for a living, but they are also involved in fiction commenting, editing, and even publishing. According to Chen, one of the four characteristics of professional fiction writers is that they are closely connected with commercial publishers. Therefore, the popularity of the book in the market and commercial profit unavoidably becomes a major concern in those professional writers’ literary activities, including THZZR, who, according to some evidence, is possibly himself a commercial publisher. However, although quite likely he is involved in the commercial market, an examination of his works shows that he doesn’t write fiction solely for commercial profit. In fact, he strikes a good balance between commercial considerations and his aspirations to elevate fiction to the status of a serious literary genre.

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46 Cheng Guofu argues that an earlier group of professional fiction writers are lower-class literati who were hired by commercial publishers to write works of fiction at the end of the Ming dynasty rather than writers of scholar-beauty fiction like THZZR in early Qing. But he also agrees that professional fiction writers not only wrote their own works, but also engaged in fiction editing to meet the needs of publishers. See Cheng Guofu, Mingdai shufang yu xiaoshuo yanjiu [明代小說與書坊研究, A study on Ming fiction and publishing houses] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 85.

On the one hand, he expresses commercial concerns in his literary activities about fiction, be it by writing fiction himself or by writing prefaces. For example, at the beginning of LJH, THZZR promises an extraordinary and marvelous experience in scholar-beauty stories on account of the rarity of talent as well as the difficulty of a marriage between a talent and a beauty. Then he explains: “PSLY has revealed such wonderful experiences between talents and beauties; nevertheless, since scholar-beauty stories have endless “fragrance” to spread broadly, [I provide] the book LJH as a sequel [to PSLY].” It could be that THZZR attempts to explain of the original intention of this book. Yet it is also likely that THZZR makes use of the popularity and the fame of his earlier work PSLY to advertise the new book. In prefaces, such advertising efforts are more obvious through self-promotional language and inspirational rhetoric designed to arouse the readers’ interest. On the other hand, compared with fanli (凡例, editorial notes) which feature more advertisement-oriented commentary, THZZR’s prefaces are more concerned with literary insights. He assumes a position closer to the literati group. He views the novel as a serious literary work and tries to appeal and communicate with talented ones in the potential readership through his prefatory commentary. It could be viewed as a kind of commercial strategy to make a certain work more luxurious and appealing even to lower class readers. Yet THZZR’s prefatory promotion to advertise a work is still much less obvious and aggressive than that of his contemporaries. In addition, through the prefatory aesthetic interpretation, THZZR uses the book market as the site where fiction can be better promoted and appreciated through literary consumption.

The main body of this chapter will demonstrate how THZZR responds to the influence of his identity of professional writer on his fiction writing and commentary. First, based on data of the publication of scholar-beauty fiction in the early-to-mid Qing period, I will show the popularity of THZZR’s representative novels YJL and PSLY. Second, I observe that THZZR takes pains to advertise works he writes or comments on through self-promotional language in his prefaces. However, his efforts are much less explicit and intense compared to the aggressive advertising attempts in the extant editorial notes in other texts. Hence, the combination of an aesthetically oriented commentary and the mild prefatory advertising efforts reveals that THZZR identifies more with the literati group than with the professional writer despite his connection with commercial publishers. Third, some novels of scholar-beauty genre feature sub-plots of other genres like crime fiction, historical fiction, supernatural fiction, chivalrous fiction, etc. THZZR is also involved in the commentary of this kind of works. Some scholar has argued that THZZR’s involvement in the commentary of these works resulted from his identity of a professional writer who has to meet the market needs; however, an examination of plot characteristics of two such works as well as THZZR’s prefatory comments to them reveals that THZZR doesn’t views these novels as belonging to a completely different genre. He provides a discussion of conceptual terms such as goodness (善, shan), and predestined relationship (緣, yuan) from an aesthetic perspective in a manner similar to that of his prefaces for “typical” scholar-beauty works, indicating that one the one hand, he maintains the role as a literatus in fiction commentary; on the other hand, the scholar-beauty genre in THZZR’s definition actually bears a multifaceted nature, that is, it may contain sub-plots of various fictional themes.
The Market Hit

Modern scholarship holds that the scholar-beauty genre matured after THZZR’s three novels appeared, namely, YJL, PSLY, and LJH. The heyday of the production of such scholar-beauty romances lasted from the end of the Shunzhi period and extended through the reign of Yongzheng (1723-1735). In this period of more than sixty years, scholar-beauty fiction was “the most active, the most fashionable, and the most influential” subgenre of fiction.49 However, according to records of fiction publication in the Qing dynasty, although the preface to the combined edition of PSLY and YJL was signed in “the fifteenth year of Shunzhi” (1658, four years before the accession of Emperor Kangxi), and the publication of the combined edition of PSLY and YJL was dated to the reign of Yongzheng (1723-1735), most recorded publications of those two works date to the reign of Qianlong (1736-1795).50 Hence, during the Qianlong period, THZZR’s works enjoyed considerable commercial success.

Han Xiduo’s A Record of Fiction Publishing Houses (Xiaoshuo shufang lu, 小說書坊錄) provides comprehensive and reliable information about the commercial publications of popular fiction during the period of Qing. The earliest recorded publication of works related to THZZR was in the reign of Kangxi (1662-1722): the publishing house named Room of Howling Flowers (Xiaohua xuan, 嘯花軒) printed The Guanhua Hall Commentary Version of Tale of Jin, Yun and Qiao (Guanhua tang pinglun Jin yun qiao zhuan, 貫華堂評論金雲

49 See Lin, 2000, 13.
50 The date of publication is provided by Han Xiduo and Wang Qingyuan’s work. See, Han Xiduo 韓錫鐸, and Wang Qingyuan 王清原, Xiaoshuo shufang lu [小說書坊錄, Record of fiction publishing houses] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1987).
in four volumes and Xinbian xiuxiang cuxin xiaoshuo Lin’er bao (新編繡像簇新小說麟兒報, Newly Edited and Illustrated Brand New Version of the Fiction Reward of Unicorn Son). Both works of the Xiaohua xuan edition contain THZZR’s prefaces.\(^5\) In the reign of Kangxi, certain works featuring scholar-beauty stories were recorded as being published by commercial publishing houses, such as Awakened from the Love Dream, Drunk in Spring Breeze (Qingmeng tuo, Zui chunfeng, 醉春風), Spring in Jade Pavilion (Yulou chun, 玉樓春), Predestiny of Dream in Mt. Wu (Wumeng yuan, 巫夢緣), Butterfly Matchmaker (Hudie mei, 蝴蝶媒), and so on.\(^5\) Nevertheless, I argue that it is not until the reign of Yongzheng and the reign of Qianlong that the heyday of the publication of

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\(^5\) Guanhua tang is Jin Shengtan’s studio name for his commented edition of The Water Margin. It was located in Suzhou and published The Fifth Book of genius: The Water Margin [Diwu caizi shu Shuihu zhan, 第五才子書水滸傳,] in the fourth year of Chongzhen (1641) with the note on the cover saying that this is “the antique edition of Guanhua Hall in Jinchang” (Jinchang guanhuatang guben, 金閶貫華堂古本). According to the record in Xiaoshuo shufang lu, it also published Mao Zonggang’s The First Book of Genius the Antique Edition of the Record of Three Kingdoms [Diyi caizi shu guben Sanguo zhi, 第一才子書古本三國志] in the reign of Shunzhi. The preface attributed to Jin Shengtan to this book has been identified as actually composed by Mao Zonggang himself. Interestingly, the title of the edition of THZZR’s two works, namely, Combined Printed Book of Seven Geniuses by Heavenly Flowers Scripture [Tianhua zang heke qicaizi shu, 天花藏合刻七才子書] also makes use of Jin’s popularity, particularly with regard to the term “book of genius” (caizi shu, 才子書). This term was first created by Jin Shengtan to refer to the six works he selected from various literary genres, namely, Zhuangzi [Zhuangzi, 莊子, also known as The Holy Canon of Nanhu, 南華經], Sorrow after Departure [Lisao, 離騷], Records of History, Collection of Minister Du’s Poetry [Du Gongbu ji, 杜工部集], The Water Margin, and Romance of the West Wing. In the preface attributed to Jin in Mao Zonggang’s Diyi caizi shu guben Sanguo yanyi. Mao mentions that “[I] once collected six books of geniuses, including…I have falsely commented and edited them. Gentlemen all around the state have praised me as really understanding those works.” See Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, Mao Zonggang pipingben Sanguo yanyi [毛宗崗批評本三國演義, The romance of the three kingdoms with commentaries by Mao Zonggang], reprinted ed., (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2006), 20. The fact that Mao falsely attributed the preface to his work to Jin, the comments he makes on Jin’s books of geniuses as widely appreciated by people in the state, as well as the claim that this book is “the first book of genius” or “the unofficial book of Shengtan” (Shengtan waishu, 聖嘆外書), collectively signals his effort to make use of Jin’s fame and promote his own work. Similarly, THZZR also tried to connect his own work with Jin’s books of geniuses to make use of their popularity in the book market as advertisement.

\(^5\) See Han and Wang, 1987, 23.

schoar-beauty fiction occurred. The two reigns saw the repeated publication of what became the representative works of this genre, namely, PSLY and YJL, by different publishers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Book of Seven Geniuses</th>
<th>YJL</th>
<th>PSLY</th>
<th>Dream of the Red Chamber (120 chapters)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kangxi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yongzheng</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qianlong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiaqing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daoguang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Xianfeng</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongzhi</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangxu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1: THZZR’s Two Novels Printed in the Early-to-mid Qing Period

As shown in the table, even *Dream of the Red Chamber* [Honglou meng, 紅樓夢], which is widely recognized as the most successful traditional Chinese novel, circulated in fewer
printed editions during the mid-Qing.\textsuperscript{54} I am not arbitrarily saying that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is less popular than THZZR’s works at that time. Actually *Dream of the Red Chamber* is known to have been largely consumed mostly in manuscript form at the early stage of its circulation. Considering the remarkable popularity of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the Qing dynasty, which is even suggested by the total number of its publications in this table, the comparison made here is still meaningful. Although the works compared in the table all have quite a few editions with unidentified publication date, it is nevertheless still tenable that the two works authored by THZZR can be considered a market splash in the middle period of the Qing dynasty.\textsuperscript{55}

Two of the three earliest publications of PSLY and YJL in the reign of Yongzheng appeared in the form of combined edition entitled *Book of Seven Geniuses Combinedly Printed by Heavenly Flowers Scripture* (*Tianhua zang heke qi caizi shu*, 天花藏合刻七才子書), as indicated in the second column of Table 1. According to Cheng Guofu, in the reign of Chongzhen in the Ming Dynasty, the publishing house named The Grand Flying Publishing House (*Xiongfei guan*, 雄飛館) printed a combined edition of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. In the preface to this edition named *Record of Heroes* (*Yingxiong pu*, 英雄谱), Xiong Fei 熊飛, the owner of the publishing house explains that the reason to combine the two novels in a single edition is that in the two works “stories about the intelligent, the brave, the loyal, and the righteous emerge one after another. Buyers will feel

\textsuperscript{54} According to *Xiaoshuo shufang lu*, the version containing one hundred and twenty chapters has most records of publications during the Qing Dynasty. See Han and Wang, 1987, 249-51.

\textsuperscript{55} It is noteworthy that after the gap formed the two reigns following Qianlong, the three successive reigns of Xianfeng, Tongzhi, and Guangxu witness a second publishing peak of the two works. But I am not going to dwell on this point here since in this essay focuses on THZZR’s literary activities in the early Qing.
regret if the two imprints are not combined.”⁵⁶ Arguably, the remarkable popularity of these works drove the publisher to capitalize on their success to publish a combined edition in a quest for even stronger sales and higher profit. Hence, in the mid-Qing the combined edition of PSLY and YJL could in turn hint at the popularity of the two works, even if THZZR’s preface to his combined edition is identical to the one found in PSLY and the publisher of that new joint edition did not add a preface of his own, irrespective of whether or not THZZR was the publisher.⁵⁷

Undoubtedly, due to the commercial success of both PSLY and YJL, in the mid-Qing book market, especially during the reign of Qianlong, THZZR himself is turned into a recognized brand with advertising potential in the domain of fiction. Some of the works of scholar-beauty fiction related to him appear to capitalize on THZZR’s name to attract buyers. For example, editions published in Qianlong and Tongzhi periods frequently used the title Xinke Tianhua zang piping Ping Shang Leng Yan (新刻天花藏批評平山冷燕, Newly Printed THZ Commented Ping Shan Leng Yan). In Xinjuan xiuxiang Sai hongsi xiaoshuo (新鐫批評繡像賽紅絲小說, Newly Printed Commented Edition of Competing the Red Silk Fiction), there are claims printed on the cover of the book like “the secret edition from Heavenly Flowers Scripture” (tianhua zang miben, 天花藏秘本). Even if the evidence for the early Qing is limited, the incipient popularity of THZZR’s works and the consequent branding effect might partly explain his intensive involvement in commentary of others’ works of scholar-beauty fiction.

⁵⁷ Chen Meilin argues that the title of the combined edition indicates that THZZR is deeply involved in the publication of this edition, if not the publisher himself. In my view, this is not sufficient evidence to affirm whether or not THZZR was part of the publication process. See Chen, Feng, and Li, 1998, 139.
Prefatory Promotion vs. Advertising in Editorial Notes

The promotional role of commentaries is easy to observe in the extant works of the scholar-beauty genre. The most obvious ones are found in editorial notes, in which editorial notes are itemized in a list rather than written in expository prose. Editorial notes refer to a text explaining the content of the work and the format of its compilation, while a preface is a piece of writing introducing and commenting on a work or an essay.\(^{58}\) Hence, editorial notes are supposed to represent a more objective attitude, whereas prefaces function as a vehicle to express more subjective personal feelings and opinions. However, in examples of editorial notes on scholar-beauty fiction, the supposedly objective introduction and explanation are often delivered in an extremely subjective way. Personal comments defending or praising the work clearly aim to promote sales. Therefore, although both editorial notes and preface can function as pre-text commentary and advertising tools, editorial notes were apparently not as appealing as prefaces to THZZR. He did not engage in the writing of editorial notes to any of the extant works, but routinely deployed commercial pitches in the prefaces attributed to him.

THZZR’s Non-defensive and Non-instructional Promotional Language

One of the most obvious advertising strategies observed in editorial notes is to defend the work against any aspect that might be potentially unsatisfying to readers. In the editorial notes to the novel *The Volume to Exhilarate the Heart* [*Kuaixin bian*, 快心編], the Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers presents himself as a sympathetic sounding board of the author. Unlike a commentator who provides personal insights into the work in terms of its content

\(^{58}\) On the explanations of the two Chinese terms, see *Gu Hanyu da cidian* [古漢語大辭典, The great dictionary of classical Chinese] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2000), 385, 1022.
and literary achievement from an interpretive perspective, here he not only highlights the work’s strong points, but more importantly, tries to defend the work against criticisms of literary inferiority or moral impropriety. Four items seek to convince readers of the distinctiveness of this work of fiction. First, the language of the work is said to be plain and simple (庸淺, yongqian), which nevertheless makes the work appealing for both refined and popular tastes. Second, the work is set in the tradition of chuanqi (傳奇, lit. legend) fiction and scholar-beauty fiction but promises to distinguish itself by its novelty and originality from the verbose and hackneyed representatives of the genre. Third, according to the Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers, the work achieves remarkable depth in depicting various aspects of society vividly and incisively, and even the ostensibly dubious joking and brawls harbor allegorical overtones. Finally, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers justifies the seemingly wordy in-text comments as straightforward and designed to allow for a satisfying reading experience. Such a defensive posture amounts to a kind of merchandising rather than simple literary commentary.

THZZR’s Narrower Definition of “The Knower”

The kind of relationship between knowers (zhiyin, 知音, lit. knower of the other’s innermost being) is established by the commentator between the author of the book (and also himself as already a knower of the author if the work is written by others) and readers of the work, although they don’t use the term “the knower” explicitly. Writers of editorial notes also use “the knower” relationship to assign readers the responsibility of an appropriate reading of the book and a better understanding of the author’s intentions. They define the concept of the knower as someone who understands the author’s intention and appreciates the book well. In
other words, without more specific definition and requirements, the concept of the knower here implies a broader readership, including people from lower educational and social background. However, THZZR circumscribes the connotation of “the knower” more narrowly. In particular, he specifies it through descriptions of the reader’s intellectual ability, and more importantly, like Jin Shengtan and other commentators, through sharp delineations between qualified and undesirable readers.

A close examination of the editorial notes on *The Volume to Exhilarate the Heart* reveals that the attitudes Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers maintains towards readers in each item seem contradictory to each other at first glance. He switches the relative positions between readers and him in a dialogic relationship. In the first item, he clearly states that through “plain and simple” language the book seeks to satisfy popular tastes, which possibly encompasses readers of lower social, economic and educational levels. Aside from this concern about the lower class readers, he also shows impressive humility, a characteristic of a traditional intellectual, vis-a-vis a readership that belongs to a relatively high social class. He says that “I dare not affect difficult language which might offend you truly refined gentlemen.” This self-deprecating gesture offers those well-read readers who are qualified to be the “truly refined gentlemen” almost absolute authority over the work and puts them in a position of superiority over the author, or even him as the author’s spokesman. Nevertheless, this unassuming attitude is completely replaced in another item when, with explicit self-confidence, he stakes out a claim for the authenticity of the story. In the third

item, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers makes the stern statement that “[I]f [the author was] involved in so doing [e.g., making up stories], he would deviate from the teaching of the classics and rebel against the Way (道, dao). How could a gentleman possibly engage in that kind of thing?”

In the following item, although still brimming with self-confidence, he softens his attitude to some extent by assuming the position of a connoisseur who is aware of the profound meaning hidden in the work and waits leisurely and patiently for someone who has a similarly discerning eye for the work’s intricacies. Those who know how to appreciate the work are addressed as the person who knows (zhizhe, 知者). According to Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers, undoubtedly, a reader who knows how to read the book will not carelessly skip over those details that seem morally dubious at first glance, but which actually reflect the author’s educational intentions. The last item of his notes expresses his expectation for readers to be the same sort of the person who knows and to be aware of the fact that to know the intention of the author through his comments is key to reading the fictional work, otherwise, crucial points of the work will be neglected. In general, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers’ varied attitudes and positions provide both invitations and challenges to a broad range of readers. Hence, the spokesman’s comments seek to cater to a range of readers and simultaneously convince them to purchase the book.

In THZZR’s most self-revelatory preface, namely the one found in PSLY as well as in the combined edition of PSLY and YJL, he sets up an explicit comparison at the very beginning: The difference between people only lies in the fact that Heaven grants some people distinctive talent and extraordinary emotional ability while others are not so favored.

60 Ibid.
He sees himself as among the talented ones whose talent is stifled and wasted and the zhiyin readers are also expected to be in this same group. On the opposite side are the untalented people who are overwhelmed by worldly enjoyment and live and die in obscurity. In FHY, talented people are contrasted with “stupid men and women” (愚夫婦, yu fufu) who are like weeds and bricks compared to the fragrance-and-jade-like talented scholars and beauties. A similar image is the so-called “people of the earthly banal feeling” (shisu yongqing, 世俗庸情) mentioned in the preface to JYQZ. The term “people of the earthly banal feeling” refers to those who, feeling ashamed about Wang Cuiqiao’s experiences, don’t agree with his interpretation of Wang Cuiqiao’s choices.

THZZR attempts to address a different readership from that implied by writers of the editorial notes, who offers their readers fiction of “plain and simple” (yongqian, 庸淺) language as well as “clearly and easily composed” (mingbai qianshu, 明白淺述) opening poems. As mentioned earlier, if commentators or editors like Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers expect to appeal to both popular and refined tastes and open up the possibility of becoming a zhiyin of the author to readers of both higher and lower educational background, THZZR seeks to “de-popularize” the works of scholar-beauty fiction he authors or comments on.

At first glance, the notion of de-popularization seems to contradict both the ostensibly popular nature of the scholar-beauty fiction and THZZR’s advertising efforts in those prefaces. THZZR would, of course, not want to reduce his readership in actuality, especially considering that the books were published by commercial publishers as profitable products for the book market. By “de-popularize” I want to underline THZZR’s attitude toward the
fiction and what kind of image he expects it to have among potential readers and in the market. By making it more exclusive and a luxury for an elite audience, he might well to mark it more desirable even for low-status readers.

At first, the preemption of the right to read the book by a certain segment of readership looks like a serious reduction in the implied readership. However, the defining line between the unqualified reader and the reader as a knower is only the attitude one assumes towards the work. Such an attitude can be easily modified. In comparison, THZZR sets the bar to be identified as a real talent, hence as a knower of the book, very high.

Other Advertising Strategies Observed in Editorial Notes

As a professional writer, THZZR seems not to be overly concerned with the commercial elements. An examination of some strategies used only in editorial notes, the strong commercial concern of the writer of editorial notes and the reluctance of THZZR to advertise his works in his prefaces will become more evident.

The Historian has very pushy and aggressive advertising language and strategy in his editorial notes even when compared to Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers, let alone to THZZR. His stronger confidence is first of all in his desire to distinguish *Spring Willow and Oriole* from most works of scholar-beauty fiction. He challenges most existing scholar-beauty fiction as presumptuously claiming to be romantic, while actually featuring adultery between men and women. He also ridicules the popular plots in which the scholar sometimes ends up with two beauties or the beauty falls in love with others before the ultimate union with the original lover. “For a fiction writer (*baiguan*, 稗官), [the twists and turns] don’t matter because such men [only care how to] make the story’s plots intricate and
to ensure that the story ends with the union of the scholar and the beauty.”⁶¹ Although not specifically mentioned, it is clear that THZZR would fall within this category of a fiction writer. In his comments, the Historian might well have alluded to THZZR’s YJL and his endorsement of Wang Cuiqiao’s behavior in JYQZ. Compared to a fiction writer described by the Historian in the quotation, the Historian addresses himself as the one who records it (zhizhe, 識者), and what has been affirmed by a fiction writer is “in the view of the one who records it problematic since it means the scholar’s and the beauty’s love to each other is not unswerving.”⁶² Therefore, *Spring Willow and Oriole* distinguishes itself as the book that features “authentic talent, beauty and romantic love”⁶³ and serves to “supplement and correct” (buzheng, 補正) those problematic works.

Not only does the Historian differentiate the work from other scholar-beauty stories, he also juxtaposes it with Jin Shengtan’s widely known version of *Romance of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*, 西廂記), which had gained broad acceptance. He recommends *Spring Willow and Oriole* to be read together with Jin Shengtan’s *Romance of the Western Wing* as *Historical Records* (*Shiji*, 史記). Besides its educational meaning as a historical work, the Historian underscores the fictional work’s pedagogical function for readers to learn how to write literature, an idea that is also influenced by Jin Shengtan’s two fully developed works of *Book of Genius* [Caizi shu, 才子書]: *The Water Margin* (preface dated 1641, edition published 1644), and *Romance of the Western Wing*. Many commercial publishers had

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⁶¹ Nanxuan heguan shizhe 南軒鶡冠史者, comp., *Shilu Pinyin qianfu*, 石廬拚飲潛夫, comm. *Chun Liu Ying* [春柳鶯, Willow and Oriole of Spring], reprinted ed., in *Dalian tushuguan cang guxiben mingqing xiaoshuo congkan* [大连圖書館藏孤稀本明清小說叢刊, Series of unique and rare copies of Ming Qing fiction held by the Dalian Library], vol.23, editorial notes.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.
falsely attributed their publication to Jin. Although the Historian’s use of Jin’s fame is different from those publishers, the commercial attempt to capitalize on Jin’s notoriety in this case is also undeniable.

The Historian also promotes his work by aligning himself with the author, or rather with literati taste, and simultaneously distancing himself from the commercial publisher. In his editorial notes, the Historian mentions three different descriptions of his multiple roles, including the Historian (shizhe, 史者), the one who records it, and the author (zuozhe, 作者). Considering the pen name he assumes and the context in which he uses these terms in the notes, it is very reasonable to say that the Historian refers to himself. Based on the note at the end of these editorial notes reading that this piece is “marked by the Historian himself,” it is very possible that the one who records it is also a self-reflexive term. Based on the information offered in the notes, he is not the original author but made some changes to a certain pre-existing story. The “author” is used to address the author of the story he edited. Nevertheless, he considers his editor’s role to be equally, if not more, important than the author’s: he warns readers who fail to read the work in an appropriate way as “unable to see the author’s intention and the insight of the one who records it.”

Similarly, the Historian also attempts to stress the literary nature of the work. In the editorial notes on Spring Willow and Oriole, the Historian claims absolute control of the interpretation of the book vis-a-vis potential readers: “As for this book, those who view it merely as a trifling matter are not allowed to read it. It will be given as a gift to reasonable people to put on their desk and read.”64 He also seeks to affirm a stronger connection with

64 Ibid.
the author/literati through a stance of alienation by convincing readers of his literary independence and relative absence of commercial influence. He shows his cooperative attitude towards the publisher’s demand to compose the chapter titles of his edition in the form of two lines although he is reluctant to do so since it has been repeatedly done this way in earlier works. But immediately he changes this attitude and insists on his unchallengeable authority over the book. He makes the decision to keep the work concise since as a literati’s creation, it ends only when it has to end, regardless whether or not it looks too short according to the publisher’s standards. Although both serving to make an impression that a certain novel is of high literary quality and a worthy purchase, the Historian’s promotional language is nevertheless much more straightforward and explicit compared to that of THZZR.

The advertising strategies in editorial notes described in this section are so explicit and skillful that they more closely resemble “modern” advertising. By contrast, THZZR’s prefaces feature more implicit promotional language. Thus, arguablely, he exhibits less self-consciousness than contemporary commentators who seized upon editorial notes as an advertising tool.

**Hybrid Scholar-beauty Fiction: Commercial Strategy or Inborn Nature?**

Through commentary, and possibly also the publication in the case of LEB, THZZR was also involved in the publication of hybrid scholar-beauty novels such as LEB, HZZ, and HTY. Modern scholarship holds that professional writers of scholar-beauty fiction needed to accelerate their speed to produce a novel for the market, so they usually try to limit the length of their works. Since a large amount of shorter length works were produced during a
relatively short period of time, their narrative pattern tended to be formulaic. Thus, some writers tried to make changes by adding sub-plots into the scholar-beauty romance. In other words, weaving sub-plots of other fictional themes into scholar-beauty narratives is a market-driven activity to generate greater sales. The problem of this argument lies in that first, it indicates that there is a chronological sequence between works of which the theme of romantic love and marriage is absolutely dominating and those containing more fully developed sub-themes. Second, THZZR’s involvement in the commentary on these works is a self-conscious recognition and promotion of a market-driven activity, indicating his identification with commercial publishers.

I have discussed the multifaceted nature of THZZR’s woks including YJL, PSLY, and LJH. Another work LEB serves as a more telling piece of evidence that there is no abrupt change in the development of scholar-beauty genre and works featuring fully developed sub-themes suddenly appearing after a certain point. According Lin Chen, scholar-beauty novels dominated the domain of fiction from the late Ming till the early period of the reign of Kangxi whereafter there appeared more scholar-beauty romances in which there were considerable sub-plots of various themes in the frame of romance love between scholars and beauties. Hence, it is reasonable to view works with multiple themes as one of the integral developments of scholar-beauty genre. However, novels of which the theme of romance is dominating were still produced after the early period of Kangxi, while in the early period of Kangxi some works featuring strong religious subtheme already appeared, for example, LEB, which contains a preface signed by THZZR in the eleventh year of the reign of Kangxi

66 See Lin, 1988, 81-4.
(1672). Such an overlap indicates that the presence of sub-themes in a scholar-beauty romance is a characteristic of the scholar-beauty genre existing all along its development rather than some new creation by later writers.

This is of course not to deny the possible social and political influence on the writing of scholar-beauty novel. Nevertheless, I observe no evidence in THZZR’s prefaces that he was responding to a change of market needs by promoting these newly emerged works with various sub-themes. Instead, even with different topics from prefaces to works like YJL and PSLY, THZZR’s comments still take an aesthetic perspective by interpreting conceptual terms in evaluating the work rather than explicitly promoting their sub-themes as a selling point. Here I take two novels, the one entitled LEB, and another named HTY as examples. The former is a hybrid of a religious-themed narratives and scholar-beauty fiction, and the latter is a scholar-beauty romance containing a strong military theme.

In THZZR’s prefaces to novels like YJL and PSLY, what is most valued by the will of Heaven is the rarity of real talent and beauty or the two combined in a single person. Therefore, the happy marriage between the talented scholar and the physically and intellectually distinctive girl is always bestowed after they overcome all the difficulties and obstacles on their way towards the happy union. In LEB, Lian Qing and Xing Zhaohua, the male and female protagonists, also achieve such a union as do the couples in PSLY, YJL, and LJH. Nevertheless, THZZR neither particularly underlines their distinctive talent nor their capacity to love as the reason why Heaven arranges their marriage. Neither does he interpret those twists and turns as a test of the genuineness of their talent and of their deep commitment and loyalty to their romantic affection. Instead, the union between the talent scholar and the beauty is a reward for the good deeds that Lian Qing’s father did for an
immortal. Although the birth of Lian Qing as well as his talent is a reward for Lian’s father, the rarity of talent is not sufficient to bring about a reward by itself. Lian Qing’s talent has been instrumentalized to achieve the marriage with a girl from an eminent family, which leads to both grant fame and wealth. As THZZR writes: “[t]he will of Heaven is extremely subtle. Scholarly honor and official rank, as well as wealth, cannot be bestowed upon Old Lian, who is neither well versed in letters nor in martial arts, so Heaven glorifies the son so as to glorify his parents.”67 The touch of individualism shown in THZZR’s praise of an individual’s outstanding intellectual ability in those prefatory commentaries to classic scholar-beauty fiction completely disappears from his comments on this work. Instead, here THZZR fully recognizes the conventional worship of family glory realized through its individual member’s success in the civil service examination.

Besides religious-themed narratives, a military theme is sometimes also woven into works of scholar-beauty fiction, for example, Huantu yuan. In this text, the image of the male protagonist, Hua Tianhe, is very different from those in the typical scholar-beauty works like YJL and PSLY, or even from Lian Qing in LEB. Although the novel also describes Hua Tianhe as good looking and talented, his most valued characteristics are his distinguished physical power and mental maturity. The author of this works views the physical beauty and poetic talent as commonplace among young people. Of course, those two features of the male protagonist are still very important in the narrative: for one, his beautiful appearance is what impresses others first; for another, his poem is key in his relationship with the female protagonist, Liu Qingyun. However, the author mostly emphatically highlights Hua’s

experience in resolving tough problems such as saving the Liu and his family from the
villain’s trap, and his sterling performance in martial arts. Besides, after passing the civil
service examination, Hua is assigned to positions in the army rather than the civil service. In
addition to Hua, the female protagonist Liu Lanyu is also described as being talented in
composing poems and in military leadership. The story begins with the description of the
rebellion and the immortal’s bestowal of a painting of the terrain of Guangdong on Hua, and
ends with Hua’s suppression of the rebellion thanks to the information contained in the
painting and the revelation of the immortal’s identity to Hua.

THZZR neither focuses on the characters’ talent in martial arts nor on their poetic talent.
He stresses the subtleness of predestination (yuan, 缘) in his preface to this work. In his
view, predestination is arranged by the will of Heaven, thus constituting the most influential
power in deciding a person’s destiny. The significance of talent as bestowed by Heaven has
been eliminated here. Talent is still important in a narrower term:

It is just because [the real talent’s] the deep affection touches people, [his] kindness moves
people, and [his] talent attracts people, [he is chosen to be] led by the dream and a rabbit
[sent by the immortal to get the painting and] goes through various twists. He almost doesn’t
consider [his] life and safety. How can he ask about predestination? It is just because [he]
doesn’t ask about predestination, predestination shows its subtlety and the will of Heaven
shows its wonder.”

Here THZZR no longer attempts to convince readers of the significance and extraordinary
nature of talent. Instead, he replaces talent to become the representation of the will of Heaven.
Hence, according to THZZR’s interpretation, the work HTY is not concerned with the power

68 Tianhua zang zhuren 天花藏主人, Huatu yuan [畫圖緣, Predestination of a painting], reprinted ed., in
Guben xiaoshuo jicheng [古本小說集成, Collection of antique editions of fiction], 14-6.
of talent to create one’s destiny, but instead offers a more conventional view of the role of predestination.

By dealing with those conceptual terms, THZZR continues his commentary strategy to evaluate these hybrid works from an aesthetic perspective by reinterpreting important conceptual terms. It is not convincing to claim that he promoted these hybrid works as a new selling point in the book market in spite of his identity as a professional writer, or at least he did not explicitly use advertising language like what is observed in editorial notes. He continues his image in prefatory writings as a literary commentator, whose most consideration is the literary evaluation of the work.

Conclusion

Despite his role as a professional writer who writes for a living rather than as a leisured literatus or scholar-official, and despite the remarkable success of his books and market potential of his commentaries as advertisements, THZZR’s literary activities are not completely driven by market need. He never engages in writing the more advertisement-oriented editorial notes to extant works in the scholar-beauty genre. The promotional language and advertising strategy developed in his prefatory writings is very mild and implicit. Cheng Guofu notes that extant editorial notes are much fewer in number than prefaces to fiction printed by commercial publishers in the Ming dynasty. \(^{69}\) This is also true in the case of scholar-beauty fiction commentary: editorial notes are not as commonly found as prefaces are in extant editions of scholar-beauty works published in the early-to-mid-Qing. Through an examination of available materials we can still say with

\(^{69}\) See Cheng, 2008, 132.
enough confidence that as a commentary tool, editorial notes are different from prefaces in that the former are more concerned with practical usage and sales promotion than the latter. Although prefaces are also used to promote books, their advertising function doesn’t supercede their original mission of literary commentary. This suggests that although considered to be among the earliest professional fiction writers in traditional Chinese society, who made fiction writing, editing and commenting a livelihood and were deeply involved in the commercial publication of fictional works, THZZR identifies more as a literatus in his writing and commenting than other contemporary commentators of scholar-beauty fiction who write both editorial notes and prefaces. Moreover, in his prefaces to hybrid scholar-beauty works, THZZR continues his aesthetic perspective in commenting on these works and provides literary evaluation of these works rather than explicitly promoting their sub-themes as a selling point. This literary stance indicates that THZZR does not subscribe to bifurcated categorization of scholar-beauty novels into “typical” and “atypical” ones. Neither does he present the fully developed sub-themes as newly created to satisfy market needs. Hence, THZZR’s prefaces to hybrid scholar-beauty novels reveal scholar-beauty fiction is a genre of multifaceted and flux nature in its full development in the late Ming and early Qing periods.
Introduction

As David Rolston notes, “for several centuries prior to this one, the Chinese read their fiction in commentary editions.” “Fiction commentaries began to appear in appreciable numbers in the late Ming,” and “commentary editions of famous novels become so popular that earlier editions without commentary or only rudimentary commentary went out of circulation and became rare books.” According to Rolston, there are three stages in the development of fiction commentary. In the third and critical stage (the last two-thirds of the seventeenth century), there appeared the most well-known commentators such as Jin Shengtan on *The Water Margin*, Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗 (1632-1709?) on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (prefaced 1680), Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (1670-1698) on *The Plum in a Golden Vase (Jin Ping Mei, 金瓶梅)* (prefaced 1695), and so on. \(^{70}\) THZZR was also active in the third stage. Unlike his contemporaries, he didn’t comment on existing famous novels. Instead, he provided evaluative commentaries on the newly produced scholar-beauty works through prefaces. Moreover, as a commentator, he not only commented on other’s works, but also on his own novels. Thus, while those commenting on old novels attempted to present “newer conceptions of how fiction should be written,” \(^{71}\) THZZR expressed his philosophical ideas


\(^{71}\) Ibid.
and literary theories through prefatory comments on new works, as demonstrated in this chapter.

The old Chinese saying “delighting in heaven and knowing fate” (letian zhiming, 樂天知命) originally deriving from The Classic of Changes (Yijing, 易經,) could suitably describe the image THZZR establishes for himself in the prefaces signed with his pen names Master of Heavenly Flowers Scripture, Master of Unofficial Politics Studio, or Old Man from Xishan (Xishan laosou, 錫山老叟). In those prefaces, he has a distinctive style compared to subsequent preface writers of scholar-beauty fiction. As a commentator on popular fiction, he establishes for himself an identifiable image of an optimistic philosopher by exploring questions about the complex relationship between talented men/women (caizi/cainü, 才子才女) and Heaven. Several related concepts are discussed around those two parties: on the one hand, the talent and the sensibility of talented men and women are highly valued; on the other hand, the talent and the sensibility are viewed as endowed by Heaven and often need to undergo draconian tests to prove their authenticity, which is prearranged in one’s fate (ming, 命) by Heaven. In such a discourse, exploring the different manifestations of the talent and the sensibility in the talented scholars and beauties against human nature endowed by Heaven and commonly shared by all succeeds in distinguishing the talented from common people.

The relationship between Heaven and human being (ren, 人) is one of the most significant and well discussed philosophical topics ever from Confucius time and not unsurprisingly, the scholarly debates about the relation between the two have yet to be resolved to the present.

As we shall see, THZZR provides his own original contribution to this long and evolving philosophical discourse.

The Analysis of Heaven and Inborn Nature

According to Confucian classic *The Classic of Changes* “the succession of the feminine or negative principle (*yin*, 陰) and the masculine or positive principle (*yang*, 陽) is called the Way (*dao*, 道). That which furthers it is good. That which brings it to completion is nature.”\(^73\) Although Confucius didn’t clearly mention the will of heaven here, one of his disciples Zisi 子思 (483-402 B.C.) developed his idea by saying that “what Heaven has ordained is called nature. Following one’s nature is called the Way.”\(^74\) In this tradition, human nature is good and authentic. This is best represented by Mencian theory of the original goodness of human nature. From Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077) on scholars used different terms to designate human nature, taking human emotions into consideration. A distinction was thus made between the original human nature endowed by Heaven and physical nature. The former is pure and good, as in the earlier Confucius tradition, whereas the latter is associated with the individual’s sharing of vital energy (*qi*, 氣) and was to some degree tainted by its materiality. Following Zhang Zai emerged Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), but they were all confronted with the challenge of explaining the relation between unity and diversity—if nature is a shared endowment from Heaven how

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\(^74\) Song Tianzheng 宋天正, *Zhongyong jinzhu jinyi* [中庸今注今譯, Modern interpretation and translation of Doctrine of the Mean] (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1977), 2.
it is that human capacities varied individually.\(^{75}\) In the opinion of Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465-1547), who was among the first of the Ming scholars to develop the argument of vital energy, human nature is one rather than two (including original nature and physical nature), only that the commonly shared nature is differently expressed in the context of phenomenal diversity.

In such a context of scholarly discussion on the relation between Heaven and human nature, in his prefaces to the scholar-beauty fiction, THZZR follows the opinion of diversity among individuals. Diversity among individual, to one degree or another, is a prerequisite of those stories about scholars and beauties and the eventful lives they experience on the way to marriage. The distinguished talent and sensibility are tested by the difficulties the heroes and heroines’ experience, which in turn differentiates them from common people.

In the prefaces to his most well known works PSLY as well as The Book of Seven Geniuses Together Printed by Heavenly Flowers Script (Tianhua zang heke qi caizi shu 天花藏合刻七才子书),\(^{76}\) THZZR explains and justifies the natural differences between common people and the talented ones through relating human nature to the will of Heaven:

Heaven (tian 天) endows human beings (ren 人) with human nature (xing 性). Although some are sagacious while others are fatuous, all of them have the virtue of loyalty (zhong 忠), piety (xiao 孝), integrity (jie 節), and righteousness (yi 義). However, talent (cai 才) and sensitivity (qing 情) are not necessarily bestowed on everyone. Therefore, anyone could set an example of good behavior, but in the history of a thousand years there are few who can draw a tiger and carve a dragon.\(^{77}\)

\(^{75}\) For the discussion about Heaven and human nature, see Wm. Teodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, Sources of Chinese Tradition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 1: 877-8.

\(^{76}\) Tianhua zang heke qicaizi shu is a combined edition of PSLY and YJL. It is called “book of genius” because it features seven talented protagonists, including four in PSLY and three in YJL. Likewise, in some editions, PSLY is also called the Book of Four Geniuses [Sicaizi shu, 四才子書].

\(^{77}\) See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 1-2.
The significations of the terms in the above quote are not exactly the same as those presented in discussions of previous dynasties. The term Heaven used by THZZR means the “will” or “arrangement” of the heaven, which should be viewed as including the two facets of the synonymous terms Heaven and fate in the idiom “delighting in heaven and knowing fate.” In other words, THZZR assumes one’s fate to be determined by Heaven and to be the materialized expression of the will of Heaven. The other terms “inborn nature,” and “literary talent and sensitivity” (caiqing 才情) describe the significant attributes of human beings in various facets. As suggested in the very beginning of the quotation, inborn nature means human nature endowed by Heaven. However, the meaning of the term “literary talent and sensitivity” used here is not that obvious. One should be hesitant to view it simply as a combination of the two component words. It is more appropriate to understand the term as centered around talent rather than sensitivity in this context, partly because what follows in the preface is all about the rarity and repression of real talent in society and the significance of writing to talent. Actually, this is the only time in all his extant prefaces that the two words talent and sensitivity are combined into one term “literary talent and sensitivity.”

The Analysis of Sensitivity

When referring to the preface of the novel JYQZ, which is also signed with the name THZZR, one will immediately see what the signification of sensitivity is in THZZR’s opinion and what kind of relation it assumes with inborn nature:

I heard that what Heaven has conferred is called nature. Therefore, chastity (zhen, 貞) and lasciviousness (yin 淫) of young people should be decided by nature and being accordant. How unexpected it is that everyone is endowed with nature but their
chastity or lasciviousness are differentiated considerably in different individuals!
Besides, considering the all-inclusive feature of human nature, one will realize that
nature provides the big picture. Included in nature are joy (xi, 喜), anger (nu, 怒),
grief (ai, 哀) and happiness (le, 樂), which are marvelous because they are the
embodiments of sensitivity…If Heaven could only endow people with nature, but
not with sensitivity, then [sensitivity] should be searched for beyond ordinary joy,
anger, grief and happiness.78

It is obvious that in this preface, sensitivity means some quality related to human emotional
ability rather than intellectual talent, thus it is completely different from what THZZR means
by “literary talent and sensitivity” in the first preface. Therefore, it is fair to say that this term
should be interpreted through the meaning of talent rather than referring to both talent and
sensitivity at the same time.

Comparatively speaking, the relation between talent and Heaven is more determinate and
evident, that is, talent is determined only by Heaven. However, the connection between talent
and nature is less clear. It could be argued that talent is but a special facet of nature. However,
by doing so, we will inevitably confront the challenge that with commonly endowed nature
come loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness, virtues found more or less found in
everyone whether virtuous or foolish, but talent and affection are exclusive to some of us.
The author makes it very clear in the preface to JYQZ that Heaven can endow common
people with nature, but sensitivity is not always available and is found somewhere beyond
common emotions. Insisting that sensitivity is part of nature challenges even the fundamental
belief in Heaven as the agent of endowing human beings with nature, or the idea that nature
can be ordained by Heaven. In light of those two challenges, I argue that THZZR views talent

78 Qingxin caizi 青心才子, comp., Tianhua zang zhuren 天花藏主人, comm., Jin Yun Qiao zhuan 金雲翹傳,
Tale of Jin, Yun, and Qiao], reprinted ed., in Guben xiaoshuo jicheng 古本小說集成, Collection of antique
editions of fiction], 1-5.
and sensitivity as something just as fundamental as nature but much more unpredictable.

Although they all focus on the variety of human nature, THZZR fundamentally differs from Luo and the three Song thinkers before him in stressing that lack of talent and affection results not from one’s situation and experience but rather from an innate lack in one’s nature. Besides, by stressing the rarity of talent and feeling in common people, he de-emphasizes the focus on ethic and moral accomplishment in the previous discourse on the differences between individuals and brings to the fore the significance of talent and feeling, that is, a person’s emotional sensitivity and capacity. In other words, he challenges the assumption that everyone is treated equally by Heaven. For those who are ordained with such special capacities, they are the lucky few who represent the high expectation of Heaven.

Therefore, without talent, one can indulge in drinking and banquet with friends, living and dying blind to the world. For those who have been endowed with a wide vision and are concerned about society and history, when they write down something, it will bring wind and rain, and when they speak out, it will overwhelm mountains and rivers. Whenever flowers blossom in spring and the moon becomes clear and bright in autumn, they can’t help but sighing for their talent not being discovered and appreciated.79

Because of the extraordinary intellectual capability, the talented stand out from ordinary people, who are dismissed as muddleheaded. This special distinction also holds true of people endowed with sensitivity.

As quoted before, in the preface of JYQZ, THZZR suggests that sensitivity must be sought out beyond the ordinary emotions of joy and grief. This is not to say, in my opinion, that sensitivity is superior to those commonly shared human emotions, but that it is different

79 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 9-10.
from common people’s emotional intelligence and is beyond their understanding and appreciation. At the end of this preface, THZZR juxtaposes sensitivity and the common emotions explicitly by saying that “if people who have only common and mediocre sensibility have seen all her experiences and jump to the conclusion that this is an indecent act done by a shameful woman without considering the whole story, then I will cry for her injustice forever.”

By differentiating sensitivity from common emotions and valuing its position as a special endowment from Heaven, THZZR justifies the repeated loss of physical chastity on the part of the female protagonist Wang Cuiqiao. It seems that THZZR is a decisive defender of the natural emotions of human beings against conventional cultural constraints. However, a close examination of the relation between sensitivity, nature, and Heaven shows that THZZR is actually responding to the trend of the valorization or even overindulgence in sensitivity in late Ming vernacular fiction and drama. In those works, sensitivity was often conflated with the concept of desire (yu, 慾). In comparison, although sensitivity is also highly valued by THZZR, I view his thinking about sensitivity as conservative because he strongly advocates for sensitivity being in harmony with moral nature and the principles of the sages (mingjiao, 名教).

As insightfully pointed out by Martin Huang, THZZR’s attitude towards sensitivity in his prefaces shows a “posture of retreat” because he relates sensitivity to nature rather than desire. In other words, sensitivity is highly valued on the condition that one’s moral nature be well maintained. To better support the argument here, I briefly explore the late Ming

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80 See Jin Yun Qiao, reprinted ed., preface.
81 See Huang, 2001, 50.
drama the *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting, 牡丹亭,*) by Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616). For comparative purposes, I will also look at Jin Shengtan’s commentary on the Yuan drama *Romance of the Western Chamber* because of the work’s significance in treating the relation between sensitivity, desire and ethical rituals (*li, 禮*) in the history of Chinese literature and because Jin Shengtan is a contemporary of THZZR, albeit much more well-known and well studied.

*Peony Pavilion* is famous for elaborating sensitivity through the heroine Du Liniang and for its far-reaching influence on the tradition of scholar-beauty fiction and even on *Dream of the Red Chamber*. More importantly, in the preface to JYQZ, THZZR describes the contrasting situation in which Wang Cuiqiao “dies but is resurrected. After her resurrection she gets reunited (with Jin)” (*si er fusheng, sheng er fuhe,* 死而復生, 生而復合) in a way very similar to how Tang Xianzu describes it in his well known commentary on the deep and strong sensitivity embodied in Du Liniang—that is, “the living die of sensitivity and the dead revives because of sensitivity.” Thus THZZR makes an implicit but identifiable allusion to that earlier drama.

As noted before, in *Peony Pavilion*, by sensitivity Tang Xianzu refers to not only the strong emotional feeling but also to the sexual desire experienced by the young heroine Du Liniang. It is the physical desire first aroused by the love poetry from the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing, 詩經*) and then by the advent of spring that leads to Du’s imagining of sexual intercourse with Liu Mengmei in a dream she has when falling asleep in the sequestered garden. From that point on, though, the focus partially shifts from physical desire to sensitivity. Du falls ill after waking up because of her repressed feeling and dies of
lovesickness and physical desire for the imagined lover in the dream (muse erwang, 慕色而亡, lit. die of desire for beauty). After her death, Liu Mengmei passes by the garden on his way to the capital to take the civil service examination and picks up Du’s self-portrait, whose beauty stirs Liu’s desire. Then Du’s spirit comes to Liu to become his lover.

Tang Xianzu says that Du gets resurrected because of her deep and authentic sensitivity towards her lover Liu Mengjun, just as her dying of the intensive sensitivity which is repressed and unsatisfied. Therefore, on the one hand, Tang Xianzu considers sensitivity as generating a spiritual power strong enough to lead to not only one’s death, but also to one’s resurrection; on the other hand, as Ma Meixin and Luo Yuming have noted, physical desire is stressed by Tang Xianzu as the basis of the emotional feeling of sensitivity and it should be satisfied because it is a desirable passion in life. The social constraints opposed to the satisfaction of sensitivity and desire in this drama are mostly embodied by the orthodox moral models, including both male (Du’s father Du Bao and her private instructor Chen Zuiliang) and female (Du’s mother). However, those moral models are described as the rigid “old,” both literally and metaphorically, and the significance of moral rites is marginalized in the world of sensitivity in the Peony Pavilion.

In comparison, THZZR shifts the focus to sensitivity’s effect on the perfection of talented scholars’ and beauties’ individual morality because of the changed historical and social context in which THZZR wrote and commented scholar-beauty fiction. The concept of desire is never directly mentioned in THZZR’s writing or commentary, but it is criticized through reference to the term “licentious.” In the preface to JYQZ, THZZR starts his

commentary on the heroine Wang Cuiqiao by criticizing her as dissolute (dang, 荡) because when she first meets Jin Zhong, her lover-to-be, she doesn’t show the expected deferential attitude. However, she is immediately praised by THZZR for her subsequent efforts to arrange their marriage rather than seek temporary sexual pleasure. In THZZR’s view, “although being dissolute at the beginning, she is able to control herself without losing the orthodox doctrine in her mind, thus she could be viewed as someone that can transform lechery into chastity.”83 It is obvious that desire is no longer viewed as good nature as it is in Tang Xianzu’s Peony Pavilion, but something that needs to be self-consciously restrained. To achieve this goal one needs to regulate one’s emotion to accord with moral nature. This is by no means to say that THZZR is a rigid moralist, instead, he distinguishes between the physical obscenity and mental obscenity. Unlike those who stick to the moral doctrine focusing on the chastity of the female body in order to embellish their actions for fame, THZZR offers a looser criterion by freeing the body from being the only and the whole object of moral expectation and shifting the focus to the virtue of one’s spirit.

Nevertheless, by so doing, desire is once again excluded from the discourse of human physical nature. As pointed out by Martin Huang, “this kind of retreat might be understood, at least in part, as a reaction against what these early Qing writers must have perceived to be overindulgence in desire during the late Ming, which, they thought, had given desire a bad name. In other words, they were trying to rehabilitate desire’s reputation by containing its possible radical or transgressive implications.”84 This kind of attitude which recognizes the significance of desire but also requires the regulation of desire by ethical rituals is also

83 See Jin Yun Qiao, reprinted ed., preface.
84 See Huang, 1995, 50.
observed in Jin Shengtan’s commentary on Romance of the Western Wing. When sensitivity is no longer viewed as in accordance with desire, the two commentators take ethical rituals into consideration. Jin Shengtan also directly deals with the term “lascivious” in his commentary on the scene of Cui Yingying’s and Student Zhang’s first sexual experience in particular, and in defending the book against being viewed as pornographic in general.

Jin Shengtan brings forward the concept of lasciviousness at the very beginning of his comments on Cui’s and Zhang’s tryst. Through challenging the established opinion about “Airs of the State” (Guofeng, 國風) as admiring the beauty but not being lascivious, Jin Shengtan admits its lasciviousness and justifies the explicit sexual description in the poems by focusing on literary excellence rather than sexual themes. Great literature dealing with sexuality should be valued for its literary achievement rather than for its story. Jin Shengtan views sex as something commonplace that happens everyday in every household; it should not be viewed as vulgar and dirty (bisu, 鄙俗). With this claim, he not only challenges previous commentary on this scene or the whole drama as being dirty, but also breaks the established correspondence between lasciviousness in literature and resulting vulgar behavior. Of course, this is not to say that Jin Shengtan had a positive attitude toward lasciviousness. He recognizes the value of the description of sex in literature for its artistry rather than as a justification for sexual desire itself. When making suggestions on how to read Romance of the Western Chamber, he asks readers to forget the sex while appreciating the literary description and artistry. Jin Shengtan does not treat lasciviousness from the same ethical

perspective as THZZR, but he passes moral judgments on Cui’s listening to Zhang strumming zither in the same way as THZZR does about Wang’s secret meeting with the male protagonist Jin, only that Jin Shengtan doesn’t use the term chaste/chastity and lascivious.

In his comments on Cui’s listening to Zhang strumming the zither at night, Jin Shengtan praises her keeping sensitivity within the limits of ethical rituals and he recognizes the value of talented scholars and beauties and the admirable nature of their love and marriage. But he values their controlling their love even more. If their being together occurs before the parents’ order and the matchmaker’s arrangement, then they will be disliked for breaking rituals (shili, 失禮). Only by so doing, that is, being sensitive and persistent enough in love but also able to keep the feeling under control to avoid violating the ritual orders can the male and the female be called talented scholar and beauty. 87 In other words, although Jin Shengtan recognizes sex and sexual desire as natural, he doesn’t value it as Tang Xianzu does in Peony Pavilion; instead, he makes it clear that sensitivity is appreciated and justified only when it doesn’t go beyond ethical norms, indicating that desire has to be constrained. In this regard, he and THZZR share the same kind of attitude, though the latter is even stricter and more conservative in defending the legitimacy of ethical rituals.

The uneasiness about the subversive potential of qing is manifested clearly in the preface to DQR, in which another allusion to the Peony Pavilion is found: “the origin of sensitivity is described as “initiated by encountering with the object and growing more and more deeply” (chuwu erqi, yiwang ershen, 觸物而起，一往而深), which is almost the same as

87 See Wang, 2008, 62.
Tang Xianzu’s words quoted above, except that Tang considers the origin of sensitivity as unknown. The essential difference between THZZR’s view and Tang Xianzu’s is that the latter magnifies the supreme spiritual power of sensitivity, whereas the former describes the flowing and unstable nature of sensitivity. On the one hand, an indulgence in sensitivity is harmful to both sensitivity itself and to one’s moral nature, and to maintain one’s righteous moral nature, one has to fix one’s sensitivity on a worthy lover first; on the other hand, it is very hard to fix one’s sensitivity because of its mutable nature. Nevertheless, only when sensitivity has been fixed on some worthy lover can the moral nature be maintained in accordance with the great doctrines of the sages’ teachings. In THZZR’s view, the world of sensitivity has been considerably narrowed to conform to moral constraints.

**On Cherishing Twists and Turns in the Narration**

Despite their different moral attitudes, THZZR and Tang Xianzu both value unusual plots as an important literary quality in fictional works: Tang Xianzu uses an unusual plot to reveal the supreme power of sensitivity over physical limits and moral rites, and THZZR considers the unusual experiences of the fictional roles as convincing proof of the authenticity of sensitivity and talent of his characters. Unusual experiences are conveyed through repeated twists and turns in plot, which are actually essential in the narrations of the scholar-beauty romance.

Such circuitous plots have long been criticized by both Chinese and Western scholars as a critical flaw of traditional Chinese fiction. In the introduction to *The Classic Chinese Novel*, C.T. Hsia mentions that “almost all traditional Chinese novels stick to the narrative framework of storytelling tradition to take the structure of piled plots.” He described the
repetition of plots as “piling incidents upon incident, climax upon climax.” Here he includes both the novels that have one hundred chapters or so, like Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Dream of the Red Chamber, as well as the relatively short ones like pornographic novels and scholar-beauty romances. Even a great novel like Dream of the Red Chamber “achieves his success in spite of laboriously maintaining the episodic convention, which entails the invention of many subsidiary stories that could well have been removed so that their space could be given to fuller elaboration of the major episodes.”

As for scholar-beauty fiction, the repetition of plots within a work and among works of the same genre is even more egregious than in novels of other categories. Traditional and modern criticism of scholar-beauty romances observes that novels of this subgenre basically tell a love story between a talented scholar and a gifted beauty who have to overcome many obstacles and difficulties, but invariably attain happy union in marriage. Writers, contemporaneous commentators, and other critics of scholar-beauty romances were aware of the excessive use of twists and turns in telling of “the phantasmagoric vicissitudes of life” in works of this genre, when they criticized earlier works to promote their own novels. Attacks on the monotonous and highly predictable repetition of plots can be found in Liu Tingji’s Miscellanea of the Zai Garden (Zaiyuan zazhi) and in Dream of the Red Chamber, both in the Stone’s comments in the first chapter and in Grandmother Jia’s criticism in Chapter 54. Modern scholars including Lu Xun also generalize the feature of

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89 Ibid.
90 See Liu, 1966-78, 105.
scholar-beauty fiction in this way.91

Well before C.T. Hsia’s judgment, translations have altered Chinese fiction to eliminate some of these structural “problems.” In most of the early translations of Feng Menglong, Ling Mengchu, and Li Yu’s short stories from Chinese into European languages, the translators cut the opening stories, commentating poems, and certain plot twists. Used to the criteria of Western fiction and appreciating Chinese fiction more as a vehicle for cultural otherness than as the object of literary study, European translators in the 18th and 19th century viewed the deletions as unnecessary and redundant repetitions. Even in translations done by some modern literary scholars, such abridgements can still be observed.92

THZZR offers another way to appreciate the repetitive nature of traditional Chinese fiction, both for his contemporary readers and for modern readers. In the preface to JYQZ, the trials and tribulations experienced by Wang Cuiqiao are highly regarded by THZZR as tests for her truehearted emotion, including her sacred love for the male protagonist Jin, her filial affection towards her parents, and her fidelity towards Xu Mingshan. In THZZR’s view, this sterling emotional quality can not only move the will of Heaven, which helps to fulfill her wish to marry Student Jin in the end, but also leads to the spontaneous adjustment of the strict rules in the doctrine of sages’ teaching to fit Wang Cuiqiao’s experiences, thus guaranteeing her chaste identity. According to THZZR, it is this kind of emotion, which has gone through various severe tests, that is the impetus for him to write this preface and to express his happiness about and admiration towards this feeling. In other words, in THZZR’s view, only through those twists and turns could the sincerity and steadfastness of the...

92 For an example of the abridged translation of Li Yu’s short stories by a modern scholar, see Nathan K Mao, Li Yü’s Twelve Towers, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1975).
protagonist’s emotions be fully accomplished and manifested, and his/her particularity established and justified.

In his other prefaces, THZZR emphasizes the significance of twists and turns more intensively as being essential to the work’s aesthetic quality. In the preface to *Chant of Flying Flowers*, THZZR lays stresses the circuitousness that the two protagonists experienced:

Not only are distinguished talent and deep emotion hard to see, singing the praise of beauty is also not easy to encounter... Therefore [I] learnt that what is lamentable is wandering, but wandering is the way the will of Heaven arranges the reunion; what is the bitterest is wandering, but wandering is the way the Creator subtly organizes the meeting... This is not asking for trouble. Without purifying, how can one know how pure gold is? Without burning, how can one know how fragrant the sandalwood is? Without experiencing afflictions, how can the talent and affection of scholars and beauties be distinguished as extraordinary and everlasting till death? ... Although they suffer considerable hardship, their talent becomes superior and their affection runs deeper, thus reminding one of the unforgettable legends about the verse of flying flowers in history.93

As in the preface to JYQZ, THZZR reiterates the significance of those hardships and troubles to test and prove the authenticity of the talents’ distinguished talent and sensitivity. Of course, he is neither the only nor the first person in Chinese history to recognize the positive effects of hardship on one’s life or career. The most well-known paragraph stems from Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145?-90? BC) *Records of the History (Shiji, 史記*) in the Han dynasty, in which he writes about how those who have high literary achievements have often faced serious hardness or even catastrophe. For Sima Qian, suffering and bitterness are essential to one’s success and those who have experienced

them are more likely to attain achievement in writing, one of the three most significant ways of achieving immortality (san buxiu, 三不朽) in the Chinese tradition. However, THZZR focuses more on how trials can lead to the authenticity of talent and sensitivity rather than on one’s achievement in writing. Besides, Sima Qian merely lists examples to show the necessity of experiencing sufferings to achieve success, while THZZR shows why those hardships and sufferings are so significant, that is, they serve to test and then underline the unusual quality of the talents’ talent and sensitivity. Although with a different focus, both agree on the function of hardship and sufferings to distinguish the gifted from the common people. The importance of the repetition of twists and turns through which sufferings and hardships are manifested is thus not only justified but also brought to the forefront.

THZZR goes on to elaborate on the positive effect generated from those twists and turns:

If a marriage is first arranged by the parents and set up by the matchmaker, and then the betrothal gifts and the dowry are exchanged, it is merely the accomplishment of another pre-arranged marriage by fate. In that case, won’t the beautiful verses chanted in the Brocade and Fragrance Street be neglected? To whom should the solemn pledge of love made among the peony blossoms in the Phoenix Garden should be given?... Isn’t it heart-breaking to see the scholar and the beauty become similar to foolish men and women? Aware of the heartache, one will realize the significance of those wandering and twists in terms of helping reuniting the righteous men and the chaste women. One should feel happy rather than sad when reading it.94

Still arguing that twists and turns in the scholar-beauty romances function to differentiate

94 See Jin Yun Qiao, reprinted ed., preface.
talented people from the common people, THZZR brings out here the aspect of marriage in a scholar-beauty story. As noted above, in earlier criticism of such novels, marriage appears as the predictable end point of the story. However, THZZR suggests that although the ending of marriage is not challenging for readers to guess, it is different from marriages in real life because the talented couple’s marriage is a superior goal and a sign of victory over all the preceding struggles they have endured. Instead of being a possible and potential starting point for sensitivity (potential because not in all marriages exists sensitivity as romantic feeling or love 愛情 in Chinese), marriage in scholar-beauty romances assumes the role of a recognition of romantic affection expressed, tested, and confirmed during all the twists and turns. Besides, according to THZZR, the twists and turns also function to verify the righteousness and the chastity of the scholar and beauty, thus making their marriage even more uncommon and admirable. With his understanding of an ideal marriage between talented people, THZZR proposes a challenge through the fictional world to the conventional expectations that marriage should be simply arranged by parents and matchmakers without much participation of the young man and woman.

The efforts THZZR has taken here to justify and promote the narrative structure of scholar-beauty fiction, (that is, to include a lot of twists and turns in the plot), should be viewed as a self-conscious advocacy for fiction as an independent genre with its own aesthetic features. Such a stance offers itself as counterevidence against the attack on the writing of traditional Chinese fiction, such as the comment by C.T. Hsia that “Chinese novelist’s failure to utilize fully of arts of fiction,” 95 in terms of redundancy of plots.

95 See Hsia, 1968, 17.
Actually even works claiming to respond against the cliché of twists and turns can’t really avoid it. Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers (天花才子, Tianhua caizi) offers a good example in his preface to The Volume to Exhilarate the Heart. Some scholars have suspected this Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers to be the same person as THZZR, but no convincing conclusion has been reached yet. No matter who he is, his criticism of earlier works for being verbose and tedious in making up stories about scholars and beauties contrasts rather starkly with his reliance on the twists and turns in plot. However, there is an essential difference between the way THZZR tries to promote the specialty and independence of the genre and the approach other commentators take: THZZR values the literary effect of intensification in expressing the emotion through those twists and turns, whereas other commentators like Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers lay more stress on the works’ didactic effect to justify their value by juxtaposing fiction with the already established genres and writing such as the classics, history, and drama.

**THZZR’s Commentaries and the Collective Effort to Advance Fiction**

As noted, in THZZR’s time, there are two principal approaches taken by commentators to advance fiction. THZZR’s approach represents one voice in the collective effort to advance fiction. To show why it should be viewed as advancement, I will now elaborate on the collective effort to raise the stature of the genre.

C.T. Hsia argues that “[A]ll evaluative criticism implies an act of comparison: until Chinese critics became acquainted with Western fiction and informed of its high literary standing, traditional historiography was for them the only body of narrative prose whose unquestioned respectability could be enlisted in the case of advancing the claims of the
novel,” and that “[t]hey [e.g., the novelists] made no attempt to depart from those formal and stylistic characteristics of the novel that betray its historical ties with the storytelling and historiographical traditions and its eclectic reliance on other forms of literature.” Hsia’s argument insightfully and accurately depicts the general situation of fiction commentary during the late Ming and early Qing, but his view becomes problematic once THZZR’s and some other commentators’ reading of scholar-beauty fiction are taken into account.

As I have mentioned, there are many examples of scholar-beauty fiction commentators promoting scholar-beauty fiction by comparing it to the classics, historical works, and even plays. Taoist of Flying above Town (Heshi daoren, 雀市道人) claims in the preface to *Awaking the Romantic* (Xing fengliu, 醒風流) that books should instruct people’s behavior to be proper and the intent of writing fiction is to do this in a way that is easier to be received and understood. As for the specific work he is commentating on, he attributes its success to its didactic value of offering warnings and helping readers to be more mature. He even alleges that “since the author has focused on the proper intent built in the work, he didn’t care about the choice of words.” Apparently, as both the commentator and the author of this novel, Taoist of Flying above Town is willing to sacrifice literary achievement for the didactic function.

Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers’s commentary on *The Volume to Exhilarate Heart* offers another piece of evidence for Hsia’s argument. In the editorial notes of this novel, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers brings out the problem about the negative effect

96 Ibid.

67
engendered by such circuitous plots in earlier works and its harmful effects upon the authenticity of the novel. At the same time, he justifies the twists and turns in this novel in another way, that is, to claim that they are all real stories:

This volume is composed of stories which come from the various aspects of society, thus every single piece reflects reality… The constant changes and vicissitudes of life in this volume all exist in real life, unlike those which are fabrications based on nothing with disjointing branches. If an author is involved in so doing, it is rebelling against the orthodoxy. How could a man of honor even consider it?98

By advocating for the authenticity of plots, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers justifies the twists and turns in the commented work. It proves what Hsia has noted that authors’ as well as readers’ conception of fiction in Ming and Qing China was different from that of modern readers and they “are interested in the fact in fiction rather than in fiction as such.”99 As Hsia also mentions, this conception derives from the influence of the historiographical tradition. Therefore, although neither directly relating this novel to history nor trying to highlight its features as a historical work, Talented Scholar of Heavenly Flowers actually justifies fiction by stressing that, like history, it inculcates moral values.

Drama is another genre to which commentators refer to legitimize fiction. In the preface to Willow and Oriole of Spring (Chun Liu Ying, 春柳鶯), Hidden Man of Carelessness and Forbearing (Pinyin qianfu, 拚飲潛夫) explicitly relates fiction to drama in terms of their being a reflection of real life and of their didactic function. He

98 See Kuaixin bian, reprinted ed., editorial notes.
99 See Hsia, 1968, 16.
claims that drama was created by men of honor to depict life and chuanqi (傳奇, lit. transmitting the strange) drama replaced drama during Song dynasty on account of its plain style and its power to educate the public. Familiar with this tradition, men of the day wrote fiction to promote the good in the society.100

However, there are also commentators who emphasized not only the didactic intent of the work but also the literary value peculiar to this genre, and some others who completely disregarded the didactic function. In other words, by recognizing fiction’s artistic uniqueness, the commentators actually advanced fiction as an independent genre, which renders Hsia’s argument problematic.

In the previously mentioned work Willow and Oriole of Spring, Historian Wearing Warrior’s Hat in the Southern Study (Nanxuan heguan shizhe, 南軒鶡冠史者), although assuming the voice of a historian, suggests to readers in his introductory notes to ponder the art of writing by utilizing his work. He even explicitly asks readers to refer to Jin Shengtan’s version of Romance of the Western Wing while reading his work, because Jin Shengtan suggests reading Romance of the Western Wing in the way how Records of History is read.101 Similarly, in the postscript of Competing Flowers and Bell (Sai hua ling, 賽花鈴),102 the Head of the Alliance of Romance (Fengyue mengzhu, 風月盟主) makes a case for the didactic intent of fiction while underscoring the literary creation of the work in Confucian tradition and describing his reading the work as a form of

100 See Chun Liu Ying, reprinted ed., editorial notes.
101 Ibid.
102 Wushan Baiyun daoren 吳山白雲道人, comp., Nanhu Yanshui sanren 南湖煙水散人, comm., Sai hua ling [賽花鈴, Competing Flowers and Bell], reprinted ed., in Dalian tushuguan cang guxiben mingqing xiaoshuo congkan [大連圖書館藏孤稀本明清小說叢刊, Series of unique and rare copies of Ming Qing fiction held by the Dalian Library], vol. 21, postscript.
entertainment. Another example is Hermit Cutting Wood in Clouds (Qiaoyun shanren, 樵云山人,). He offers readers the flexibility to read the novel Colorful Thinking about Flying Flowers (Feihua yanxiang, 飛花艷想) either as fiction or as one of the Confucian classics. He praises the artistry of the novel as good enough to catch eyes (duomu, 奪目), and “entertain the spirit” (yuqing, 娛情), as a book which adds fun to the reading of literati. Here we observe the effort to depart from the conventional reliance on history and classics and instead justify fiction through its artistic accomplishment.

In the commentary on Competing Flowers and Bell, we find a more thorough divorce from that convention. Valuing the twists and turns in plot as THZZR does, Free Man of Fog and Water (Yanshui sanren, 煙水散人,), writes in the introductory notes of the novel that “[I]n my view, the history written by unofficial historians can’t be transmitted unless it is legendary. What can be viewed as legendary here are not fabrications about Heaven and ghosts, which are based on illusions. It relies on the variety of style and unconstrained and distinctive narration.” It is clear that Free Man of Fog and Water does not refer to the same literary effect produced by the use of twists and turns in plot. Instead, he promodes the narrative structure from the perspective of the potential pleasure the text might generated; the novel should be appreciated by the readers during the process of reading, and attracting attention to how those twists and turns serve to make the narration more fascinating.

Another way commentators departed from the established convention was to abandon the interest in facts. In his preface to Competing Flowers and Bell, Free Man of Fog and Water frankly admits his unawareness of whether the romance originated from fact or fabrication, and suggests that those who are obsessed with real identity of the heroines to pay
attention to the ability of literary imagination by alluding to the verse in *Classic of Poetry*:

“Who said that the river is wide? Reed can be a route to cross it.” (*Shuiwei heguang, yiwei hangzhi* 誰謂河廣，一葦杭之). In the preface to *Pearl of Uniting at the Riverfront* (*Hepu zhu*, 合浦珠), Free Man of Fog and Water also expresses his disdain for the idea of tracing the factual origin of the story.\(^\text{103}\) Surnamed Remnant Room (*Shengzhai shi*, 剩齋氏) suggests as well that as long as the novel would move and entertain the reader, it is unnecessary to know whether it is based on fact or not.\(^\text{104}\)

Not unlike THZZR, both Free Man of Fog and Water and the other two commentators just mentioned seek to legitimize fiction through positioning its artistry ahead of other features. From treating the pattern of circuitous plots as a special artistic feature with a particular literary effect leading to a kind of new reading experience, and from justifying the imaginary features of fiction by challenging the necessity of factual authenticity, these commentators’ way to promote scholar-beauty fiction cautions us against viewing the collective effort to justify fiction at that historical moment as a homogenous trend. Within the collective effort, there are attempts to justify fiction as an independent art form by drawing attention its particular literary features. THZZR played a critical role in these of attempts.

**Conclusion**

Through the exploration of the key terms in THZZR’s fiction commentary in prefaces to

\(^{103}\) Zuili Yanshui sanren 檳李煙水散人, comp., *Hepu zhu* [合浦珠, Pearl of uniting at the riverfront], reprinted ed., in *Dalian tushuguan cang guxiben mingqing xiaoshuo congkan* [大连圖書館藏孤稀本明清小說叢刊], Series of unique and rare copies of Ming Qing fiction held by the Dalian Library], vol.27, preface.

several scholar-beauty romances, we have observed that THZZR endowed the three concepts of talent, nature, and sensitivity with new connotations. His use of sensitivity bespeaks his situation in the interpretation of those traditional concepts, that is, a relatively conservative stance towards sensitivity and desire compared to the attitudes in Yuan and Ming dramas, and a greater concern with moral regulation. Nevertheless, as an advocate of fiction, THZZR played a substantial role in separating fiction from other established genres to be an independent art form by focusing on the literary effects of twists and turns in the plot.
Chapter 4: Defining the Genre through Establishing An Image of Real Talent:
A Close Reading of Tianhua zang zhuren’s 天花藏主人 Ping, Shan, Leng, and Yan, Yu, Jiao, and Li, and Two Inverse Marriages

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analyzed prefatory commentaries on some representative works of scholar-beauty fiction, focusing especially on prefaces attributed to THZZR. Based on the analysis of THZZR’s interpretations of the significant concepts including human nature, talent, and sensitivity, as well as related ideas about licentiousness and moral norms. In this chapter I carry the study of those key terms a step further by examining them in the context of three works of scholar-beauty fiction by THZZR: PSLY, YJL, and LJH. Close reading of three key works reveals further details about THZZR’s notions of these important concepts, and highlights how he defines scholar-beauty fiction as a literary genre through establishing images of his talented male and female protagonist. By attaching historical significance to talented scholars and beauties, granting them mental superiority over ordinary intellectuals, as well as echoing to earlier dramatic works and contemporary erotic vernacular romances in terms of the way to treatment and describe sexual desire, THZZR shows his view of scholar-beauty fiction: a genre of fictional writing that expresses serious social concerns like historical fiction and distinguishes itself from the erotic vernacular romance.

105 I provide plot summaries of the three works at the end of this chapter.
Over the last decade, a considerable body of both English and Chinese scholarship has analyzed these novels and their protagonists in terms of the cultural perspective of gender. Keith McMachon and Martin Huang are two important examples of gender analysis of those novels. McMahon carefully examines THZZR’s work FHY and YJL in *Miser, Shrews, and Polygamists*. He argues that the “symmetry”, which includes functions as “equivalence, identity, and complementarity,” “refers to a mirroring and connotes parallelism,” is achieved in FHY through the parallel experiences of the male and female protagonists; in YJL the “illusion of symmetry” works out through bigamous marriage in which the three people almost marry “to each other rather than one man to two women.”106 In the book entitled *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, Huang provides insightful close-reading of two works commented on by THZZR, JYQZ and DQR. Huang argues that those works “can be read as representative of a more conscious effort during the early Qing to harmonize righteousness (yi, 義) and sensitivity by purifying the latter,” or can “even be viewed as a possible reaction against the tendency to promote the cause of desire by ignoring the assumed distinctions between sensitivity and desire as exemplified in works such as the late Ming erotic novel *History of Lasciviousness (Langshi, 浪史)* and the apparent emphasis on desire at the expense of sensitivity in works such as *The Plum In A Golden Vase.*”107

In fact, taking a gender perspective on works of scholar-beauty fiction can be traced back as early as Lu Xun’s comment on YJL and PSLY. In the highly influential *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun observed: “The general objective of the two works is to advertise

the distinguished ability of women…” 108 The characteristics of the female figures in those two novels as well as in LJH are so significant in understanding the individual novels, and the genre as a whole, that any complete and convincing reading can not circumvent this issue. In this chapter, I build on this body of work by looking at the multiple levels of the gendered concept of talent in the context of the analysis of the key term talent as well as some contrastive concepts like learned knowledge (*xuewen*, 學問), ethical rituals, moral virtue (*de*, 德), and sexual desire.

Generally speaking, the three novels touch on all those concepts respectively, with the term talent assuming pride of place. In other words, THZZR always views a scholar’s or a beauty’s sensitivity, or moral virtue as the product of talent, or the additional virtue of a person of talent. In the narration of the novel, the characters first always notice talent as the most attractive characteristic of a talent. They also use talent as the sole criterion to determine the nature of a person as talented person/man/woman. Other characteristics appear as manifestations of the authenticity of a real talented scholar. Nevertheless, this is not to say that each novel treats each conceptual term in the same way. For instance, PSLY focuses more heavily on the notion of talent than earlier YJL or LJH.

This chapter will develop several aspects of the notion of talent. First, THZZR sets talent in a grand historical context and highlights the historical significance of people who are endowed with it. The way THZZR considers talented scholars and beauties as manifestation of the will of Heaven at a certain point in historical development makes them, in some sense, similar to heroes in historical novels like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

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However, Luo Guanzhong’s male protagonists display their heroic masculinity through their martial arts or political wisdom. In contrast, male talents in THZZR’s novels are all gentle poets who also put on an extraordinary performance in the civil service examination. However, most of the time, the poetic talent already gains recognition for these scholars from important male superiors and the female protagonists before taking the civil service exam. Passing the exam and getting an official position only helps to match them to the social status of female protagonists who usually come from eminent families. The contrast between their slighting attitude towards the imperial examination and their easy success manifests the superiority of their intellect over those who are trained by the examination system. Moreover, as far as the male protagonists go, THZZR always stresses his male characters’ physical beauty. Romance of the Three Kingdoms also features some handsome generals who have distinguished masculine beauty, such as Guan Yu and Zhou Yu, but the male beauties in THZZR’s works are described in a feminine way. What’s more different is that in THZZR’s work the historical significance is manifested in female guise, which is a far cry from the masculine world of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Aside from the extraordinary poetic endowment of men and women, THZZR also shows that a talented woman masters learned knowledge better than ordinary male intellectuals. Those male intellectuals are trained and selected by the civil service examination system. Thus, like the male protagonists’ success in the examination, female protagonists’ superior talent also proves the problematic function of the conventional education system organized around the imperial examination.

Despite his challenge to the late Ming adage that “having no talent is the greatest virtue of a woman,” THZZR values moral virtue in his female protagonists. He attempts to
restrict his female heroes’ behaviors within the traditional moral rites imposed on women, with his female heroes rejecting any pre-martial sexual involvement and taking pride in their female virtue. However, THZZR doesn’t deny sexual desire among male talents. In addition, he presents the pleasure of wedding-night sex between the talented scholars and beauties without any hesitation. More interestingly, in all three works, I observe homoerotic elements between female heroes before they get married. The homoerotic connection of sisterhood and friendship is based on appreciation of each other’s poetic talent and physical beauty. Sometimes this homoerotic relation is achieved through crossing-dressing. The homoerotic relation reveals the two facets of the attraction among the talents, namely, spiritual admiration and sexual attraction. Although THZZR eliminates the sexual attraction from pre-marital female protagonists’ pursuit of love and marriage, the sexual desire, together with the homoerotic desire between female protagonists in a polygamous relation, are fulfilled in the heterosexual marriage.

**Talent of Historical Significance**

What differentiates PSLY from the other two novels, as well as from works of scholar-beauty fiction by other writers, is that it deals with the concept of talent in the broad context of a peaceful setting in the Ming dynasty. Unlike other novels, which begin with the introduction of a certain scholar or beauty who is endowed with distinguished talent and is looking for an amorous match of the other gender, PSLY begins with a chapter entitled “The Peaceful World Blessed with Talents by the Star of Talent.”¹⁰⁹ It provides an imperial setting of the great Ming empire being blessed with talented youth by the will of Heaven. After a short

¹⁰⁹ See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 1.
description of the prosperity of the empire and of the solemn scene of the morning court, the
novel continues with a memorial presented by the Imperial Astronomer to the Emperor:

I watched constellations in the sky during night and observed that auspicious clouds
and lucky haze were surrounding and protecting the Supreme Purple Star and that the
Happy Dazzling Star was shining above the Ecliptic Zodiac. All those signs indicate
that the emperor is sage and bright, that the imperial court is governing the country in a
proper way, and that people under Heaven are living in ease and comfort. I could not
feel more thankful and want to report it to Your Majesty. I beg Your Majesty to ask the
six ministries to tell people under Heaven to celebrate and spread the refined
civilization of harmony and prosperity under your reign. I also observed that the Six
Academic Stars are much more bright than usual, which means there are learned men
in the imperial academy to manifest the civilization and cultivation. This is not
surprising since there are plenty of such people at court and at large to carry out this
mission. The most amazing thing is that the Legs Star and the Wall Star have fleeting
light which spreads all over the country. It means there should be some formidable
intellects of the time in the country. Be it dragons or phoenixes, they are hiding and
crouching in some secluded place in mountains and woods. I am afraid it is hard to
reach all of them in a regular way. I beg you to ask the Ministry of Rites to send
messengers to search for them all over the country and use them to assist in the
imperial rule.  

As shown in the citation above, at the very beginning of the story, THZZZR establishes a
cosmological background to highlight the significant meaning of talent: first of all, the
importance of talent is so underscored by THZZZR that it is brought up as a highly influential
matter relevant to the successful imperial rule and the whole country’s peace and prosperity
of the whole country; second, individuals who are endowed with real talent have an
important bearing on the fortune of the empire and thus are worthy of close attention and
intense effort to search for; third, there is a difference between a learned man and a
formidably talented person. While society is not short of the former, it is very rare to see the

110 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 3-4.
latter; last but not least, people of talent represent the will of Heaven. As for the last two points, I will elaborate on them later.

What is of concern here is the mysterious historical background. The way THZZR establishes this historical setting and locates the talented heroine Shan Dai in it is reminiscent of how Luo Guanzhong begins the classic historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. If we look at the part before the already cited memorial from PSLY, and compare them with the beginning of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, we will see more clearly how THZZR like Luo attaches historical significance to heavenly-bestowed talent and the talented heroine:

Speaking of the prosperous time of the previous reign, the son of Heaven ruled the empire in a proper way and it was peaceful all over the country. Both officials and generals were loyal and honest, and all people were working in contentment. At that time, the capital was in the area of You and Yan. Armies occupied the nine towns of military importance with absolute predominance and the court enjoyed a superior control of the whole country. In peaceful times, the country was rich in products and all kinds of goods are available. In the city of Chang’an, there were nine city gates and hundreds of crossroads, six main streets and three markets. There were thirty-six red-light areas and seventy-two music houses. Civilized people converged in the city which is full of bustle carts and horses. Everyone was striking the hill and singing, and everywhere music was played for fun. It really represented a peaceful and prosperous civilization.111

---from PSLY

Empires wax and wane; states cleave asunder and coalesce. When the rule of Zhou weakened seven contending principalities sprang up, warring one with another till they settled down as Ts’in and when its destiny had been fulfilled arose Ch’u and Han to contend for the mastery. And Han was the victor.

The rise of the fortunes of Han began with the slaughter of the White Serpent. In a short time the whole Empire was theirs and their magnificent heritage was handed down in successive generations till the days of Kuang-Wu, whose name stands in the middle of the long line of Han. This was in the first century of the western ear and the

111 See *Ping Shan Leng Yan*, reprinted ed., 1-3.
The dynasty had then already passed its zenith. A century later came to the division into three parts, known to history as The Three Kingdoms.

The descent into misrule hastened in the reigns of the two Emperors Huan and Ling, who sat in the dragon seat about the middle of the second century. The former of these two paid no heed to the good men of his court, but gave his confidence to the palace eunuchs. He lived and died, leaving the scepter to Ling, whose trusted advisers were the General Tou Wu and the Grand Tutor Chen Fan. These two, disgusted with the abuses resulting from the meddling of the eunuchs in affairs of State, plotted their destruction. But the chief eunuch Ts’ao Chieh was not to be disposed of easily. The plot leaked out and the two honest men fell, leaving the eunuchs stronger than before.

It fell upon the day of full moon of the fourth month, second year of the period Chien-Ning, that the Emperor went in state to the Wen-te Hall. As he drew near the Throne a rushing whirlwind arose in the corner of the hall and, lo! from the roof beams floated down a monstrous black serpent that coiled itself up on the very seat of majesty. The Emperor fell in a swoon. Those nearest him hastily raised and bore him to his palace while the courtiers scattered and fled. The serpent disappeared.

But there followed a terrific tempest, thunder, hail and torrents of rain, lasting till midnight and working havoc on all sides. Two years later the earth quaked in Loyang, while along the coast a huge tidal wave rushed in which, in its recoil, wept away all the dwellers by the sea. Another evil omen was recorded ten years later, when the reign-title was changed: certain hens suddenly developed male characteristics, a miracle which could only refer to the effeminate eunuchs meddling in affairs of State. At the new moon of the sixth month a long wreath of black vapour wound its way into the audience chamber, while in the following month a rainbow was seen in the Jade Chamber. Away from the capital a mountain fell in, leaving a mighty rift in its flank.

Such were some of various omens. The Emperor, greatly moved by these signs of the displeasure of Heaven, issued an edict asking his ministers for an explanation of the calamities and marvels. A certain Ts’ai Yung replied bluntly that showers of insects and changes of fowls’ sexes were brought about by feminine interference in State affairs.112

--from Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The similarity between the beginning part of the scholar-beauty fiction and that of the historical novel is very noteworthy. Both beginnings offer a grand historical context in which the will of Heaven is manifested and highlighted through various mysterious omens. The difference is that THZZZR applauds a peaceful and prosperous reign while Luo describes a time of disorder. After the historical contextualization, Luo introduces the historical figure

Zhang Jiao and briefly depicts the Yellow Turban Rebellion led by Zhang, which offers a more specific historical background against which to introduce the heroes Liu Bei and his two sworn brothers. In comparison, PSLY describes an imperial banquet scene, in which the lack of real talent among officials is revealed and the white swallow poem presented to the emperor draws attention to the female talent Shan Dai. It is believed that in wild times, heroes emerge automatically as a response to restore order, then when the reign is peaceful and prosperous, talented people will appear to play their role in history when called upon by the ruler. In this sense, I think it’s reasonable to view real talents in PSLY as having equal historical significance to the development of history as military and political heroes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Therefore, at the very beginning of the novel, Shan Dai and three other talents are implicitly juxtaposed with historical figures like Liu Bei. However, the fact that in PSLY the historical significance of talent is manifested in female guise is inconceivable in the masculine world of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in which female characters mostly serve to achieve certain political objectives through marriage.

The imperial banquet granted by the emperor to the two couples at the end of the novel echoes the symbolic meaning of talent set up in the opening scene. It serves to complete the social/historical frame in which the scholar-beauty story is set. At the end of the novel, these two couples are granted an imperial banquet by the emperor. At the banquet, the four talents are asked to compose a new set of white-swallow poems and as usual the emperor is pleased by their superior talent. The Imperial Astronomer presents another memorial to the emperor, saying again that “[T]he Talent Star is shining over the imperial palace. It indicates that civilization has spread all over the country and the state enjoys good
Real talented has been reaffirmed again as the representation of the age. THZZR elevates the symbolic meaning of the individuals of supreme talent as showing the good fortune of the empire to the point that he weakens the necessity of any contributions they might make to society in the civil service.

By attaching such historical significance to real talent and talented people, THZZR suggests that the genre of scholar-beauty fiction deserves more serious attention and should not be treated merely as romantic love stories happening in middle-level or upper-class families. Works of scholar-beauty fiction actually have the same importance as a literary production as historical novels because the characteristics these two kinds of novels establish assume different social roles and positions, yet achieve comparable impact on the fortunes of the empire. Moreover, as manifested in the beginning of this novel, the way the story is narrated also shows characteristics of the historical fiction.

However, PSLY differs from the historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in at least two regards. First, the accomplishment of THZZR’s heroes and heroines relies on their contribution to their individual families. Upon closer examination, we observe that the ending of the novel actually includes three stages: first, the delightful wedding of the two couples and the pleasant family banquet that brings all the talents together for the first time; second, the imperial banquet granted to the two couples; and at last the account of how the two couples live their lives afterwards. Although both male talents have successfully passed the civil service examination, Yan Baihan goes back to his hometown with Shan Dai to produce sons to continue the family line, while Ping Ruheng and Leng Jiangxue settle in Ping’s hometown of Luoyang to revive his declined family fortunes and to propitiate his

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113 See *Ping Shan Leng Yan*, reprinted ed., 659.
parents. Through the three stages, the setting of the story moves from the domestic dimension to the social and public space and eventually reverts back to the domestic sphere of an extended family.

Apparently, here THZZR underscores the talents’ contribution to the two individual families rather than their accomplishment in society. Compared to Liu Bei and other heroes who make use of their talent in actual political activities, in PSLY, the talents’ significance to the state and historical development is more abstract and symbolic rather than a concrete achievement in serving society. Considering the declining importance of the civil service examination system during the Ming and Qing transition, it is possible that THZZR’s low expectation of actual achievement in civil service from the male talents who successfully pass the examination corresponds to a social reality. Nevertheless, functioning as symbolic markers doesn’t make them less important than the heroes who command an army or establish a state in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Instead, their value is beyond measure by any specific standard. In this sense, it is reasonable to view such an ending as both the representation of the reality, and THZZR’s ambivalent attitude towards the reality. On the one hand, facing the decline of the importance of the civil service examination system, he still has some belief in the system in terms of recognizing talents, so he fantasizes about the scholars’ success in the examination and subsequent promising political career; on the other hand, he opposes the validity of this system by making his male protagonists go back to the domestic sphere instead of continuing their political career, indicating that what matters are the real talents outside of that system. I will further demonstrate this argument with examples discussed in the following section.
Unmatchable Talent and Learned Knowledge

In the beginning of PSLY THZZR highlights an important aspect of the concept of talent, that is, the innateness of talent. In other words, talent is in nature the representation of the will of Heaven, and it can only be bestowed by Heaven. Hence, THZZR puts heavenly-endowed talent above learned knowledge, or at least he suggests that learned knowledge is by itself not sufficient to define talent. It is even not the key factor in deciding if someone is a real talent.

According to THZZR, as a gift from Heaven, real talent is beyond any comparison. Learned knowledge, no matter how broad and profound it is, can’t match innate talent. The emperor is the first person who identifies Shan Dai as beautiful talent (meicai, 美才) after reading Shan Dan’s white-swallow poem presented by her father Minister Shan. When he hears that the Shan Dai is only ten years old and the poem wasn’t revised by her father at all, the emperor says: “Your daughter is really the concentration of the aura of the romantic charm of mountains and rivers. How can mortal girls in the human world be compared to her?” 114 Minister Shan replies by telling him the dreams his wife and he had when Shan Dai was born, in which she appears as the incarnation of the Jade Light Star. Then another official says:

Although she is a minister’s daughter like a rare treasure in his hand, she actually represents the civilizing influence all over the country. The pair of white swallows fluttering in front of the emperor and the emperor insisting that we compose poems on it is all arranged by the will of Heaven in order to disclose the rare talent of Minister Shan’s daughter… 115

114 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 22.
115 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 23.
THZZZR not only uses the emperor’s recognition to show the unmatchable nature of Shan Dai’s heavenly endowed talent, but also confirms it through a real literary test. He arranges a competition between Shan Dai and some well-read officials who have serious misgivings about Shan Dai’s talent due to their bias against her young age and female gender. The emperor first prepares five questions for the competition, but after Shan Dai wins all five rounds, some officials still doubt her talent and knowledge, so they add two extra questions to test her anew. Shan Dai again effortlessly provides satisfying answers to both questions. During the test, they gradually recognize Shan Dai as a talented girl and then as a real talented girl. After the third question, one of the officials admits: “[T]his is endowed by Heaven and beyond mortal people’s power. I give up.” By the fourth question, most of them agree that Shan Dai is “the rare talent endowed by Heaven.” The doubt that “talent might be endowed by Heaven, but knowledge can’t be gained without learning” is brought up after Shan Dai successfully answers the fifth question which is designed to test the competitors’ basic knowledge rather than literary creativity. But this doubt is immediately dispelled by Shan Dai’s excellent response to the extra question. By the end of the competition, those learned officials recognize Shan Dai’s talent, or rather the possibility of heavenly-endowed talent: “Knowledge is granted by Heaven, and talent is bestowed by Heaven. Her compositions appear to be assisted by ghosts and the gods, and thus they cannot be compared with our vulgar learning.”¹¹⁶ Here THZZZR challenges the common view that knowledge has to be acquired through long-time learning, on the one hand, and the bias towards women’s intellectual ability, on the other hand. He suggests that real talent trumps age and gender. In addition, through Shan Dai’s triumph over regular officialdom, THZZZR again affirms that

¹¹⁶ See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 97-135.
real talent endowed by Heaven exceeds the institutional framework of the examination system.

The Crossing of Gender Characteristics in Male and Female Protagonists

Shan Dai’s experience of being identified as a real talent because of her white-swallow poems shows that the most essential element of real talent is poetic creativity. Those well-read officials who have been recognized by the civil service examination system are dwarfed by Shan Dai because they lack in both poetic talent and real mastery of knowledge. Considering that during the late Ming and early Qing, the civil service examination no longer rewarded poetic creativity, THZZR reveals some of the limitations of the real examination system in effectively selecting talent for the country.

Equally important are good looks, which are fittingly termed “external talent”, that is, physical beauty (waicai, 外才). For instance, when a friend of Ping Ruheng’s describes Yan Baihan’s appearance, he says “[H]e looks slim and graceful like a jade tree in front of the steps, and strong and vigorous like a wild goose in the sky. It can be seen with half an eye. It is called physical gifts (e.g. physical beauty) …”117 Such kind of appreciation of physical beauty holds true not only for Shan Dai, but also for the other talents, both female and male, in all three works. It is not surprising that the author expects physical beauty from a female talent. As for male scholars, THZZR also attempts to direct readers’ attention to their physical appearance. To be sure, in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Luo Guanzhong also establishes some memorable images of heroes who have distinguished good looks. For

117 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 276.
example, Guan Yu is described like this: “Yuan-te looked over the new comer item by item and noted his huge frame, his long beard, his dark brown face and deep red lips. He had eyes like a phoenix and fine bushy eyebrows like silkworms. His whole appearance was dignified and awe-inspiring.” The comments, “dignified and awe-inspiring,” are very high praise of a handsome man. Zhou Yu, who has the most refined character among all generals in the novel, is of “elegant mien and graceful appearance.” The description of his looks is no doubt more feminine than that of Guan Yu, which might be the reason why the author doesn’t provide more concrete description of his facial features. Considering that here Zhou appears as the leader of an army, the author would be unlikely to highlight the feminine aspects of his appearance. In PSLY, however, the physical beauty of scholars is appreciated because of its femininity.

The first impressions exchanged between Leng Jiangxue and Ping Ruheng in PSLY are a good example of the importance of the physical beauty as part of a talent’s attraction. Unlike Shan Dai who comes from a famous family and has the opportunity to be recognized by the emperor, Leng Jiangxue is born into an ordinary family in a village near Yangzhou and has no one to appreciate her talent even within the family. So at first she self-identifies as a talented girl and then is subsequently recognized by others. Among all the responses Leng’s poetic accomplishment and physical beauty elicits from others, the reaction of Ping Ruheng is a good example to show the attractiveness of Leng’s appearance. Since Ping is also a real talent, their response to each other will show how important poetic creativity and physical beauty are to defining a real talent. When Ping sees the poem Leng writes on the

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wall of the temple, he is amazed by Leng’s poetic accomplishment and identifies her as a talented girl. He writes a response to the poem and leaves. When Leng comes back to the temple and sees the matching poem, she is also surprised and says to herself: “I used to think that there is no real talent under Heaven, and didn’t expect that I could meet a soul-mate in the blink of an eye.” Immediately after this scene of mutual literary admiration, THZZR arranges an opportunity for them to appreciate each other’s physical beauty. Leng describes Ping as “pretty and elegantly charming,” while in Ping’s eyes, Leng has delicate features and exudes a radiant healthy glow, comparable to that of the ancient beauties of Wang Qiang and Xishi. After their separation, Leng values Ping as “worthy of love because of his ability to swiftly respond to my poem with one that is excellent in terms of both language and emotion,” and Ping remembers Leng as “an elegantly charming and pretty young girl of talent.” Poetic accomplishment by itself is sufficient to define a real talent, but beautiful appearance is also vital in kindling romantic feelings between two talents. Through this example, we observe that THZZR not only attaches the same importance of physical beauty to male and female talents, but also expects the same kind of beauty from them, namely, the beauty of very feminine features.

In some other cases, the talent’s physical beauty even surpasses poetic ability in its capacity to impress people. In other words, a lack of beauty is enough to eliminate the possibility of a person to be identified as a real talent. An example in PSLY demonstrates this point. After the emperor bestows the honorary title “Talented girl in promoting civilization” (hongwen cainv, 弘文才女) upon Shan Dai, many people come to request poems and calligraphy from her. Among them there is a young man named Yan Wenwu, who rushes to
the Shan family’s house to get the fan which he sent previously with a request of receiving a poetic inscription from her:

Shan Dai finds his piece of silk and the golden fan upstairs. She discovers a note written on the wrapping paper, saying: “I am Yan Yaoming, the eldest grandson of Minister Yan in Jiangxi Province. My name is Wenwu. I recently passed the exam and was selected to be a magistrate. My political achievements and prose writings are highly valued by the current generation.” The young lady smiles and says to herself: “What kind of a person is he! He dares to applaud his political achievements and prose writing.” Then she hears that the person is downstairs waiting for her poem. She walks to the window quietly and peeps downstairs. The person waiting there is wearing a kerchief and a loose garment, limping and squinting around. When she looks at him, she finds that he has a blind eye and a lame leg. She laughs in her heart: “Even such a person dares to be so arrogant.”

Yan Wenwu serves a structural purpose in PSLY. In other words, he is not among the main villain characters who create most of the trials and tribulations for the talents. In fact, Yan never appears again in the rest of the novel. However, his resentment and revenge against Shan Dai, whose response poem insinuatingly pokes fun at his blind eye and lame leg, are ultimately the precipitating cause of the literary competition between Shan Dai and the officials described earlier. However, even his minor role in the story shows that poetic accomplishment and physical beauty are the two vital criteria in identifying a real talent in THZZR’s world. It is obvious that Shan Dai doesn’t rush to any conclusion about Yan when she notices his self-commendation in the note. Instead, she feels curious about him and interested in knowing more. So she steals a glance at him from upstairs, which is a very bold and inappropriate action considering her status as a young lady. Apparently Yan’s poor

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120 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 69.
appearance disappoints Shan Dai, thus precluding the possibility of him being identified as a talented scholar.

The decisive importance attached to poetic creativity partly explains why Li Qing, one of the most interesting and vital characteristics in LJH, isn’t called a talented beauty. She is very smart and sensible, but she is not good at writing or appreciating poetry. Of course her social identity as a prostitute is very likely another contributing cause. In my analysis in this section, I do not want to suggest that a real talent has only those two characteristics. Instead, THZZR attaches other attributes such as social status and moral virtues to the talented scholars and beauties.

One such virtue highly praised by THZZR is tolerance and broadmindedness found in the female talent Shan Dai in PSLY. THZZR displays Shan Dai’s magnanimous personality on two occasions. On the first, she begs the emperor to forgive the sins of a villain who had tried to set her up. As a result, the emperor praises her as “not only talented, but also remarkable in virtue and tolerance.” The second scene praises Shan Dai’s appreciation of real talent through her attitude towards Leng Jiangxue when the latter first comes to the Shan family. When Minister Shan tries to warn Leng to be more prudent in front of Shan Dai, Leng replies: “[I] am only afraid that the lady’s talent is not real. If she is a real talent, there is no way that a talent won’t appreciate another talent…” These two kinds of virtues, namely, forgiving others and returning good for evil, and appreciating other women’s talent, are conventionally found in male discourse: the former corresponds to the Confucian idea of the Way of forgiving (shudao, 恕道) and is originally proposed in The Analects of Confucius (Lunyu, 論語) as to use integrity as a response to enmity (yizhi baoyuan, 以直報怨); the best example of the latter is the brotherhood among the heroes in The Water Margin.

When
Chao Gai and his sworn brothers first arrived at the Liang Mountain, Lin Chong says to them that “[T]he old says goes like ‘the smart person appreciates the smart person, and the hero appreciates the hero’…” THZZR applies the virtues which are more likely used to describe the moral traits of a gentlemen or a hero to the heroines in his novels. Hence, as real talents, the high morality of these female talents male partly benefits from their masculine attributes.

As demonstrated in the examples discussed in this section, the talented scholars and beauties share the same attributes which define their common identity as real talents, namely, the feminine physical beauty, the poetic talent, as well as the masculine moral virtues. Maram Epstein has briefly noted that “…in many scholar-beauty novels the male and female protagonists are in many ways indistinguishable.” McMahon has also argued that “…the woman achieves her superiority only by becoming like a man, that is, by cross-dressing and literally acting and writing like him.” Both of their arguments focus on one aspect in the phenomenon of gender blending in this genre. More specifically, Epstein’s argument focuses on the feminization of the male roles which produces a “feminine” space and “offers readers redemptive escape from the spiritual, moral, and physical compromises demanded by more conventional Confucian roles,” while McMahon stresses the superiority of the masculinized female talents in the idealized world of chaste scholar-beauty fiction. In my view, their observations are both accurate and enlightening. However, in THZZR’s novels, I don’t think the author reverses the roles of the two genders with one superior to the other. Instead, with crossing characteristics of two genders, THZZR tries to propose an ideal for

121 Shi Nai’an 施耐庵, Shuihu zhuang [水滸傳, The water margin], reprinted, ed., (Changchun: Jilin renmin chuban she, 2006), 67.
both. As two manifestations of real talent, the two genders complement each other in many ways and thus feature more equivalence. In addition, although the two genders have many features in common, they are not really indistinguishable. Actually THZZR treats his male protagonists and female roles differently when it comes to the contentious issue of sex.

The Gendered Concept of Talent: Restrictions on the Female Talent

As argued in the previous section, THZZR applies the same criteria equally to females and males to define a real talent, that is, poetic talent and physical beauty. He even values the masculine moral traits featured by female characters. Nevertheless, he has different expectations for the involvement in sex from a scholar and from a beauty. His ideal of a real talent is not a gender-reversed scholar or a female talent. This section is going to reveal how THZZR is influenced by the traditional gender standards in portraying his female protagonists. More specifically, THZZR restricts the female talents within a framework of the Confucian female virtues of li (礼, moral rites) and de (德, moral virtue). In his novels, the female protagonists are deprived of sexual desire in their brave pursuit of love; and they must be tolerant enough to accept a polygamous marriage. Compared to the Yuan play The Story of the Western Wing and the Ming drama Peony Pavilion, where the author allows pre-marital sex between the male and female protagonists in their quest for love, THHZZR’s endorsement of the freedom of love and marriage is contingent on the purification and desexualization of the heroines’ sensitivity. As McMahon pointed out, “the price of the freedom, however, is the rationalization and de-eroticization of love.”

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123 McMahon, 1995, 102.
Before delving into going to the main body of this section, which will consist of detailed examination of examples of the moral restrictions on women, it is necessary to mention the historical background in which THZZR values female virtue in his masculinized female figures. It is not unusual to see the female images of high morality in late Ming and early Qing literature. Actually female chastity had become something of a recurring trope in various literary genres during that period of time. Martin Huang has noted that the cult of chaste women “reached an unprecedented scale during the Ming dynasty. In male literati writings on chaste women…profuse praise of female chastity was often accompanied by laments over the male deficiencies of male literati.”124 In other words, female chastity serves as a metaphor for manhood and the state. In the context of early Qing, McMahon also suggests to view chastity of woman as “implying the chastity of the Han Chinese literatus or the Han in general, including those hoping that the Qing Manchus will appreciate their talents,” and also “the images of those Han still loyal to the fallen Ming.”125 However, in the three novels examined in this chapter, I prefer to view the chastity of female protagonists before marriage as an effort “against the tendencies of previous fiction, in particular, the late Ming erotic story and its portrayals of men and women easily given to illicit sexual passion.”126 In other words, the chastity of female protagonists serves more as a determinate element in defining the genre of scholar-beauty romance than as a political metaphor. As noted by McMahon, female chastity is “one of the most prominent features of

124 Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2006), 72.
125 See McMahon, 1995, 102.
these works” in contrast with late Ming and especially contemporary erotic vernacular fiction.  

In the three works, THZZR’s expectation of female talents’ abidance by ethical rituals and the internal conflict it causes in a beauty is fully demonstrated in the one of the three leading female roles of YJL, namely, the young lady Bai Hongyu. Compared to Shan Dai and Leng Jiangxue in PSLY, as well as to Xin Guchai and Gan Meng in LJH, the two young ladies Bai Hongyu and Lu Mengli show more initiative and self-determination in their quest for a satisfying marriage. As for the other heroines, although they fall in love with someone who matches them in terms of both talent and beauty and eventually manage to marry their beloved scholars, the realization of their marriages very much relies on coincidences. Moreover, in every case, the match is arranged and protected by parents, an elder, or the emperor himself. In these novels, the dimensions of the patriarchal system—that is, the will of Heaven, the emperor in a state, and the male parent in a family—are absolutely authoritative at different levels. In addition, there is some metaphorical relationship among the three roles. For example, the emperor is often compared to Heaven and the male parent is also described as Heaven within a family. Hence, it is also reasonable to say that the recognition from the emperor or the male parent is the representation of the blessing of Heaven, which is consistent with the historical significance of the Heavenly endowed talent. Moreover, the recurring consent of the authority reduces the subversiveness of these talents, especially the female protagonists. Since the real talented people are always also endowed with distinguished sensitivity which potentially has the power to overwhelm and violate moral rites and constraints, the recognition of authorities effectively eliminates the need of

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talented people to go against social expectations and more importantly weakens the
subversiveness in the female protagonists’ active pursuit of love and marriage.

Bai Hongyu and Lu Mengli’s marriages with Su Youbai also feature a lot of
coincidences and rely on the consent of the authorities. However, both of them distinguish
themselves from the other beauties in how they establish their connection with the male
scholar. When Bai’s maid Yansu Bai discovers that Zhang Guiru, who has been selected by
Bai’s father as a talent and a potential son-in-law is actually a fake talent, and that the real
talent Su has been mistakenly neglected, she tells Bai her misgivings about Zhang and her
discovery of Su. Bai sends her to contact Su and Yansu becomes a messenger between the
two talents after that point. After the confirmation of Su’s talent and affection towards her
through an exchange of poems, Bai sends Yansu a message of her promise of marriage. As
for Lu, when she discovers that Su is a real talent and would be a good match, she even
makes a marriage proposal by herself, albeit in the guise of her own brother. At first glance,
Bai and Lu appear much braver and more determined than the other beauties. Nevertheless,
THZZR doesn’t pay any less attention to justify their behavior in the context of ethical rituals,
though his moral statements made in their cases don’t resonate as well with the bold actions
they have taken.

In Bai’s case, the uneasiness caused by the secret meeting and love initiated by a
young lady is mitigated by the role of the maid, who mediates between the beauty and the
scholar. As Bai’s maid, Yansu discovers the real talent, analyzes the situation for her mistress,
and persuades her to take the right action. More importantly, she sends messages between the
two and talks to Su in person. She serves to protect the young lady from direct contact with a
male stranger, thus shielding her to some degree from the censure of public opinion. Yansu’s
image reminds us of the Yuan play *Romance of the Western Wing*, which features the maid named Hongniang in a similar role. But Hongniang’s role is not as important as Yansu’s since Yansu is the one who discovers the talent. Moreover, there is no direct contact between Bai and Su such as when Cui Yingying listens to Zhang Junrui playing a zither at night. What distinguishes Yansu most from Hongniang is that she rejects the scholar’s request to meet secretly with the young lady when it’s dark and no one else is present. Yansu’s response to Su’s request strongly implies THZZR’s opprobrium toward the secret love affair in *Romance of the Western Wing*:

> I can’t agree with what you just said. My young lady is the daughter of a noble family. She constrains her own behavior within the rules of etiquette. Even today’s action is aimed to select a real talent for a good marriage. It mustn’t be compared to an unmarried woman’s desires for a husband. If you stick with what you just said, you are a talent without moral excellence. The young lady will look down upon you and the marriage becomes impossible.  

The critique about the unmarried woman desiring a husband in such a situation is doubtless an allusion to Cui Yingying’s secret rendezvous and love making with Zhang Junrui. It indicates that THZZR might self-consciously be drawing comparisons and contrasts between this part of YJL and *Romance of the Western Wing*. Through the comment made by Yansu on this affair, THZZR indicates his attitude towards the issue of sexualized love and self-determined marriage, that is, he has a positive attitude towards the female talent’s free choice of love and husband, but doesn’t allow any pre-marital sexual stigma. Therefore, the chastity of the pre-marital female protagonists in fact serves as a defining characteristic which distinguish THZZR’s novel, and thus the genre as a whole, from romances featuring illicit sexual descriptions of their female protagonists.

The scholar and the beauty’s exchange of poems through the maid and especially the maid’s sending of messages for both sides to arrange the match undeniably repeat the formula established in *Romance of the Western Wing*, but we also observe a challenge to the *Romance of the Western Wing* tradition. On the one hand, THZZR highly values talent and the recognition of talent. A real talented scholar even warrants the young lady’s taking the risk of breaking moral rules to have a rendez-vous with him. On the other hand, Yansu’s justification of her mistress’ behavior reveals the essential difference between Bai and Cui Yingying in THZZR’s mind. In his view, Bai’s secret love for Su derives from her intellectual admiration of a real talent, whereas Cui Yingying’s interest in Zhang Junrui is grounded in sexual desire. From this perspective, THZZR adds some constraints on the freedom of human feeling, a notion that was highly prized in the late Ming. Of course this is not to say that THZZR completely rejects sex in his fiction. Instead, especially in YJL and LJH, for male talents and some other female character, he explicitly depicts their sexual desire, a point to which I will return later.

Besides abidance by ethical rituals, THZZR also expects moral virtue from a female talent. More specifically, THZZR repeatedly applauds traditional female virtue being free from envy and jealousy. In YJL, when the disguised Lu Mengli expresses “his” younger sister’s willingness to marry Su Youbai and worries about not being tolerated by the girl Su has already been engaged to, Su claims with confidence that “If she is not a lady, I will not woo her. If she is a real lady, how can she be jealous?” Later when Bai and Lu talk about how to stay together with each other forever, Bai voluntarily offers to follow the example of Ehuang and Nüying to share and serve one husband with her sister Lu. When Lu expresses her worry that Minister Bai, who is also her uncle, will not marry her to Su because he may
not want her to share his daughter Bai Hongyu’s husband, Bai, priding herself upon her female virtue, comforts Lu by saying that: “My father is not like ordinary people. He loves me, so he certainly will also love you. In addition, he has been entrusted with your problem by your mother. So he definitely will not treat you and me differently, and make me play the role of a jealous woman [who can’t tolerate her own sister].” In the end, when the three get married, they “respect each other and love each other and live a harmonious life.” THZZR attaches great importance to Bai’s lack of jealousy. For Su, Bai couldn’t be a real lady worth wooing if she did not possess the virtue of tolerance. Bai’s father never doubts his daughter’s female virtue of being tolerant in a polygamous marriage. Bai herself values this virtue even more.

McMahon views this kind of female not being jealous in a polygamous marriage as the loss of female superiority and “critical for the man’s control over women.” However, further examination of the relationship between the two women married to the same man will reveal that in THZZR’s novels, a polygamous marriage doesn’t necessarily point to the man’s control over the women. According to THZZR, the relation among the three parties works out smoothly because they are all real talents: their appreciation of each other’s talent provides the possibility of harmony in a polygamous marriage. Additionally, the appreciation is not only at the intellectual level, but also involves erotic desire between the two women. I will return to this point in the following section.

129 Tianhua zang zhuren 天花藏主人, comp., Yu jiao li 玉嬌梨 [Yu, Jiao, and Li], reprinted ed., in Dalian tushuguan cang guxiben mingqing xiaoshuo congkan 大連圖書館藏孤稀本明清小說叢刊 [Series of unique and rare copies of Ming Qing fiction held by the Dalian Library], vol. 18, Chapter 17.

130 See McMahon, 1995, 125.
In general, THZZR’s view of talent is gendered in terms of maintaining the difference between women and man, even if his novels feature considerable crossing of gender boundaries. As mentioned earlier, the desexualized female protagonists before marriage constitute a determinate attribute of the genre of scholar-beauty romance. However, as McMahon has observed: “In the (erotic) Qing romance, sex is domesticated by being brought into the sphere of marriage. The enjoyment of sex no longer subverts social order but instead belongs to that order,” the examination of THZZR’s novels I offers in this section reveals that many of the features McMahon attributes to the early Qing erotic romances were also found in the chaste scholar-beauty novels.

Illicit Sexual Desire, Homoerotic Relation, and Marital Sex

THZZR doesn’t completely delete the sexual desire in these chaste romances, although he rejects pre-marital female sexual desire and highly praises the female protagonists’ chastity before marriage. The novels depict sexual desire of male talented scholars, both pre-marital and post-marital, in a relatively direct way. The post-marital sex usually involves the male protagonists and the female talents while the pre-marital sex is engaged by the male scholar and some female character that is out of the conventional frame of Confucian moral rituals. Of course such a woman would not be called a talent though she is also physically attractive and intellectually distinguished. The prostitute Li Qing in LJH is one such example. In the description of these sexual elements, the author treated both parties equally. Li Qing even plays an initiating role in her sexual relation with the scholar Gan Yi. I will first examine Li

131 See McMahon, 1995, 147.
and Su’s case as an example to demonstrate the presence of non-marital sex in THZZR’s novels.

Gan’s original intention for meet the prostitute Li is not sexual: he seeks to make a connection with the beauty Xin Guchai through Li, who is said to be Xin’s acquaintance. Similarly, after Gan and Li spend a lot of time together, Li’s intention gradually goes beyond merely having sex in the process of her helping Gan to realize his wish of marrying Xin. Li hopes to entrust Gan with the rest of her life by marrying him. Gan also develops a deep admiration for and reliance on Li rather than treating her as a prostitute who is temporarily useful. However, as THZZR’s narration shows, it is undeniable that at the beginning sexual attraction is what starts the romance between the two:

Li Qing smiles and says: “[Y]ou have your selfish motive. I have my selfish motive. It is not difficult for me to realize your hope. Yet it will be better if you realize mine first.” Gan Yi asks: “How do I realize your intention?” Li Qing says: “My intention is not very excessive. Since you have been here and shown interest in me, I should at least prepare some wine to act as a hostess. After we have finished our mission, we can start talking about other things.”…The truth is that Li Qing thinks Gan Yi is attracted to her and must ask for love making with her, since Gan Yi comes to see her everyday. She is very happy about that. She doesn’t expect that when they finally meet, he shows no interests in her or having sex with her although his words are sweet and intimate. Li Qing realizes that she has been excited for nothing… Li Qing smiles and says: “Don’t you want to marry the Lady Xin? I am embarrassed by my lowliness, and dare not insult you by asking you to stay. It is all up to you to stay or to leave. If you have the intention, you will need my help and have to stay here for the moment. When it is deep in the night and quiet, I can secretly plan it for you. This is my selfish motive but actually it is for your interest. I am not sure what you think about it.” Gan Yi hears the implied meaning in her words and realizes that there is no other option. Besides, Li Qing is very pretty and attractive. So he says: “It is already unexpected that you ask me to stay. Now there is even more unexpected promise. How lucky I am!”…They talk and laugh, and when they are drunk, they go to bed to enjoy sex. They have a lot of pleasure and fall asleep happily afterwards…Li Qing sees Gan Yi worries about it. She plans to tease him and make him more worried, but when he shows his pretty smile and utters those
soft and sweet words with tender affection, she already has her heart-fire burning and the private parts wet…

With the detailed description of Li Qing’s emotional feeling and physical reaction resulting from her sexual attraction to Gan Yi, as well as the confirmation of the pleasure Gan Yi derives from sex with Li Qing, THZZR recognizes the natural sexual attraction between them without any detectable reservations. Actually, he takes pains to mention Li Qing’s and Gan Xin’s enjoyment of sex everytime they meet, only in more abbreviated and formulaic fashion compared to the detailed language quoted above.

Although THZZR eliminates the sexual element from young ladies’ secret admiration towards talented scholars, he has a different attitude towards marital sex between talents. He highlights the perfection of the sex on the night of each couple’s wedding. In PSLY and YJL it’s briefly noted, but in LJH, he uses a poem to describe the pleasure of the two couple’s sexual union:

The red candles have been blown out, and the silk garments have been unbuttoned. The laughs and sobs suddenly turn into flirtatious whispers. In the brocade curtain has piled tonight’s love with amorousness knitted in; The fringe is blown by the wind of pleasure and full of the spring beauty. If she is willing to enjoy it, why doesn’t he force harder? Even if she is too exhausted to bear it, she won’t ask for help. Don’t admire the two hearts clearly enamored of each other. Even the dream of Mt. Wu dims after a long time.

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132 See Liang Jiaohun xiaozhuan, reprinted ed., 111-34.
133 The term Wushan 巫山, or Mt. Wu appears in one of the most widely used literary expression for the sexual act, namely, wushan yunyu (巫山雲雨, lit. clouds and rain over Mt. Wu). The idea occurs in the preface which the great Chinese poet Song Yu added to his “Gaotang fu” (高唐賦, Poetic essay on Gaotang). In the preface he says: “in former times a king once made an excursion to a place named Gaotang. “Feeling tired he there slept during the daytime. He dreamt that he met a woman who said to him ‘I am the lady of Mt. Wu, and temporarily reside here in Gaotang. Having heard that you have come here, so I wish to share pillow and couch with you.’ Thereupon the king had sexual intercourse with her. At parting she said ‘I live on the southern slope of Mt. Wu, on the top of a high hill. At dawn I am the morning clouds, in the evening I am the pouring
Although without any mention of specific sexual organs or bodily reactions, this description of the first sexual experience between the scholar and the beauty is no less arousing than the depiction of Li Qing’s response. The descriptions of the change of in sound, as well in the physical stamina all connote sexual activity. Therefore, sex is not a taboo in THZZR’s fiction. Instead, the sexual obsession with a real talent is considered natural and an appreciation of talent. Sex is only eliminated from unmarried young ladies while socially justified sexual desires are all gratified with pleasure.

Although heterosexual desire is not allowed in an unmarried lady, all three works fully develop homoerotic obsessions among the female talents. In PSLY, Shan Dai and Leng Jiangxue admire each other’s beauty and poetic talent to the point that “they cling to each other like glue and lacquer. Everyday, in the Shan family’s house, they either look at flowers composing poems or they look at the moon writing poems. Everywhere, they stay together, no matter whether they sit or lie down, and they show respect and love to each other.” In LJH, female homoerotic affection between unmarried girls is also found in a sub-plot of cross-dressing. As suggested by Li Qing, Gan Yi dresses up in the disguise of his sister Gan Meng and manages to meet Xin Guchai at her house. After exchanging poems, Xin Guchai develops deep admiration for Gan Meng. When asked what kind of person she would agree to marry, she says “[M]y wish is very hard to realize. Unless you, my sister, change into a man, and I would be willing to run to you with my beddings…It’s regretful that Heaven will rain. Every morning and every night I hover about beneath the Yang terrace.” See R. H. van Gulik, Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 38-9. 

134 See Ping Shan Leng Yan, reprinted ed., 262-3.
not give people what we want and usually goes against it.”135 At their parting in the hall, “they are reluctant to leave each other. It’s not like a host is seeing off a guest, but more like a couple’s farewell at a Wayside Pavilion. They almost shed tears.”136 Gan Yi’s cross-dressing, Xin Guchai’s wish for the cross-dressed Gan Yi to be a male, as well as Xin’s ambivalent feeling towards Gan, together generate three layers of sexual ambiguity. In this complicated scenario, the physical attraction between two talents is fulfilled in homoerotic emotion. The danger of heterosexual desire as a product of the physical attraction is relieved.

The example of Bai Hongyu and Lu Mengli incorporates homoerotic overtones into legitimate heterosexual marriage. Similar to what Xin Guchai says to the cross-dressed Gan Yi in the admiration of her beauty and poetic talent, Bai once says to Lu, observing that “If you, my younger sister, were a man, I would love to serve you as my husband all lifelong.”137 Lu’s response, although not without the intention to bring about her engagement with Su, shows even more direct and determined affection:

Miss Lu frowns when she hears that. Being silent for a while, she says: “I am not a man, so, my elder sister, are you going to abandon me? What you just said is lack of affection.” Miss Bai smiles and says: “My younger sister, you misunderstand me. It is because I admire your talent so much that I want to stay together with you forever. But I am afraid we can’t, so I said those words. It’s really an extreme idea since I have no alternative… 138

The conversation continues until Bai brings up the suggestion that both of them marry the same man so that they will never be parted. Later when the marriage is realized, the

137 See Yu Jiao Li, reprinted ed., Chapter 16.
138 Ibid.
threesome is depicted as “showing respect and love to one another and living in great harmony and happiness.” Based on the pre-marital affection that the two girls have for each other, it is reasonable to say that it extends to their married life. Although no sexual intimacy is ever indicated between the two girls, their emotional and physical closeness justifies the possibility of a homoerotic relation, which is disguised by and yet accommodated in a heterosexual polygamous marriage. Therefore, the polygamous marriage doesn't lead to the man’s control of the woman. The relation between the husband and the wife in a polygamous marriage featuring one talented scholar and two talented beauties includes two facets: sexual attraction and spiritual appreciation between all parties. Similarly, the bond between the two wives also consists of both erotic desire and intellectual connection between knowers of each other’s innermost being. Hence, the man and the woman hence manage to keep the equivalence of gender in their marriage.

Whether it is heterosexual desire in marriage or pre-marital homoerotic attraction, it proves that sex is not a taboo in the so-called chaste romances. What distinguishes this sub-genre from the erotic romance is the fact that female protagonists must be chaste before marriage and pre-marital sex between the male and female talents is rejected. In addition, although marital sex and sex between the man and the non-talent beauty is allowed, the writing style of sex in these works tends towards the abstract and stereotyped.

Conclusion

The main body of this chapter consists of close reading of THZZR’s three novels. It reveals that through defining real talent in the images of talented scholars and beauties, THZZR shows his view of the scholar-beauty genre. First, the historical significance attached to real
talent in PSLY indicates that THZZR doesn’t view this novel as a domestic story about everyday life. Instead, the work tells of unusual experiences of distinguished people just like the heroic narrative in historical fiction. Second, the superiority of talent over learned knowledge, the superiority of female talent over ordinary male intellectuals, as well as male protagonists’ eventual abundance of political career which is a reward of their successes in the imperial examination, altogether shows THZZR’s response to the reality in his fictional writing. Facing the invalidation of the civil service examination system, THZZR creates an imagined world where real talent is recognized both in and out of the examination system. Third, in this imagined world, male and female characters feature many crossing gender characteristics. Two genders complemented each other to produce the perfect images of a real talent. This is not saying that THZZR’s image of a real talent is androgynous. THZZR treats his heroes and heroines differently in terms of their involvement in sex. The female protagonists are de-sexualized in their freedom to pursuit love and marriage, while their martial sex with the male protagonists’ is not circumvented. In comparison, THZZR views legitimate his male protagonists’ pre-marital sex which is realized with other kinds of female roles like a sensitive and beautiful prostitute. By rejecting the pre-marital sex between the male and the female protagonists, THZZR establishes their love on the basis of spiritual attraction. However, the bond between real talents, namely, the appreciation of each other’s talent, actually includes not only the intellectual facet, but also sexual attraction. Neither the sexual desire between the male and the female protagonists nor the erotic connection between two female talents are legitimate. It is only through the heterosexual marriage, monogamous or polygamous, that these illicit desires are realized and justified. Hence,
THZZR defines his novels with the pre-marital female chastity, and also with the equivalence between two genders as individuals and as a unit in marriage.

**Plot Summaries of the Three Novels**

*Yu, Jiao, and Li*

YJL tells of the polygamous romance between two beauties Bai Hongyu and Lu Mengliu and the male scholar Su Youbai. Bai Hongyu, the only daughter of Minister Bai Xuan, is famous for her beauty and literary talent. Minister Yang Tingzhao wants to marry Bai Hongyu to his son Yang Fang. Having found that Yang Fang is merely dandy without any literary talent, Bai Xuan rejects Yang Tingzhao’s marriage proposal. To take revenge against Bai Xuan, Yang Tingzhao makes a proposal to the Emperor to assign a tough mission to Bai Xuan and send him to a remote foreign country. Bai Xuan asks Minister Wu Gui, who is also Bai Hongyu’s uncle, to take care of Bai Hongyu and send her to temporarily live in his house. To escape the Yang family’s detection, Bai Hongyu changes her name to Wu Wujiao. After Bai Xuan leaves for the mission, the Wu family moves back to Wu Gui’s hometown Nanjing. Wu Gui meets a scholar named Su Youbai, who is both talented and handsome. Having found that Su Youbai also has good performance in the civil service examination, Wu Gui asks a matchmaker to propose marriage of his daughter Wu Wujiao (Bai Hongyu) to Su Youbai. Su Youbai steals a glance at the Lady Wu, finding that she is not attractive at all. So he rejected the marriage proposal. He doesn’t know that in fact the girl he sees is Wu Gui’s daughter Wu Wuyan.

Later he meets two people named Zhang Guiru and Wang Wenzhang, who are trying to respond to the “New Willow Poem.” The “New Willow Poem” is actually composed by
Bai Honyu. At that time, Bai Xuan has successfully completed his mission and gets back to his hometown Nanjing. He promises to consider marrying Bai Hongyu to anyone who can respond to “New Willow Poem” with a good poem. Su Youbai writes two poems. Zhang Guiru steals Su Youbai’s poems and gets appreciated by Bai Xuan. Bai Xuan asks him to be his nephew’s private tutor.

Bai Hongyu and his maid Yansu both detect something wrong with Zhang Guiru since his calligraphy and his appearance don't fit his poetic talent at all. Later Yansu meets Su Youbai in the garden, finding that Zhang Guiru has been stealing Su Youbai’s poems all the time. After communicating through poems, Bai Hongyu believes that Su Youbai is a real talent, so she indicates her willingness to marry Su Youbai and suggests him to ask for help from Wu Gui.

On his way to finding Wu Gui, Su Youbai meets a person named Su Youde, who deceives him by saying that Wu Gui has gone to the capital. Then Su Youbai goes to the capital and Su Youde goes to get a letter of recommendation from Wu Gui. In the Bai family’s house, both Zhang Guiru and Su Youde are found to be fake talents by Bai Xuan, who then knows that there is a real talent named Su Youbai.

Su Youbai is robbed on his way to the capital, so he has sell calligraphy and paintings to earn money for the trip. Once he is invited to a Li family to write poems and seen by the Li family’s neighbor Lu Mengli. Lu Mengli is attracted by Su Youbai’s poetic talent and beautiful appearance, so she cross-dresses into a male scholar to meet Su Youbai. After becoming bosom friends, Lu Mengli proposes to marry his (her) sister to Su Youbai and suggests him to take the civil service examination.
After successfully passing the civil service examination, Su Youbai goes to Shandong to meet Lu Mengli, who has already moved to South with her family. He doesn’t know that in fact Lu Mengli is the niece of Bai Xuan and she goes to Bai Xuan’s house to wait for Su Youbai since she knows that he will go there to ask for marriage with Bai Hongyu. Later Su Youbai rejects Yang Tingzhao, who is then his superior, and resigns the office.

In a place named Yuxue, Su Youbai with a pseudonym Liu meets Bai Xuan with the pseudonym Huangfu. Bai Xuan likes Su Youbai’s talent and beauty so he asks Liu to marry both his daughter and his niece. At the same time, Wu Gui and Su Youbai’s uncle Minister Su send letters to make a marriage proposal for Su Youbai. When everyone is in a dilemma, Wu Gui arrives and clarifies the misunderstandings. Su Youbai then marries both Bai Hongyu and Lu Mengli. Later he also takes as concubine the maid Yansu, who helps to arrange their marriage.

*Ping, Shan, Leng and Yan*

PSLY tells a story about two couples of talented scholars and beauties, Ping Ruheng, Shan Dai, Leng Jiangxue and Yan Baihan. The story begins with the Emperor’s recognition of Shan Dai’s, who is the only daughter of Minister Shan Xianren, poetic talent. Shan Xianren presents Shan Dai’s white swallow poem to the Emperor at an imperial banquet. The emperor is pleased and grants the title of “Talented Girl in Promoting Civilization” to Shan Dai. After that, a lot of people come to Shan family’s house to request poems from Shan Dai. A vulgar man named Yan Wenwu behaved badly at Shan family’s house when he is waiting for Shan Dai to inscribe a poem on his fan. Shan Dai thus writes a poem to poke fun at his deformity. To revenge against Shan Dai, Yan Wenwu asks help for his cousin Dou Guoyi
and the poet Song Xin. They buy off some officials in court and make a request to the emperor for a literary competition with Shan Dai. During the competition, Shan Dai’s outstanding performance convinced all the officials. Dou Guoyi is degraded and Song Xin is sent back to his hometown from the capital as punishment for their spiting Shan Dai.

Later, Song Xin dishonors himself in poetic competition with another talented girl named Leng Jiangxue in a county near Yangzhou. He collides with Dou Guoyi to force the Leng family to sell Leng Jiangxue to the government. To please the Shan family, they sent Leng Jiangxue to be Shan Dai’s servant. However, Leng Jiangxue is well treated by the Shan family, especially Shan Dai, because of her talent. The Emperor hears about Leng Jiangxue and grants the title “Woman Kanzler” to her.

On her way to the capital, Leng Jaingxue meets a scholar named Ping Ruheng. Ping Ruheng responds to her poem inscribed on the wall of a temple and they are attracted to each others’ talent and beauty, albeit it’s only a very short meet and they don’t know who the other is at all. Ping Ruheng has a friend named Yan Baihan, who is also a talented poet. When they hear about Shan Dai, they plan go to the capital and compete with her. Shan Dai contests with Ping Ruheng and Leng Jiangxue contests with Yan Baihan. They both win, yet they find that the two scholars are also real talents. When they ask Minister Shan to find them, the two scholars have left.

Zhang Yin, the son of a high official, presents a collection of poems to Shan Dai and pretends to be a talent. Shan Dai finds that all the poems are stolen from others so she asks to contest Zhang Yin in person. Zhang Yin is not gifted in poetry at all and he rushes into Shan Dai’s study without permission. To punish him, Shan Dai paints his face to show that he is a fake talent. Zhang Yin’s father then lodge a complaint against Shan Dai to the Emperor,
saying that Shan Dai is involved in secret love with two scholars. At that time Yan Baihan and Ping Ruheng have successfully passed the civil service examination. The Emperor finds that the two scholars are just the two talents recommended by some officials earlier and knows the reality about their literary competition with Shan Dai. Then he grants marriages to the four scholars. Shan Dai marries Yan Baihan and Leng Jiangxue marries Ping Ruheng. At the wedding night, Shan Dai realize that Yan Baihan is just the scholar who writes a poem on the wall of her house in admiration of her beauty and she responds with a poem. Leng Jiangxue and Ping Ruheng find that the other is just the person they met before.

Two Inverse Marriages

This novel tells the crossing marriage between two families: the beauty Xin Guichai marries the scholar Gan Yi, and Xin Guchai’s brother Xin Fa marries Gan Yi’s sister Gan Meng. Gan Yi and Gan Meng live in a county in Sichuan. They both have distinguished talent and physical beauty. After passing the imperial examination at the county level, Xin Yi goes to Yangzhou and hears about the fame of Xin Guichai, who is the beautiful and talented daughter in an official family. To make a connection with Xin Guchai, Gan Yi goes to ask for help from the prostitute Li Qing, who is a friend of Xin Guchai. Under Li Qing’s help, Gan Yi cross dresses into a girl and requests to meet Xin Guchai under his sister’s name Gan Meng. In their meeting, Xin Guchai and Gan Yi (Gan Meng) are deeply attracted to each other’s talent and beauty. Later Xin Guchai realizes that the girl named Gan Meng is actually Gan Meng’s brother Gan Yi. So she asks her brother Xin Fa to meet Gan Yi. Xin Fa decides to marry Gan Meng and Xin Guchai asks her father to invite Gan Yi to their house. Minister Xin appreciates Gan Yi’s talent a lot and wants to marry Xin Guichai to Gan Yi.
Back in Sichuan, Ga Meng smartly rejects her Cousin Diao Zhi’s forced marriage proposal. The local official surnamed Wang is surprised by Gan Meng’s brightness and beauty, so he offers to marry Gan Meng to his teacher’s son Xin Fa. After the Xin family and Gan Yi hears about the news in the capital, Minister Xin suggests Gan Yi to take the imperial examination at higher levels.

After Gan Yi goes back to Sichuan, General Bao forces Minister Xin to marry Xin Guchai to his son Bao Wen. Xin Guchai sends her maid Lüqi under the guise of Minister Xin’s daughter to marry Bao Wen. Then the Xin family moves to the capital. When Gan Yi is back in Yangzhou, he hears about the news that Lady Xin has been married to Bao Wen. Li Qing reminds him of the low credibility of the gossip and suggests him to still make proposal to the Xin family.

Later, both Gan Yi and Xin Fa pass the civil service examination at the higher level. Bao Wen wants to marry his sister to Gan Yi and gets rejected. Gan Yi is arrested by the official who wants to please the Bao family. The Emperor hears about that and knows the truth. Then he grants marriage to Gan Yi and Xin Guchai. Xin Fa secretly takes his sister Xin Guchai with him to his official position in Sichuan. The two couples get married there. Later Li Qing finds Gan Yi and Xin Guchai and marries Gan Yi as his concubine.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis with its focus on the re-construction of THZZR’s triple personae in the context of book market and fiction writing in the early-to-mid-Qing period is a preliminary study. As far as I know, a solid analysis of the publication and the paradigm of reading and writing of scholar-beauty fiction in the context of book printing in late imperial China has not been attempted before, although some Chinese scholars such as Zhou Jianyu and Su Jianxin touch on related issues. Nevertheless, in the past decade, issues surrounding the printing of the Classics, dramas, and several older novels in the Ming/Qing periods have attracted a considerable amount of English scholarship.

In the pioneering volume *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, essays are devoted to various aspects of book printing in the late Ming and Qing periods. Regarding printing of vernacular texts, Anne E. McLaren’s and Robert Hegel’s essays provide new and inspiring insights about readers and publishers of vernacular fiction. Regarding the examination of popularized editions of Classics and older vernacular narratives such as *Romance of the Western Wing*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, etc, McLaren demonstrates “the historical specificity of notions of readership” during that period of time: as suggested in prefaces and commentaries of this era, the targeted readership of these vernacular texts was no longer restricted to the learned class, but rather “a heterogeneous one of officials, literati, collectors among the new class of nouveaux riches, members of the laity, common people, the relatively unlearned, and even the all-inclusive
‘people of the empire.’"139 Hegel provides a close examination of the physical form of printed vernacular novels and suggests that there was no niche marketing of vernacular fiction because “the quality of the imprints clearly varies though time and among publishing houses.” Both with regard to older works and new popular romances produced during the Qing, “the printing quality of novels and story collections fell during the Qing period,” which indicates a decrease in price and a growing readership.140 Although neither McLaren nor Hegel specifically touches on the category of scholar-beauty fiction, their observations paves the way for subsequent studies of this particular genre in the context of commercial printing of vernacular texts.

A seminal figure in the development of scholar-beauty fiction, THZZR focuses exclusively on scholar-beauty fiction. An examination of his activities as a professional writer who assumes triple roles as publisher (or at least closely connected with commercial publishers), commentator, and writer reveals the specificity of printing and targeted readership of this category of vernacular fiction. Since no conclusion on THZZR’s exact historical identity has been made due to a lack of conclusive source material, no autobiographical information about him could be used to make an argument. However, taking my cue from scholars such as McLaren and others, in this thesis I examine THZZR’s own works as well as his prefatory commentaries on scholar-beauty novels authored by him and other writers.

The recorded publication of some other scholar-beauty works predated THZZR’s novels, for example, *Awakened from the Love Dream*, *Drunk in Spring Breeze*, *Spring in Jade Pavilion*, *Pre-destiny of Dream in Mt. Wu*, *Butterfly Matchmaker*, etc. Arguably, these works enjoyed popularity in book market before the heyday of THZZR’s novels, but the available data of printing of books in both groups suggests that THZZR’s works decidedly surpassed those sexually explicit romances in terms of appeal. As shown by correlating available date of printed books in early-to-mid Qing period, THZZR’s two novels YJL and PSLY, became best sellers in the book market during the reign of Qianlong. In fact, I disagree with the cut and dried categorization of scholar-beauty romances into erotic and chaste ones, yet it is undeniable that the earlier novels differ from THZZR’s works in that they feature explicit language in describing sexual acts between male protagonists and female characters, usually more than two. Hence, it is clear that THZZR attempts to reinvent the genre by curtailing sexual elements in scholar-beauty romances, a feature that appeared to find favor with reading audiences.

Without firm dates to establish the printing of scholar-beauty novels in greater detail, it is difficult to conclude that THZZR’s own commentatorial efforts directly influenced the popularity of his works in later reign periods. However, he made noticable attempts to promote scholar-beauty novels in prefatory commentaries. Compared to other commentators’ promotion of these novels in editorial notes, THZZR’s prefatory promotional language is rather mild and indirect. He establishes an exclusive relationship between “real knowers” to attract potential readership of well-read people and connect them with the author/commentator of the work. While commentators writing editorial notes also attempt to attract both elites with high social and educational background and ordinary readers with
lower literacy in a claimed “knowers’ relationship,” THZZR only addresses himself to the learned and refined readers. Arguably, this is but another strategy which attempts to make the novel appear to be a more exclusive and luxurious genre, thus becoming more appealing to all kinds of readers, including ordinary or common buyers.

THZZR also comments on hybrid scholar-beauty novels in which sub-plots of other fictional themes, such as military affairs, historical narrative, and chivalry, etc. are well developed in the frame of the romance between talented scholars and beauties. Some scholars suggest that these hybrid novels responded to new market needs, characterizing THZZR’s involvement in promoting these works as a professional writer’s response to the change in market. In my view, the multifaceted nature shown in most scholar-beauty novels suggests that those sub-themes are not newly created sales ploys. An examination of THZZR’s commentaries supports this view: in prefaces to hybrid scholar-beauty romances, THZZR takes an aesthetic perspective and provides interpretations of significant conceptual terms in a fashion similar to how he treats other scholar-beauty works in prefatory commentaries.

With regard to his role as a commentator, THZZR reinvents the genre of scholar-beauty fiction and raises its status in the literary domain through prefatory writing. In his prefaces, THZZR reinterprets conceptual terms such as talent, sensitivity, desire, inborn nature, and ethical rituals, etc. He pays close attention, especially to concepts of talent and sensitivity, which he correlates with one another. Regarding the concept of real talent, THZZR stresses that real talents are different from ordinary people in that they have innate talent bestowed by Heaven. Therefore, these distinguished talents possess romantic emotion, which is more intense and loyal than that of their ordinary fellows. More importantly, their emotion is informed by the observance of ethical rituals, a manifestation of the authenticity
of their identity as real talent. Responding to the tendency of overwhelming emotion which leads to premarital sex in earlier dramatic works as well as to the tendency of excessive sexual descriptions in earlier and contemporary vernacular fiction, THZZR advocates restrained feeling in scholar-beauty romances. He also values the twists and turns in these narratives as a way to test the authenticity of real talents’ sensitivity and as a proof of the marvel of these romantic love stories between talented men and women. By doing so, THZZR justifies the peculiar aesthetic characteristic of traditional fiction, namely, the seemingly repeated and redundant twists and turns in plot, thus calling for a more serious attitude towards fiction reading among potential readers.

Through close readings of THZZR’s three works PSLY, YJL, and LJH, we observe that the way he stresses the historical significance of talent in PSLY is similar to the way writers of military/historical novels introduce their heroes. This is a telling example to confirm my observation that scholar-beauty novels are of a multifaceted nature, which cautions us against any simplified definition or categorization of the genre. THZZR takes pains to show the unmatchable nature of talent and its superiority over knowledge gained through regular education. Although his male protagonists all successfully pass the civil service examination at the highest level, THZZR attempts to challenge the effectiveness of civil service examination system in education and talent selection by depreciating the intellectual capabilities of ordinary literati-officials. Moreover, the male talents in his works all abandon civil service after passing the exam and marrying the beauties. This ambivalent attitude towards the civil service examination system very likely derives from the discrepancy between the reality of declined importance of civil service examination in late
Ming and early Qing periods and THZZR’s desire for the Qing rulers’ recognition of talents, himself included.

On close reading the three texts, I observe the existence of marital sex between male and protagonists, as well as the explicit description of sex between male talent and prostitute, even if premarital sexual desire is eliminated from female protagonists’ pursuit of love. More interestingly, the three romances all contain sexually suggestive homoerotic relationships between female talents. It derives from the mutual appreciation of the other’s talent and physical beauty and is presented in the guise of the female characters’ sisterhood or friendship. In addition, this homoerotic relationship is sometimes realized through the male protagonist’s cross-dressing, and eventually accommodated by the heterosexual polygamous marriage between the male protagonist and two female talents.

In order to develop an even fuller picture of the roles THZZR played in literary history, more detailed examination needs to be done regarding the publication of works related to him and the consumption of those works by readers in late imperial China. Hegel has briefly noted that all the new popular romances written in Qing “appeared in cheap, low-quality editions regardless of the artistic merit of the text itself” and were printed “for a broad range of buyers rather than exclusively serving those at the high end of the economic scale.” Yet to reconstruct the actual reading of scholar-beauty novels in the Qing dynasty, a detailed study on extant imprints of scholar-beauty works is still necessary. Not only do the material conditions and physical forms deserve careful examination, the locations of publishers that printed novels of this genre is also important in that it suggests the geographical coverage of the circulation of these novels. According to Zhou Jianyu, more

141 Ibid.
than one hundred and twenty publishing houses had printed scholar-beauty works, and some of them have been successfully located. It indicates that novels of this genre had been consumed on a large scale in the Qing dynasty. According to Zhou, major locations for the printing of scholar-beauty romances include Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Guangzhou. Yet it will be more convincing to make claim a nation-wide popularity of scholar-beauty fiction if more places can be located besides those major publishing centers. Such an analysis would allow us to examine to what extent scholar-beauty fiction might have knitted together different strata of readers into a different kinds of “imagined communities.”

It will also be stimulating to look at the consumption and circulation of scholar-beauty novels in the larger Sinophone sphere. Although some scholarship in both English and Chinese has been paid to the circulation and rewriting of the specific works, for example, JYQZ in Korea and in South East Asian countries, no comprehensive study on the general circulation of those works is yet available. This aspect is reminiscent of the newly flourishing study of Sinophone literature. Although it seems to be a modern concept, the Sinophone literature existed in pre-modern times when those scholar-beauty novels were consumed in Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese book markets. Therefore, an in-depth study of the circulation of scholar-beauty fiction in Qing will lead to a better understanding of the complete tradition of Sinophone literature.

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