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# Gender Identity and Literati Identity in Late Imperial China

By

Wensi Wang

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Faculty Advisor: Stephanie M. Painter

Preceptor: Deirdre Theresa Lyons

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relative gender relations and gender dynamics in two erotic novels about Wu Zetian —*Ruyijun Zhuan* 如意君传 from the Ming Dynasty and *Konghejian Miji* 控鹤监秘记 from the Qing Dynasty. By analyzing the different narratives of sexual activities in the two novels, this thesis proposes a new perspective on reading erotica works in late imperial China, which could be a reflection of the subcurrents of the political, social, and ideological contexts of the respective time periods. This thesis focuses on the historical context of the Ming and the Qing Dynasties that implicitly led to the differences and continuities in the construction of literati scholars' male identity, which was in turn mirrored in the constructions of sexual dynamics in the two erotica works.

**Keywords:** Late Imperial China, Neo-Confucianism, Erotica

## Introduction

Erotica has long been an essential component of human civilization across the world. This was also true in the seemingly conventional and reserved ancient Chinese Confucian society, which held strict moral confinements. Aside from a depiction of actual sexual scenes, erotica was an important medium that represented the imagination and fantasies of sexual behaviors of both the producers and intended readers, and more importantly, the social, political, cultural, and historical context that rendered and necessitated these particular kinds of fantasies, which was a major way for contemporary readers to learn about the muted and hidden lives of ancient Chinese females, and how the male dominators constructed and disciplined their sexualities.

In this thesis, I will examine two erotic tales—*Ruyijun Zhuan* (如意君传) and *Konghhejian Miji* (控鹤监秘记)—about Wu Zetian from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) respectively in order to analyze the changing gender dynamics during these time periods, which was presented in a discussion about the sexual appetites of one of the most powerful while infamous women in Chinese history: Wu Zetian, who was the only female emperor in Chinese History. The aim is to analyze the evolving gender dynamics, particularly the changing relationships between men and women, during these periods. I argue that the gender dynamics depicted through Wu's sexual life in these novels have both similarities and differences that can be better understood within the historical contexts of the two dynasties. Firstly, both novels portray Wu as a sexual object whose desires are exaggerated and demonized, reflecting the anxiety and fragility of masculinity in both dynasties due to foreign threats: the Mongolian invasion before the

Ming Dynasty and the Manchurian rule during the Qing Dynasty. These invasions undermined the core values of neo-Confucianism: loyalty, ethnocentrism, and masculinity. Secondly, *Ruyijun Zhuan* from the Ming Dynasty upholds a relatively more masculine, powerful, moral, and assertive portrayal of men and a submissive and passive portrayal of women. In contrast, *Konghejian Miji* from the Qing Dynasty depicts a more powerful and assertive femininity and a weakened masculinity. This difference may be related to the historical context that influenced the self-identity of Confucian scholars: during the Ming Dynasty, despite anxiety over masculinity, neo-Confucianism flourished as the state ideology. At the same time, literati elites felt pressure from the lower commercial class, reinforcing the need to construct a powerful, masculine identity. In comparison, during the Qing Dynasty, Confucian scholars faced pressure from the upper Manchurian ruling class, which portrayed the literati as weak. Combined with the spread of Yangmingism, which emphasized following one's heart and discarding strict neo-Confucian dogma that upholds the patriarchal ideologies, the depiction of weakened masculinity proliferated. While it is oversimplified to draw definitive conclusions from these two novels alone, and further research is necessary, gender constructions in erotic works are largely overlooked by scholars. When erotica is indeed analyzed as a manifestation of historical context, the Ming and Qing dynasties are usually grouped under late Imperial China. Therefore, it is time to separate the Ming and Qing Dynasties to better understand the nuances of the political, social, and ideological currents and how these influenced gender interactions within society, as reflected in erotic literature that carries the fantasy, imagination, lament, and wishes of both authors and readers.

Wu Zetian was the single most powerful woman in ancient China, which made her an obtrusive target when the patriarchs aimed to discipline women to be demure and submissive to male rules. In the following section, I reconstruct Wu's life according to *The Old Book of Tang*, *The New Book of Tang*, and *Zizhi Tongjian*, which were the official chronicles of the Tang Dynasty compiled during the Jin Dynasty and the Song Dynasty respectively. I select the events that appeared in all three sources in order to rebuild a commonly agreed version of Wu's life story. Wu Zetian was born in 624 in the Tang dynasty, in a well-to-do family. Wu's father was a merchant who later entered the nobility rank, and her mother was from the powerful Yang family.<sup>1</sup> At the age of fourteen, Wu was selected as the consort concubine of emperor Taizong as a *Lady of Talent*, the sixth rank of the Tang imperial palace, though allegedly, she wasn't very favored by Taizong, as she wasn't promoted for ten years. After a decade, Taizong passed away and his son, Gaozong, ascended to the crown, with whom Wu purportedly had an affair before Taizong's death. According to the custom, concubines of deceased emperors who did not have sons were to become nuns for the rest of their lives, and Wu moved into the Ganye Temple. However, after a year, the two old lovers, Wu and Gaozong, met again in the temple during the one-year death-memorial service of Taizong and reignited their sexual liaison. This secret affair was discovered by Gaozong's wife, Empress Wang, who believed Wu could be a helpful ally in her strife with Pure Consort Xiao, who was very much favored by Gaozong and held second rank. Under Empress Wang's permit, Wu returned to the palace and became Gaozong's concubine—*Lady of Bright Department*, which was the third rank—in 651. After a short four-year period, Wu defeated Empress Wang and Consort Xiao in vying for the

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<sup>1</sup> Ouyang, *Zizhi Tongjian*, 资治通鉴 (卷 204)

emperor's favor—both of whom were deposed from the palace by Gaozong—and Wu became the new empress in 655. During her career as an Empress, Wu actively participated in political decisions. For example, in 674, Wu presented a memorial to the throne (normally presented by the government officials to the emperor) and stated twelve suggestions to make the Empire more prosperous and powerful, such as encouraging agriculture, increasing the salary of government officials, and reducing taxes.<sup>2</sup> After Gaozong's death in 683, Wu ruled as the empress dowager by regency for the next seven years. In 690, at the age of 66, after Wu being the actual power holder of the Empire for almost thirty years, Wu finally gathered enough political support that allowed her to abolish the current emperor, who was her son, and officially ascended to the crown which marked the start of the Zhou Dynasty, lasting from 690 to 705.<sup>3</sup>

Among the thousands of years of Chinese history, Wu was the first and the only woman who ever ascended to the throne as emperor. Though there were other women who were the actual supreme power holders, they were always under the disguise of empress dowager,<sup>4</sup> which means the legitimation for women holding supreme political power was still completed through patrilineal connection—either as the chaste widow of the dead emperor who helped to secure stability after the short period when the emperor passed away or as the benevolent mother of the young emperor and would return the power as soon as the emperor became an adult. In contrast, Wu Zetian was the only female who dared to step beyond these titles and explicitly declared herself as the emperor.

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Book of Tang*, 新唐书, p61

<sup>3</sup> *The New Book of Tang*, p132

<sup>4</sup> Yang, *Female Rulers in Imperial China*, p51

Far from being the only politically ambitious woman in Chinese history, what made Wu's path to power different can be attributed to several key internal and external political and social factors distinct to the time period in which she operated. Historians such as Mark Edward Lewis have described the Tang dynasty as the golden age for women in ancient China<sup>5</sup>. Defined by a period of economic and political prosperity, in this cosmopolitan empire of Tang Dynasty China, 'rather than being strictly confined to the inner quarters, women of this era were more visible, riding horses and donning male attire'.<sup>6</sup> In this time period, women enjoyed 'a relative autonomy and power'<sup>7</sup>. According to Lewis, Wu 'emerged in the right place at the right time'<sup>8</sup>.

Yet even when compared to the most elite women from the Tang Dynasty who enjoyed considerable freedom, Wu's gendered experience as a woman politician was indeed exceptional and privileged. First, Wu's father secured her a well-educated childhood. She learned about not only arts, music, and writing, but also how to read the Chinese classics and political topics from a young age, which were uncommon topics for elite ladies even during the Tang Dynasty when education for women primarily focused on artistic skills and knowledge, womanly virtue, and related rituals.<sup>9</sup> Also, during her decade as Taizong's concubine, though she was not specifically favored by him, her position as *Lady of Bright Department* allowed her to wait on him when he dealt with political issues, and allowed Wu to 'gain experience working with official documents and learned the necessary useful skills

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p179

<sup>6</sup> Rothschild, *Wu Zhao's Remarkable Aviary*, p1

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p179

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p179

<sup>9</sup> Sun, *Women's Education in the Period of Social Reforms in Tang Dynasty*, p1

for conducting state affairs'<sup>10</sup>. Such experience facilitated her with all the necessary skills and mindset required for her future participation in political affairs. Furthermore, when she entered Gaozong's harem, she did not focus on winning favors from her husband like other consorts by being sexually attractive, demure, and adhering to womanly virtues; instead, she honed her skills as a valuable political ally for Gaozong. After Wu became Gaozong's empress, it was recorded that 'her royal highness was wise and has intensively studied Classics and History...the emperor suffered a lot from headaches after the year of Xianqing (from Year 656 to 661); thus all the memorials for the throne were dealt by the Empress. From that time, the Empress helped to rule the empire for more than ten years, and her power and influence were just like the emperor himself.'<sup>11</sup> Most of the historical records from the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty—though denying her legitimacy to the throne for being a woman—held a relatively positive view of Wu, noting that she promoted meritocracy, broke the nobility's monopoly of political power, readily accepted suggestions and critics about her reign, and developed agriculture throughout the empire.<sup>12</sup>

The record of Wu Zetian serves as an example of the success and possibility of women's rulership at the highest echelons of political power in a patriarchal society that otherwise envisioned little room for it. Yet after her passing, male scholars increasingly offered harsh comments about Wu's reign in official historical records produced by the ruling class during later dynasties. In her analysis of the changing image of Wu Zetian, Han Lin argues that during the Tang Dynasty, Wu's account was relatively objective, while during

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<sup>10</sup> Lee, *Wu Zhao: Ruler of Tang Dynasty China*, Association for Asian Studies

<sup>11</sup> Liu, *The Old Book of Tang*, p128

<sup>12</sup> Han, *Wu's Image*, p30



the later periods, she was either depicted as a brutal tyrant or a lustful seductress.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true during the Ming Dynasty, when masculinity was in flux for literati elites whose monopoly on power was at risk due in part to the threat of Mongolian foreign invasion and the prosperity of the commercial middle class that threatened to compete with them. Thus, while the narratives men constructed about Wu Zetian throughout history may not provide us with clear insight into the complex realities of her life, these stories serve as sites to examine scholar-elite men's changing attitudes towards women's power, revealing to the audience how the authors, and the audience that the authors wanted to appeal to, viewed her and her achievements, as well as fulfilling the fantasy, ideals, and imagination of the self of both the authors and the audience, which were largely males, especially elite males, due to the low literacy rates of the Ming Dynasty.

### Historiographic Review

Being the single most powerful woman in Chinese history, Wu is among the most extensively discussed women in academia and historical records. In the common narratives in ancient Chinese Chronicles compiled by scholar-officials, such as *The Old Book of Tang*, *The New Book of Tang*, and *Zizhi Tongjian*, Wu was usually depicted as a brutal ruler who gained power by sexually seducing her husbands, appointing brutal officials, and even killing her own children. In recent years, many authors have made an effort to divert Wu's negative image and to reconstruct her life stories more objectively.<sup>14</sup> Such examples include

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<sup>13</sup> Han, *Wu's Image*, p21, 22

<sup>14</sup> For notable works that reconstructed Wu's life see: Cawthorne, Nigel (2007). *Daughter of Heaven: The True Story of the Only Woman to Become Emperor of China*. Oxford, England: One World Publications; Clements, Jonathan (2007). *Wu: The Chinese Empress Who Schemed, Seduced and Murdered Her Way to Become a Living God*. Stroud: Sutton; Rothschild, N. Harry (2008). *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor*. Pearson Education; Colla, Elisabetta, *When the Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武则天(624-705), the "Emulator of Heaven"*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

*When The Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武则天 (624-705), The “Emulator of Heaven”* by Elisabetta Colla, which discusses how Wu utilized ‘religion, magic, and symbolism to legitimize her swift rise to the dragon throne’<sup>15</sup>. These works manage to discard the conventional femme fatale narratives and discuss her political policies and tactics like treating a male politician.

Aside from the attempts to reconstruct the true life of Wu Zetian and deconstruct the subjective patriarchal description of Wu during imperial China, more and more scholars have begun to focus on the different historical representations of Wu in literature during imperial China.<sup>16</sup> However, most of them focus on religious, political, and artistic works, and few of them focus on erotic works. One rare example is the article *Representations of Emperor Wu Zetian in Ming-Qing Fiction: ‘Ruyijun zhuan’ and ‘Jinghua yuan’*, where Wong—by analyzing the erotic novella *Ruyijun zhuan* and the fantasy novel *Jinghua yuan*—connects the sexual depictions of Wu with the specific historical context of the Ming and Qing era. For example, she links the abnormally insatiable and uncontrollable sexual desires with the Ming Dynasty’s fear of female gender transgression: it was rooted in neo-Confucianism ideologies that a major part of masculinity was the ability to control one’s desire and to prioritize moral pursuits against carnal desires. As a representation of such a Confucianism ideal, the male protagonist—Wu’s lover—was able to control his sexual desire and sacrifice it for higher moral ends, as he threatened Wu to castrate himself if Wu wouldn’t summon

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<sup>15</sup> Colla, *When the Emperor is a Woman*

<sup>16</sup> For notable works that analyzed Wu’s image in ancient literary works, see: Han, Lin. *Wu Zetian’s Image: Cultural Construction and Explanation*, China Social Sciences Press, (2018); Wong, Tin Kei. “Representations of Emperor Wu Zetian in Ming-Qing Fiction: ‘Ruyijun Zhuan’ and ‘Jinghua Yuan.’” *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 49 (2017): [90]-111.; Shu-fang Dien, Dora (2003). *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History: Female Defiance in Confucian China*. Nova Publishing

back the Prince Crown, who was the ‘legitimate’ heir to the throne under patriarchal Confucianism mindset.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, as the most powerful and genderly transgressive woman in Chinese History, Wu’s failure to control her sexual desire was a manifestation of the impossibility of females to compete with males. In comparison, during the Qing Dynasty, though some of the negative attitudes towards Wu still lingered, her image turned more positive overall, which was connected with the late imperial Chinese literati’s fear of potential failure in the Imperial Examination and unrecognized talents, which was commonly represented by seemingly feminism themes in Qing literature.<sup>18</sup>

In this thesis, I also aim to connect gender dynamics in Ming-Qing novels with specific political and philosophical historical contexts along the road that Wong has paved. However, what is missing from Wong’s work that I’d like to contribute to is that firstly, though Wong chooses an erotic novel—*Ruyijun Zhuan*—as her primary source for the Ming Dynasty, she largely omits the sexual interactions between Wu and her lovers, which impressed by Millet’s Sexual Politics Theory, which will be discussed later, I believe is a valuable and untapped source for analyzing the gender relationship and sexuality construction in late Imperial China, instead of merely treating the sexual plots as pornographic elements that spice up the novels. Instead, in this thesis, I will conduct a close analysis of the sexual plots in two erotic novels about Wu Zetian, which carried the fantasy, imagination, ideal, and blueprints of both the authors and readers, who were mostly educated literati, about how the social relations between the two genders should be like. Moreover, though Wong analyzes the different images of Wu from the Ming and the Qing

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<sup>17</sup> Wong, *Representations of Emperor Wu Zetian in Ming-Qing Fiction*, p96-99

<sup>18</sup> Wong, *Representations of Emperor Wu Zetian in Ming-Qing Fiction*, p110

Dynasty respectively, she treats the underlying historical contexts as two individual and exclusive trends without paying attention to the underlying continuities and changes of the subcurrents. In contrast, in my thesis, I would like to focus on the continuities and differences of the gender relations depicted in these sexual behaviors and pave the way towards further research about the subcurrents that might foster these similar and different representations of sexuality construction in literary works.

### Literary Analysis

The following section will compare and contrast the depictions of sexual relationships in the two novels—*Ruyijun Zhuan* and *KHJMJ*. Both novels depict the female protagonist, Wu, as a sexually insatiable woman, whose desires are exaggerated, stigmatized, and demonized. Despite this continuity, the two stories also present totally different gender constructions in Wu's sexual encounters: in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, the narrative reinforces Confucianism masculinity and femininity by depicting the male protagonist as assertive, sexually dominative, and moral, which are the core of neo-Confucianism male identity, while the female protagonist as submissive while sexualized. In contrast, *KHJMJ* represents somehow subverted gender roles by presenting a weakened male figure and a powerful and assertive female figure.

The Ming Dynasty marked the start of the commercial society of imperial China<sup>19</sup>. One instance of such commercialization was the rapid development of printing. The increase in money, population, and interactions between people resulted in the emergence

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<sup>19</sup> Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, p107

of the merchant middle class and subverted the conventional social hierarchy of gentry scholars 士, peasant farmers 农, artisans and craftsmen 工, and merchants 商. This newly emerging of merchant class represented a group that was less educated but even wealthier than the traditional literati elites, ready to spend their money on conspicuous leisure, which as Timothy Brook explains, made the late imperial China ‘a time of cultural brilliance, innovative ideas and endless pleasure—also a time of confusion and anxiety.’<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it was also during the late Ming Dynasty that the printing technology boomed, allowing for the mass production of knowledge and information like never before. With the rise of the merchant class and the mass development of printing technologies, the Ming dynasty witnessed a shift in publishing culture from a period defined by the production of scholarly works to a world of commercial and entertainment books for a growing literate public that could afford this luxury.<sup>21</sup>

Under such social circumstances emerged a large number of erotica literary works, as the Ming Dynasty witnessed the emergence of the fountainhead of Chinese erotica.<sup>22</sup> The two main primary sources I will analyze in this thesis are *控鹤监秘记* *The Secret Stories of the Konghe Department*, first published in 1788, which will be referred to in the rest of the thesis as *KHJMJ*, and *Ruyijun Zhuan* (*如意君传*), *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, which was published during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, both of which were erotic novels about Wu Zetian produced in late imperial China. *Ruyijun Zhuan* was regarded as the fountainhead of erotic

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<sup>20</sup> Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, p154

<sup>21</sup> Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, p170

<sup>22</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p1

novels in ancient China, and it was published as an individual book. On the other hand, KHJM is a short novel included in the book *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (子不语), which is a collection of more than 700 short stories. According to the Confucian canonical *The Analects*, 'the subjects on which the Master did not discuss, were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings.'<sup>23</sup> These four categories were out of the Confucian scholarships that focused exclusively on canonical readings and moral discourses. As the title suggests, this collection of short stories discussed a range of taboo topics in a normative Confucian society, such as supernatural beings and immoral conduct. KHJM is such an example that describes the imagined private sexual life of Wu Zetian.

The authors of the two novels were both members of the elite literati class, and at least to some extent, their worldviews aligned with the implicit ideologies of their mainstream literati elite class. According to Charles Stone, the author of *Ruyijun Zhuan* was assumably Huang Xun 黄训, who was a literati governmental official in the Ming Dynasty through imperial examination, and ended up being the Senior Provincial Governmental Official before he was dismissed from the office.<sup>24</sup> In comparison, the compiler of *What the Master Would Not Discuss*, Yuan Mei 袁枚, was well-known in the Qing Dynasty. Yuan was a famous essayist who produced a large number of poems, essays, and other literary works that depicted his own ideologies as well as reflected societal customs and popular norms. It was also noteworthy that both the authors were literati who passed the Imperial Examination and became literati governmental officials, but both of whom later left the

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<sup>23</sup> Confucius. *The Analects*, P28

<sup>24</sup> Qing Daoguang eight years of engraving "She County Records · Volume Eight Five"

office because of their refusal to conform to corruptive officialdom practices at a relatively young age.<sup>25</sup> Though there was little information about Huang Xun, the similarities between him and Yuan suggest that it is possible that these two men also possessed similar moral and social values. On the other hand, as both books were published in classical Chinese language, which was the formal language in writing, instead of vernacular Chinese, it was safe to assume that both books targeted a readership of educated Han literati elites, as most people who were proficient in classical Chinese were people who learnt the classical Confucian works. In comparison, erotic works that targeted the expanding commercial class were completed in vernacular Chinese, which manifested that they served more of a pornographic end, unlike *Ruyijun Zhuan* and *KHJMJ*.

Literature works have always been a crucial site for understanding the underlying historical, social, and political realities. As mentioned above, the Ming Dynasty witnessed the proliferation of commercial literature works including novels and tale collections. *KHJMJ* was an excerpt of such tale collections. It was argued by various scholars that the style of literature collections was a significant way to construct the compilers' own identity and internal ideologies. For example, by analyzing the implying ideologies in late imperial novel collections such as *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Strange Tales from a Studio of Leisure), Lydia Chang argues that 'a collection is not an accidental assembly of items...the objects of collection reflect the taste, values, knowledge, resources, and power of the collector and become extensions of his or her selfhood. By selecting, ordering, and re-presenting the objects of desire, the collecting subject re-creates the self.'<sup>26</sup> This theory bridges the unneglectable

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<sup>25</sup> Qing Shi Gao 清史稿卷 485

<sup>26</sup> Chang, *Collecting the Self*, p1

connections between the literary traditions and the mindsets and psychological states of the authors and the compilers, and justifies the convention of using literary traditions as an indicator of the underlying historical contexts. I draw upon Chang's analysis here to argue that by creating and organizing different narratives, the authors of both novels constructed their own ideal identities. In their imagination of Wu's sexual life, these authors constructed different ideal masculine identity and feminine identities: the Ming Dynasty novel upheld the conventional Confucianism gender binaries, which depicted men as powerful, assertive, and moral, while the women as passive and sexualized, while on the other hand, the Qing Dynasty work presented a deviated form of gender construction with a weakened masculinity and an overly powerful and subjective female sexuality. More specifically, reconstructing the identity and behavior of Wu reflected the ideals about themselves in their imaginations: as a man, what should they be and how should they act. Nonetheless, both the works chose to retell Wu's story as an erotica was not merely a coincidence: by sexualizing Wu, the narrators not only reduced Wu from a powerful politician to merely a sexual object, which reduced Wu's real political power, but also expressed the insecure and fragility of masculinity by exaggerating and demonized Wu's sexual desires. In short, by sexualizing Wu Zetian, both of these erotic works reflect elite men's ideals about the relationship between ideal performances of masculinity and their attitudes towards women's agency and power.

Next, I'd like to examine the plots of the two stories, and then describe how their narratives differ in terms of their depiction of Wu Zetian. First of all, both stories follow the general life story of Wu according to the historical chronicles; however, the sexual encounters are largely fictionalized. *Ruyijun Zhuan* tells the story of Wu Zetian and the



fictional figure, Xue Aocao. The story begins when Wu had an illicit affair with the then crown prince Gaozong when both of them were attending at the bedside of the ill Taizong. Then, after Taizong died, she entered the inner palace of Gaozong, who finally made her Empress by killing loyal ministers who opposed it, and Wu began to actively participate in political decisions. After Gaozong passed away, Wu began to seek a number of lovers, all of whom gradually failed to fulfil her sexual desires. At this time, her loyal eunuch recommended Xue Aocao to her, who was famous because of his extremely large penis that no woman could accommodate. Xue quickly gained Wu's favor and they spent several years of very happy days together. The narrator spends a great amount of time depicting their sexual activities in the following years in great detail. In the end, when Wu fell sick at an old age, she sent Xue to her niece's household in order to protect him.

In *Ruyijun Zhuan*, the author constructs the normative gender relationships in two ways: firstly it depicts the male protagonist as moral and loyal while the female protagonist is viewed as immoral and in need of male guidance; Secondly, men are viewed as sexually aggressive and mighty while the female as submissive and demure, and whose only weapon was their sexual attractiveness, even despite their political power, which makes Wu's image even a little bit contradicted: despite her insatiable sexual desires and ability to accept the extraordinarily large penis of Xue Aocao, she is constructed as sexually submissive and had to endure the pains during her sex activities with Xue Aocao. From time to time, the narrator explicitly depicts Xue Aocao as being integral and virtuous in comparison to Wu. When Wu first summoned Xue Aocao to the palace, he refused the imperial order by saying that 'there is an appropriate road to reach a higher status. To use a penis as the stairway to

advancement is assuredly disgraceful'<sup>27</sup>. Though he was eventually convinced and partly coerced by the eunuch to go to the palace, his verbal performativity secured his status as being moral. Then, at the end of the story, when Wu asked what he wanted for reward, he replied that his only wish was for Wu to summon back the crown prince, who was dismissed by Wu out of the capital city. People who previously disdained Xue because of his sexual relationship with the Empress began to respect him as he stopped Wu from further usurping the Tang Dynasty and the patriarchal order. Although the majority of the text is dedicated to explicit erotic descriptions between Wu and Xue Aocao, the preface argues that this story is actually a moral lesson, that 'Empress Wu Zetian was violent beyond regulation and became more lecherous with each passing day. Even though she went so far as to depose the crown prince and usurp the throne, no one was able to rectify the situation. And the reinstatement of Zhong Zong was truly due to the efforts of Xue Aocao. Although he attained advancement through lascivious conduct, was he not also faithful to the state?'<sup>28</sup> Aside from a high morality, the narrator also constructs a positive image of Xue Aocao by emphasizing his intellectuality. When first introducing him, the narrator explicitly states that he was 'widely versed in the classics and histories; and he excelled at the arts of calligraphy, painting, playing the *qin*, and the game of go.'<sup>29</sup> In several places, Xue Aocao expressed regrets that he was not able to gain a higher social status through the Imperial Examination because of his identity as Wu's secret lover. This kind of regret implicitly indicated his dedication to scholarly works in the first two decades of his life, as any other literati scholar who entered the exam.

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<sup>27</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p135

<sup>28</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p133

<sup>29</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p138

What is in sheer comparison with Xue Aocao's reluctance when invited by Wu to the palace is his aggressiveness, eagerness, and readiness to engage in sexual activities with Wu. The core of this erotica work and the essential factor in their erotic relationship is his extremely large penis. While the author explicitly emphasizes his masculinity in several places, using phrases such as 'powerful', 'tall', and 'strong, the narrative extensively focuses on Xue Aocao's abnormally large sexual organ. The description not only focuses on how big it was, but also emphasized the aggressiveness of the penis. When his penis first appeared in the story, the author described it as

'being exceptionally great and unusually virile...When it became engorged its veins stood out and its head had four or five sunken furrows. When it became excited, the flesh in the furrows protruded like a snail oozing forth. From the tip to the base the sinews vigorously rippled like an earthworm. From head to tail, it had more than twenty striations. It was red and lustrous, clear and unblemished...When the youth saw it they were all amazed and tested it by hanging a peck of grain from its head. It stayed erect with strength to spare.'<sup>30</sup>

All of these descriptions portray the penis as an active actor in its own right and being able to invade and cause harm. Indeed, in multiple scenes, the extremely gigantic penis causes enormous pain for Wu, in some cases it almost killed her. In other words, despite Wu's extraordinary sexual appetites, when it really came to sex, she was put under the control of Xue Aocao's phallus, and at several times, the ruler-subject hierarchy was subverted and the only hierarchy left was that a man could always dominate a woman.

This sexual hierarchy was expressed by the fact that though Xue Aocao expressed refusal to advancement by his sexual capability several times and escaped when Wu demanded to see him again at the end of the story, he was more than happy to engage in

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<sup>30</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p138

erotic activities with Wu. There were several places when he aggressively invaded Wu's body for his own sexual satisfaction, which might seem odd for contemporary readers because Wu was far more politically powerful in their relationship, being the supreme Empress of the Tang Empire, while Xue Aocao was only a commoner. Phrases that clearly indicated Xue prioritized his own sexual satisfaction included 'retract and thrust as he pleased', and when Wu begged Xue to stop penetrating, 'Aocao did not listen...after a while the empress' feet went limp, her eyes closed and teeth clenched, breathing through her nostrils was very faint, and her faculties were disoriented'<sup>31</sup>. There was also a scene depicting Xue penetrating Wu forcefully when she fell asleep naked, which resulted in Wu making 'an anguished sound'<sup>32</sup>. These depictions deprive the right of consent of Wu, and diminish her, the most powerful woman in Chinese history, as merely a sexual toy for Xue Aocao. Though Wu was a powerful seventy-year-old woman, she was depicted as being not different from a submissive while sexually alluring young girl, who was the prey instead of the predator in a sexual relationship and who needed to endure pain and coercion during intercourses, even though she eventually enjoyed the pain, she still didn't have a say in the process of the sex. Phrases and vocabularies utilized by the narrator to describe Wu included 'coquettish', 'although she was of advanced age, her teeth and hair were not in decline and her ample flesh and attractive demeanor were just like those of a young woman.'<sup>33</sup> And when the two engaged in sex, 'the empress said: "Enter gradually." Xue wanted to penetrate quickly. The Empress steeled herself to receive him, knit her brow, clenched her teeth, and endured the pain.'<sup>34</sup>To sum up, though Wu was the single most

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<sup>31</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p151

<sup>32</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p152

<sup>33</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p139

<sup>34</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p144

powerful individual at that time while Xue Aocao had no power at all, she still needed to be beautiful, sexy, and submissive in a sexual relationship. In other words, the author tactically diminishes and denies Wu's real political power by emphasizing her ability to seduce males to have sex with her because of her beauty. Wu was stripped of the identity of a powerful ruler and constructed as a female, a sexual object—whose political power was invalid during her sexual activities with a man, that her ability to provide sexual satisfaction to Xue Aocao simply lied in her sexualized body's ability to accommodate his large penis.

On the other hand, the sexual relationship enjoyed by Wu with her lovers in *KHJMJ* was very different from *Ruyijun Zhuan*, mainly because the gender norms of the first story were largely traversed. Unlike the previous story, *KHJMJ* does not have a clear plot, but a majority of the narration focuses on multiple women's sexual exploits of males and the penis connoisseurship: in this story, the penis was deprived of the phallic power and active agency; instead, the penis was simply an object that could bring sexual enjoyment to women. As the single most important symbol of male sexuality, the different constructions of the penis in the stories are transferred into different construction of masculinity: assertive and active in *Ruyijun Zhuan* while passive and weakened in *KHJMJ*. The story is divided into several erotic anecdotes about Wu, her lovers, and her female confidants: the first part describes when Wu lost interest in her old lover, Xue Xiaobao, who was arrogant towards the literati officials. So Princess Qianjin recommended Zhang Changzong to Wu Zetian as her new lover by letting her waitress, who had sex with Zhang under the Princess' order, describe her sexual activity. Zhang then gained Wu's favor as a sexual partner because of his perfect phallic shape; the second anecdote is about when Wu's trusted subordinate Shangguan Waner, who had a special feeling for Zhang, and whenever Zhang

urinated, Shangguan could not control herself but peeked at it. Later when Zhang failed to erect, Wu felt very disappointed. Then Waner, who was waiting aside the bed, was sexually aroused and intended to touch Zhang. Wu was infuriated and hurt Shangguan by a golden knife. However, after a while, Shangguan was still trusted and favored by Wu. Later she commented on the pros and cons of different penis shapes during a banquet.

Unlike the former story, in *KHJMJ*, the author reinstates repeatedly that the best candidates for lovers were not those who were masculine or strong, but those who were gentle and could put female's sexual enjoyment and orgasm ahead of their own. Wu claimed to Princess Qianjin, that 'I always hear about vulgar women who only love strong and masculine men instead of gentler men, these were just lewd pleasures for village women. The strength and duration can be achieved by aphrodisiac, which I have a lot in the palace, but it has not much use. Instead, the best part of a penis is its satisfactory gentleness.'<sup>35</sup> When the waitress of Princess Qianjing reported back to Wu Zhang's sexual ability, she emphasized how he always took good care of how she felt. In this story, the penis is stripped of the phallic aggressiveness and no longer controls women, but instead, the penis is reduced and objectified into an object for female pleasure. After Wu enjoyed the sexual satisfaction because of Zhang, she ordered painters to draw out the shape of Zhang's phallus and said 'I hear that ancient Princesses were often adulterous, this is because they didn't select the perfect husbands. From now on, only men whose phallus resembles the shape of Zhang's can be selected to be a princess's husband.' Then the narrator states that the following emperors all followed this rule. As a result, though

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<sup>35</sup> *KHJMJ*

Princess Anle, who was Wu's granddaughter, was extravagant and dissipated, her relationship with her husband was pretty loving, and she didn't take any extra lovers, and this was all because of Wu's standards of choosing husbands for the princesses. Moreover, in all the sexual descriptions, the narrator solely focuses on the feelings of the female pleasure and neglected how the male lovers felt during the sexual encounter, as throughout the story, Wu's lovers' feelings towards their sexual activities are not mentioned at all. So in conclusion, as for the narrator's worldview, whether he approved or not, here is the possibility for another form of gender construction and masculinity, when women could be the dominant part of a relationship and do not need to be submissive to male desires.

However, though the two stories represent a different depiction of Wu's sexual life and a different construction of sexuality, they still share the commonality that both of them demonized women's sexual desires and depict Wu as merely a sexualized figure, instead of a sophisticated and accomplished political figure, and when they do mention Wu's political life, both of them focused on her image as a ruthless and seductive femme fatale Queen. To start with, both stories' plots began when Wu was in her seventies. As both stories contained plots in which Wu's young lovers could not satisfy her sexual desires, she was extremely sexually virile, even more so for a seventy-year-old elder. In both stories, the sexual virility of Wu is exaggerated to a frightening and demonized extent. Firstly, in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, it is emphasized several times that Xue's penis was so big that 'only Wu's vagina could take it up.'<sup>36</sup> Also, in several places, though Wu was submissive and accommodating in her sexual encounters with Xue, she is very sexually insatiable, as she is so easily aroused

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<sup>36</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p150

that she even requires sex upon hearing birds singing. To a large extent, her sexual desires are stigmatized, as the narrator introduced that 'her desires grew incandescent. Even veteran prostitutes and nymphomaniacs were not able to match her'<sup>37</sup>. In regard to sexual relations between the two genders, Wu's sexual desires are detrimental to males, as both *Ruyijun Zhuan* and *KHJMJ* contain plots in which Wu's unsatisfied sexual desires leeched her lovers white. In *Ruyijun Zhuan*, Shen Nanqiu, one of her old lovers, 'could not overcome a disease of lust as his bone marrow was exhausted and died'<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, in *KHJMJ*, there was a scene when Zhang could not erect, which made Wu very disappointed about it. In this scene, failure to erect seems a failure of male sexuality, which is defeated by exaggerated and powerful female sexual desires.

Sex always wasn't just about pleasure or reproduction. Instead, sex is political and represents the underlying power dynamics. From the 1970s, gender relations began to be recognized in essence as a struggle in power dynamics, as manifested by the evolving concept of sexual politics. In her influential work *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet also begins by introducing literary sexual scenes that displayed elements of pain, violence, and sexually insatiable women, and she goes on to argue that 'coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes.'<sup>39</sup> She then defines the term 'politics' as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is

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<sup>37</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p138

<sup>38</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p139

<sup>39</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p23



controlled by another'<sup>40</sup>. Millet carries on by pointing out that 'a disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination.'<sup>41</sup> In most of the world throughout history, the power relationship between the two sexes is always defined by 'the birthright priority whereby males rule females'<sup>42</sup>.

Then Millet analyzes the characteristics that bridge the relationship between dominance/submissive binary and the gender roles, which is 'the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ("masculine" and "feminine"), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue," and ineffectuality in the female'.<sup>43</sup> Aside from these ideological ideals, masculinity is deeply connected with phallic symbols. Millet introduces that 'fertility cults in ancient society at some point took a turn toward patriarchy...and attributing the power of life to the phallus alone'.<sup>44</sup> Not coincidentally, all these traits of masculinity construction were manifested in *Ruyijun Zhuan's* construction of Xue Aocao's image. In other words, the erotica was reinforcing the conventional ideals of masculinity. It was also noteworthy for the author to choose Wu Zetian, the most powerful and unorthodox woman throughout Chinese history, to reinforce the masculinity. To successfully confine the most powerful female meant the possibility of confining all women

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<sup>40</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p23

<sup>41</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p24, 25

<sup>42</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p25

<sup>43</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p26

<sup>44</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, p28

into the patriarchal gender power dynamics. For Wu, she wasn't an 'ideally virtuous woman' as she possessed significant political power and wasn't ignorant at all. As a result, in order to secure the establishment of proper sexual power dynamics, the author of the story inevitably reinforced other feminine traits, such as being docile and passive in sexual activities. However, in contrast, in *KHJMJ*, it seemed like Wu, instead of her male lovers, was more consistent with the masculine traits described by Millet. More specifically, in sexual encounters between Wu and Zhang, she was always the active part, as throughout the story, Zhang's feelings and active actions were completely eliminated from the narratives, as if he was just a sex toy that was appreciated, commented, and enjoyed by Wu, unlike Xue Aocao in the Ming Dynasty story, whose sexual desires, mental activities, and inner struggles were presented in the narratives.

In conclusion, by analyzing the sexual depictions of the two stories, we can conclude that while both stories exaggerated and terrorized Wu's threatening sexual desires, the Ming story *Ruyijun Zhuan* represented a stronger and more powerful masculinity while the Qing story *KHJMJ* presented a weakened masculinity and a more powerful femininity. In the next sections, I will analyze the historical, social, political, and ideological subcurrents that may enhance our understanding of both the differences and continuities in these gender constructions in sexual relationships.

#### Historical Analysis of the Ming Dynasty

After comparing the two erotica works about Wu's sexual life written by authors from similar socio-economic classes and possessing similar Confucian ideologies, we can see the distinct differences as well as similarities between the gender construction during the

Ming and the Qing Dynasty, which this thesis will argue that could be better understood after examining the social, political, and ideological subcurrents that impacted the changes in the literati elite's male identity.

First of all, as stated in the previous section, both the erotic novels from the Ming and the Qing Dynasty presented an overly exaggerated, frightening, and even demonized female sexual desire. I'd like to argue that this may be partly attributed to the insecurity and fragility of masculinity, which could be the result of the collective memory of foreign invasion right before the Ming Dynasty.

For the Ming Dynasty, the fear of foreign invasion was derived from the collective memory of invasion by the Mongolians. The Ming Dynasty was right after the Yuan Dynasty, which was the first dynasty when the Han ethnicity lost control completely of China Proper and was then governed by Mongolians as a part of the broader Mongol Empire right after the end of the Song Dynasty. The downfall of the Song Dynasty in 1279 was an extremely tragic one, when the eight-year-old Emperor Huaizong, the prime minister, and 800 royal clan members ended their lives together with the Empire by committing suicide. Submitting to the Yuan Dynasty was so hard for many literati elites that many of them could not do it and chose either to commit suicide or escape into total seclusion instead. For families who survived the less-than-one-hundred-year Yuan Dynasty, submission to Mongolian rulers was regarded as the most humiliating experience, which was then transferred into a kind of collective memories and nightmares for the whole literati elite social class, which spilled

over to the Ming Dynasty, which was established right after the downfall of the Yuan Dynasty.<sup>45</sup>

Also, the marginalization of Han Confucian scholars worsened this terrifying experience. During the Yuan Dynasty, China was not only ruled by foreign ethnicity, but also from a broader perspective, annexed as a part of the larger Mongolian Empire; in other words, the pride Central Kingdom didn't exist anymore. In addition to this, the social hierarchy, and previously the most superior Confucian elite was stricken down to the bottom of the society. According to *Xin Shi* (心史), which was the literature collection of Zheng Sixiao, who experienced the downfall of the Song Dynasty, 'Based on the Yuan dynasty system, the ten classes are: first, high officials; second, petty officials; third, Buddhist monks; fourth, Taoist priests; fifth, physicians; sixth, artisans; seventh, hunters; eighth, ordinary workers; ninth, Confucian scholars; and tenth, beggars.'<sup>46</sup> Gradually, the expression 九儒十丐 (the ninth Confucian scholars and the tenth beggars) became a commonly used phrase to diminish Confucian scholars. Though it only came from this specific source that accounted for the personal experiences of Zheng, the widespread spread of this expression in Han literature traditions during the Yuan Dynasty to some extent manifested that being marginalized and condemned to the bottom of the social structure was a common feeling of literati scholars during the Yuan Dynasty.

More specifically, the haunting memory of losing one's ethnicity, one's country, oneself, and one's dignity was always deeply connected with one's identity as a Confucian

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<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *In The Shadow of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia*, p5

<sup>46</sup> Zheng, *Xin Shi*, Chapter Seven, *Dayi Luexv* 大义略叙

gentleman. The canonical Confucianism ideology dictated that the most essential interpersonal relationship was that between the ruler and his subjects, that the subjects should ensure unqualified loyalty and obedience to the emperor to such an extent that the concept of loyalty was often associated with negative connotations such as 'blind submission, ungrounded favoritism, and the erosion of integrity'.<sup>47</sup> However, the downfall of the Song Dynasty deprived the literati elites of the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty and even led to the opposite if they chose to work in government in the new dynasty; worse still, this betrayal of the principle of loyalty was worsened by the identity of the new ruler as an ethnic minority. Ancient China confidently upheld ethnocentrism, that it was the center of the world, and should be admired and emulated by all its neighbors.<sup>48</sup> Being the proud citizens of the Central Kingdom was an essential and indispensable part of Chinese people's identity. The Chinese citizens put themselves at the highest hierarchy, and 'this hierarchy was centered on Han Chinese culture, or Confucianism...The position of non-Han people in the hierarchy was determined by the extent to which they resembled mainstream Han culture'.<sup>49</sup> So this ethnocentrism was also strongly rooted in Confucianism, the core cohesion of the literati elite class. In short, the downfall of the Song Dynasty and rule under the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty weakened the multifold literati elites' identity: as loyal subjects, Han-ethnic citizens, and a proud Confucianism.

So if the above are the reasons that Confucian elite identity needed to be reinforced, how this was related to gender construction? Under Chinese Confucianism ideology, the core identity of all Confucian literati is *Junzi*, 君子 (which can be loosely translated into

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<sup>47</sup> Winnie, *Zhong in the Analects with the Insights into Loyalty*, p175

<sup>48</sup> Wang, *History, Space, and Ethnicity*, p287

<sup>49</sup> Wang, *History, Space, and Ethnicity*, p287

Gentleman). To a large extent, this identity had a gendered undertone as much as the moral connotation. It was clearly stated in the Confucian canonical *The Analects* that ‘The Master said, Women and petty persons are the hardest to look after. Treat them in a friendly manner, and they become impertinent; keep them at a distance, and they take offense.’<sup>50</sup> In this stanza, it was quite clear that the subject—Junzi—was put on the opposite side of both women and petty person, which connoted the two essential components of the identity of *Junzi*: being masculine and virtuous at the same time. Also, the dualist gender construction of *yin-yang* was deeply rooted in the Confucianism ideology. According to the Ming Dynasty neo-Confucianism, ‘women are the opposite of men: subservient, weak, and envious. These traits were encapsulated in *yin*... The virtues for women were vastly different, including chastity and compliance, that perpetuated oppressive acts...intended for the husband’s external affairs to complement the wife’s internal affairs.’<sup>51</sup> So the essence of the gender construction of neo-Confucianism was the clear division of the gender role: women should take care of the inner household and be submissive, while men should take care of the outside matters and be strong and powerful. In turn, it is logical to assume that the past memory of being invaded, occupied, and humiliated by foreign ethnicities also undermined the Confucian literatus’s masculinity identity.

Back to the exaggerated female sexuality, it was represented in literary traditions as female figures that were exceptionally powerful, sexually insatiable, or ‘wanton’. In his work *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions*, Keith McMahon states that the repertoire of wanton and lustrous women ‘was

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<sup>50</sup> Watson, *The Analects of Confucius*, p125

<sup>51</sup> Batista, *The Confucianism-Feminism Conflict*

something to which people could turn to warn about and prevent crisis, especially when the situation arose in which ruling men were weak'<sup>52</sup> In other words, the narratives of wanton women were particularly popular at the times when masculinity was at risk. Moreover, throughout Chinese history, condemnation of women was a common way to implicitly express literati's stress about foreign invasions. In the book *Wu's Image*, Han argues that 'Han literati opposed Wu Zetian's reign to express their unwillingness to be ruled by the foreign ethnicities...women cannot dominate over men just like non-Han people could not dominate over Han people'<sup>53</sup>. In this argument, we can deduce that late imperial literati used to draw a parallel between women and ethnic minorities, and the past memory of foreign invasion was expressed in a powerful female image, both of which were against the Confucianism patriarchal paradigm.

Other than the powerful shrew narratives, the Ming literati elites also reinforced their Confucian male identity by constructing normative masculinity and femininity: a male figure who is powerful, moral, and assertive and a female figure who is passive and strictly confined by Confucian norms such as footbinding and chastity cult. But if both the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty experienced anxiety towards their male neo-Confucian identity, why the Ming Dynasty's remedy was an ever more pride and moral masculinity and the strict confinement of women, while the Qing Dynasty manifested a strict confinement towards women plus a weakened masculinity instead? I think the reason lies in the fact that during the Ming Dynasty, foreign invasion was already a past memory, neo-Confucianism

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<sup>52</sup> Stevenson & Wu, *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature*, p30

<sup>53</sup> Han, *Wu's Image*, p35

was in its heyday, and even neo-Confucianism experienced some competition, it was from the commercial middle class, which was below the scholars along the social ladder.

After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, China was once again returned to the control of the Han people and Confucian ideologies. However, the memories of anxiety about their own identities were preserved, and were manifested in political, social, and cultural phenomena. To re-establish the superiority of the Han ethnicity, neo-Confucianism reentered the mainstream society as the core cultural and philosophical, and more importantly, became the most important legitimacy of the establishment of the Ming Dynasty.<sup>54</sup> In other words, as the official leading ideology, the Confucian ideology was not only a kind of philosophy that ancient Chinese could choose to adhere to or not. Instead, it was the universal value of ancient Chinese Empires for centuries. No matter China was ruled by which dynasty, Confucianism was always the leading ideology, religion, state philosophy, and way of life from the Han Dynasty. Furthermore, during the Song Dynasty, Confucianism scholarship became the core curriculum of the Imperial Examination System, which was almost the only way for social mobility in ancient China, when anyone who passed the final round of the exam could enter the government. As a result, Confucianism, especially the neo-Confucianism that was developed during the Song and the Ming Dynasty, became the foundational philosophy of the scholar-official class in Ming China. Confucianism ideology was the prerequisite for a literati scholar to enter the class and be accepted as an insider member of this elite class, as well as a standard that was internalized by the scholar-officials

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<sup>54</sup> Britannica, *Chinese Culture*. Accessed July.10<sup>th</sup>, 2024.  
<https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Coinage#ref590369>



and imposed on themselves, which meant that in order to secure their identity of Confucian literati elite, it was more than necessary for them to uphold the Confucianism ideology.

Aside from threats of national and ethnic survival, another factor that contributed to the reinforced identity of literati elite males was the rise of the commercial middle class during the Ming Dynasty. Before the Ming Dynasty, Chinese society adhered to a clear social hierarchy of Four Occupation Categories: the highest being the gentry elites, then the peasants and farmers, next the artisans, and the lowest being the merchants. As a result, the Confucian literati elites were always at the top of the social hierarchy and they received not only special policy advantages, such as exemption from taxes, but also enormous social respect and prestige. However, the literati elites during the Ming Dynasty were forced to share this uniquely supreme elite status with the newly emerged commercial middle class for the first time in History. The gradual emergence of a commercial economy and the increasingly complex and advanced economy eliminated mere survival and subsistence as the only goal for the lower three classes' productive activities, especially for the merchant class, who through the rapid development of a cash economy began to accumulate a considerable amount of wealth. Inevitably, the superiority was not exclusive to literati elites, but also to the 'new money' commercial elites, who were able to enjoy almost everything previously exclusive to the gentry scholars. Exquisite artistic works such as calligraphies and paintings that previously circulated among the literati class now degraded into commodities that could be bought by wealthy merchants who might not fully understand the artistic values of the works. This extravagance and conspicuous consumption made many literati elites feel disgruntled. The literati officials legitimized their discontent by framing it as concerns over 'social mobility, the decay of traditional customs, and the erosion of the

established moral order'<sup>55</sup>, which could be related to the reinforced male morality in stories such as *Ruyijun Zhuan*, which at several places emphasized the morality and integrity of Xue Aocao, the male protagonist.

As more and more people outside of the literati elite circle were able to enjoy the same lifestyle as them, these educated elites tried hard to make their circle increasingly exclusive. As Timothy Brook argues, 'in the tough competitive social atmosphere that prevailed in the late Ming, the greater gentry families felt themselves constantly under siege from lesser gentry and even merchant families.'<sup>56</sup> One way to counteract this insecurity was to include intangible criteria into their exclusive circle's standards, which means that a part of their elite identity was not only constructed by owning certain things, but by understanding intangible standards of these things, such as elegance, taste, and connoisseurship. According to Brook, 'elegance was the ineffable criterion that the elite used to safeguard entry into their ranks. It was a tough criterion to meet, especially when it defied clear definition.'<sup>57</sup> For example, Li Rihua was a literati scholar and a prominent painter who passed the highest level of the Imperial Examination and became an official. However, soon after that, he resigned from his position and returned to his hometown. Though he didn't mention the reason for leaving the office, it was reasonable to assume that he aimed for political reclusion as reclusion was a common motif in his paintings. From his diary we can see that on one hand, he actively collaborated with merchants to buy and sell paintings and calligraphies, while on the other hand, he emphasized that only he and his fellow literati scholars were able to distinguish between the good and bad artistic works.

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<sup>55</sup> Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, p126

<sup>56</sup> Brook, *The Artful Life of the Late Ming Recluse*, p58

<sup>57</sup> Brook, *The Artful Life of the Late Ming Recluse*, p58

As a way to uphold the above Confucianism ideology, aside from connoisseurship for artistic works such as artistic paintings and exquisite instruments, another object that needed these literati elites' connoisseurship, construction, and judgement, and was different between the gentry elite and commercial elite classes, was women and their womanly virtues. In an agrarian society, the gendered division of labor was rather clear with men ploughing and women weaving. However, 'the growth of the commercial economy had the capacity to upset the gendered division of labor'<sup>58</sup>. Also, with the commercialization of book printing and knowledge production, erotica works that depicted explicit sexual encounters with lecherous women proliferated. Under this kind of 'moral degradation' and the invasion of the commercial class's leisure pleasure, it was more urgent for the literati elite to guard their moral standards and distinctness from petty merchants by stressing the difference between male and female sexuality. By reinforcing the moral standards of literati elites, the Confucian scholars emphasized both the active morality of men and the passive moral confinement of women at the same time. Firstly, while erotic novels proliferated among the newly commercial class for purely carnal excitement, the literati elites, on the other hand, made an effort to imbue a sense of neo-Confucianism morality, which was the core factor of Confucian male identity, as argued before, into the erotic stories. As mentioned in the historiographic section, Wong mentions that an essential element in *Ruyijun Zhuan* is its comparison of Xue Aocao's ability to control his sexual desires and put moral pursuits above carnal desires, while Wu Zetian failed to do so. This moral comparison was once again stated by Stone, who argues that 'Wu Zetian is constitutionally incapable of moderating her lust'<sup>59</sup>, while that Xue Aocao possessed morals and utilized Wu's insatiable

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<sup>58</sup> Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, p138

<sup>59</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p129

desires to pursue her restore the Crown Prince, which was regarded as an ultimate act that fulfilled the Confucian morality of integrity and loyalty.<sup>60</sup> Aside from the emphasized masculine morality, the gender norms and Confucian literati identity were also manifested by their ability to confine feminine moralities. One significant manifestation was the proliferation of the Chastity Arch for chaste widows during the Ming Dynasty. According to the government policy, a woman who was widowed before the age of twenty-nine and remained unmarried after the age of forty-nine was eligible for Chastity Arch existed in China as early as the Qin Dynasty, but it reached its peak during the Ming Dynasty. In an empire where patrilineal heritage was regarded as extremely important while on the other hand male greatly outnumbered females, it was quite common for widows to remarry, especially for people from lower social hierarchies. Under this pressure and the urgency to uphold themselves as more superior commercial elite, the gentry scholar elites during the Ming Dynasty increasingly stressed the importance of widowhood chastity, and objections against widows remarrying became more extreme. The Confucian literati Cao Duan, who was a pivotal figure in the development of neo-Confucianism, proposed that 'a widow suspected of being involved in a liaison with another man should be given a knife and a rope and locked in a cowshed until she committed suicide'.<sup>61</sup> Supported by the government officials and largely recorded in the local gazetteers, which was usually compiled by local scholar-officials, widowhood chastity was largely supported by the literati elite class and represented their mindsets and ideals.

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<sup>60</sup> Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, p55

<sup>61</sup> Cao Duan, 'Jiagui jilüe' (Summary of family regulation), in his *Cao Yuechuan xiansheng ji* (Collected writings of Master Cao Yuechuan), Quoted in Taga, *Chūgoku sōfu no kenkyū*, 168

Moreover, *Ruyijun Zhuan* wasn't the only example that represented the reinforcement of masculinity and femininity construction in erotica literature works during the Ming Dynasty. It was a common phenomenon. For example, the famous erotic novel, *Jing Ping Mei*, was known for its manifestation of sexual politics and gender dynamics. Naifei Ding states in her work *Obscene Things* that partly the core idea of *Jing Ping Mei* was about 'women and [female] sexuality', which to a large extent 'signify a moral and psychophysiological obsession with, and concomitant fear and even hatred of, particular women and female sexuality'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, according to Ding, it is not unusual that the reason for extreme misogyny is insecurity about one's own masculinity.

#### Historical Analysis of the Qing Dynasty

As argued before, just like the Ming Dynasty, the fragility of masculinity for the Qing Dynasty literati class could also be partly attributed to the foreign invasion. Just like the Ming literati elites, the literati scholars in the Qing Dynasty were also constantly under the fear and discomfort of foreign invasion. However, unlike the Ming Dynasty, the foreign invasion was a hard cold fact for the Han literati during the Qing Dynasty instead of a fear derived from past memory. In 1644, the leader of the peasant rebellion, Li Zicheng, occupied Beijing and the Forbidden City, which announced the end of the Ming Dynasty. Then Li announced himself the Emperor and tried to eliminate the remaining Ming army, which included the forces led by the Ming General, Wu Sangui. However, instead of submitting to Li, Wu decided to cooperate with the Manchurians, which was a Tungusic ethnic group primarily based in northwestern China under the prosperous and enlarging

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<sup>62</sup> Ding, *Obscene Things*, Pxiii

Jurchen Empire. Upon Wu Sangui's assistance, Manchurians successfully entered Beijing, defeated Li, and established the Qing Dynasty.<sup>63</sup>

When this insecurity of masculinity was reflected in literary traditions, it corresponded with the proliferation of shrew women in novels during the Qing Dynasty, which corresponds to the demonized and stigmatized depictions of women in the literary works discussed earlier. In the book *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China*, Yenna Wu presents us with a collection of shrew stories from late imperial China. She argues that

such a negative representation of women is undoubtedly derived from a patriarchal concern to contain women...the late imperial authors' interest in the shrew may have partially resulted from an anxious wish to assert cultural identity by containing their women...During the Qing dynasty, the Manchu government's relentless command...had deeply humiliated the Confucian literatus and injured his integrity. At the same time, footbinding became more widespread and injunctions against widow's remarrying grew much stricter. Since the barbarian rule and its hair-cutting command deprived the literatus of the distinguishing marks of his ethnicity and culture, he may have wanted to compensate for the created anxiety, reasserting his identity and superiority by reinforcing practices that limited women's mobility...Seen in this context, the anxiety of losing male identity is reflected in a story about a weak male who is dominated by his wife...<sup>64</sup>

Yenna Wu also states earlier that shrew women were a broad concept that includes any women who rebelled against the Confucian patriarchy and did not follow the moral code for women to be chaste, submissive, and passive to men. In this sense, *KHJMJ*, though not a conventional shrew story, had some similarities with this category, when an adulterous woman, Wu, controlled her male partners and subverted the normal gender dynamics that women should subsume to men. Moreover, the seemingly discursive plot in *KHJMJ* is that

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<sup>63</sup> *Qing Shi Gao* 清史稿 (卷 474)

<sup>64</sup> Wu, *The Lioness Roars*, p3-4

whenever Zhang returned home to rest, Wu would have someone to go with him in order to keep watch over him and make sure he wouldn't have the chance to even talk with his wife. His mother pitied him about this and hid a concubine in the closet, who finally bore a son for Zhang. This plot follows the shrew narrative that a jealous woman would 'deprive her husband of having a male heir and renders him unable to pass down the family property and maintain the all-important Confucian sacrifices to the ancestors.'<sup>65</sup> By adding this plot, it further reinforced Wu's identity as a powerful shrew who was a deviation from the Confucian paradigm, which in turn a figure that needed to be condemned. Lastly, by successfully bearing a son despite Wu's effort, Zhang and his mother successfully smashed Wu's 'maneuver', which aligned with the author's argument that 'the anxiety is alleviated in the eventual outcome...the shrew reforms, and poetic justice is restored'<sup>66</sup>. Though Wu could not be truly 'reformed', Confucian morality was restored by the birth of the precious son, and challenged the power and efficacy of Wu as the Emperor. So in essence, Wu's sexual anecdotes in *KHJMJ*, and many other shrew stories from late-imperial China, served the common dual purposes of expressing the laments over the weakened masculinity by constructing a dominating female figure, while at the same time, expressing the need for restoring the patriarchal order and condemning women who stepped out of the boundary.

Also, in the above paragraph, Yenna Wu mentioned that this insecure of masculinity because of the Manchurian reign was not only expressed by the literary figure of dominative shrews, but also by the even stricter confinement of females—both physically and mentally and the construction of female sexuality as passive, weak, submissive—in order to reinforce

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<sup>65</sup> Wu, *The Lioness Roars*, p2

<sup>66</sup> Wu, *The Lioness Roars*, p4

the damaged Confucian literati's male identity, which was damaged by both the dominative women and invading Manchurians. This intertwining relationship between female sexuality and male identity was significantly manifested in the practice of footbinding, which became ever more pervasive during late imperial China. For example, Dorothy Ko argues in her treatise about footbinding that when the Ming Dynasty was approaching its downfall under the Manchurian invasion, because of the historical and current threat of alien domination, both the 'manhood and nationhood' identity was under threat, and 'in this period of intense anxiety over personal and national survival, loyalty was expressed in gendered terms and sexuality acquired overt political significance. Indeed, footbinding became the terrain on which the ethnic and cultural boundaries between the Han Chinese and the "Other" were being drawn'.<sup>67</sup> In other words, the cultural superiority of Confucianism and the masculinity of Han people who lost in wars all depended on the female body and their bound feet: an extreme and 'cultural' form of femininity. It was not a coincidence that footbinding became increasingly popular among elite women during Qing China, when the masculine Confucian identity and Sinocentrism were at their biggest risk for Han ethnicity. Failures to suppress women under their control (their mothers, wives, concubines, and daughters) were regarded as a failure of masculinity. A salient example was that between the interchanging period between the Ming and the Qing Dynasty, the Qing Emperor ordered all males to shave their heads and all females to unbind their feet as a gesture to adopt Manchu attires. Among the first literati officials who accepted this edict included Sun Zhixie—who ordered all men in his household to shave their heads and all women in his household to unbind their feet, and Li Ruolin—who only ordered males to shave their heads but had the females

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<sup>67</sup> Ko, *The Body as Attire*, p10



to keep their feet bound. However, as a repercussion of their actions, their fellow Han-ethnic officials plotted to entrap them and soon they were dismissed from the office. Moreover, unlike Li, Sun suffered an extra punishment: when their city was raided by a rebel, Sun and seven of his grandsons were murdered together by the rebels. Ko argues that 'by unbinding his women's feet, Sun seemed to have harmed his own masculinity in the minds of his contemporaries. Although Sun and Li equally incurred the rage of their Han colleagues in court by voluntarily shaving their heads, Sun bore the blunt ridicule and vicious condemnation from loyalist resisters as far as Jiangsu because of what he did to his women's feet'.<sup>68</sup> Just like the turbulent period at the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty also witnessed a tightening of the discipline towards female sexuality and chastity. Requirements for females to strictly follow the moral codes of neo-Confucianism that diminished human desires proliferated, and strict confinements such as chastity cult 'lay at the heart of the paradigm of virtue that informed notions of gender difference and norms of proper behavior in mind-Qing China'.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the similarity that both the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty novels depicted an exaggerated and powerful female sexuality, which could possibly be attributed to the anxiety and fear towards foreign invasions, as argued before, the Ming Dynasty constructed an ever more powerful masculinity as a remedy, while the Qing Dynasty novel—*KHJMJ*—displayed a weakened masculinity, which could be because of the annexation of the Manchus and the feminization of the Confucianism.

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<sup>68</sup> Ko, *The Body as Attire*, p21

<sup>69</sup> Brownell, *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, p47

Like the stressed masculinity during the Ming Dynasty, the weakened masculinity also was manifested in multiple literary works and examined by multiple scholars during the Qing Dynasty. For instance, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the greatest literary works in ancient China, was well-known for its vivid depiction of an elite household during the Qing Dynasty, and scholars even developed its own scholarly field, Redology, to analyze the underlying ideologies of this family saga. In his work *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in the Red Chamber Dream*, Edwards related the character depictions and gender constructions with subconsciousness identity struggles and stress. The main character, Jia Baoyu, was the younger son of a very wealthy literati elite family in the Qing Dynasty. He was constructed as a controversial figure possessing a number of feminine characteristics: he was extremely sensitive, willing to take on household responsibilities typically reserved for women, and able to appreciate female talent and initiative, which was contradicted by the conventional feminine construction of being submissive and passive, while on the same time, Baoyu's personality also contained masculine side such as violence, sexual aggressiveness, etc. Also, Baoyu was noticeable for his bisexuality. Edwards further argues that 'the metaphoric bisexuality is amplified resulting in his conflict with the society that seeks to divide masculinity and femininity between the sexes. The conflict between Confucian principles of rigid gender prescriptions, the yin-yang philosophy's flexibility of corporeal sexuality and the Daoist adoption of femininity as a rejection of passion is played out in the character of Baoyu.'<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Edwards stated that the coexistence of both feminine and masculine factors in Baoyu's personality was in comparison with other phallic monosexual male characters, in which there was a clear distinction between Self and Other,

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<sup>70</sup> Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China*, p37

that ‘the depiction of the feminine-Other as the object of masculine-Self’s sexual desires...the Self is a “function of the desire and acknowledgement of the Other’.<sup>71</sup> This statement of monosexuality clearly emphasized the Otherness of the females in a patriarchal world, resonating with de Beauvoir’s powerful statement that ‘Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being...the male sees her essentially as a sexed being’.<sup>72</sup> This construction of the female body fully from the perspective of male sexual desires was well-presented in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, when the most powerful woman still needed to be constructed in a sexualized way that aligned with male sexual aesthetics. In comparison, in KHJMJ, the gender relationship was subverted: the females came to possess subjectivity that enabled them to objectify the male body—to judge it, appreciate it, possess it, and enjoy it.

This change in male identity could be better understood when connected with the change of the social structure that decreased the prestige of the Han literati elite, and just like females, to some extent, they became the Others and the marginalized group under the Manchurian rule. Unlike the Ming Dynasty when the invasion of foreign ethnicities was either a horrifying past memory from the Yuan Dynasty, or a fear that lingered, the foreign invasion became a reality during the Qing Dynasty, when the entire China territory was occupied by Manchurians. While the Qing court made the gesture to embrace all ethnicities under its rule—Han Chinese, Manchus, and Mongolians, etc.—by keeping the Imperial Examination system, accepting Han literati elites in its government, and appreciating their capabilities as either civil bureaucrats or military leaders, as the ethnic minority, Manchu

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<sup>71</sup> Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China*, p40

<sup>72</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p26

rulers inevitably suspect and guard against the Han literati elites as outsiders at least to some extent. For example, though the Manchu emperors kept the Imperial System that existed in China for centuries, they consistently modified specific exam policies to constrain the number of Han literati who passed the exams and made it much easier for the Manchus and Mongolians to pass. After all, securing the Manchu ethnic priority was the basic state policy of the Qing Empire. Unlike the Confucian ideology that emphasized civility and morality, the core of Manchurian culture was rooted in physical strength, and archery and riding horses were an essential part of Manchurian identity, that all boys were trained from their teenage years.<sup>73</sup> However, under the reign of Kangxi Emperor from 1661 to 1722, in order to better centralize the Manchurian rule, he promoted Sinicization and accepted traditional Han culture, which included the neo-Confucian system, and he himself was well-educated neo-Confucianism scholarships and calligraphy.<sup>74</sup> Aside from this effort to revere Han culture and Confucianism, there was still a boundary between Han ethnicity and Manchurian culture, with the latter being emphasized as being the supreme. Emperor Yong Zheng reinforced the special status and importance of the bannerman several times by stating that the Bannerman Militant was the cornerstone of the Qing Empire.<sup>75</sup> Emperor Jiaqing, who ruled from 1796 to 1820, criticized that ‘the bannermen nowadays all think about to promote themselves by their literature abilities, and discard horse riding and archery...which decreased them to the weak’<sup>76</sup>. To translate this historical record into historical context, it means that the Manchurian bannermen tried to enter the government by attending Imperial Examinations, which mainly focused on neo-Confucianism

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<sup>73</sup> Yi, *The Collection of Early Qing's Historical Sources*, p44

<sup>74</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (2013), pp. 56-58

<sup>75</sup> Liu, *Bannerman During the Qing Dynasty*, p1

<sup>76</sup> 清实录, *Qing Shi Lu*, p647

scholarships. This quotation drew the clear dichotomy that Manchurians were physically strong and mighty, while the Han Confucianists were weak and scholastic (文弱). The connection between being physically weak and mentally sophisticated made them the new identity of Han literati scholars. So in general, as 'compared with their position in the Ming dynasty the Qing literati are often described as being in a much weaker position in political, social and cultural terms'<sup>77</sup>, the weakness of the Han literati during the Qing Dynasty was extended to both physical and social senses. As a result, the neo-Confucianism during the Qing Dynasty was less masculine.

At the same time, another factor that contributed to the appearance of a weakened masculinity was the change of philosophical trends with the decline of neo-Confucianism and the development of the School of the Heart. During the Song and the Ming Dynasty, the leading philosophy was the Cheng-Zhu School of neo-Confucianism, which emphasized strict morals and rationality, and its foundational dogma was to 'preserve heavenly principles and to eliminate human desires'<sup>78</sup>. Among the 'heavenly principles', there was the strict gender construction and the scrupulous confinement of females, as analyzed in the previous section. In comparison, the School of the Heart, or Yangmingism, though not explicitly upholding gender equality, many of its prominent followers contributed to the reconstruction of gender relations. For example, Li Zhi, an unorthodox philosopher from the late Ming Dynasty, was criticized by his fellow scholars because that he explicitly engaged with elite females, accepted them as his students, and discussed philosophical and academic issues with them. Though this action was condemned as illicit and unchaste, he legitimized

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<sup>77</sup> Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* , p1

<sup>78</sup> Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, p268

this behavior by arguing it was true that women were empirically shortsighted, however, he ‘denies that this “shortsightedness” refers to any inherent, essential spiritual or intellectual deficiency in women’ and explained ‘this as a result of contingent social circumstances, insisting that physical confinement (of women in the inner chamber) unjustly stunts the development of women, who in fact possess capacities for reading, writing, governing, and spiritual attainment identical to those of men...a person with a woman’s body and a man’s vision.’<sup>79</sup> Though this philosophical discourse that weakened the strict boundary between female and male was developed as early as the end of the Ming Dynasty, it was only gradually accepted during the Qing Dynasty. One example was the compiler of *What the Master Would Not Discuss*, Yuan Mei, who also was well-known for his acceptance and welcoming of female students. However, unlike Li Zhi who was condemned and excluded from the literati elite circle because of this, Yuan’s same gesture received a much more positive reception from his fellow scholar-gentry class, and he remained a respected leading figure in this exclusive circle. In other words, the somehow subverted gender construction—a more powerful femininity and passive masculinity—might also be connected with impacted by the subcurrents of a more open opinion towards gender relationships.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the main aim is to discover the subcurrents that influenced the literati elite’s male identity, which was possibly able to enhance our understanding of the different ways of the gender constructions in the Ming Dynasty novel *Ruyijun Zhuan* and the Qing Dynasty novel *Konghejian Miji*. In essence, ethnocentrism upholding the Han ethnicity as

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<sup>79</sup> Lee, *Native Seeds of Change*, p132

the supreme, morality, and patriarchy were the three intertwining cornerstones that consisted of the identity of a neo-Confucianism male literati elite. Both stories display a powerful, demonized, and overly sexual female image of Wu by exaggerating Wu's insatiable sexual desire. This demonized and exaggerated image of powerful women possibly resulted from foreign invasions—Mongolians for the Ming Dynasty and Manchurians for the Qing Dynasty respectively, which in turn undermined the neo-Confucianism identity of the literati elites. It was a historical tradition in ancient Chinese literacy to express discontent towards foreign invasion by depicting discomfort towards powerful and unorthodox female figures. Moreover, both the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty compensated for this insecurity of masculinity by a stricter confined female sexuality and female body, manifested by more pervasive practices of chastity cult and footbinding. Despite this similar historical context that possibly contributed to the insecurity of Confucianism masculinity, the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty erotic stories nonetheless exhibited a distinct difference: in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, the male sexuality of Xue Aochao was reinforced by depicting him as being virtuous, able to control his own desires, assertive, and powerful; in the contrast, in *KHJMJ*, the male figures were weak and passive. This difference was not a coincident, as the weakened masculinity was quite common in Qing literary traditions, and this phenomenon could possibly be explained partly by the fact that during the Ming Dynasty, despite the insecure of literati elites because of the Mongolian invasion decades ago, neo-Confucianism held the supreme status as the state ideology, and though it faced competition from the emerging commercial middle class, it was from a lower social hierarchy and did not hinder the superiority of the literati elites. However, in the Qing Dynasty, because of the Manchurian reign that deprived Han literati scholars of their supreme political and social position and depicted them as weakened, and

the emerging ideological trend of Yangmingism, the literati class and neo-Confucianism ceased being the most prestigious social group, which was reflected as a weakened masculinity in the literary works that were both produced and consumed by the literati class.

In this thesis, I'd like to pave the road for further research that dives into the relationships between erotica works and the implying gender dynamics rendered by these sexual encounters, which could be an honest reflection of the historical context that influenced both the authors' and readers' mindsets.



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