Prologue

Jin Shengtan 金聖歎 (1608–1661), arguably the greatest critic of the traditional Chinese fiction and drama, recorded his youthful experience of reading *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The western wing). He was so moved and overwhelmed by a line in the play that he had to confine himself to his bed for three or four days, unable to do anything else. In the scene in question (1.3), an aspiring and struggling student, Zhang Junrui 張君瑞 (better known as the student or youth with the family name of Zhang 張生), who happens to have fallen helplessly in love with the female protagonist, Yingying 鶯鶯 (Oriole), has managed to get a second glimpse of the object of his desire, who emerges for a brief moment from her cloistered existence into the courtyard to burn incense and make wishes. At the outset of the scene,

> The jade vault is without dust,
> The Silver River drips light;
> Moon's color straddles the void,
> Flowers' shadows fill the courtyard.
> My silken sleeves grow cold,
> My fragrant heart is on alert. (*JX* 1.3.65; *WX* 32; *MZ* 203)[1]

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[1] *The Moon and the Zither* is the translation of the 1498 Hongzhi edition (*WX*). When Jin Shengtan's recension (*JX*) varies from the Hongzhi edition, the translation will be altered to confirm with the Jin edition, instances of which will be noted accordingly.

The setting is significant; it seems that the lens first zooms out, to bring about a cosmic dimension manifested in the firmament, the Silver River (Milky Way), and the moon, and then zooms in, to concentrate on what is here on earth, the shadows of flowers, with all their connotative and evocative power. All this converges on him, his "fragrant heart."[2] The entire setting may also hint that desire, or love (*qing* 情; for its connotations, see below), has a cosmic dimension. Zhang, in order to attract Yingying's attention, chants a poem, to which she replies. But she has to leave soon for her own chamber. Zhang, left alone, becomes despondent, with all his expectations and anticipations gone: the contrast could not be more conspicuous and stark. His aria:

> Just as I was going back,
> I stood still in the empty courtyard:
> Branch tips of bamboo vibrated in the wind,
> The handle of the Dipper was strung by clouds.
> (*JX* 1.3.71; *WX* 35; *MZ* 208)

Here, again, the heavenly and earthly images converge, as if to pit human life—and desire—against a cosmic background. Jin Shengtan himself is very sensitive to such juxtapositions (more in Chapter 3). Now,

> The bleakness of this night is four-starred [i.e., certain],
> What can I do if she cares not for me? (*JX* 1.3.71; *WX* 35; *MZ* 208)

The contrast here anticipates what Jin Shengtan conceives to be the end of the play, the tragic outcome of Zhang's love. Indeed, such a contrast, between desire (*qing*) and emptiness, in its various incarnations and manifestations, physical or metaphysical, characterizes many of the works we will discuss in this study.

Jin Shengtan recorded his experience in these terms:

> I still remember the first time I read *Xixiang ji* in my youth [*you* 幼].[3] When I came across the line, "What can I do if she cares not for me?" [Literally, "She heeds me not; how can I live on?"] I lay down quietly for

[2] Cf. the Jin commentary; *JX* 1.3.65–66.

[3] According to some scholars, less than 15; according to others, less than 19.

> three or four days, unable to read further. It is a case in which a human being, alive, dies on account of this, and a dead one, because of this, comes back to life; a case in which an enlightened man is deluded again on account of this, and a deluded man is enlightened through this. I did not know whether I was alive or dead, enlightened or deluded. Anyway, I quietly lay there for three or four days, without drinking, eating, or speaking, like a stone that has sunken to the bottom of the sea, or like a fire that has been extinguished, all because of the power of these seven characters in that line. (*JX* 1.3.71)

This passage is reminiscent of many typical expressions concerning *qing* (love, desire, or, reductively, erotic desire), popular in the late imperial period, and may well serve as a starting point for this study on certain manifestations of *qing* in drama and narrative. We might be able to deduce several motifs or points from this passage. First, *qing* is so powerful, volatile, all-consuming, and fatal that it is able to cause life or death, even to a reader of a text. This has been attested by the stories about men and women, in real life and as well as in fiction, dying of *qing*, even dying of reading literary works about *qing*. Second, it is related to religion, capable of bringing about enlightenment or inducing delusion. Third, it is characterized by a concomitant sense of suffering, or the tragic. This episode naturally leads us to the issue of *qing*, as it is manifested, sometimes oddly, in the Chinese context.

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One feature of the dramatic and narrative works in late imperial China, like their counterparts in the West, is a preoccupation, even obsession, with human desire (*qing*), culminating in a culture, a faith, or a cult, of *qing*, complete with a unique and complex metaphysics. The Chinese term is extremely complicated, denoting and connoting passion, desire, feeling, attachment, craving, love, and more. *Qing*, in reductive ways, is equivalent to *eros* in all its manifestations (although it may encompass *agape* and *philia*, as well as *eros*). In the discussions I will use the Chinese term throughout and its English equivalents, desire, love, or other synonyms.

Anthony C. Yu has characterized *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the red chamber), the monument of the traditional Chinese novel, as

well as of a body of literature of that period as *pathocentric*.[4] It seems that writers and dramatists consciously contributed to the discourse about *qing*; in the vocabulary of these masters or their critics (mainly their commentators), a gallery of paragons of *qing* (*qingzhong* 情種) has been created. "Has the world ever seen a woman's love [*qing*] to rival that of Du Liniang?" (*MDT* 1; *PP* ix), so writes Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) in the celebrated Preface to his play, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The peony pavilion). Hong Sheng (1645–1704) characterizes the provenance of his *Changsheng dian* 長生殿 (Palace of lasting life) as "nothing but *qing* (*qing eryi* 情而已)" in the Prologue to his play (*CSD* 1). In *Honglou meng*'s framing story, a character who is responsible for bringing the book to the human realm sees that "its main theme was love [*qing*] (*dazhi tan qing* 大旨談情)" (*HLM* 1.6; *SS* 1:51). According to Martin Huang, "the development of traditional Chinese fiction as a narrative genre was closely related to the changing views of desire in late imperial China": "the obsession with individual desire is an essential quality that defines traditional Chinese fiction as a narrative genre. In fact, the maturing of this genre can best be appreciated in terms of the sophistication with which the phenomenon of desire is explored in many works."[5] Indeed, so pervasive is the obsession with *qing* that many social and metaphysical issues are manifested in the artists' different approaches to it; we can even say that any philosophical school of learning would have to formulate its own concept about it. In the late Ming (1368–1644), roughly starting with the Longqing 隆慶 reign-period (1567–1572), there evolved a metaphysics of *qing*, alongside with a culture, more commonly called a cult, of *qing*. It was with passion, precision, profundity, as well as psychological depth that dramatists and novelists explored full spectrum of *qing*, including its origin, development, and outcome.

In this study I explore the nature of desire (*qing*) and its literary expressions in China; in particular, I deal with certain characteristics in the obsession with *qing* in late imperial China,[6] namely the late Ming

4 Yu, *Rereading the Stone*, *passim*.

5 Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 3.

6 It is interesting to look back at the comparisons in this respect by Western scholars. Arthur Waley wrote in *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918; rpt. 1945): "To the European poet the relation between man and

through the Qianlong period (1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). These characteristics derive from an understanding of the origin, nature, unfolding, and end of *qing*, as developed by the thinkers and artists and manifested in literary works: characteristics that are different from the features in the ascendance of passion from the times of the troubadours to the present in the West.[7]

In China, the discourse about *qing* is rooted in its religions; we may even say that *qing* is intertwined with religious frames of reference by default, so much so that they are in fact inextricable: simply put, desire *is* a religious issue.[8] In particular, there is an appropriation of Buddhist,

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woman is a thing of supreme importance and mystery. To the Chinese, it is something commonplace, obvious—a need of the body, not a satisfaction of the *emotions*. These he reserves entirely for friendship" (4). Denis de Rougemont, in *L'Amour et l'Occident* (1939, revised edition 1956), translated as *Love in the Western World*, wrote, "In the East, and also in the Greece of Plato, human love has usually been regarded as mere pleasure and physical enjoyment. Not only has passion—in the tragic and painful sense of the word—seldom been met with there, but also and especially it has been despised in the eyes of current morals and treated as a sickness or frenzy." In the note to this, he went further, "The Chinese have married young, unions being arranged by the parents, and for them the problem of love does not arise" (71). It seems that we have travelled a long way, in our understanding, from there.

7 There are numerous works on this phenomenon. See, among others, Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*; Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*; Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*; Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence*; Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart*; A. O. J. Cockshut, *Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel, 1770–1940*; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

8 Octavio Paz, in *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (38–39), makes the following comments in his characterization of the ideologies of love in the West and East. "The principal difference," writes he, "is that in the East love was conceived of within a religious tradition; it was not an independent thought but a derivative of some doctrine. In the West, from the beginning, the philosophy of love lay outside official religion and at times was in opposition to it. . . . No such thing is to be found in the Oriental tradition.

as well as Confucian and Daoist, discourses, in terms of both vocabulary and ways of presentation, in the understanding of the origin and nature of *qing*, which also determines its unfolding and outcome in literary works. Paradoxically, at least in form, the vocabulary of two of these religions that prescribe the control of desire and a set of ascetic values, even celibacy of the clergy, is used to explain and legitimate desire. Could we call this a transvaluation of values?

The "transmutations" of desire discussed in this volume are threefold. First, *qing* in religious discourses—Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian—transmutes itself and finds its way into literary works, providing the latter with a conceptual frame, a set of plot patterns and structures, and a metaphysical dimension; this will be discussed at some length in Chapter 1. Second, the literary works dramatize the tension between desire and religions; in particular, the two extremes are often juxtaposed against each other. One depends on the other to define and express itself, and their tension and reconciliation inform the works under discussion. Writers configure *qing* and religion together, and understand one by its contrast with the other, with the result that both ends of the spectrum are highlighted, intensified, and enhanced. Moreover, they tend to provide religious and metaphysical solutions to emotional, domestic, and social issues. This obsession is fraught with a strong sense of the tragic, which was heightened in the Qing period. Third, it refers to the attempts by traditional critics and commentators to make interpretations that are at least religiously oriented, as in the interpretation of *Xixiang ji* by Jin Shengtan, among others, and the interpretation of *Mudan ting* by Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639), Qian

Cao Xueqin's novel is composed as a counterpoint between two worlds which, although separate, are in communion with each other: the beyond of Buddhism and Taoism, peopled by monks, ascetics, and divinities, and the passions, encounters, and separations of a polygamous aristocratic family in eighteenth-century China. Religious metaphysics and psychological realism." Granted that Paz is not a specialist on Chinese literature, and his characterization of the Western tradition might be open to question, but he does intuit into a very important aspect in the understanding of the tradition of love in Chinese literature. Indeed, it seems that in the Chinese context, the period when love flourished most coincides with the period when religions were at their most active. See also Paolo Santangelo, "Zhongguo yu Ouzhou 'aiqing' gainianhua de zongjiao yingxiang."

Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664), Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), and, in a more deliberate, self-conscious, extensive, and sustained manner, Wu Zhensheng 吳震生 (1695–1769) and his wife, Cheng Qiong 程瓊 (dates unknown).

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In his classic study, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, Lawrence Stone comments on the relationship between the increasing cases of marriage for love, starting in the early 17th century, and the popularity of novels. "According to the contemporaries, the growth of marriage for love in the eighteenth century was caused by the growing consumption of novels. Always a stock-in-trade of the theatre, romantic love was the principal theme of the novel, whose astonishing rise to popularity was so marked a feature of the age." He points out further, "romantic love and the romantic novel grew together after 1780, and the problem of cause and effect is one that is impossible to solve."[9] The same phenomenon is also observable in the history of China, roughly since the 17th century, that is, to use Stone's term, an "affective individualism" was being developed in China, on its own impetus, from the late Ming through the Qing to the modern era of the 20th century. Indeed, a "culture of love," or an "erotic faith,"[10] also developed in China in roughly the same time period. The movement had its ebbs and flows, but it had managed to surface and resurface, until, in the age heralded by the May Fourth Movement (1919), it securely established itself as the model of modern life.[11]

[9] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 283–284.

[10] See Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*; Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence*.

[11] Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) made the assumption that the practices of modern literature, prescribed and espoused by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), coincide with those of the late-Ming Gong'an 公安 and Jingling 竟陵 schools; Zhou has stressed the similarities between the modern movement and the characteristics of the late-Ming literary practices. This, I believe, certainly applies to conceptions of desire and love. See Zhou, *Zhongguo xin wenxue de yuanliu*, 23; see also 28.

Kang-i Sun Chang makes this remark about the cult of *qing* as manifested in the late Ming: "the blossoming of the cult [. . .] took place largely through readers' imitation of the role types created in contemporary fiction and drama, role types that focused on the idea of love and encouraged a cultural reevaluation of human feelings."[12] Indeed, it was a common practice for women readers to keep a copy of *Mudan ting* in their sewing or embroidering work box, and it played a central role in their affective initiation and emotional education. Literature also reflects this phenomenon. For instance, one way Du Liniang 杜麗娘 is initiated into the erotic world is the literary works she has read. In turn, she has inspired other characters in drama and fiction: Lin Daiyu 林黛玉, among others, is so moved by Du's arias that she could hardly contain herself, finding herself to be on the verge of collapse. Furthermore, the authors of the works under discussion wrote while having the earlier masterpieces in mind, deliberately responding to them, whereby to define their own stances and enhance, fine-tune, and refine their arguments—for instance, *Mudan ting* responded to *Xixiang ji*, while the author of *Changsheng dian* was personally an acute critic of *Mudan ting*. Jiang Shiquan 蔣士銓 (1725–1784) responded to Tang Xianzu, and Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715/1724–1763/1764) deliberately echoed and built on the earlier masters. The metaphysics of desire was accomplished in the endeavors which could be described as "intertextual." But here texts are definitely much more than mere texts, which could be so powerful as to be fatal.

After a study of the philosophical and religious trends that foreground the metaphysics of desire, the culture or cult of desire, or the erotic faith, which constitutes Chapter 1, I discuss the following dramatic texts, *Xixiang ji*, *Mudan ting*, *Changsheng dian*, *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (Peach blossom fan), the works of Xu Xi 徐燨 (1732–1807)[13] and Jiang Shiquan, and the novel *Honglou meng*. For most of these works, I concentrate on the primary text as well as the commentary traditions that grow from, and revolve around, them. There are many other works of romantic love in many genres, including the *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 novellas with their focus on the courtship between a young

[12] Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung*, 11.

[13] Xu Xi's dates are determined by Du Guiping, "Qingdai xiqujia Xu Xi shengping shiji ji zaju banben kaoshu."

scholar and a woman or several women of tremendous beauty,[14] as well as the much more graphic erotic novel (*yanqing xiaoshuo* 豔情小說).[15] Owing to the fact that characters and plots of the two genres are relatively more conventional, stereotypical, and predictable, whose impact can be measured in sociological, rather than literary, terms, I will not elaborate on them. But the fact speaks volumes: the philandering of the protagonists is often juxtaposed against the final renunciation scene, Buddhist or Daoist, although, as Martin Huang has discussed, "the persuasiveness of the moral is seriously undermined by the apparent contradictions between the often perfunctory didactic ending and the lengthy, titillating, and graphic descriptions that precede it."[16] It seems that the conflicts, for many authors, can only be resolved religiously.

In the West, love occupies the center stage in the modern age, whether in art, intellectual life, or the economic life; whether in highbrow or lowbrow culture. In Beryl Schlossman's formulation, "Love is at the center of modern literature, and the texts of modernism locate its cultural contexts all over the map: on the street, in the movie theater, in religious devotion, in social history, in theology, and in popular entertainment."[17] There was a process of evolution that led to such an outcome. We may observe a similar development in China, on its own impetus, which has resulted in this characteristic of modernity—this feature of modern life has been securely and unambiguously established, not the least abetted by the thriving of literature about *qing*, whether in traditional or modern forms. Perhaps in this facet of modernity China's transformation was achieved without the many characteristic social upheavals that accompanied the revolutions in other areas,

[14] See, among others, Su Jianxin, *Zhongguo caizi jiaren xiaoshuo yanbian shi*; Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas*.

[15] See, among others, Qi Yukun, *Mingdai xiaoshuo shi*, 306–311; Zhang Jun, *Qingdai xiaoshuo shi*, 166–171; Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*; Chi Xiao, *The Chinese Garden as Lyric Enclave*, 205–212. For a categorization of these novels, see Zhang Jun, 168–169.

[16] Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 64.

[17] Beryl Schlossman, *Objects of Desire: The Madonnas of Modernism*, 1.

partly thanks to the traditional works.[18] I do not make any pretentions about a study in the parallel development of modernity in the West and in China; I, however, only try to concentrate on some of the nuances of a similar trend manifested in the Chinese context. The emphasis is readings of literary texts, in all their subtlety and evocative power.

[18] Shang Chuan regards the Ming social history as a disrupted, incomplete reorientation towards "modernity," a task to be resumed by the May Fourth generation. See his "Ming wenhua: Wei wancheng de xiandaihua zhuanxing."