

Transmutations of Desire

The forty-eight thousand years [of human history] are nothing but an entanglement of the intertwining roots of *qing* [desire]. To be enlightened about the great Dao, one has to destroy the root of *qing* with the understanding of *kong* [emptiness]. To destroy the root of *qing* with an understanding of *kong*, one first has to enter *qing*. When one enters *qing*, one sees the emptiness of its root. Then he makes his exit from *qing*, and comes to see the reality of the root of Dao.

四萬八千年俱是情根團結。悟通大道，必先空破情根。空破情根，必先走入情內。走入情內，見得世界情根之虛；然後走出情外，認得道根之實。

—Jingxiaozhai zhuren 靜嘯齋主人，
“*Xiyou bu da wen*” 西遊補答問¹

Qing (Desire) and Religions

What is morally interesting about human life is played out in the domain of the emotions.

—Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions*²

¹ *Further Adventures on the Journey to the West*, trans. Qiancheng Li and Robert E. Hegel, 25.

² Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions*, 17.

Recent developments in the field of China's intellectual history have stressed the emotive and affective spectrum in various intellectual schools. Meng Peiyuan has studied the manifestation of the affective and emotive in Confucianism;³ we could perhaps say that his exploration about the subjectivity in Chinese philosophy has led to this.⁴ Yu Zhiping takes the history of Western philosophy into consideration, concluding that Confucian philosophy can be characterized, in one way, as a metaphysics of the emotive and affective, in contrast to its Western counterparts, where reason is duly emphasized.⁵ David Webster has made similar remarks in his comparison between Western and Indian philosophical systems concerning desire:

Desire has never been the central topic in Western philosophy, and from this one might draw the conclusion that desire is not wholly seen as an appropriate object for philosophical enquiry. This may indicate the non-introspective tone that much Western metaphysical thought maintains. Indeed, we only find desire examined in a more thorough and explicit manner once traditional Western approaches, particularly to ontology, began to be questioned and undermined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶

And yet the issue of desire in Chinese history has had its ebbs and flows. The periods in which *qing* 情 received the most attention, in metaphysical speculation as well as in real life, are the Wei and Jin 魏晉 (196–420) and Six Dynasties 六朝 (229–589),⁷ the Tang (618–907), and

³ Meng Peiyuan, *Qinggan yu lixing*, esp. 157–185.

⁴ Meng Peiyuan, *Zhongguo zhhexue zhuti siwei*.

⁵ Yu Zhiping, "Xingqing xingershangxue: Ruxue zhhexue de teyou menjing."

⁶ David Webster, *The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon*, 189–190.

⁷ This periodization is based on literary factors, somewhat different from the usual historical periodization. I follow Luo Zongqiang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi*, 1. See also Luo Zongqiang, *Xuanxue yu Wei Jin shiren xintai*, and Wang Xiaoyi, *Ru Shi Dao yu Wei Jin xuanxue xingcheng*. Scholars have always emphasized the Wei Jin period, but I think that in this context the Six Dynasties should be included too, although there is some overlapping in time. In the Six Dynasties period, religions, particularly Buddhism, and literature both flourished; it is also an age in which desire found many manifestations and expressions in literature as well as in

the late Ming (1368–1644), the latter commencing with the Longqing 隆慶 reign-period (1567–1572), when significant changes took place in literature as well as in socio-economic and political life.⁸ If Wei, Jin and Six Dynasties writers and thinkers first celebrated subjectivity and desire, then this trend reached its broadest scope and scale in the late Ming.⁹ As we will see in discussions below, late Ming authors constantly refer back to their predecessors to define their own stances on *qing*.

Qing is a very complicated issue, not the least because of the multiplicity of meaning inherent in this term. It means human emotive and affective response to stimuli, as is manifested by the concept of *qiqing* 七情, the emotions or feelings of joy (*xi* 喜), anger (*nu* 怒), sadness (*ai* 哀), fear (*ju* 懼), love (*ai* 愛), aversion (*wu* 惡), and desire (*yu* 欲).¹⁰ The developments in Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism have only complicated the understanding of *qing*. But *qing*, in late Ming discourses, or at least in the discourses of those who championed it, increasingly takes on the meaning of erotic love or desire.

In a question-and-answer series penned by Wu Ren 吳人 (i.e., Wu Shufu 吳舒晷, also known as Wu Wushan 吳吳山; b. 1657), recorded by his wife Qian Yi 錢宜 in the commentary edition of *Mudan ting* (Peony pavilion), the centerpiece of the cult of *qing*, he briefly discussed the different layers of meaning of this term.

The human being is endowed with life in between heaven and earth, which is *xing* 性. *Xing* manifests itself in *qing* [the affective and emotive spectrum]. On some occasions, [*qing*] becomes excessive, which then turns to be *yu* 欲 [desire or craving]. As it is stated in *Shujing* 書經 (Classic of documents): “[Heaven] gives birth to people with desires (*yu*).”¹¹ Immersed in them in abandonment, one easily indulges in them. In the

various social aspects. The literature of this period has a strong influence on Tang Xianzu, among others, in the late Ming.

⁸ Cf. Rao Longsun, *Mingdai Longqing, Wanli jian wenxue sixiang zhuanbian yanjiu, shiwen bufen*.

⁹ Cf. Luo Zongqiang, *Mingdai houqi shiren xintai yanjiu*, 441; he explicitly points out the similarities between the Wei-Jin and the late Ming, 541. See also his *Mingdai wenxue sixiang shi*.

¹⁰ There are variations in the components of these seven types of *qing*.

¹¹ [維天]生民有欲. James Legge, trans., *The Shoo King*, 178.

poem “Wanqiu” 宛丘 (Hollow mound) [in *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of poetry), #136], singing and dancing are seen as expressions of *qing*,¹² that is, *qing* in its manifestation as *yu*. Thus, it is stated in the exegesis, “The things which men greatly desire are comprehended in meat and drink and sexual pleasure” 飲食男女人之大欲存焉.¹³ The Buddhists, in their turn, have regarded sentience, love, and attachment as *qing*. When people of the Jin stated, “we can’t avoid having *qing*,”¹⁴ it is close to this. Later, those who discourse on *qing* take it to mean love and attachment between men and women.¹⁵

In the following, *qing* will refer to “love and attachment between men and women.”¹⁶ However, it will also mean the whole affective and emotive spectrum (with love and attachment included), particularly in the discussions concerning its metaphysical aspects. The focus here is erotic love, but it is, again, an issue more complicated than meets the eye.

This project concentrates on the roles that religions have played in the unfolding and development of *qing* since the late Ming; it is not

¹² Arthur Waley’s translation:

How you make free,
There on top of the Hollow Mound!
Truly, a man of feeling,
But very careless of repute.

Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs*, 1996. There are different interpretations concerning the character *qing* in “*Xun you qing xi*” 洵有情兮, which Waley translates as “feeling.”

¹³ In “*Liyun*” 禮運 of *Liji* 禮記. Legge, trans., *The Li Ki*, 380.

¹⁴ The *locus classicus* of this is in *Shishuo xinyu* 2.32: “When Wei Jie was about to cross the Yangzi River (in 311) his body and spirit were emaciated and depressed, and he remarked to his attendants, ‘As I view this desolate expanse of water, somehow without my being aware of it a hundred thoughts come crowding together. But as long as we can’t avoid having feelings [*qing*], who indeed can be free of this?’” See Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu*, 1:2.51; Liu I-ch’ing [Liu Yiqing], *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, 47.

¹⁵ Mao Xiaotong, ed., *Tang Xianzu yanjiu ziliao huibian*, 897; Wu Wushan *sanfu heping Mudan ting*, 148.

¹⁶ Cf. Keith McMahan’s translation of the term as “sublime passion”; *Polygamy and Sublime Passion*, esp. 16.

a comprehensive treatment of *qing* in Chinese literary history.¹⁷ My attempt is to contextualize the cult of *qing* in religions, particularly late Ming varieties of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. I would argue that this culture of, and faith in, *qing* are grounded in religious discourses, even when some of the writers, playwrights, and editors were not consciously aware of this. The Ming incarnation of the *xinxue* 心學 (the learning of the mind-heart), the Neo-Confucian school inaugurated by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Wang Shouren 王守仁, 1472–1528), which unambiguously left its stamp on the writers, is already inundated with Buddhist terminology, conceptions, and ways of cultivation. In a way, the cult of *qing* is a fruit of mutual infiltration between Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism.¹⁸ A contextualization of *qing* in the religious traditions will enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. Although it is not my intention to explore the social interactions among the literati and the Buddhist clergy, this is a good place to state that the interactions were intense and fruitful, as in the friendship developed between the eminent monk Dagan 達觀 (Zibo Zhenke 紫柏真可, 1543–1603) and Tang Xianzu, the Buddhist influence on Hong Sheng, the unambiguous Buddhist leanings among the critics and commentators like Jin Shengtan, Wu Zhensheng, and Cheng Qiong. Jiang Shiquan, whose mindset was not congenial to Buddhist beliefs, depended on the religion, particularly its cosmological frame, in his dramatic works. Even Wang Yangming and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) themselves were actively involved with Buddhist figures.

In the literary scene of the Ming-Qing period, particularly the late Ming, we may be able to detect one persistent and consistent pattern, in the lives of the literati as well as in their works. Many literati vacillated between two extreme ways of life, between an immersion in a life of pleasure, or at least a career championing *qing* (predominantly, passion and love, or erotic love), and religion, which prescribes a code

¹⁷ For a comprehensive study of *qing* in Chinese philosophical and literary history, mainly pre-Tang, see Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the Stone*, 53–109; for a discussion on the manifestation of *qing* in late imperial literature, see Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 5–85.

¹⁸ Cf. Chen Yongge, *Wan-Ming Fojiao sixiang yanjiu*, 251–260, where he discusses the extreme form of Chan (*kuang Chan* 狂禪).

of asceticism, or an elimination of *qing* altogether. They may have lived their lives in the spirit of *zhongqing* 鍾情 (adoration or cult of emotion, passion, love), or *shiyi* 適意 (following one's intent), but they were at the same time obsessed with the question of *shengsi* 生死 (cycles of life and death, or *samsāra*) or *xingming* 性命 (understanding of the ultimate nature of life in religious and transcendental terms, which lies beyond the cycles of life and death).¹⁹ In the words of Tu Long 屠隆 (1542–1605), whose life is paradigmatic in more ways than one, “I once said there were only two important things in this world: the first is learning the Way and cultivating oneself by preserving energy and resting one's spirit (*xiushen xuedao*, *baoqi qishen* 修身學道，抱氣棲神); the second is seeking as much pleasure as one can at the present moment (*kuaiyi dangqian*, *jishi xingle* 快意當前，及時行樂).”²⁰ Luo Zongqiang has analyzed the lives of Tu Long, Wang Zhideng 王禩登 (1535–1612), and Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1575–1630), representative figures who vacillated between hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and religious longing, which prescribes renunciation of such indulgence, devoting a chapter (chap. 6) to this phenomenon. Yuan Zhongdao later repented, spending his life in Buddhist Pure Land devotions.²¹

Interestingly, those who championed *qing* the most are oftentimes among the most pious and adamant defenders of religion, a fact that makes it imperative to contextualize the cult of *qing* within the religious traditions. It is right that Gong Pengcheng characterizes Yuan Hongdao's 袁宏道 (1568–1610) practice of Pure Land Buddhism as a result of a poignant concern with the cycle of life and death, or *samsāra*

¹⁹ Luo Zongqiang sees this as a result of the abandonment to desire and the intellectual reflection upon it, especially when one's health was impaired as a result in the indulgence of hedonistic, including sexual, activities. The novel *Jin Ping Mei* is one of the manifestations. See *Mingdai wenxue sixiang shi*, e.g., 800–807. I would argue that the religious dimension is not that passive.

²⁰ Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 19. Tu Long, *Baiyu ji* 白榆集, *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu*, Jibu 180, 9.1b–2a (facsimile, 239).

²¹ Luo Zongqiang, *Mingdai houqi shiren xintai yanjiu*, 372–443.

(*shengsi qingqie* 生死情切).²² This could well be a good characterization of much late Ming philosophy and literature.

Li Zhi's life is a case in point. He discussed about what spurred him on in his pursuit of transcendence—in his own words, his fear of death: “The pursuit of the Way should be based on genuine concerns. If one starts with the fear of death, one will concentrate on finding ways to transcend cycles of life and death. . . . Although people so occupied may proceed at different pace, it is impossible for them not to reach the other shore.” He wrote on another occasion, “The ultimate concern is one's own life and death.” In his formulation, “This fearlessness in face of death comes from extreme fear of death. The worldly men are attached to this body of blood and flesh, precisely because they are not afraid of death, resulting in their wandering in the cycles of life and death without end. Sages have a tremendous fear of death, which leads to their tireless search for the root cause of life and death; they will not rest until they have personally realized no-life.”²³

Deng Huoqu 鄧豁渠 (1498–1569), out of this acute concern, renounced the pursuit defined by the followers of the Wang Yangming school, took the tonsure, disregarded his social obligations (to the horror of his former Confucian mentor, Zhao Dazhou 趙大洲 [1508–1576], who tried to distance himself from him and, later, offered to finance him should he return and live by his father's gravesite in repentance), and wandered in his search for an understanding of *xingming* until his death in a Buddhist temple in the wilderness. Tang Xianzu, the greatest Ming dramatist, had a similar experience in his years of learning. One day Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588) objected to his association with young gallants, wandering and chanting, assuming a heroic air. “What does this have to do with your understanding of *xingming*?” Luo asked. “When would you be able to comprehend its mystery?” Tang was not able to fall asleep thinking about this.²⁴ As I will argue, this concern is also present in his literary works.

The lifestyle of many literati was sensational, but they, at the same time, tended to shift their attention to religion and might regret their indulgence in *qing*. They acted in the manner of their predecessors in

²² See his *Wan-Ming sichao*.

²³ *Fenshu*, 4.168, 169, 171.

²⁴ Tang Xianzu, *Tang Xianzu quanji*, ed. Xu Shuofang, 2:1228.

Tang and Song (960–1279) periods, for example Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101), who became their role models. However, not even Bo and Su took themselves to writing religious treatises the way many Ming-Qing literati did—to mention a few examples, Qian Qianyi (1582–1664) wrote *Lengyanjing shujie Meng chao* 楞嚴經疏解蒙鈔;²⁵ Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574–1624), representative of the Jingling school, wrote *Lengyanjing rushuo* 楞嚴經如說;²⁶ and Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610), representative the Gong'an school, wrote *Xifang helun* 西方合論;²⁷ these works are canonized, and constitute important works on the interpretation of the *Lengyan jing* and Pure Land practice. Li Zhi, who, while writing extensively on Buddhism, took the tonsure himself, although his motivation was too complicated to summarize in a few words (and much of his *Fenshu* 焚書 [A book to burn] is related to Buddhism). Among Confucians who took a strong interest in Buddhism, we have Yang Qiyuan 楊起元 (1547–1599), who even signed his name with the title of Biqu 比丘 (Bhikṣu; monk) to his work, *Zhujing pinjie* 諸經品節, and Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1619), for whom Buddhism was a lasting influence and who wrote on Buddhism. Yang Qiyuan wrote, in a scholarly note, “The two teachings [Buddhism and Daoism] have been regarded as heretical in the bygone ages, but are seen in our Ming as the orthodox Way.”²⁸ It is difficult to doubt their seriousness in religion. The sheer number of literati figures who became lay Buddhists in the last three reigns of Wanli (1573–1620), Tianqi (1620–1627), and Chongzhen (1627–1644) was unprecedented.²⁹

²⁵ X 287.13.497–928.

²⁶ X 286.13.383–498.

²⁷ T 1976.47.385–419.

²⁸ Yang Qiyuan, *Taishi Yang Fusuo xiansheng Zhengxue bian*, 1.25b.

²⁹ Zhou Qun, *Ru Shi Dao yu wan-Ming wenxue sichao*, 6. For studies of Buddhism in this period, relevant to literary studies, see, among others, Zheng Peikai, *Tang Xianzu yu wan-Ming wenhua*; Liao Zhaocheng, “Wan-Ming aiqing guan yu Fojiao jiaoshe chuyi: Yi Jin Ping Mei wei zhongxin,” in Xiong Bingzhen, gen. ed., *Yu yan mi zhang: Zhongguo lishi wenhua zhong de “si” yu “qing”*—*Si qing pian*, 159–178; “Yinci yanqu yu Fojiao: Cong *Xixiangji* xiangguan wenben lun Qingchu xiqu meixue de Fojiao quanshi,” *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 26 (2005): 127–160.