Canonizing Pornography. A (Foolish?) Woman’s Sexual Education in *Chipozhi zhuan*
by
Paola Zamperini
Amherst College¹

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This paper focuses on the late Ming novel *Chipozi zhuan* (痴婆子傳), The Tale of a Foolish Woman, with the goal of reconstructing normative and transgressive representations of sexuality in late imperial Chinese fiction. This first-person narrative in literary Chinese can help us to explore and understand how issues such as gender and voice, sexual identity and agency, ethical didacticism and sex education—for lack of a better term—, were represented and imagined at a critical stage in the history of Chinese literature. Thus we will look at the composition of the text and its structure, as well as to the narrative conventions and “anomalies” found in *Chipozi zhuan*, in order to assess how they can help us define canonical discourses of pornography and eroticism in pre-modern Chinese literature. Whenever possible and useful I will compare the Chinese text to the French literary canon of pornography, in order to shed mutual light on these complex sources. In particular I contrast *Chipozi zhuan* to the French novel in a dialogue form, the anonymous *L'école des Filles* (1655) and, on occasion, to Sade’s *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795). Here I will define

2 Bai Xingjian (776-826), 天地阴阳交欢大乐赋 天地陰陽交歡大樂賦: 1卷. Tian di yin yang jiao huan da le fu: 1 juan. Shanghai shu dian, [1994?].


5 Epigraph of the original edition of Sade’s *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, 1795.


8 The reason I chose to use these two French sources is that the former is seen as the first truly pornographic novel of the modern period in France, while Sade’s work in a way presents this genre in its ultimate incarnation. They also emphasize the didactic component of a young woman’s sexual awakening,
pornography as printed or visual material, often illegal and condemned, containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs and activity, intended to stimulate erotic, rather than aesthetic or emotional, feelings. Erotic sources are here understood here as part of the same semantic field of pornographic material, for the reasons I shall presently illustrate.

First of all, I would like to say a few words about the origins of and the reasons for this essay. I have worked for some years on the body and sexuality in pre-modern Chinese fiction, with an emphasis on late imperial vernacular novels, and as a result I have been reading a good deal of texts, written in the vernacular and in literary Chinese, that deal with sex and passion in varying degrees. Time and again I have been struck by the fluidity and the heterogeneity of such sources. Leaving the most traditional chaste romances aside, sex flows through many late imperial sources and defies clear-cut genre definitions, especially when one compares late imperial Chinese fiction to Italian and French pornography. As clearly illustrated in many studies, pornography as a genre in the West has very precise characteristics, including specific “birthdate” and birthplaces. And yet, it would seem that in the case of Chinese fiction, erotic and pornographic plots appear and intersect with other—at times more, at times less—powerful genre-related and stylistic features. This in turn raises the very important issue of terminology. What, in other words, should we call a text that contains, among other things, explicit sex with the goal of arousing and titillating the reader? Yanqing xiaoshuo 艳情小说 can encompass without problem a source like the seventeenth-century Xiuta yeshi 繡榻野史, but what about Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅? There is no question that the latter can indeed be defined “erotic”, but as a literary text, in terms of its stylistic features, narrative breadth, philosophical and intellectual goals, it goes well beyond the perimeter and the parameters of the misadventures of Lu Tiancheng’s hero, Dongmen, modeled after Ximen Qing. Similarly, the sixteenth-century Ruyijun zhuan 如意君傳, is also an incredibly important work to understand history, power, gender roles in a way that is too complex to fit most contemporary Western definitions of pornography. From this perspective, Charles Stone’s argument that Ruyijun zhuan is at once “the fountainhead of Chinese erotica” and also “in a class by itself” is quite convincing to anyone who has read The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction as well as Stone’s erudite and compelling study. But things get a bit confusing when he defines it as nothing less than the non-pornographic source of all Chinese pornography. Who determines if a novel like the Ruyijun zhuan is more than simple exposure of and to “acts of one sort, and one sort alone”?

And, coming to later sources, how do we understand sexually explicit passages that we find in the masterpiece of Qing fiction, the Hong Lou Meng 紅樓夢? Is one explicit sex act alone enough to make a text pornographic? Terms like weixie xiaoshuo 赭鬱小说 have

which is a very important part of A’na’s tale, and thus they provide a very intriguing counterpart to the Ming novella. Sade, Marquis de, La philosophie dans le boudoir, in Œuvres complètes du marquis de Sade, vol. 3.
been used by scholars like Sun Kaidi, and in more recent studies adjectives such as huange 黃色 have been deployed to describe pornographic material. But if we look at canonical studies of Chinese literature, we find that, just like Confucius would not speak about ghosts, a scholar like Lu Xun refrained from invoking genre divisions that included sexuality in his still influential study of Chinese fiction, and this silence continues to reverberate still in the field, as there does not seem to be a consensus (or even an interest?) as to what terms to use in Chinese and in Western languages to define stories that deal explicitly with sex. In English, for one, the slippage between erotic and pornographic when discussing pre-modern Chinese fiction is troubling, as it too often the category of the “erotic” is evoked in ways that hide and obscure the sexually complicated and at times troubling dynamics depicted by the late imperial Chinese authors.

Consequently, as a scholar, I have been struggling with the fluidity of the Chinese texts and with this apparent lack of terminology in the face of a very lively textual presence, and I have been trying to use this terminological obscurity, as it were, as the starting point for an understanding of certain permanent features of the discourse of the erotic and the pornographic in pre-modern Chinese literature. The arbitrary nature of definitions we deploy, and by the fact that we often do not question what we mean with the terms we use thus prompted me to rethink my own approach to the material I study, and they are important factors in choosing to write the present essay.

My effort stems also from the fact that I have been teaching for some years now a course on sexual culture in China, past and present. I teach at a liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts, to a student-body that is very diverse racially, culturally and intellectually. And yet, over the years, I have come across time and again a very striking common feature to all my students, regardless of their very different backgrounds: namely a lack of cohesion and understanding of terminology related to the pornographic and the erotic as categories of analysis. This lack of clarity in the terminology of North-American English language speakers, in turn, has prompted me to investigate the pornographic and the erotic more specifically in the fields of gender studies and Chinese literature. And while in both arenas many great works address aspects of the discourse about pornography, I have found Western theoretical constructs to be pedagogically and historically inadequate (Foucault, after all, does not spend more than a couple of paragraphs on those non-Western Others that he lumped together in his history of sexuality—but that is another paper altogether). Thus I come to this topic as a scholar and as a teacher, challenged but also driven by curiosity towards linguistic and cultural absences, and struck by unquestioned assumptions about a common vocabulary that to me appears non-existent.

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13 For the problematic categories that such absence can engender, see the example of the “Ruan Scale” in Ruan, Fangfu. Sex in China. Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture. New York : Plenum Press, 1991.
My main working assumption here is that we can reflect on all these issues (terminology and categories of critical inquiry, literary history, pedagogy and the canon) in late imperial fiction by looking also at the margins of the existing literary tenets. In other words, given the heterogeneity of the sources and the themes under discussion, one possible way to go about defining the norms of pornography in the context of Ming fiction could be looking not just at “major” work such as Ruyijun zhuan, but also at “minor” works such as Chipozi zhuan. For one thing, one would be hard pressed to call this short text a novel. Written in a first person narrative in wenyan 文言, it is more reminiscent of a biji 筆記 than a xiaoshuo 小說 (though Sun Kaidi included it in his list of obscene novels in 1932). First published some time between 1521 and 1620, the earliest existing edition of this text dates to 1764, and it is clear from the number of still circulating editions that it underwent numerous reprints up until the present time, though it was of course banned repeatedly as a lascivious and obscene work.

Seen as one of the first pornographic sources within the history of Chinese literature (actually it is usually listed together with the afore mentioned Ruyijun zhuan and Xiuta yeshi in many Chinese sources, such as the Roupu tuan), this apparently autobiographical narrative retraces a woman’s sexual education from youth to old age. At the same time, as we shall see presently, this text deals more with the growth of the narrator’s awareness of her body, its desires, its joys and its sorrows, than with graphic depictions of the sexual act. That this text is intended as sexual education meant to arouse and stimulate its reader from its incipit to its supposedly natural conclusion is, by the way, also documented in Li Yu’s Rouputuan 肉蒲團, as this is one of the sources he gives his shy first wife to get her to be more sexually enthusiastic, a point to which I will return later on.

Even more interestingly, it is a portrait of a woman who knows what gives her pleasure, and also when and where to get it. She is also able how to express her sexual frustration and her need for more sex. She ends up paying a great deal for her choice to live a sexually satisfying life with multiple sexual partners, but at the end of her tale, she is happy, in good health and clearly relishing her past. In other words, she emerges from the pages of this story as a powerful and articulate personality, one that modern readers could be tempted to read either as a “very wicked girl/woman” or as a sexually empowered and socially liberated woman. Just how problematic these readings could be, however, will be shown as we look more closely at her story.

Schooling Pleasure. The Tale of A Foolish/Infatuated Woman

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15 I use the term “major” and “minor” here mindful of Deleuze and Guattari’s brilliant analysis of Kafka’s work, as I shall explain in more detail below. See Kafka, 1986.
16 Li Yu. Rouputuan, Hong Kong: Lian He chubanshe, n.d., Chapter 3.
17 Enuo is the reading of the protagonist’s name that Martin Huang favors, in his reading of Chipozi zhuan. See Martin Huang, Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center : 2001.
Let us now turn to follow Shangguan A’Na’s “sexual education” through her own retelling. She first appears as a ruddy seventy-year-old woman with a taste for spinning her yarn, and who begins her tale prompted by a curious visitor to her village. After a brief excursion about the origins of the Shangguan family, she starts her autobiographical retelling with her life as pre-pubescent eight-year old, to then move on to her entrance into adulthood, marriage, motherhood, adultery, all the way to her fall from grace with her husband and back to the future, as it were, to her old age, exactly where her present day retelling had begun. Stylistically speaking, one of the most innovative features of this novella is its structure. The text is constructed as a first person narrative pre- and post-faced by the words of her interviewer/editor following in a loose fashion the tradition established by Tang dynasty’s chuangqi such as Yingying zhuan. Her “interviewer” appears three times in the text, each time with the specific function to give rhythm to the narrative: at its very beginning, he initiates the retelling, as he is drawn to befriend A’Na by the remains of her beauty on her aging face; midway, as A’Na pauses a the end of the first day, he promises to return the following day to hear the rest of the story. And then at the very end, he promises to publish her tale. He indicates a very specific readership at the end of the Foolish Woman’s tale, and one that may be surprising, as the editor clearly states that this book is meant for women of the inner quarters, so that they will be able to learn from the mistakes of the sexually adventurous female protagonist. That this text is then intended as sexual education meant to arouse and stimulate its (female) reader is confirmed by Li Yu’s Rouputuan 肉蒲團, where at least one fictional heroine, Xiang Yu, Jade Scent, Weiyangsheng/Vesperus’ wife, follows A’Na’s instructions in the realm of the senses, as this is one of the works her husband Vesperus gives her to teach her to be more sexually enthusiastic (albeit with disastrous consequences) as we shall see below.19

This structure defines, not surprisingly, the text as a didactic tale of social fall and spiritual redemption. Where lust undoes the social standing of the foolish woman, Buddhism steps in to wash away the impurity of the yinxin 淫心 of the heroine. In this sense, this source allows the audience to dwell in the fluid position created by the traditional fiction of enlightenment. So, the student in the first half of the story is A’Na herself, an apprentice in the way of the flesh. In the second half of the text, she has become the teacher of this dao 道, but she still has much to learn about it, as she soon discovers that to maintain control in the realm of the sense is impossible for a woman. Thus she returns, humiliated and disgraced, to the role of student, once she is evicted from her social position in life and sent back home. At the very end ofCHIPOLI Zhuan, speaking in her own voice of the hard lesson she has learned, she becomes again the teacher, transmitting, just like a dharma preacher, her xinfa 心法 first and foremost to her guest/interviewer, and then, by extension to the readers outside the text. These protean shifts in roles (from student to teacher and vice versa) allow the readers to enjoy a multiplicity of positions in reading and enjoying the text.

I would argue that even more interesting than its narrative organization, it is this novella’s numerical structure: the first numerical framework, that constitutes the main organizing thread of A’Na’s narrative, is provided by the heroine’s various ages. She brings them into the text as the various stages in which she has new sexual (and eventually also

19 Li Yu. Rouputuan, Hong Kong: Lian He chubanshe, n.d., Chapter 3.
sentimental) experiences. Another set of chronological and narrative partitions is that provided by the number of her lovers, twelve in all (it would be thirteen, if we included her husband, but there is not that much sex between them). Closely connected to this scansion is the one provided by the type of sexual encounter and the kind of social, moral and sexual taboo it breaks, as she herself mentions at the very end of her story: from incest to adultery, from breach of social propriety to disrespect for ritual, she does it all, as she has sex with her father and her three brothers-in-law (the two on her husband’s side, and the one on her sister’s side), for example, as well as with servants and her son’s teacher. She has sex with a monk and sex with a female impersonator, and she demeans herself by wasting her husband’s money and resources on her son’s tutor. She neglects her motherly duties, and the utmost filial act we see her perform is servicing sexually her father-in-law, at least in his words. When she gets pregnant with her son, she is not even sure about the father’s identity! And the list of transgression could go on.

How to explain this? Numbers of positions and enumerations of lovers, conquests, and transgressions are not only standard features of Chinese erotic and pornographic works, but also of earlier Daoist sex manuals (and of many Western pornographic texts as well), and the focus on numbers immediately relates Chipozi zhuan to this material. Repetition of the same (type of) acts, even transgressive ones, seems to be very much at the heart of what defines pornography. What is rather unusual is the beginning of the narrative with A’Na at age seventy, and then the immediate shift backwards in time to her as a child on the road to sexual perdition. Martin Huang mentions the very intriguing possibility that the anonymous author of the Chipozi zhuan could be intentionally begin A’Na’s story at seventy years of age as a direct reference to Wu Zetian’s age when the Ruyijun zhuan begins. For sure the two texts are in many ways complementary and it is not too far fetched to suppose that the author of the latter source would be consciously framing his own story against that of the earlier text. This connection between these two Ming sources is further reinforced by the family name of the protagonist, which is highly reminiscent of a woman who was very much associated with Wu Zetian, namely, Shangguan Wan’er, a woman whose life was full of adventure, adultery, and literary endeavors. The age and the name of the protagonist are thus immediate markers of her connection with two very problematic and yet seductive and exciting female figures in Chinese history, and thus set the stage for the erotic content of the text.

But these numerical extremes, as it were, do constitute very solid narrative markers because they show A’Na’s story as a tight, self-contained narrative unit that has already come to an end by the time it begins for the reader (not unlike it is the case with the much later novel Honglou meng). They also convey a remarkable lucidity to the life-story of A’Na. Even if she is introduced to us as a white-haired woman with barely any teeth left in her mouth, the clear thread of her tale leaves no doubt to her soundness of mind even in her advanced age. This foolish woman is no fool when it comes to retracing her lifeline. Last but not least, this type of story telling “by numbers” also gives a more compelling rhythm to her voice, but

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20 Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 129.
at the same time makes it more universal. Her “rake’s progress”, divided in neat stages, can be also read as a sure roadmap towards perdition that any woman could follow.

The sparseness and the austerity of this work’s prose enhance this feeling of universality of her narrative arc and of her enunciative position. A’Na’s words are kept at a bare minimum. She is given no precise birthplace or birth date and while she does talk about her family, her childhood, her life, we are given nothing but generic features, that could indeed apply to any woman’s infancy during the sixteenth century. We know about her curiosity, her mischievousness as a little girl, about the fact that her parents, for instance, do not want her to read certain airs in the Shi jing. But while vernacular fiction was bursting at the seams with details and poetry when it came to framing its characters, here we find only essential descriptions, for example, of a man’s charm (usually in terms of penis size), and virtually no depiction of the places A’Na inhabits. Also the actual depiction of sex acts is quite basic and bare. What drives the narrative forward is the retelling of the woman’s life more than anything else, not so much her sexual exploits (unlike it is the case with Pan Jinlian, for instance—think of the description of Ximen Qing’s sexual organ alone in Jinpingmei cihua). In a way, the space that A’Na’s tale opens to her reader’s gaze is highly reminiscent of the bare stage in late imperial theater, with minimum props and thus maximum focus on the actors. She herself stars, both synchronically and diachronically, as the female lead. Ingénue one moment, devoted filial daughter in law the next, yinfu for a while, she ends up in a comic role not unlike that of the clown in Yuan drama. In this sense she performs, across time, the rise and the decline of one character in all is different facets. The scarcity of details also allows for greater freedom of interpretation on the audience’s part, greater possibility of identification, and provides him or her with the stuff of fiction, transforming A’Na’s life into a meta-text for readers of all ages to dispose of as they please.

It is interesting from this perspective then that her first stop on this journey into her past takes her all the way back to her childhood encounter with poetry, of all things. The discovery of sexuality begins for A’Na through text— and more specifically with reading and trying to understand forbidden passages in the Shi jing dealing with male-female relations. Between the age of eight and twelve, she challenges her parents’ authority and reads the very poems that they have warned her about, and this immediately becomes the mode of her relationship to sexual desire as well as the reason for her very strong sexual awakening. Reading forbidden books opens a realm that is sexy, exciting and that in turn leads to more excitement and danger. This is one of the main characteristics of a pornographic act, in Chinese literature, the movement of the eye from text to sex and back, endlessly. Thus the reader outside the text is immediately complicit in the sexual transgression. A’Na reads the forbidden poems, and so do we, with her. And she begins to read her body’s nascent sexual desire, so do we read her reading the poem, her body, her blooming desire. This nexus of text, sex, danger, and desire is again a very powerful trope in pre-modern Chinese fiction, and here it clearly foreshadows A’Na’s eventual downfall into a lustful life-style, not unlike Du Liniang’s lessons in poetry foreshadowed her fall into the realm of qing.

As A’Na feels full of desires she herself does not fully understand, her main curiosity moves from reading about love in past literary sources to reading present differences in the body of boys and girls. As it is often the case with many Chinese (and Western)
pornographic narratives, an older female figure, a neighbor in this case, is forced by the eager A’Na to recount how to understand physical differences between men and women. This is in and of itself is a topic fascinating enough for an entire book, so I will just focus on the question of pleasure, in particular in terms of how it is defined by its opposite, pain. This contrast, of pleasure versus pain, is one of the most interesting aspects of this brief text. In her exchange with her young neighbor, A’Na learns that sex happened somewhat by chance between the primordial man and the primordial woman, born of the natural chaos of things, when they disrobed upon the arrival of summer and upon seeing each other naked, they discovered that one had something that the other lacked. Upon the joining of the bodies, the man (from whose perspective this story is old, even though it is narrated by a woman) reacted immediately with nothing less than ecstasy, and his rise to bliss is described in very detailed terms, while we hear nothing of the woman’s pleasure, though we are told that it is from here that stems the mutual joy of men and women 男女之相悦. It is at this point that A’Na’s instructress mentions the fact that when it comes to physical fulfillment, women have to put up with pain at first, unlike it is the case for men.22

Here and elsewhere in the novella, the first sexual congress with a new partner (and not just the loss of virginity) is always associated with pain: the usual progress of intercourse for A’Na is that she immediately feels pain upon penetration (in her teenage years, this is clearly because of the inexperience of her partners), and then immediately wants to stop it but without success—at which point the intercourse becomes a veritable rape scene. This dynamic is very clearly illustrated when, at around twelve years of age, A’Na loses her virginity to her cousin, even if it is the virgin girl who has the curiosity, the will, the drive and the wherewithal to seduce the equally virgin (and somewhat slow-witted) boy.

In this sense, A’Na’s story about her sexual past seems to indicate that female pleasure is something painfully learned. Unlike the natural and immediate response in a man, for whom sex is immediately bliss, jouissance is a hard conquest for a woman. It requires a partner of one’s choice, and even then, pain is seen as the necessary price of eventual climax and orgasm, which is nonetheless presented as the goal towards which both partners strive. A woman on her own is a tad useless, the text seems to tell us. We see for instance that A’Na, inspired by her neighbor’s teachings, increases her sexual explorations, checking her genitals to assess with her fingers her physical changes, and soon discovers the thrills of masturbation, which fail, however, to give her the full-body swoon described by her neighbor. From this perspective, putting up with pain could appear a small price to pay in exchange for physical satisfaction.

Chipozi zhuan thus naturalizes differences in sexual behavior and response: whereas for many of the real life counterparts of A’Na experiences of and reactions to the sex act could be read as informed also by gender imperatives, expectations, and education, the text presents it as a matter of body and physical conformation alone. So we see that while a positive male response to sex does not appear to require any practice, or simply nothing more than a handful of tries to get on the right track (or inside the right orifice, for that matter), the female sexual response needs more time to unfold. The text clearly makes it a question of sufficient lubrication, attraction, and willingness on the part of the woman, but also of a natural configuration that makes a woman respond in a less immediately fulfilling way to sex.

22 Furongzhuren, Chipozi zhuan, 285.
It also portrays male sexuality as unstoppable and relentless, a point to which I will return later. For sure, this source describes the various phases of male sexual response in very precise detail, while A’Na’s body can only react to sexual intercourse in two modes: pain and orgasmic bliss. This aspect, in and of itself, could indeed constitute a good argument for a male authorship, and readership for Chipazi zhuan, since this imbalance cannot be just coincidental in such a well-structured source.

This point intersects with this work’s portrayal of male sexuality as unstoppable and relentless. As mentioned above, almost each time a man and a woman have sex, the woman says no at first, and every single time, the man does not withdraw, and plunges blindly on, though he may, on occasion, acknowledge her resistance. A’Na’s sister-in-law is raped by their father-in-law; A’Na herself is raped, practically within a matter of minutes of having made love to her beloved servant lover Yinglang, by Datu, a foul smelling servant who insists on sodomizing her; and by her brother in law. Her maid is also raped by her son’s tutor, Gu, to facilitate the affair between him and A’Na. This seems indeed indicate the common view that women mean yes when they say no, or simply that they need to be brought around to see that what is bad for them is not only good for the men, but eventually good for them also. Mutual pleasure indeed: in other words, all throughout the text, while both men and women experience lust, pleasure, desire, men have more fun, and get away with it. Women are able to compensate for the lack of sexual satisfaction with love, and indeed A’Na often tells her lovers that she does not mind not feeling fully satisfied physically, as she loves her paramour so much.

Anyway, at this early stage, the question remains as to what drives A’Na on at this early phase of her life. Pleasure it cannot be, as she is still learning it. Curiosity, it would seem, or is it foolishness? Or we could call her drive as fueled by a thirst for knowledge that appears misplaced in a young girl. The good news is that she quickly learns to know the orgasmic perimeters of her body. Even if her cousin Huimin is not well endowed (he is after all, only a boy), she does not give up, and eventually pleasure comes to them both. For A’Na, this means an entrance also into the realm of love (ai 愛), a love that she immediately recognizes as forbidden, as she and her cousin clearly know that they have to keep their nightly frolicking a secret. But A’Na shows stamina worth of a Daoist practitioner, as she does not give up her quest for pleasure easily, though for her pleasure is the ultimate goal, and not the tool to reach immortality. She soon learns when she is satisfied, and she knows what to do to achieve her pleasure; she also knows how to articulate her lack of fulfillment and her need for more sex to achieve her satisfaction. Often it is the case that the men lack the stamina to satisfy her sexually, which would indicate, again, a male authorship, a point to which I will return later on.

Entrapped by her own carnal desires, the thirty-year old A’Na continues on with her sexual exploits. It seems like the stakes get higher each time she chooses a new sexual partner; each time she takes on a lover, he has to share her with the previous ones, and eventually she creates for herself a veritable harem of sexual partners, form all social classes and ages. Particularly relevant in terms of shaping her sexual promiscuity seems to be here the role played by the space that A’Na, as a married woman, occupies in her daily life. Homebound, she seldom has much to do, and meets only her husband’s male and female relatives, or her servants, male and female. Her life seems to be carried out in close quarters with many other
people, and her sexual indiscretions are always seen, heard, and exploited by others. The entire household in a way is made up of sexual predators. A’Na is, in other words, in very good company!

Like in many other Ming novels and stories, A’Na inhabits a very topsy-turvy world, where a woman like herself, young, beautiful, and driven becomes for a while the center of the world. Male servants seem to be convenient sexual partners who are always willing to replace absent husbands. Men of A’Na’s rank are very mobile, often gone on extended professional journeys. Male servants substitute their masters in performing sexual duties that keep their wives happily occupied. Indeed A’Na is consumed by her affairs. She does not seem concerned with womanly work, except when at the beginning of her life as a young bride, she tries to please her mother-in-law. But she works hard at pleasing herself. For their part, the men who crowd her house, and her bedroom, are just as idle and always out of place. Privacy seems to be non-existent in the domestic sphere, as the division between the sexes. And walls do have ears and eyes! Her neighbors even make up a ditty that is sung about her affairs. It appears the only one who does not know about this state of affairs is her husband, as he later says when her trysts and affairs are revealed to him. Her sexual appetite and her need for sexual fulfillment appear to increase with age, and together with the craving for sex, love (ai 愛) appears. Because she grows so fond of the man who is to be her last lover, Gu, her son’s tutor, A’Na starts refusing all her other lovers who grow resentful and eventually expose her to her husband, who sends her back home to her mother. Interestingly though, it is the pursuit of a monogamous, romantic relationship that encompasses but also transcends sex that causes her social downfall. At this time she is thirty-nine years old.

The scene in which A’Na’s is exposed is at once crucial and excruciating. Her fall from grace is precipitated by the return of her cousin Huimin. Now a respectable scholar, he decides to go and visit her, with no lewd intentions whatsoever. But A’Na’s lover, driven by his jealousy, makes a scene and this in turn causes Huimin, offended and ruffled by Gu’s insolence, to leave in high dudgeon. He runs into another of A’Na old lovers, her sister’s husband, and together they denounce her to her husband Keyong. For sure it is no mere coincidence that the man whom she seduced and who deflowered her should come back to put her in her “proper place”. But he is in good company, as all the men of the household, i.e. almost all of her past lovers, circle her and Gu, her current paramour. He gets severely beaten, and then Keyong’s brother says that A’Na should also be punished (truly an ungrateful lover). Her husband then turns his attention to her and beats her mercilessly. He would have her killed but her son intercedes on her behalf, so Keyong relents. All throughout this very extended and dramatic climax, which lasts much more than any of the depiction of sexual intercourse or sexual pleasure and in which tears and blood flow even more freely than semen in any of her amorous trysts, A’Na is shown as ashamed and remorseful. She voices no resistance to her treatment. She begs for her life to be spared, but she also actually says that she deserves to be sent away, as a lustful woman who has lost her chastity.

It is true that this scene unveils the hypocrisy of the men who had shared her bed, as

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23 Furongzhuren, Chipozi zhuan, 305.
24 Furongzhuren, Chipozi zhuan, 305-306.
25 Furongzhuren, Chipozi zhuan, 306.
not even one among them defends her, except her son. The men themselves, though they often initiated sexual congress with A’Na—always illicitly, adulterously and at times incestuously—, do not meet with any retribution, or show any regret.\footnote{In this sense, this whole scene is a very apt reflection of the gender dynamics and imperatives revolving around female chastity that Janet Theiss brilliantly maps out in \textit{Disgraceful Matters. The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-century China}, University of California Press, 2004, especially in her discussion of adultery and incest in Qing legal sources, pp. 108-112.} It is also important not to confuse this scene with a sadist performance (think, for instance, of the grand finale in Sade’s \textit{Philosophy in the Bedroom}). While the bodies of the adulterous couple are indeed part of the narrative here, the true focus of this scene is the emotional and psychological suffering of Keyong and A’Na. A’Na’s pain and suffering for losing her beloved, together with her shame at being fingered by her neighbors as a lascivious wife who has been repudiated, are retold in a detailed and realistic fashion, and again in greater length than in most of the sexual passages in the earlier pages. The humiliation and the pain eventually drive her to join her mother in her Buddhist practices to purify her lascivious mind (\textit{yinxin 淫心}), and that is where the “transcriber” of her “confession” meets her. The ending seems to reinforce the didactic framework of the story, showing the folly of pursuing one’s heart’s desire, and the dire consequences, social and emotional, of doing so.

To conclude this brief journey through A’Na’s much more complex and vibrant narrative, her twenty-six years of sexual activity include much pain and loss, and are thus met with more than thirty years of chastity and penance. So this source does not, unlike most of Italian and French pornography, presents a rational argument for changing social attitudes, if not values about sex.

So what can we conclude from this painfully brief excursus in this fascinating text? First of all that a first person female narrative is indeed a very rare event in a fictional context before the late Qing period and that it breaks strikingly with both previous and later narrative modes and models. It also powerfully modifies and complicates the voyeuristic position of the reader. This move is in stark contrast with sources like \textit{Ruyijun zhu\u2019an} or even like Li Yu’s \textit{Rouputuan}, where the implied reader is clearly a male that can substitute himself for the voracious and well-endowed sexual hero. It is also indeed highly reminiscent of contemporary Western pornography, such as \textit{L’école des Filles}, discussed below, where a female voice, even when she is not always speaking in the first person, can be used to arouse and stimulate the male reader. Furthermore, in \textit{Chipozi zhu\u2019an}, the male reader would be hard, as it were, put to occupy this position when confronted, since the very incipit of the narrative, with a female subject who speaks of her own sexual experience as an old woman, who has moved beyond the samsaric wheel of pleasure and desire. Even if the narrative immediately moves backwards in time, to present the listener with a much younger and sexually curious girl, it is hard to dismiss the ghost of old age and decrepitude that grotesquely haunts the narrator.

At the same time we see that when it comes to describing the journey into adult sexuality, the voice of the foolish woman spends more time teaching about male sexual responses and reactions than about those of women. Women are like a two gear car when it
comes to sex: be they willing or unwilling, once sexual intercourse (no mention of Daoist foreplay here) happens, they immediately fall in love with whoever gives them fist pain, and then pleasure, and they will be willing to face any danger to hold on to their source of physical bliss. Not that the pursuit of pleasure should be underappreciated, but the ones who really rejoice here are the men, who get away with all those sexual improprieties that cost so dearly to A’Na.

Perhaps we could say that this allows for both a female- and male-gendered subject position. The male-gendered one posits the sexual object of desire as the ever young, ever desirable, accessible, and penetrable Other, and this is the young A’Na, driven from one lover to the next by her narrative trajectory. The female gendered one, on the other hand, is that of the voice of pleasure and joy that comes to greater wisdom in a fashion that is very reminiscent of the Daoist sex classics like Su Nu jing 素女經, where the experienced woman dispenses sexual advice and wisdom to the male listener, who, not unlike the male editor of A’Na’s story, sits and listens to the wonderful tale of this old hag’s adventures, learning how to navigate the dangerous seas of passion and desire in a very pleasurable and entertaining fashion.

Interesting, from this perspective then, is the fact that we are dealing here with a common woman. A’Na is not a beautiful and famous courtesan, not even in the making. Her biggest change in social status is to become a wife, and eventually a sort of lay nun. Though she claims to be of noble descent, she is no Shangguan Wan’er. She is neither a princess nor an Empress, thus she does not have any social and class related characteristic to make her sexual visibility particularly appealing narrative-wise, sexually or otherwise, like it is very clear, for example, in Ruyijun zhuàn, featuring none other than Wu Zetian, or the supposedly late Ming novel Yu guihong 玉閨紅. An upper-class sexy heroine is one that is hard to get, and hard to come by. A cloistered upper-class virgin, a nymphomaniac with a twisted mind, a neglected wife, a very famous courtesan, a imperial consort: those would appear to be the true heroines of ero-pornographic Chinese lore. Class, invisibility, and inaccessibility are often the markers of the female/feminized pornographic object of male desire. And yet this very feature, in a way, her plainness, physically and also fictionally, may be the true key to A’Na’s everlasting sex appeal: like of many of the female characters of contemporary pornography worldwide, the true pornographic subject is often cast, right next the unrealistic model of the porn star, as the woman next door, a teacher, a wife, a mother.

This effect is further enhanced by her limited resources as a woman, which also delimit the spatial boundaries of her sexual existence. Unlike the sex-driven vagabonds of texts like Luye xianzong, the foolish woman lives in the walled confines of an unsatisfying marriage. Her sexual partners are not dashing scholars or expert playboys, but clumsy cousins, hunky boy-servants and horny in-laws. We find in this text no sextopia or erotopia, which we can clearly see as one of the main features of the erotic narrative: no garden blooming in spring, no yin-charged brothel or monastery, no lavish mansion with access to many different realms of sensory experiences through the graces of the various concubines and willing sexual partners absconded in every noon and cranny of the building. Nor do we encounter detailed description of a boudoir laden with exotic scents and womanly paraphernalia that in turns opens the gates to a fairyland of sexual adventures (as it is the case in Chapter Five of Hongloumeng). The garden where A’Na meets one of her long-term
lovers, Yinglang, is the scene of her rape by Du, the servant stinking of onion and reeking of wine. While especially her last paramour, Gu the Tutor, is said to have a very impressive member, no man appears to be endowed with enormous penises, a la Wu Acao, nor is A’Na’s vagina monstrous in its size and depth, a la Wu Zetian.

But we could read this domestication and deflation of the ero-pornographic discourse’s tendency inflate and affabulate the size of sex, in all terms, as equally powerful. The narrator’s voice speaking of her own pleasure in a heterosexual context is constructed as powerfully titillating to the male heterosexual reader precisely because it is so realistic and does not evoke inaccessible ideals and goals. Furthermore, it does so in the very familiar didactic structure of the narrative of enlightenment. By presenting sexual awakening and desire as natural and legitimate, even in a woman (bringing as mentioned above to mind echoes of pre-Han Daoist sex manuals), but by also depicting the dire consequences that a woman faces in actively pursuing her sexual needs and resisting unwanted sexual advances, the author follows a very stable tradition of story-telling. This, together with the other elements mentioned earlier, would appear to indicate a male authorship, along with the fact that time and again in the text A’Na’s sexual partners fail to satisfy her sexually, a point that would seem to indicate a clear male anxiety regarding sexual prowess and stamina, which dates back to pre-Qin times.

From this perspective I, for one, do not see this text either as a proto-feminist attempt to make a claim for independent female sexuality and desire or as one of the instances of “feminine authority” in Chinese fictional narratives.27 On the contrary, the text in my reading complies with what appear to be the main features of erotic and pornographic canonical discourse in the late Ming and early Qing as well as with the much earlier tradition of bedchamber manuals and Daoist sexual yoga precepts. Showing the dual subject position mentioned above where sex and desire and lust are possible for men and women but can lead a woman to divorce and rejection is indeed a very clear example of lack of feminine authority. Ming China, even fictionally, is still a man’s world, and A’Na’s words reinforce the message and do not destabilize it.

The fact that the foolish woman is presenting her tale as a fiction of enlightenment should not mislead us either. What appears to be more problematic and interesting, however, is the fact that her voice is quite powerful in describing also how she is the object of sexual violence and exploitation, and we see here none of the explicit details that often in pre-modern Chinese texts transform rape and violence into a titillating experience for the voyeurs—inside and outside the text (see, for example, rape scenes in late Ming homoerotic collections such as Bian’erchai 弁而釵, or in Yuguihong, or even in huaben xiaoshuo 話本小說 such as Maiyoulang du zhan huakui 賣油郎獨占花魁). We could simply say that here, other more sexually explicit and driven narratives, the intent of the author (or transcriber) is to create a very credible “folly-and-its-consequences” narrative.

So, is the reader asked to end up sympathizing with A’Na’s fate? Is “the narrator is Moll Flanders rather than the wife of Bath, more sinned against than sinning”?28 It can actually be argued that after her beating, and her disgraceful return home, A’Na does not

27 Huang, Desire and Fictional Narrative, 135-136.
change much. It is true that she is forced to face the consequences of her actions and to come to terms with the fact that what she did was wrong; and yet, the reader knows that her awareness of lasciviousness and the sense of guilt in the pursuit of her own pleasure were born in A’Na together with her desire. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that she kept her poetic readings hidden, and concealed her tryst with Huimin; she also fakes her virginity on her wedding night, revealing that if she knows how pleasurable sex is, she also knows that, as a woman, she is not entitled to finding such pleasure before marriage, and, once married, outside the monogamous (and often monotonous and empty) bedchamber of her matrimony. As A’Na spends time healing in her mother’s home, not only does she not change her social attitudes, her values about sex remain the same. She still sees it as a pleasurable, and dangerous, and as a source of illusion and delusion, but she loves talking about it all, even to a complete stranger. How deep is her enlightenment then? This tension between didactic intent and lustful motives is indeed characteristic of most ero-pornographic fiction of the time, so it is not surprising to find it here.

This in turn brings with it the question of the intended audience for this brief text. Who would want to read this tale? Who was it written for? Given its characteristic and the fact that it is written in Classical Chinese, one could postulate here a female audience for this text, a point that I will be happy to expound on if there is anyone interested in the audience, a point that is also reinforced by the fact that A’Na herself is a reader of Classical poetry and that the author explicitly mentions at the end of his “transcription” that his main intent in writing A’Na’s story down was to warn women and teach them the importance of preserving their chastity. This interpretation is confirmed by the above mentioned Chapter Three of Rouputuan, where the scholar Vesperus goes to the bookstore to buy a boxed set of erotic works for his sexually inexperienced and somewhat recalcitrant wife to read to encourage her to become more sexually adventurous. Contemporaries readers, male and female, saw this text as pornographic, in the sense mentioned at the beginning of the essay, and thus as a literary “sex toy” that they could bring into their conjugal bed. At the same time, its strong didactic structure, reinforced by its original first-persona female narrative, made reading the text not only a sexually enjoyable experience but also an ethically “safe” one, especially for women. It is true that A’Na was able to come to enlightenment on her very own carnal prayer mat, not a common achievement in late Ming times, as now.

And let me thus come back to Li Yu’s Rouputuan. Weiyang sheng or Vesperus wants his timid and inexperienced wife Xiangyu or Jade Scent to become sexually assertive and courageous (the text says actually that he wants to aid her lewd nature 要助他淫性). First he has her look at chungong 春宮, spring pictures, and then he goes to the bookstore to get her twelve fengyuzhishu 風月之書, including Xiuta yeshi 鏤塌野史, Ruyijun zhuan 如意君傳, and, last but not least, Chipozhi zhuan. His choice of a novella like Chipozhi zhuan, illuminates and, more importantly perhaps, naturalizes a woman’s sexual appetite. The fact that it is composed in literary Chinese makes even more sense, from this perspective, as the text that accompanies many chuanhua, erotic albums, is also literary Chinese. The relevance of the textual component of the wife’s education is important, as it echoes what happens to A’Na. But with one very important difference: as a young girl and with no man to lead her, A’Na uses the literary canon of the Confucian classics as a “secret museum” to piece together the mystery of sexual attraction between men and women, driven by her own solitary desire.
at first, and then has to rely on other women’s greater experience. A’Na’s school is a very fluid space where young women take the initiative to open texts that do not belong to them, such as the *Shi Jing*, and initiate random sexual encounters. She seems to be breaking new ground and taboos, and to confuse socially acceptable behavior. So whereas Ana’s textual discovery was stolen, illegitimate, Fragrant Jade’s is legitimized by her husband’s pedagogical aims and her status as a married woman. Jade Scent learns in the comfort of her own house, and does not have to read in secret: her husband educates her, procures the textbooks, and turns the bedroom into a classroom. Vesperus’ wife is a willing student who has nothing to hide and all to gain from her sexual education. What remains similar in these two women’s journey through sexuality and pleasure is their eventual fall from social grace. Thus, when Jade Scent, inspired by her legitimate education to pursue pleasure in an individual way that leads her away from the domestic confines of a monogamous marriage, she too is punished, not unlike A’Na, with public humiliation (and in Jade Scent’s case, suicide).

It could be argued that *Chipozi zhuan*, by mapping out the natural development of a woman’s sexual awakening and maturity, emphasizes their natural quality and thus legitimizes them. Not unlike the eighth century *Dalefu* by Bai Xingjian it celebrates the pleasures of the flesh by chronicling the growth and the biological changes that enable boys and girls to enter the circuit of adult sexuality. At the same time it also shows the dangers, just like the *Roupu tuan* does, that manifest when that female appetite transcends the boundaries of married life and of monogamous sexual intercourse (the man’s situation is different, as Keith McMahon has so compellingly shown, as he can be polygynous, as long as he does not transgress into adultery). Lust may be natural in a woman, but it must be orthodox: it cannot be polyandric, except in courtesans and prostitutes, but that is a whole another story (and paper!).

A’Na’s defiance of her parents, her disrespect for her husband and her proscribed gender roles lead her straight to her eventual capitulation to the dominant Confucian ethical framework and to her escape into Buddhism and celibacy, because a socially disgraced woman like herself had not other choice, even in fiction. Pornography’s other *raison d’être*, in this sense, is to climax in a celebration of sexually normative behavior. Explicit sexual representation is always about regulation, in other words, about the normalization of sexual mores and modes of intercourse with the other or the same sex. Love and sex, in other words, are almost always inevitably about the law.\(^29\) The laws of (individual) desire and those of society may conflate or clash: and yet no fiction writer can invoke the one without defining the other. In this sense, all the rules and rituals that were sanctioned in Ming times, including filial piety and its violations, coexist and intertwine necessarily within late imperial Chinese fiction. From this perspective, *Chipozi zhuan* shows us how the reckless pursuit of pleasure naturally morphs into the systematic violation of all the bonds, social, familial, emotional, which make up the fabric of society. So A’Na undermines her bonds within her family, her husband, his family, and in her neighborhood. By sleeping with servants, tutors, and in-laws she creates that problematic chaos stemming from the lack of society’s

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\(^29\) I am very thankful to professor David Wang, who with his incredibly helpful questions, helped me realize how central the relationship between desire and the law is in terms of defining this work’s genre and meanings (Harvard, November 2008).
management of sexuality (especially women’s) that prescriptions such as chastity and incest avoidance are meant to enforce.\(^\text{30}\) As Godelier writes

> [wherever incest is condemned and at the same time practiced, it potentially and really subverts, across the board, relations of cooperation and authority within the family. For when incest is practiced, all of the individual kinship positions gradually merge and fuse with one another and in the end are abolished, since the same individual can end up being, for instance, the son and the husband of his mother as well as the brother of the sons and daughters born of this union.\(^\text{31}\)]

A’Na’s sexual drive is fundamentally asocial: while her goal is not to defy the rules that bind and regulate her sex life and appetites for ideological reasons, it would seem that the author, through her, particularly delights in breaking them, at least temporarily. Hence the important role of fiction in pre-modern times and of pornography (and the internet in modern and contemporary societies) to allow the iconoclastic delights of asocial sexual behavior, especially when at the end there can be the promise of redemption and liberation from the ego that drives it, as it is the case of Chipozi zhuan.

Thus, Chipozi zhuan’s novel approach to narrating female sexual transgressions ends up, like many other late imperial tales of exceptional women, bringing women where they belong, namely under male authority and straight back to the monogamous bedroom of their husband, rightfully chosen by their parents. Perhaps the only possible reading that allows for Chipozi zhuan to be read in a more problematic fashion is to understand the author’s choice to write this story in literary Chinese as a forerunner of the literary move that Deleuze and Guattari termed “the deterritorializations of a major language through a minor literature written in the major language from a marginalized or minoritarian position.” In other words, by choosing wenyan as the language of A’Na’s voice and story, the anonymous Ming author could be seen here as taking on the “major” language of history, official biographies, poetry, and of the cultural establishment, and putting it in the mouth of a woman, whose voice is always meant as “minor”, thereby transforming this voice into one with an enunciative value that transcends the individual’s story (in this case, A’Na’s) and makes it collective in a politically significant way.\(^\text{32}\) Seductive as this possibility is, however, the fact remains that imminent, embodied, the yinxin/xing of women goes through the eye, the, heart and the flesh, and it has nothing to do with subversive social practices, and all to do with the intent of the writer and that of the reader. It does not see itself as either iconoclastic or transgressive, just as “foolish” or “infatuated” when it escapes its proper place. This escape can render female lust an interesting and titillating matter-out-place to sexually arouse the reader, but in the end it provides the legitimate context for the acquisition and application of sexual practices, and also of established gender norms.

\(^{30}\) This discussion, focused on incest in late imperial and modern Chinese fiction, is taken on in more depth in my manuscript in progress “A Family Romance. Incest and Filial Piety in Zhang Ailing’s Xinjing.”


\(^{32}\) Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F., Kafka. 17 and ff. .
The School of Girls, or, The Woman’s Body Orgasmic. 33

“C’est la meilleure chose du monde.”

In 1661, in Paris, a book came to an extremely tragic end. Its incineration in turn launched it into a very long and profitable existence through the annals of French and European literary history. Not that its fiery demise came unexpectedly. As a copy of the anonymous L’école des filles, this particular volume had been on the lam, as it were, for quite a few years. Louis XIV’s minister of finance, Nicolas Fouquet, had managed to conceal it in a secret room in his mistress’ house, and thus to keep it away from the burning eyes (quite literally) of the censors since 1655, when the entire first print of the work had been incinerated, —with the exception of six copies, one of which had been given as a gift to Fouquet. Michel Millot and Jean L’ange, the two men who paid for the text’s printing in 1655—but who were most likely not its authors—had been tried and found guilty that very year. It is undeniable that compared with Claude Le Petit (1638–1662), who was burned at stake for his satirical work Le Bordel des Muses, Millot and L’Ange got off relatively unscathed: Millot was symbolically hanged and then burned in effigy, and L’Ange was sentenced to three years of exile from Paris, a sentence that was most likely never enforced.

What was less predictable was that shortly thereafter the novel that they helped bring into print and to the pyre would emerge like a phoenix from its ashes, and come in time to be seen as the origin of the modern European pornographic novel. Though there are different opinions as to whether or not this novel deserves such an “honor,” The School of Girls is a very good counterpart for A’Na’s journey through pleasure. It is not, strictly speaking, a first person narrative, but it does rely on a dialogue between two women to retell of the sexual education of a young woman to an intended audience of other young female readers, at least in theory (and this is something that will become a stable quality of French pornography, as it is clear in Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom, when he auspicates that mothers will buy his book for their daughters). In this sense, it is meant to play the same pedagogical role that Chipozhi zhuang does for Vesperus and his wife. But the French author takes his didactic imperative a step further, by making the book become, quite literally, the penis that needs the feminine eyes/I for its successful reception. In this sense one could say that this novel is revolutionary, in that it posits the reader as female, not just in terms of gender, but also of sex. The poem that works as an epitaph to the novel makes this interpretation indisputable:

Fucking writer from Cyprus,
Who in all your fucking writings
Show that to fuck well means to live well,
The countless arguments you teach

33 An earlier and less extensive version of this section was published as “Pornography”, in Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History, Oxford University Press, 2007.
To make people fuck in countless ways
Will not render your pen eternal.
No, what will make you famous forever
Is that in your fucking book,
In a novel way,
Your prose fucks us through the eyes.34

The text, in other words, is not just a mirror for couplings and sexual intercourse: it is sex, made, once more, text. The novel is built as a series of two dialogues that marks the two stages (before and after) of the sexual education of Fanchon, a sixteen-year old girl from a very respectable, albeit quite boring family. In the first dialogue the reader witnesses the education of the young innocent girl through the words of the older, more experienced cousin. Here, just like in Chipozī zhuan, verbal education equals seduction and initiation. While there is no text equivalent to the forbidden Shijing that acts as a conduit of education/corruption, words play a fundamental role in the training of the future libertine. Much is made by the author that Fanchon is quite modest and inexperienced in many ways. Just like the foolish woman of the Chinese source, Fachon hails from a “good” family, but unlike A’NA, she lacks any curiosity towards the other sex. Her cousin, Susanne, older and much more experienced, takes it upon herself to educate Fanchon to the pleasure of the flesh. She begins her training by telling her younger cousin that sex is the best thing in the world. Susanne then proceeds to tell her doltish cousin all about sex, beginning with the male anatomy, including all the possible terminology for penis: entrance in heterosexual sexuality is an entrance in a discourse that is at once physical, linguistic, and emotional.

The great and positive change for Fanchon is that pleasure is guaranteed. Indeed, for Susanne, pleasure is unavoidable and almost synonymous with penetration. Even for a female virgin, after the initial discomfort, orgasm is bound to manifest for any woman as a result of genital stimulation through vaginal penetration.35 The second dialogue takes places after Fanchon’s loss of virginity at the hands, for lack of a better word, of her appropriately named lover Robinet. This time is the young girl to speak, though the dynamics of her tale is the same as her cousin’s, since again sex and pleasure become word.36 The loss of virginity, in Fanchon’s retelling, is described in tantalizing detail, no doubt for scenic effect. But it is an

34 Claude Le Petit, L’école des filles, p. 1101.
Auteur foutou d’un foutou livre,
Écrivain foutou de Cypris,
Qui dans tous tes foutous écrits
Fais voir que bien foutre est bien vivre,
Cent arguments foutous dont tu fais tes leçons,
Pour faire foutre en cent façons,
N’éterniseront pas ta plume.
Non, ce qui te rendra pour jamais glorieux,
C’est que dans ton foutou volume,
Par une nouvelle coutume,
Ta prose nous fout par les yeux.
35 Claude Le Petit, L’école des filles, p. 1142.
36 L’école des filles, p. 1154.
indirect tale, and the two lovers are left, undisturbed, in the privacy of their alcove. Unlike it is the case for the A’Na, pleasure is mutual, and if anything, it is one’s lover’s bliss that makes sexual intercourse truly pleasurable. She does actually weave her choice, inspired by Susanne, as a neo-platonic argument where two halves find themselves and are at last rejoined through sexual intercourse. But pleasure comes also from the fact that, by choosing her pleasure with her lover of choice, Fanchon defies, in one fell swoop, her parents, as well as the stale Catholic morality that would want her sexually ignorant and a bigot, and that would deny her body the natural and enriching pleasure that her naturally orgasmic body is meant to give her.

From this perspective, then, an important paradox lies embedded in the heart of pornography in the Italian/French continuum, as both a literary and cultural construct, given that it is presented to the readers as a source of natural pleasure but also as a site of political resistance and rebellion. This paradox is implicitly outlined in Lynn Hunt’s definition of pornography. She describes the ironically traditional, if not presumably timeless, quality of pornography as “the explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practices with the aim of arousing sexual feelings”; at the same time, however, she compellingly argues for the “modernity” of European pornography, especially in the early modern period, that stems from the fact that such works, “us[ed] the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities”, as we have seen is the goal of Susanne and Fanchon. Consequently, the transgressive nature of pornography is rooted in the desire to mock, to upend, and in some cases to reshape the mores of the dominant culture. In Foucauldian fashion, the effort made through pornography to challenge existing authority and to suggest new paradigms of thought, identity, and behavior is what makes it “modern” in the current sense of the term.

In other words, the pursuit of sexual pleasure for men and women is at once anti-modern as it is natural and thus timeless (and in this sense the anonymous author of the _L’école des filles_ pays homage to Giulio Romano and Pietro Aretino). But it is also modern because it is chronologically meaningful and political as it is timely posed against social hypocrisy. It is also “modern” as it wants to be a new way to relate to life, society, and power. It is iconoclastic because it wants to define itself against a tradition it does not recognize. The pursuit of pleasure then becomes immanent in revolt against the transcendental message of love as sentiment (the message in Goethe’s Young Werther) and as a platonic force, especially in the Catholic context. The transgression happens through sex; furthermore, it can only happen through sex in words, and by allowing women to speak for themselves. It is true that even in _L’école des filles_ the women in the end rail against men of the church to the bigots on behalf of other men. They are actually excluded from making meaning for themselves. But mouthpieces that they may be, these women have a great deal of fun, pleasure and sex, as they service not only the bodies but also the philosophy of men. They destroy hymens, norms, and merrily transgress, and with each orgasm they shake the

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roots of Catholic morality a bit more deeply. The training of the young woman through sex is thus revolutionary because it undermines society at its very ethical core. The Marquis de Sade takes this lesson to the extreme and educates both his girls and their mothers in ways that violently etch onto their bodies the schizophrenic message of the sexual education as the key to annihilation, and not as “a portal to pleasure” as well as “a gateway to transcendent experience.” But the fact remains that Ecole des Filles “presents a rational argument for changing social attitudes, if not values about sex.”

It is from this perspective that we can use French pornography in a way that truly illuminates the dynamics in a source like the Chipizi zhuan in Ming times (and vice versa). Clearly A’Na, Jade Scent, or Pan Jinlian, for that matter, are not, as they are often seen, shadows of the sexually voracious heroines who in the pages of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century French pornographic works vociferously celebrate their orgasmic body and condemn the perverse powers of the Catholic Church and of the social hypocrites of their times. In particular, A’Na’s voice in Chipizi zhuan, as we have seen, is not only different, but in the end also quite antithetical in terms of (erotic, political and sexual) goals and strategies to the French ones, and not just because of the obvious linguistic, cultural and socio-political differences.

The Chinese and the French sources are both framed as didactic texts and are spoken, in a monologue and dialogue form respectively, from a woman’s voice. In Chipizi zhuan we find an old woman who has gone through worldly experience and thus speaks with the authority of age and disillusion. Her location, both at the beginning and at the end of the tale, in a Buddhist secluded position of non-attachment is challenged by the pleasure that retelling her story gives her. In Ecole des filles the older cousin appears to be in a position of at least chronological superiority at the beginning of the dialogue, but just for few years: here authority is not so much age-wise but gained through sexual experience. Furthermore, by the end of the novel both cousins become equal, as the younger one is no longer a virgin and she is able to relate and also somehow surpass her cousin in terms of sexual savvies and expertise. But the seemingly empowerment that comes from the first person narrative in the Chinese source is diminished by the fact that we know that the text, in the end, is a dialogue between a older woman, with no powerful social standing, and a man (the editor who brings the woman’s words from the realm of the oral and colloquial to that of the written and of the literary).

It is also true that the subject matter is similar (the sexual education of young woman), but the moral lessons to be drawn are dramatically different. We should not forget that in both cultures we are dealing with fictional sources that depict dynamics and fantasies that would most likely be unknown or shocking to the majority of readers and viewers. Even with this caveat, the Chinese source is quite socially conservative, as we have seen. Even if the anonymous author of the Chipizi zhuan brings the discourse of ethics into the bedroom, he keeps the center of shi (authority/penis, the true phallus!) where it should be, in male hands, and does not destabilize any established system of power. We could call his work

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carnévalessque, in the Bakhtinian sense, but for sure we are not dealing with a call to revolutionize the customs of the bedroom and challenge the established ethical and religious norms of the time, as Susanne and Fanchon do.

What is unique and interesting is that A’Na seems to prove that the pleasure of the text, better, of the story, is independent of what happens to its heroine. While L’école des filles ends at the apex of the cousins’ journey into the bliss of adult sexuality, A’Na’s tale is complete, and thus made absolute, as the story of pleasure waxing and waning. But it is also a lesson of how one can hold on to the bliss of the flesh long after one’s youth is gone. We could see in this difference the site of the disconnect between the (Chinese) fiction of enlightenment and the (French) turn towards the pornographic. But I would move away from this rather mechanical reading, and argue instead that while A’Na may not be a revolutionary, in other words, she could still be seen as a libertine who knows that her libertinage is permissible only as fiction, as an exemplary tale. It is undeniable that she does get to hold on to the pleasures of the flesh, only for a limited time, and in secret. When her sexual exploits are exposed, A’Na loses her source of pleasure, unlike Fanchon, whom we leave at the dawn of a very promising sexual awakening. But Fanchon’s fate is left unknown, and we do not know what the results of her and her cousin’s crusade against hypocrisy will be. If we are to judge by what happens to Eugenie in Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom who self-combusts in an orgasmic frenzy, the prospects are not that encouraging. A’Na gets to live to a ripe old age, and as long as she does, the story of her pleasure lives with her through her retellings. And this is perhaps the reason why through the story she does get to hold on to the pleasures of the flesh all the way. A’Na gets to live her entire life under the eyes of her readers and listeners, and, here is the twist, as long as she does, the story of her pleasure lives with her, again and again. Her tale may or may not be pornographic in revolutionary way as Fanchon or Eugenie’s, but it is A’na who could be read as the ultimate pornographer, retelling a sexually explicit telling with the purpose of arousing others, as we have seen it was the case with Jade Scent. And if the Marquis the Sade did not look down on the pleasures of the mind (Eugenie, the protagonist of the Philosophy in the bedroom, has an orgasm just to think of how she will torture and brutalize her own mother), why should we?

I hope to have at least shown the relevance of the many questions that can and, in a way, need to be asked of texts such as the Chipozi zhuan. Often seen as marginal to the canon of Ming and Qing fiction, these sources can help us explore reading and writing practices, as well as late imperial understandings of gender, sexuality, and desire. Looking critically at Chipozi zhuan does not mean to try and insert it in a Westernized narrative of empowerment or to force onto it Western theoretical constructs. As I hope to have at least shown in my brief comparison with the French novel Ecole des filles, quite the opposite is true, though it remains a text that, because of its structure, subject matter and style, is a very useful voice in a cross-cultural dialogue.

Perhaps one working category we can use to think critically about Chipozi zhuan and the other books that deal with sex and sexuality in late imperial China could be that of the yinshu 淫書, a term that is often translated into English as “lascivious books”, but that in
my view would be better rendered as “lustful books/writing.” This category illuminates the nexus between text and desire and sex mentioned above by connecting the story to the characters’ (as well as the readers’) yinxin. The yinxin would in turn become the thread that connects works such as Ruiyjun zhuan and Chipozi zhuan to Jin Ping Mei, Hong Lou Meng, and so on, beyond stylistic and plot-related differences.

Looking at the Tale of a Foolish Woman from this perspective, as part of the yinshu canon, can give us important answers, and not just in the realm of Chinese literature, and not just in the past, to questions such as: what exactly is pornography, that it would keep inspiring such passions? How does it affect its viewers, across time and cultures? Who writes it, reads it, and is inspired, turned on—or off—by it? Why? And how do gender, age, power, and sexual identity affect it and its messages, and how, -in turn, are these elements affected by pornography?

In conclusion, I would like to comment on one very specific challenge of including pornography in the construction of any literary canon, a challenge that I have referred to already at the beginning of this presentation today, but that bears some final considerations. Only those who have tried know that it is immensely difficult to define pornography in any coherent fashion. Pornography is especially hard to retrace, reconstruct, and read in its pre-modern manifestations. In many cultures, and China is no exception, most pornographic material has been historically associated with secrecy, privacy, shame, and immorality. Thus very few of the possibly many consumers have been so careless as to leave behind the texts and objects of their consumption. Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), a very enthusiastic reader of the above mentioned L’école des filles, made sure to burn the book so as not to leave any trace of it in his library. But as with the novel whose existence he was trying to erase from his bookshelves, his pornographic infractions were burned onto the pages of his diary for posterity to witness. Thus the interested scholar, along with the contemporary consumer of historical past pornography, must become a sexual archaeologist of sorts, and retrieve the genealogy of sex-related material, not unlike Michel Foucault did in his History of Sexuality, in all sorts of sources, and not only those that would be strictly deemed “pornographic.”

Furthermore, it is not to be discounted that, as is the case in many fields, past artefacts undergo radical transformations under the pressure of ever-changing contemporary needs, desires, and anxieties. We have lost countless pornographic texts in China, and others, such as the complex and intriguing eighteenth-century Guwang yan, have only recently surfaced and are being studied with the potential to enrich our understanding of our field. But all these challenges can make the quest more intriguing and compelling. For all the darkness that surrounds certain sources, that light that they can shed on the imagination and the desire of Chinese men and women will always be endlessly fascinating and worth the trouble. We shall never know if A’Na, the libertine storyteller, really lived, and if she did,

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44 Completed in 1730, the novel was first published, in part, in 1941. In 1964 the Russian sinologist Boris L’vovich Riftin discovered a complete handwritten manuscript, but the novel was not published in full till 1997. See also Gang Gary Xu, “Ethics of Forms: QIng and Narrative Excess in Guwangyan,” in Wang, David Der-wei, and Shang Wei, editors, Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation. From the Late Ming to the late Qing and Beyond, Harvard University Press, 2005, 235.
whether it was her choice to have her words written down for posterity (and future generations of readers like ourselves) to enjoy. Still, her story has a good deal to teach us: we would be the fools not to listen to her tale.