

Exploring the Evolution of Confucianism and Taoism in the Late Ming Dynasty from the Perspective of Sexual Culture

—Taking the Ming and Qing Novels Involving the Descriptions of Male Love as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In the mid and late Ming dynasty, the bud of capitalism appeared, with the rapid development of the commodity economy, which triggered the ideological trend of evolution of the whole society. It cannot be ignored is that the "male love" peaked at this time and the relevant novels are the rage. Almost the whole nation was overwhelmed by this trend, which contains the transition of Confucianism represented by scholars and the secularization tendency of Taoism. Therefore, this research will from the perspective of the special sexual culture to explore the ideological trend of evolution of the Confucian and Taoist in the mid and late Ming, by involving the descriptions of male love of popular novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties as the carrier. This study confirmed that the change promoted the ethos social trends in the mid and late Ming dynasty, for the majority of scholars to provide a historical profile.

Keywords: *Confucianism, Taoism, the ideological trend of evolution, male love, the Ming and Qing novels, sexual culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid and late Ming dynasty, the economy recovered gradually, then the progress of textiles, handicrafts, iron smelting industry and other businesses, the development of trade in goods and the increase of the producers, frequent trade between different places. For instance, there were some world famous producers of goods or distribution centers at that time, such as Beijing, Hankou, Foshan, Suzhou, in the Ming dynasty, known as the "four centers"[1], in these areas rich in goods and freight, many commercial centers and towns sprang up, providing the place for commodity trading, and making commodity economy flourished, leading to the emergence of markets with a capitalist character, and thus to the bud of capitalism.

Under the increasingly rigid ideological situation, which had been restrained by the neo-confucianism of Cheng-Zhu, the phenomenon with the mark of modernization appeared in the traditional feudal society,

which impacted the original class system and moral concept system, thus resulting in the trend of ideological evolution. The resulting social atmosphere of human liberation and pursuit of extravagance and material desire was very distinct in the history of the Ming Dynasty. The change in the concept of sexual customs was a typical feature of this period, especially the obsession with male love, which the whole society was enthusiastic. So, it was an unavoidable link in the study of the general mood of society in the mid and late Ming Dynasty. Thus, this article will start from this special sexual culture phenomenon, to explore the ideological evolution of Confucianism and Taoism behind it. Meanwhile, among the kind of fiction known as Novel of Manners, the novels of kind of male love are representative, so they will be used to elaborate the points of the article. And because the Qing Dynasty inherited the concept of men's sexual love, there are some situations of Qing.

2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICS, ECONOMY, CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY IN THE MID AND LATE MING:

2.1. The eunuch interfered with the government - One of the chief culprits who guided obscenity in the palace

Emperors in this period indulged in pleasure, and some were fond of male love, such as Emperor Wuzong and Emperor Shenzong. ZaoLin miscellanies recorded that Emperor Shenzong spent ten days and nights having sex with ten little eunuchs[2], so it can be seen that male love has begun to appear since the beginning of the emperors. At the same time, those eunuchs who held more power and were among the chief culprits of sexual immorality let the southerners teach boys acting in an opera for their enjoyment[3]. Meanwhile, in order to gain more power, they catered to the emperors' sexual needs and lured emperors into sexual immorality. Taking Emperor Wuzong as an example, once, because he liked a singing boy, the eunuch in charge of him thought that Wuzong wanted to make a pet of this singing boy, so the eunuch castrated this boy so that he could bring him into the court[4].

2.2. The emergence of capitalism - caused social change

According to the Shenzong Emperor Record in Ming, there were a lot of young labor forces in the south, and they had few fixed assets. Almost every family setting up in the south of China were willing to make a living by producing textile and the merchant who owns a certain amount of textile machines hired some workers who would like to earn remuneration by working for them[5]. It indicates that there was already production of goods with employment relations. Another example, Ming Dynasty novelist Feng Menglong, in *Stories to Awaken Men*, who wrote a story called *Shi Runze met a friend in Tanjue*. There is a plot that describes a couple who owned 30 to 40 silk machines in less than 10 years because of selling their high quality silks, which means they could expand their productivity[6]. From the side, it reflects the emergence of small capitalists who can employ workers to carry out a certain number of larger-scale production.

This trend of economic prosperity brought about a change in social class. The enthusiastic pursuit of material interests became a popular trend, spreading from the royal family to common people, which lead to the increasing of the status of a merchant class. The scholars and businessmen communicated frequently, religion became secularized.

2.3. Fiction with male love is rampant - contains the phenomenon of sexual culture that the trend of thought changes

A kind of fiction called Novel of Manners reflecting the living of the world and became popular. Due to the prevalence of male love, then a large number of the novel with plots of descriptions of male love appeared at this time and became a phenomenon that could not be ignored. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were more than one hundred novels about male love. Even *Dream of Red Mansions*, one of the Four Great Classical Masterpieces of China, had a plot about boy's love. It can be seen that male love flourished during this period. And the more typical works are *Yi-Chun-Xiang-Zhi*, *Bian-Er-Chai* and *Long-Yang-Yi-Shi*. The novelist Feng Menglong specifically listed *Qingwai* in his book called *History of love*, collecting and commenting on homosexual stories in various literature since ancient times. In his opinion, homosexuality and heterosexuality have existed together for a long time, he explicitly discussed these sexualities together, arguing that there is no difference of benefits or drawbacks between them[7]. It is worth mentioning that, such an open concept of sexual culture was extremely rare in western society during that time.

2.4. Ideological trend of evolution - There were voices within Confucianism opposing the Neo-Confucianism asceticism and Taoism was becoming secular

At the beginning of the founding of the Ming Dynasty, "In the early Ming Dynasty, relying on the imposition of feudal rulers, the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism became the official ruling ideology"[8]. However, the Neo-Confucianism gradually fell into the swamp of rigid dogmatism in the later period. During the social changes in the mid-Ming Dynasty, Cheng-Zhu's Neo-Confucianism did not adapt to the variation of the times[9]. Thus, the Philosophy of Mind, led by Wang Yangming, rose up, which greatly impacted the ideological system dominated by the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu. It indirectly promoted the prevalence of sexual indulgence. In the class of scholar-officials, because of the prohibition of the prostitution system, so they turned to male prostitutes.

On the religious level, Taoism had a broad mass base among the citizens, because it is doctrine affirms people's enjoyment tendency and value, which was very much in line with the social ethos at that time. "Some Taoist Ceremonies were still flourishing among people, such as Praying to the gods for peace、 Communicating with the gods through the sciomancy, use marked swords to kill demons, etc"[10]. In the process of secularization, Taoism's ancient Chinese Sexual Arts have once again become a trend, which had been used as an excuse for indulging in sexual desires. Some people choose to

switch from male-female love to male-male intercourse in order to avoid the so-called leakage of their Yang qi which is a substance called Chunyang in Taoism.

3. THE CHANGES OF CONFUCIANISM IN THE MID AND LATE MING DYNASTY

3.1. The boundary between scholar-officials and merchants was blurred

The development of the commodity economy had led to serious polarization, people were keen to seek interests. Zhang Han, an official man of the Ming Dynasty, used famous ancient sentences to describe this kind of scene, “Hustling for benefits, all come; bustling for benefits, all leave”[11], which describes the occasion of merchants and department stores gathered incisively and vividly. It shows that abandoning farmers to do business became a trend, which brought a phenomenon was the increase of number of merchants.

Many of them were rich businessmen who often patronized prostitutes' restaurants and were happy to miss home and duty. Zhang Laiyi, a literati of Ming Dynasty, said that Merchants often visit brothels on the banks of the Yangtze River when they travel by boat[12]. These businessmen also liked male love. For example, a fiction called *Yi-Chun-Xiang-Zhi* that is full of male love, mentioned that a businessman spent three to five hundred pieces of gold on a male prostitute[13]. But, these merchants were not content to indulge in sensual pleasure. The desire for power made them expect to have more interaction with the scholar-official class, especially when they had legal business registration, “Their children could legally take the imperial examinations in the places where they were temporarily housed[14]”, This made it possible for other classes of the nation to join in the ranks of scholar-officials. The sons of these merchants intended to enter the government by becoming officials, but some of them were frustrated in officialdom and went back to do business again, which made the boundaries between scholars and merchants began to blur. “Ming culture corresponds to a blurring of boundaries at a variety of levels—of philosophical and religious boundaries, surely, but also social (most notably, between literati and merchants)”[15], the scholars of that time, when they were young, liked to go to the brothel to find prostitutes to drink and have fun, and regarded this as a very fashionable thing[16], which made the original method of entertainment into a way to pursue extravagant enjoyment, like businessmen, and some Ming Dynasty thinkers, such as Chen que, clearly affirmed the Confucians should have economic status first. So the habits of both of them infected each other, .Some businessmen did follow the Confucian style, the literati and officialdom began to appear extravagant and corrupt.

3.2. The rise of the Philosophy of Mind

Wang Yangming is the founder of Yangming's theory of mind. He put forward that “xin ji li”(The highest truth can be obtained from one's own heart), believed “zhi liang zhi”(Conscience should be realized in practical actions) and “zhi xing he yi”(knowledge and practice should be integrated), etc.

Firstly, He mentioned a concept in the Chuan-Xi-Lu which is a book that his disciples recorded his words, deeds and letters, thought the noumenon of the mind is nature and nature is the reason for the world[17], which was quite different from the views of Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu. In Zhu Xi's theory, “Li”(The nature of the world) is the master of all things and the essential law and principle of the world, but Wang believes that to seek the “Li” of things comes from people's hearts. Secondly, “zhi liang zhi” is close to Zhu's principle of “cun tian li, mie ren yu”(Keep the principle of the world and remove the desire of humans) at the spiritual core of the theory. In Quotations of Zhu-zhi's Remarks, he answered a student that it is a natural law that people need to eat basic foods to keep their lives. But if they want to eat delicacies, this is a human desire[18], which shows that the human desire in Zhu's theory refers to greed beyond basic human needs. It is similar with Wang's concept to a certain degree. According to Wang, “We must let our hearts only full of the essential truth of the world and get rid of human greed. This is the art of becoming a saint”[19], he also insisted that people must overcome greed and pursue “Li”.

However, first, in the mid and late Ming Dynasty, the implementation of Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu had reduced to a dogmatic ruling tool and a means for scholar-officials to enter the official career. What is more, Wang held that all human beings have consciences, no matter whether they are saints or ordinary people, they are the same in the past or at present[20]. This implied the enlightenment thought that all men are created equal, which greatly stimulated the transformation of the social trend of mind.

Later, based on inheriting Yangming's theory of the mind, Li Zhi thought that it was human nature to dress and eat[21], sharply criticizing the traditional ascetic thought, and greatly affirming people's pursuit of basic material desires. In the theory of childlike innocence, he retorted to those who clung to the feudal ethical code, arguing that their knowledge was based on the theories learned and did not come from their minds[22]. It was a direct criticism of the traditional Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu that was a shackle to people's minds, and a bold statement for the liberation of personality. That is why it was respected by the people in lower classes at that time. Meanwhile, the thought of the scholar-official class was also greatly shaken.

3.3. An anti-ascetic trend of thought

Under the social environment of mutual influence between commodity economy and ideology, hedonism prevailed, and the whole society formed an anti ascetic trend of indulgence, which has gone to the other extreme.

A case in point is people's attitude toward sex. After suffering the shackles of sexual repression for a long time, the literati and officialdom pursued the opening of the sexual concept. For example, Xie Zhaohui who is a Ming Dynasty literati clearly pointed out that the country's rise and fall had nothing to do with plebeian prostitutes[23]. It is a rebuttal to the traditional defender of old moral ideas who wanted to ban actors, singers and prostitutes at that time. In addition, the court of the Ming Dynasty had been enforcing the prohibition of whoring, requiring all officials not to go whoring. The literati and officialdom were all afraid of this, so they turned their eyes to handsome men in this wave of thought, as Lu Xun mentioned that in the Ming Dynasty, although there were Jiaofangsi(The Imperial Music Office and official brothels), scholar-officials were forbidden to participate in there and to go whoring, but they were allowed to invite male actors to sing operas to amuse them, and it became a trend.[24].

Therefore, male love reached its peak in the late Ming Dynasty, which is enough to show that this was a period of sexual openness rarely seen in Chinese feudal society, and this tolerance and admiration for homosexual love were also rare in the whole history of China.

3.4. This trend of thought in the novels involving the descriptions of male love

Following this social zeitgeist, Novel of Manners, which shows all kinds of situations and joys and sorrows in the world, rose rapidly, among which a large number of novels about male love became a major feature that could not be ignored in this period.

At that time, the officials even regarded playing with the actors as a love affair, and they were never tired of it. They even kept male servants and children in their private houses. In addition to the emperor, some nobles and ministers were also fond of male love, such as Yan Song, a powerful official, and his son Yan Shifan. Wu Miscellany mentioned that one of Yan Song's family members, Yongnian, had a penchant for preferring men[25]. Another example, Zhang Dai, a famous scholar in late Ming, said in his epitaph that he was fond of catamites[26]. According to the novel Yi-Chun-Xiang-Zhi, Some teachers in the school see good-looking male students, will also pull together to make love[27].

Scholar-officials even exploited male prostitutes to show their status, and it was a trend that continued into the Qing Dynasty, like Yuan Mei, the leader of the poetry circle with outstanding literary ability, when he was 60,

carried a charming male of 28 and happily paraded in the city, feeling very proud of himself[28].

But the literati and officials who liked male love still could not avoid the traditional ethical concept. For example, Bian-Er-Chai, one of the representative novels of male love in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, is not only superior in literature, but also eulogize the love between gay and hope to set ideal models for the male prostitutes of the time. However, the male protagonists in the four stories, those who love men, can not only get the favor and love of male prostitutes, but also return to their families to marry and have children, not deviating from the traditional the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues. Like the descriptions in the third chapter called Qing-Lie-Ji, "Wen Sheng said, 'The magistrate has a daughter who is seventeen years old and very talented. You should marry her and have children with her.'"[29]. Wenyun, a male prostitute, tried his best to persuade his lover Yun Han to marry a perfect girl that he found and have children, which can show that the actions of this character under the author's writing accord with the requirements of the literati who were bound by feudal ethics for the words and actions of the people around them.

This is typical hegemonic thinking of male supremacy in the patriarchal society. For those wives and concubines who are lower than their own status, as well as prostitutes and actresses, they set extremely strict moral norms for those people. On the contrary, when they can't control their emotions and violate their own code of conduct, they indulged themselves to cover up with decent excuses, which is the expression of feudal class thought.

4. THE SECULARIZATION OF TAOISM IN THE LATE MING DYNASTY

4.1. secular tendency

Taoism, as China's indigenous religion, originated in the Han Dynasty, By the leader of the Five Pecks of Grain Sect, Zhang Daoling, in the Lao-Zi-Xiang-Er-Zhu put forward. Its essence is to satisfy people's desire in this life, so that people will enjoy it forever[30]. With immortalization as the ultimate goal, it inherited and carried forward part of Lao Zi's philosophy, and mixed with various schools, It is compatible with the advantages of Confucianism and Mohism, covering the essence of various theories, like including Yin-Yang, the five elements, the believer of immortals, etc[30], is a comprehensive science. Therefore, its mass base is very broad. Mr. Lu Xun said, "China's roots are all in Taoism"[32]. At the same time, the Taoist idea thinks that my destiny is held in my own hands, not in that of God[33]. The spirit of resisting fate emphasizes the value of individual power all the time, which is in line with the

anti-ascetic trend of thought in the mid and late Ming Dynasty.

Although Confucianism has always been in the mainstream, as mentioned above, the society in the stage underwent economic and ideological changes, which inevitably required the renewal of the original moral system in order to adapt to the new social trend of thought. Therefore, the famous historian Yu Yingshi, in his book "Religious Ethics and Merchant Spirit in Modern China", talked about the turn of new Confucianism, new Zen and new Taoism into the world after the Song and Yuan Dynasties and the influence of this turn on the formation of new moral outlook[34]. The interaction and integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in the Ming Dynasty is a good reflection. In this process, Taoism's affirmation of individual hedonism made it accepted and sought after by more people.

4.2. Catering to the trend of sensual indulgence

The Fangzhong art(The ancient Chinese Sexual Arts) had widely spread in the FangZhong school of Taoism(A Taoist school that pursues the harmonization of Yin and Yang through ancient Chinese Sexual Arts). Because sexual intercourse catered to the trend of indulgence of lust at that time, it prevailed at that time. This kind of thing was no longer just popular in the court as a secret, but this is recognized as a common thing followed by many people. In the process, however, the original purpose of this technique had been distorted. Fangzhong art was not created by Taoism, and was an enlightenment science of sexual techniques, originally explaining the methods of sexual intercourse. Later, it was absorbed by Taoism which paid attention to health and longevity. Nevertheless, in fact, the Ming Dynasty emperor and the common people were good at this way, also mostly only for their own private desire to find an excuse. During the Jiajing period, although Emperor Shenzong claimed to pay attention to the art of immortality, in fact, most of the prescriptions he paid attention to were for sexual intercourse. Therefore, at that time, whether those who claimed to be able to visit immortality and make medicine for immortality, or officials, they would choose to present prescriptions to Shenzong to win the favor of the emperor[35] . The number of pornographic shops producing such prescriptions was very large, which shows the flourishing of the vogue.

On the worship of Fangzhongshu reflecting on the phenomenon of male love in the Ming and Qing, is the argument from against so-called leakage of their Yang qi. The Fang Zhong Shu, starting from the patriarchal consciousness, advocated maintaining Yang Qi, collecting Yin Qi, and replenishing Yang Qi, that is, maintaining no ejaculation while having sexual intercourse, and preserving the so-called 'Yuan Yang'. And sexual intercourse between men will not lose his Yang Qi, because during male-male sex, the Yang Qi lost

due to ejaculation will be compensated by the Yang Qi in the other's body[36] . This made male love more prosperous in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

4.3. This trend of thought in the novels involving the descriptions of male love

It can be seen that the secularization of Taoism and the convergence of the three religions must have had an impact on the creation of the novels reflecting the world at that time, which are reflected in the novels about male love in three plot structures.

In the first type, Taoist alchemists taught Fangzhong art on their own initiative, or gave prescriptions. Male love novel Yi-Chun-Xiang-zhi has written that the male prostitute Ying'er met a Taoist and experienced being taught the art of sex by a goddess[37]”, which implies the ancient people's inherent concept of Taoism. Since the HuangDi(Leader of the Ancient Huaxia Tribal Alliance) was guided by a goddess to become immortal, many Taoist sexual enlightenment teachers were women. So in these male love novels, those who appear and teach the secret of sexual intercourse are always the goddess or fairy. Second, the protagonist is blessed by the gods and becomes immortal. There are many examples in the male love novel Bian-Er-Chai, such as the Qing-Lie-Ji(third chapter)and Qing-Qi-Ji(fourth chapter)of Bian-Er-Chai end with the male prostitute ascending to the divine. In Qing-Lie-Ji, the male prostitute Wensheng was invited by Master Cihang to be chief of the water god of the South Sea”[38]. As mentioned earlier, the author created this book to set the example of male prostitutes who are faithful to love for those prostitutes who sell themselves for profits, and thus to glorify the male prostitute characters and even to give them a fairy ending, which is rare in this kind of novel.

Last one, this is the type of mortal meets demon, mostly for the theme of love, in the Qing dynasty ZhiGuai fiction(a type of classical novel which featured ghost stories and was popular in the Wei and Jin)is more common. For example, the story called Huang Jiulang in the third volume of Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio described a fox demon who is kind and faithful to love[39]. The difference between it and Bian-Er-Chai is that the identity of a genie is inherently romantic, compared to common people. So the human and emotional nature of the characters makes these monsters even more attractive, which leads to people hard not to yearn for such magical love. It is worth mentioning that in this kind of work, as stated earlier, such creators could not escape the constraint of feudal thoughts, but they will intentionally or unintentionally make the image of the monster ideal. Just like the male fox demon in this story, even though he gave unconditionally for his lover and blindly followed the lover like traditional women at that time, which was the embodiment of the feudal tradition, he also had good character and presented a pure and

harmless monster image, rather than a scary and harmful negative role.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the political and economic changes in the mid and late Ming Dynasty promoted the ideological shift, and then affected the whole social atmosphere, which was the basis of the phenomenon of the special sexual culture of male love reached a peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Therefore, the profound influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism on ancient Chinese society cannot be ignored when researchers study the specific cultural phenomena in ancient China. Therefore, as the carrier of thought and social mentality, the literary works can vividly reflect the change of social trend of thought in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, especially the Novel of Manners. Thus, more attention should be paid to the significance of literary works in the study of cultural phenomena.

This research mainly focuses on the phenomenon of sex culture of fonding of male-male sex, but the number of famous female prostitutes in Ming Dynasty, their talent and the frequency of social activities were far more than those in previous dynasties, which is also a subject worth studying. Such studies about non-mainstream cultural phenomena are of certain significance for the comprehensive understanding of the causes of the mentality of ancient Chinese culture. Hence, in the future, the author will make a more complete investigation of all kinds of sexual cultural phenomena in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

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