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Hanan/Falling in Love

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These seven outstanding vernacular stories are drawn from two Ming collections, *Xing shi hengyan* (Constant words to awaken the world), first published in 1627, and *Shi dian tou* (The rocks nod their heads), of approximately the same date. All seven stories deal with falling in love, and some with marriage as well.

Marriage in traditional China was decided by the family heads, while the details of the marriage contract were generally negotiated by a go-between. The process consisted of six steps (the “Six Rites”), the first three of which were preliminary: the overture by the boy’s family, the request for the girl’s horoscope, and the matching of horoscopes. The fourth step was the crucial one, the delivery of the agreed-upon betrothal settlement to the girl’s family. It sealed the engagement; thereafter, although the girl lived at home until her wedding, she could almost be said to belong to the boy’s family. In the fifth step his family proposed an auspicious date for the wedding, a date that, by convention, the girl’s family accepted. In the sixth and final step the groom (or in some cases the go-between) escorted the bride with her trousseau to the groom’s house, where they first worshiped heaven and earth, kowtowed to the groom’s ancestral tablets, bowed to each other, and kowtowed to his parents. Soon afterward the bride’s veil was removed, and she and her husband were able to look into each other’s eyes for the first time. On the third day, the couple visited her parents and kowtowed to them, then returned to his family’s compound to live. This system survived into the early years of the twentieth century.
In a significant variation, the groom married into the bride's family and lived in their household. This was most likely to occur when the girl's family had no sons to perform the ancestral sacrifices. The boy generally came from a poorer family with more than one son.

In broad outline, allowing for certain other differences due to time, place, and social class, these were the normal marriage procedures for Chinese families of some financial means, at least among the Han majority of the population, during most of the imperial period. The main difference concerned the bride's trousseau, which could sometimes take the form of a dowry as large as, or larger than, the betrothal settlement. Needless to say, the size of such a dowry was also negotiated in advance.

Since marriage was primarily an alliance between two families in which social status and money were basic criteria, the choice of marriage partners was considered too important to be left to the individuals themselves. So far as possible, girls were segregated from boys at an early age and kept away from outsiders, at least until marriage. If they left the house at all, it was on some special occasion, such as a visit to a local temple to worship. Engagements were entered into early, so that the girl had a name to fix her thoughts on. Weddings were also held early, fourteen being an acceptable age for a bride. These measures were meant to ensure that on her wedding day she could be delivered to her fiancé as a virgin.

It was therefore highly unlikely that a girl and a boy could manage to see each other, fall in love, consummate that love, and then either elope or else persuade their parents to let them marry. If the lovers were already engaged to other people, as they would probably have been, the cancellation of the engagements, with four sets of parents to placate and two settlements to return, would have been difficult, if not impossible. And weighing on everybody's minds the whole time would have been the fear of public ridicule.

Yet this highly unlikely chain of events becomes a reality in much Chinese fiction. (At least, the falling in love becomes a reality; the romance sometimes turns tragic.) Popular song down through the ages had always been much concerned with clandestine assignations, but rarely dealt with the social con-
sequences. The classic anecdotes of love leading to marriage were those concerning the poet Sima Xiangru of the second century, who fell in love with the young widow Zhuo Wangsun and eloped with her, and Han Shou of the following century, who fell in love with Jia Chong’s daughter and consummated the affair in Jia’s own house. Zhuo Wangsun’s father eventually forgave the eloping couple, and Jia Chong decided to hush the matter up and marry his daughter to her lover. Both anecdotes involved only a parent of the girl, not the boy. The Tang dynasty tale “Yingying zhuan” (The tale of Yingying) by Yuan Zhen (779–831), source of the famous play Xixiangji (The west chamber), also involves only a parent of the girl. From that time on, an increasing number of classical tales (short fiction in literary Chinese) were written with the same kind of subject matter, as well as an increasing number of plays. In the landmark collections of vernacular stories made by Feng Menglong (1574–1646), of which Constant Words to Awaken the World was the third, and in the work of some of Feng’s imitators, such as The Rocks Nod Their Heads, romantic love is one of the main themes.

This paradox—a prescribed practice of arranged marriage existing alongside an imaginative literature glorifying romantic love—was hardly peculiar to China; arranged marriages were the norm in most cultures until modern times, and romantic love was a staple literary theme in many of them. Of course, like most fiction, Chinese realistic fiction never tried to represent the commonplace as such, but rather to show an extraordinary event or series of events occurring against a background of the commonplace. Still, in China the difference between the prescribed practice and the extraordinary events of the romantic theme was singularly stark.

Lawrence Stone, in his study of marriage in England between 1500 and 1800, sets out a scheme of four “basic options” for the choice of marriage partners that is useful in considering the Chinese situation. The options may be restated as follows: parental choice without input from the children; parental choice with the children holding a veto; choice by the children with the parents holding a veto; and choice by the children with the parents informed but not consulted. Almost all marriages
in traditional China resulted from the first option: they were arranged by the parents without any input from their children. Only in the early decades of the twentieth century did the fourth option gradually become dominant. Of the motives for choice of partner cited by Stone (economic, social, or political interest; personal affection between the prospective bride and groom; physical attraction; and romantic love “as portrayed in fiction and on the stage”), only the first applied in traditional China. Yet the stories deal almost exclusively with the third and fourth motives, those of physical attraction and romantic love.

Since in principle there was little possibility of setting eyes on an eligible partner, let alone of meeting him or her, courtship was out of the question. Only with courtesans, by which I mean high-level prostitutes of particular beauty and talent, was courtship possible or indeed necessary; see the story translated as “The Oil Seller,” of which courtship forms the main topic. In other romantic fiction access is the great problem, in contrast to comparable European literature. The Romeo and Juliet theme, for example, is often given as the classic literary case of young love thwarted by parents, but in Luigi da Porto’s novella “Romeo and Giulietta,” Romeo attends a masked ball given by Giulietta’s father. She admires him and he joins her in a dance, and afterwards they exchange loving glances “at church and in windows.”7 He then makes a practice of sitting on the balcony outside her window until one night she discovers him there, and so forth. Similar opportunities abound in the version by Matteo Bandello8 as well as in Shakespeare’s play. But such a degree of access was unimaginable in Chinese fiction, let alone in Chinese life. A Chinese Romeo was unlikely to be able to see his Juliet, let alone to serenade her. And with regard to the masked ball, as late as 1904 the Chinese translation of a French novel happened to mention one, and the commentator promptly condemned it as a threat to Chinese morals.9

With almost no opportunity to meet, lovers had to resort to elaborate stratagems and risky escapades. (Part of the pleasure for the reader of these stories comes from the romantic adventure itself; a reader’s interest in fiction is commonly driven by either fear or desire, and these stories provide both.) Young people fall in love at first sight, and if there is no way to consum-
mate their love, they sometimes become physically ill. When they do meet, usually in tense situations, there is no time for the niceties of courtship; they make love immediately and then swear undying fidelity. The lovemaking is rapturous and the relationship unproblematic. The lovers are strikingly beautiful and talented, of course, and they often receive the special dispensation reserved for such paragons. The whole remarkable affair is set within a story of painstakingly realistic detail.

Although realistic romantic fiction—as distinct from the countless Chinese tales of love between young men and supernatural beings—goes back at least to the eighth century, there are reasons why it became particularly important in Feng Menglong’s time. One strain of late Ming thought exalted the role of qing (the passions, especially passionate love). Feng himself inspired the compilation of an anthology titled Qing shi leilüe (The anatomy of love), a classified anthology of tales and anecdotes, many of which deal with romantic love. All seven of the stories in this volume are represented in the anthology in some fashion, either by analogues, reprinted sources, or simple references. The commentator on Qing shi leilüe takes a notably tolerant attitude toward behavior that was, by any contemporary definition, immoral. At the end of the reprinted source of “The Reckless Scholar,” for example, he says nothing about the immorality of the elopement and merely notes what a risk the girl took in trusting her lover’s word; he might well have been married already, and to a jealous wife at that.¹⁰

The evident sympathy of the authors for the romantic aspirations of their heroes and heroines stands in sharp contrast to mainstream ethical values. A copious literature of books and pamphlets existed in this period that condemned all fiction and drama, not because of their fictive nature, but because of the dubious moral examples that they chose to present.¹¹ As late as 1905, an article appeared in the influential journal Xin xiaoshuo (New fiction) deploring the influence on Chinese youth of the heroines of such popular translated novels as La dame aux camélias by Alexandre Dumas fils, Joan Haste by H. Rider Haggard, and A Double Thread by Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler. The writer expresses his concern that within a few decades such practices as kissing in public would become commonplace in
And in 1906 the novelist Wu Jianren blamed *The West Chamber* and *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji*, also known as *Honglou meng*), the most famous play and the most famous novel in the Chinese tradition, for misleading readers about the proper role of *qing*.¹³

But just because readers relished the romantic adventure in these stories, we cannot say that they subscribed to a romantic ethic of individualistic love. The desires of the imagination are not necessarily constrained by social values. However, the narrator in most of these vernacular stories still had to present himself as a custodian of traditional morality.¹⁴ (Narrators in the classical tale, a fictional form that was directed at a more selective readership, seldom adopted such a role). Much as the vernacular writers sympathized with the desires of their young lovers, they also felt that the romantic theme had to be explained away or deplored.¹⁵ If a love affair resulted in a successful marriage in defiance of moral values, they sometimes had their narrators resort to karmic myth, explaining the marriage as the consequence of a romantic liaison in a previous life, and as such, beyond the reach of moral law and custom.¹⁶ If the love affair turned tragic, of course, the tragedy itself could be presented to readers as a salutary warning.

All seven stories contain the theme of falling in love.¹⁷ Each starts with an extraordinary situation and follows it up with ingenious plotting and an unexpected denouement. It is worth noting that most of the romantic heroes and heroines have no brothers or sisters; the purpose, I think, is to place the conflict between children and their parents, particularly their fathers, in the harshest possible light.

Two stories are at a certain remove from the others. “The Lovers’ Tombs” is a homosexual love story of two students, both of whom are already engaged to young women. It is not the earliest fictional account of homosexual love in China, but it is the first in the vernacular and also the first to be worked out in terms of its social repercussions. “The Oil Seller” tells of a love affair between a young man and a courtesan. Prostitutes were
the only women to whom a young man had ready access before his marriage—apart, perhaps, from the maids in his father’s house. While dalliance with a prostitute was not regarded as a very serious matter in itself, marriage to a former prostitute meant allying the family with a person who, no matter how much fame and money she might have acquired, was not of respectable stock; in fact, until she married, she belonged to a separate, lower caste. The standard reference is “Li Wa zhuan” (The tale of Li Wa) by Bai Xingjian (775–826), a classical tale that is briefly recounted in the prologue to “The Oil Seller.” But the main story of “The Oil Seller” is very different. The hero’s father has given up his son for adoption and gone off to serve in a monastery. The problem for the hero, gripped as he is by an obsessive desire to sleep with the famous courtesan, is that his social status as a humble oil seller is far below hers, even though as a prostitute she belongs to a lower caste.

Most vernacular stories of this period draw on much shorter accounts in literary Chinese. At least two of the seven stories, “The Rainbow Slippers” and “The Reckless Scholar,” were developed from full-blown classical tales (see the translations “Zhang Jin” and “The Provincial Graduate,” in the appendix). The tales read almost like scenarios that the stories have filled out with detailed settings, incident, motivation, and commentary, and to which they have added an extra level of moral meaning.

We do not know the identity of the authors of the stories, but we can say something about their dates of composition. “Shengxian” was written much earlier than the others, probably as early as the fourteenth century. Readers will notice certain features that tend to set it apart. It is a great deal more terse. Its prologue (consisting of an introductory poem and some prose) is not a moral pronouncement; rather, it sets the scene for the meeting of hero and heroine. And as the romance progresses, warnings of dire consequences are issued at every step.

The other stories were all written much later, at about the time the collections were made, and probably for the collections. “Marriage Destinies Rearranged,” “The Rainbow Slippers,” and “Wu Yan” are almost certainly by a single author.
The connections of “The Reckless Scholar” and “The Lovers’ Tombs” to the work of Li Yu (1611–1680) are worth noting. Li Yu, who wrote stories as well as the novel *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, was the great exponent of the comic erotic mode in Chinese fiction. “The Reckless Scholar,” in particular, has a nexus of characters and events that we can discern, vastly transformed, in *The Carnal Prayer Mat*. Master Si, the flinty, scrupulously honest, parsimonious, unsociable retired official with the beautiful daughter almost certainly suggested to Li Yu the character Iron Door. Master Si’s daughter, Ziying, is having an affair with someone hidden in her bedroom. To avoid discovery, they abscond together, taking with them Ziying’s maid, whom her lover has also seduced. This resembles Quan’s affair with Iron Door’s daughter Jade Scent and her maid Ruyi in *The Carnal Prayer Mat*. Again, Master Si is so afraid to acknowledge the fact of the elopement that he fakes his daughter’s funeral, just as in the novel. I also believe that the talented young rake who is the hero of this story supplied Li Yu with ideas for Vesperus (Weiyang Sheng) in *The Carnal Prayer Mat*. (Note how he patrols the temple in search of girls.) Unlike many other authors of vernacular fiction, Li Yu did not depend directly on literary sources in writing his fiction, but he had close relations with previous literature, as these examples show.

Similarly, “The Lovers’ Tombs” exerted some influence on Li Yu’s stories of homosexual love, especially “The Male Mencius’s Mother” in *Silent Operas* (Wusheng xi) and “House of Gathered Refinements” in *Twelve Lou* (Shi’er lou). I mean particularly the stories’ multiple voices on the subject of homosexuality: orthodox condemnation, vulgar raillery, romantic sympathy.

The form of the stories also deserves attention. Each story begins with a prologue, which consists of a sententious poem followed by a short piece of prose. Some stories, such as “The Reckless Scholar,” extend the prose into a brief essay that sets
the theme within the Chinese tradition, while others add a short introductory story that prefigures in some fashion the theme of the main story.

Like the prologue, the main story is conventionally represented as told by a storyteller, who in these stories at least is a generic figure without any personal characteristics. Occasionally, the storytelling simulation is carried a step further, and a question is put to the storyteller by a member of the imaginary audience, as in “Wu Yan,” when it becomes necessary to explain how the heroine managed to peep through the door at the hero despite her mother’s presence in the room. The operations of narration—changes of focus or time, switches between scene and summary, explanations, projections into the future, and so forth—are all performed by the narrator with the use of well-established phrases. There is a pronounced element of commentary by the narrator, particularly on the moral significance of the action.

The commentary may be embodied in the couplets or short poems that are interspersed throughout the text and offer proverbial wisdom, moral judgment, or wry criticism. The couplets and poems come at key points, usually after significant plot developments. But originally they were at least partly designed to serve a purpose that is no longer relevant. The Chinese chapter was printed in one long paragraph—except for couplets, poems, and descriptive set pieces, all of which were indented—and thus these forms served to break up the text.

Descriptive set pieces are unrhymed compositions that make use of strict parallelism. They are generally euphuistic, using inflated language and classical allusion. In these stories they are used for describing such subjects as personal beauty or lovemaking.

Each story ends with a sententious epilogue poem reflecting on its meaning.

An interesting feature of two of the stories (“The Oil Seller” and “The Lovers’ Tombs”) is their use of popular song. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in particular, certain popular song forms captured the imagination of literary intellectuals, who collected existing songs and also wrote their own songs to the same tunes. Feng Menglong made two collections, in-
cluding one of songs to the tune “Guazhi’er” (Hanging branch), which was popular in much of China and which was commonly composed in Mandarin. The tune could be used either for romantic expression or for satire. When the courtesan in “The Oil Seller” realizes that she is in love with the oil seller, she expresses her thoughts to herself in the form of a Guazhi’er song, and in both stories young men use the same tune for bawdy raillery.

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NOTES


2. I am leaving the term “falling in love” undefined, without speculating whether—or rather, to what extent—the effect of love is produced by cultural or biochemical factors. Chinese thinking distinguished between love and mere sexual desire—qìng and sè, respectively. Falling in love at first sight was called yì jiàn zhòng qìng.

3. There is also a copious literature that glorifies heroic fidelity to an engagement, even though the engaged couple have never even met; an outstanding example is “The Unbreakable Marriage Bond of Chen Duoshou,” the ninth story in Constant Words to Awaken the World. The vernacular fiction of the Qing dynasty, especially the so-called caizi jiaren novels (novels of the brilliant and beautiful, also known as scholar-beauty romances), show great ingenuity in exploiting certain aspects of the romance while claiming to adhere to the accepted morality.


9. See Zhou Guisheng’s translation, titled *Du she quan*, of Fortuné du Boisgobey’s *Margot la Balafrière*, *Xin xiaoshuo* 18:126. The commentator was the novelist Wu Jianren.

10. See “Mo Juren,” *Qing shi leilüe, juan* 3 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1986), 1: 82–83. The source story is translated in the appendix to this volume, under the title “The Provincial Graduate,” together with the commentator’s remarks.

11. See, for example, the sources excerpted in Wang Liqi, *Yuan Ming Qing sandai jinhui xiaoshuo xiqu shiliao*, rev. ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), pp. 167–430.


14. Note that the titles of both collections suggest a moral purpose. *The Rocks Nod Their Heads* title refers to the myth of a Buddhist priest in Hangzhou who preached his message so eloquently that the very rocks nodded their heads. Among the stories translated here, “Shengxian” is the exception; it contains several warnings, but not of the moral variety. It is significant that it is also much earlier than the rest of the stories.


16. As in “Wu Yan” and, particularly, “The Reckless Scholar.” Note that the source of the latter story, the classical tale “Mo Juren,” does
not mention the karmic level at all; see the translation titled “The Provincial Graduate” in the appendix to this volume.

17. Some of them might be considered stories of seduction ending in mutual love.


19. Sun Kaidi, in his *Xiaoshuo pangzheng* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), assembled the putative sources and analogues of the stories in both of these collections.


21. There are distinct stylistic similarities—as well as significant differences—between twenty-odd *Xing shi hengyan* stories (including “Marriage Destinies Rearranged,” “The Rainbow Slippers,” and “Wu Yan”) and the *Shi dian tou* stories. In *The Chinese Short Story* I argued that both sets of stories were probably by the same author, whom in *The Chinese Vernacular Story* I referred to as Langxian. However, the thesis of common authorship is far from proven, and I think it prudent here to consider the two sets of stories as by separate authors.

22. See my translation (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996). It should be distinguished from another translation that borrowed the title “Carnal Prayer Mat” from mine. (The latter is actually a reissue of an old and inadequate translation from the German.)

23. It should be noted that the story “I Want to Get Married” told by Aunt Flora in chapter 17 of *The Carnal Prayer Mat* comes from a tale of that name (“Nu yao jia”). It is found in juan 1 of the *Xuanxuan pian*, a Ming collection compiled by Xiaozhu Zhuren and edited by Deng Zhimo that is preserved in the Naikaku Bunko in Tokyo. As told by Aunt Flora, however, the story is somewhat changed and owes nothing textually to its source.