INTRODUCTION

Androgyny Defined

The gender deviation in late-imperial Chinese literature has in recent decades stimulated growth of scholarship in the sinological field, to which the present inquiry aims to add a new dimension. Scholars’ mounting political dissidence and thriving individualistic impulses during this period engendered destabilization of their gender status, traditionally a yin position, when they questioned decadent politics and conservative ideology. Viewing gender from both Chinese and Western theoretical perspectives, this study explores the strategies and rhetoric with which literati scholars appropriate the “symbolic female” for their own purposes and inscribe their own recalcitrant drives for political/ideological confrontation in their characterizations of gender abnormality. Through the analysis of gendered implications in literary texts, this inquiry strives for novel interpretations of canonical works and seeks to unveil a trend of androgyny (as defined herein) in the late Ming and early Qing literature (roughly 1550–1750).1

A fashionable trope frequently used in late Ming/early Qing literature is “heroes among women” (nüzhong zhangfu). It can be traced to the writings of the scholar-official Lü Kun (1536–1618), the social critic Li Zhi (1527–1602), the poet Yu Huai (1616–1696), the playwrights Xu Wei (1521–1593) and Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), the fiction editor Feng Menglong (1574–
1654), the story writer Ling Mengchu (1580–1644), and numerous authors of scholar-beauty romances.\(^2\) With its implied female adoption of male attributes, this term may be conveniently associated with the concept of gender fluidity or sexual equality, but such a notion has been challenged by Western feminist scholars in recent decades in their observations on its androcentric import and manipulation by patriarchy. In her study of the nüzhong zhangfu in *Records of the Strange at the Studio of Leisure* (Liaozhai zhiyi), Judith Zeitlin indicates that such a heroine “violates social norms to accomplish a goal that itself embodies the highest social ideals,” so that “she can be contained under the old rubric ‘exemplary woman’ or treated as an honorary male.”\(^3\) Likewise, in discussing the woman warrior Lin Siniang in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), Louise Edwards remarks that such an Amazon is “primarily instrumental in ensuring its [patriarchal power’s] continued existence because the deeds she performs are undeniably consolidating the existing Confucian social and moral order.”\(^4\)

What lies behind such feminist visions is an assumption that most works written in the classic age were composed by men who inevitably brought with them patriarchal bias, or what Fredric Jameson terms “political unconsciousness,” in creating their characters, the masculine women in particular. Although such feminist readings help us gain some insights into the character of masculine women by contextualizing them in patriarchal culture, the multifaceted identity of the small army of nüzhong zhangfu emerging from Ming-Qing literature is endowed with a complexity that invites further critical scrutiny. Contemporary feminist theory enlightens us on the identical gender status between women and marginalized men; what determines one’s gender is not his sexual identity, but his social/political/ideological position.\(^5\) This feminist insight applies well to premodern Chinese culture, in which marginal men often compare themselves to women. The word “marginal,” extensively used in the following study, must be taken as a relative term. A scholar who has passed the imperial examination might remain marginal in his political stand if he is alienated from the emperor or the prime minister. Similarly, a boy born to an aristocratic family might become spiritually marginal if he renounces the values attached to his given status. Marginality, therefore, can emerge as a consequence of one’s alienation complex, alienation from the ruling clique, and orthodoxy. Correspondingly, in premodern Chinese culture, the politically and ideologically alienated/marginalized scholars tended, most likely, to identify with the female and the feminine. Maram Epstein argues elegantly that in the late Ming
the feminine, “as the potentially pure embodiment of qing [love, feeling, sentiment],” began “to be idealized as an authentic subject position untainted by the frustrations, sacrifices and moral compromises demanded by participating in the bureaucratic system.” The late Ming liberals’ provocative writings that initiated the cult of qing and the idealization of the feminine often convey criticism of the orthodox, defiance of the rigid Cheng-Zhu neo-Confucianism, and a strong drive for self-authenticity. Literati’s sentimental or symbolic identification with the feminine, therefore, often carries hidden strength, which is traditionally associated with the masculine gender.

In recent decades many scholars have turned to exploring literati scholars’ male presence and cherished values inscribed in the characterization of the females in their works. Acknowledging such autobiographical sensibilities and allegorical modes of presentation in Ming-Qing literature, this study takes a slightly different approach in its gender analysis by emphasizing the marginalization of the literati authors, whose alienation complex often engenders an intensified awareness of their yin status, hence a shared gender identity with women. Their subsequent aversion to such imposed feminization is often artistically projected onto literary characters of ambiguous gender, be it transgressive women or feminine men, making them genuinely subversive to the patriarchal order. In this study the term adopted for such political/ideological stance of fashioning personal identity is “androgyny”; its precise connotations in relation to late Ming/early Qing literature are further specified herein.

Stemming from the Greek words for male and female, the term “androgyny” is commonly designated as the “union of sexes in one individual” or “a healthy personality with a balance of masculine and feminine attributes,” although variations from these common definitions occurred even in ancient Greece, where it was occasionally related to cowardly, impotent, or even castrated men. The tendency to associate the term with gender rather than sex becomes more prominent in its modern usage. Since Virginia Woolf’s exalting androgyny as a poetic ideal in A Room of One’s Own (1929) and Carolyn Heilbrun’s groundbreaking work Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (1973), the concept of androgyny has stimulated growing interest and triggered protracted debate in the West. While research on androgyny has been extended to many spheres of human experience, such as drinking habits, linguistic usage, sexual functions, and family role-sharing, shifting feminist trends have been engaged in polemics debating the potential damage and benefit it may bring to the feminist cause. Some feminists label an-
drogyny “sexist,” with the belief that it is built on the premise of sexual dichotomy; some take it as a romantic fantasy in which male poets can freely absorb female “perspectives, values and qualities” in their writings as a means to approach the divine identity of the original whole; others, such as Toril Moi, view it as a human ideal capable of “deconstructing” the “binary opposition of masculinity and femininity.” With Chinese literati scholars’ (often conscious) sentimental or rhetorical identification with women, a unique cultural phenomenon that distinguishes Chinese literature from its Western counterpart, the ideal of androgyny celebrated in Chinese texts inevitably carries its own connotations. Building its thesis on the observation of Chinese literati scholars’ political/ideological marginalization/feminization and their unsuppressed masculinity, this study will largely explore male scholars’ gender identity, often on a symbolic level, through their literary characterizing. While generally concurring with Toril Moi in her positive appraisal of androgyny, it acknowledges the inherent sexism of androgyny as a male discourse in Chinese culture, a point that is addressed in my concluding chapter.

Concerning the literature of late imperial China explored in this text, two definitive statements about the concept used in Western gender study are particularly relevant. In her introduction to the 1974 issue of Women’s Studies, Cynthia Secor provides a succinct and useful definition: “Androgyny is the capacity of a single person of either sex to embody the full range of human character traits, despite cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine.” The psychological impetus for such gender deviation is captured in Carolyn Heilbrun’s perceptive remark that “androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate.” Both definitions view androgyny as subversion of cultural norms and a drive for individual fulfillment. Such a perspective is epistemologically associated with the scrutiny of androgyny in Ming-Qing literature in the chapters that follow. With its parameters thus extended, the term “androgyny” in this study designates not only one’s capacity for dual sexual roles—one’s inclination to transcend gender dichotomy—but also one’s drive to deviate from or resist culturally/politically prescribed gender positions, particularly the institutionalized yin status of women and marginalized men, for the pursuit of a wholesome identity. To preserve the term’s association with the human urge for self-liberation, this study disassociates androgyny from gender inversion of any kind that subverts the norms not for self-salvation but for self-gains. Both a eunuch’s castration to
gain access to the power source and a vicious Amazon’s aggressive dominance over her former male tyrant are regarded as gender perversion rather than androgyny, since such alteration leads to new oppression rather than to personal emancipation. Presentations in literature of androgyny and of gender perversion often reflect opposite ideological stands of their authors as well as the authors’ different psychological distances from their characters.

This study attempts to apply the perspective of androgyny in examining a group of Chinese classics produced during the late Ming/early Qing period, noted for its fascination with the fluidity of sexual roles in Chinese society\textsuperscript{15} and the idealization of the feminine in its literati’s writings. While feminist terminology will be used extensively in this study, feminism is relevant here only for its recognition of marginal men’s gender identification with women and for the pedagogy it fosters in applying gendered terms to discuss power relation and hierarchical conflicts of all kinds. As a male critic exploring gender inscription in literature, I am concerned, if not predominantly, with male literati’s plight in their institutionalized yin status in China’s political/ideological structure as well as their revolt through literary creation against such abasement. The aim of this study is to track the fluctuating traces of androgyny in Chinese literature, as a social ideal and a literati tactic in fashioning self-identity in gender crisis, to explore their cultural significance, and thereby to seek from a new perspective unexplored dimensions of meaning in literature. While building my thesis on a relatively wide range of writings, I will concentrate my analysis on the following classics: \textit{The Plum in the Golden Vase} (Jin Ping Mei, 1596, a novel by Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, hereafter referred to as the \textit{Plum}), \textit{The Peony Pavilion} (Mudan ting, 1598, a drama by Tang Xianzu, hereafter referred to as the \textit{Pavilion}), \textit{The Peach Blossom Fan} (Taohua shan, 1699, a drama by Kong Shangren, hereafter referred to as the \textit{Fan}), \textit{The Dream of the Red Chamber} (Honglou meng, 1792, a novel by Cao Xueqin, hereafter referred to as the \textit{Dream}) and a group of scholar-beauty romances (ca. 1600–1750). Since androgyny as a cultural/literary phenomenon was more prominent in the late Ming, due emphasis is given to the late sixteenth century; as easily seen, even the Qing play selected for study here, the \textit{Fan}, reflects late Ming politics. While the \textit{Dream} ostensibly falls out of the historical period dealt with here, given its initial publication in 1792, the time of its composition, generally acknowledged to be the middle of eighteenth century, merges with the concluding fringe of our period.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, recent scholarship has almost reached a consensus that author of the \textit{Dream}, Cao Xueqin, inherited the legacy of
late Ming liberal outlooks. The complex gender issues in the *Dream* and its deviation from previous works in gender construction make it an indispensable part of the present inquiry.

Extensively used in the following gender study are the metaphysical terms “yin” and “yang.” Although in her work on the relationship between gender and Chinese cosmology, Alison Black rightly observes that etymologically and primarily yin and yang do not mean “feminine” and “masculine,” their symbolic association, as Lisa Raphals’ recent study indicates, is solidly established after the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu (179–104 B.C.) applies the metaphysical terms to designate gendered human relations. Charlotte Furth confirms this association in her study on gender in Chinese medical history: “It is through yin and yang that gender could be seen as an attribute of nature itself within the body and without, and by association the qualities of myriad natural phenomena could be linked to gendered meanings.” Classical Chinese literature is an art fraught with symbolism, where the metaphysical yin and yang often serve as major metaphors for human sexual roles. Their gendered associations with numbers, colors, nature, seasons, sex, plants, and gardens will be incorporated into this study to enrich the discussion. Preceding the detailed investigation of literary works, a brief survey of androgyny in Chinese culture is provided in the first two chapters, as background for this study.