

SU E PIAN: A UNIQUE TREASURE AT THE KINSEY INSTITUTE LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

The Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A. is a research institute on sex, gender and reproduction. Its library has the only complete edition of the *Su E Pian*, a Chinese erotic novel of late Ming Dynasty. This article examines the content and historical background of this Chinese erotic novel which also reflected the political and morality environment of the Ming Dynasty. The fact that *Su E Pian* was not a manuscript, but a printed erotic novel shows the general acceptance of its form by the populace. The author also calls for further research of the Chinese collections at the Kinsey Institute.

THE KINSEY INSTITUTE AND ITS COLLECTIONS

The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction is a private, not-for-profit corporation affiliated with the Indiana University. Founded by Dr. Alfred Kinsey in 1947, the Kinsey Institute Library's mission is to collect and archive scientific, cultural and artistic materials in the areas of sex, gender, and reproduction; and to disseminate information to both the scientific community and the public. The Kinsey Institute Library has archival materials from different cultures. It currently has over 80,000 books, journals, and reprints including scientific volumes, first editions of erotic classics, commercial periodicals and works of fiction of the West and East in many languages.

THE CHINESE AND JAPANESE COLLECTIONS

The Chinese collections of the Institute Library started when Dr. Kinsey undertook his unfailing efforts to collect a wide range of materials depicting and describing human sexual behavior in the 1940's and 1950's. Dr. Kinsey's

monumental works on male and female sexual behaviors attracted many generous donations including Chinese and Japanese materials. The Library currently has more than 500 volumes in the Chinese and Japanese languages. This collection consists of novels, plays, poems, comics, and pillow books (sexual instructions books). They have been studied and used by researchers and scholars from around the world.

ACCESS

All materials in the Institute Library are acquired as gifts or donations, and are purchased with Institute income. No public funds have ever been used to acquire any erotic materials. Access to the Institute is made available to scholars and researchers by contacting the Institute directly.

SU E PIAN (素娥篇): A UNIQUE TREASURE FROM THE KINSEY INSTITUTE

Su E Pian (also translated as "The Lady of the Moon"), a Chinese erotic novel of the late Ming Dynasty is available at the Kinsey Institute. This is the only copy of the book existing today in its most complete form in the world. Mr. Wang Ji Zhen (王際真), a professor at Columbia University, donated his book to The Kinsey Institute Library on April 11, 1948. He had studied the book and attached four pages of notes in English at the end of the book relating the history of the book and dating it. There is no date anywhere in the book, but Wang dated it ca. 1610. This is based on the observation that the known wood-plate cutter of *Su E Pian* was also the illustrator of the famous "Romance of the West Chamber" (西廂記 *Xi Xiang Ji*) where notes written by Li Zhou Wu (李卓吾), who died in 1610) were found. Ma You Yan, a Chinese scholar who visited the Kinsey Institute in 1979 and studied the book found the dating agreeable even the new data showed that Li Zhou Wu died in 1602 instead of 1610. Ma published his article on *Su E Pian* in *China Times* (中國時報), a Taiwan newspaper, in September 1979. In his article, Mr. Ma believed that the only other copy of *Su E Pian* in China was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.¹

Su E Pian has more than 10,000 Chinese characters, 90 illustrations and forty-three chapters in a set of four volumes with white cotton paper and white fringe. The frame is 20.8 cm in height and 14.1 cm in width.

A preface was provided by Fang Hu Xian Ke (方壺仙客) which means "the immortal square pot." Pot was used as a favorite symbol of the Taoists. "Pot," or "container", in Chinese Taoist's terms, symbolizes "Hun-Tun" meaning "chaos," "mixture of Ying and Yang," or "small universe." In the preface, the author of *Su E*

Pian self-designated another pseudonym as Ye Hua Sheng. Like many novels in ancient China, the authorship was not recorded in Chinese bibliographies.² Traditionally, story or any other literary writing was considered inferior to the writing of formal "classics"; therefore Chinese literary authors receive no official recognition. The scholars of repute often wrote stories anonymously. *Su E Pian* is no exception.

THE TANG'S STORY OF SU E and HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SU E PIAN of THE MING

The Ming dynasty's *Su E Pian*'s antecedent version is a story of Su E written by Yuan Jiao (袁郊) of Tang Dynasty. Yuan's Su E was recorded in *Gan Ze Yao* (甘澤謠) which was collected in *Jin Di Mi Shu* (津逮秘書). Yuan Jiao's story of Su E has a text of 402 Chinese characters, but with no illustrations nor mention of the forty-three sexual positions which appeared in the Ming edition. It nonetheless told the same story of Master Wu and Su E in the same setting.³

Su E (素娥), a beautiful concubine of Master Wu Shan Si was also an artist and poet. Because of her refusal to meet with the righteous Minister, Di Ren Jie (狄仁杰), she was discovered to be a spirit of flowers and the moon. In a human form, she was seen as a messenger from the Supreme Being to lure the human mind and body.

Tang's fiction usually demonstrates naturalness of style and focus on love stories, hero tales, and tales of the supernatural. Even in the love stories and heroes tales, there is often an element of the supernatural. Indeed, like many other Tang dynasty's legendary short stories, this short story of Su E consisted of "brief, disjointed anecdotes relating to the court and officials, in stories of incredible happening"⁴ Wu San Si, the royal family member, and Su E, the spirit of the flowers and the moon, along with De Ren Jie, a court official, are portrayed in this short story.

Tang's short stories were considered the earliest form of Chinese novel, and were immediately favored by the populace. The fictional or historical characters in stories became widespread. Edwards pointed out in his *Chinese Prose History*: "Tang's short stories are not short stories in the western sense of the term, for many were capable of being expanded, and were so expanded in later dynasties, into drama and novels."⁵

The popularity of the Tang's story of Su E is due to three obvious reasons. First, Wu San Shi was the almighty Empress Wu Ze Tian's (武則天) nephew and the garrison commander of Changan (the imperial capital), who was known in the Chinese folk history for his capacity of searching for a few good "face heads" (male sexual partners) for the Empress.⁶ Second, Su E was a known nickname for the lady of the moon who symbolized Chinese femininity and beauty. Third, not

only was Yuang Jiao credited with the authorship of the story of Su E, but also another known author, Zhu Xi Ji (朱希濟) who included Su E in his collection of *Yao Wang Chuan* (妖妄傳) *Wang Yan Chuan*, which consisted of four stories that were believed capable of expelling the evil spirit and to avoid fire. The fact that the story was collected in two books certainly help increase its readership in a pre-print time.

It is not surprising that the story of Su E was chosen and expanded in such a way in the Ming dynasty. How this story became a beautifully illustrated erotic book remains to be further explored. However, it was not uncommon for artists and illustrators to develop a highly erotic piece from a non-erotic work.

Many novels of erotic contents were produced in the Ming dynasty. Morality in the late Ming dynasty had declined to such a degree that people were appointed to high offices not for their scholarship and knowledge of the classics but for their success in concocting aphrodisiacs. During that time, erotic themes were freely treated in the art and literature. Erotic novels and paintings came into vogue. *Su E Pian* is a good example of the trend.

The difference between the two versions of *Su E Pian* reflects a general difference of literature in the Ming Dynasty and the earlier dynasties. The fact that Ming's *Su E Pian* was not a manuscript, but a printed erotic novel shows the general acceptance of its form by the populace.

THE ENGRAVER OF SU E PIAN

The first page of the preface reveals that the engraver of the books was Huang Yi Kai. Huang Yi Kai (1580-1622)⁷ was born in Qiu village (虬), Xin An county (新安), Anhui Province (安徽). His father brought him and his brothers to Hangzhou (杭州) where they continued to reside. Huang was from a well-known engraver family and was the twenty-seventh generation of his clan.⁸

Engraving in the Ming Dynasty was very popular. Almost all popular novels were illustrated by applying this technique. In the old days, an engraver was viewed as a craftsman, and usually was not recorded in family genealogy unless he was also bestowed an official post in the government. However, it was a common practice for engravers to leave their names on their work.

There were three different types of engraving work done in Ming Dynasty: family engraving enterprises; individual engravers for publishers, and individual engravers for authors. The Huang clan represented the best Hui Style (徽) of engraving woodcuts. They began to engrave plates for books during late Tang Dynasty, and their profession flourished in the middle of Ming Dynasty. Huang Yi Kai illustrated many romantic novels of his time. He illustrated for the aforementioned *Xi Xiang Ji* (西廂記) (Romance of the West Chamber), *Gui Fan*

Tu Shuo (閨范圖說) (Picture of the Boudoir, 1612), *Mu Dan Ting Huan Hun Ji* (牡丹亭還魂記) (Return from Grave, to Peony Pavilion, 1617), *Gu Qu-zhai Yuan Ren Za Ju* (顧曲齋元人雜劇) (GuGu-zhai Miscellaneous Plays by Yuan Dynasty Playwrights, 1619), *Fan Gang Jing Pu Sa Jie* (The Commandments of Bodhisattva of Fan Gang Canon), *Wu Yue Chun Qiu Yue Fu* (吳越春秋圖) (Book of Songs of the Wu Yue Spring-Autumn), *Nan Pi Pa Ji* (南琵琶記) (The Story of the Southern Concubines), and *Qing Lou Yun Yu* (青樓韻語) (The Lyrics in the Whorehouse).

Zhang Xiu Min (張秀文) did a detailed studies of Huang Yi Kai and published his work on Hui style woodcutting and engravers in the premiere issue of *Tu Shu Guan* (The Library) in 1964, but he did not mention Su E Pian in his article. A comparison of Su E Pian with Huang's other works shows a great similarity in their artistic style and their quality. It is safe to say that Huang Yi Kai worked on Su E Pian in his later years. Huang's style of woodcutting was minute and exquisite, and was highly representative of the style of the woodcut in the Ming Dynasty in Anhui Province. However, his artistic accomplishment in Su E Pian was never mentioned in any books.¹⁰

THE SYNOPSIS OF THE SU E PIAN

The story's hero, Master Wu San Si, was the nephew of the Empress Wu Ze Tian and a man with power and great fortune. He had a large harem with which he was getting somewhat weary. One day he discovered among his innumerable women a young girl named Su E whom he had somehow overlooked before. Her charms soon captivated him completely. Together they performed sexual acts in forty three forms. As they acted out each form, they gave it a very poetic name.

Hearing of Su E's exquisite beauty, the Minister, Di Ren Jie, insisted upon seeing her; she was reluctant, protesting that he was an upright man and that she was not a mortal, but a spirit from flowers and the moon. He persisted and was finally introduced to her. As a result of their meeting, the "Moon Lady" shortly ascended to another world taking with her the spiritual essence of Wu. At a later point, visitors to the Chung Nan Mountains (終南山) reported seeing both Wu and Su E in the guise of Taoists.

The forty three chapters describe the sexual adventures of Wu and Su E. The author uses elegant language to describe the natural scenes, how the couple was aroused by the natural setting and how the couple was enlightened by what they felt as to which position to perform. Then the couple would give the sexual act a poetic name, most often a phrase or idiom that alluded to the sexual scene or position. The couple would then write a verse following the style of traditional Chinese poem writing. Some positions were titled as: Flowers Longing for Butterflies

(花開蝶戀), The Union of Ying and Yang (勿侖太極) Boat Widthwise over the Ferry (野渡橫舟), Lightless on the Palm (掌上輕盈), Stopping the Horse to Pull the Saddle (駐馬板鞍) etc.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK

Su E Pian portrayed a very obvious Taoist theory of sexuality throughout the entire book. The book is about sexual positions, a typical theme of Chinese erotica. It also emphasizes the harmony between nature and human beings which reflects another Tao's theme of returning to nature. Although there are many depictions and illustrations of bedroom sex play, outdoor love-making, in which a couple is surrounded by grass, trees, and sky. This revealed the Taoism's sense of oneness with nature and with nature's peace and beauty. It is interesting to note that all the sexual spontaneity of the couple was inspired by the natural scenes: the shape of a stone, love-making butterflies, and the smell of flowers. In short, human being's sexual act forms only a part of the natural scene.

The Late Ming Dynasty was a time after the dominant Neo-Confucian thoughts of the Song dynasty became so hostile towards human nature. It was believed that in Neo-Confucianism the Heaven's ruling" or reasons should completely repress human needs. Obviously, the book of *Su E* encouraged people to enjoy life and explore the pleasure of sex.

This book, unlike some other erotic novels, is also of high literary quality, even though the book was apparently intended for an audience with or without a literary background. The unreserved pictures are explicit enough for anyone to follow, but the text was probably prepared for the educated only. The book used no colloquial language but strictly followed the Chinese classical style.

Besides *Su E Pian*, there is much to learn from the Chinese Collections of The Kinsey Institute. The Kinsey Institute welcomes interested scholars from different fields to study abundant elegant materials such as *Su E Pian* and many others from philosophical, cultural, artistic, literary and historical perspectives.

NOTES

1. While conducting research in China in 1992, the author learned that a well-known Chinese rare books publishing house conducted an extensive search for a copy of *Su E Pian* in China and yet failed to find one.
2. *Su E Pian* was only mentioned in *Zhong Guo Tong Su Xiao Suo Mu Lu* (Catalog of Chinese Popular Literature) compiled by Mr. Eoyang Jian,

1989. The entry for Su E Pian was originated from an introductory article by Mr. Ma You Yuan.

3. Translation of Tang's story of Su E "Su O was a singing-girl in the house of Wu San Su. The singing and dancing of her predecessor, the musician Chiao, had had described by Wu, who had a wide knowledge of these matters, as the finest in the world. Chiao, however, was unfortunately drowned in the Lo river, and wu" attendants recommended Su both for her beauty and for her skills as a musician. When she arrived Wu was delighted with her. He gave a "coming-out" banquet for her, at which all the high official were present except Ti Ren-Chieh, who excused him on the pleas of ill-health. Wu's remarks on the subject were duly reported to Ti, He came the next day to apologize and promised to be early at the next banquet. Overhearing this remark, Su O begged Wu not to invite him again.

On the occasion of the next feast, however, Ti was not only invited, but came early as he had promised. Su was sent for to entertain the quest, but was nowhere to be found. Wu went himself to seek her and presently a delicious fragrance emanating from a crevice in the wall revealed her whereabouts. Putting his ear to the crack Wu heard her voice, fine as silk and only just distinguishable." (Edwards, E.D. (Chinese Prose Literature of The Tang Period. v.2, London, W.C: Arthur Probsthain, 1938. p. 346)

4. Edwards, E.D. *Chinese Prose Literature of The Tang Period*. v.2, London, W.C: Arthur Probsthain, 1938. p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Chou, Eric. *The Dragon and the Phoenix: love, sex and the Chinese*. London: Michael Joseph, 1971. p. 29.
7. This dating was established by Zhang Xiu Min who did extended studies of the Huang family engravers. There are other dates established for the engraver. Other dating included from 1573-1620 (*Dictionary of Biographies of the Chinese Artists* (中國美術家人名大詞典)), or 1580-1622 (*Chinese Art Encyclopedia* (中國美術詞典)),
8. See entries under Huang Yi Kai in *Zhong Guo Mei Shu Jia Ren Ming Da Chi Dian* in the *Dictionary of Biographies of The Chinese Artists*, Shanghai

People's Arts Press, 1980; and Zhong Guo Mei Shu Chi Dian (Chinese Art Encyclopedia) published by Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, 1987.

10. Eoyang Jian (歐陽健), a Chinese scholar whom the author visited with, pointed out that late Ming Dynasty was known for its hastily produced low quality books, including art books. He was greatly impressed with the style and artistic beauty of Su E Pian, after viewing some portions of its photocopies that the author brought to China, and said that Su E Pian was certainly an exception for that time.

