

Between the Past and the West: the Images of Europe in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction

By

Huili Zheng

Modern and Classical Languages, Saint Vincent College

Huili Zheng, 302 N. Shenandoah Dr. Apt. 202.

Latrobe, PA, 15650

mayazheng2000@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the image of Europe in Wang Tao's literary tales produced in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on Wang Tao's appropriation of the old trope of foreign woman pursuing Chinese man and how he in the meantime gives this old trope new twist, this paper aims to investigate how gender politics is played out in self-other positioning in a transcultural context.

Huili Zheng

Enchanted Encounter: Gender Politics, Cultural Identity, and Sino-Western Romance by Wang
Tao

Introduction

Born into a minor scholar's family in Suzhou with a prodigious literary talent in 1828, Wang Tao 王韜 (1828-97) believed that he was destined for an illustrious career of scholar-official.¹ Although he passed the licentiate degree with distinction at the age of seventeen, he never made any further in climbing the ladder of success. In 1848 he went to Shanghai to visit his father who was working for the London Missionary Society's press. The significance of this visit in Wang Tao's life can be fathomed only in retrospect. In the next year upon his father's death, he was invited by Walter Medhurst (1796-1857, Chinese name Mai Dusi 麥都思), the head of the London Missionary Society's press, to help translate the Bible into Chinese. In the spring of 1862 Wang Tao became implicated with the Taiping rebels. In order to escape arrest by the Manchu government he took refuge in the British consulate in Shanghai. Several months later the British Consul, who happened to be Walter Medhurst's son, secretly placed Wang on a boat bound for Hong Kong, and Wang thus began his exile of more than two decades. In his sojourn in Hong Kong, Wang came to be associated with the renowned Sinologist James Legge (1815-97, Chinese name Li Yage 理雅各) and helped him translate the Chinese classics.

In 1867 Wang was invited by James Legge to accompany him back to Britain to continue translating the classics. Although Wang Tao's personal travel to Europe happened to coincide with the first two official delegations dispatched by the Qing government to the West,² Wang's

¹ For studies of Wang Tao's life and career in English, see Paul A. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China*; Henry McAleavy, *Wang T'ao: the Life and Writings of a Displaced Person*.

² The Qing government dispatched the first delegation to Europe in 1866, just one year before Wang Tao's journey to

more-than-two-year stay in Europe gave him the rare opportunity to observe Western society firsthand and especially associate with Europeans personally which was denied to the Chinese emissaries visited the West at the same time.³ This trip broadened Wang's intellectual horizons considerably as well as provided him the opportunity to reflect on Chinese culture in light of the "Other"---- European society and culture. When he returned to Hong Kong Wang became an ardent advocate of reform, introducing his reformist ideas on the *Xunhuan ribao* 循環日報 (*Global Daily*), one of the earliest Chinese-language newspaper published by Wang Tao himself. Although Wang had never made his way to the political center, he nonetheless left an indelible imprint on China's nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural history precisely because the new ideas he introduced to China. As a prominent advocate of reform, the thinker Wang Tao has drawn much scholarly attention which he rightly deserves. In the past decade Wang Tao's role as a literary figure, especially his travel writing, have drawn much critical attention as well.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to look at Wang Tao primarily as a literary figure and read his representation of the West against his immediate historical context as well as the age-old literary tradition of the representation of the foreign other. Focusing on Wang Tao's appropriation of the

the West. This informal delegation was led by a Manchu official named Bin Chun 斌椿 (b. 1804). In 1868 the Qing court dispatched the first formal diplomatic mission to America and Europe headed by a Manchu official named Zhi Gang 志剛 (?-?) and the former American Ambassador to the Qing court Anson Burlingame (1820-70, Chinese name Pu Anchen 蒲安臣). Both Bin Chun and Zhi Gang kept travel journals which can be found in *Zouxiang shijie congshu* 走向世界叢書, edited by Zhong Shuhe 鐘叔河.

³ As pointed out by Paul Cohen in his study of Wang Tao, "Wang T'ao was probably the first classically trained Chinese scholar in the modern era to spend a meaningful period of time in the West." Idem, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, p. 67.

⁴ For instance, Catherine Vance Yeh, "The Life-Style of Four Wenren in Late Qing Shanghai." Sheldon Lu, "Waking to Modernity: the Classical Tale in Late-Qing China." Patrick Hanan, "The Bible as Chinese Literature: Medhurst, Wang Tao, and the Delegates' Version." Lü Wencui 呂文翠, "Wanqing Shanhai de Kua Wenhua Xinglü: Lun Wang Tao yu Yuan Zuzhi de Taixi Youji" 晚清上海的跨文化行旅: 論王韜與袁祖志的泰西遊記. Emma Jinhua Teng, "The West as a Kingdom of Women: Woman and Occidentalism in Wang Tao's Tales of Travel." Wang Jinguang 王晉光, "Wang Tao: Xianggang Zuojia Bizu Lun" 王韜: 香港作家鼻祖論. In her monograph on travel writings in the early medieval and nineteenth-century China, Xiaofei Tian includes a section of discussion on the poems Wang Tao wrote during his stay in England, see idem, *Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings in the Early Medieval and Nineteenth-century China*, pp. 229-238.

traditional rhetorical strategy of gendering the Other, especially the conventional trope of “foreign woman pursuing Chinese man,” this paper aims to investigate how Wang Tao employs and in the meantime transforms these old rhetorical strategies by giving them new twists, thus shedding light on how gender politics is played out in the discursive presentation of self-other positioning in fictional inter-cultural encounters as China enters the modern age.

Between the Past and the West

Wang Tao’s representation of the West mainly comes from two works: *Songyin manlu* 崧隱漫錄 (Random Records of a Recluse in Wusong, 1884-1887) and *Manyou suilu* 漫遊隨錄 (Casual Jottings of Random Wanderings, 1887). Both collections were first published in serials in the periodical *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (Pictorial of the Studio of Touching Stone) and both were publication hits in late Qing Shanghai.⁵ The former is a collection of short stories written in elaborate literary Chinese in the mode of *chuanqi* 傳奇 (stories of the marvelous and extraordinary) style, and the latter is a collection of autobiographical travel accounts whose geographical locations span from Wang Tao’s hometown Suzhou to Europe. The images of the West and self-other positioning in these two collections are drastically different partly due to the differences of genres. In keeping with the *chuanqi* style exemplified by Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (Tales of the Strange from the Studio of Leisure), woman figures prominently in *Songyin manlu*.⁶ However, while the *Liaozhai zhiyi* centers on the figure of fox and ghost, in *Songyin manlu* courtesans (both Chinese and non-Chinese) emphatically take

⁵ For a brief discussion of the publication of the two works on *Dianshizhai huabao*, see Rania Hungtington, “The Weird in the Newspaper.”

⁶ *Songyin manlu* is also known as *Hou Liaozhai zhiyi* 後聊齋志異 (Post-Tales of the Strange from the Studio of Leisure).

the spotlight.⁷

The complete collection of *Songyin manlu* contains around 130 stories in total. Although there are only five stories that explicitly involves the West in *Songyin manlu*, the West figures prominently in the self-preface (*zixu* 自序) of the collection. In the preface the West serves as an epistemic framework of reference against which the Chinese beliefs in the magic and the marvelous in general, and the literary writings about the strange and the fantastic, the thematic hallmark of the *zhiguai* 志怪(records of the strange) tradition in particular, are critically assessed. As the self-preface is critical to the interpretation of the representation of the West and even the whole collection of *Songyin manlu*,⁸ it is worthwhile to discuss it at length here.

Wang Tao first takes the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas), the *locus classicus* of the literary tradition of the strange and the fantastic, to task by arguing that the existences of those strange lands recorded in that work are unverifiable as Westerners have found no empirical evidence of the existences of those strange lands. The writing of the *Shanhai jing* therefore is “untrustworthy” (斯其說不足信也).⁹ Wang Tao then goes further arguing that the existences of those hallowed fantastic creatures, such as dragons, phoenixes, unicorns as well as those supernatural beings like ghosts, foxes and immortals sound absurd as “the Westerners utterly deny the existences of such things” (斯皆西人所悍然不信者),¹⁰ and concludes that “indeed empty words are no equal to real practice” (誠以虛言不如實踐也).¹¹ He then expands

⁷ According to Lu Xun 魯迅, Wang Tao’s three collections of short stories written in literary Chinese: *Dunku lanyan* 遁窟瀾言 (Remarks while Hiding in a Cave, 1875), *Songyin manlu*, and *Songbin suohua* 淞濱瑣話 (Trivial Talks on the Banks of Wusong, 1887), were modeled at *Liaozhai zhiyi* but the main content is devoted to the lives of the courtesans.

⁸ Sheldon Lu observes that Wang Tao attempts to “reenchant a disappearing magical world” by writing about the fantastic. See idem, “Waking to Modernity: the Classical Tale in Late-Qing China,” p. 750.

⁹ *Songyin manlu*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2.

on this antithetic paradigm of China versus the West by pointing out the practical consequences of the two different epistemologies had on society and state:

The Westerners advance their science and technology to make tools for practical uses. With these tools they measure the height of the sky and the distance of the land and make distinctions of mountains and waters. The speed of their boat and train can overtake electricity and wind. With hydroelectric and thermal power they open up route to reach remote and dangerous areas. The speed of telecommunication can reach a thousand miles in an instant. Their excellence in chemistry enables them to make products of myriads of change. Their superlative craftsmanship is unbelievable. What the Westerners talk about can be put in practice, which brought great benefits to the welfare of the people and the power of the nation. If the Chinese do not focus on matters of practical importance but dwell on the fantastic and mysterious, it is not only going too far with the love for the strange, it is also morally suspicious.

西人窮其技巧，造器致用，測天之高，度地之遠，辨山岡，區水土，舟車之行，躡電追風，水火之力，縫幽鑿險，信音之速，瞬息千裏，化學之精，頃刻萬變，幾於神工鬼斧，不可思議。坐而言者，可以起而行，利民生，裨國是，乃其犖犖大者。不此之務，而反索之於支離虛誕、杳渺不可究詰之境，豈獨好奇之過哉，其志亦荒矣！¹²

In this passage cited above Wang Tao paints in extravagant and glorified terms a glittering image of the West which makes the image of China pale in comparison. The Westerners' practical and utilitarian epistemology makes them concern with things of practical importance which had brought practical advantages, both economic and military, to their society and state as a result, by stark contrast, the Chinese indulge themselves with things insubstantial and unverifiable which not only have no practical benefits but is also morally suspicious. In this intercultural contrast the fact that the West takes a superior epistemic position is beyond question.

In the opening passage of the self-preface Wang Tao presents two worlds or two worldviews in diametrical opposition. In favoring "real practice" over and against "empty words" Wang Tao endorses a rational and utilitarian mentality which is at the core of his image as a reformer. In the passage following it, however, the image of Wang Tao turns explicitly emotional and personal.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

He first remarks that he had the ambition of “benefiting the world” (*yongshi* 用世) when young, and “concerned solely with the real and the true” (一惟實事求是).¹³ Indignant with the uselessness of the examination essays and the ignorance and narrow-mindedness of Confucian scholars produced by the examination system, he gave up on his attempts at the civil service examinations as early as before he turned twenty years old. With his ambitions repeatedly thwarted and his talents could not be put in use, he had no choice but to “go to the deep mountains and dense forests” (惟有入山必深，入林必密) and vent his frustrations in writing:

If I cannot find what I cherish in China, I look for them in far-away places, remote regions and foreign peoples. If I cannot find them among my contemporaries, I search for them back to the beginning of antiquity and down to thousands of years in the future. If I cannot find them in my species, I search for them among ghosts, foxes, immortals, Buddhas, grass, birds and beasts. 求之於中國二不得，則求之於遐陬絕嶠；求之餘並世之人而不得，則上溯之亙古以前，下極之千載以後；求之於同類之體之人而不得，則求之於鬼狐仙佛，草木鳥獸。

The subject matters listed here all are the conventional subjects of the *zhiguai* tradition. In a self-vindictive manner, Wang Tao then refers to Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca.340- ca.278 BC), Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (ca.369-ca.286 BC) and Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154-93 BC), thus placing himself in the long tradition of discontent scholars who turned to the strange and the fantastic to vent their frustrations.

The conflicting self-images presented in the self-preface are hard to escape notice. In the first passage Wang Tao takes the *zhiguai* tradition and the Chinese beliefs in the fantastic and the supernatural to task by referring to Western standards, and in so doing Wang presents himself as a rational and iconoclastic reformer. In the emotive self-representation in the second passage,

¹³ Ibid, p. 2.

however, Wang Tao apologetically appeals to the *zhiguai* tradition he attacks in the first passage to justify his writing about the strange and the fantastic, and presents himself in the image of a frustrated recluse. These two conflicting modes of discourse: the rational and the emotional, and the resulting split cultural identity: reformer and recluse, speaks voluminously of the cultural predicament faced by Wang Tao living in a transitional period. Wang Tao's complex and conflicting cultural identity is best spelled out in the ambivalent and ambiguous images of the West presented in fictional Sino-Western encounters.

Gendering the West and Re-centering the Self

The titles of the five stories about the West are: “Biography of Mary” (Meili xiaozhuan 媚黎小傳), “Wonderland under the Sea” (Haidi qijing 海底奇境), “Beauties Overseas” (Haiwai meiren 海外美人), “Grand Tours Overseas” (Haiwai zhuangyou 海外壯遊), and “Records of Various Kinds of Performances in the West” (Taixi zhu xiju lei 泰西諸戲劇類記). Except the last one the rest of the four stories all involve romantic Sino-Western relations.

The European women represented in *Songyin manlu* share some common characteristics: intelligent, spirited and independent. While the collection of *Songyin manlu* is crowded with pretty and talented female characters, mainly Chinese and in some cases Japanese, most of those talented beauties belong to the *demimonde*, and their talents are those of literati cultivations such as verse composition and calligraphy. Compared to their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, the European women come off in sharp relief in two regards: their command of practical knowledge and their remarkable freedom of movement.

The “Biography of Mary” tells of a tale about Mary (Meili 媚黎), an English beauty with great talents. Born into a distinguished family, Mary speaks several foreign languages and excels in

mathematics. She and John (Yuehan 约翰), a young man also versed in mathematics, are classmates and are madly in love with each other. However, John is from a low-ranking family and the disparity of their social status makes their marital union seem out of the question, and the two of them have to keep their love affairs secret. With her parents' arrangements, Mary is introduced to Simon Lee (Li Ximen 栗西门), a son of a wealthy family. After initial resistance, Mary eventually concedes to marrying Simon because of his wealth. John, however, refuses to let go of Mary. On their wedding night he gives Simon a big envelope. The letters in the envelope turn out to be love letters Mary wrote to John which include Mary's passionate love pledge to John and her descriptive depictions of their secret rendezvous. With burning infuriation, Simon grabs a pistol and storms to the bedroom to kill Mary but cannot bring himself to do it in the face of Mary's charms. After writing a letter to Mary explaining the situation, he kills himself instead as a way out of his humiliation.

Confined by her parents and realizing that no one would court her because of the amorous scandal, Mary decides to take a trip to China whose splendors, as she has long heard of, "greatly surpasses Europe" (遠勝歐洲) and "finds no rival in the world" (於天下首屈一指焉).¹⁴ With a big load of cash given by her parents, Mary sets out for the alluring East. On the boat she encounters a handsome, lavishly dressed young Chinese official named Feng Yuting 丰玉田 who is on his journey back to China from England. Feng is infatuated with Mary's beauty the moment he lays his eyes on her, and is eager to get acquainted with Mary. As Mary wants to learn Chinese, Feng becomes her tutor and the two of them grow fond of each other. When learns that Feng is still single, Mary proposes to marry Feng. Feng, however, declines Mary's proposal on the ground that he does not have the financial means to support her. Mary insists, saying that she

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 307.

has got her own money, and Feng finally accepts Mary's proposal. The two of them travel extensively in China before settling down in Shanghai. When pirates maraud on China's coastal areas she not only urges Feng to join the Chinese military, she herself participates in the battle as well. With her expertise in mathematics she destroys three pirate ships. Their talents are not appreciated by the Chinese court, though, and they return to Shanghai with frustrations. Mary then purchases a piece of land and builds a residence on it. The two of them lives a life of comfort and leisure, and Mary makes an effort to learn to speak and read Chinese. She speaks so well that one can hardly tell that she has any accent. They often make excursions in the surrounding areas of Shanghai and on those occasions Mary dresses up like a Chinese lady (易華妝做中國女子) which makes her even more bewitching. The only blemish is that her hair is a bit yellowish and her eyes are a little green (惟嫌雲鬢微黃，秋波稍碧耳).¹⁵ She even wears shoes designed by herself to hide her natural feet. But when her husband asks her to dress like Chinese to go visit his parents and no one would see through it, Mary responds that she "occasionally dresses herself like Chinese merely for fun (偶一為之，聊以解嘲), and "it is rather imposing to dress that way all the time" (若日日效顰，殊覺強人以所難矣).¹⁶ When she goes out her beauty dazzles onlookers yet no one is aware of the fact that she is a "Western beauty" (西方美人).¹⁷

The story could have ended here as a pure fantasy of Sino-Western romance in a revamp of the old motif of "scholar-beauty romance." However, the plot continues that while Mary and her Chinese husband enjoy matrimonial bliss, John follows Mary's suit and comes to China on the hope of renewing their love affair and appropriating Mary's money. Once finding out that Mary

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 308.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 308.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 309.

married to a Chinese, John is outraged and determines to kill them both. Mary, however, has nothing but resentment left for John because of Simon's suicide. When she finds out about John's arrival in China from the newspaper, she determines to revenge for Simon if she gets the chance, and she carries a pistol with her when she goes out just to prepare for the worst. One day when Mary and Feng are out in a carriage to theater, they meet John. Mary pretends not to know him when John greets her. Realizing that she cannot get rid of John, Mary then asks Feng to go back home and confronts John by herself. She and John shoot at each other at the same time and both die. With great grief, Feng buries Mary and erects a gravestone on which it reads: "Tomb of Mary: An extraordinary British Lady" (英國奇女子媚黎之墓).¹⁸

There is nothing extraordinary about the tale in the conventional sense of the word *qi* 奇, as the tales involves nothing fantastic or supernatural. What is extraordinary is the character Mary. Reading a story like this, a late Qing reader would have been struck with Mary's daring, independent and determined character, but what really makes Mary stand out in the gallery of female characters in *Songyin manlu* is what she signifies: knowledge and wealth---the pursuits of the *yangwu* 洋務 (Western knowledge and technology) self-strengthening movement which was in its heyday when Wang Tao wrote the story, not to mention Wang Tao himself was an leading advocate of the *yangwu* movement. However, while the open-minded Chinese male intellectuals like Wang Tao were eager to reform China in the model of Western institutions, fictional Western women like Mary is enchanted with China. By presenting a splendid image of China with no rivals in the world from Mary's point of view, Wang Tao situates China at the center on the global stage. This "central" position of China is further reinforced by making Feng the final winner of Mary's heart. The West is discursively domesticated as Feng returns to China

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 309.

with Mary as his wife. In so doing the tale offers psychological compensation for the humiliation China suffered from the military might of Britain in reality. However, upon close scrutiny, we will find out that the symbolic central position accorded to China is rather precarious.

Mary's eagerness to marry Feng calls to mind the traditional topoi of "foreign woman marrying Chinese youth" extensively used in military romance of the Ming-Qing times.¹⁹ There is a marked difference between Mary and these foreign women, though. While these foreign women are more than eager to embrace Chinese culture and disown their own culture, with some of them going to the extreme of disowning their own parents and fighting side by side with their Chinese husband against their own country, by contrast, Mary maintains her identity as a European woman whose symbolic appeal lies precisely in her foreign identity. As a European woman Mary is idealized to symbolize the West whose wealth and power were much needed in China who suffered a great deal of humiliation in the hands of Western powers at the time. Even though she speaks almost perfect Chinese, her facility with Chinese only accentuates her talent and, although she occasionally dresses up like a Chinese lady she does that only for fun. She refuses to forgo her foreign identity which can never be completely concealed, as indicated by her yellow hair and green eyes.²⁰

Furthermore, after they are married Mary never uses the intimate and supposedly self-deprecatory personal pronoun "*qi*妾," which was commonly used by wives and concubines in front of their husbands or masters in private situation, to address herself in front of Feng, in its

¹⁹ On the use and cultural significance of this topoi in Ming-Qing military romance, see Liu Xiangyu 劉相雨, "Lun Qingdai Yingxiong Chuanqi Xiaoshuo zhong de 'Fannü Jia Hanjiang' Moshi de Jiben Tezhen ji Wenhua Yiyun" 論清代英雄傳奇小說中的'番女嫁漢將'模式的基本特征及文化意蘊. See also Wolfram Eberhard, "Foreigners and Foreign Wars in Chinese Folk Novels."

²⁰ The racial differences as shown by physical features are never brought up in these military romance featuring "foreign women marrying Chinese men." In these novels all the foreign female warriors are described in the fashion of Han Chinese beauties whereas their male compatriots are distinguished by their racial differences and are depicted as ugly.

stead she uses the less intimate personal pronoun “*yu*余” and “*wo*我.” While her marriage to Feng supposedly serves to domesticate the West discursively, these personal pronouns indicate that Mary is never completely domesticated by the Chinese gender ideology. And although Mary’s marriage to Feng supposedly situates him at the center of Mary’s love affair, he remains a marginal figure in his relation with Mary, as all the decisions are made by Mary. Another supporting detail is that, when Mary learns of John’s arrival in China she is determined to risk her life to kill John so as to revenge Simon’s death, and in so doing she “might have the opportunity to meet my husband in the underworld” (庶可見我 婿于九泉之下).²¹ Her determination to risk her life for Simon and her wish to reunite with him in the nether world makes it manifest that her heart belongs to Simon, regardless the fact she is married to Feng. One final revealing detail is that when Feng buries her, in the inscription on the gravestone she is not addressed as Feng’s wife, but by her nationality. Mary remains a foreigner despite her marriage to Feng. The tension of the transnational romance smoothed over on the surface is made explicit at the end of the tale. Although the Sino-Western romance intends to domesticate the West by gendering the West as feminine, and this feminized the Other helps “strengthen” the Self as demonstrated by Mary’s fighting back of pirate encroachment with her scientific knowledge and technological equipment, however, the feminized West never completely gives way to the masculine West embodied by Simon and John who are quick to resort to firearms. The short-lived Sino-Western romance terminated by no one else but the ruthless John indicates the formidable threat posed by the masculine West whose presence the tale attempts to hold at bay and smooth over.

In the next tale “Wonderland under the Sea,” the improbability and fragility of Sino-Western

²¹ *Songyin manlu*, p. 309.

romance is rendered more explicit. Unlike “Biography of Mary,” in this tale the Chinese male Nie Ruitu 聶瑞圖 takes center stage. Nie is from a wealthy family in Nanjing. He is a licentiate and is interested in practical matters such as flood-control. He also has an open mind for new ideas, as he endorses the idea of building railway. Frustrated with the state of affair, he sets out on a journey abroad with a huge amount of money and four interpreters: English, French, Russian and Japanese. The four foreign languages stand for the external threat posed by the four imperialist powers at the time when the tale was written. Nie’s overseas journey thus is implicit with political significance. Wherever he goes in Europe, Nie would give out gifts to local officials. These gifts are all rare treasures of which European women had hardly seen before. Due to his generosity his European visits arouse much attention, and the local newspaper would announce his arrival in advance. If in “Biography of Mary” it is Mary’s romanticized vision of China that put China at the center of the global stage, here in this tale it is Nie’s prodigious wealth that overwhelms the Europeans and makes China “prevail” over the West.

Nie is particularly fond of Switzerland where he encounters an intelligent schoolgirl named Lana (Lan’na 蘭娜) whose beauty finds no rival in the West. Upon seeing Nie, Lana seems to meet with an old friend (惘然如舊相識) and invites him home.²² Lana’s reaction to Nie indicates a romantic relation yet to unfold. Lana is from a wealthy family, and she shows to Nie all sorts of Chinese curios which were previously owned by the deposed French empress. She picks a few of the rarest treasures and gives them to Nie. When Nie declines on the ground that he cannot accept them as they have just met, Lana insists by saying that although they are from places far apart, however, “as far as *qing* is concerned,” they have “the same heart like gold and

²² *Songyin manlu*, p. 351.

jade” (以情言，则金玉同心),²³ and forces Nie to accept them. The use of the rhetoric of *qing* is interesting, as *qing* here supposedly transcends cultural and racial differences.

When parted with Lana, Nie sets out for New York City from London. The boat encounters a huge storm and Nie is swept off to the ocean. When he wakes up Nie finds himself on a wonderland dotted with beautiful and health-enhancing magical plants which are explicitly evocative of a Taoist paradise. On the land he meets with an old lady with two maids all dressed up in Chinese clothing. The old lady tells Nie that a “Western beauty” (西方美人) happens to have arrived lately and asks Nie to go find her. Much to Nie’s surprise, the “Western beauty” turns out to be no one else but Lana. Nie learns from Lana that saddened with his departure, she embarked on foreign travels but fell to a river on her trip to England, and was sent by God to live in this wonderland under the sea. Lana then goes on telling Nie that she “has admired Chinese culture for a long time” (企慕中華久矣),²⁴ but she does not know where to start since she has no knowledge of Chinese language, and asking if Nie would like to teach her. Nie happily grants her request and the two of them spend quite a period of time on the Taoist fairyland.

But one day Nie is frightened to see the land surrounded by raging waves. When he tells Lana about this, Lana laughs to congratulate him, saying that it is time for him to go back to the mortal world and for them to part as well. She then orders her maid to prepare a banquet to see Nie off. On the banquet she plays zither and sings a farewell song composed by herself in Chinese. She then makes careful arrangements for Nie’s journey home, giving him several bags of treasures as parting gifts. After three days and three nights on the sea, Nie lands on the east coast of China and he then sets off to Shanghai to sell the treasures Lana gave him. One day he is visited by a

²³ Ibid., p. 351.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 352.

Persian merchant.²⁵ Amazed by a huge diamond shown by Nie, the Persian merchant asks how he obtained the diamond as such treasure can be found only in France. Nie replies that “If Chinese treasures can be scattered abroad, why treasures of French royal household wouldn’t come to my hand?” (中華寶物流入外洋，豈法王內廷之珍不能入於吾手哉).²⁶ He sells the diamond to the Persian merchant with an enormous amount of money and uses the money to save the people in Shandong who have suffered from a natural catastrophe. His lofty deeds win him high regard.

Like Mary in “Biography of Mary,” Lana in this tale is the embodiment of wealth and knowledge as well. In both tales the two European women help their Chinese husband or lover engage state affairs and deal with practical issues. The symbolic significance of the Sino-Western romance thus is obvious. While there is nothing fantastic about “Biography of Mary,” “Wonderland under the Sea” is a tale typical of the supernatural and the fantastic. The tale embeds itself intertextually within the long literary tradition of *chuanqi* fantasy. The gendered utopia Nie stumbles into brings to our mind the long-standing motif of “encountering with immortals” harking back to the Six Dynasties (220-589).²⁷ And the enormous wealth Nie acquires from his undersea experiences calls to mind the motif of “striking wealth overseas” which was quite popular in the seventeenth-century fiction during which period of time overseas trade flourished.²⁸ The age-old literary tradition sets up a cultural frame whereby the otherness of Lana is contained.

²⁵ The theme of “Persian merchants recognizing treasures” is a common motif in the *zhiguai* fiction of the Tang dynasty.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

²⁷ The remote origin of this motif is the story about Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇 recorded in Li Yiqing’s 劉義慶 *Youming lu* 幽明錄 (Records of Worlds of Darkness and Light), p. 697. For an English translation of this story see Karl. S.Y. Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, pp. 137-39.

²⁸ For instance, in the story “Luocha haishi” 羅刹海市 (The Land of Luocha and the Sea Fair) Pu Songling writes a tale about a Chinese youth obtains wealth from his romantic encounters with a woman living in the sea. See *idem*, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, pp. 454-465

If the West overshadows China in "Biography of Mary," as indicated by Mary's command of scientific knowledge which wards off pirate encroachment on the high sea, in "Wonderland under the Sea," by contrast, the pendulum is swung emphatically from the West to China. When preparing for Nie's trip back to the human world, Lana gives him two Chinese pearls previously owned by the French royal household. The two pearls, according Lana, have the magic powers of fending off waves and therefore will guarantee Nie a safe journey back to the human world. Scientific knowledge embodied by the West here is superseded by magic powers represented by China. And while Chinese treasures are scattered abroad and possessed by Westerners, which is a clear sign of China's weakness, this sorry state of affair is redressed when Western treasures are obtained by Nie. The fact that Lana remains in the nether world whereas Nie returns to the mortal world with foreign treasures is illustrative of the notion that China wins over the West in the end. However, the retrieving of Chinese treasures, the obtainment of Western rarities, and Nie's return to the human world, a sign of his masculinity regained, is made possible all because of Lana.

The "Biography of Mary" presents a Sino-Western romance consummated in marriage, in the "Wonderland under the Sea" the Sino-Western romance becomes possible only in a completely secluded supernatural realm after the deaths of both protagonists. In this tale again we find out that Lana, like Mary, is enchanted with Chinese culture and eager to learn Chinese and both European women eventually learn to speak and write Chinese, which indicates the alluring power of Chinese high culture (*wen* 文). While as a reformer Wang Tao promotes Western learning, in both tales we witness the situation is reversed. Instead of Chinese scholars learning from the West, we read Western women enchanted with China and eager to learn Chinese instead. In so doing the Sinocentric worldview is affirmed by default. This affirmation is

made possible only by gendering the West as feminine, though. In sharp contrast to traditional transnational romances in which foreign women marry Chinese men and are thus domesticated by the Chinese gender hierarchy, in these two tales neither Mary nor Lana is brought within the Chinese gender hierarchy, and both European women leave their Chinese men at the end of the story. The Sino-Western romance presented in these two tales on one hand serve to affirm China's symbolic central position, on the other hand this position is exposed to be precarious and instable, as demonstrated by the short-lived and fragile romantic relations.

The next tale "Beauties Overseas" does not directly involves Western women. However, the West is an important presence in the tale. The protagonist Lu Meifang 陸梅舫 is from a wealthy family of Fujian. Lu is fond of travelling and has the yearning to explore adventures overseas. His yearning could not come true until both his parents passed away, though. When designing his boat for his overseas journey, his helmsmen all favor Western steamboat. Lu dismisses the advice, arguing that his family had been in seafaring business long before Westerners came to China and there is no need to rely on Western steamboat to travel around the world. Lu then builds a ship of his own design: the length of the ship is twenty-eight *zhang* 丈, corresponding to the twenty-eight constellations (二十八宿); the twenty-four axles work in accordance with the twenty-four lunar festivals (二十四氣); and there is a pump in the bow and the stern which corresponds to the sun and the moon respectively. All the sailors dress in the costume with the Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦) on it. And the boat uses electricity for lightening. If the boat designed by Lu is a metaphor for China, this fantastical design that combine both Chinese cosmologic thinking and Western science might be the concretization of the idea "Chinese learning as principal and Western

learning as application” which was the rationale of the *yangwu* self-strengthening movement.²⁹

When the boat has been built up Lu and his wife set out to Japan and Europe. They first land on an island of Japan where they are introduced to the mummied bodies of three Ming loyalists. The presence of Chinese, even if dead, is an assuring sign of familiarity. The next stop is Majapahit where they see a martial arts competition. The host is a local native who defeated two Chinese males in a row. When a Japanese martial arts instructor is kicked off stage, Lu’s wife, a woman with martial prowess, jumps onto the stage to revenge for the Japanese. Both Lu’s wife and the native die of fierce fighting. Seeing Lu dejected with the death of his wife, Lu’s brother-in-law suggests him to sail to the West, saying that he has heard that there are many beauties in the West, and the legendary “Country of Women” (Nüer guo 女兒國) is not far away. Lu then sets out for Europe. When they arrive in the Mediterranean they moor at an Italian seaport Messina (Moxina 墨西拿), which is “known as ‘Daqin’ in Chinese historical records” (即史書所稱為大秦者也).³⁰ In the hotel where Lu stays there are many Italian women musicians. They play music while the guests have lunch. However, the foreign music only makes Lu sad.

One day a big boat anchors right next to Lu’s, and Lu finds out that the person taking charge looks like Chinese. They then introduce to each other and Lu learns that the guest is actually from Fujian as well. When invited onto the guest’s boat, Lu notices that all his maids look dazzlingly beautiful. Envious, Lu asks the guest how come he is so lucky to possess all these beautiful women. The guest then generously calls out two most beautiful girls and gives them to Lu. When Lu declines the offer the guest explains that all these beautiful girls are from the Land

²⁹ “Boat” is a quite popular metaphor of China in late Qing fiction, a famous example is the one found in the beginning of *Laocan youji* 老殘遊記 (The Travel of Laocan) written by Wang Tao’s younger contemporary Liu E 劉鶚 (1857-1909).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195. On his voyage to Europe, Wang Tao stopped at the same port; see *idem*, *Manyou suilu*, p. 79.

of Luocho (Luocho guo 羅刹國).³¹ The inhabitants of this country are extremely ugly. However, one day two sages who have the skills to transform the ugly to the beautiful arrived on this land. What they do is making a human skin as thin as silk; on the skin they draw all the human features such as eyes, noses and the like.³² And when one wears the painted skin on her body it looks more than real. People who wear the painted skin never take it off except when taking bath. However, the painted skin is quite costly and some people only have half of it. The two girls the guest gave to Lu wear painted skin in its completion, and they are therefore called “whole-body beauties” (全體美人). Upon learning this Lu refuses to accept the two beauties on the ground that they are not real. Lu’s reaction is met with the guest’s mocking laughter, saying that nothing in the world is real and Lu will achieve enlightenment through the two fake beauties. Lu takes the two beauties home. Happy with their company, he does not remarry. He once peeps at them when they take bath but does not see anything abnormal, hence suspecting what the guest has said.

If in the two previous tales the image of the West is affirmatively positive, in this tale, in which the ancient (Chinese cosmological thinking) and the modern (electricity), the imaginary (the Land of Luocho), the legendary (the Country of Women), the historical (Daqin), and the factual (Japan, Italy, Messina, and the Mediterranean Sea), are curiously mixed together, the image of the West becomes mystified and ambiguous as a result. Given the fact that Wang Tao was a leading advocate of the self-strengthening movement which promoted pragmatic learning of Western science and technology, and that Wang Tao had been to Europe and on his voyage to the West he stopped at the very same port Messina, this curious mix warrants more attention. Lu

³¹ See “Luocho haishi 羅刹海市” in Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, pp. 454-465. It is satirical story about a Chinese scholar’s travel to the foreign land “Luocho” where the inhabitants are extremely ugly, and political office in that country is determined not by literary talent, but by the degree of one’s ugliness.

³² This is adapted from another story “Huapi 畫皮” (Painted Skin) from *Liaozhai zhiyi*, see pp. 119-124.

obtains the two beauties in Italy and brings them back to China, but is the two girls' bewitching appearance real or fake? The guest's remark about the illusoriness of the two beauties and the suspended credibility of his remark might suggest Wang Tao's misgivings about the *yangwu* movement he once avidly promoted.³³

The last tale I want to discuss, "A Grand Tour Overseas," brings out this point more clearly. In this tale the male protagonist, Qian Siyan 錢思衍, is from a wealthy family in Zhejiang. Although he passed the *juren* 舉人 degree examinations but he detests the empty examination essays and has the ambitions for real achievements in political and public realm. One day a Taoist shows up at his door, saying that he has come over to be his mentor since Qian has the idea of leaving the mundane world. Riding on a dragon conjured up by the Taoist, they are swept off to the top of Mountain Emei where Qian is introduced to the Taoist's master, a young and beautiful goddess. Seeing Qian yet to overcome his carnal desire, the goddess instructs him to go down to the bustling red dust and attain enlightenment by way of it. The Taoist then has Qian step on a handkerchief which flies Qian up on the clouds. While Qian is flying up on high he all of a sudden hears the explosions of cannons and he drops to the ground immediately. On the ground Qian sees troops wearing Western costume with firearms in hands. When they rush to Qian asking him questions, Qian however cannot understand a single word. Fortunately there is a local gentleman named Dechen 德臣 (transliteration) who once visited China. From him Qian finds out that he is at a seaport in Scotland, and the troops are having navy and infantry exercises

³³ Wang Tao became an avid advocate of Western knowledge and technology (*yangwu* 洋務) when he returned from Europe in 1870. In a private letter written in 1876, however, Wang Tao voices his harsh criticism of the *yangwu* movement, saying that it has "name" but no "reality," arguing that what is really at stake is the people, therefore "the urgent priorities of China are educating the people first and strengthening the military next" (固今我國之急務，其先在治民，其次在治兵)，see idem, "A Letter in Reply to Magistrate Yu Qianzhi" (Da Yu Qianzhi daling shu 答于謙之大令書), in *Taoyuan Chidu* 弢園尺牘 (Letters from the Tao Garden), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959, p.130

which holds Qian in awe (不勝嘆異).³⁴ When the troops ask if he possess any magic powers to fly on the clouds, Qian replies equivocally that it is likely that their eyes are blurred to see him drop from the clouds.

The next day Qian is showed around in Edinburgh by Dechen and there he encounters a social dance by dozens of pairs of young men and young women. In the following Wang Tao gives an elaborate description of the custom, costume, and patterns of the dancing, with women receiving the highlight of his descriptions. As with the military exercises, Qian is once again amazed.

Qian next encounters a girl named Josie---- a rare beauty from a local distinguished family. Josie, like the above-mentioned Lana, treats Qian as an old friend upon their first encounter, and invites him to her house. She accompanies Qian to travel around during daytime and hosts banquet for him at night. Upon learning that London is “the most marvelous city in the world” (天下闡闡最盛之區) Qian sets for London with the company of Josie.³⁵ *En route* to London they stop by a church and meet with another beautiful British woman, a music instructor named Mary. Mary joins their trip to London whose mayor happens to be her uncle. He arranges for Qian an entourage of a dozen odd of people to escort Qian to see all the sights of London. They visit museums, libraries, factories, arsenals, and the Crystal Museum which hold greatly impressed Qian. The good-looking Qian accompanied by two beautiful women draws much envious attention (嘆羨).³⁶ When they go to shops those pretty saleswomen “all wink coquettishly at him” (皆與之眉挑目語),³⁷ and Qian would purchase items from them regardless of prices and then give them these items as a token of his gratitude for their affection. After

³⁴ *Songyin manlu*, p. 357.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

London Mary accompanies Qian to Paris and Switzerland. On their way to Berlin the Taoist suddenly appears, asking whether Qian has enjoyed his European trip and telling him that it is time to return. They fly away on a dragon conjured up by the Taoist and thus the end of Qian's tour in Europe

In some regards Qian's European trip parallels Wang Tao's travels in Europe. Wang Tao was greatly impressed with the sights and sounds of London of which he writes in glowing terms in his travel accounts. In his travel records he describes the various institutions he visited with awe and appreciation, and he writes in great details about British social customs such as dance.³⁸ The two beautiful British women who keep Qian company on his European trip, Josie and Mary, are the names of Wang Tao's two female friends who had accompanied him on his various outings and travels in England and Scotland. According to his travel records, Wang Tao had a particular close relationship with Josie, and the two of them are even once mistaken as a couple on one of their outings.³⁹ While in his travel records Britain comes off as all but a utopia, in this tale the image of the West is quite ambiguous, to see the least.

As insightfully pointed out by Sheldon Lu, there exist "two worlds, or two worldviews in the story, the ancient, the Eastern, the Taoist, and the modern, the Western, the secular."⁴⁰ The Taoist paradise high on top of Mount Emei tends to subsume Qian's worldly experiences under the Taoist metaphysics of detachment and transcendence. Seen from the Taoist view, the sound and sight of Europe is merely an illusion; on the other hand, the traditional view of Taoist transcendence loses credibility in the face of the modern Western world. The confrontation of the two worlds is illustrated clearly and dramatically by the dropping of the magic handkerchief to the ground at the sound of the explosions of the cannons. Furthermore, when the British troops

³⁸ See the part of Wang Tao's trip to Europe in *Manyou suilu*.

³⁹ *Manyou suilu*, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Sheldon, Lu, "Waking to Modernity: the Classical Tale in Late-Qing China," p. 757.

ask Qian if he possesses any magic powers, Qian does not give a straightforward answer which belies the fact that while from the traditional Taoist view the physical and sensual world can be seen as merely illusory; from the modern and rational point of view the Taoist magic powers appear equally illusory. The anxiety caused by this head-on encounter of two worlds, however, is soon diminished with an “ethnological” interest in the British social dance, and is further displaced with the introduction of British women, and the ensuing narrative puts Qian at the center of British women’s generous affection. In doing so the frightful fear caused by the explosions of cannons is replaced with female affection which Qian enjoys a great deal.⁴¹ Although at the end of the tale Wang Tao attempts to subsume Qian’s European trip within the frame of Taoist allegory, the Taoist allegorical frame stops short of a convincing allegory, though. Qian experiences no epistemic or spiritual enlightenment from his European trip at all, and his travel is cut off abruptly by the Taoist while he is enjoying the sight and sound of Europe. In other words, the Taoist metaphysics of detachment and transcendence fails to contain the West by way of allegorization, it is as if the explosions of the cannons and the impending threat it symbolizes is too real to allow the West to be elevated to the level of metaphysical abstract. The abrupt and ambiguous ending and the unresolved tensions between the two worldviews it signals reminds us of the conflicting cultural identity: the rational and the emotional, presented in Wang Tao’s self-preface discussed above. If the West represents the “objective reality” that Wang Tao and his contemporaries were confronted with and obliged to accept and even to emulate, the traditional belief in the fantastic and the supernatural, which was losing its credibility due to the introduction of Western science and technology, still offers psychological outlets and even spiritual transcendence to the anxiety caused by the new modern world.

⁴¹ This might indicate Wang Tao’s ambivalent attitude towards Britain. As a Chinese he was much distressed to see the pain and humiliation inflicted on China by Britain’s gunboat; on the other hand, he cherishes the warm and polite treatment he received during his sojourn in Britain.

Concluding Remarks

The four tales discussed above, especially those with a markedly fantastic orientation, illustrate a split world Wang Tao was caught in: on one hand the reformer Wang Tao is eager to embrace the brave new modern world of the West, as symbolized by the idealized images of Western women and the fictional Sino-Western romance; on the other hand, the literatus Wang Tao hesitates at the prospect of this new world and clings to a disappearing old world embodied by the fantastic and the supernatural. As a solution to this dilemma Wang Tao offers a fictional world in which China still symbolically retains its central position by gendering the West as the feminine. However, Wang Tao understands very well that China is losing its central position in the face of Western powers, as evidenced by the fact that there is always an intruder which brings an abrupt end to the Sino-Western romantic relations, for instance, the ending of Mary's marriage with Feng Yutian due to the intrusion of Simon in "Biography of Mary," Nie Ruitu's inevitable parting from Lana caused by the sea storm in "Wonderland under the Sea," and Qian Siyan's interrupted European journey with the accompany of Mary by the Taoist in "Grand Tours Overseas." These short-lived Sino-Western romantic relations on one hand indicates Wang Tao's embrace of the new modern world embodied by the West, and his lingering attachment to and even nostalgia for the receding past on the other hand. In the fictional Sino-Western encounters presented by Wang Tao, the Self, as embodied by the Chinese male protagonists involved in transnational romances, is simultaneously centered and decentered with subtle textual strategies.

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