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THE LITERATURE OF DESIRE

I have always thought that, since ancient times, literature has been a subtle form for the articulation of desire. From east to west, from *Canterbury Tales* to *Strange Tales in a Chinese Studio* (a 17th century collection of fantastic stories), literature has been a sacred device by which writers transcend reality. The “desire” that I am concerned with here is not limited to physical desire. Lust, passionate love, and erotic fascinations, as man’s natural instincts, are frequent objects of literary expression.

Distinctive erotica is not rare in China’s literary tradition, even though these narratives have been marginalized in status. Canonical literary genres such as *jing* (classics) and *shi* (history) demonstrate a primary desire to realize social, political or ethical ideals about one’s family, nation and the world. For instance, Tao Yuanming’s famous story *Peach Blossom Shangri-la* (*Taohuayuan ji* 421) depicts an ideal society projected by traditional intellectuals in the ancient period. This utopian society, however, is not a haven of romantic love or corporeal desire, not to mention transvestitism. In traditional Chinese poetry, the depicted love object is often the narrator’s friend, or his wife. Of course, there are expressions of longing for a “lover” in the modern sense. However, very few ancient writings directly express this kind of desire. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) witnessed the rise of erotic novels, many of which surpass Western erotic narratives with their audacity and forthrightness. Modernist writers like D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller seem like naïve teenagers when compared with the authors of late imperial erotic novels, such as *The Candlewick Monk* (*Dengcao heshang* 14th century), *Happy Lovers* (*Huanxi yuanjia* 1640), and *Stories of Infatuated Women* (*Chipozi zhuan* 1764). However, these authors had very low social status, and did not even have the audacity to use their real names. For instance, the writer of the famous novel *Plum in the Golden Vase* still remains unidentified today.. Scholars have tried to verify the author among over 50 writers. However, the real author’s name has never been confirmed. Ironically, despite its many graphic depictions of sexuality, *Plum in the Golden Vase* aims to criticize and critically reflect upon the theme of desire.

Powerful and liberating, love, passion and eroticism are legitimate and crucial writing topics. In the west, I think, desire became a pivotal theme in literature after the 18th century. Michel Foucault holds that so-called modern literature in the west did not take form until the 19th century. The increasing significance of desire is associated with the expansion of capitalism and the rise of individualistic ideology. In other words, east or west, modern and contemporary literature often

seeks to subvert extant traditions instead of bringing about an organic development of traditions. Therefore, a critical reflection on the “literature of desire” entails a general assessment of modern and contemporary literature. In my recent article entitled “The End of Modern Literature”, I reviewed some current debates in the world about the “death” of literature. However, I don’t think literature itself will cease to exist. Rather, what is withering is so-called “modern literature”, which could date back to the 18th century.

Translated from the Chinese by Li Guo