

THE LANGUAGE OF BODY AS REPULSIVE/ SEDUCTIVE LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF THE LITERATI IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA*

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Introduction

This essay presents some aspects of the body as communication language in the late imperial China. I plan to analyze the topics of beauty, as strategy of seduction, and of ugliness, as obstacle of interpersonal contacts. Two other parts of the essay are respectively dedicated to some cases of negative answer to the seductive language of beauty and to the paragons of gender-beauties and attraction's attributes.

By the phrase, "The Imagination of the Body," we may intend several concepts, from the Daoist macro-microcosm and Neo-Confucian metaphysical representations to common people's ideas and images of the body. At times the body was treated with great respect, as a form of respect for ancestors and family in Confucian morality, or as a means of obtaining immortality in Daoist thought. Thus, eunuchs preserved their body parts that had been severed so that they could be buried along with their corpses, and daughters-in-law suckled their mothers-in-law if it was necessary to improve the latter's health. Research on the body is always an attempt to uncover its inner essence, like in the contemporary French painting by Verlinde¹, or in the deconstructing of the body into its shelves of desires, like in Salvador Dalí, "Lighted Giraffes", 1936-1937.

But how one perceives the body (one's own or another's) does not only reflect a metaphysical relationship: it is also a way of communicating and interacting with other people, as the notion of "somatic society" implies. This perception of the body is not concerned with any physical or biological image of the body; rather it removes the body from its physicality, allowing us to discover the myths and signs, desires and fantasies related to the body, all of which are built in our mind. By walking or dressing in a certain way, we may wish to show our social posi-

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1 See his painting "Interiority", 1979; *Claude Verlinde. Peintures - Paintings - Gemälde*, Paris, Editions Natiris, 1983

tion, or to express superiority or inner self-satisfaction; thus we may be indicating a welcoming or a refusal attitude toward others. The language of the body expresses first and foremost inner emotions, communicating them to other people through gestures, facial expressions or dress. In fact, it appears that the body is constantly communicating with others and that the very perception of one's own body is inseparable from the reality of others' bodies. Before Michel Foucault's contribution on the relationship between the body and society, Paul Schilder had enquired body experience within a psychological and sociological framework, stressing that body image is not only a cognitive construct, but also a way of interactions with the other members of the society.² On the "intersubjective reality of bodies" (*réalité intersubjective des corps*), Roland Barthes wrote:

J'appelle intersubjectif le fait que le corps de l'autre est toujours une image pour moi, et mon corps toujours une image pour l'autre; mais, ce qu'il y a de plus subtil et de plus important, c'est que mon corps est pour moi-même l'image que je crois que l'autre a de ce corps, et ainsi s'institue toute une sorte de jeu, toute une tactique entre les êtres, à travers leur corps, sans qu'ils s'en rendent compte souvent, une tactique de séduction et une tactique d'intimidation...

(I call intersubjective the fact that the other's body is always an image to me, and my body is always an image to the other. The most subtle and the most important thing, however, is that my body is for myself the image that I believe the other has of his own body. A kind of game, thus, is established, a sort of tactics among human beings played out through their bodies, often without any conscious participation, tactics of seduction and tactics of intimidation ...).³

Somebody might however object that this view is the clear expression of Western consumer modern hedonistic attitude, which is far from the Chinese traditional perception of body, even farther than Christian puritanical orthodoxy, moving from the concept of "labouring body" to the concept of "desiring body".⁴ We can try to see how the Chinese texts themselves have represented the body.

A glance at Chinese literature reveals a wealth of expressions used to describe

2 See for instance Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris, 1984, and Ann Stoller's essay, *Race and the Education of Desire : Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995. Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, New York, International Universities Press, 1950.

3 Roland Barthes, "Encore le corps", *Critique*, 1982, quoted in Bruno Huisman et François Ribes, *Les Philosophes et le corps*, Paris, Dunod, 1992, p. 311

the body. A few examples are expressions like *meifei sewu*, 眉飛色舞 "with a radiant face and eyebrows dancing like butterflies"; *zhanyan shumei* 展眼舒眉 with radiant eyes and relaxed eyebrows"; *xiaorong manmian*, 笑容滿面 "being all smiles"; *xixiao yankai*, 喜笑顏開 "being wreathed in smiles"; *xiaozhu yankai*, 笑逐顏開. "happy and beam with smiles"; *xeikai yanxiao*, 眉開眼笑 "being all smiles"; *xiaorong keju*, 笑容可掬 "being radiant with smiles"; *xuxiao xuanhu*, 語笑喧呼 "being filled with laughter and excitement"; *xixing yuse*, 喜形于色 "light up with pleasure"; *yangmei zhizhang*, 揚眉抵掌 "raise one's brows and clap one's hands"; *paishou chengkuai*, 拍手稱快 "clap and cheer"; *shouwu zudao*, 手舞足蹈 "dance for joy"; *xiyue bianwu*, 喜躍抃舞 "happily dancing with hands and feet"; *yangshou shenmei*, 仰首伸眉 "raise the head and stretch the eyebrows"; *yaotou huangnao*, 搖頭晃腦 "shake one's head"; *chuanhong dailü*, 穿紅戴綠 "gaily dressed (in red and green)"; *shenqi huoxian*, 神氣活現 "as proud as a peacock"; *gupan zixiong*, 顧盼自雄 "look about complacently"; *fuzhang daxiao*, 撫掌大笑 "self-pleased laugh"; *angshou tingxiong*, 昂首挺胸 "chin up and chest out"; *jushou kou'e*, 舉手扣額 "raise one's hand to pat on the forehead".

The face alone – that is, its physiological description, its organs and hair – deserves its own study. In Chinese literature not only the face (*lian* 臉, *mian* 面), but also its parts are often mentioned, sometimes isolated, but often paired together: ears (*er* 耳), forehead (*e* 額), cheek (*jiasai* 頰腮), eyes (*yan* 眼, *mu* 目), nose (*bi* 鼻), mouth (*kou* 口), lips (*chun* 唇), tongue (*she* 舌) and teeth (*yachi* 牙齒), brow (*mei* 眉), beard (*xu* 鬚), moustache (*zi* 髭), whiskers (*ran* 髯), temple hair (*bin* 鬢), hair (*fa* 髮). The single or coupled features can transmit feelings (面目傳情) or display agitation by, for example, a red face and dishevelled hair (面紅髮亂), or they may express sadness and suffering (愁眉苦臉), or anger (立眉瞋目).

The body, and especially the face, may be seen as a reflection of one's personality. In a passage from *Guoyu* 國語, a pre-imperial work, the concept of "external appearance", *mao* 貌, is closely related to the notion of "internal attitudes", *qing* 情, and "oral expression", *yan* 言.⁵ A recent essay by Halvor Eifring⁶ studies facial features as expressions of states of mind and personality. He looks at facial features (face proper, organs located in the face, and hair located on the face) and their

4 Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society*, London, Sage, 1996, quoted by A.B. Shamsul, "Contestualizing 'Reproductive Technology' in Non-Western Societies: The 'Body' in Malay Society", paper for an International Conference on *Genes the World Over: Reproductive Technologies, the Moral and Cultural Dimension*, October 1998. This essay answers to the question concerning the tremendous consequences of social, medical and economic changes on the Malay value system, and their implications on the way of viewing the body. For a more general survey of sexual transformations in post-modern Western society, see also Anthony Giddens, *The Transformations of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992.

5 *Guoyu* 國語 11, *Jinyu* 晉語 5.

6 Halvor Eifring, "Chinese Faces. The Sociopsychology of Facial Features as Described in 'The Story of the Stone'", in Halvor Eifring, ed. *Minds and Mentalities in Traditional Chinese Literature*, Beijing, Culture and Art Publishing House, 1999, 46-119.

physiognomic implications and emphasizes the parallelism of the descriptions, which implies not only similarity but also contrast. The proportions of one's body and the tone of the voice are physical manifestations of the balance or imbalance of one's psychology, reflections of one's inner benevolence or arrogance. Rune Svarverud has demonstrated how the physiognomy of Han times sought to identify a logical and semantic connection between a person's physical appearance and their ethical and mental qualities. Thus, since ancient China, beautiful eyebrows have indicated a person of clear vision and prudence, while a beard and whiskers described a person of authority, courage and power, and the nose and mouth, according to their shape, were signs of kindness, dignity or cruelty. In addition, the cheekbones, chest, neck and height contributed to the depiction of man's character and dispositions.⁷ Similar interpretations can be found in Europe as well. Therefore, beauty of external features is not dissociated from character traits and basic dispositions. It is nonetheless acknowledged that appearances can be misleading, since beauty must be distinguished from goodness, and in Chinese fiction it is often stated, for instance, that "you know one's face, but do not know his/her heart and mind" (知面不知心). Yet this is in opposition to the statement in the Preface of the "Compendium of Physiognomy", 神相全編, according to which "if you want to know what happens in one's heart, look only at the expression in his eyes, because eyes are the doors of one's spirit". 要知心裡事, 但看眼神情。眼乃心之門。⁸ Therefore, the body carries an ambiguous message, which mixes aesthetic and moral elements.

If we consider the body as a language, what message does it give us? The first message is one of attraction or repulsion, the body either demanding your interest or failing to capture your curiosity. Aesthetic criteria of judgment are undoubtedly involved. Attempts to contrast ideal beauty and ugliness are common in every culture, usually by adopting a youth and death metaphor.⁹ In a dynamic perspective, body becomes language, and "beauty" and "ugliness" themselves may be used to express messages much more complex than mere descriptions. "Beauty" and "ugliness", in fact, only partially correspond to a permanent condition and require objective criteria of evaluation, and often depend on subjective and cultural attitudes. Furthermore, they are usually stereotyped in the paragons of each society,

7 See Rune Svarverud, "Body and Character. Physiognomical Descriptions in Han Dynasty Literature", in Halvor Eifring, ed. *Minds and Mentalities in Traditional Chinese Literature*, Beijing, Culture and Art Publishing House, 1999, 120-146.

8 Quoted by H. Eifring 1999, p. 105.

9 However, in Li Song's (李嵩, fl. 1190-1230) "Skeleton Puppet Show" (a fan in the Palace Museum, Beijing), notwithstanding the macabre subject of the skeleton puppeteer who entices a small boy with his skeleton puppet, a gracious tranquillity prevails: the young mother nursing a child and sitting behind the skeleton appears curiously uninterested and the whole composition inspires more peacefulness than drama. See Ellen Johnston Laing's study, "Li Sung and Some Aspects of Southern Sung Figure Painting", *Artibus Asiae*, 37, 1-2, 1975, pp. 10-11.

and embody their own scales of aesthetic and moral values. The extreme relativity of the concept of beauty and attractiveness can be grasped through literature, which is rich in references to such concepts. What cultural concept of attractiveness drove the elder Karamazov to observe: "According to my rule, you can find in every woman something - damn it - something extraordinarily interesting, something you won't find in any other woman. Only you must know how to find it - that's the point! That requires talent!..."¹⁰ And what ideals were those that moved the student Zhang 張 to say at the beginning of Yuan Zhen's 元稹 (779-831) story: "I consider myself a lover of beauty, who happens never to have met a fitting woman. How can we explain that? It is because, generally speaking, one understands he is not free from passions only when his heart cannot avoid being captured by an outstanding beauty." (余真好色者而適不我值。何以言之？大凡物之尤者未嘗不留連於心是知其非忘情者也。) ¹¹

Cult of beauty

I wish to analyze here merely two perceptions of the body: the body as attractive and the body as repulsive.

When speaking of physical beauty and ugliness, we inevitably touch upon several implications and references, allusions and double meanings that deserve further studies. For instance, the Chinese scholar Guo Yingde 郭英德 has examined the subtle relationship between the praise of beautiful women in Ming and Qing literature and the ambitions and frustrations of the literati lauding them. He stressed how the many images of beauties not only represent the embodiment of ideal personalities in the scholar's mind, but also act as a self-image. The scholar's seeking and yearning for beauty not only show his earnest longing for a happy love life, but also reveal the religious worship of an ideal affective world.

In the late Ming novel "The Two Beauties", *Yu jiao li* 玉嬌梨, the hero, a talented man named Su Youbai 蘇友白, states his views on beauty, stressing both inner and external qualities, but also the relevance of the subjective element in defining what a beautiful woman is:

Even if she is a talent but is not a beauty, she cannot be considered a truly beautiful woman; and if she is a beauty but not a talent, she cannot be considered a truly beautiful woman. Moreover, even if she is both a beauty and a talent, but there is no feeling between her and me, Su Youbai, she also is not

10 F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1958, p.159

11 Cf. *Tangren chuangji xiaoshuoji* 唐人傳奇小說集, 2, p. 138

my beauty.

有才無色，算不得佳人；有色無才，算不得佳人；即有才有色，而與我蘇友白無一段旖旎相關的情，亦算不得我蘇友白的佳人。¹²

We can see here the subjective/objective concept of beauty. The above quoted sentence is emblematic of Ming and Qing scholars' conception of ideal beauty, which should possess at once three qualities: charm (*se* 色), talent (*cai* 才), and sentiment (*qing* 情). According to the author of "Writings of Talented Women" (*Nü caizi shu* 女才子書),¹³ a "waxdoll" (*sezhuang yugua* 色莊語寡) cannot be considered a real beauty; to be skilled in needlework instead of learning and reciting poems indeed cannot be said to be "elegant and refined". Spending one's life within the embroidered bedroom but never leaning against the balustrades to look at the moon or sentimentally indulging in languorous thoughts indeed is not charming. This kind of woman, "cool like a piece of wood", is neither interesting nor seductive. The real beauty "must first of all be virtuous, wise, endowed with personal charm", "then must be brave", "at last must nurture sentiments". The perfect beauty should be "virtuous and gifted, brave and sentimental at the same time".¹⁴

We cannot overlook the different traditions in China and the West, concerning the body-spirit relation, and the best example of the divide is found in the concept of love.¹⁵ Notwithstanding (and because) of the strict morality that in fact reduced passionate love to a sickness and sex to a necessary physiological act for procreation, a close link between love and sexuality was considered obvious in China. There was no distinction made between "sacred love" and "profane love", between spiritual and sensual love, of the kind that has tormented but also enriched Western literature and ethics. In general, for Chinese writers, the physical aspect

12 Han Xiduo ed., 韓錫鐸校點，玉嬌梨，第五回，沈陽，春風文藝出版社，1981，5:55.

13 This collection of short stories was written by a scholar under the pseudonym Vagrant of the Mandarin Ducks Lake and Misty Waters (Yuan hu yan shui sanren 鴛湖煙水散人), during the reign of Shunzhi at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty.

14 Ma Rong, ed., 1983, pp. 71, 169. For this part, cf. Guo Yingde's article in Ming Qing yanjiu 1999, pp. 3-32.

15 The term *shenjiao* 神交. "divine union" or "spiritual relationship", well known in religious literature, was contrasted with the concept of physical union linked to sexual desire by Chen Shibin in his commentary on chapter 54 of the *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (*Xiyou zhenquan*): "All beings originate from the union of the vital spirit of man and woman. When the woman receives this spirit, it is the generative seed; when it is the man who receives it, it is the seed of wisdom. Yet these exchanges are completely different, as are different [the woman's] acceptance and [the man's] abstinence 男女媾精，萬物化生。女得之為人種，男得之為仙種。交媾迥別，順逆不同." (Cf. *Xiyouji*, *Guoxue jiben congshu* 國學基本叢書，3:548-49). This author's theory is that a man's desire for a woman is incompatible with his own moral perfection; "although the process of becoming immortal or enlightened cannot exist without the Way of sexual reproduction, in the first place it is composed of "divine union" or "spiritual relations" (*shenjiao*, that is to say based on energy, *qi*) and not of physical relations or the fulfilment of desires (*xingjiao* 行交 *er shun qi suoyu* 形交而順其所欲). (See *Xiyouji*, *Guoxue jiben congshu*, 3:549). This "spiritual relation" is later explained as an exchange without a physical element (*Ibidem*, 3:550; also see A. Plaks, 1987, p. 250). Worth noting is the general disfavour for a prolonged virginity or life-long celibacy of women, notwithstanding the great value of

could not be separated from love. In fact, they shared the idea -- as in the short story that both Hong Pian and Feng Menglong include in their collections -- of the indissolubility of love's emotional and sensual elements: "Passions (*qing*) and physical attraction or beauty (*se*) constitute a single essence (*ti* 體) and a sole function (*yong* 用). As acutely analyzed by Shigehisa Kuriyama in his deep comparative analysis of Greek and Chinese medical perceptions of the body, the morpheme *se* is not only what the eyes can or should perceive (like in "diagnostic gaze" 望色), but also what they like to see (好色).¹⁶ Indeed, beauty fascinates the eye, and emotion perturbs the mind-heart: no sage or gentlemen, from ancient times until the present day, has ever been able to ignore the fact that emotion and beauty feed reciprocally

chastity in unmarried girls and widows (see for instance the young nun Miaoyu in "The Dream of the Red Chamber"). Anyway, lacking is the concept of "divine love" in its religious as well as metaphysical meanings: it is not without consequences that in Chinese literature one cannot find the Platonic concept of love as a means of reaching God and its vision (*Sophia*) through another human being, or the dramatic Augustinian perception of the body as corruption. This opposition, although retaining some points in common with the Western contrast between carnal and spiritual love, is in reality very different, for the fact that - as we have already seen - it derives from a presumed superiority of men over women: it is the man who possesses the generative seed, and it is the man who, through chastity, not only safeguards his own health, but may also aspire to supreme wisdom. This extreme Puritanism was generally refuted by common conscience, and in order to avoid excesses of lust, one author from the Ming period, Fang Ruhao, fought against Buddhist asceticism and against a number of practices that were discriminatory towards women. Another novelist, Xia Jingqu, who lived in the eighteenth century, also held a different position on the matter, based on 'refusal of lust', *quse* 卻色: like Cao Xueqin, he fought off the passion of love because of the dangers it heralds. Yet his motivation appears to be different, because in his efforts to re-establish traditional, orthodox morality, he tends to rationalise love and eliminate feelings to as great an extent as possible. He acknowledges the sexual nature of love, in which he distinguishes the fundamental function of procreation from aspects of desire and pleasure. Procreation must occur within the sphere of social norms, therefore within the family, in relations with the first wife or with concubines (*Yesou puyan* 野叟曝言, 88:757: "I know that the reduction of desires (*guayu* 寡欲) allows the birth of many sons. Therefore it is necessary to sleep with the wife and with the concubines only once a month, taking into account their menstrual cycle.") married in the normal way with parental approval. This duty, plus hygiene and health requirements, do not allow for any waste of that vital essence with which men are endowed, and so pleasure should be limited to those manifestations which, outside of matrimony, do not include the full sexual act (See K.R. McMahon's essay, 1988, pp. 32-55). A rare example of "platonic" love could be recognised in Daiyu's affection for Baoyu. For Daiyu, the internalisation of strict moral standards regarding sex - note the principle of the separation of the sexes (*nannü youbie* 男女有別) - influences her perception of love; it seems that even the attraction she feels towards Baoyu, one in which on a conscious level all sexual desire is banished, is induced by the femininity of the protagonist of "The Dream of the Red Chamber". Actually, their relation is very complex and contradictory, and the author acknowledges the presence of sexual attraction, however neurotic and repressed it is. A relation based on *qing* (sentiment) is contrasted with a relation based on *yin* 淫 ('lust') in *Xiangyu*, a Pu Songling's story (*Liaozhai zhiyi*, "Strange Stories from the Studio of Liao" [from now on *Lzzy*], 3:137-42). Huang student, after meeting two flower fairies, Xiangyu and Jiangxue, starts a passionate love relation with the former. But after some time, she dies. Moved by Huang's sincere love for her friend, Jiangxue comes to him in order to console him. However, unlike Xiangyu, she is detached and cold, and refuses any sexual relation. She says: "I will be with you, but our relation must be based on sentiment, not on carnal pleasure (*jiao yi qing bu yi yin* 交以情不以淫). I am not able to indulge in improper intimacy with you, neither at night nor in the daytime." (Ibidem, 3:139) In this case, anyway, Jiangxue shows no love towards Huang; her feelings are just friendship, or better, a sense of obligation towards her friend and gratitude for Huang's loyalty.

16 Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*, New York, Zone Books, 1999, pp. 171-182.

upon one another, just as sight and the heart influence one another".¹⁷

The only resemblance to the Western distinction between body and spirit in Chinese literature is a certain *crystallisation of desires* into spirits and souls which are temporarily dissociated from their respective bodies – like in ghost stories or in the well-known opera "The Peony Pavilion". Even here, however, spirit is not contrasted with matter, but rather consists of energy/vital spirit (*qi* 氣), and is the essence of sensual desire. The use of such images, in fact, endows love-passion with a power transcending all boundaries of human existence, space and time, and annihilating the distinction between dream and reality, life and death.¹⁸ This element can be found also in previous periods, from the *mirabilia* genre (*zhiguai* 志怪) of the Six Dynasties to the Tang tales (*chuanqi* 傳奇).

In the West this concentration of desire, seen as forbidden *libido*, is embodied in demoniac characters, often represented in the Romantic and post-Romantic fantasy fiction.¹⁹ But in Chinese literature there is little distinction between human and supernatural sensuality, and even the attributes of human and supernatural beauty may overlap. Judith Zeitlin has recently noted that in female ghosts such as those described by Pu Songling, "we find a powerful convergence between traditional literary representations of the ghost as a weightless, evanescent, mournful being and new ideals of feminine attractiveness that emphasized qualities such as slenderness, sickness, and melancholy, often in conjunction with literary or artistic talent and untimely death."²⁰ As Feng Menglong stressed in his "Anatomy of Love", love-passion is common to men, spirits and gods (思之思之, 鬼神通之, 蓋思生於情, 而鬼神亦情所結也), and the nature of supernatural beings has thus no less libido and passions than men and women.²¹ The few cases of de-sexualisation of the female

17 Cf. Hong Pian, *Qingpingshan tang huaben* 清平山堂話本, 14:247-48; Feng Menglong, *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (*Jstj*), 38:572. Cf. also the beginning of the first chapter of *Jinpingmei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 (concerning the editions of Ming and Qing sources, see the bibliography in P. Santangelo, "Emotions and the Origin of Evil in Neo-Confucian Thought", in H. Eifring, ed., *Minds and Mentalities in Traditional Chinese Literature*, Beijing, Culture and Art Publishing House, 1999, 184-316.). One may compare these passages with the description of the process of enamourment according to the Troubadours: for them too it works through senses, especially sight and hearing (cf. M. René Nelli, *L'érotique des troubadours*, Paris 1974, vol. I, p. 351), but the outcome is seen in a different, if not an opposed, way. For Renaissance Neo-Platonists, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) in *primis* -whose influence on European literature of the 16th and 17th centuries was considerable-, sight and hearing were the noble senses because they inspired superior love, that is, the Heavenly Love for Beauty.

18 See my recent essay *L'amore in Cina, attraverso alcune opere letterarie negli ultimi secoli dell'impero*, Napoli, Liguori, 1999, pp. 128-150

19 See, for instance, M.G. Lewis's "The Monk", some of the "Contes fantastiques" by T. Gautier, J. Cazotte's "Le diable amoureux", or "Le manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse" by J. Potocki. For an analysis of the relation between desire and imaginative creation, cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *La letteratura fantastica (Introduction à la littérature fantastique)*, Paris 1970), Milano 1991, pp. 129-60

20 Judith Zeitlin, "Embodying the Disembodied: Representations of Ghosts and the Feminine", in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 246-47.

21 *Qingshi*, Qingganlei 情史, 情感類, 8:224.

body, even if relevant, cannot but confirm this general rule.

This likening of female beauty to ghostly beauty comes from a change in attitude. The very change in the visual representation of beautiful women and men from fat to slim and frail, pointed out by van Gulik, can be seen by comparing a Tang scroll "A Palace concert" representing Palace beauties, with any Qing dynasty painting or drawing. The shift reflects the search for a new language to describe new sentiments and sensations according to the new cult of passions, through an aestheticisation and eroticisation of frailness and sickness.

The legacy which is dominant in China is clearly different from the Platonic one; the former may be expressed in the Chinese proverb "beautiful face, unlucky destiny", *hongyan boming* 紅顏薄命 and re-stated by Yuan Zhen's: "It is a general rule that those women endowed by Heaven with exceptional beauty invariably either entrap themselves or seduce others" 入凡天之所命尤物不妖其身必妖於人。²² These concepts may be indicative of the fact that the contrast between sacred and profane love, and between the "angelic woman" and the "sensual woman", is not as important in China as in the West.²³ In fact, in the West we have, on the one hand, an increasing dichotomy between the idealisation of woman and her heretical and Manichean desexualisation and, on the other hand, the lust for her body as the "Place of My Desire". Hence, it is apparent that the Western approach is an altogether unique one which differs from that of other cultures.

Undoubtedly, external beauty and charm, *se*, are the basic and direct qualities. To the *Shuowen* 說文, *se* means the "expression" of the face, the "appearance", *yanqi* 顏氣, yet it also means sexual desire, intercourse between man and woman, ²⁴ as well as the appeal of feminine beauty.²⁵ It generally means colour, from whence

22 Another culturally widespread system of signification that cannot be ignored when examining representations of the body – especially portraits – is physiognomy, read not only for personal character traits but also for destiny. See Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits 1600-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1992. On Yuan Zhen, *ibid.*

23 See for example Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, Paris, 1957 (*L'eroticismo. Il comportamento e le più segrete mozioni dell'homo eroticus*, Milano, 1969, pp. 151-53).

24 See Lunyu, 論語 9, 17; 1, 7; Shijing 詩經, (Xiaoxu, Zhou Nan [Short Foreword, Zhou and the South], in J. Legge, *The She King*, p. 37). According to a number of scholars, the form of the character *se* is derived from the representation of two intertwined human figures, in the act of sexual intercourse; other scholars are of the opinion that the character indicates sexual desire, or the woman as object of such desire. See Kasahara Chūji 笠原伸二, *Chūgokujin no shizenkan to biishiki*, 中國人の自然観と美意識 Tokyo, 1982, pp. 186-187.

25 For some examples of the attributes of feminine beauty in ancient China, see *Shijing*, *Maoshi yinde*, 10/37; 12/57; *Huainanzi*, 19:1299; *Zhanguo*, 16:540; 33:1180; Sima Xiangru, *Shanglin fu*. Appreciation of physical beauty are just as common in the Classics and in other ancient texts; for examples, see the *Zuozhuan*, Huangong 1; *Huainanzi*, 7:1235-37; *Shijing*, *Maoshi yinde*, 9/42; 10/47; 12/57; 19/93, 94; 29/143. On aesthetic enjoyment in the admiration of female beauty, note the expression "pleasing to the sight" (*mubaose*) in *Xunzi yinde*, 41/11/79 and the passage taken from the *Shuolin xun* from the *Huainanzi* (17:1286), in which the pleasure of sighting lovely girls is exalted because of the fact that their bodies and faces are different (*jiaren bu tongti meiren bu tongmian er jie yue yu mu*). On female charm, see also Kasahara Chūji, Tokyo, 1982, pp. 188-93.

come its other major meanings of expression [of the face], appearance, and therefore [feminine] beauty,²⁶ sexual attraction, and finally, lust. From context, *se* may be correctly understood as *libido*, or everything in this world which is attractive, or, as the negative meaning attributed to it by Buddhism would have it, as unreality. The most common expression is *haose* 好色, "man's propensity to be attracted to feminine charm", that can be traced back to the Confucian "Analects". The expression, which had negative connotations for Confucianists, was definitely condemned by the Neo-Confucian dualism of Heavenly Principles and egotistical desires 天理。私欲。²⁷

Charm denotes external beauty: a pleasing, loveable and attractive appearance, which means graceful features, seductive appearance, coquettish complexion, and so on. Beauty is fundamentally a catalyst for love because it stirs sexual attraction. In China, going back to the period of the "Book of Odes", *Shijing*, we can find terms concerning prettiness, such as "handsome" (*zidu* 子都), "beautiful woman" (*shuonü* 碩女).²⁸ According to the poet Du Fu 杜甫, beauty is a harmonious combination of physical and spiritual qualities, elegance of clothes and ornaments.

The third day of the third month the new spring air has come. Many are the beautiful girls on the margin of the rivers of Chang'an. Noble is their deportment, and elegant their spirit. Smooth is their skin, and harmonious their body. The silks of their clothes bright like full spring. Precious and rare things are in their rooms. ... Many cars come for visits, gentlemen stop their horses, go down and come to visit. Flowers fall like snow, white all around.²⁹

Beauty can even take on miraculous and supernatural qualities: Yue Shi's 樂史 (930-1007) *Yang Taizhen waizhuan* 《楊太真外傳》 describes Xuanzong's remembrances after Yang Guifei's death, and his true love for her, though their lustful relationship had been thought to have been the ruin of the State. In the following passage, describing the deep nostalgia of the Emperor for his dead lover Yang Guifei,

26 Qian Qianyi (1582-1664) couples the term *se*, perceived in the sense of "visual images", with sounds, smells and tastes, distinguishing those sensations which feed the eyes from other sensations (see *Qingdai wenxue piping ziliao huibian*, I, p.58). Western tradition, too, emphasizes the role of the eyes in the origin of feelings from Aristotle's (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 5, 12: 1167a, 1171b) to Jacques Ferrand (*Malinconia erotica*, 3:10-11).

27 Cf. P.Santangelo Paolo, *Emozioni e desideri in Cina. La riflessione neoconfuciana dalla metà del XIV alla metà del XIX secolo*, Bari 1992

28 For the first term, see *Shijing*, "Zheng feng 鄭風- *Shan you fu su* 山有扶蘇", for the second, *ibid*, "Wei feng 衛風 *Shuoren* 碩人".

29 *Lirenxin* 丽人行, quoted in Wu Liquan 吴礼权, *Zhongguo yanqing xiaoshuo shi* 中国情小説史, 台北商務, 1995, p. 55.

the author tells of an unusual story about her body. While her corpse is not exactly likened to the body of a saint, whose odour remains fragrant, and indeed has already lost flesh and skin, an essence sachet was preserved on her bosom. The passage is as follows:

[...] The Emperor went to Mawei, where Yang Guifei had died, and came to the balustrade. On the side of the road he saw flowers, and near the temple the ripe pomegranate that she liked so much. Therefore he called it the "proper tree", thinking of her. Then he reached the Sloping Gorge under a drizzle. As he walked it was still raining. He heard a bell sound re-echoing against the mountains ridge. As the Emperor missed her deeply, inspired by these sounds, he composed a melody of "drizzle and bell", to express his regret. In the second year of the Zhide period (757) he went back to the Western Capital. In the eleventh month, he came back to Chengdu for the ceremonies in her honour. He later wished to move her tomb, but Li Fuguo and other high officials were against it. [...] Then the Emperor secretly ordered the eunuch Qian to move the tomb to his own residence. Here her corpse was buried for the first time, wrapping her in violet blankets. *Her relocated corpse had already lost flesh and skin, but on her bosom a perfume sachet was still preserved.* The eunuch took it to the Emperor, who kept it in his inner pocket. Furthermore, the Emperor ordered a painter to paint the shape of his concubine in his private Hall. From morning till night he looked at this painting, sobbing. From the Southern Palace, where he lived, in the late night he went to the Pavilion of the Diligent Policy, and, leaning on the balustrade, looked toward the South, filling his eyes with the misty moon. Then, he started to sing to himself: "The jade tree in front of the Court has already grown so high that people can climb it, but the soldiers left for the war still do not come back." He had just finished singing when he heard faint music coming from inside. "Is there a company of old actors? - He asked his attendant. - Tomorrow, let them pay me a visit." The following day, the attendant went and invited them, in accordance with the imperial order. After that, the Emperor went to meet his concubine's maid, Red Peach. She sang the song "Liangzhou", that the concubine had composed, while he was accompanying her with a jade flute. When this song was finished, both felt moved and sympathetic towards each other, and could not hide their tears.....³⁰

Certainly no one better than Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680) has left images of

30 Cited in Wu Liquean, *Zhongguo yangqing xiaoshuo shi*, p. 129. Italics are mine.

female appeal that are as brief as they are magic. His ecstatic astonishment at the enchantment of female charm is expressed in his works with a marvellous delicacy matched by few writers in world literature.³¹ Female charm is a reflection of his refined hedonism in which sensual pleasure merges with aesthetic pleasure as an expression of joy and vitality. Female appeal, *taidu* 態度 or *meitai* 媚態, he writes, "is by no means unimportant, it is to a woman what flame is to fire, radiance to a lamp, glitter to gold and jewels - something about which you're not sure whether it has form or not; it is a concrete yet undefined object, mysterious because it is sublime. It is something wonderful which cannot be explained in words, every time a woman makes you fall in love at first sight, to the point of making you forget about yourself and risk your life to be near her... 媚態二字，必不可少。媚態之在人身，猶火之有焰，燈之有光，珠貝金銀之有寶色，是無形之物，非有形之物也。惟其是物而非物，無形似有形，是以名為優物。優物者，怪物也，不可解說之事也。凡女子，一見即令人思之而不能自己，遂至舍命以圖，..."³² An intense erotic atmosphere can be created by a glance or a movement. Speaking of his actress-concubine Wang, Li Yu writes: "Conversing with her, playing chess, taking tea, burning incense, [...] all these things create a rare erotic atmosphere thanks to her femininity".³³ And a game of chess might indeed create an atmosphere of magic if "a young girl's dainty fingers pick up the pawn and remain suspended, hesitating about where to put it down. Watching her carefully is enough to make you feel your heart melt."³⁴ The body becomes evanescent in this atmosphere that transcends reality, but at the same time the girl and her sensuality, the catalysts for such a transcendence, are very real and inevitably physical.

While beauty and charm may be idealized and considered magical or transcendent, they are often used as powerful means to reach some very real goals. We find several different examples in Chinese narrative. In the well-known novel *Jin-PingMei* beauty and charm can be used for 'getting money' (借色求財), as with Wang Liuer 王六兒 and Song Huilian 宋惠蓮. Sexual attraction could be exploited not only as a means of obtaining money, but also for other purposes, such as pleasure (a direct and natural purpose) or, more ambitiously and indirectly, for power,

31 Cf. *Zuozhuan*, Xi gong 24; *Shiji*, 39:1658; *Hanshu*, 60:2668; *Sanguozhi*, 4:128. In Western literature this attitude might recall the religious meaning of female beauty and love for humanists such as the Italian Firenzuola, for whom the inexhaustible desire for female beauty prefigures the joys of paradise. (Cf. *I discorsi della bellezza delle donne* [*The arguments concerning the beauty of women*], p. 42, cit. in Alberto Tenenti, *Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento*, Torino, 1957 [1977], pp. 204, 184-85)

32 Cf. Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji* 閑情偶寄, 3, in *Li Yu quanji*, 3:115. Cf. also Patrick Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*, Cambridge Mass., 1988, p. 68; and the Italian translation by O. Carloni in Giuliano Bertuccioli, a cura di, *Mandarini e cortigiane*, 1988, p. 182

33 Cf. Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, 3:154. Here Li Yu uses the phrase "*wenrou xiang zhi yiqu* 溫柔鄉之異趣", in other words the rare taste of the "warm and soft surroundings" (contact with female beauty). Cf. also Gong Zizhen, 10:534 and Pu Songling, 14:706 for the same expression.

34 Cf. Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, 3, in *Li Yu quanji*, 3:146. Cf. Also Patrick Hanan, 1988, p. 67

like Pan Jinlian did. Offspring is another purpose of sexual attraction which should not be ignored and which is, according to Neo-Confucian morality, its only legitimate aim; an example of this is Yueniang 月娘. On the other hand, a beautiful woman herself is sometimes the goal, as in Ximen Qing's practice of 'using money to obtain a beauty', 借財求色. However, there is no lack of descriptions of other kinds of beauties which stress their physical appearance, like the following passage quoted from the Preface of "Ranks of Beijing's courtesans" *Yandu jipin* 《燕都妓品叙》:

The beauties of Northern China, have an aspect as splendid as jade, without match since the antiquity. From the time the Capital was moved to North until now Beijing is flourishing, she has been affected by the Southern customs, and her inhabitants have been likewise influenced. Without doubt, the beauties there astonish the world with their gorgeoussness. From 1597 to 1600 they were considered the most beautiful women in China.³⁵

A certain cult of beauty is testified by the so-called "Beauty contests" *hua'an* 花案 (lit.: "Flower Judgments"), that took their names from floral terminology, and in particular from flower shows which had been held ever since the Song dynasty and are recorded in texts such as "The Flower Classic" (*Huajing* 花經). Known also as "Records of the winners of the floral examination" (*Huabang* 花榜), "Flower Evaluations" (*Huaping* 花評), "Flower Point Score" (*Pinhua* 品花), they were organized along the lines of state examinations; the evaluation depended on the candidates' appearance, their character and their temperament; they were held in the entertainment areas of the main cities, such as Beijing, Nanjing, Yangzhou, and the examining commission was composed of the courtesans' clients.³⁶ In the end, again following the model of state examinations, the winners, whose names appeared on special wall posters, were paraded through the streets of the entertainment quarter. Among the most beautiful and famous courtesans, at least from the Yuan era on, actual beauty contests began to be held, which became widespread in the following two dynasties. After the period of great success at the end of the Ming dynasty, these contests went through a critical period during the Manchu conquest. This was due

35 Cit. in Wu Liguan, p. 190

36 A description of such contests and the surrounding atmosphere can be found in the 4th act of Li Yu's opera "The cautious lovers" (*Shen luanjiao*, in *Li Yu quanji*, 11:4821-29 12:5029), as well as in late-Qing novels concerning homosexual and courtesans life, like "The Precious Mirror for the Beauty Contest" (*Pinghua baojian* 評花寶鑑) by Chen Sen (1796?-1870?). Here, as David Wang ("Edifying Depravity: Three Late-Qing Courtesan Novels", in Eva Hung, ed., *Paradoxes of Traditional Chinese Literature*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 1994, pp. 232-39, 252) notices, the same rhetorical codes of sentimental-erotic streams are ironically represented in homosexual relations.

not only to the war situation, but also to the moral condemnation that accompanied the ascent of the new dynasty and the legislative provisions against prostitution. Only in the mid 19th century did the situation in the main cities start to return to that of the Ming era; Shanghai became one of the main centres, where even theatre actresses took part in the contests, and numerous books were published on them here at the end of last century. Analogous practices were held in Canton, organized also by the local government in order to enrich the municipal coffers, until the 20th century, under the "modern" and "democratic" name of "Records of the winners of the floral election" (*Huabang xuanju* 花榜選舉).³⁷

These contests, of which a trace remains even in the "Dream of the Red Chamber" (suffice it to think of the "twelve beauties", *shi'er chai* 十二釵), are richly documented by reports that have been gathered to form material of different kinds, in prose and theatrical works from the Yuan era until the Qing period, as attested by the richly researched study by Gôyama Kiwamu, (1989, pp. 99-126). In several of these works, according to the final ranking, the place and the date of the contest, the name and nickname of the winners, there is a report – sometimes accompanied by a portrait – of the qualities, the judgments and even the critical notes, the corresponding flower, and the verses quoted or poems written in their honour.

The above examples show how broad the topic concerning the concept of beauty is, and how complex, different and contradictory its attributes are. At this time I would not be able to give a precise answer to the broad question "What does beauty mean in late Imperial culture?" I will limit my analysis to some key examples which offer an idea of the manifold perception of the body's aesthetic image. All these notes cannot but elucidate our discussion on the language of the body. What I intend to address here will be restricted to two abilities that the body excels at: keeping others at a distance or attracting them.

The body as an obstacle to contact others

First of all, it must be pointed out that in literature gives us many examples of a kind of ugliness which exists against the subject's will. Everyone will remember the unlucky elder brother of Wu Song, Wu Da 武大, represented both in the *Shuihuzhuan* and in *JinPingMei* as an ugly and ridiculous man. Especially in Daoist literature, starting from Zhuangzi, there are several examples of invalids or unsightly people that helped create the conventional type of ugly sage: they are usually

37 Cf. Ho Virgil Kit-yiu, "Selling Smiles in Canton: Prostitution in the Early Republic", *East Asian History*, 5, 1993, pp. 101-132, especially pp. 128-129. See also Dorothy Ko, "The Written Word and the Bound Foot: A History of the Courtesan's Aura", in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1997, p. 86.

enlightened men, who, thanks their ugliness, have discarded the conventional values attached to beauty, and know the Way. And also the legendary king Yu 禹, whose merit was having built the great waterworks, was described by Sima Qian as an ugly peasant: "His thighs and calves were without hair, his hands and feet had become calluses, and his face black under the sun."³⁸

This is one type of ugliness. However, it is best to begin with a sort of negative attitude towards beauty; an ugliness which is brought onto ourselves when we intend to keep distance from others or, even though it is rare, when we try to refuse any contact with other human beings. This is the case of Aijie's reaction after being informed of Chen Jingji's death, in *JinPingMei* 金瓶梅.

When Wild Rose (Aijie) heard of Jingji's death, she cried day and night and would not take anything to eat. [...] Wild Rose got out of her sedan-chair and burned some paper money. She made a reverence before the grave and said: "Oh, dearest brother, I had hoped that I might live with you always. Never I did think that you would die so young." She gave a great cry and fell fainting to the ground. [...] But when she got up, she collapsed again in a faint. [...] "Though I was only his mistress," she said, "we vowed eternal love and our passion was deep and sincere. I had hoped that I might always belong to him, but Heaven would have it otherwise and decreed his death. Now I am all alone in the world. When he was alive he gave me a silk handkerchief on which he had written a poem. I knew he was married, but I was willing to serve only for his amusement. If you doubt me, look at this handkerchief. [...] For his sake, *I would cut out my eyes and break my nose. I shall never marry anyone else.*" [...] Her uncle urged her to marry one of the rich young men of Huzhou who wished to marry her, but *she cut off her hair, cut out her eyes*, went to a temple, and became a nun. In her thirty-first year she fell ill and died.³⁹

In this case, on the one hand, it seems that the depression that deprives her of any interest and makes her desire an end to life, can be summed up in the sentence "I would cut out my eyes and break my nose". Clearly, becoming ugly is a way to avoid being the object of desire. This attitude, however, is not only due to a "spontaneous" personal reaction, but we can see how it is also the product of the social and cultural environment. We cannot overlook a well- established tradition:

³⁸ *Shiji*, 87:2553.

³⁹ Cf. *JinPingMei* [from now on *JPM*], 1990, 99:1403-405, 100:1414. (Egerton's translation with small changes, 1973, IV, pp.353-55, 365)

the historical and literary model of the widow who destroyed her beauty to avoid the king's pressures. Playing this role is a form of self-assertion, a way of raising one's position to that of a heroine, or at least of a formal legal wife. We should not be surprised then, because this "disfiguration" (*huirong* 毀容) is a reoccurring moral model and a classic example of a how manifesting sentiments can be a form of self-representation and re-assertion of one's social role.

If we examine "Illustrated Primer for Women's Instruction" *Guifan tushuo* 閨範圖說, influenced by *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳 (*Biographies of Exemplary Women*) of the Han 漢 period, Lü Kun 呂坤 (1538-1618) presents several examples of heroines. The beautiful widow Gao 高 "takes a mirror, and with a knife cuts her nose" (援鏡待刀割其鼻) to refuse the requests of the nobles and the king of Liang. The young widow Ling 令 not only has to cut her hair, but cuts off her ears and cuts her nose (斷髮。截其兩耳，斷其鼻)" in order to resist her parents' requests of remarrying her. So, in the name of their chastity and duty widows Huan 桓 and Fang 房 cut their ears (割其耳，截耳), and lady Li, widow of Wang Ning, cuts off her hand with an ax (引斧自斷其臂) to preserve her purity when an innkeeper has touched it.⁴⁰

Another example is lady Wang 王, who has to find a clever way to defend herself in a lawless society. After the death of her husband, the area is not safe as it is riddled with bandits, and the dangers due to a rebellion are many, because she is still young and charming. How to preserve her honour and chastity? She resorts to the scheme of dirtying her face with mud, her hair hanging down her back, and putting on big shoes (名節難保，乃以湮土塗面，鬚頭散足...), so that nobody will notice her beauty. Lu Kun comments that lady Wang was aware of the lustful effects of a seductive look, and therefore this is the way a beauty becomes ugly.

At last we shall mention a further example: the eighteen-year-old widow Li 李 dreams a man asking her in marriage. She of course refuses his proposal which is improper for a virtuous Neo-Confucian widow. But every night the same dream haunts her. At last, considering that her attractiveness beckoned this lustful demon, she decides to cut her hair, to dirty her face and skin, to put on course clothes, and so the dream does not appear again.⁴¹ This story is believable from the psychological point of view. The dreams expressed the hidden unconscious desires of the woman (the lustful demons called by her charm); she repressed them, but in fact could not

40 Another interesting case is presented by M. Elvin in his study on the 'Bell of Poesy', *Qing shiduo* 清詩鐸. Feng Jing's 馮景 poem "Cutting off both ears" 割雙耳詩 (20:711) extols the miraculous power of a widow's fidelity in the 18th century Fujian, with the happy end: both ears regenerated themselves. See Mark Elvin, "Unseen Lives. The Emotions of Everyday Existence Mirrored in Chinese Popular Poetry of the Mid-Seventeenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century", in R. Ames with T. Kasulis and W. Dissanayake, eds., *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, New York, SUNY, 1998, pp. 174-175 (113-199).

41 Cf. *Guifan tushuo*, in *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan er bian, di wu ji* 中國古代版畫叢刊二編，第五輯 Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994, pp. 425-45.

get free of them. Once she is deeply convinced that her life needs a different destiny, that her beauty is not relevant at all, because she does not need to be desired by anybody else, then all hidden desires fall away by themselves, and she is no longer haunted by the dreams. In the "Weaver", a short story by Pu Songling, a mysterious young girl appears before a widow, and with her beauty arouses in the widow a series of desires and lascivious thoughts; then she shows herself to a scholar, who writes risqué verses about her. At the end of the tale the heroine realises that the pleasure of her good looks and the display of her charm, when they arouse desires in others, are leading her to become ensnared by passion, as seduction necessarily involves allowing oneself to be seduced. "It is not your fault at all. By showing my beauty to others, I ended up in the trap of the passions (*wo ou duo qing zhang, yi se shen shi ren* 我偶多情障, 以色身示人), and so I have been insulted with unseemly verses. I brought all this upon myself; you have nothing whatever to do with it. If I do not quickly go away, I'm afraid I will fall into the abysses of love"⁴². With the exception of Du Liniang's self-portrait in *Mudanting*, such parossistic excesses of narcissistic contemplation of one's beauty are rather rare in Chinese literature, unlike in the West where there is a more conscious attitude towards personal beauty.

In the above examples, women make their bodies ugly and undesirable and hide their natural charm for different reasons. The message they are sending through their ugliness is the same, but their personal aims sometimes diverge, sometimes converge. Based fundamentally on fear, Wang's behavior is an attempt to go unnoticed, hiding her body from the sight of potential enemies. In other cases (Aijie, Gao, Ling, Huan, Fang and Li), on the contrary, the change in appearance is an ostentatious act, directed at drawing attention to their own attitude and decision. We cannot exclude that refusing relations with others is often due to a certain degree of self-resentment, contempt for one's own body, a wish of self-destruction. It seems evident, however, that at least in the cases of Aijie and the widow Gao, the girls sought to improve their own social status and image through their heroic deed. Ugliness thus becomes a symbol of virtue and determination.

The language of the body as seductive

Since Zong Zimei had married Chang'e, his family had become suddenly rich. His houses were so many that their verandas lined up on the sides of the streets. Chang'e liked to joke. Once she saw a painting with beautiful girls.

42 Lzzy, Zhinu, 9:1223-24.

Zong said: "In my opinion, nobody can be compared with you in the world, but I have never seen Zhao Feiyan and Yang Guifei." Chang'e said to Zong Zimei smiling: "If you wish to see them, there is no difficulty at all." She took the painting and carefully observed it, then she hurried into her room. There, in front of the mirror, she dressed up as Zhao Feiyan while dancing, and then imitated Yang Guifei when drunk. 對鏡修妝，倣飛燕舞風，又學楊妃帶醉 In each case she was able to change according to their stature and frame, matching their charm and elegance, just as they were represented in the painting. Her female fascination expressed the same soft amorous feelings represented in the pictures. When Chang'e first started dancing, a female servant entered, and she could hardly recognize Chang'e: astonished, she asked her fellow sisters, and only after carefully examining, suddenly she realized it and laughed. "I have got one beauty, – Zong Zimei said – and yet all beauties of past ages are in my bedchamber! 吾得一美人，而千古之美人，皆在床闌矣！"⁴³

This passage can be considered a masterpiece in the description of a beautiful woman's ability to present her body in different shapes in order to become a constant object of desire. The story represents the contest between the Moon Goddess Chang'e 嫦娥 and the fox spirit Diandang 顛當 to win the love of the protagonist, the young scholar Zong Zimei 宗子美. In reality, both heroines are nothing other than the two aspects of the same personality – a personality divided in two female characters which balance and control each other. Here Chang'e is very good at imitating the most famous beauties in Chinese history. The term used by Pu Songling is *Chang'e shan xiexu* 嫦娥善諧謔, that is, she was able to play, and like any artist she becomes many different personalities. Her method is noteworthy: she takes the painting of girls that her beloved was admiring, studies their images, one by one, then tries to imitate them in front of the mirror, when she feels she has mastered the personality of the other girls, she starts dancing, embodying the different beauties so well that her servant hardly recognises her. As Wai-ye Li sharply observes, "impersonation in this instance is the realization of the multifarious aspects of desire".⁴⁴ I would add that she is not only able to gratify Zong Zimei with her skill, but also to satisfy her desire to be attractive in various and complementary personifications. Later on, an analogous play is performed by Chang'e's double, Diandang, and in this case the desire is reflected from one heroine to the other, and each seems to desire through the other: "Diandang bound her hair as a teen-age

43 Lzzy, Chang'e, 8:1071.

44 Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment. Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, Princeton 1993, p. 128

boy, bowed to all directions, prostrated on the ground rolling and twisting, in the most strange contortions, bending now right now left, and letting her socks touch her ears. Chang'e was delighted at that show, and still sitting, lightly kicked her for fun. Diandang raised her head, held Chang'e's small foot in her mouth, and nibbled at it. Just when Chang'e was enjoying herself in that play, she suddenly felt a thread of sensuous longing rising from the toes and heading straight for the heart. Lustful feelings and thoughts of sensual pleasure took hold of her, as if she were losing control. But then, she quickly concentrated her mind cooling down, and scolded Diandang: 'Fox slave, you deserve death! Aren't you even able to choose proper people before seducing them?' [...]" .⁴⁵

In this essay my purpose is to examine mainly how bodies expressing love and the joy of life are portrayed and what messages such representations convey. Such sentiments are the most common desires, along with the desire to be desired, where the body is the mouthpiece for a language of seduction. Emblematic is the scene in which a woman applies make-up in order to improve her beauty and seductive powers. We previously came across the puritan statement *yerong huiyin* 冶容誨淫 "charms invite lust"? The general meaning of the term "seduction" is "to induce, tempt, attract, lead", not too far removed from the Latin etymology of the term *se-[d]-ducere*, meaning "to lead aside", "to divert". The disturbing note - introduced in words of Latin derivation by the particle *sed*, and found in the term "sedition" - also appears in several Chinese equivalents. In particular, this ambiguous hint between danger and captivation can be found in the semantic part of some analogous Chinese morpheme, referring to "women", "spirits" and "hook".⁴⁶ It is no accident that the semantic part of *mei* 媚 (flatter, charm, enchant) corresponds to the ideogram *nü* 女 ("woman"). It is often interchangeable with the homophone 魅, whose basic meanings are "demon of the forests" (see *chi mei wang liang* 魑魅魍魎, evil spirits of rivers and mountains), magic, and charming. *Mo mei* 魔魅 is a deceiv-

45 Lzzy, *Chang'e*, 8:1075-1076. Cf. Li Wai-ye's translation, 1993, p.129.

46 Many other characters and composites are also used, for example *liaobo* 撩撥, *yinyou* 引誘 or *tiaodu* 逃逗, *tiaodong* 挑動, *tiaoqing* 挑情, *gouyin* 勾引 in reference to seduction and flattery. As far as the other morpheme *you* 誘 is concerned, we find it also in legal terminology, in *youguai* 誘拐, soliciting and abduction, a crime committed against minors and women and punished severely.⁴⁶ Its root consists of the ideogram *yan* 言 (word) which certainly refers to the use of the word as an instrument to persuade and involve the victim of the seduction. The last expression, *gouyin*, for instance is used in the trial documentation from the adultery case against Xu Tian and his lover Jiang (I am grateful to Paola Paderni for material on the legal cases of 1736 relating to marriage and the family, which is kept in the central archives in Peking and which she examined and kindly put at my disposal). Frequently used in *JinPingMei* are the terms 勾引 and *gouqing* 勾情, with the meaning of "to tempt, to seduce, to arouse to passion". See also the term *gou* 鉤, which literally means "hook", "to hook", and "to entice", "to lure". The term *guhuo* 蛊惑, 鼓惑 more correctly expresses "to excite", "to agitate". These terms can also be used in a more or less figurative sense, as can *gouyin*, which in a story in the collection "Texts of the Study of the Pure Peace Mountain" (*Qingping-shan tang huaben* 清平山堂話本, 25:307) is used for "the poetic inspiration" (*gouyin shixing* 勾引詩興) drawn from the light of the moon after an exciting visit to some historic remains.

ing spirit, and *mei li* 魅力 is charm, fascination, glamour, *mei huo* 魅惑 is attraction, fascination, lure, captivation, charm.

The idea of magic is in fact central to this concept. Nor is it by chance that the charm or fascination of a woman who bewitches with her seductiveness is described as magic, *yaoli* 妖裏 *yaoqi* 妖氣 or *yaorao* 妖嬈. Sometimes, like in "The Humble Words of the Old Rustic" (*Yesou puyan* 野叟曝言) by Xia Jingqu (1705-1787)⁴⁷, a woman's ability to attract and control a man by means of the power of her sexuality was imagined as witchery: she evokes her magic powers (*shu* 術) by baring her breasts, rubbing them, manipulating her navel, reciting a special spell, and finally directing her genitals at her male victim and shooting him with her lethal "female energy", *yinqi* 陰氣⁴⁸. Of course such descriptions seem parodies of the softer and more sophisticated ways of female charms, and its language is more pornographic than erotic. Her behavior is almost opposed to that described in the Hongloulou, concerning You Sanjie's bearing :

Out of deliberate disregard for appearances she had taken off her hair-ornaments and outer clothes, and from time to time as she spoke, the animated gestures with which her words were accompanied caused the imperfectly-fastened crimson shirt she was wearing to gape open, revealing glimpses of leek-green breast-binder and snow-white flesh beneath; the red shoes that peeped out below her green drawers were all the time tap-tapping or coming together in a manner that was anything but ladylike, and her earrings bobbed to and fro like little swings. To her "brow's dusky crown and lips incarnadine" the lamplight lent an added softness and brightness; and the wine she had drunk gave her eyes, which were at all times sparkling and vivacious, an even more irresistible allure. The two men were spellbound, and yet at the same time repelled. Her looks and gestures were all that inflamed concupiscence could desire; but her words and the very frankness of a provocation too brazen to be seductive kept them at bay. [...] Sometimes she abused them, called them names, said the most outrageous things to them. It was as though the roles had been reversed - as though she was the man and they were a pair of poor, simpering playthings whose services she had paid for. And when she had had

47 On the novel, cf. Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* (A Brief History of Chinese Fiction, Beijing 1959) in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Lu Xun complete works, Beijing, 1982, vol. 9, pp. 242-44 (1959, pp. 300-3); McMahon, "A Case for Confucian Sexuality: The Eighteenth-Century Novel *Yesou Puyan*", *Late Imperial China*, 9, 2, 1988, pp. 32-55 e id., *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists. Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 150-75.

48 Cited in K. R. McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists. Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 13.

enough of playing with them, she dismissed them ignominiously, bolted the door after them, and went to bed. [...] Sanjie was a very peculiar young woman. She took a perverse pleasure in enhancing her natural beauty by affecting a striking style of dress and by adopting every conceivable kind of outrageously seductive attitude. The effect was that every man who encountered her was smitten - not only the susceptible ones like Jia Lian and Cousin Zhen, but those made of sterner stuff as well; yet all of them, after only a few minutes in her company, felt their ardour extinguished and their advances repelled by the reckless, forthright, almost insolent way in which she received them.⁴⁹

Of course, the skill of seduction through body demeanour became an art, especially for women. As a popular song collected by Feng Menglong says,

She dresses her hair until it shines like lacquer bowl,
And in the presence of others seduces a man with her small feet.
Usually the man seduces the girl,
But recently in this new age girls are bold enough to entice a man.⁵⁰

From this song, we learn as well that the way girls seduced men was first by their hairstyle and their feet. At the beginning of the story "The oil seller"⁵¹ there is a list of the requirements for achieving success with high-class courtesans, and in "Mortal encounters"⁵² the "art of the ten principles [of seduction]" (*Shiyao zhi shu* 十要之術) is presented.

The art of seduction was particularly cultivated in the large cities, as shown in the following passage:

While she is displaying her lovely features and showing off her elegant clothes, spy on her from a distance and study her from close by, speaking only with your eyes. Position yourself behind her, and brushing her body with yours, follow her closely with a firm step. Once you feel this attraction, you must let her know your feelings. If she shows interest, she must respond

49 *Honglouloumeng*, 65:842-43; translation by David Hawkes, 1980, vol. 3, pp.282-84.

50 Feng Menglong (ed.), *Shan'ge* 山歌, 2:15-16, in *Ming Qing min'geshitiao ji* 明清民歌詩調集, Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, neibu, 1986, pp. 299-300. Translation by Oki Yasushi (*Women in Feng Menglong's 'Mountain Songs'*, in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1997, p. 133.

51 *Xingshi hengyan* [Xshy] 3:1 (35)

52 *Qingpingshan tang huaben*, 14:261-62 [162-63] and Jsty, 38:698 (577-78)

to your smile. When she nods you must understand; if she coughs, you must show you have noticed. If she appears to be in a hurry, you must not loiter; if she moves slowly, you can deliberately linger. When she speaks distractedly, be silent; when she turns you down, be brazen. When she pretends to be indifferent, or demonstrates reluctance, study her carefully for what is true and what is false. Later, when you have the situation in hand, you will know with certainty whether she agrees. Of course this list of stratagems is not complete; one would need great talent to list them all. A heart that is in reality willing may appear to be of steel; but if you have worked on it until it bends to your will, she will be as sweet as sugar towards you.⁵³

Managing one's personal charm is something that is far from new. It is present in a more subtle way in some female figures beginning with the "Songs of Chu", where they come onto the scene with the illusion of promise, both sensually and aesthetically, but in the end remain inaccessible. Woman, observes Baudrillard, is "the teasing ecstasy of man's desire", the "dizziness of a game where the stakes are constantly being raised", the object of seduction who seduces the subject (man) in a subtle game – wherein provocation alternates with retreat or refusal, following the sublime strategy of eternal woman–in which she, as the object of desire, is always the winner.⁵⁴ And in the following example taken from a story by Li Yu, the figure of the girl's mother may even appear cynical in her efforts to instruct the daughter in the "strategic" use of female charm and the art of seduction, in order for her to have the greatest success in life:

Let them look but do not let them touch. Let them have the appearance but not the substance. Let them be tempted but grant them nothing [...] The full demonstration of a man's love for a woman comes not from physical contact, but from [the initial phase of falling in love when] each sends glances to the other. Like a gourmet at the sight of wine and food: you can let him sniff, but not taste, because once he is at table his desire will pass.⁵⁵

The advice Pu Songling has the fox-woman Hengniang give to her friend Zhu Shi on the feminine art of giving pleasure and maintaining her fascination is nevertheless very wise. She gives Zhu Shi actual lessons in how to give seductive glances and smile mischievously, showing the whiteness of the teeth. She advises her

53 Cf. *Gjxs*, 23:84-85 (358).

54 Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Della seduzione*, Bologna, 1986, pp. 109-115

to know how to move in bed, and teaches her the technique of seeming to be indifferent: in short, this is the "way to change from wife into lover" (literally "into concubine", *yi qi wei qie zhi fa* 易妻爲妾之法):

Don't you know that human feelings abhor the old and are attracted by the new, that they give importance to that which is hard to get and scorn what is easy? Your husband's love for the concubine is not due to her beauty, the attraction lies in the novelty and the difficulty. [...] So, moving on from the routine to the new, from the easy to the difficult, that is the way to change from wife into concubine.⁵⁶

Seduction thus presupposes three conditions: the subject A sends a *message* that transmits an *attractive image* of him/herself, and the subject B is interested and ready to *understand and accept* it. Concerning the perception of such messages, the passive subject becomes full of "confusion", *mi* 迷, *huo* 惑. The inability to control one's emotion is usually expressed with the metaphor of the souls leaving the body. Thus, in Cao Zhi's (192-232) "*Fu* on the Goddess of the river Luo", the episode is introduced by the lost of one's self-control: "my spirit is bewildered and my soul is shaken, all at once my thoughts are dispersed"⁵⁷ in the corresponding painting by Gu Kaizhi (in the 4th century), the feminine image, whether or not it is the metaphorical projection of political ambitions, derives her identity from its sensuality and thus as object of desire.⁵⁸

Following this trend, Feng Menglong (1574-1646) for instance writes in the well-known tale "Jiang Xingge sees again the pearl shift" in relation to the merchant who seduced Sanqiao'er: "who would ever have imagined that the spirit of Chen Dalang would be completely bewitched by that woman's glance?" 誰知陳大郎的一片精魂早被婦人眼光兒攝上去了。⁵⁹ Just to take another example, Li Yu, in the second story of the "Twelve Halls", "The Hall of the Prize Winners", describes the reaction

55 Li Yu, *Li Yu quanji* (*Chuanqi shizhong*, "The ten stories", *Bimuyu*, 10:4151-2. The intention here in postponing the union is purely to increase the "extra advantages" of pleasure and raise the price of the performance. In other cases where the courtesan is famous, the postponement keeps the "game" alive and the relationship depends on the woman's acceptance (see the amusing episode in the collection of notes by Du Yiwo, *Xiaoxiao lu* (Notes for laughter): the courtesan Liu Yuan 劉元, although no longer particularly young, rejected the offers of a famous man of letters; she had this response to the man's protests: "What does 'famous man of letters' mean? How much money is it worth?" Cf. *Lidai xiaoshuo biji xuan* 歷代小說筆記選 *Ji Liu Yuan 妓劉元* (The courtesan Liu Yuan, 2nd vol., p. 335). The possibility of persevering with virtue as a tactic to force someone into marriage is not foreseen, given that the marriage procedure requires the agreement of the bride's and the groom's parents, the assistance of an intermediary and the existence of a series of social conditions, rather than the free will of the two parties.

56 *Lzzy* 10:1433-34 (4:187, incomplete text)

57 *Cao zi jianji* 曹子建集, 3:11a (Sibu congkan). See also Wai-ye Li, op. cit., 1993, pp. 17-46.

58 See Stephen Goldberg, "Figures of Identity. Topoi and Gendered Subject in Chinese Art", in R. Ames with T. Kasulis and W. Dissanayake, *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, New York, SUNY, 1998, pp. 48-49.

59 *Gjxs*, 1:36.

of people, and especially of clerks and officials at the view of two beautiful sisters coming to the Government offices: they stretched their heads, all fixing their attention on the girls, like an exceptional treasure had fallen from the nine heavens. The sisters were so charming that not only drew the ecstatic admiration of the young, but also the old could not but exclaim: "drop-dead gorgeous! drop-dead gorgeous!"⁶⁰

In the West there is a rich tradition linking love to sight as a channel for falling in love, and to the glance as a vehicle for seduction. This could be traced back to Plato, who in his *Phaedrus* (255 c-d) compares love to "a sickness of the eyes"; and, following Platonic stream, Plotinus attributes to the term *eros* an etymology linked to the concept of sight, saying it is the emanation of the desire that comes from contemplation of archetypal Beauty (*Enneads*, III 5, 3). According to the troubadours the process of falling love occurs via the senses, in particular sight and hearing.⁶¹ To these may be added the Renaissance neo-Platonists, and first among them Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose influence on 16th- and 17th-century European literature was considerable. For him, sight and hearing were the noble senses, because they inspired superior love, the heavenly variety, in other words the love of Beauty, which is seen as an emanation of divinity. While appreciating the category of reason, its own creation, Western philosophy has in the course of its history recognised the positive function of the emotions, from the Platonic myth of the carriage drawn by two fiery steeds to Hume's idea of the propulsive function of the sentiments.⁶²

In China a similar image is that of "the monkey of the heart and the horse of the intentions", a metaphor of Daoist origin that refers to the impulses and moods which are not under control, and thus disperse the will outside the self. The metaphor stands for the mind under restless and unsettled passions and desires. In the popular Japanese engraving here presented, the mind-heart is on the body (the stick), and firmly holds back both horse and monkey. The difference between this metaphor and the Platonic myth is fundamental: the charioteer, which is reason, is not the heart-mind, and the two animals are not comparable with the white and black steers, id est the irascible and concupiscible souls.

It was Cavalcanti again who recalled that love "comes from a form seen and known". The image Giacomo da Lentini spoke of as "painted like a fresco on a

58 See Stephen Goldberg, "Figures of Identity. Topoi and Gendered Subject in Chinese Art", in R. Ames with T. Kasulis and W. Dissanayake, *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, New York, SUNY, 1998, pp. 48-49.

59 Gjxs, 1:36.

60 Li Yu, Duojuinlou, *Li Yu quanji*, 9:37, 42.

61 Cf. M. Rene Nelli, *L'érotique des troubadours*, Paris 1974, p. 351

62 See David Hume, *Ricerche sull'intelletto umano e sui principi della morale* (Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Moral, London, 1788), Bari, 1968, p. 281.

wall" in the heart is perhaps that same "illusion", which also plays an important part in the process of falling in love. The later sensuously beautiful nudes painted during the Renaissance like Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" reflected the same Neo-Platonic ideals:

Amor è un desio che ven dal core
 Per abondanza di gran piacimento;
 E li occhi in prima generan l'amore
 E lo core li dà nutricamento.
 [...]
 E lo cor, che di zo è concepitore, imagina, e piace quel desio ...

Love is a desire which comes from the heart,
 Struck by a great beauty;
 Eyes first breed love
 And heart nourishes it
 [...] And the heart, the creator of all this,
 imagines, and takes pleasure in that desire...⁶³

In China, too, the channels by which the emotional message is transmitted and received are the sense organs – sight, in the first instance. To open one's eyes wide (*deng* 瞪) has always some emotional content, and if it is not out of anger, it is out of fear or sexual arousal. Worry is expressed by the idioms that indicate frowning or knitting one's brows (*zhoumei* 皺眉, *cumei* 蹙眉), but we will come back to this later. We find expressions like "give hints with the eyes", *shiyense* 使眼色 (lit. "send eyes color", *Hlm*, ch. 4, 6, 21, 22, 24, etc.) or *diyanse* 遞眼色 (lit. pass eyes colour", *Hlm*, ch. 6, 40), which refer to the eye language to give hints concerning matters that cannot be expressed in language in certain social situations. "Playing with eyes" (*jimei nongyan* 擠眉弄眼, *nongmei jiyan* 弄眉擠眼, *jiyan nongmei* 擠眼弄眉) is the idiomatic expression used for lovers' sending glances at each other.⁶⁴ Disrespect and anger are expressed in idioms that indicate avoiding looking at someone straight in the eyes: 正眼也不看、正眼也不瞧 (*Hlm*, ch. 24, 25, 27, 35, 67), or "not

63 Giacomo da Lentini, *Rime*, XIXc; cf. G. Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Torino 1993 (1977), p. 82. G. Agamben (1993, pp. 79-82) quotes *Lai de l'ombre* (*The reflected image*, verses 882, 893). by J. Renart and some verses by Giacomo da Lentini, one of the chief exponents of the Sicilian School. For the last lines reference is made to the *Antologia della letteratura italiana*, edited by A. Galletti e E. Chiorboli, Bologna: Zanichelli, 1958, vol. I, *Dalle origini all'umanesimo*, p. 42 and *La letteratura italiana. Storia, critica e opere complete*, Zanichelli, CD.

64 Cf. in Malay-Indonesian the idiom "main mata", 'play with eyes' that means to flirt.

even lift one's eyelids" (眼皮兒也不抬, *Hlm*, ch. 91). Fear and hate are expressed by the term "look sideways at someone" 側目而視. Not daring to look straight at someone, on the contrary, is a sign of great respect, as in 連正眼也不敢看 (*Hlm*, ch. 26)⁶⁵

Indeed, the words of Cavalcanti could serve as a translation of the first verse of a poem in praise of love, "the passion that comes from enjoyment of each other following mutual admiration" (*du se xiang yue ren zhi qing* 睹色相悅人之情), although it then goes on to warn against lust.⁶⁶ The role of the glance is evident again in the following passage: "he held her tighter, and gradually Liaonu's cheeks grew crimson, as though he could not control himself; and he gave her burning glances which conveyed his intentions, holding her fiercely to him, until she was overcome with passion" (*baochi yi li; Liaonu liang jia zhe fachen, ruo buzichi zhe; He ning ti song yi po ken zhi, sui ji yu luan* 抱持益力了奴兩頰漸髮頰若不自持者 何凝送意迫懇之 遂及於亂).⁶⁷ The same is true for the power of the female gaze to transmit or

65 See H. Eifring 1999, pp. 101-108.

66 Cf *Ekpajq* 14:293.

67 *Ershilu* 4189

68 In classical literature the traditional gesture which expressed displeasure was indicated with the characters *ewan*. See Peterson, 1979, p. 102, no. 6. K.R. McMahon (1988, p. 22) cites another expression used to signify a state of high agitation: "gesticulation with hands and feet", *zhi shou hua jiao* 指手劃腳 (see, for example, *Pai'an jingqi*, 32:566); in *JPM* (1990, 8:102-103) we find the expression *huangshoujiao* 慌手腳, "losing the control of hands and legs", in the case of alarm and terror, besides other manifestations such as pallor and perspiration, and in *Li Yu quanji*, 12:5198, 5218) "feeling the blood running cold" (*hanxin* 寒心) or "hands and legs turning to ice" (*shoujiao bingleng* 手腳冰冷); *famao senshu* is a sentence that is similar to the English "one's hair standing on its end with fear" (for instance *Lzzy*, 14:708). In the "Unofficial Story of the Forest of Scholars" (*Rulin waishi*), Guang Zhaoren's face becomes earth-coloured from fear (20:197), while Wan's face blushes and his hands are frozen from rage (23:229); Wang Hui cries when is informed that his friend has died (8:84) and the licentiate Yan blushes with shame (6:61) and insults subordinates out of anger (6:63-65). Pu Songling describes some cases of repressed anger owing to the disproportion between his and his aggressor's strength: Xiangru accumulates rage but shows himself smiling (*nu xing yu se, ji si shi bu di, lian nu wei xiao* "怒形於色, 既思勢不敵, 斂怒為笑" "rage changed the colour of his face, but he thought that he was not able to react owing to the strength of his adversary, and repressed his anger"), while Xing cannot but stamp his foot out of indignation and grief (*dunzu beifen eryi* 頓足悲憤而已 "he could only stamp his foot for anger"); the terrible shrew Jin opens her eyes widely for anger (*liezi*). (*Lzzy*, [1988] respectively *Hongyu*, 3:104, *Shi qingxu*, 3:148, *Shaonü* 7:349). Another example of losing one's self-control (*bu neng jinzhì*) is described in *JPM* (1990, 78:1132; *-cihua*, Hong Kong 1986, 78:1190) in a lively manner, when Ximen Qing is overwhelmed by the infatuation for a young lady: his soul is almost dispersed (*hunfei tianwai*), his heart is beating fast and his eyes are floating (*xintiao mudang*). On the subject of indignation, see *Honglouloumeng*, 23:269). "To shake one's sleeve" (*fuxiu*) or "to shake one's dress" (*fuyi*) became a common expression of displeasure or anger (see for instance *Xiyoubu*, "Supplement to the Journey to the West", 11:7 or *Lzzy*, 14:708). Anger is often expressed with the expression "grind the teeth" (*qiechi*), and grief or remorse "beating the breast and stamping the feet" (*chuixiong dunzu*); see for instance *Li Yu quanji*, respectively 12:5198, 5216, and 5221 (for an analogous expression. see *Jsty*, 4:47). Happiness may be expressed by opening one's eyes and mouth wide and by laughing (for instance *Li Yu quanji*, 13:5605). For the expression of joy which is also manifestation of virtue, see *Mencius*, 4, a, 27: "When joy arises how can one stop it? And when one cannot stop it, then one begins to dance with one's feet and wave one's arms without knowing it." (Translation by Lau 1970, p. 127) In "The Wondrous Discourse of the Immaculate Girl", *Sunü miaolun*, of the Ming period (van Gulik 1951, p. 137 of the Chinese part) gestures are mentioned as means of arousing a woman's interest and spurring feelings in her. The meaning of gesture, attitude and facial expression in iconography and theatre deserves specific studies in relation with emotions: from the stereotypes of masks to the omnipresence of the impenetrable smile of bodhisattvas where benevolence is mixed with a transcendent detachment from reality.

communicate feelings: "from a distance the woman sent him messages with her eyebrows, and their passion grew more intense" *Xiangyinlou bintan*, 1:2). In chapters 69 and 72 of *Hongloumeng* a very poetic expression is used to indicate the language of love: "brows come and eyes go" 眉來眼去. And again in the third story of the "Ancient and modern tales" (*Gujin xiaoshuo* [gjsx]), "Wu Shan lowered his head to throw the girl an intense look, and she in turn watched him intently with her magnificent eyes" (*Wu Shan di zhe tou jun na xiao furen, zhe xiao furen yi shuang junqiao yan qu zhe Wu Shan* 吳山低著頭睨那小婦人, 這小婦人一雙俊俏眼覷著吳山 [gjsx, 3:183]). And we find a similar case in Pu Songling: "a young girl ... was looking at Wang, sending him seductive glances filled with love; so elegant was she, and lovely of bearing that she seemed like a fairy. Wang was a man of honest and upright principles, but he was so struck by the sight of the girl that he felt lost" (*Liaozhai zhiyi* [lzzy], *Yatou*, 5:600).

Chinese literature abounds with terms expressing emotional manifestations, such as sobbing, weeping, smiling, laughing etc.⁶⁸ Special attention was paid to body language, in particular to the eyes, as in Ling Mengchu's vivid description of the student Tangqing's courtship of the daughter of a ferryman.⁶⁹

The communication of the codes of love and the language of seduction⁷⁰ is another element of extreme interest in understanding the way feelings are displayed in any society. Some idioms directly indicate body language, such as the intimacy expressed by "following closely shoulder to shoulder" (*aijian dabei* 挨肩搭背). But what is stressed here is the communication of the codes of love. This is all the more natural because the sources are literary ones, which are intrinsically vehicles of such

69 These extraordinarily beautiful pages, in the thirty-second tale of the *Pai'an jingqi* (32:566-68), describe the first time the two young people meet, their falling in love and Tangqing's courtship: "...For fear lest her father noticed, he did not dare to look directly at the girl but, from time to time, threw her furtive glances. And the more he looked at her, the more marvellous she seemed. Feelings cannot be repressed." After employing a stratagem to make the girl's father and his brother leave so that they could speak freely, Tangqing addressed her "throwing her meaningful glances. At times the young woman shyly stared at the ground, at times she proudly sustained his gaze. But when Tangqing no longer held his eyes on her and looked away, she mischievously began to whisper something, laughing softly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye." He then threw her a knotted handkerchief as a sign of love; but she pretended not to have noticed, even when the young man repeatedly drew her attention to his sign, first with a glance, then with his hands; and even when her father returned, she remained apparently indifferent, while Tangqing became more and more restless. Only at the last moment the girl "calmly stretched out a foot towards the handkerchief, pulling it in with the tip of her shoe before slowly picking it up and hiding it in her sleeve. Finally, turning towards the water, she burst out laughing. The young man, having been cast by the girl into a state of high agitation, was now full of gratitude and fuller still of passion. From that moment on, they understood each other [...]" The glance as a discreet sign of love and secret understanding frequently occurs in fiction (for instance *JPM*, 69:259, 98:1387; *Pai'an jingqi*, 26:453; *Huanxi yuanjia*, 10:172; *Tanhua bao*, 10:4; *Jiandeng xinhu*, 2:55). But a look may express also warning (as in *Hongloumeng*, 22:252), anger (*JPM*, 75:1045), desire (*JPM*, 3:51-53, 59:776, 78:1133). It is worth noting that one of the loftiest ways to express one's love was sending and exchanging poems, as well as one's emotion at a friend's departure

70 See my article in *Ming Qing yanjiu* 1996, pp. 157-232.

language.

Particular attention is always given to the language of gesture, and above all of the eyes: "the two faces scrutinised each other, while their gazes crossed; the girl gave a brief, spontaneous smile" (兩面對觀 四目相視 那女子不覺微微而笑).⁷¹ In this passage the language of seduction consists of a dialogue of looks and smiles. The pages of extraordinary beauty that follow are from the thirty-second story in the collection "Beating the Table in Astonishment" by Ling Mengchu (1580-1644); they describe very vividly the meeting of the student Tangqing with the daughter of a boatman, her being courted by Tangqing, and how the two young people fall in love:

[...]He did not dare look directly at the girl for fear her father would notice, but from time to time he shot her a furtive glance. And the more he looked at her, the more wonderful she appeared. Feelings cannot be suppressed.

After devising a pretext to send the boatgirl's father and brother away from the bridge so he could talk to her freely, Tangqing addressed her,

giving her meaningful glances. The girl sometimes shyly lowered her gaze, at other times proudly met the challenge. But when Tangqing ceased looking at her, turning his eyes elsewhere, she began mischievously to whisper something, laughing softly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

But while it is obvious that for both cultures sight and the glance assume primary importance in love-codes, and thus in falling in love and seduction, the presuppositions are different, possibly due in fact to the Platonic imprint on Western civilisation. Still on the subject of visual language, let me add that the love message can be conveyed not only by smiles and glances, but also by languishing or sad expressions, such as found in the typical expression "frowning brows" (*pin* 顰 or *cu* 蹙). Such facial expressions are the canonical aspects of a particular type of beauty. We'll come back to this subject in the last part of this essay, when we refer to Xi Shi. In the following passage we find an incident which may happen in everyday life: "the next day he saw the woman, her long eyebrows tightly knitted, almost with tears in her eyes, separated from the young scholar; from the boat she fixed her gaze, and from afar they could not help but communicate to each other the feeling of regret and sorrow" 明日見女，則雙蛾緊鎖，秋波微汪，與生隔舟凝睇，遙相寄恨而已。

71 *Xshy* 16:6

(*Xiangyinlou bintan*, 1:3). In *Hongloumeng*, apart from Daiyu, also the actress Lingguan's eyebrows are frowning like "mountains in spring" and "autumn waters" (眉蹙春山, 眼顰秋水). We may point out that Chinese authors appreciate the expressiveness of eyebrows much more than Western counterparts do, in the description of their appearance as well as in reading them as an emotional sign.

In another passage, the exchange of glances is followed and supported by another method of seduction, the sending of love poems: "the girl ... secretly eyed the elegance of the good-looking young scholar; they exchanged long gazes and then he, ... unable to repress his feelings, wrote a poem on a round fan" 女...窺生容顏韶秀, 相視目成者久之, 生...情不自禁, 乃題一詩於團扇之上. (*Qingshi* 18:550).

Indifference to the seductive language of beauty: Tripitaka and Wu Song

The seductive message, seen as part of a complex language of the body, is generally accepted by the receiver of the message; however, there are exceptions. Here I will quote two examples of unsuccessful seductions, the first of the monk Tripitaka by an evil spirit, and the second of Wu Song by Golden Lotus (Pan Jinlian). In these cases, the woman's beauty goes unnoticed because the message is not understood or/and not accepted. Although exceptional and extreme, this epilogue belongs in fact to the orthodox cosmological dualism of the two opposites which complement each other: active *yang*-self-cultivating male and passive *yin*-object-of-desire female.

Warnings of the dangers of female charms appear frequently in epic tales and short stories, whether romantic or erotic. Here we often see the theme of the destructive role beauty has upon the State and even upon human life, and indeed some scholars have identified a constant "prototype" in female seduction.⁷² Thus, as far back as in *Zuozhuan*, woman's unlimited power is mentioned; in "Historical memoirs" Chonger is criticised for her fondness for her own allure; in *Hanshu* the immoderate love of this appeal is condemned, and in *Sanguozhi* there is condemnation of its excesses. One example of this misogynist concept is *Xiyouji* 西遊記, "The Journey to the West". Here, as in other narrative works of the Late Empire, the

72 For example *Sui Tang yanyi* 隋唐演義 (Romance of the Sui and the Tang), [about 1675, ed. Sixuecaotang published in Suzhou 1695] repr. Shanghai, Shanghai guji, 1983, 35:262; 71:549; 72:556; 81:623. Cf. Robert Hegel, "Sui Tang yen-i": *The Sources and Narrative Techniques of a Traditional Chinese Novel*, Ph.D. Columbia Univ., 1973, p. 204. Hong Pian 洪楩, *Qingpingshantang huaben* 清平山堂話本 (*Liushi jia xiaoshuo* 六十家小說) (1550), repr. Beijing, Wenxue guji, 1955 [or Shanghai, Gudian wenxue, 1957], 17:329-31 [206-7], 18:339-41 [212-14], 14:247-69 [154-68], *Jsty*, 28:335-36 (445), 38:681 (573), *Gujin xiaoshuo* [Gjxs], 3:175-77 (62-63), *Erke paian jingqi* [Ekpajq], 29:612-26, *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閑話 (Casual Talks Under the Bean Arbour), 2:12-20

ancient idea of the "art of the bedroom" as a means of self-education is reduced to a sole preoccupation with preserving the male seed, and female seduction is therefore seen as a piece of sorcery to tempt a man and make him disperse the precious treasure that he is jealously and avariciously guarding. But, even in this case, the complexity of seduction emerges in the psychological reflections attributed by the writer to the women or enchantresses who are attacking the man's chastity.

We shall take two successive episodes in chapters 54 and 55 of the 100-chapter edition,⁷³ which ironically deal with the misadventures of Tripitaka and his companions in the imaginary Kingdom of the Women of Western Liangs, and the kidnapping of Tripitaka by an evil female spirit (*nüguai* 女怪). In the first episode, it is the Queen who tries to detain Tripitaka and make him her husband and king of the Western Liangs, and it is only thanks to the trickery of Sun Wukong the Monkey that the pilgrims manage to escape from this obstacle to their journey and to the Master's chastity.

The Queen's attempts at seduction rely mainly on the power of attraction of wealth and honours. The text mentions at least two modes of expression used by the Queen – tone of voice and gestures. It would not have been the normal thing for a woman to go so far as to rest her shoulders on the chest or side of her fiancé.

When the Queen heard these words, she leaned her fragrant shoulders against Tripitaka's side, and brought her peachlike cheeks close to his face; then, opening her sweet-scented mouth, she whispered to him: ...⁷⁴

The Queen's unusual behavior add a more human dimension to the figure of a woman who, within the overall framework of the book, basically represents one of the many obstacles and dangers facing the pilgrims. But it also signals an internal change occurring within the heroine, the awakening and assertion of a passion:

At these words, the Queen lifted the pearl curtains, climbed down from the royal bed, and opening her cherry blossom mouth, showed her sparkling teeth and asked in a seductive voice (露銀齒笑盈盈 嬌聲問曰): "You have met the Royal Prince. What did he say?"⁷⁵

Further on there is a stronger assault on the holy monk by another young woman, who in fact is an evil spirit. The temptation this time comes from an

73 Wu Cheng'en, *Xiyouji* (Shidetang ed.), repr. Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1972

74 Wu Cheng'en, op. cit., 54:757, cf. also 54:760-61

75 Ibid 54:755

enchantress who becomes infatuated with Tripitaka and tries to seduce and possess him. Becoming infatuated with the monk after seeing him in the Kingdom of Women, she uses her magic powers to carry him away, and hides him in the isolation of her enchanted lair. There she begins to woo him, but while she is attempting to persuade him, the Monkey arrives and engages her in a furious duel at the mouth of the cave. She wins the fight and returns to her subterranean palace to resume her attempts at seduction using words, body language, and even the furnishings in her bedroom:

The enchantress presented herself to him in the most bewitching and seductive manner (那女怪弄出十分 嬌媚之態, ... Truly a good monk!

His eyes do not see immodest images,
his ears do not hear voluptuous sounds.

He considers worthless the silky splendour of her beautiful face,
dust and ashes the pearly glow of feminine splendour.

Throughout his life he has loved only the search for the true faith,
and has not moved so much as half a step from his Law of Buddha.

How could he nurse affection and love for jades and perfumes,
once he has known the true nature of Buddha?

This woman provokes him, all agitated as she is with amorous desires without limit (活潑潑春意無邊);

the monk, indifferent and cold, is fully engaged with the secrets of Meditation.

She seems soft jade and warm perfume,

He seems a dry trunk or dead ash.

She pulls back the covers of the nuptial bed, as her passion grows;

he draws his habit tightly closed, incorruptible in his purity.

She would satisfy her passion, breast against breast, thighs entwined;

he would meditate, facing the wall, and take refuge in the mountains to meet Bodhidharma.

The woman undresses, to reveal her delicate and fragrant skin;

the monk Tang fastens his cloak, to hide the coarseness of his skin.

...

The two talked and talked like this until late into the night, but the monk Tang was not tempted in the least. Even though the woman drew him to her and would not let him go, he steadfastly resisted her offers.⁷⁶

76 Wu Cheng'en, op.cit., 55:768

Even more ritualistic is the confrontation drawn in the novel "Water Margin" (*Shuihuzhuan*), between one of the most famous female characters, Golden Lotus, and Wu Song, two characters who would be further developed in *JinPingMei*. This contest is presented for the first time in the episode of the "Water Margin": Wu Song meets Golden Lotus in his brother's home. In the "Water Margin", the young woman is attracted specifically by the pride, virility, and strength of her brother-in-law, which she compares with her husband's skinniness. This is how the two males differed in the eyes of a woman:

Listen carefully, reader: Wu Da and Wu Song were two true brothers born to the same mother. But the second brother was eight feet tall, handsome to look at, and above all possessed of incredible strength; otherwise how could he have defeated that tiger? The older brother on the other hand was less than five feet tall, his face was ugly and his appearance laughable.⁷⁷

Golden Lotus' inclination is also briefly mentioned - she is unhappy with her husband's physique and general appearance; there is nothing about him that she likes:

But nothing about him was pleasing to Golden Lotus, his lack of height, the vulgarity of his behavior, nothing that would make him amiable, *and so since the beginning she was ready to find herself a lover.*⁷⁸

On the contrary, looking at Wu Song's image, his strength and physical appearance combined with the reputation as a hero that he acquired from a fight with a tiger, add up to an irresistible fascination in the eyes of Golden Lotus. The comparison with her husband's slight form only serves to heighten her desire, which shows itself in repeated references to their marriage. Finally, one cold winter's day she decided to try a direct approach: "Today" she said to herself, "I really want to seduce him; and I don't think he will resist me." 我今日著實療鬥他一療鬥不信他不動情

And after offering him a drink,

Revealing a glimpse of the whiteness and softness of her breast, she partly loosed her soft chignon; then she said with an inviting smile: "I've heard tell that you keep a singer in the Eastern district. Is it true?" "You must not listen to that kind of gossip" replied he. "I am certainly not that kind of person!" [...] Golden Lotus poured him another three or four cups of wine,

77 *Shuihuzhuan*, 24:266

78 *Shuihuzhuan*, 24:266-67. The italics are mine

and gulped down as many herself. Spurred on by a passion which had become overwhelming under the wine's influence, she did nothing to control herself, but rather was in the mood to speak even more freely. Wu Song, who by this time had become eighty percent aware of the situation, bowed his head. The young woman stood up to get some more wine and warm it, while Wu Song was stoking the fire in the brazier. When she returned, she was holding the jug of hot wine in one hand, and with the other she pinched her brother-in-law's shoulders. "Is this the only garment you wear at this time of year?" she asked him. "Don't you feel cold?" Wu Song, who was extremely embarrassed, did not reply. But she, seeing that he was not responding, took the poker from his hands and whispered to him: "I see you don't know how to stir up the fire. I'll do for you: you will see how hot you will be, as hot as the brazier .." By this time Wu Song was on the point of losing his patience, and limited himself to remaining silent; Golden Lotus however was burning with desire and had not noticed his anger. Laying down the poker, she poured some wine, drank a mouthful and then offered the remainder to Wu Song: "If you have any feeling for me" she said to him, "drink the wine that is left." But Wu Song snatched the cup and poured its contents onto the floor: "Sister-in-law, have you no shame at all!" he shouted at her, and gave her such a push that it almost caused her to fall. "I am a man who walks with his head held high, not like those pigs and dogs without principles who undermine public morality!" ⁷⁹

The choice he makes is to put an end to his passive behavior – bowing his head, avoiding her eyes, remaining silent – and to give vent to anger and indignation instead.

Paragons of beauty and the attributes of attraction

In the same chapter of *JinPingMei*, the figure of another man's handsome, Ximen Qing, is also described:

On his head he wears a tasseled hat, gold openwork hairpins, and a jade bracelet inlaid with gold; on his long torso, a green silk jacket; on his feet, fine-soled imperial shoes, and pure cotton stockings; on his trouser legs, jet drawnwork kneepads. In his hand he sports a gold-flecked Sichuan fan, enhancing a face as handsome as the young scholar Zhang's, a countenance

79 *Shuihuzhuan*, 24:271-72; cf. *JPM*, 2:29-30, *JPM cibua*, 1:15

as good-looking as Pan An's. A passionate man of great elegance, very pleasant to her eyes, while beneath the screen she tips a wink at him.⁸⁰

頭上戴著纓子帽兒，金鈴瓏簪兒，金井玉欄桿圈兒；長腰才，身穿綠羅褶兒；腳下細結底陳橋鞋兒，清水布襪兒；手裡搖著灑金川扇兒，越顯出張生般龐兒，潘安的貌兒。可意的人兒，風風流流從簾子下丟與個眼色兒。

The paragons of male beauty are the young scholar Zhang, of the "Western Chamber" myth, and Pan An, legendary poet famous for his success in love affairs – he was so handsome that when he passed in the streets, the women of Luoyang expressed their appreciation by throwing fruit at him – identified with Pan Yue 潘岳 (247-300). The two literary allusions to the scholar Zhang and to the poet Pan should not be overlooked. Zhang is the main character of a transgressive love affair (outside of matrimony), and Pan is the epitome of the handsome man. Most of their charm seems to be due to clothing and ornaments (hat, hairpins, bracelet, jacket, shoes, stockings, fan). But, if we go through carefully, we discover several sensual references. His long torso (長腰才) clothed by the green silk jacket is the most explicit description, and the reaction of Golden Lotus is also clear, when she peeps at Ximen Qing from beneath the screen. Last but not the least, he is attractive for his behavior and personality, because he comes across as a romantic and elegant man, a *fengliu*.

Ximen Qing was likewise struck by the beauty of Golden Lotus:

Her luxuriant shiny black hair, overflowing like fragrant clouds, is fastened on each side by small pins, and by a pair of combs with a cleverly fashioned flower, at the back. Difficult to be described are her willow-leaf eyebrows, decorated by two peach flowers. Her jade pendants are remarkable, but priceless is the precious jade of her uncovered bosom. She wears a blue gown bound with a long silk-embroidered sash, and keeps a fragrant handkerchief in her sleeve, and a tiny satchel of perfumes. Beneath her delicate throat, a many-buttoned corsage conceals her breast. Looking downward, her small feet are closed in embroidered pointed shoes, shaped like crows among mountain clouds. Thus, she seems to walk upon a fragrant dust, on her high heels by white silk. Her red silken trousers are decorated with birds and flowers and, either when she seats or moves, the wind puffs out her skirts and undergarments. A perfume as delicious as that of orchids and musk comes from her moth, and her cherry lips smile like flowers. Whoever sees her loses his spirit at the sight, and almost dies beside himself with desire.⁸¹

80 *JPM*, 2:35, see also Roy's translation (1993, p. 49)

頭上戴著黑油油頭髮鬅髻，一逕裡靚出香雲，週圍小簪兒齊插。斜戴一朵並頭花，排草梳兒後押。難描劃，柳葉眉襯著兩朵桃花。玲瓏墜兒最堪誇，露來酥玉胸無價。毛青布大袖衫兒，又短襖湘裙碾絹紗。通花汗巾兒袖口兒邊搭刺。香袋兒身邊低掛。抹胸兒重重紐扣香喉下。往下看尖翹金蓮小腳，雲頭巧緝山鴉。鞋兒白綾高底，步香塵偏襯登踏。紅紗膝褲扣鶯花，行坐處風吹裙袴。口兒裡常噴出異香蘭麝，櫻桃口笑臉生花。人見了魂飛魄喪，賣弄殺俏冤家。

In the above passage we can see the contrast between the canons for masculine and feminine beauties: they appear clearly distinguished. I would say that the beauty of the effeminate male exalted in some late Imperial literature cannot be considered the only paragon of gender-based beauty in Ming and Qing periods.

It is nonetheless worthwhile noting a tendency towards a softening of these differences which finds its expression in the ideal of the *bangchen* 幫襯⁸² "pleasantness, charm", and in the *qingzhong* 情重, a "passionate man" of the late Ming dynasty. The new "hero" – but this is not the case with Ximen Qing – characterized by a kind and noble spirit, is in many ways similar to *shiqu de ren* 識趣的人, "sensitive person" (that is, those who know how to behave in a delicate situation); he stands out because of his kindness and highmindedness,⁸³ much richer qualities than those of the *fengliu* in its conventional acceptance. He is not just elegant and an admirer of female beauty: the new hero, like Baoyu in the "Dream of the Red Chamber", arouses interest in the other sex because he is passionate, sensitive to women's problems, gentle and kind; he often possesses female traits in his character and appearance (*meiren* 美人), and can be seen in some previous representations of Bodhisattvas and Buddha with a feminine face.

Moreover, this noble spirit is not exclusive to scholars and aristocrats of good family, but potentially belongs to any man, regardless of his origin or profession, like the oil merchant in the story by Feng Menglong. These new values creep their way into even the traditional virtues of the errant knights, their sense of justice and solidarity (*yi* 義): chapter four of "History of Love" is devoted to stories that immortalise the "knights of love compassion", *qingxia* 情俠. Baoyu is the Qing period hero who represents the highest expression of these values, with his feminine qualities, like the spring-flower freshness of his face (色如春曉之花。。。面若春花), the shape of his brows as if painted (眉如墨畫), or the red of his lips that look colored with rouge (唇若施脂).⁸⁴ The *Hongloumeng* emphasizes the beauty of the eyes and the vermillion

81 JPM, 2:35-36.

82 Cf. for instance *Jsty*, 32:486

83 For example *Ty*, 32:486. For the hero of another work "The Happy Match" (*Haoqiu zhuan*), see R. Hessney 1985, pp. 223-25.

84 Cf. *Hongloumeng*, chapters 3 and 15. For the main character of another romance, "The Fortunate Union" (*Haoqiu zhuan*), see R. Hessney 1985, pp. 223-25

of the lips of other young men, like the actor Jiang Yuhan and Qin Zhong, while in *JinPingMei* the feminine attractiveness of a boy are presented with his clear and delicate face, "delicate brows and charming eyes" (眉清目秀).⁸⁵ For the alienation and weakening of the figure of the male heroes and on the exchange of roles between men and women in several Qing novels, M. Epstein's analysis (1992) is the most useful and convincing.

However, another example, in Chapter 30 of *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史, ending with an actors' contest, demonstrates the existence of different possible models of beauty. The chapter ironically deals with a "lover of handsome youths", where Du Shenqing's 杜慎卿 friend describes a "male beauty", which presents clear differences from a "female beauty":

He is handsome and elegant, but not in any feminine way -- his is true masculine beauty. It always irritates me to hear people praise a handsome man by declaring he looks like a woman. How ridiculous! Anyone who likes feminine beauty can look at women. But there is a masculine beauty too, which is seldom recognised.⁸⁶

In fact, this "handsome young man" was a disappointing surprise for Du, because he "had a dark, greasy face, bushy eyebrows, a big nose and thick beard, and looked over fifty".⁸⁷ Contrasted with that "beauty" later we find the description of a male's "feminine beauty", where men emulated women in order to appear sexually desirable: "He was a beautiful boy, better-looking even than Du's concubine."

Another unusual beauty contest among males is ironically reported in Li Yu's story "The Hall of the Prize Winners". The special contest was a modified literary examination, and was organised by the local magistrate to find proper bachelors endowed with both talent and beauty for the two splendid twin sisters that we have already mentioned. Two of the four winners had to be bachelors, and the prize would have been marriage with the beautiful girls. Therefore, in the first part of the examinations the candidates had to declare their marital status, and those who passed it, in the second test, had to face an interview as well to ascertain their looks. The selection therefore was based not only on their literary ability, but also on their appearance, judged according to the feminine standard of the *meiren*. For this quali-

84 Cf. *Honglounmeng*, chapters 3 and 15. For the main character of another romance, "The Fortunate Union" (*Haoqiu zhuan*), see R. Hessney 1985, pp. 223-25

85 See respectively chapters 93 (唇若塗朱) and 7 (眉清目秀, 粉面朱唇) of *Honglounmeng* and chapter 1 of *JPM* (眉清目秀).

86 *Rulin waishi*, 30:297. English translation by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, 1957, p.328.

87 *Rulin waishi*, 30:298. English translation by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, 1957, p.330.

ty, the term *biaozhi* (標致) is used, which usually means a woman's prettiness. And in fact, Li Yu explains that the candidates, considering it important for the judgment, used cosmetics and moved twisting their waist in a feminine way (*tuzhimofen niuniunienie* 涂脂抹粉扭扭捏捏). We wonder now if this posture was more due to the fact that the judge was a male, or to the accepted aesthetic standard of beauty of the times.⁸⁸

The elements of erotic attraction have not always followed the same channels as in the West or used the codes best known to us,⁸⁹ and in this case too it is extremely valuable to look to literary sources in order to understand them. By reading fictional works of the period, we can see that the codes of erotic attraction are of various kinds. The messages are not only verbal, but may be communicated through dress, gestures, and behavior. Unquestionably, the love object is transformed into an erotic symbol through descriptions of some physical characteristics, the frequency of these descriptions varying according to the author and the type of novel in question. However, they are often integrated into and enhanced by other details that are not strictly physical – clothing, for example – as well as a series of transformations and metaphors. We know that feet were in late Imperial China a fetishist symbol of the female genitals. Think of the frequent references to tiny feet and feminine shoes, which come close to a sort of fetishism. Yet, as Dorothy Ko points out, the very recurrence of the theme of footbinding, even in the feminine literature of the time, demonstrates the pride and satisfaction of gentrywomen who celebrated their own dignity, identity and distinction through these symbols.

Recently Wu Hung⁹⁰ has studied and compared pictorial examples and systematic accounts of *meiren*, like Wei Yong's 衛泳 (17th century) "Delight in Adornments" (*Yuerong bian* 悅容編) and Xu Zhen's 徐震 (fl.1659-1711) "Manual of Beauties" (*Meiren pu* 美人譜). He writes that the various criteria for the qualification of "beauty" not only include personal attributes like facial and bodily features,

88 Li Yu, *Tuojinlou*, Li Yu *quanji*, 9:45-46

89 In traditional China the differentiation between male and female hairstyles responded to social requirements and was erotically oriented, covering both the private and the public sphere. It would not be difficult for Madam Yan to appear as a male and take part in examination trials, once she had obtained the agreement of her husband and changed her clothes, taking a man's hat and in particular putting on a man's boots and stuffing with cotton the gaps left empty by her tiny feet (*Lzzy*, *Yanshi*, 6:766-69 [10:520-21]. Compare with the opposite phenomenon when actors impersonate female figures and keep up the female role even in everyday life. On women assuming masculine clothes and hairstyles and the consequent violation of social distinctions relating to sex, see Judith Zeitlin 1993, pp. 116-25. For a more general reflection of the changes in the gender roles at the end of the Ming dynasty, see Dorothy Ko, 1994

90 Wu Hung, "Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the 'Dream of the Red Chamber'", in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 306-65. In his acute analysis the author discovers the exotic eroticism with which in the Qing court feminine images and spaces were represented re-creating the courtesan culture of the South.

as well as age, gesture and expression, clothes, ornaments and makeup, but environmental elements like dwelling, interior decoration, activities and even maid-servants.⁹¹ In fact, physical description seems the simplest and most standardized: "Wei Yong said not a single word about her individual character and physique. When her body and face become subjects of consideration, they dissolve into the fragments of a blazon: star-bright eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, cloud-like hair, and snow-white bosom. The question of her personal nature may indeed be irrelevant: a beauty is by definition idealized and must therefore surpass individuation. [...] a beauty is essentially the *sum* of all the visible forms one expects to find in her place ..."⁹²

As Howard Levy, a pioneering scholar of Chinese psychological history, insightfully points out, "Confucian-oriented writers must have observed a sort of 'gentlemen's agreement' on what one should or should not include when depicting feminine charms [...] to rely on formula-type expressions. These expressions could usually be traced back to the *Book of Odes* or to other early and revered texts, but they told us little if anything out of the particular person who was being discussed. [...] There was no specific mention or allusion to nose, breasts, thighs, or private parts. Instead the courtesan was praised as a woman of lovely bones who emitted perfumed fragrance, a lady skilled in adornment who glittered like a willow under the spring moon and shimmered like a lotus emerging from the waters."⁹³ The standard physical qualities listed by Xu Zhen are: cicada forehead 螭首, apricot lips 杏唇, bright teeth like pumpkin's seeds 犀齒, creamy breasts 酥乳, eyebrows dark like far-away mountains 遠山眉, glances like autumn waves 秋波, lotus-petal face 芙蓉臉, cloud hair 雲髮, feet like bamboo shoots carved in jade 玉筍, white grass-shoots fingers 萸指, willow waist 楊柳腰, steps like walking on lotus 步步蓮, neither fat nor thin 不肥不瘦, appropriate height 長短適宜. These appear the scattered attributes of an ideal abstract beauty. Among the adornments, Xu Zhen lists skirt, shirt, shoes, hairpins, belt, etc.⁹⁴ The same attributes can be found in other references to typical beauties, like in the "Small Guide of the Ten Brows Song" (*Shimeiyao xiaoyin* 十眉謠

91 For instance we can read: "A beauty cannot be without maids, like a flower cannot be without leaves" 美人不可無婢. 猶花不可無葉 (*Yuerong bian*, in *Xiangyan congshu* 香艷叢書, 一集, repr. Beijing, Renmin wenzue, 1992, p.70). See for example the description of Ling Mengchu, in *Paian jingqi* [Paij], 10:160. On the growing importance of literary talent for the women of the upper strata, see Dorothy Ko, 1994, pp. 14-15, 51-53, 64-65, 210-11, 237-44. On the importance of the topoi or the "natural dwelling places" to describe an individual on the basis of the *ganlei* 感類 principle, "responding according to the categorical correlation", see Stephen Goldberg, "Figures of Identity. Topoi and Gendered Subject in Chinese Art", in R. Ames with T. Kasulis and W. Dissanayake, *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, New York, SUNY, 1998, pp. 33-58.

92 Wu Hung, 1997, pp. 325-26

93 Levy Howard, tr., *A Feast of Mist and Flowers. The Gay Quarters of Nanking at the End of the Ming*, Revised Illustrations by Kazuko Ishibashi, Yokohama, Mimio-graphed, 1966, 2nd ed. 1967, pp. 7-8

94 Meiren pu, in *Xiangyan congshu*, p. 11

小引),⁹⁵ dedicated to seductive eyebrows in history.

At the very beginning of the *JinPingMei* the scarlet lips and bright teeth (朱唇皓齒), the flashing of eyes and dallying with the sleeve (掩袖回眸), the silken hose and the tiny feet (羅襪一彎, 金蓮三寸) are mentioned. And in the *Honglouloumeng* (chapters 8 and 63) a beautiful face is described as "a face like a silver plate with eyes like water apricot" (臉若銀盤, 眼如水杏) or "whiter than the full moon with eyes clearer than autumn waters" (面如滿月猶白, 眼如秋水還清). The moon is in fact a privileged image for a beautiful face, as the new moon summons up an image of the brows. In many novels the face is also compared to the image of peach flowers 桃花. Phoenix (Xifeng) had phoenix eyes (丹鳳眼) and willow-leaf eyebrows (柳葉眉).⁹⁶ We know that Golden Lotus, Wang Liu'er and the widow Lin are short 五短身材 while Meng Yulou is slender (長條身材). Another girl, Zhen Shiyin's servant Jiaoxing, is described as not so beautiful (無十分姿色), but nonetheless attractive (有動人之處) for her elegance and bright eyes (儀容不俗, 眉目清明).

The highly symbolised description of the beauty's body has a long, sophisticated tradition in China, with authoritative examples like Cao Zhi's 曹植 poem on beauty 美女篇, where he describes it resorting to the image of bright pearls linked to beautiful jades, 明珠交美玉. James Legge notices that in the "Classic of Odes" the Chinese beauty was described with fingers like young white grass 荑指, skin like congealed ointment 凝脂, neck like the tree-grub 蟪蛄, teeth like melon-seeds 瓠犀, forehead like that of cicada 螭首, eyebrows like [the antennae of] silkworm moth 蛾眉, black hair like clouds 鬢髮如雲.⁹⁷ The painted faces are just as indeterminate and standardised. This lack of individualisation, however, can be understood, according to Akiyama Terukazu, as a device to allow the viewer to read herself or himself into the situation and to facilitate her or his identification with the image.⁹⁸ Furthermore, descriptions of appearance are much more formalized and less realistic than Western descriptions. In Chinese literature stereotypes are easier to revert to, due to the availability of chengyu and other idiomatic expressions, not to mention the play of correspondences and oppositions in stylised rigour and morpheme parallelism. Eifring astutely compares this formalism to poems written for celebrations.⁹⁹

Ming and Qing writers always depict beauties just like the classical beauties of Xi Shi and Wang Qiang¹⁰⁰ are described, with such expressions as "to be so beau-

95 *Shimeiyao xiaoyin*, in *Xiangyan congshu*, p. 25. See also the following work.

96 Cf. the quoted essay by H. Eifring.

97 See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes*, IV, The She King, repr. Taipei, Southern Materials Center, 1985, Prolegomena, p. 144.

98 Cf. Akiyama Terukazu, *Heian jidai sezokuga no kenkyū* (Secular Painting in Early Medieval Japan), Tokyo, 1964.

99 H. Eifring 1999, p. 116.

tiful that the moon hides its face and the flowers blush out of shame at the sight of her" 閉月羞花, or as having "cherry lips and a soft waistline" 櫻唇柳腰, or again the beauty is so dazzling that she "makes the fish sink and wild geese fall" 沉魚落雁. The writers willingly adopt such stereotypes and rarely portray the individual features of these females.

Indeed Xi Shi, the classic model of female beauty, was famous for her ability to seduce using a skilful slant of the eyebrows and simulation of feelings: 棒心而顰.¹⁰¹ Thus, frowning (*pin* 顰) to express feelings of sorrow or anxiety became a pattern for women's skill in controlling their facial expressions. In a passage from *Zhuangzi*, mention is made to a neighbour of Xi Shi, a woman of great ugliness who, desirous of imitating such fascinating manners, expressed her languidness by pressing her bosom and frowning, and this attitude became proverbial of the learning of techniques of female seduction and the use thereof – often in a grotesque fashion. Thus, in the foreword to "New songs of the Jade Terrace" (*Yutai xinyong* 玉台新詠) by Xu Ling 徐陵, we learn of another beauty's ability to frown slightly (*weipin* 微顰) and to smile (*qiaoxiao* 巧笑), Donglin 東鄰. We are also told of the fact that Xi Shi had been taught how to seduce the king of Wu before being sent to him as a gift.¹⁰² Lin Daiyu of *Hongloumeng* is the beauty whose frown emulates Xi Shi.

The myth of Xi Shi has been examined by the Japanese scholar Yajima Mitsuko, and is extremely relevant as a paragon of beauty and charm. She is an example of a woman who is famous for her beauty, as opposed to Momu, a woman of proverbial ugliness. The first fundamental characterization of Xi Shi, is in fact that of the female beauty *par excellence*, which distinguishes her from the majority of other women. This is how she is represented in the earliest sources (from *Guanzi* to *Zhuangzi*, from *Mencius* to the *Huinanzi*), often coupled with Mao Qiang. Insisting on the difference that separates her from the others, *Chuci* introduces a fresh ele-

100 Xi Shi, also called Xizi, lived in the state of Yue in the 5th century B.C.. The traditional story reports that she was given by the king of Yue as a concubine to the king of Wu, from which she was to come back soon after, having destroyed with her charms the king and his realm. Wang Qiang was sent by Yuandi of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Xiongnu as a spouse. These two beautiful women's names have been used ever since as synonym of beauty.

101 Yajima Mitsuko; 矢島美都子 *Sei Shi imeiji no hensan - bijo kara initsu sekai no iro dori made*; 西施のイメージの變遷 – 一人から隱逸世界の色どりまで (evolution of the images of Xi Shi - from the beautiful woman to the hermitage trick); *Ochanomizu joshi daigaku Chūgoku bungakkaibō*; 7, 1988; 39-61 The *Zhuangzi* tells the story of an ugly woman who tried to imitate the famous beauty Xi Shi's manners, and frowned in order to express her bad feeling. This gesture became proverbial for the feminine technics of seduction. Cf. also the entry *pengxin* 棒心 in *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典, 6, p. 636 and *Zhongwen dacidian* 中文大詞典, p. 5830

102 A further new aspect that emerges during this period is that of her social ascent, from humble and wretched conditions as a girl who washed clothes by the riverside (*huansha* 浣紗) to becoming the emperor's favourite. Superimposed on this image in the Tang era was another image, of popular origin, of the "girl by the riverside", and thus the search for an isolated and tranquil place, after the fall of the state of Wu and her return to Yue. This process was completed in Li Bai and Wang Wei who associate these images with the figure of the fisherman.. Cf. Yajima Mitsuko, 1988, pp. 39-61.

ment – the envy and gossip of the uglier women – and emphasizes the fact that, as well as being beautiful, Xi Shi is also intelligent and wise. In a number of rhapsodic *fu* compositions of the Han era, emphasis was laid on the Xi Shi's beauty and intelligence, as on her misfortune.

A new and important element was added during the period of the Three Kingdoms, when the myth of Xi Shi was compared to Nanwei 南威 [instead of to Mao Qiang], the beautiful woman who caused the downfall of her state. In "the ruin of Yue" (*Yue jue shu* 越絕書), the image of Xi Shi is likened to that of Nanwei. It is not clear whether the state of Wu collapsed because of Xi Shi, nor whether she intended to cause it to collapse, although it is a fact that she began to take on the character of the seductive and dangerous beauty. Furthermore, the poet Cao Zhi displays her seductive ability through the expressions of her face and in particular her smile (using the old term *qiaoxiao*).

In any case, the difference between the Western and Chinese traditions becomes apparent when we compare the nude in the history of art in both traditions. As Mark Elvin has perceptively observed, the ideals of female beauty in China are concentrated on the surface (perfume, makeup, hairdo), on artificial devices (the arch of the eyebrows and the deformation of the feet), on the extremities (fingers and feet) and on clothing, which express social and to some extent moral status.¹⁰³ These elements are nonetheless highly erotic in nature. On the other hand, though, even women, especially the most cultivated, seem to be very conscious of the value of their appearance and of their power of seduction, not only for the exterior beauty, but above all as an expression of inner qualities and distinction. Among the documents of the time, the most moving are the lines written by the sixteen-year-old Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞 (1616-1632), on the eve of her wedding, that a premature death would not allow her to celebrate. Here she expressed her fascination with the enchantment of her body in a series of vivid and refined poems.¹⁰⁴

Arbitrary though the selection may be, if we take *JinPingMei* and the "Dream of the Red Chamber" as examples of the erotic and the "sentimental" novel respectively, in the former, as expected, most references are to purely physical aspects – the whiteness of the skin, the magnificence of the eyes and curve of the eyebrows, the beauty of her face, the blackness of her hair, the daintiness of her fingers, the harmony of her body and the slenderness of her waist, the sound of her voice, the attraction of her tiny feet.

References to the erogenous zones are less frequent.¹⁰⁵ At times in *JinPing-*

103 M. Elvin 1989, p. 285. Elvin's essay (pp. 266-349) is most interesting on the concept of body and on its relationship to the concept of mind in contemporary and modern China. Cf. also Eberhard 1971, pp. 271-72.

104 Cf. above all Dorothy Ko 1994, pp. 166-71

Mei the breasts or thighs are mentioned (as when Ximen meets Golden Lotus for the first time, and when he glimpses the shape of Ping'er's legs through the transparency of her dress in the sunlight).¹⁰⁶

This does not mean however that more "artificial" decorative elements such as dress are neglected: perfumes, garments, belt and shoes, necklaces, bracelets and earrings, lipsticks, foundations and face powder are also mentioned. Details of clothing and sometimes taste in dress, which we notice indirectly through the opinions of others, contribute to the overall image of the figure and personality of the female characters. Such details passed also into the traditional art of woodblock prints, as we can see in the Suzhou New Year Print, representing three beauties. Nor can the almost obsessive insistence on the deformation of the feet and the tiny feminine shoes¹⁰⁷, be underestimated; they, and the hairstyle, form part of the "artificial nature". In fact, in almost all the passages where female beauty is described, these other details appear alongside the information about physical appearance. Clothing plays a relatively important role in enhancing attraction and beauty: "and then a girl aged thirteen or fourteen appeared, with her hair done up in two *chignons* on her head like horns, wearing a short tight-sleeved jacket, graceful like coloured clouds ... Soon afterwards, Liaonu came in from outside, wearing a red dress and a green bamboo headpiece, with fallen flowers on her whole body" (*Ersbilu* 4187-88).

But there is another, third level of female representation where the abstraction and metaphorical elements are even more pronounced. "Her bearing seems like that of Guanyin of the moon reflected in the water" are the poetic lines that follow on from a description of the elegance of the wife of He, a young official: "lovelier than a flower because she is a flower that speaks; lovelier than jade because she is a jade that smells sweet."¹⁰⁸

The three descriptive levels – the physical, the "artificial" and the abstract/metaphorical – are also found in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, though the proportion is reversed. Here, female beauty is more ethereal, and so is present-

105 See for example the following passages in JPM: 2:36, 7:88, 37:481, 59:776, 68:932, 77:1103, 78:1132. Cf. also W. Eberhard ("What is Beautiful in a Chinese Woman") 1971, p. 295

106 See JPM 2:35-36 and 27:350 respectively. Mention is also made of female reactions to the erection of the male organ.

107 On footbinding fetishism in Imperial China during the last thousand years, we need only mention "Evaluation of the Qualities of 'Fragrant Lotusess'" (*Xianglian pinzao* 香蓮品藻) and "Golden Garden's Miscellanies" (*Jinyuan zazuan* 金園雜纂) by an 18th-century writer using the pseudonym Fang Xun, who names no less than 58 sorts of tiny feet and spends time going into details of type, defects, styles and classifications of every description (the two texts are quoted in full in the "Collection of the Fragrant Beauties", *Xiangyan congshu* 香艷叢書 8, 1:1-7 and 1:8-15 [2043-56] and 2057-72); they are summarised by Howard Levy, New York 1967, pp. 107-22 and by Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funu shenghuo shi*, [Shanghai, 1937] Taibei, Shangwu 1980, pp. 233-39). On the use of the women's little shoes as a wine chalice see the two subsequent chapters of Fang Xun (*Xiangyan congshu* 8, 1:16-30 [2073-2101])

108 JPM, 78:1132

ed in a more elaborate, abstract and poetic fashion which fuses with the third type of description; it often transcends physical representation, though this is also present and is achieved by indirect references, conventional formulae, mythical images and allegory. So the beauty of some young girls like Phoenix, Baochai, and a heavenly goddess, is conveyed not only by describing the face and eyes, but turning to floral metaphors as well. The immortal encountered by Baoyu in a dream appears to us first through her shadow, then through the billowing of her sleeves and the movement of her robes; after that we can glimpse the dimples of her smiling face, her flowing locks, her lips, teeth, eyebrows and waist, her walk as she advances, her tiny feet, and finally her jewellery; and in addition to our sight, our sense of smell is assailed by the girl's delicate perfumes, and our hearing by the cheerful tinkling of her jade bracelets and trinkets. Also for the image of You Sanjie, clothing and adornments appear to be more important than her looks; indeed, on the one hand they accentuate her seductiveness, and on the other they help to give us an inner portrait of the girl.¹⁰⁹

The writer presents her wearing a green breast-binder against her white skin and swinging earrings that accompany her agitation as she sits and stands, constantly moving from joy to anger and back again.¹¹⁰ Then there is the servant-girl Baochan who, with a combination of naturalness and skill, tries to seduce a young man by appearing before him early in the morning in a gaudy dress, artfully dishevelled and without makeup.¹¹¹

Any analysis of body language, especially concerning seduction and the conscious or unconscious wish to be an object of desire, cannot ignore the perception of beauty, especially female beauty. We can single out at least four different paragons of beauty: 1) the classical female beauty of a tender girl (like most of the female heroines in the *caizijiaren*); 2) the mannish beauty of strong character ladies (like Fengjie in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*); 3) the masculine beauty of the hero (like Wu Song); 4) the womanish beauty of a young man (like the so called *meiren* or Baoyu).

In some cases, beauty transcends the subjective judgment of the lover and acquires an almost objective dimension when confirmed by the opinions of others (think of the beauty of Daiyu, acknowledged not only by Baoyu but also by Fengjie). At times a physical trait enhances the beauty spiritually, at least in Daiyu's case, where consumption renders her beauty more ethereal and spiritual. However, the delicate condition of her health has a dual origin. Here we have a beautiful

109 Cf. *Honglounmeng*, 68:875, 97:1256 and 5:54 respectively.

110 Cf. *Honglounmeng* 65:842

111 Cf. *Honglounmeng* 91:1171

woman and, according to tradition, beauty is the harbinger of misfortunes,¹¹² amorous passions and therefore lovesickness; but we are also dealing with a weakness of constitution, which enhances the girl's beauty with a particular note of anguish. Nonetheless, beauty, with its multifarious and contradictory attributes, is accepted as fundamentally subjective evaluation. We have seen in the quoted Su Youbai's ????? statement that charm was required alongside talent and sentiment. In the "Anatomy of Love" it is written that when an affinity exists (yuanfen ???), XE "yuanfen ?t?A" that is to say in "predestined" love), neither beauty nor ugliness counts and neither good nor evil ways are of importance: to somebody in love, bricks and tiles may seem gold and jade.¹¹³ And again, more explicitly, Pu Songling states that the source of beauty is only subjective admiration: "In the end, what is truly liked in a woman is not the extent of her beauty. In the cases of Mao Qiang and Xi Shi, the famous beauties of ancient times, how could we not understand that those who loved them consider them beautiful?" 心之所好，原不在妍媸也。毛嬙、西施，焉知非自愛之者美之乎?¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, we are looking in general at a transfiguration which first of all introduces physical beauty expressed mainly through colours – even if these qualities, as a result of a long literary tradition, have come to appear as stereotypes. The hair is black and shining, the eyebrows are arched like vermilion phoenixes¹¹⁵ or a crescent moon or the willow's leaves; the skin is snow-white, and the teeth are also white, often compared to the seeds of a melon, contrasting with cherry lips; cheeks are firm and fresh like lychees, while the nose looks like soap made of goose fat. The face is pink as a peach blossom because of the powdered red cheeks, while the hair is raven-coloured. Eyes are delicate like petals, clear and limpid like autumn water, bright like stars. The shape of the face is round, like the full moon or a plate.¹¹⁶ Special attention is also given to the daintiness of the hands, with fingers that must be tapered like jade, and to the lines of the feet, that should be tiny and pointed. The slim waist should be like a willow tree. Grace of bearing is not forgotten, and is sufficiently important to "surpass even physical beauty not once but

112 See for example the reference to the misfortune of the beautiful Yingying in *Honglouloumeng* 35:415. Cf. also "The Story of the Western Chamber" (*Xixiangji*) Act 2, scene 3, p. 78 ("Beautiful women for the most part have always been unlucky")

113 See *Qingshi*, 2:66. See also Lucretius on the craziness of love. A further analogy on the link between destiny and the passion of love might be found in the tradition of "amorous filters", but *chunyao* and *meiyao* are rather aphrodisiacs. In Western Medieval tales, the love potion meant that the two lovers had lost control of themselves, and that two people were bound to one another by a magical power that rescued them from any rules of society and church.

114 *Lzzyi, Lü Wubing* 8:1117.

115 The phoenix is one of the fantastic and magic animals of Chinese mythology, like the dragon and the unicorn. The vermilion phoenix (*danfeng*), also known as the phoenix "from the cinnabar mountain", can be connected with alchemic as well as sexual practices, and evokes the female sex. For the prototype of the description of ideal beauty, see the song of the state of Wei, Shiren, in the *Classic of the Odes* (*Shisanjing jingwen*, *Maoshi*, p. 15)

116 See H. Eifring 1999, p. 89

twice over".¹¹⁷ However, the external appearance is not sufficient to transmit a strong enough message: the situation, the style of behavior and the environment are always important, and moral and intellectual gifts are of course also appreciated, from the ability to write verse, sing, play an instrument, paint, do calligraphy or embroidery. The beauty is always a pathetic beauty, like Liniang, or Yingying. By contrast, ugliness is usually represented not just as the opposite of beauty: it may be the attribute of a ridiculous or grotesque character, or else a moral consequence.

I do not believe we can give a single final answer to a question such as "What was the ideal beauty in the imagination of the body?" in late Imperial China. It is clear that from the different attitudes we have seen that a pluralist notion of the body comes out. If we combine all these attributes as if putting together the pieces of a puzzle, it looks just as abstract and cold as if we were trying to create a perfect beauty combining the Gioconda's mysterious smile with the elegance of Modigliani's female portraits, the sensuality of Giambattista Tiepolo's "Mandolin Player" and the exoticism of Gauguin's images. These above canons were just a framework from which each Chinese author borrowed to create his own patterns of ideal beauties, while faced every day with the concrete images of real men and women met in the streets and at work. However, I hope that this collection of some basic rhetorical elements will make a small contribution to the reconstruction of the imagination of the body and its language in late Imperial China.

¹¹⁷Cf. Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, 3, in *Li Yu quanji* 5:2218. For a quite extensive description of physical beauty, see the mentioned presentation of Golden Lotus body in *JPM* 2:35-36