

Pinhua Baojian (1849; Sen Chen)

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Pinhua Baojian (1849; Sen Chen)

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Chinese novel depicting homoerotic relations between members of the literati and the female impersonators of kunqu opera.

Pinhua baojian (Precious mirror for ranking flowers) is a Chinese novel written by Sen Chen (c. 1796–1870) and published for the first time in 1849. It is set in the capital city of Beijing and focuses on the representation of the homoerotic relations established between elite literati, wealthy merchants, and young female impersonators (*dan*) of *kunqu* opera. While also featuring some purely mercenary transactions, the novel primarily foregrounds male romances that are predicated on chastity—even on the complete lack of any carnal desire—and on a sentimental affinity that erases the social gulf between the elite literati and the socially debased actors.

The Novel’s Model

Radicalizing the discourse on love carried out in the eighteenth-century classic *Honglou meng* (Dream of the red chamber), *Pinhua baojian* champions the aesthetics and affectivity of “sublime love” (McMahon 2002). Although, beginning in the late sixteenth century, a sizable number of works of fiction had been produced that explored the topic of love between men, *Pinhua baojian*’s most important literary predecessor is undoubtedly *Honglou meng* (both in terms of sentimental and sexual relations), from which Chen borrows both the basic romantic ideology and key aspects of the narrative plot. There is a notable difference between the two novels, however, pertaining to gender. *Honglou meng* involves a love triangle between a young man and his two female cousins—one the source of his most passionate attachment, and the other who will eventually

become his wife—whereas *Pinhua baojian* instead follows the romance between a young elite man, Mei Ziyu, and an opera actor of female roles, Du Qinyan, and the parallel story of his marriage to a woman, Wang Qionghua, who uncannily looks just like his beloved boy-actor. If *Honglou meng* moreover hinted at a triangular bliss that it finally failed to deliver, in *Pinhua baojian* the protagonist manages in the end not only to enjoy a harmonious marriage with a woman but also to preserve the affective connection with the young actor, who gets redeemed from his lowly status and practically adopted into his family. In this way, *Pinhua baojian*’s Ziyu is allowed to salvage both his social obligations and his romantic yearnings: to have a devoted wife and keep his beloved male friend, too. In spite of the ostensible parallelism between Ziyu’s two relationships, however, it must be emphasized that the novel is especially concerned with the homoerotic one between the two young men; the very fact that Ziyu’s wife turns out to look like the boy-actor symbolically suggests the derivative nature of his heterosexual liaison. The latter appears to be in other words a reflection, perhaps one could even say a copy, of his homoerotic one, which remains the ultimate romantic standard the novel aims to portray as ideal (Vitiello 2011).

Placing the Novel in Its Social Time

The world depicted in *Pinhua baojian* is related to social practices current at the time it was written, especially in the capital city of Beijing. There was a long history of male prostitution in China that gravitated around the theater, the boy-actors (especially female impersonators) having traditionally doubled as prostitutes. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the theater became a key site of Beijing social culture (Goldman 2012). As a result, the imperial capital also became the center of male prostitution. The actors typically entertained their patrons/aficionados after their performances, when they shed their female clothes and resumed their masculine personas (Goldman 2012; Wu and Stevenson 2010). The vogue of such actor-prostitutes, known as “gentlemen” (*xianggong*), apparently reached its peak between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries in Beijing, precisely the time and place in which Chen’s novel is set. *Pinhua baojian* is the first novel that looks specifically at this chapter of erotic culture and zooms in on the particular romantic relations between actors and scholars flourishing in that milieu. Before becoming the object of a fictional representation, this social phenomenon had actually already found a literary expression in a connoisseurial genre of writing known as *huapu* (flower registers) that was devoted to the aesthetic appreciation and ranking of the looks and performing skills of female impersonators. Such expertise earned their owners a social capital that could be spent to strengthen ties within the male literati elites. For this reason, it has been suggested that

Chen's novel can be ultimately considered a fictionalization of such connoisseurial writings and practices (Wu and Stevenson 2010).

Being traditionally tied to the business of male prostitution, the actor was burdened by an ambiguous social status. This explains the novel's heartfelt concern with discriminating between morally superior boys unjustly trapped in their debased station, who are deservedly treated as equals by their romantically inclined patrons, on the one hand; and ordinary male prostitutes, who deserve instead to be despised together with their vulgar clients, on the other. As for the idealized actors, they are appreciated for being the ultimate embodiments of feminine beauty, being at the same time pitied for being perfectly fine men, virtual literati who, because of adverse circumstances, have had the misfortune of falling into a socially loathed position. It follows that the fuel of the romances the novel's author most cares about is the desire on the part of the actors' sophisticated patrons to liberate and redeem them from their lowly condition.

As mentioned, at the center of the narrative there is one romance cast as exemplary of the ideal love between men. Another germane romance—that between Tian Chunhang and Su Huifang (apparently inspired by a real, and legendary, homoerotic affair that occurred just a few decades before the novel's publication)—represents an important strand in the novel's plot, in that it reinforces its core romantic ideology. A series of mundane, mercenary relations between vulgar wealthy men (usually merchants) and actor-prostitutes play a similar role, if this time in a contrastive fashion. In these crude affairs the romantic fantasy finds its all-too-real obverse; and in fact only in the representations of mercenary relations does the reader find descriptions of sexual acts, whereas the novel's "superior" lovers, when they meet, are always rigorously clothed and have hardly any physical contact at all. Indeed, *Pinhua baojian*'s preeminent romance is characterized by the lovers' continued separation and yearning to see each other. In fact, they barely ever meet; the few encounters between them are moreover drowned in tears, as if suffering and the deprivation of the beloved's sight were the real essence of the romantic experience, as opposed to its mundane, carnal fruition. Although other characters do not understand the chaste romance of the "superior" lovers, those who sympathetically witness their love understand that chastity is supposed to be the basis of the sublime love of a scholar for a boy-actor. For the novel's "superior" characters, a passion for boys is thus the mark of an enhanced aesthetic and romantic sensibility. As various characters state throughout the novel, the scholar's attitude toward a boy-actor ought to be "an aesthetic delight devoid of sexual desire" (*hao se bu yin*). It is such an attitude that defines the ideal male romance between a renowned scholar (*mingshi*) and a famous actor

(*mingdan*)—what might be called the "literati homoeroticism" that the novel proposes as an aesthetic and romantic ideal (Vitiello 2011).

Are the Boy-Actors in the Novel Virtual Women?

It has been pointed out that the boy-actors of *Pinhua baojian* are a variation on the female courtesans of a time-honored romantic literary discourse predicated on the redemption of a most talented and virtuous woman who is a model of moral behavior and who, as such, should be lifted out of her lowly condition and made to join the "decent" society she spiritually belonged to in the first place (Wang 1997). Some scholars have for this reason argued that the novel's boy-actors ultimately stand for female courtesans and are to be considered for all practical purposes virtual women, suggesting that the novel should be read metonymically—that one should see through its rhetorical device and read women for men (Wang 1997; Starr 1999). This critical approach, however, would have the consequence of paradoxically erasing the male homoerotic romance from the novel, a move that does not appear to be justified either by the external evidence (the social scenario described above) or by the fictional narrative itself (Vitiello 2011).

As for the latter, one could recall, for example, the debates found occasionally in the novel that center on the contrasting and ranking of male and female beauty, and implicitly of homo- and heteroeroticism (and resolved typically to the detriment of the latter). Even though the idealized boy-actors in the novel inevitably remind the reader of the countless literary representations of courtesans, it is worth noting that some actual female prostitutes do appear in the novel, if mostly presented as a lower type of entertainment compared to the elegant female impersonators (who are more often contrasted to lower-level male prostitutes). Moreover, the very form the "superior" actors' redemption takes in *Pinhua baojian*—joining the ranks of the literati—is in itself gender specific, as it involves their full remasculinization, thus indicating that their male identities have never truly been overlooked, let alone entirely erased. Finally, as for the hypothesis that the homoerotic liaisons celebrated in the novel are presented as youthful experiences to be eventually superseded by heterosexual relations at the onset of maturity (Starr 1999), it is important to note that the novel's ending clearly confirms the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Ziyu and Qinyan, even after the actor has been redeemed and has become a virtual brother/friend of the protagonist. The novel's last scene features in fact (the now ex-actor) Qinyan falling asleep on Ziyu's arm, thereby symbolically (and pointedly) evoking the most canonical literary standard of homoerotic relations—that is, the 2,000-year-old story of Emperor

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Ai of the Han dynasty who cut off the sleeve of his own robe to avoid awakening his male favorite who had fallen asleep with his head lying on it, and from which the expression “cut sleeve” (*duanxiu*), one of the key terms of the Chinese lexicon of male homosexuality, is derived (Vitiello 2011).

In conclusion, while the boy-actors’ beauty and demeanor in *Pinhua baojian* is no doubt associated with femininity, and their charm is inextricably tied to gender ambiguity, this does not mean that they are perceived as virtual women; the novel’s characters are perfectly aware of their fundamental boyhood. On one occasion, one sophisticated patron of boy-actors states that, because it is not proper to bring women along in public, the actors are the best compromise, having the face of a girl but a male body. In this regard, there is a metafictional moment toward the narrative’s ending, when the author says that, because the two lovers, being two men, could not crown their romantic destiny, heaven out of pity had made for Ziyu a girl that perfectly resembled Qinyan. In other words, Ziyu’s wife, Qionghua, needs to be narratively summoned to bail out her husband from his impossible romantic predicament; and the same actually applies to the other exemplary romantic couple in the novel. In both cases, women not only allow men to fulfill their social and filial obligations through marriage but also—as the novel’s conclusion suggests—provide a space to accommodate their homoerotic yearnings and relations (Vitiello 2011).

Pinhua baojian continued to be reprinted into the 1930s and was shortly before then identified by the foremost intellectual and writer of the period, Lu Xun (1881–1936), as the predecessor of the long list of late nineteenth-century novels about brothels and female prostitution. It is witness to the literary resilience of the novel that it has, in more recent times, inspired the Taiwanese writer Wu Jiwen’s *Shiji mo shaonian’ai duben* (1996; *The fin-de-siècle boy love reader*), which offers a rewriting of Chen’s novel in which the main characters anticipate the subjectivities of late twentieth-century gay men (Sang 2014).

SEE ALSO Fire (1996; Deepa Mehta); *MSM (Men Who Have Sex with Men) in Asia; Tongzhi Literature, Taiwan*

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The Nazi label for gay prisoners of the Third Reich, which was repurposed as a symbol of gay pride in the early 1970s, first in Germany and then the United States.

Although homophobia was never a central tenet of National Socialist (Nazi) ideology (as anti-Semitism was), the party leadership clearly considered homosexuality as a serious threat to the German nation. For the National Socialists, sexuality was inextricably tied to race, citizenship, and power. In 1937, for example, Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) told a group of SS lieutenants that “all things which take place in the sexual sphere are not the private affair of the individual, but signify the life and death of the nation” (quoted in Burleigh and Wippermann 1991, 193). Because sex was the means through which race was reproduced, the architects of the Nazi state were obsessed with comprehending and controlling human sexuality.

Homosexual Germans occupied a legal and ideological gray area in the Nazi state. Their German ethnicity granted them citizenship in the Third Reich. Yet, their