

Golden Lotus, The

Jīn Píng Méi 金瓶梅

The Golden Lotus is the first lengthy novel by a single author in Chinese literary history, and is noted for its highly sophisticated combination of plot and composition as well as its explicit sexual contents. The plot is set in Northern Song (960–1126) China and tells the story of the rise and fall of the merchant Ximen Qing.

The *Golden Lotus* is the title of Clement Egerton's 1953 English translation of the Chinese novel *Jin Ping Mei*, which was written by an anonymous author towards the end of the sixteenth century and first published in 1617 or 1618. The English title refers to the main female character, Pan Jinlian, whose personal name means Golden Lotus, whereas the Chinese title alludes to the three principal women in the novel; Pan Jinlian, Li Pinger, and Peng Chunmei. *Jin ping mei* literally means "the golden vase plum twig"—the twig in the vase being an allusion to sexual intercourse—and due to its sexually explicit contents the novel has been banned for long periods of time.

The story line tells how the licentious bourgeois merchant Ximen Qing rises to prominence and wealth and how his self-inflicted decline leads to his death from a lethal dose of aphrodisiac. Ximen's undisguised partiality for his sixth wife Li Pinger slowly but surely disrupts the household, and his excessive sexual behavior eventually causes the deaths of those dear to him. The plot is set in

Northern Song dynasty China (960–1126) in the latter half of Emperor Huizong's reign (1100–1126) when worsening domestic crises eventually lead to the downfall of the dynasty and the Jurchen occupation of Northern China. The household of Ximen has many obvious parallels to the imperial house and the historical events; for example, the six wives of Ximen are thought to represent the six immoral ministers who were held responsible for the collapse of the Northern Song. It is also a widely held belief that the anonymous author deliberately used the plot as a concealed criticism of his own time, the declining years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The novel is more likely a moral response to the sexual eccentricities it depicts in graphic detail than it is an endorsement of these.

The *Jin Ping Mei* stands out in Chinese literary history as the first lengthy novel by a single author and for the highly sophisticated combination of plot and composition. The novel consists of one hundred chapters of which chapters 53 and 57 are suspected to have been inserted by other authors. The *Jin Ping Mei* draws on a wide variety of literary sources and traditions but the author never loses focus on the story and the characters.

The composition of the novel may be broken down in several ways. It may be divided into ten parts of ten chapters each, which share the same repetitive patterns; thus when new elements and surprising developments are introduced into the story, it usually happens in the seventh chapter of each division, and a high point is reached in the ninth chapter. The novel has also been analyzed as being composed of four divisions: A prelude of twenty chapters introducing the cast, a main part in two divisions of thirty

From *Jin Ping Mei*

In the following passage taken from David Tod Roy's translation of Jin Ping Mei, an estranged husband and wife reconcile after he observes her lighting incense and praying for him.

“Darling,” he said, “I had absolutely no idea that you’ve really been inspired by concern for me. I’ve been wrong about you all this time I’ve been giving you the cold shoulder. By now, I’m afraid, it’s rather late to repent.”

“You must have lost your way in the snow,” said Yueh-niang. “I dare say these really aren’t the quarters you’re looking for, anyway. You’re barking up the wrong tree. I’m that ‘undutiful whore,’ remember. Since there’s nothing between us, where do you get that stuff about concern for you? What reason should you have to pay any further attention to me? If we were never to see each other again:

For a thousand years or all eternity,
it would be all right with me.

Hsi-men Ch’ing took Yuen-niang by the hand and pulled her into the room where he proceeded to look her over by lamplight. She was wearing her usual attire: a scarlet jacket of Lu-chou silk that opened down the middle, and a skirt of a soft yellow material. On her head she wore a sable toque over her chignon and, in front of her coiffure, a tiara of gold representing “Kuan-yin in her full glory,” setting off to perfection:

Her silver salver face, modeled in plaster
carved of jade;
The clouds over Ch’u peaks, her cicada
chignon
and raven tresses,
How could Hsi-men Ch’ing have been
anything but captivated?

Source: Roy, D. T. (2006). *The plum in the golden vase or, “Chin P’ing Mei”: Volume two: The Rivals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 5.

chapters each describing the rise and fall Ximen Qing, and a postlude detailing the collapse of his household.

A complete translation into English entitled *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is being undertaken by David Tod Roy, with three of five planned volumes published as of 2006. Several movies have been based on the plot.

Bent NIELSEN

Further Reading

Roy, D. T. (1993–2006). *The plum in the golden vase, or Chin p’ing mei*. Vol. 1: *The Gathering* (1993), Vol. 2: *The Rivals* (2001), Vol. 3: *The Aphrodisiac* (2006). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ding Naifei. (2002). *Obscene things: Sexual politics in Jin Ping Mei*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

