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Inventing Li Yu

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Several years ago Patrick Hanan mentioned that he was working on Li Yu 李漁. Thus the appearance of his Invention came as no surprise, although the publication in rapid succession of his translation of the erotic classic Rou putuan 肉蒲團和 his edition of selected stories from Li’s Wusheng xi 無聲戲 collections (all of which Hanan translated as well, either by himself or in collaboration with another) was an unexpected treat. His scholarly study has already become standard reading; in fidelity and grace, his translations compare very favorably with David Hawkes’ remarkable recreation of Honglou meng in English. Having Li Yu’s works of fiction available in translation will only help to convince Western readers of the richness of old China’s vernacular fiction; Hanan’s study of the literary craft behind them appropriately complicates every scholarly reader’s understanding of Li Yu and his art.

Li Yu (1610 or 1611-1680) was certainly well enough known in his time. Numerous contemporary writers inscribed Li’s voluminous creations with their own appreciative comments; his casual essays, his plays, and his stories all circulated widely. Moreover, as impresario he traveled the length and nearly the breadth of China with his dramatic troupe. In recent times Helmut Martin drew the attention of Western scholars to Li Yu’s critical acumen with his Li Liweng über das Theater (Heidelberg, 1966; Taipei, 1968). Dr. Martin then proceeded to compile his literary works, Li Yu quanjī 李漁全集, in fifteen volumes (Taipei: Chengwen, 1970). Subsequently Nathan Mao and Liu Ts’un-yan collaborated on Li Yü in the Twayne World Authors Series (Boston, 1977), and Eric Henry published his Chinese Amusement: The Lively Plays of Li Yü (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1980). In the 1930s, Sun Kaidi had published his studies of bibliographic questions concerning Li Yu’s fiction; Huang Lizhen’s influential Li Yu yanjiu 李漁研究 (Taipei: Chun wenxue) appeared in 1974. Itoh Sohei’s important articles appeared in the 1980s, as have a number of studies and compilations from China mainland scholars. Likewise, a “Li Yu Research Society” (yanjiu hui) was established in Lanxi, Zhejiang in 1982. Thus Li Yu is surely well
enough known today. What, then, is there to invent? Patrick Hanan is playing Li Yu-like word games in his title (and elsewhere throughout this delightful book); his concerns are with both the personae Li Yu constructed in his writings and Li Yu’s creative variations on—generally inversions of—the literary conventions of his day. But in the process of his exploration, Professor Hanan deliberately avoids searching for any “true Li Yu.” Nevertheless he “invents” a Li Yu of his own, a figure behind the guises that is somewhat at variance with—and generally more appealing than—the one we can glimpse through Hanan’s own masterful translations of Li’s fiction. While no scholarly writer “invents” her subject, what we see in every study of a writer, especially of Li Yu in the publications under review here, is necessarily partial, given our remove in time and circumstance from the writer, and contingent on the interests and predilections of the scholar—in this case, of Patrick Hanan. I suspect (as does David Ralston; see his review article in Ming Studies 29 [1990], 56, n. 2) that the scholar is the source of some of the appeal in the subject of his studies. Clearly Patrick Hanan found Li Yu’s work fascinating; occasionally he strays into the realm of speculation about the man’s personal values on the basis of comments made in his art. But since Hanan takes especial pains to demonstrate the extraordinary degree to which Li Yu was self-conscious of—and enjoyed himself with—his art, it seems more defensible to me to regard everything in his writing as deliberate artifice of one form or another. I think one ought not equate an appealing implied author or narrator with the historical figure—each of these voices, each of these sets of values, is, after all, another manifestation of Li Yu’s “inventions.”

Lest I be misunderstood, let me hasten to qualify my statement. It would be hard to find any more careful scholar than Professor Hanan to entrust with resurrecting this long-dead and quite difficult writer. Throughout these three volumes, as in his pathbreaking earlier examinations of late Ming short fiction, one can discern the hallmarks of Hanan scholarship: thorough reading of all relevant primary and secondary materials, careful attention to significant detail in his texts, encyclopedic knowledge and solid understanding of the historical developments in literature and culture of which these works are a part, and heavy reliance on the wondrous collections of the Harvard libraries. What Hanan has found, and what he presents so persuasively in this study and reveals in these translations, is a Li Yu who was consistently and nearly obsessively self-conscious: he was always writing to elicit a particular response, or a complex of particular responses, from his readers. In effect, Li Yu was always “on stage” and playing to a crowd (see Invention, pp. 34-35).

Consequently Li Yu was quite deliberately as outrageous as possible. Hanan uses that term repeatedly, and always with good reason, throughout The Invention of Li Yu; he also calls his subject “impulsive” in his imprudent choice of subject matter, “perverse” in presenting his unpopular opinions, “contrary” in his choice of viewpoints to defend, “playful” in his iconoclasm, and “obsessive” in his constant self references. Professor Hanan further demonstrates how uniquely fascinated with speech Li Yu was: he filled his plays and his stories with debates between characters who defend a variety of positions; his fictional narrators become mouthpieces for extended commentaries on life and morals; his nonfictional writings are heavily laden with personal references presented in a conversational, even jocular, tone. Li Yu wrote, probably more extensively even than his prolific contemporaries, on what he presents as his own tastes, and while he embellishes his writings with references
to earlier literature (about which, more later), he is not to be known for his scholarship or even for new ideas: his originality is to be measured, Hanan proposes, in his ongoing literary dialogues with the past, with the fashions and mores of his time, with other writers, and—most significantly—with his readers. In each case, it was Li Yu's aim to be different by contrast with the conventions of his day.

Professor Hanan uses this dialogic approach to explore the various "inventions" of self that Li Yu attempted. First he notes Li Yu's satisfaction with being able to "create talk and provoke laughter" (p. 6); we undoubtedly know more about Li Yu's ostensible intentions in writing than we do for any other writer of Ming and Qing China. Then Hanan asserts (and later proves, both in Inventions and in his translations) that Li Yu's early stories are all inversions of social or literary conventions. Furthermore, Li's historical essays overturn traditional interpretations of events, and his collection of legal cases are presented with an assumed authority—Li Yu never served in civil administration—that renders the whole enterprise something of a mockery of serious readers of such collections. In a chapter entitled "The Necessity of Invention" Hanan observes that to Li Yu "[n]ewness...is a universal value in everything..." (p. 45) but that his originality was accomplished only through interaction with and manipulation of the outside world rather than through the formulation of new ideas (p. 54). The significance of Professor Hanan's conclusion here can hardly be overestimated for the evaluation and understanding of the writer Li Yu. In his discussion of the story collection Shi'er lou 十二樓  (The Twelve Structures), Hanan proves the primacy of "discursive dialogue and monologue" over narrative details in Li Yu's fiction as well as his regular incongruous use of terms and misapplications of quotations and common sayings throughout his corpus (p. 77). Not only does this dialogue with the reader include direct address on the part of Li Yu's fictional narrator as well as an anonymous commentator (surely another of Li's fictional personae, despite Hanan's assertion to the contrary, p. 128), even the regular inversions of romantic comedies (caizi jiaren. 子佳人  conventional) involve an implicit understanding between writer and reader—their comedy comes to life only if one understands the butt of Li Yu's humor. In his adaptations of his own stories for the stage, Li Yu maintained the function and content of such commentaries; they are "dramatized as dialogue, debate, soliloquy" (p. 139). Furthermore, "discourse dominates the novel" Rou putuan (p. 128), including the "down-to-earth" discussion of sex in its Chapter 1, Hanan demonstrates. On yet another level of dialogue, characters in Li Yu's plays are defined only in relation to each other, "as foils, echoes, counterparts, and contrasts" (pp. 148-149).

Thus in each of the literary forms in which he wrote Li Yu was deliberately and self-consciously engaging in what might be generally termed parody, although Patrick Hanan does not identify Li Yu's characteristic literary game by this single term. Nor do I mean any lack of seriousness on Li Yu's part by applying it; instead I intend to make explicit, by way of commentary, what appears so clearly when reading Hanan's observations on Li Yu's art. Parody as identified by Gary Saul Morson is a relationship between two "speech acts" that has the audience always clearly in mind ("Parody, History and Metaparody," Rethinking Bakhtin, ed. Morson and Caryl Emerson [Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 63-86). Morson explains that his conception of parody involves works that evoke another or others, that are antithetical in some respect to the other(s), and that are intended to have
a higher semantic authority than the other; “[a] parodic utterance is one of open disagreement” with its source (Morson, p. 66). In each of his chapters, Professor Hanan demonstrates with his characteristic attention to detail how Li Yu’s works all depend on others for interpretation—that each is “double-voiced,” to use Morson’s term, in one way or another an inversion of an earlier discourse. (In fact Li Yu makes more intertextual references or allusions than Hanan chooses to point out. Among them: when a maid and her mistress in Li Yu’s Lian xiangban 懷香伴 discuss the “pure love” of Du Liniang from Mudan ting, significantly they ignore the lusty—and physically satisfying—dream enjoyed by the heroine of the earlier play [see. pp. 142-43]; what Hanan identifies as a general reference to attaining Taoist immortality [p. 232, n. 17] is a straightforward parody of the Tang tale Zhenzhong ji 枕中記, meaning “Don’t wake me up—let me enjoy my illusions! [see p. 64].) But he stops short of concluding what I believe is fully justified: that Li Yu was so self-conscious as a writer and so deliberate in his literary parodies that none of his works was meant to stand alone, without being read intertextually. In short, it is only reasonable to regard every one of his writings as being to one degree or another an inversion of some previous work or some element of contemporary cultural values. Thus any assertion about the moral values of the “true” Li Yu necessarily becomes problematic.

Surely through his masterful study of plays and works of fiction, as well as through these excellent translations, Patrick Hanan shows his readers Li Yu in all of his roles, all of his literary guises, all of his invented selves. Can it be impossible to find the real historical figure? There are elements of satire, laments over suffering, and the like in certain of Li Yu’s writings that some scholars seize upon as traces of the “real” Li Yu. But these occur in his inferior writings, Hanan notes; it was not in such sentiments that Li Yu invested his artistic energies. Moreover, in his casual essays as well, Li Yu is generally “more concerned with the powers of invention and analysis than with emotional self-expression,” Hanan observes. In fact, even the Xianqing ouji 閣情偶寄 (“Casual Expressions,” to Hanan) collection of apparently intensely personal statements on fashions and culture are unified by an “invented self” (p. 198); Li Yu’s “personae are omnipresent,” Hanan concludes (p. 206). Thus Hanan seems to contradict the evidence he has accumulated when he denies (p. 128) that “any distance remains between author and narrator” in Rou putuan. It appears that Hanan risks circularity in his argument here: he assumes that Li Yu wrote this bawdy comic novel—an assumption that is still not generally shared—and then Hanan finds demonstrations of Li Yu’s personal values therein. I will not debate the authorship of the novel; I find totally convincing Professor Hanan’s insightful argument that there are numerous narrative parallels between the novel and Li Yu’s short stories: I believe that the question of authorship is sufficiently answered. But Professor Hanan has shown us too much of the writer that was Li Yu and too many of his literary games for us to believe that suddenly he should reveal his own standards in the most outrageous of his spoofs on contemporary values.

On this point a few further comparisons between his writings might reveal something more of the writer than he planned. Consider, as a case in point, his attitudes toward women. When discussing Li Yu’s detailed explanations of how to educate one’s pubescent concubines (Li acquired his favorites when they were twelve),
Professor Hanan warns his readers that “[t]here is a cultural gap between him and ourselves that cannot be bridged” concerning sexual mores; Hanan even characterizes this Li Yu as a “guilt-free Humbert Humbert” while rightly noting the prevalence of imposing concubinage on very young women during his time (p. 201). I propose confronting this difference as a means to understand the art of his fiction even more thoroughly.

Earlier Hanan had noted appropriately that the heroines of Li Yu’s erotic fiction are not innocent virgins victimized or seduced by some older man as in comparable Western writings. Li Yu’s women are mature physically and emotionally; they are willing and active, even aggressive, participants in illicit sexual encounters. Professor Hanan has identified these characters as inversions of the demure and refined younger women of *caizi jiaren* fiction and drama and argues that they represent Li Yu’s down-to-earth—and, by implication, progressive—attitudes about sexuality. While clearly Hanan is correct in his first conclusion, I am dubious about the second. That is, I suspect that these older and experienced women characters reveal less of Li Yu’s personal feelings and more of his literary games: their attributes and appetites make them the logical opposite of the tender young ladies in romantic tales; they do not necessarily embody Li Yu’s ideals, despite their correspondence with values expressed by Li Yu’s fictional narrators and commentators—themselves frequently inversions of standard characters in these roles (see the prominence allotted to the narrator in Chapter 1 of *Rou putuan*).

Modern readers will be “discomfited” by Li Yu’s erotic attachments to young girls, Hanan asserts (p. 201); earlier in the book he surmises that Li’s contemporaries must have been “shocked” by his fictional explorations of gay and lesbian relationships and the directness of his descriptions of female desire (see pp. 122). Surely I agree with Professor Hanan on the first score, but it may also be the case that Li Yu’s characters and situations were so widely divergent from “real” people and events of the time—and that the values his narrators express were so alien—that his original readers only saw them as wildly incongruous and therefore humorous. (This line of reasoning assumes, with Hanan, that the *Xianqing ouji* entries are more authentic representations of the values of the real Li Yu. If this assumption, too, is rendered invalid, probably the “true” Li Yu can never be found!) Examples of comic exaggeration in *Rou putuan* include the number of thrusts Vesperus is supposed to be capable of making, the operation which he undergoes, and the contrived coincidences by which the hero is cuckolded by every man whose wife he slept with—all of which are clearly meant to be funny in their gross incongruity.

But what did readers make of the forced castration of the attractive young homosexual in Li Yu’s story *Cuiyalou 蘇雅樓* (see pp. 98-102); the story ends “comically” (i.e., incongruously) with the mutilated youth receiving the skull of his attacker for use as a urinal. Was this initially considered horrifying or was it merely regarded as a witty inversion of conventional tales of heterosexual rape? And consider how an audience who lived through the widespread bloodshed and pillage surrounding the fall of the Ming would have responded when in Li Yu’s play *Naihetian 奈何天* a rebel chief rounds up abducted women and portions them out one to every two of his commanders, advising them to “attack from front and back simultaneously” as a way to keep the men warm on a cold night (see *Li Yu quanji*, Vol. 9, pp. 4019-20)? Might such scenes both shock and amuse as, presumably, do
the fictional business discussions between prostitutes in the play *Huang qiu feng* 鳳求凰. While rape is hardly a laughing matter in the values of today, such seemingly callous descriptions might have appeared to be just another form of literary game in the early Qing. In fact, they might not represent the “true” Li Yu either. Just consider how the attitudes toward sexual exploitation in Li Yu’s writings contrast with the outrage of the narrator who interrupts a rape scene to condemn the inhumanity of such acts in the 1633 novel *Sui shi yiwen* (see my *Novel in Seventeenth-Century China*). This earlier novelist seems much more morally outspoken—although artistically less adventurous—than the parodist Li Yu, in my opinion. What modern readers might identify as “healthy” or socially progressive attitudes toward sexuality (endorsing mutual enjoyment of sexual activity by consenting adults, acknowledging the naturalness of homosexual activity, etc.) appear far more frequently in Li Yu’s self-conscious and multifaceted comic literary parodies than in writings that ostensibly reveal the author’s own personal values, whatever they might have been. It is probably safe to conclude, given the mores of his day, that Li Yu was generally a conventional male chauvinist in his personal affairs.

The likelihood that my reservations are valid forces us to marvel ever more at the complexities of the dialogues that exist between Li Yu’s writings and his intended audiences—who would have included those who might perceive as incongruous any sympathy for raped wives, violated homosexual youths, or girls sold into concubinage early in their teens. I still have no clear idea of what the “real” Li Yu was like—surely he is not to be fully identified with any of his fictional narrators or commentators. But after reading Patrick Hanan’s exploration of Li Yu’s work I am convinced that Li was probably the most self-conscious writer of his age and a genius of a very curious sort. And I doubt that I would have liked him very much, even though Hanan is assuredly correct in characterizing Li Yu as “the Chinese comic specialist par excellence” (p. vii). Nevertheless, now through Professor Hanan’s efforts, Li Yu will receive the attention abroad his works deserve and more will come to appreciate just how “inventive” a writer could be within the conventions of Ming-Qing literature. And simultaneously our conception of that tradition will have to be revised to include Li Yu’s far-ranging and constantly inventive literary play.