General Introduction

For centuries now, the novel in your hands has been denigrated as a “dirty book” (yinshu), one that describes, and might encourage the reader’s own, illicit behavior. Consequently it has frequently been proscribed, and many editions are expurgated. Yet even before it was completed, perhaps around 1590, leading Chinese writers of the time shared the manuscript among themselves, avidly poring over it, marveling at its rich and nuanced representations of daily life and individual social interactions. They also commented on its intricate structure and its biting indictment of the immorality and cruelty of its age, especially on the part of the leaders of the state. *Golden Lotus* was without precedent in China and was not to be equaled in sophistication in any of these areas for another two centuries.

In contrast to more “sprawling” sagas in other languages and all previous Chinese-language novels, *Golden Lotus* is tightly focused on one household, and for much of its length on two individuals. One is the prominent merchant Ximen Qing, a handsome, well-placed, and fortunate young man; his connections in the imperial government lead to his appointment in the local judicial administration. But unlike the other Chinese novels of the time that narrate great military campaigns and the far-ranging adventures of outlaws, this text focuses on Ximen's private life: his parents are dead, leaving him with a substantial inheritance and no one to rein in his excessive self-indulgence. Much of the novel takes place within his extensive household, at the center of which is his beautiful fifth wife, Pan Jinlian.

Initially she had been the helpless plaything of older men. But after her seduction by Ximen Qing she becomes insatiable in her desire to exert control over her husband and, through him, the entire household. Jinlian's primary weapon in this struggle is simply sex: she employs any and all activities to monopolize his desire. *Golden Lotus* reveals the inner politics of this wealthy family, particularly the machinations of Jinlian and others as she claws her way to a position of dominance. The intertwined lives of these two central characters bring out their brutality in their incessant concern for momentary pleasure; both are heedlessly self-destructive, and that tendency brings about the ultimate collapse of the entire household. Throughout this process, parallels between events within...
the Ximen household and the attitudes and activities of the emperors of the time suggest a scathing condemnation of petty self-indulgence on the part of Ming imperial house.

Approaches to the Novel

*Jin Ping Mei cihua*, its original title, combines elements from the names of three female protagonists: Pan Jinlian ("Golden Lotus"), Li Ping'er ("Vase"), and Hua Chunmei ("Spring Plum"). to read “The Plum in the Golden Vase, a ballad tale.” The title provides rich clues to its meaning. Although its final element celebrates the inclusion of large numbers of poems and songs, the novel is primarily about characters, not just these three but dozens of others as well, and about their complex interactions as each makes his or her way through life always on the lookout for personal advantage. From the perspective of the seventeenth-century critic Zhang Zhupo (1670–1698), placing beautiful “flowers” (women) in elegant surroundings allows them to be appreciated properly by the refined reader. Yet the title would seem to refer to an anonymous earlier poem suggesting that when these most beautiful flowers are placed in an elegant vase, the aesthetic elements clash with each other, and the combined effect cheapens both the blossoms and their receptacle. From its very title, the novel suggests ambiguity and calls for the reader’s engagement in interpreting its various meanings, ranging from the elegant to the decidedly vulgar. Thus from the outset the perceptive reader is warned to be aware of multiple levels of signification.

The novel is justly famous for two very conspicuous elements: its detailed characterization and its frequent narrations of sexual encounters. The denizens of the Ximen house and his contacts outside are realized primarily through extensive dialogue; the novelist creates a multiplicity of voices, dialects, and social registers to suggest the texture of contemporary society. Pan Jinlian seems to mimic the language of popular romantic songs, even though their plaintive lyrics contrast sharply with her often cold-blooded plots. Jinlian seems to mimic the language of popular romantic songs, even though Ximen Qing adopts the language of official documents. The novel’s second half narrates his decline: he is overextended financially and socially and physically depleted. The first twenty chapters introduce the novel’s main characters; they are mirrored by Chapters 80 to 100 in which they scatter after Ximen Qing’s death in Chapter 79. Scenes set in cold places are balanced by those set in hot locales: frigid comments occur in hot places, and heated encounters happen where it is cool. In terms of their narrative flow, chapters occur in groups of ten throughout the work: decades generally reach an emotional peak in the fifth chapter with a narrative twist in the seventh, while a dramatic climax is reached in the ninth. This is a major reason the novel was so celebrated: close reading reveals that it was meticulously constructed by a highly self-conscious—and remarkably innovative—author.

As early readers clearly perceived, the text is structured with mathematical precision. The novel is a hundred chapters in length, with a pivotal scene in Chapter 49. Up until that point, and apparently slightly thereafter, Ximen Qing’s fortunes are on the rise: he grows in wealth, prominence, and power. The novel’s second half narrates his decline: he is overextended financially and socially and physically depleted. The first twenty chapters introduce the novel’s main characters; they are mirrored by Chapters 80 to 100 in which they scatter after Ximen Qing’s death in Chapter 79. Scenes set in cold places are balanced by those set in hot locales: frigid comments occur in hot places, and heated encounters happen where it is cool. In terms of their narrative flow, chapters occur in groups of ten throughout the work: decades generally reach an emotional peak in the fifth chapter with a narrative twist in the seventh, while a dramatic climax is reached in the ninth. This is a major reason the novel was so celebrated: close reading reveals that it was meticulously constructed by a highly self-conscious—and remarkably innovative—author.

*The Golden Lotus* is considered the first single-authored novel in the Chinese tradition. To a great extent, this is true. However, a substantial portion of the early chapters was borrowed from an earlier novel, a short story and other prose texts; likewise, hundreds of popular songs, common sayings, and current jokes have been adapted here. Yet each earlier text is woven into the fabric of the novel so skillfully that they do not necessarily stand out to later readers. Recognizing popular stories and songs that would have

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† Shang, “*Jin Ping Mei* and Late Ming Print Culture,” pp. 201–02.

delighted the novel’s original readers is a pleasure now lost to us; only a few of these adapted texts are visible in this translation. Critics from the seventeenth century onward have complained that readers tend to overlook what was an ongoing and very complicated literary game successfully crafted to impress and enthral the author’s highly educated contemporaries—with whom they identify. The novelist’s endless sampling of texts from contemporary culture does contribute a degree of choppiness in his style, as translators and some critics have noted. Even so, generations of readers have found the novel gripping, its characters mesmerizing in their tragic vulnerability even as they treat others with callous lack of concern or even cruelty.

At the most obvious level, the novelist demands that his readers understand his essential message: the inevitable consequences of self-indulgence, particularly in the four vices of drunkenness, lust, greed, and anger, are suffering and ultimate destruction. In this he offers the “counsel” that Walter Benjamin saw in all stories. The novel offers glimmers of hope of release suffering and ultimate destruction. In this he offers the “counsel” that Walter Benjamin saw in all stories. The novel offers glimmers of hope of release


The historical setting of the novel is itself ominous. As the first chapter tells us, the fictitious Ximen Qing lived during the reign of the Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1126) of the Song Empire (968–1279). This monarch was an accomplished painter and calligrapher; his work can be found in major museum collections around the world. But he was a far better artist than he was administrator; during his reign bandits pillaged widely, in numbers far beyond the ability of his imperial armies to control. Moreover, growing tensions along the northern frontier erupted into a full-scale invasion by the Jurchens, a nomadic people who had established a sedentary empire of their own in 1114, the Jin. Song imperial guards were no match for their disciplined and dedicated forces. Huizong and his successor, the Song emperor Qinzong, were taken captive in 1127 and eventually died of exposure and disease after long periods of detention in the north by the Jin. As a consequence of that military disaster, the Song Empire hastily moved its capital south to the modern city of Hangzhou; there the Southern Song persisted until the Mongol conquest brought the dynasty to an end in 1279.

‡ For a succinct history of the period during which the novel was produced and initially circulated, see Mote, *Imperial China*. David Roy discusses these historical references very persuasively in his Introduction to *Plum*, vol. 1, pp. xxix–xxxvi. For biographical sketches of the Jiajing and Wanli Emperors of the Ming, see *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, pp. 315, 325.
tion. Despite its generally didactic function, narrative was often considered more utilitarian than artistic, and could be written with less formality as a consequence—in contrast to refined classical prose essays that often incorporated the arts of the poet. Writing in the vernacular, especially when it imitated the verbal art of the professional storyteller, seemingly took this educational function seriously as it focused on the mistakes and crimes committed by people at all levels of society. However, the vernacular literature of late imperial China demonstrates the authors’ uses of these new forms to develop the art of writing.

The earliest novel in Chinese was Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi, “A Popular Elaboration on The Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms,” commonly referred to in English as The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Its first imprint was dated 1522, although one preface bears the date 1494, suggesting that it was completed two decades earlier. By tradition it has been attributed to a fourteenth-century playwright named Luo Guanzhong, but there is no evidence to suggest that the text is anywhere that old. Starting around 1550 there appeared a virtually unbroken series of fictionalized histories of the individual empires that occupied portions of the Chinese landmass of today; most of these texts were dreary adaptations and rewritings of historical chronicles demonstrating little sense of how to develop a good story. By contrast, a second novel, the Shuihu zhuan (known in English as “The Water Margin” or, more recently, Outlaws of the Marsh) relates the adventures of 108 bandits whose individual exploits and misadventures draw them together as an ever-growing rebel band in a Shandong mountain fastness called Liangshan. The product of many hands, this novel circulated in versions of dissimilar lengths; it was “finalized” to a degree by the seventeenth-century editor Jin Shengtan (1608-1661) whose annotated seventy-chapter version has been the standard ever since. Late in the sixteenth century two other major novels appeared, the Golden Lotus and Xiyou ji (“Journey to the West”). Journey relates the adventures of a timid cleric based on the historical monk Xuanzang (600–661) who traveled from Chang’an, the capital of the Tang Empire, through various Central Asian kingdoms to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures. On this fictional pilgrimage he rides a horse that is really a transformed dragon and is guarded by a pig monster, a man-eating ogre known as Sand, and the Monkey King. For his wit and mischief, along with his physical and mental prowess, the Monkey becomes the novel’s central character. Together these works have been termed the “Four Masterworks,” or da qishu, in the Ming novel form. All are now available in fine English translations.

Due to their heavy debts to earlier texts, the other three novels should be considered compilations and adaptations, rather than the creative writing of single authors. Three Kingdoms makes this clear from its title: it refers to the earliest survey of the turbulent third century compiled by historian Chen Shou around the year 280. Its proximate source was one of the proto-novels known as pinghua (“plain tales”) printed in the 1320s. By contrast, Outlaws of the Marsh drew upon a fertile tradition of oral and theatrical narratives about this heroic bandit troupe who ultimately come together to struggle against the evil ministers at court who are misleading their ruler—Emperor Huizong of the Song. They nominally retain their loyalty to the throne nonetheless. Journey to the West rewrites a broad range of plays, shorter vernacular tales, and historical accounts about the great Tang pilgrim to create a original composition that ultimately imitates the narrative structure of an esoteric Buddhist scripture. All three are essentially collective works that have been edited by one or more writers into their present forms. Although its multifaceted reliance on earlier texts is unmistakable, Golden Lotus represents a major step in the direction of originality.

The best known textual source for Golden Lotus is, of course, Outlaws of the Marsh. There Wu Song is a stalwart hero, known, as are many of the others, for righting wrongs on behalf of the powerless. One is his mishapen brother, a dwarf whose attractive wife Pan Jinlian falls for the rake Ximen Qing and kills her husband to get him out of their way. Virtually all Chinese readers would have been familiar with the earlier novel and this episode in particular because of its long and detailed seduction scene—and for the equally detailed scene in which Wu Song kills a tiger with his bare hands. By building on that tale, Golden Lotus draws attention to the stark contrast between Ximen Qing’s urban world of sex and commerce and the marginal realm of “rivers and lakes” (jianghu) inhabited by Wu Song and the other heroic outlaws; the adapted material merely sets the stage for a new location and far more developed characterization in Golden Lotus. Wu Song’s revenge for his brother’s murder comes swiftly in the parent novel; by contrast, in Golden Lotus he is exiled for most of the text, returning only at the end to wreak bloody vengeance on Jinlian after Ximen’s death.†

While the other early vernacular novels regularly narrate the violence of individual combat but avoid all explicit descriptions of sexual activity, Golden Lotus draws on a then-current fashion for erotic novellas in the classical language for many of its scenes. Of the fewer than twenty of these

* For brief surveys of the history of the Chinese novel, see Hegel, “Chinese Novel,” and Idema and Haff, Guide to Chinese Literature, pp. 198–211, 219–30. An extensive study of these four major novels as a group is Plaks, Four Masterworks.
† See Hanan, “Sources of the Chin Ping Mei.” For a translation of Shuihu zhuan, see Sidney Shapiro, trans., Outlaws of the Marsh (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), where the Wu Song–Pan Jinlian episode takes up chapters 23–27.
medium-length compositions still extant, all deal with the sexual exploits of one young scholar and many, many women. One has thirty wives by the end of the tale; others have fewer formal wives but more wide-ranging conquests among the other women their tiresome heroes meet. Most detail sexual activity in the flowery language found in this novel as well. By adapting this tradition of mindless titillation into serious vernacular fiction, the novelist has in effect harshly parodied a fashionable trend in reading of his day.

Golden Lotus appeared just as the vernacular short story in Chinese was developing. Around 1550 the eminent Hangzhou publisher Hong Pian edited a collection of sixty of these tales. They circulated in six collections of ten stories each; only twenty-seven of the total survive today, having been driven off the market by the success in the 1620s of more refined stories edited by Feng Menglong, a scholar who produced three collections of forty stories each before finally becoming a local administrator. Some of these were his original adaptations of earlier tales; many reflect older turns of phrase and thematic concerns. A number dating from around the middle of the Ming narrate the misadventures of merchants. Patrick Hanan has aptly described this theme as “folly and consequences.” Here, again, our anonymous novelist developed this fairly commonplace idea from the short story form into the central motif of his novel. In essence, Golden Lotus narrates the terrible consequences of excessive desire in its multiple forms.

Adaptation in Golden Lotus involves the use of earlier narrative material in new and original ways. Instead of simply copying both the text and the thematic content of pre-existing fiction, songs, jokes, and the like, our unidentified novelist carefully fitted each piece into his own overarching theme, adapting every one to suit his larger narrative project. He signaled this practice by following the conventions of presentation in the printed versions of these materials. It is tempting to imagine that the novelist simply wrote out of his own personal collection of popular literature. Although large private libraries were not uncommon among the learned who could afford them, to have a large collection of these ephemera was only possible because of the rapid development of printing during the Ming period: a broad range of printed texts would have been available at that time for a relatively modest investment.

About the Edition Translated Here
Golden Lotus apparently was written during the early years of the Wanli era (1573–1620) of the Ming Empire, late in the sixteenth century. Several prominent scholars of the day commented on it as it circulated in manuscript around 1605; its earliest extant printed edition, entitled Jin Ping Mei cihua (“Ballad Tale of ...”), is dated 1618. A second version, impoverished in style by some critical estimates, was produced somewhat later, during the Chongzhen reign period (1628–1644); it deletes a number of the poems from the older edition and other wording throughout to shorten the text somewhat. The Chongzhen edition was the only one available for centuries; this is the version translated here. The earlier cihua edition was considered lost until 1932, when a copy was discovered in Shanxi and was purchased by the Beijing National Library. The Chongzhen edition also formed the basis for the most heavily annotated version, produced early in the Qing period by Zhang Zhuopu (1670–1698); Zhang also wrote extensive prefatory notes pointing out the novel’s artistic features. His preface is dated 1695. Until David Roy began his monumental five-volume complete translation of Jin Ping Mei cihua, there were only Japanese and French renditions of the older and fuller version. The versions also vary in what comes first: the Chongzhen edition begins with Ximen Qing’s oaths of brotherhood with his party-loving cronies, laying the emphasis from its first page on the protagonist’s excessive indulgence. The older cihua edition first traces Wu Song’s rise to prominence by killing a tiger with his bare hands; this episode leads, epidically, to an introduction of his stunted brother, the latter’s wife Pan Jinlian, her affair with Ximen Qing, and then to life in the merchant house. Chapters 53–57 in both versions seem to have been written by yet another author, perhaps because that portion of the manuscript had been lost while being circulated among the small circle of its initial readers before it was completed.

†† See Hanan, “Text of the Chin P'ing Mei.” Given the time required to copy a lengthy text by hand, there were generally only one or two manuscript copies of an unprinted or unfi-
About the Author
As with the three other “masterworks” of the Ming novel, *Golden Lotus* was produced anonymously, using an untraceable pseudonym. In fact, the idea of individual authorship of vernacular fiction in Chinese only developed during the seventeenth century. Before then (and afterward as well) writers freely adapted and improved on earlier texts with no apparent concern for either originality or proprietary control over what they had written—even of the loose sort writers held for their poetry and essays. That is, writing lines parallel to, alluding to, or even quoting from earlier texts was not only acceptable, it was a common practice. By doing so a poet demonstrated his ability to appreciate an earlier writer by locating himself emotionally and intellectually in the same place as his predecessor; this practice was intended to expand the scope and significance of his own composition by generalizing, even universalizing, an individual’s personal experience and insights.

 Earlier novels, even the “masterworks,” recast older material from the oral, theatrical, or print traditions, quoting or paraphrasing while writing new portions to create a unique compilation. Most authors did not derive income from publishing their novels directly, as far as can be known; most texts circulated in manuscript among limited circles of the elite, often the novelist’s friends and acquaintances. In addition to the segment adapted from *Shuihu zhuan* which every reader would immediately recognize, this novelist incorporated dozens of songs, jokes, stories, and anecdotes then in circulation, and innumerable passing references to other narratives. Shang Wei has argued successfully that the novel could only have been written by a man who had access to hundreds of written texts, perhaps a collector of *Chin Ping Mei*.† Moreover, Master Xun’s contention that leaders must serve as strong moral exemplars lies behind the novel’s castigation of Ximen Qing, of the Song Emperor Huizong, and, by implication, the Ming Jiajing and Wanli emperors as well. Chinese scholar Wu Xiaoling also demonstrates that the nominal setting for the novel, the city called “Qinghe” (“Clear River,” in practice an epithet of praise for the emperor’s sagacity), has many features unique to the Ming imperial capital, Beijing.§ Here again as with so many elements in the novel, the Shandong location is an ironic reference to the novelist’s here and now, by implication the capital of a realm doomed by moral weaknesses to suffer a disastrous end.

About the Translator
Frederick Clement Christie Egerton was born around 1890, the son of an English country pastor. In 1910 he published a book of church music and the following year was consecrated as a bishop of the Anglican Church, an *episcopus vagans* of the Matthew Succession, a highly controversial move at that time. This heresy led a church scholar to remark that Egerton subsequently was “reconciled with the Holy See, became a soldier and performed no ministerial functions.”¶

During the Great War Egerton served in the British Army, where he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. After a divorce from his first wife—with whom he had run away when she was quite young and with whom he had four children—in 1923 he married Katherine Aspinwall Hodge (b. 1896) from New York; later she would work as a secretary at the American Consulate in London.** The couple had no children. During the 1920s he visited Japan and later commented on the beauty of Mount Fuji. Apparently he

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† See *Han, “Sources of *Chin Ping Mei.”*
‡ See *Roy, Plum,* vol. 1, pp. xxiii–vii, xxix–xxxii, for his argument about the novel’s moralistic perspective.
§ Wu Xiaoling, “*Jing Ping Mei* cihua li de Qinghe ji yi Jiajing shiqi de Beijing wei moxing chutan,” *Zhongwai wenxue* 18.2 (1989), 107–22; cited in *Roy, Plum,* vol. 1, ” pp. xxxvi, 453n64.
began his study of Chinese soon after returning from East Asia. After the war Egerton’s profession was listed as “editor;” he was a skilled and prolific writer of broad experience and interests. From his early dedication to religion, Egerton turned to education, and then two decades later he published his translation of *Golden Lotus*. About the same time his highly detailed travelogue appeared, *African Majesty: A Record of Refuge at the Court of the King of Bangangté in the French Cameroons* (1938). This was followed by a short political treatise, *Reaction, Revolution, or Re-birth* and in the 1940s by his biography of the right-wing Catholic prime minister of Portugal, António de Oliveira Salazar. He published two more books on Angola in the 1950s, presumably in favor of Salazar’s policies toward Portugal’s African colonies; Egerton had been highly favorable of the French colonial administration of the Cameroons in the 1930s.

In *African Majesty* Egerton described himself in his forties as “a fattish, bespectacled, middle-aged, would-be slightly cynical publisher” (p. xvii) who was largely bald (p. 189) and who resided on Lime Street in London, presumably near the Leadenhall Market. He had taken part in seminars offered at the London University School of Economics by the widely influential pioneer in that field, the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) (p. 4). He was also “very fond” of reading travel books, and yet he had little patience for “travelers” who seldom left their comfortable carriages to engage with the people they purported to be describing. His travel diaries demonstrate far more contact with local people.

Egerton’s anthropological interests in learning more about the differences among human cultures is what drew him to West Africa (xvii) and to other subsequent adventures. It may also have informed his tackling *Golden Lotus* as a novel of social behavior. Although he was a prolific photographer who took innumerable still photos and even motion pictures while on his journeys, he admitted that he lacked the technical skills to keep his cameras functioning (p. 260). Egerton likewise acknowledged about his first African expedition,

I was very eager to find out, so far as I could, the attitude of the Bangangté people to what we call the problem of sex. We, ourselves, seem to have gone more wrong on sex than on anything else, and that is saying a great deal. It absorbs our energies out of all measure. It permeates every department of our lives. It arouses the bitterest controversies. It is the most popular form of amusement. It saturates our art and literature. It fills our gaols; it lurks in the background of most of our murders and suicides. Even the advertisers who try to sell us motor-cars or cigarettes endeavor to
do so by appealing to our sex interest. When all other topics of conversation fail, there is always sex to fall back upon. And, most amazing, we conventionally behave like ostriches and keep up a polite pretence that sex is not really important or, if it is important, it is too disgusting to be mentioned in decent society. With all this atmosphere behind me, I cannot pretend to be uninterested, or even purely scientifically interested, in the matter of sex. (p. 296)

From this perspective, a consuming interest in *Golden Lotus* would seem perfectly natural for Clement Egerton.

Egerton’s work on the novel began soon after his second marriage. Short on cash and dependent on his new wife’s meager income, Egerton suggested sharing an apartment with a friend who had made at London University, the man he referred to as C. C. Shu (Shu Qingchun, 1899–1966)—who was soon to become famous among Chinese readers as the Beijing novelist Lao She. At that time Shu was a lecturer in Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies, where he taught from 1924 to 1929; they agreed that he should pay the rent while Egerton and his wife provided food for the three of them. He and Egerton also exchanged language lessons for their mutual benefit.

Although in his 1936 essay “My Several Landlords” (“Wode jige fang-dong”) Lao She says that they lived together for three years, 1924 to 1926, he never mentioned their collaborative work on *Golden Lotus*, although he did admit that he read fiction avidly as a means to develop his own English reading skills. Undoubtedly he encouraged Egerton to do the same for Chinese.† Shu was extremely productive himself, however; in addition to his teaching duties, during those years he completed two Dickensian novels in Chinese, *Old Zhang’s Philosophy* (*Lao Zhang de zhexue*, 1926), and *Master Zhao Says* (*Zhao zi yue*, published 1928), and then his humorous and sensitive study of cultural differences, *Ma and Son* (*Er Ma*, also published 1928).

Many decades later and without citing his sources, martial arts film maker King Hu (Hu Jinquan) commented that the *Golden Lotus* translation was the product of close collaboration between the two men, and surely it

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*†* For a photograph of Egerton in the mid 1930s, see his *African Majesty*, Plate 121, “Saying Good-bye” to King N’jiké (facing p. 329); Egerton is wearing a pith helmet along with tie, white shirt, sweater, jacket, and glasses; his face is in profile.

*†* Lao She, “Wode jige fang-dong,” http://www.edu2hai.net/wenxue/xdmj/laoche/ zw14/048.htm. For a photograph of Lao She during those years, perhaps taken in the apartment shared with the Egertons, see: http://baike.baidu.com/image/718e25c7a08959dd0006023 (both sites accessed August 16, 2010). For Shu’s references to reading English fiction as language learning material, see Zhang Guixing, ed., *Lao She nianpu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi, 1997), vol. 1, p. 43.
must have been.’ Egerton had begun to study Chinese in London not long before he and Lao She met. Lao She notes that Egerton finally landed a job just as he was moving out in 1926; whether Egerton continued his study of Chinese thereafter is not clear. Given the complexity of the various voices and the innumerable contemporary references in Jin Ping Mei, it is highly unlikely that a foreigner could translate the text after only a few years of language study, even for a gifted language learner (Egerton reportedly was able to read Latin, Greek, German, and French). It seems much more likely that as his Chinese tutor Shu might have provided a rough translation, which Egerton then spent years polishing into its present form.

Ironically, Egerton complains that the novel’s style was “telegraphese,” more likely a characteristic of Lao She’s imperfect English than an attribute of the Ming novelist writing in his own language. But Egerton had a fine sense of English style, which is clearly visible in the resultant translation. For his part, even though he praised Jin Ping Mei as “one of the greatest Chinese works of fiction” and considered its author “very serious” in his intent, Lao She never acknowledged his role in this translation project. Perhaps he was embarrassed—not by its morally objectionable content as many have claimed, but by the linguistic mistakes he may have inadvertently introduced there. Lao She need not have worried; generations of readers have found very few problems in this Golden Lotus translation. His efforts have surely contributed to a far more widespread appreciation of the Chinese novel of the late imperial period.

Egerton’s translation of Jin Ping Mei has undergone 25 editions since its first appearance in 1939. The first major alteration came in 1972 when Routledge published an edition in which Egerton’s Latin passages (inadvertently except one) had been rendered into English (that overlooked line has been translated from the Chinese for this edition); recently an abridgement has appeared (Rockville, MD: Silk Pagoda Press, 2008). Golden Lotus has been published in London, New York, Singapore, Tokyo, and, in 2008, by Renmin wenxue (People’s Literature Press) in Beijing. The online bibliographical source WorldCat lists 366 separate printings to be found in participating libraries around the globe. It is my hope that this updated edition extends its life to reach yet another generation or two of readers.

About this Edition
Until around 1980, the dominant scheme for representing the standard pronunciation of Chinese was the Wade-Giles Romanization system, named after a missionary and a scholar, both British, of the late nineteenth century. But with the death of Mao and China’s reemergence on the world stage, the Romanization system authorized by the People’s Republic government and adopted by the United Nations has become the standard for Chinese language textbooks and, increasingly, for scholarly writings in Western languages. This edition has been reset in this international system, designated Hanyu pinyin, to make it easier for new generations of readers to equate the names given here with what they have read in other sources. Most of the secondary works in the bibliography that follows still use the Wade-Giles system, rendering the novel’s original title as Chin P’ing Mei tzu-hua.

Through the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, English translators of Chinese fiction regularly Romanized the names of male characters while translating the names of all women and girls, ostensibly to make identification easier for readers unfamiliar with Chinese transliterations. Egerton followed this practice in his 1939 edition. But literal translations often produced odd or confusing renditions; two different names in Chinese could well turn out looking very similar in English. To avoid such confusion (and to avoid the sexist overtones of treating male names differently from women’s names), this edition renders all names in the modern standard pinyin and provides a character finding list, as did Egerton’s original, in the hope that this facilitates following each of them through the various chapters in which they appear. The work of Romanizing all names was ably carried out by Dr. Rumyana Cholakova. I am extremely grateful for her care and thoroughness in editing; through this process she also discovered and corrected occasional misidentifications of minor characters in Egerton’s translation. I have corrected several other small errors here, including those pointed out by Lionel Giles in his 1940 review of the first edition.

* Hu Jinquan, Lao She he ta de zuopin (Hong Kong: Wenhua Shenghuo, 1977), pp. 32-36, translated as “Lao She in England,” pp. 46-47. In his 1939 preface to The Golden Lotus Egerton notes that he had begun the translation fifteen years before and that he had spent many years polishing it with advice from various scholars, apparently after Lao She was no longer working on the project. I am grateful to Dr. Rüdiger Breuer for his unerring assistance in locating sources of information about Lao She’s activities in England.

† This supposition seems to be confirmed by a comment made by Lionel Giles in his 1940 review of Golden Lotus. There he finds Egerton mistranslating zhuli as “bamboo fans” when instead it means literally “bamboo fence” (introductory poem to Chapter 79). The characters for “fans” (shen) and “fence” (li) look nothing alike, but a Chinese learner of English might well pronounce the two similarly.

Useful Sources in English


