

A Comparative Study of Womanland in Journey to the West and Flowers in the Mirror

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Abstract: *Journey to the West* (Xiyou Ji 西游记) and *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jinghua Yuan 镜花缘) are two of the best-known stories of travel in ancient Chinese literature. Both works contain descriptions of outlandish sights and foreign customs, particularly the vivid descriptions of the fantastic and outlandish Womanland (Nv'er Guo 女儿国), which embodies traditional Chinese scholars' understanding of the outside world. Comparativists tend to regard the portrayals of these exotic women and their talents, and the subverted roles of men and women, as the authors' statements about the inferior status of women in feudal China and their denunciations of the oppression of women. *Flowers in the Mirror* is seen as more radical in its pursuit of women's rights and gender equality. This article argues that androcentrism still prevails even in the positive depictions of the expression of women's desires. Furthermore, the delineation of these exotic women and of supernatural spirits demonstrates the authors' praise of China's pre-eminence and its condescending views of foreign places.

Keywords: Womanland; story of travel; defamiliarisation; foot-binding

Journey to the West (Xiyou Ji 西游记) and *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jinghua Yuan 镜花缘) are two of the best-known stories of travel in ancient Chinese literature. The former is generally believed to have been written, or at least completed, by Wu Cheng-en¹ (吴承恩 1500–1583), a novelist and scholar of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The latter was written by Li Ru-zhen (李汝珍 1763–1830), a phonologist and novelist of the early Qing Dynasty (1636–1912). These two novels share obvious similarities, particularly in their presentations of an exotic and imaginary Womanland. Previous comparisons of the utopian Womanland in both novels tend to agree that this kind of utopia embodies the authors' extolling of women's talents and abilities, both in the management of public affairs such as the administration of a country or the construction of water locks and canals, and in domestic affairs such as bringing up a family

¹ In this article, when mentioning Chinese names, we follow the Chinese convention of placing the family name before the given name.

and having children (Hu 1998; Zheng 2000; Zhao 2007; Chen 2008; Xie 2013). *Flowers in the Mirror* is considered more radical in its stance on gender equality, its denunciation of the barbarous practice of foot-binding, and its advocacy of female talents and blunt rejection of the Chinese traditional belief that “ignorance is a woman’s virtue”. (Hu 1998; Zhang 1999; Zheng 2000; Chen 2008; Xie 2013; Miao 2013) This article acknowledges its debt to these previous studies, but argues that both *Journey to the West* and *Flowers in the Mirror* are imbued with patriarchal thinking and male chauvinism; the superficially radical and rebellious stance of the latter is, therefore, a further confirmation of the deep-rooted sexism in China, and that the progress evidenced by *Flowers in the Mirror* is more a result of social evolution. Both novels’ portrayals of exotic females and supernatural spirits demonstrate their authors’ self-centeredness and even nationalism, but also their sympathy for women’s suffering. The gaze of foreign women also illustrates the co-existence of androcentrism and ethnocentrism.

The Origination of Womanland

The imagination and literary representation of Womanland in *Journey to the West* and *Flowers in the Mirror* can be traced back to the ancient Chinese classic *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* (Shan Haijing 山海经), a compilation of mythology and mythic geography, part of which first appeared in the fourth century B.C. This book is not only an account of the early pre-Qin dynasty, but also a record of geography and a source of mythology to which Chinese historians and writers constantly refer. One chapter, “Overseas Western Classic”, includes the earliest description of Womanland: “the Womanland is in the north of Wuxian Kingdom, where two women live together and are surrounded by water” (Guo 1989: 104). Guo Pu (郭璞 276–324), an interpreter of exegesis, writer, and poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420), made an explanatory note to this: “There is a yellow-colored pool, where women could take a bath and get pregnant” (Guo 1989: 104). This depiction calls to mind the pregnancy of Sanzang and his disciples after they mistakenly drank water from the Motherhood River in *Journey to the West*.

Following *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, Womanland is mentioned and described in other works, such as the *History of Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo zhi 三国志), the *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (Honhan Shu 后汉书) and the *Book of the Liang Dynasty* (Liang Shu 梁书). “Biographies of Eastern Tribes”, a chapter in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, notes that somewhere in this country is a magic well that can make women pregnant by gazing into it. The *History of Three Kingdoms* similarly records the existence of a country on the

far eastern sea that is populated entirely by women. All of these narratives of Womanland have common features: their populations are purely female, and they procreate with the aid of water, which can be interpreted as an ancient Chinese conjecture on a primitive matriarchal society. Literary works of later dynasties eventually establish two images of Womanland: one is populated entirely by women who procreate with water; the other is populated by both men and women, but women take the dominant positions traditionally occupied by men, in a reversal of the existing patriarchal society.

The Womanland in *Journey to the West* and that in *Flowers in the Mirror* are respective representatives of these two types. In *Journey to the West*, the Womanland, called the Country of Western Liang, belongs to the first type, a country populated entirely by females. There are no men there, and the women are overwhelmed with joy at seeing the four monks enter their country. Sanzang and his disciples venture into Womanland in Chapters 53–55. Chapter 53 details how Sanzang and Pigsy mistakenly drink water from the Motherhood River and get pregnant, and how Monkey obtains magic water from the Miscarriage Spring in the Childfree Cave to end their pregnancy. Chapter 54 recounts how Sanzang resists the temptation of the marriage proposal and great wealth offered by the beautiful Queen of Western Liang. Chapter 55 chronicles Sanzang's capture by the Scorpion Spirit and his resistance to the spirit's sexual advances. At the end of this adventure, Sanzang proves his resistance against the worldly inducement of the ocean of gold and the sexual seduction of women, and earns the opportunity to continue to win the true achievements of fetching the scriptures and attaining Buddhahood. The story of Womanland in *Flowers in the Mirror* is told in Chapters 13 and 14, and part of chapter 15.² The Womanland in this novel is of the second type, in which men and women exist but in reversed positions: "They call men women and women men. The men wear skirts and take care of the home, while the women wear hats and trousers and manage affairs outside" (Li 2004: 650). In this story, the scholar-merchant Lin Zhiyang, a fair young man, is forcefully made the "concubine" of the "King" of the Country of Women. During the process Lin undergoes the cruel physical processes that Chinese women of his time suffered, such as foot-binding, brow-plucking, and ear-piercing. It is only after the novel's hero Tang Ao helps them mend the broken canals to save the

² In the original Chinese version, the adventure of Womanland in *Flowers in the Mirror* continues from chapter 32 to chapter 37. The English translation omits this section because the translator, Lin Tai-yi, believed certain content would not appeal to English readers, and therefore the chapter numbers may not correspond to each other. However, the English translation does provide a full rendition of the Womanland story, and this article thus uses the English translation.

country from flooding that the 'King' reluctantly sets Lin free to reunite with his wife.

The Gaze of Foreign Females as a Mirror of Self-Criticism and Reflection

In their respective delineation of the imaginary Womanland, both writers commend the women's potential and provide refutations of China's long-standing sexism. The affluence and prosperity of Western Liang Country under the rule of their queen, or the swift and clever repairing of the canals broken by female workers in the Country of Women display the strength of women. Both novels also voice concerns about the physical and spiritual oppression of women, particularly physical torture and the denial of academic pursuits.

First, both of these countries flourish under the rule of women, demonstrating their administrative competence. Although *Journey to the West* "as a long fairytale comprised of folklore, allegory, religion, history, anti-bureaucratic satire, and poetry" may not prioritise a realistic depiction of economic development (Brose 2020: 169), such themes are still present amongst what Hu Shi has called the "good humor, profound nonsense, good-natured satire and delightful entertainment" (qtd in Waley 1943: 5). For example, on entering the country of Western Liang, Sanzang and his disciples see that the peasants, scholars, artisans, merchants, fisherfolk, woodcutters, tillers, and stock-raisers are all women. As they move forward, they also see "that the buildings along the city streets were well-built and the shop fronts imposing. There were grocers and corn-chandlers, bars and teahouses, multi-storeyed shops where everything was sold, towers and fine mansions with well-draped windows" (Wu 2001: 1226). The people of Western Liang enjoy a prosperous and contented life that is not second to China, the so-called "superior country" ruled by a heaven-sent dynasty. For thousands of years, without the help of men, the women of Western Liang have lived peaceful and flourishing lives, with women in all kinds of jobs and all walks of life.

The situation in the Country of Women in *Flowers in the Mirror* is similar. Other than the flooding, this country is well governed with no immediate adversity. Merchant Lin originally planned to make a fortune out of their liking for cosmetics, which also indicates their affluence. The women's efficient work in repairing the water locks serves as an example of their potential in general. Tang Ao comments that even though the female workers dress like men, they are smarter by nature since they are women. They are very different from the male workers who are at a loss when anyone tries to guide them. The women can finish their work in a short time because they need only a little enlightening

in order to fully understand. The women prove that they are not inferior to men, but actually far better, if given equal opportunity. Later, after Empress Wu sets up a special imperial examination for women, all the girls demonstrate their superb accomplishments in book learning, lyre-playing, chess, calligraphy, painting, poetry, martial art and medicine, among many other skills. This account of the happy life of Womanland provides both praise for women and a challenge to established gender biases, as does that in *Journey to the West*.

Both books convey sympathy towards women and denounce distorted aesthetic beliefs of Chinese men of the time. This empathy is rare and valuable, considering the prevalence of male chauvinism and the gender of the authors themselves. In doing this, both novels employ defamiliarisation to force readers to see the familiar and the long overlooked from a fresh perspective. The term *defamiliarisation* was first coined by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" (1917), and was originally meant to distinguish "poetic language" from "practical language". Critics including Boris Eikhenbaum (1886–1959), Yury Tynianov (1894–1943), and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) believed that the creation of art lay in this distinction; perception is prolonged and impeded when objects are made unfamiliar. This term has also been related to Bertolt Brecht's influential concept of the "Alienation Effect".

In Chapter 53 of *Journey to the West*, Sanzang and Pigsy accidentally drink from the Motherhood River, and both display symptoms of pregnancy. The most noticeable change in their bodies is their pregnant bellies, just as a mother's belly stretches to make room for the growth of the baby. They "were in unbearable pain and their abdomens were gradually swelling" (Wu 2001: 1206). In a short time, "the two were groaning in agony from their protruding bellies, their faces sallow and their foreheads creased with frowns" (Wu 2001: 1207). In light of all the previous torments to which they had been subjected, they had proven resilient to all but the pain of pregnancy and childbirth. The physical impossibility of a male becoming pregnant is contradictory to readers' expectations, thus creating a defamiliarisation effect and preventing what Shklovsky called "over-automation" in the reader.

In *Flowers in the Mirror*, the merchant Lin's experience of being modified into a perfect woman shocks readers into a new understanding of the stark reality of Chinese women. When Lin goes to the Women Country's imperial palace to sell cosmetics, he is favoured by the "King" and then forced to be a royal concubine. On first seeing the "King", Lin "saw that she was a woman of some thirty years old, with a beautiful face, fair skin and cherry-red lips" (Li 2004: 653). While Lin is watching and consuming the "King's" physical appearance from a man's standpoint, the "King" also makes him the victim

of a gendered gaze, reversing the usual expectations of women subject to the male gaze. To make him the favourite royal concubine, the palace maids strip him, give him a perfumed bath, anoint, perfume, powder, and rouge him, dress him in a skirt, and pierce his ears: "As Lin screamed with pain, powdered lead was smeared on his earlobes and a pair of 'eight-precious' earrings was hung from the holes" (Li 2004: 654). His eyebrows are also plucked to resemble a crescent moon. This defamiliarising account of female grooming provides a glimpse into the discipline and reproduction of the female body and the ordeal it involves. In this sense, we can agree with Zheng (2000), who concludes that beneath the surface of exotic adventures and supernatural descriptions, the novel shows a deep concern for women's plight and criticises sexual prejudice against them and the domination of women's spirit and body.

The most typical example of the Alienation Effect, meant to sharpen readers' awareness and change their automatised perception, is the practice of foot-binding, which is forced on Lin Zhi-yang. When the custom of foot-binding began in China is unknown, but it is generally believed that it first became popular among the upper class in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) because male audiences were erotically fascinated by court dancers' bound feet. As a way of modifying and perfecting woman's bodies, foot-binding has been compared to corsets and other forms of mutilation. For hundreds of years, numerous Chinese scholars have eulogised and sensualised its unique beauty and ignored its barbarity, either due to apathy or because, as males, they are free of it. However, this deliberately overlooked savagery is exposed in the meticulous description of Lin's maltreatment at the hands of the palace maids. Li Ru-zhen uses lengthy paragraphs to thoroughly narrate the whole process of foot-binding. The palace "maid" first "sprinkled white alum powder between the toes and the grooves of the foot. He squeezed the toe tightly together, bent them down so that the whole foot was shaped like an arch, and took a length of white silk and bound it tightly around it twice. One of the others sewed the ribbon together in small stitches" (Li 2004: 656). With his feet bound, Lin feels such a burning pain that he decides he would rather die than endure it, reminding the reader of the pain Chinese girls feel when they undergo this rite. Two weeks later, Lin's feet "had begun to assume a permanently arched form, and his toes begun to rot" (Li 2004: 657). By making a male suffer this torment, which was exclusively imposed on Chinese women for almost a thousand years, Li appeals to the imagination of his readers by exposing how the absurdity and cruelty of foot-binding was taken for granted and ignored. Hu Shi notes that Li was the first to draw attention to this problem, and therefore reads *Flowers in the Mirror* more as a reflection on women's issues than a fantastic adventure story.

Although both books condemn cruelty against women and commiserate with their miseries, *Journey to the West* tends to focus more on the natural and unalienable parts of the female experience, such as childbirth, while *Flowers in the Mirror* pays more attention to social influences such as body manipulation and gender bias. The pregnancy of Sanzang and Pigsy in *Journey to the West* is more for humorous effect than a reminder of the agony that women suffer. Though foot-binding in *Flowers in the Mirror* is also dramatised almost to the effect of a farce, which weakens the intensity of the criticism, *Flowers in the Mirror* is more revolutionary due to its ruthless exposure and explicit denunciation of this oppressive practice. As the Chinese scholar Xie Dan points out, “the deliberately designed grotesque plot of *Flowers in the Mirror* is meant to boldly decry the cruelty against women and to ironize the social malady. Compared to *Journey to the West*, *Flowers in the Mirror* is more sober and more critical” (Xie 2013: 9). Li’s novel questions the justification of practices such as foot-binding and ear-piercing by reminding readers of the pain they cause. In contrast, Wu does not have the awareness to question the validity of foot-binding, and therefore, in *Journey to the West*, the females – princesses and ordinary women of this world, or goddesses, demons and spirits of the supernatural world – all have bound feet. For example, the Queen of Western Liang, the embodiment of a perfect Chinese beauty, easily reminds the readers of the outlook of merchant Lin as the “King’s” favourite concubine and the torture that he undergoes. On this point, we can say that the imaginative Womanland in *Flowers in the Mirror* is a calculated pungent mockery of androcentric feudal society, and in this regard its commentary is more deeply rooted and more definite than that of *Journey to the West*.

Li’s concern for women’s issues should first be attributed to the changes in the Chinese social environment and the development of society. Since the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the commodity economy developed rapidly within the economic structure of feudal China, particularly south of the Yangtze River and in the southeastern coastal area where Li Ru-zhen lived for most of his life. The emergence of capitalist production relationships brought about a social class of industry and commerce. Many literary scholars became merchants, a profession long despised in China. Within this social transformation came a new ideology that questioned feudal ethics and demanded respect for personality, equality and freedom, as well as more opportunities for women to participate in social activities and have their intelligence recognised among society. Philosophers such as Li Zhi (李贽 1527–1602) opposed female inferiority and advocated gender equality. The influential scholar Yuan Mei (袁枚 1716–1798), to some extent the godfather of the Yangtze River poets, appreciated the talents of women and strongly

opposed foot-binding. For example, more than half of his representative collection *Essays of Suiyuan on Poetry* (Suiyuan Shihua 随园诗话) are poems created by women. Regardless of the pressure of public opinion, he openly recruited female students and edited and collected some of their poetry as *Selected Poems of the Female Students of Suiyuan* (Suiyuan Nvdizi Shixuan 随园女弟子诗选). Thanks to this liberal social climate, Li Ru-zhen also paid close attention to women's issues, particularly foot-binding and scholarship, which had been unthinkable for Wu almost a century earlier.

Wu's indifference to women's issues can be attributed to the fact that both the queen and the female devils in *Journey to the West* are posed with the ultimate test of Sanzang's competence and nature, and they have acquired archetypal significance. For example, in his dialogue with Monkey, Sanzang worries that the queen would take him into her palace and ask him to perform his conjugal duties: "I could not possibly lose my primal masculinity and ruin my conduct as a Buddhist monk, or let my true seed escape and destroy my status in the faith" (Wu 2001: 1234). He also fears being overwhelmed by his own sexual desires aroused by the Queen and the Scorpion Spirit, or, in Buddhist terms, losing "the centration of the mind". Consequently, their adventures in the Womanland of Western Liang are presented as a set of tests and ordeals that they must surmount to prove that they are qualified to be scripture fetchers; therefore, women's concerns receive far less attention. The Womanland in *Flowers in the Mirror* does not have this kind of metaphorical significance, and is more of a fanciful imagination of a utopia to "vent Li's anger at the unequal and inhumane treatment of women in this world" (Hu 2006: 383). Li deliberately created the Womanland as an opposite to and a reversal of China's patriarchal and androcentric reality, so that men and women swap positions and men are the victims of sexism and body modification. Lin's experience is a mirror of the appalling and man-made misery that Chinese women had been forced to endure for more than a thousand years, but their voices had been silenced and their plight was deliberately neglected and downplayed.

The Gaze of Foreign Females as a Mirror of Self-centeredness and Othering

The gaze of foreign women in *Journey to the West* and *Flowers in the Mirror* is more than a mirror to reflect China's contemporary problems; it also demonstrates both authors' idealisation of China as the centre of the world and a sovereign to which all other countries paid homage. In this sense both authors exhibit limited vision, self-importance, and perhaps also some of the

romantic collective consciousness of the past glory of China when it was one of the world's most developed and civilised powers. Looking back towards the Tang Dynasty (618–907) from the Ming Dynasty for Wu and from the Qing Dynasty in the case of Li, both see the period as the peak of Chinese civilisation. *Journey to the West* takes place in the early Tang Dynasty, ruled by emperor Tang Taizong (唐太宗 598–649), while the story of *Flowers in the Mirror* takes place in the time of Empress Wu Zetian (武则天 624–705), the only empress in the long history of feudal China. On hearing that the group of Sanzang is from China, the female official of Western Liang immediately kneels down and says “forgive me, my lords. I am only the superintendent of the Male-welcoming Post Station and I did not realize that you were gentlemen from a superior country [Shangbang 上邦] who deserved to be met at a great distance from here” (Wu 2001: 1228). One explanation for her calling China a “superior” country is the long tradition of self-deprecation that was esteemed in Chinese culture. Calling the other “superior” is showing one's politeness and respect for guests who have come from far away. However, it is more than that, particularly if we consider the queen's eager marriage proposal and the other female characters' cavitation of the body of Sanzang, the imperial brother of the Tang Emperor. Throughout the novel, female demons either want to devour Sanzang's flesh or to wed him. Their desire for Sanzang's body illustrates the exchange and equivalence of national power and masculine superiority. The arrival of Sanzang and his disciples delights the queen of the Country of Western Liang so much that she says that “the fortunate arrival of the Tang emperor's younger brother must be a gift from Heaven. I have decided to use our country's wealth to persuade the emperor's brother to become king with me his queen” (Wu 2001: 1229). Her comment can be read as a chauvinistic example of women's self-abasement and perceived inferiority, and also as the author's projection of his worldview of China as the centre of the world to which other countries look up.

Such an emphasis of China's patronising stance is accompanied by denigration of foreign countries. For example, when the women of Western Liang see the male monks in the street, they “started to applaud, laugh and say with smiles all over their faces, ‘Men, men!’ the streets were packed and the air was ringing with happy voices” (Wu 2001: 1225) Even though these men may be as grotesque as Monkey or as ugly as Pigsy, the women of Western Liang are eager to sleep with them. If their sexual appetite is not satisfied or they are refused, as the old woman told the Monkey, “they'd have murdered you and cut all the flesh off your bodies to put in perfume bags” (Wu 2001: 1227). These foreign countries are obviously reduced to carnality and cannibalism, in sharp contrast to the civilisation and spiritual advancement personified by

Sanzang. Along their journey, the demons' obsession with Sanzang's body³ can be interpreted as an allegory of the captivating power of Chinese culture. In *Journey to the West*, all the other countries throw themselves at the feet of China, either out of admiration or out of fear of the superb martial art and craft of the Monkey.

Journey to the West is placed inside a rigid hierarchy of China-centrism with China at the hub, and its influence and grace radiating to other countries. This is a reflection of the deep-rooted belief of the ancient Chinese that China, as its Chinese name 中国⁴ (Zhong Guo) indicates, is the heart of the universe. This kind of self-definition is natural, since all construction of identity starts with the self. The problem occurs when this perception is ossified and becomes the only standard. It is therefore not surprising that both novels contain humorous depictions of foreigners immediately feeling inferior on hearing the name of China, "a great country ruled by a heaven-sent dynasty" (Tianchao Shangguo 天朝上国), regardless of the distance. Chinese customs and beliefs are practiced and upheld by the whole world. For example, in the Womanland of Western Liang, the pregnant Pigsy is warned that he must be very cautious, for "you might be in a draught, if you catch a cold you may get milk fever... washing in the first month after childbirth can make you ill" (Wu 2001: 1222–1223). Even in a distant and foreign country like Western Liang, the Chinese practice of confinement after childbirth is also strictly obeyed. In another example, the Queen's tutor says at the wedding banquet, "Master and disciples are like father and sons. It would be wrong to seat them side by side" (Wu 2001: 1242), suggesting that the Confucian ethical hierarchy is also accepted by the people of Western Liang.

³ According to the novel, Sanzang's flesh possesses miraculous power, one piece of which can make anybody immortal. Therefore, the demons, particularly the male demons, try every means to eat him. Because his sperm has similar power and because he is handsome, some of the female demons chose not to eat him, but to wed him, so they can enjoy sexual pleasure and at the same time achieve immortality.

⁴ The literal translation of 中国 (Zhong Guo) is 'Middle Country', meaning 'the country at the center of the world'. This name first appeared in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 B.C.), which means "country as my home" (Zhaizhi Zhong Guo 宅之中国). Later, the name Zhong Guo referred to the land where the Chinese emperor rules, and it is not limited to Han Ethnic imperial court. Some Dynasties established in the central plains (Zhongyuan 中原) by minority ethnicities are also called Zhong Guo. Generally speaking, dynasties and sovereignties established in the central plains of China would be recognised as Zhong Guo. Those people and areas outside China are roughly classified into four groups: Man (蛮), Yi (夷), Rong (戎), and Di (狄), according to the four directions: south, east, west and north.

Flowers in the Mirror also features many depictions of Chinese self-elevation. All the foreign countries that Tang visits, no matter how distant, always address China respectfully as the Kingdom on Earth. Lin's physical attractiveness and Tang Ao's ability to repair the canal problems that had plagued the country both serve as emblems of Chinese superiority. For instance, on seeing Lin, the "King" is immediately drawn to him and all the other concubines lose "his" favour. "He" decides to make Lin "his" favourite concubine. This is similar to the Queen's desire for Sanzang in *Journey to the West*; however, the King's desire stems from biological and sexual urges, whereas the Queen of Western Liang also values Sanzang's thoughts and feelings. The "King" here actually treats Lin as a sexual toy that can be bought with wealth and comforts. A more obvious and typical example of the superiority of China is the demonstration of Tang's genius and wisdom. To save Lin from becoming a concubine and to reunite him with his family, Tang strips the official proclamation posted on the boards "appealing to anyone to come forward who knew how to mend broken canals" (Li 2004: 663). Before this, Tang had known that the problem with the repair was that the locals lacked proper tools and did not know how to dredge. Drawing on the wisdom of the Chinese mythic hero Yu, the founder of Xia Dynasty (about 2070–1600 B.C.), Tang "proceeded with the repairs when the necessary tools were made. Water locks were built and the canals were widened and deepened section by section, about ten days later, the work was finished" (Li 2004: 668). The problem that no natives of Womanland can solve is easily cracked by Tang, an ordinary Chinese scholar who happens to share the name of the Tang Dynasty, and who thus embodies the pre-eminence of China.

Compared to *Journey to the West*, the framework in *Flowers in the Mirror* is not one-sidedly in favour of China. For example, the Chinese merchant Lin is desired by the "King" of the Country of Women similarly to Sanzang's encounter with the Queen of Western Liang. But in *Journey to the West*, the Queen never forces her ideas on Sanzang nor does she torture him for her pleasure; she is full of adoration and affection for Sanzang, but her emotions are checked by rite and ceremony. However, the "King" of the Country of Women focuses only on "his" own pleasure, and in her eyes, Lin is more like an emotionless toy that she can buy with titles, comfort and wealth. Despite her favourable impression of China, the "King" would no longer adore and respect Lin as the Queen of Western Liang did. In this change lies Li's new understanding of China's position in the world. Until the end of the Qing Dynasty, China remained closed to the outside world and was not aware of the rapid development and industrialisation in the rest of the world, and many Chinese scholars' idea of the outside world was narrow and limited. Unlike them, Li lived in the southeast coastal area of China, one of the few areas that

were left open to foreign trade, and he had personally been overseas to trade too. Li's personal experience is reflected in *Flowers in the Mirror* as a more balanced and equal relationship between China and other countries.

Closing Remarks

Some comparative studies of *Flowers in the Mirror* and *Journey to the West* conclude that they are in the same tradition, thus believing that the Womanland in these two novels are meant to be understood in the same vein. This is true in that neither of them is free from the androcentric hierarchy of feudal China. In addition, in this sense, C. T. Hsia dismissed the argument that *Flowers in the Mirror* was a book about women's issues, maintaining that in Li's fictional world all the women are foot-bound and some of them later chose to kill themselves after the death of their husbands, as with the custom of *sati*. Some critics believe Li's creation of Womanland is a reversal of an androcentric system and the essential logic is still the domination of women. In fact, Li directs his criticism of foot-binding to a man rather than to women. On the one hand, Lin's suffering is emphasised; on the other hand, young girls' similar experiences are ignored. However, other critics hold opposite views, underscoring the radicality in *Flowers in the Mirror*. This article takes all of these opinions in mind and argues that a fair evaluation lies somewhere in between. Despite its conservatism, *Flowers in the Mirror* is more revolutionary and radical, particularly in Li's approval of female talents and his advocacy of gender equality and social progress.

The investigation of the female gaze in these novels reflects the homogeneity, sexism, and nationalism present in the society in which they were written. Wu's concept of the world is based on a rigid and imaginary China-centred frame, where Li has a comparatively better understanding of the outside world. This is reflected in the change from a China-dominated world view to a more modern perception of the world. In this sense, these light-hearted and musing classic travel stories also contain many significant hidden symbolic meanings that deserve to be further explored.

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