A Critical Analysis on the Idealism in Scholar-Beauty Fiction of Early Qing

Abstract

This study focuses on the idealism reflected in the scholar-beauty fiction (才子佳人小说) of the early Qing from the reign of Shun-chi to Kang-hsi.

Previous studies have observed the formulaic quality of character portrayal and plot in the scholar-beauty romances, resulting the characters to be archetype and the endings of the story fortold. As such, they have overlooked the implications underneath this genre of fiction. However, such a formulaic patterning of character and plot can be viewed as a portrayal of the mentality of literati or wenren (文人) in early Qing.

Romance, as defined in western criticism, is the wish-fulfilment dream. Dreams are not real, and they contradict with reality. It is through these dreams that the ambivalent feelings experienced by literati in reality is reflected. Literati in early Qing, who were deprived of opportunities of the leading role in society, now had to seek a new style of living in order to achieve personal success and immortality. In scholar-beauty romances, the plot is a quest story whereby the central character goes through one adventure after another until his goal is achieved. The quest thus represents a form of individualism, which shapes the new tradition of literati mentality.

In conclusion, literati had deviated from the traditional Confucian political norm, where the individual existed for the state. The new tradition stressed that the individual existed only for the dictates of his conscience, which is beyond and above the concerns of his society and state.