Two “Cults”: Qing and Chastity in the Ming

Terms and Names 1/29

Ming Dynasty: 1368 – 1644

Jiajing Emperor (r. 1522-1567) (11 th emp.)
Wanli Emperor (r. 1573-1620) (13th emp.)

The Three Teachings – Confucianism, Daoism & Buddhism; in the sixteenth century Taizhou School intellectuals argue for the unity of the three teachings or a syncretic approach to philosophy.

Cult of emotions/cult of qing 情 – fascination with romantic love popular in elite circles in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; spread through literati essays and contemporary works of fiction and drama; some of the hallmark works in this tradition include Tang Xianzu's drama the Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting, 1598). Valorized raw emotions as pure and located that purity in young women; part of a literati self-critique, but fiction and drama in this vein also had an important impact on literate women during late imperial times.

Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616); statesman and playwright; author of the drama Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting 牡丹亭).

Du Linliang 杜麗娘, lead female character in Peony Pavilion
Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅, lead male character in Peony Pavilion

Kun opera, or kunqu 崑曲: a genre of Chinese opera that developed in the mid-sixteenth century. Based on local folk tunes and the dialect of the Suzhou region, popularity of the opera genre very quickly spread throughout China. It came to be known as the elite or classical drama by the end of the Ming dynasty.

Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664); a famous courtesan; lover of the Ming loyalist martyr Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-1647); later married to the poet and statesman Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664); celebrated as an excellent poet among late Ming literati; was known to have dressed in men's clothing as part of her individualist, eccentric style.

Cult of widow chastity – becomes more and more important between the 12th and 15th centuries; encourages widows to prove their fidelity to a husband through permanent widowhood and/or suicide; by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has spread to all levels of the social hierarchy.

Yang Tinghe 楊廷和 (1459-1529), Grand Secretary during the first half of the Jiajing reign; remonstrates with the emperor to carry out sacrifices to imperial lineage in the traditional way; one of the leading officials caught up in the Rites Controversy.

Hai Rui 海瑞 (1513-1587), as a minor official he memorializes the throne with a harsh indictment of the emperor. Before sending in his memorial, he buys himself a coffin. Nearly dies in prison. Comes to symbolize the morally upright scholar-official – willing to sacrifice his own life as a kind of moral suasion against errant, abusive autocratic power. Becomes the subject of a historical drama written by Wu Han in the 1960s, which serves as a veiled critique of Mao Zedong. Criticism of this play is one of the first salvos in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).