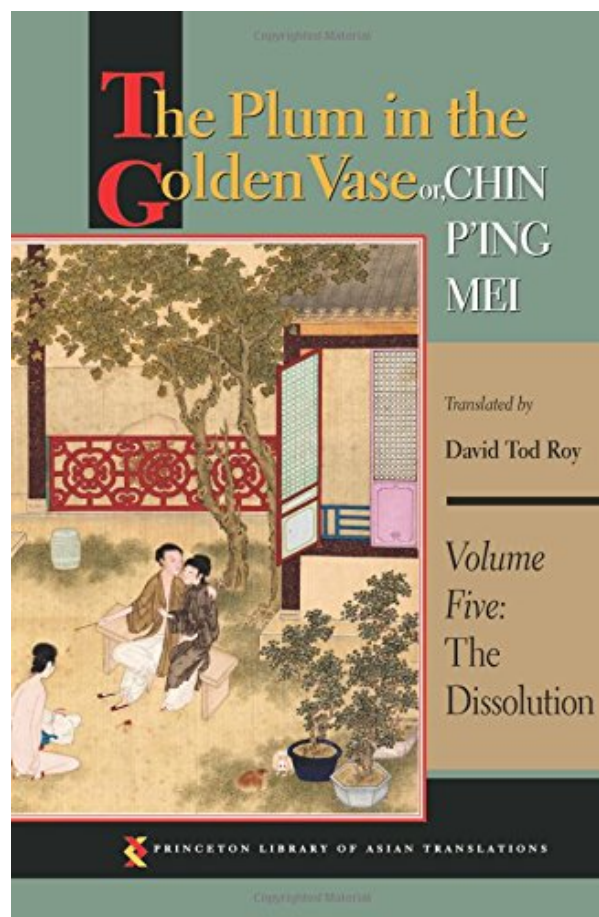
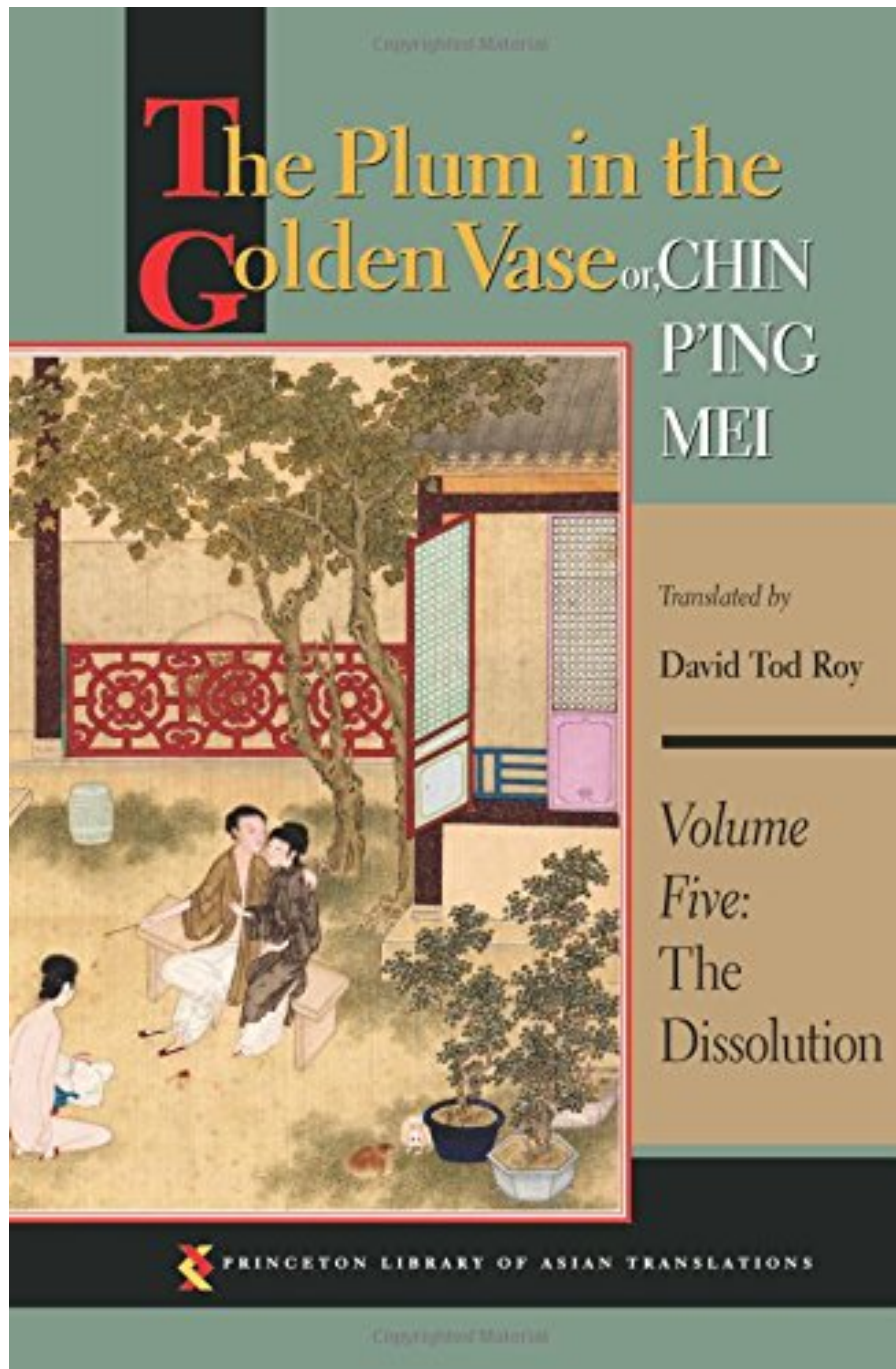


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Review

One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2014

One of The Wall Street Journal Bookshelf Best Books of 2013, chosen by Tash Aw

"The story sprawls. There are more than eight hundred named characters, from high officials and military commanders to peddlers and prostitutes, with actors, tailors, monks and nuns, fortunetellers, acrobats, and many others, even cats and dogs, in between. Roy helps us keep track of everyone in a fifty-six-page 'cast of characters.' . . . In the original woodblock printing of the text, characters follow one another, without punctuation, no matter their source. Modern printings provide punctuation, but Roy goes further by devising a system of indentation and differing type sizes to set off allusions, poems, and songs. With this editorial help, the translation is actually easier to read than the original."--Perry Link, *New York Review of Books*

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This is the fifth and final volume in David Roy's celebrated translation of one of the most famous and important novels in Chinese literature. *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei* is an anonymous sixteenth-century work that focuses on the domestic life of Hsi-men Ch'ing, a corrupt, upwardly mobile merchant in a provincial town, who maintains a harem of six wives and concubines. The novel, known primarily for its erotic realism, is also a landmark in the development of the narrative art form--not only from a specifically Chinese perspective but in a world-historical context.

This complete and annotated translation aims to faithfully represent and elucidate all the rhetorical features of the original in its most authentic form and thereby enable the Western reader to appreciate this Chinese masterpiece at its true worth.

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A panoply of characters from ancient China who are still amongst us today.

By Laszlo Hopp

This is review of all 5 volumes of the *Plum in the Golden Vase*

At one time this Ming Dynasty story was one of the four most revered books of classic Chinese literature. Then, some 200 years later, the *Dreams of the Red Mansion* came along and joined the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *Outlaws of the Marsh* as the last one of the four pillars of classic Chinese literature. There is a reason however that the *Plum in the Golden Vase* kept its eminent position in Chinese literature and many today refer to it as the "fifth" great classic Chinese novel.

The book was written in the mid-sixteenth century but depicts the life of a fictive well-to-do family from the twelfth century Song Dynasty. As such, I don't know if the story reflects Chinese society from the Ming or the Song era. - How much difference was between the two, anyway? - Regardless, it is a meticulously detailed account of a long-ago time from a "far away" corner of the world--far away for the Western reader, that is.

It almost doesn't matter how old the story is because it comes across as a timeless, and in many respects a surprisingly modern master piece.

Like a modern day reality TV show, although with more candor, the book gives an uncensored insight into the life of the licentious main character, Hsi-men Ch'ing and the boom followed by the rapid disintegration of his household. Inside the house as well as in the outside world endless merriment alternates with heartbreaking calamity. Phony friendships, corruption, lasciviousness, avarice, alcoholism, and foul play abound but refreshingly upright administrators, loyal employees, and honorable businessmen make this fictive world realistic and pulsating.

Hsi-men Ch'ing runs a well diversified business operation focusing on pharmaceuticals, real estate, and silk trade. We get an intimate look into his business practices, which have two hallmarks: cozying up with the more powerful and being Machiavellian toward the weak. It is clear that in those days both accepting and offering bribery were intrinsic to the business and legal world.

How things haven't changed!

Corrupt as the social organization of the time seems and hypocritical as the private life of the household may appear, the author manages to keep a sense of balance between the dominating "bad" and the occasional "good." This concept of balance that permeates the book is perhaps best appreciated in the multi-layered character development, but more on that later.

With the great care expected from a successful businessman, Hsi-men Ch'ing assembles a vibrating assortment of six women including a principle wife and five concubines. In addition, he leaves very few house maids untouched, some of whom become important characters in the story - most notably Ch'un-mei, the principle maid of the master's favorite concubine, P'an Chin-lien. Hsi-men Ch'ing's interest is not limited to his immediate household but includes singing girls from the "licensed" quarter, the better looking wives of his employees, and even a few of his boy servants. This wild, sexually charged aspect of the story has given the Plum in the Golden Vase the reputation of being "pornographic."

Indeed, the sexual adventures of Hsi-men Ch'ing and a few secondary characters are depicted in such graphic detail that many contemporary erotic novels would pale in comparison. The spectrum of mischievous sexual actions is mainly heterosexual but some male homosexuality is also depicted. Love potions and sexual toys abound and an occasional allusion to borderline sadomasochistic act can also be encountered. There are a few situations that may trigger a sense of disgust in most readers. However, even the most graphic details don't feel as "self-serving" claptraps--far more than that, they illustrate how desperately the women of those days tried to please their men; and, the women had very good reason for this. Starting from the simplest maidservers all the way up to the principle wife of the master, women at that time were defenseless, shall we say "naked," without their men's good will.

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Warning: Potential spoiler!

I dare to propose that the incredible vulnerability of women of those days is the real tragedy and the primary conflict in the book. By the end, the whole household of Hsi-men Ch'ing, including the remaining four concubines (one of them died earlier) end up with unspeakable misery after the sexual consumption takes the master's life. Even Wu Yueh-niang, his dignified widowed wife who preserved her high social status after Hsi-men Ch'ing death, has to endure humiliation at one point in the story.

One of the major appeals of the book is the rich variety of human relationships. The focus is primarily on gender liaisons but everyday alliance and rivalry as well as master-servant (think of boss-subordinate in today's world) affiliations are all an important part of the complex story.

Although Hsi-men Ch'ing has no concept of fidelity and shows favoritism among the many women he interacts with, his treatment of most other women seems fair in his own way. Despite his debauchery, the care Hsi-men Ch'ing displays toward Wu Yueh-niang during her times of hardship is almost moving. In her turn, Wu Yueh-niang remains fiercely dedicated to her husband, obediently accepting Hsi-men Ch'ing's right to the five concubines, maidservants, and scores of singing girls from the licensed quarters. She only gets mildly agitated when Hsi-men Ch'ing gets involved with women outside this circle; and this happens a lot.

The relationship between Hsi-men Ch'ing and his favorite concubine, P'an Chin-lien bares the hallmark of constant jealousy on the part of the woman. Her incessant attempts to manipulate him meets Hsi-men Ch'ing's various efforts to appease her, making the two a very dynamic couple indeed.

Among the women of the household we will witness plenty of gossip, jealousy, competitiveness, malice, and even viciousness, but they also display genuine kindness and generosity toward each-other in critical times.

Some of the more intriguing relationships form between P'an Chin-lien and her confidante, the maidservant Chun-mei; the two main concubines, Chin-lien and Li P'ing-erh; or Hsi-men Ch'ing's son-in-law, Ch'en Ching-chi, and his wife. The nature of the relationships varies from tender to caring, from suspicious to brutally abusive from flirtatious to adulterous.

What truly made this book memorable for me was the wide spectrum of masterfully constructed characters.

Warning: Potential spoiler!

Hsi-men Ch'ing is introduced first as an unscrupulous criminal, responsible for the death of at least one man and covering up for the murder of another. Yet, he is really not a murderous criminal rotten to his soul. Rather, he becomes a Casanova of the East - or was it Casanova who became the Hsi-men Ch'ing of the West? - who continues to conquer various women using his power, influence and wealth. Admittedly however, he does possess an irresistible charm and great sexual mastery. In his business dealings Hsi-men Ch'ing is ruthless but knows when fairness serves his best interest. One cannot help but give credit to this scoundrel of a man for keeping a large family and business enterprise together. Strangely enough I could not help feeling moved by the way Hsi-men Ch'ing conducted himself on his death bed while trying to reassure the subsistence of his "empire" after his demise.

Warning: Potential spoiler!

Undoubtedly the second main character of the book is Hsi-men Ch'ing's most favored concubine, P'an Chin-lien. Blessed with an irresistible physical beauty she is by far the most sinister female character driven by uncontrollable selfishness, murderous single-mindedness and plain cruelty. She is capable of forming only a single meaningful and loyal relationship with her maidservant, Chun-mei. P'an Chin-lien has a voracious sexual appetite unmatched by anyone but Hsi-men Ch'ing himself. Without a second thought, P'an Chin-lien cheats on her dedicated benefactor and eventually harms him with her excessive sexuality. Being an exceptionally clever woman, P'an Chin-lien cunningly outsmarts nearly all her adversaries thus maintaining herself in the highest possible status until the very end. One of her adversaries however proves to be too much even for her smart, calculating mind...

P'an Chin-lei's maid and confidante, Chun-mei, is another remarkable female character. She becomes a virtual mirror image of her mistress both in shrewdness, egoism, cruelty, and even sexual conduct. Her adventurous life becomes the focus of the last volume, titled *The Dissolution*.

Wu Yueh-niang, the wife of Hsi-men Ch'ing, becomes the matriarch of the household at a fairly young age. Until late into the story, she comes across as a middle age women but actually she is only in her late twenties. In the early part of the story Wu Yueh-niang seems somewhat indecisive and vulnerable but toward the end she "grows into her role" as the person in charge. Her fierce loyalty to an undeserving husband is respectable as is her overall benevolence and honorable conduct with others.

The fifth concubine, or the "sixth lady," Li Ping-erh, is a worthy competitor to P'an Chin-lei both in appearance and intelligence. She is likable with a gentle, compassionate nature. The latter makes her vulnerable to P'an Chin-lei's incessant cabals and at the end not even Hsi-men Ch'ing, who recognizes her values, can save her from the wickedness of jealousy.

Warning: Potential spoiler!

The last character worth a few words is Hsi-men Ch'ing's son-in-law, Ch'en Ching-chi, by far the book's most deplorable figure. He sins in many different ways and in every possible situation. Despite coming from a respectable family and enjoying the sympathy of multiple helping hands during his fall, Ch'en Ching-chi continues to tumble to the bottom of the garbage pit. Ironically fate catches up and he meets a well deserved

end just when good fortune plans to give him yet another crooked opportunity.

The language of the book is simple and direct without any sense of sugarcoating or disingenuous dramatization. The narration will feel unfamiliar to most of today's readers with its painstakingly meticulous descriptions of clothing, interiors, and scenery. The narrator seems compelled to inform the reader about every detail, as if an invisible live microphone or video camera were following the characters. At times the dialogues have the distinct feel of a monotonous word-by-word court transcript forcing the reader to skip lines or even whole paragraphs. I found this same narrative style in the other four classic Chinese novels as well. This exhaustive storytelling, along with the tendency to rehashing events already supposed to be known to the reader slow the flow and dampens the pleasure of the reading. With all fairness it has to be admitted however that hidden behind the narrative quirks there are sections where the writing becomes scintillating with moving tenderness, some of the boldest sexual explicitness or chilling brutality.

There are many poems in the book. I estimate that as much as 20-25% of the text may be in poetry. This may balance the simplicity of the language for some, or may make it harder to read for others. Regardless how one looks at them, but the poems are an organic part of the book. Each of the 100 chapters starts with a short introductory poem and ends with a brief concluding one. Within the passages there are multiple additional poems, some as long as 4-5 pages. The poetry plays various roles in the book. The opening poems seem to set the mood for the chapter, the closing ones tend to summarize the events often with a hint of moral lesson. The embedded poems serve mostly an esthetic, decorative role. Other times, they provide none-essential detail and moral messages, whereas in some instance the poems advance the storyline. This latter kind of poems makes the events easier to understand and as such, they are worth reading. Here is an example of a short moralizing poem:

"In painting a tiger, you can paint the skin,
but can't paint the bones;
In knowing people, you know their faces,
but you can't know their hearts."

All in all, reading the poems is optional but in my opinion they add a great deal to the overall gratification. Instead of skipping the poems, one can skim through them and read more carefully those that capture one's fancy - which is what I did.

The book is richly illustrated with drawings. I enjoyed them because they helped to place myself in the physical reality of the characters.

This magnificent story sometimes has been described as pornographic. To me pornography is depicting sexual act with the purpose of stimulating sexual desire alone. The multifaceted storyline and carefully drawn assembly of characters of this epic story however do not play on one's sexuality rather, they stimulate contemplation on life. Who are we? What opportunities do life present for us, and which ones we feel most comfortable pursuing? Which of the panoply of characters in the book we would like to emulate or which one of them could become a good friend, partner, colleague of ours?

The Plum in the Golden Vase is a deeply philosophical story worth the attention of everyone. If the length of 2400+ pages is intimidating, one may try some of the abridged versions although I can't promise the same intellectual satisfaction the full version gave me in David Tod Roy's translation.

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful.
Journey's End

By Steven Moore

In a perfect world, the appearance of the final volume of Roy's monumental translation of Xiaoxiaosheng's great novel would be trumpeted on the front page of the "New York Times Book Review." It is not only perhaps the greatest novel in Chinese literature--Cao Xueqin's "Dream of Red Mansions" is its only rival--but it is one of the earliest examples of the realistic novel that some literary critics would argue didn't appear until the 18th century, and of the sexually explicit realistic novel that wouldn't appear until the 20th. All lovers of world literature should scoop up all five volumes of the novel and bow before Dr. Roy's stupendous achievement.

My only complaint--of this and the preceding four volumes--is that the author's name doesn't appear on the jacket or the title page. Can you imagine a new translation of "Don Quixote" that listed only the translator's name? It's pseudonymous ("the Scoffing Scholar of Lanling"), but not anonymous. (I see that Amazon doesn't list the author either.) Otherwise it's a beautifully produced volume with many period illustrations and copious annotations.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Roy, you've done a very good job

By alanzxw

Mr. Roy's translation of Chin P'ing Mei has been the best one I've ever read and I love the full translations of the whole set of the five volumes, though I've found some of the Chinese can be translated into English in other more effective ways. The most impressive points in his translation is that he does not omit any details of the sexual scenes described in the original and any sentence in the novel. It is well worth reading!

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