REFORMER, SAINT, AND SAVIOR:  
VISIONS OF THE GREAT MOTHER IN THE NOVEL  
XINGSHI YINYUAN ZHUAN  
AND ITS SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINESE  
CONTEXT*

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Abstract

The theme of the Great Mother emerges as a leitmotif in the seventeenth-century vernacular Chinese novel Xingshi yinyuan zhuang. This paper analyzes the portrayal of the protagonist Mme. Chao as a mother-figure, her transformation from a virtuous widow to a local leader, and her posthumous apotheosis, while placing her representation within the literary and historical context of the novel. The characterization of Mme. Chao as a reformer, saint, and savior in times of disaster dramatizes a millenarian ambience that appears to have prevailed during the last years of the Ming dynasty, reflecting the apprehension of the apocalypse and the search for a new kind of moral leadership.

On the eve of her ascension to heaven, Mme. Chao 晴夫人 (née Zheng 鄭氏) takes a bath, dons her robes, and sits down to wait. Some female relatives keep vigil by her side. At night a sweet scent and music fill the air. Mme. Chao, aged 104, closes her eyes. Undergoing transformation in the manner of holy people, she attains immortality.1 These events in Chapter 90 of the seventeenth-century Chinese novel Xingshi yinyuan zhuang 頂世姻緣傳 (hereafter: Yinyuan zhuang) form the climax to the story of the heroine Mme. Chao, which spans almost the entire novel.

The story of Mme. Chao can teach us—both modern literary critics and historians—several things about seventeenth-century China.

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1 Xi Zhou sheng 馮周生 (pseud.), Xingshi yinyuan zhuang 頂世姻緣傳 (hereafter, 1722), 3 vols. (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985), 90.1288.

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When looking at Mme. Chao as a literary construct and trying to reconstruct the historical background, we encounter voices and visions from the world of seventeenth-century China. These voices and visions provide us with rare and precious insights into the world as seventeenth-century Chinese minds may have perceived it. They give us access to the dreams and nightmares of an era through the eyes of contemporary observers. We shall attempt to read fiction as historical source material shedding light on the informal and unofficial aspects of traditional Chinese society, the vernacular culture as opposed to the imperially ordained culture of China. This analytical approach aims to explore the intersection of history and fiction, to understand how the literary text communicates its perception of the world out of which it emerged. We shall try to identify the voices and trace the visions that Mme. Chao’s story can provide through critical comparison with its reconstructed literary and historical context. These voices and visions may allow us to witness the mood and ambience of an era in the long past.

The *Yiyuan zhuang* ranks among the longest traditional Chinese vernacular novels ever written. The sagas of two families from Shandong 山东 province, one called Chao 蕭, the other Di 迪, are played out over one hundred chapters. The two main plot strands—the ‘Chao plot’ dealing with the rise and fall of the Chao family and the ‘Di plot’ dramatizing the fate of the Di family—divide the novel into two uneven parts which are structurally linked through the theme of reincarnation and karmic retribution. Crime and debauchery put an early end to the life of the first hero, Chao Yuan 晏源, the son of Mme. Chao. Chao, but he is later reincarnated as the second hero, Di Xichen 迪西恒 who has to atone for Chao Yuan’s sins. A brief interlude in Chapters 23 and 24 marks the first transition from the Chao plot to the Di plot, depicting a small village in Shandong as a utopian paradise of the past and an image of the ideal world in stark contrast to the world of decadence, extravagance, expanding market towns, and booming commercial centers inhabited by the Chao and Di families.

All we know about the author is his pen name: Xi Zhou sheng

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1 See *The Zizhi Tongjian* 27.6.378; Yenn Wu, “Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World: A Literary Study of *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang*” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986), 40.
2 For the early limit, see Sun Kaidi 孫佳吉, *Yijing kaozheng* *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* de xin*’*一計考略 (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1935), 6; for the late limit (a reference to two copies of the novel circulating among literati in the Jiangnan region, see) Yan Quangui 楊光啟, *Tongshi juan* (Shanghai: Shanghai Academic Press, 1935), 3.123-29.
3 See Otsuka Hitokata 村上秋生, *Kono seikado no seishun* (Tokyo: Kyoko shoin, 1987), 124; Yenn Wu, “*Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* de banben wenti” *Jingjiao jingzhong* 17.2 (1980): 97-107; Xu Lingzhong 徐玲仲, *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* *yizhu xianhun* *he yueyao* *keshu* *jingshui* *zhe* *yuan* *zhen* *hui* *zhe* *xu* *o* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1998), 1-87.
4 See Hu Shi 胡适, *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang kaozheng* (Beijing jingzhong* xi* bo* shi* xuan* 2) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1985), 64-70 and 70 (1955): 45-48; Wu, “Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World,” 19-58; Cao Dawei 曹偉, “*Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* zuo yu Mingzong bian*’*” *Jingjiao jingzhong* 17.2 (1980), 64-77; Zhang Quying 张清颖, *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* *xi* *bo* *shen* *zheng* *hu* (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 1991), 1-32; Xu, *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* *yizhu xianhun* *he yueyao* *keshu* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1998), 56-76; Yunnishizhuo 明世著, *Shi* *li* *quan* *xi*, in Xi, *Xingyi yiyuan zhuang* *yizhu xianhun* *he yueyao* *keshu*, 1-5.
between 1628 and 1648, but the text lacks any explicit reference to the demise of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the subsequent events. Whether it was written in the last years of the Ming or the early years of the Qing, the text reflects voices and visions steeped in the late Ming world, an era of turmoil and ferment that witnessed corruption in the imperial bureaucracy, rebellion from within the empire, and the invasion of foreign forces at the frontiers, heralding the collapse of the last native Chinese dynasty.

With its fierce scrutiny of provincial society, the *Tianyuan zhuan* appears as a novel of manners and has been called a “novel of social realism,” but the issue of realism proves problematic because the text explicitly erases the borders between fiction and truth, making the fictional and the historical coexist in the narrative as complementary parts rather than opposites. The *Tianyuan zhuan* links its play on history and fiction, reality and illusion, with a positive/negative axis, as in good and bad, virtue and vice, the ideal and its antithesis. The contrast of positive and negative morality in the world becomes most clear-cut in the intersecting utopian Chapters 23 and 24. This sketch of a lost utopia in paradoxical antithesis to the narrative present depicted at length in the remaining ninety-eight chapters suggests the reading of the text as a satirical anti-utopia, juxtaposing the image of an ideal world with its satirical inversion: the grotesque nightmare of anti-utopia. While the depiction of the utopian images remains brief, the bulk of the narrative explores in great detail, as if under the satirical magnifying glass, a topsy-turvy world of inverted norms and values, featuring the breakdown of Confucian morals and manners. The disintegration of the familiar old world is portrayed in vivid images of the burlesque, comic and grotesque and with heavy irony.

The identification of the narrative voice in the *Tianyuan zhuan* plays an important part in the present analysis. The voice of the narrator appears in many guises, parading as a moralist, preacher, satirist, humorist, and caricaturist. One striking feature of the narrative voice is its stressing the topicality of events in the story. By referring to “nowadays” (jin今), it fabricates the illusion of topical references linking the world in the narrative to the contemporary present time of narrating. It frequently juxtaposes the present with the past while projecting past and present as antithetical images. Perceived past and present divide according to moral criteria. The present represents a fallen world in contrast to a morally intact past. Parodic wordiness and satire relate to the dystopian mode which dominates the exploration of the present. By contrast, brevity in description and seriousness in the narrative voice relate to the utopian images which appear in Chapters 23 and 24 and in the brief reminders of the ideal interspersed throughout the entire narrative. The perceived present also embeds positive visions in a series of negative scenes, as in particular the story of Mme. Chao shows.

In the *Tianyuan zhuan*, the fear of impending doom for the dynasty and a millenarian atmosphere create utopian dreams of how to save the world amidst the nightmare of perceived reality. Mme. Chao, a widow from Wucheng county 武城縣 in Shandong, appears as one of the key figures. Although she takes part in the grotesque anti-utopian drama of the Chao plot, she appears as one of the very few positive and ideal characters. As the narrative progresses, Mme. Chao gains increasing importance as an ideal and serious character. A reformer, saint, and savior in a world threatened by the apocalypse, she emerges as the single most utopian character in the narrative. While criticizing the decadent world around her and painting a grotesque, and therefore comic, picture of society, the narrative voice advertises the norms and values Mme. Chao represents in a serious tone, with little recourse to irony or satire.

The narrative voice represents human follies and vices in carnivalesque imagery with warning and apocalyptic overtones. In deploiring the current state of affairs and condemning Confucian norms and values, the narrative voice reveals itself as a Confucian conservative. As the fictional world succumbs to satirical inversion and hyperbolic perversion, the story appears as both

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9 The fictional character Li Cuirun 李翠然 from Chapter 31 of the *Tianyuan zhuan* closely resembles the historical scholar-official Li Zhengxu 李政修 (styled Cuirun 萊翁) who held the post of Assistant Surveillance Commissioner and served as head of the General Surveillance Circuit of Jinan between 1628 and 1634; compare Sun Kai, in *TZ*, 1521-22. The *Tianyuan zhuan* also refers to the late Ming woman leader Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 (ca. 1574-1648) as a contemporary personage; see *TZ*, 49.720.
13 For example, *TZ*, 20.304. There are numerous other references; Chapters 23 to 29 depict the most important contrast of “then” and “now.”
didactic and entertaining. The declared and implied thematic patterns, however, frequently break down and open up glimpses of individuals, not rhetorical figures. The moral shock to a contemporary reader, then, may have consisted in recognizing anti-utopia as the world around him. As we, too, lose sight of rhetorical figures and frameworks, we gain a sharper view of perceived reality in seventeenth-century Chinese imagination.

Fictional and non-fictional sources may differ in their style and rhetoric, but fictional narrative and historical evidence both have an arbitrary relationship to historical reality as they are perceived and narrated by someone. Both therefore constitute forms of discourse that can be equally decoded and deconstructed. The reality of seventeenth-century China that we can know today exists only as a narrated or perceived reality, in the voices of various observers, in reconstructed images from surviving sources.

The concept of perception is thus of crucial importance to the present study. We can tackle the problem of perception in textual analysis by identifying the voices that communicate to us from the past by reconstructing their meaning in critical comparison with contextual (both literary and non-literary) sources. Chinese orthodox historiography, as, for example, in government records, represent the official version of history. Official sources leave us with a version of history that projects self-images in accordance with the current state ideology of the tendentious bias of their authors. Fictional accounts, too, represent versions of perceived history. But they speak out where other sources remain silent, focusing on people, actions, or situations that may not have merited the attention of other records. They deal with a subculture as opposed to the officially recognized culture, with vernacular history in contrast to the official version of history.

Seventeenth-century Chinese readers may not have built shrines for the character of Mme. Chao, but they and their contemporaries did venerate similar figures. Not only did they idolize and pray to female immortals, but even a literary heroine such as Du Liniang 杜麗娘 from Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 《牡丹亭》 Mudan ting 牡丹亭 (first published in 1589) also became the object of her readers’ adoration and adulation. Such events were all part of the culture that furnished the mind of the anonymous author as he sat down to compose the T’ien-yuan chuan.

For the present purpose, it does not primarily matter how much of Mme. Chao’s story really happened or whether seventeenth-century readers believed her story to be true or not. What matters is to hear the voices of the past speak out about their world and to reconstruct their emotional and moral universe. In the words of the French historian Fernand Braudel, history appears as “a song for many voices,” although some voices will drown others, and reality will not always fit into a harmonized setting for solo and chorus.

The following analysis presents an attempt to listen to some of these voices, aiming to gain access to the popular imagination of China’s past.

Visions of Female Immortals in the Late Ming Context

Late Ming citizens witnessed events similar to the apotheosis of Mme. Chao in the T’ien-yuan chuan—or so they claimed. According to two contemporary scholar-officials, Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-90) and Fan Shouji 范守己 (1542-ca. 1611), a hundred thousand people watched in Taicang 太倉, Nan Zhi 南直隸 province, on the Double Ninth festival (the ninth day of the ninth month on the Chinese calendar/October 17) of 1580 as the twenty-one-year-old widow Wang Daozhen 王道貞, alias Tan Yangzi 覃陽子 (1558-80), underwent transformation and ascended to heaven as an immortal.

Tan Yangzi, the daughter of the Grand Secretary Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534-1611), lost her fiancé when she was only seventeen

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years of age. Claiming the status of widowhood, she subsequently moved into rooms of her own. She had visions of conversing with female immortals and deities, among them the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wangmu 西王母) and the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音.

Contemporary literati and officials became Tan Yangzi’s disciples, among them her father Wang Xiju; her uncle, the vice-commissioner of education Wang Dingjue 王鼎爵 (1536-85); the writer Wang Shizhen and his younger brother, the poet and minister Wang Shimou 王世懋 (1536-88); the prefectural judge Pan Shouji; the scholar-official Shen Miao 石濤 (1539-82); the magistrate, poet and dramatist Tu Long 唐隆 (1542-1600); the chancellor of Nanjing National University Feng Mengzheng 鳳夢楨 (1546-1605); the scholar Qu Ruji 繼汝稷 (1548-1610); the scholar-official Guan Zhidao 葛志道 (1536-1608); and the Hanlin Academician and minister Zhao Yongxian 趙用賢 (1535-96), all holders of the highest academic degree 頜士 进士. She also had female followers. Modern historians have marvelled at her appeal to high and low. She must have offered something her contemporaries longed for. Her teachings center on morality, the return to simplicity, and serenity (tian dao 天道). She preached salvation for the world and used her power to heal illnesses. Her hagiographers link moral reform to the image of healing the body. The Tanwuan zhan, too, relates healing the body, curing the ills of the world, restoring morality in society, and re-establishing order in government.

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8 On Wang Xiju, see Goodridge and Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1376-79.
20 See Goodridge and Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 138-40 (on Zhao), 343 (on Peng), 703 (on Qiu), 740 (on Guan), 1192 (on Shen), 1324-27 (on Tu), 1376 (on Wang Dinjue), 1406-8 (on Wang Shimou).
21 For example, Tu Long’s wife and mother, see Tu Long 唐隆, Baiju ji 白鶴集 (Taipei: Weiwen 1977), 8:160-17a.
22 See Goodridge and Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1427.
23 Yanzhong shaven xuan, 78.14b. In Fang Shouji’s “Tianyang xinshu zhan” (32.16b, 19b), dan is rendered as 對.

Tan Yangzi was not the only female to attain immortality in the late Ming period. The scholar-official Ye Shaojuan 葉紹袁 (1589-1648) and his wife, the poet and teacher Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635), were convinced that their two daughters, the teenage poet and painter Ye Xiaolin 葉小蓮 (1616-32) and her sister Ye Wanwan 葉婉婉 (1610-33), had undergone apotheosis after their early deaths at the ages of 16 and 22. Ye Shaojuán affirms in his writings that he and his wife began to worship them as domestic goddesses. Men were primarily responsible for creating such visions of goddesses by immortalizing their womenfolk in their writings, but gentry women like Shen Yixiu also believed in these goddesses and actively participated in the cult surrounding them. Ye Xiaolin’s legend lived on in public imagination as the fame of her poetry and paintings spread. In the seventeenth century, both male and female readers valorized Ye Xiaolin, along with Tan Yangzi and the literary heroine Du Liniang from the play Mudan ting, as female deities.

Despite the grotesque and comic nature of the Tanwuan zhan, the narrative voice describes Mme. Chao’s apotheosis in a serious and solemn tone, rather like the rhetoric used by late Ming literati to report on the phenomenon of Tan Yangzi. The apotheosis of Mme. Chao thus represents more than just a figment of one author’s imagination. It captures the ambience of an era while opening for us a window on the discourse and common currency among a wider circle of late Ming literati and their womenfolk.

The Goddess

After ascension to immortality, Mme. Chao becomes the Mother Goddess (niangniang 娘娘) of Mount Yi 山. This range of hills southeast of Zou county 趙縣 in southern Shandong is famous for the visit of the first emperor Qin Shi huangdi 秦始皇帝 (r. 221-210 BCE) in 220 BCE. Mme. Chao presides over a site of historic importance for state religion. In this respect, she resembles the mother goddess of Mount Tai 泰山 in Shandong. The cult of the mother goddess here too includes the imperial dimension. Recent
Male and female pilgrims from commoners and scholar elite families swarm over Mount Yi ever after. Mme. Chao’s concern for the welfare of the people transcends all social distinctions. In this respect, Mme. Chao also resembles one of the most distinguished scholars, the archetypal mother goddess that would precede all other deities. So they created Wusheng laomu as the mother of Xi Wangmu and Guanyin. The cult of the Eternal Venerable Mother reached a peak in the mid-warring period (1573-1620). At that time she appeared as an aged mother goddess who had created the world and now strove to bring salvation to its inhabitants, her straying children. She became the central deity in the White Lotus sectarian movement of the late Ming. Seventeenth-century sectarian writings equate Wusheng laomu with the goddess of Mount Tai. Modern scholarship has placed Tan Yangzi too into the context of Wusheng laomu. The Tianguan zaoren does not express the connection with Wusheng laomu, but Mme. Chao embodies a similar archetype within a millenarian atmosphere. Sectarian believers held that the Eternal Venerable

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28. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.

29. TiZ 90.1288.


32. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.


34. TiZ 93.1330.

35. See TiZ 93.341-46.


38. Cf. Overmeyer, Folk Buddhist Religion, 130, 142.


40. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.


42. TiZ 93.1330.

43. See TiZ 93.341-46.


46. Cf. Overmeyer, Folk Buddhist Religion, 130, 142.

47. This movement frequently led to uprisings; one occurred in Shandong in 1622. See Barend ter Haar, The White Lotus Teaching in Chinese Religious History (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1992), 227-30.

48. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.


50. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.


52. TiZ 93.1290. See Shi ji, 47.1905.
Mother would send a messenger deity when natural disasters and human wickedness had caused disorder and chaos at the end of one kalpa, or era:

The Three Powers [Heaven, Earth, and Man] will not be in harmony. When Heaven is not in harmony, the stars and planets will roll about chaotically. When Earth is not in harmony, the five grains will not grow. When Man is not in harmony, the people will be in great distress.\(^\text{32}\)

The followers of the sectarian movement imagined the apocalypse as a time of calamities such as flood, fire, or wind. But the Eternal Venerable Mother would protect and save her believers. As promised by the precious scroll of the Buddha of Medicine Tōshi rui kai benyuan houjuan 藥師如來本願 brunette, printed in 1543 by donations from one imperial concubine and five princesses, when the people of the mortal world "suddenly meet the Eternal Mother they will escape from their suffering and as children enter the Lotus Pool."\(^\text{43}\) She would show how to survive and return to paradise.\(^\text{44}\)

The Taiyuan zhum presents a similar dystopia. A flood of almost biblical dimensions engulfing the depraved new market towns of Shandong also affects Mme. Chao's native Wucheng county and spills over the whole empire. The narrating voice notes that the days of prosperity and harmony (taiping 太平) have come to an end.\(^\text{45}\) A series of natural disasters plagues Wucheng: During a drought, the magistrate summons a Daoist to induce rainfall.\(^\text{46}\) But the evil practices of the Daoist merely exacerbate the situation. When the people of Wucheng pray for rain at Mme. Chao's shrine, the elements return to their old ways and rain ultimately is withheld. A good harvest follows. Later, a monk confirms in trance that it was indeed the Goddess of Mount Yi who sent rain. Mme. Chao here functions like the ancient Chinese mother goddess Xi Wangmu in a popular cult in or near Shandong in 3 BCE: as the

\(^{32}\) Gengchong deng 官中壇, National Palace Museum, Taiwan (1815), trans. in Naquin, Millenarian Rebellion in China, 12.

\(^{33}\) Cited in Zheng Zhenduo 鄭建華, Zhongguo zuowei Shi 中國作史文史 (Shanghai: Shanghai shijia, 1984), 2:314.

\(^{34}\) Cf. Naquin, Millenarian Rebellion in China, 12.

\(^{35}\) YYZ, 32:463. Taiping, the realm of Supreme Harmony was first depicted in the Lishu changpi and Quangci. See Lishu changpi jiaoxue 历史长沙经释 ed., Chen Qiyou 陈奇猷 (Shanghai: Xuejin 1984), 1:44-65; Quangci jiaoxue 长沙经释 ed., Guo Qingfan 郭清凡 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1961), 13-471.

\(^{36}\) YYZ, 93.1331-33.


\(^{44}\) YYZ, 93.1330-31.

\(^{45}\) See YYZ, 23:949-51.

\(^{46}\) YYZ, 90.1277, 1290.

\(^{47}\) Chao Yuan forbids Mme. Chao and Ms. Ji to visit temples while going on pilgrimages with Zhenge, YYZ 2.19, 11.155.
intelligence, debating skills, and classical scholarship. High ministers sought their advice on government affairs. In his household instructions, Tianshi jiaxun 諸尼家訓, the model for a genre of household instructions in later centuries, the Confucianist Yan Zhitui 諸之推 (531-91) assigned women to their place inside the house, but he nevertheless conceded:

If a woman has intelligence, talent, and a good grasp of ancient and modern literature, then she should assist her husband and make up for his shortcomings.

In the late Ming, Tan Yangzi’s mother, Mme. Zhu 朱氏人 (1533-98), would counsel her husband, the Wanli emperor’s Grand Secretary Wang Xijue, about important affairs of state: “She would quote ancient and recent examples and ponder the problem from all aspects.” Unlike such women, Mme. Chao lacks literary and a classical education. But she has an intuitive knowledge of morality, giving her wisdom and moral superiority. Both her husband and her son pay dearly (suffering demotion from scholar-elite status and premature death respectively) for not listening to her advice and for failing to reform. Like the ideal patron of scholarship, Mr. Li 李大郎, in the utopian Chapter 23, Mme. Chao comes from a rich and illiterate commoner family, but she intuitively knows how to treat a scholar and teacher with respect. In late Ming terms, her innate knowledge—the concept of liangzi 良知 as Mencius (孟子) defined it—makes her one of Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 (1472-1529) modern sages.67

62 Yan Zhitui 諸之推, Tianshi jiaxun 諸氏家訓 (Shanghai: Guji chuban she, 1980), 1.59.
65 Tzu, 15.228.
66 Tzu, Chapters 17-19.
67 Tzu, 16.255, for her treatment of Chao Yuan’s teacher, see 92, 1307-8.

82 Zengzi 顏子, 3.33b.
Mme. Chao’s wisdom and gentleness make her an ideal wife and mother from neo-Confucian point of view. She lacks jealousy completely—like the exemplary Taisi 太姬 from the Zhou dynasty, wife of King Wen 文王 and mother of King Wu 武王, and in contrast to the shrillish spouses of the protagonists Chao Yuan and Di Xichen. Mme. Chao consents readily when her husband Chao Sixiao 操氏要求 her to take a concubine. Her model conduct is her good fortune: when both Chao Sixiao and her son Chao Yuan die, the concubine presents her with a new male heir, Chao Sixiao’s posthumous son Chao Liang 操良.

*The Widow*

After the deaths of Chao Sixiao and Chao Yuan, Mme. Chao begins to play a major part in the *Tingyuan zhuan*. Her status as Chao Sixiao’s principal wife makes her Chao Liang’s “formal mother” (*dimu* 拾母). The formal mother often played a more important role in a boy’s life than his biological mother. In a recent article on mothers and sons in late imperial China, Hsiung Ping-chen notes: “In the words and deeds of many Ming-Qing males, we find that the mother who came to mean the most was actually his *dimu*, or ‘formal mother’.”

She could exert a strong influence on the moral and intellectual education of her “formal” son. In the seventeenth century, for example, Ms. Wang 王氏 (d. 1645), the formal mother of the thinker Gu Yanwu 閔羹武 (1613-82), would read classical literature and instruct Gu Yanwu in morality. After the death of her fiancé, she lived in chaste widowhood with the Gu family, performed *gege* 剃過 (cutting flesh off one’s thigh to use for a medicinal broth) to express her devotion to her parents-in-law, pledged her life to the Ming dynasty, and starved herself to death when the Manchu army approached in 1645. Her example made Gu Yanwu a Ming loyalist.

Mme. Chao likewise devotes herself to educating her formal son. She employs him to teach Chao Yuan and encourages his Confucian studies. She trains him in showing compassion for the people and makes him join in philanthropic activities. Mme. Chao fulfills the task of guiding her son in true Confucian manner, following the classic example of Mencius’s mother, Mengmu 孟母. The Confucian tradition attributed great importance to mothers training their sons as the future elite. Liu Xiang’s *Lüü zhuan* 列女傳 places mothers at the top of the list. Yan Zhitui’s household instructions emphasize the role of mothers in the molding of their sons’ characters: “To put an end to quarreling and fighting among brothers, the exhortation of a widowed mother is more effective even than the doctrines of [the legendary empresses] Yao 姚 and Shun. In the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279), the Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) also attributed great importance to mothers in matters of education, for they could help to prepare their sons for success in the civil service.

While Mme. Chao is not successful in the education of her first son, Chao Yuan, she succeeds in turning her formal son Chao Liang into a Confucian scholar and a paragon of filial piety. Mme. Chao succeeds in educating Chao Liang because she has become a widow. She no longer has to submit to the authority of her husband or her first son—two of the most dystopian examples of the elite. As Chao Liang grows up, Mme. Chao reigns supreme in her household. As a widow she can play the role of mother to perfection.

In the eyes of Confucianists, Mme. Chao would personify a model widow. She never remarries, in accordance with the neo-Confucian ideal of chaste widowhood that gained prominence with the Song dynasty philosophers Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-85) and Cheng Yi

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70 *TZZ* 18.293.
71 Hsiung Ping-chen, "Constructing Emotions: The Bond Between Mothers and Sons in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 15.1 (1994): 88 (romanization adapted by the author).
Guoxiang's motives for murdering his cousin were to end the family line and usurp the property rights.

Like Ms. Peng, Mme. Chao, too, falls prey to the greed of her husband's clan. The members of the Chao clan introduce themselves to her as soon as Chao Suxiao and Chao Yuan are dead. The demand grain and loot her house, attempting to dispossess her. She later divides her property, giving a share to all clan members, but they continue to harass her. Moreover, a villain from Wucheng, Wei San 魏三, tries to extort money from Mme. Chao. He files a suit against her, falsely claiming Chao Liang as his son. Each time Mme. Chao finds herself at the mercy of the local magistrate—like Ms. Peng in seventeenth-century Tancheng county, whose case Huang Liuhong tried. Each time a fair magistrate appears like a Deus ex machina to rescue Mme. Chao. These narrating voices concede that this becomes possible only with the help of higher powers: Heaven does not tolerate such misconduct, and the spirits send the good magistrate in time. Upon the death of another relative, Chao Jinren 趙近仁, the rapacious members of the Chao clan seize his land and strip his widow of her inheritance. The late Ming scholar-official Liu Kun 吕坤 (1536-1618) appears exceptional in his efforts to instruct women how to claim their rights.

Life is hard for widows and orphans. It is even more pitiable if a childless widow has to remain chaste. She may receive generous treatment if she is wealthy. But who will care for her if she is poor? People cheat and harm her in all possible ways and she has nowhere to go. They persist in making false accusations before heaven. If the woman wishes to inherit her husband's property, she should insist on proceeding according to the legal code.

The examples of Mme. Chao and Chao Jinren's widow in the Yi yuan zhen and Ms. Peng in seventeenth-century Tancheng county show how difficult it was to put Liu Kun's advice into practice. Mme. Chao, however, triumphs against all odds.
The Reformer

To Mme. Chao, widowhood also means liberation and the opportunity for leadership. Similar to Tan Yangzi in the Wanjun years, Mme. Chao gains the independence to become active in society only as a widow. She can now act outside the confines of her home and teach morality by making her conduct an example for others to emulate. In early fifteenth-century Shandong, the widow Tang Sai'er 唐赛儿 from Putai 蓬莱 rose to power in her community as a religious and military leader. On returning from her husband's grave, she decided to follow her calling, styled herself “Mother of Buddha” (fumou 佛母), and led an insurrection in 1420. The early eighteenth-century novel Nüxiàn wanshi 女仙外史 by Li Xiong 吕熊 (fl.1704) portrays her as an immortal. But unlike Tang Sai'er and other female sectarian leaders in Ming/Qing times, Mme. Chao does not instigate a rebellion. Her acts never undermine the power of the rulers and the state. On the contrary, she devotes herself to moral reform and the restoration of law and order.

Mme. Chao's deeds dramatize on the local level what the warrior widow Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 (ca. 1574-1648) did on the national scale during the last decades of the Ming dynasty. Qin Liangyu, a native of Zhongzhou 忠州 in Sichuan, first gained military fame alongside her husband, a local chieflain, when quelling a local rebellion in 1600. After his death (ca. 1615), the widow Qin Liangyu took on the leadership of her husband's army and set out to defend the nation against both native rebels and Manchu invaders. She succeeded in suppressing several local rebellions in her native Sichuan but failed to defeat the rebel leader Zhang Xianzhong 张献忠 in 1640. Qin received rank and titles (such as brigade-general, Marquis Zhongzhou 思贞侯, Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent) for her services to the empire. The last Ming emperor (Chongzhen 崇祯, Sizong 恩宗, r. 1628-44) wrote four poems in praise of her bravery and loyalty. She died of illness in 1648. The Tànyuán zhuan 誡言传 mentions the glorious widow Qin Liangyu as a contemporary of Mme. Chao's.

Similar to Qin Liangyu, Mme. Chao, too, takes over the function of her husband after his death. She acts as a mother not only to her son but also to the whole community. But while her husband Chao Sixiao, a selfish, rapacious and ruthless magistrate, fails in his role as the “father of the people,” as “mother of the people” Mme. Chao personifies the ideal Confucian “parent official” (famia guan 父母官) who acts like a parent to the people—as does the ideal magistrate in the utopian Chapter 24. She receives the emperor’s recognition and admiration, like Qin Liangyu in the years of the last Ming monarch.

Mme. Chao's native Wucheng appears as a dystopian island, the very inversion of the utopian paradise depicted in Chapters 23 and 24. When natural disasters ravage the empire, the literati elite set up relief projects everywhere—except for Wucheng. Seeing the apathy and lack of compassion among both scholar-officials and local gentry, Mme. Chao becomes active. The narrating voice stresses the Confucian dimension of her motives. As famine and cannibalism decimate the population, she cannot bear to see the suffering (sainzong shifen liurz 心中十分不忍). She displays the kind of mentality (having a mind that cannot bear to see others suffer, you bu ren ren zhi xin 有不忍人之心) Mencius attributed to the ideal ruler. By taking action, she puts into practice the Confucian concept of ideal leadership.

Mme. Chao as the landlady of Yongshan 酿山 estate in Wucheng county first saves its six to seven hundred inhabitants. She forbids her estate managers to oust a single person, counts the number of people, and orders the distribution of grain. While looting, theft, and starvation are the order of the day on all other estates, everyone at Yongshan survives unharmed. Mme. Chao turns her estate into the utopia of the model landlord, as depicted in seventeenth-century
morality books (shanshu 善書). Turning her attention to the whole community, she subsequently embarks on famine relief. She starts to sell grain well below the market price to provide food, while economizing with her resources. To aid the destitute, she runs a free soup kitchen. Upon hearing about the deprivation of the commoners at the hands of the vicious magistrate Ke Yishan 李以山, she pays the remaining tax debts on behalf of the people. She distributes rice and grain for famine relief and orders the rich to provide for the poor. Mme. Chao takes care of the orphans, the crippled, the sick, the poor, and the needy. Herself but a widow, Mme. Chao also devotes herself to protecting widows. She acts true to the spirit of King Wen's ideal state as described by Mencius and the utopia of the Great Sharing. (daxi 大同) as depicted in the Li Ji 礼記. She anticipates in spirit the sponsorship of philanthropic institutions for the protection of widows that began to flourish in the early Qing but are lacking in her world.

The scholar elite, the emperor and the narrating voice laud her as a manifestation of the bodhisattva Guanyin. The narrating voice, moreover, places her among the cream of the elite, calling her a “female Sir Fan Wenzheng 傅文正公”, alias Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989-1052), the Song dynasty scholar and philanthropist. She takes on the responsibilities the literati elite should have taken on but did not. Mme. Chao the perfect philanthropist would get full scores in the Ming/Qing morality books. As a Daoist immortal, a bodhisattva in her compassion, and a Confucian reformer of society, Mme. Chao epitomizes the syncretic utopia for excellence. The rarity of her example, moreover, reflects back on the weakness of her contemporaries: the men in power.

In perfect Confucian form, Mme. Chao stands as a model for her fellow citizens. They learn from her example, just as the author of the guidebook for magistrates, Huang Liuhong, envisaged social reform on the model of the ancient sages. She reforms not only the evil and cruel magistrate Ke Yishan but also both the rural and the urban elites of Wucheng in addition to everyone on her estate and in her soup kitchen. The powerful families in the neighborhood of Yongshan imitate her estate management. Her influence thus saves many lives among the rural population. The retired magistrate Wu Qingyun 武卿雲 in Wucheng city hears of Mme. Chao’s example and feels shame:

Such wonderful acts of charity—and we men with our high hats and broad sashes, we are not doing anything at all, while letting one woman who wears a skirt and her hair in a bun do everything! What is the use of all our masculine attire? How shameless!

He subsequently raises funds to distribute grain and runs a soup kitchen himself. Eventually, all powerful families follow suit and join in the relief work, donating rice and wood or running their own soup kitchens. Mme. Chao’s morality and generosity prevent her estate managers and aid workers from cheating. The Yi Yuan zhai 義元齋 here makes a point similar to that of the seventeenth-century morality book Huijuan 懷_or (written 1671-87) by Chen Xigu 陳錫觀 (1634-87), which depicts elderly ladies and widows as the model heads of their households: septuagenarian Mme. Yang Chengzhai 楊成齋夫人 gives much care to the well-being of her servants; Mme. Sima Wenzheng 司馬文正夫人, née Zhang 張氏, and Mme. Yuan 袁夫人 treat their servants with kindness and generosity. Never showing anger or arrogance, these ladies educate...
the members of their household by the example of their virtue.\textsuperscript{123} Mme. Chao likewise succeeds in regulating her household and restoring order in her community. Her household and her soup kitchen resemble the philanthropic inn run by a retired chancellor, an ideal member of the literati elite, as depicted in the utopian Chapter 23: flourishing true to the spirit of the ancient Chinese concept of the ideal world.\textsuperscript{126}

Patron of Healers

Apart from promoting moral soundness and harmony in her world, Mme. Chao also helps to heal illnesses. As in the lore of Tan Yangzi, Mme. Chao's story combines the imagery of bringing order to the state with that of healing the body. In a world ravaged by sin and illness, she initiates moral reform as well as the return to physical health. She nurses a boy from the Chao clan back to health.\textsuperscript{127} Although Mme. Chao herself does not heal, she sends out healers, patronizes doctors, and distributes medicines. In times of epidemics in Wucheng, she gives money to Hu Wuyi 胡維岳, the actor-turned-monk-turned-healer, to buy land, grow medicinal herbs, prepare medicines, and cure people's illnesses.\textsuperscript{128} When her adopted son Chao Liang falls ill due to excessive mourning after her leaving the mortal world, she sends from heaven the Daoist immortal Sun Zhenren 孫真人 with a wonder drug to save Chao Liang.\textsuperscript{129} First as a widowed mother and later as a goddess, she fulfills the same function of benefactress to society. Under her wing, healers appear and illnesses get cured. Albeit from behind the scenes, she plays an important part in restoring the well-being of the people.

Other Mothers

In depicting how Mme. Chao reforms, cures, and saves her world, the narrating voice becomes increasingly serious. Her hyperbolic representation of goodness and moral soundness sets a counterpart to the explorations into the depths of sin and vice that dominate the novel. Many mothers appear in the *Tianyuan zhuang* apart from Mme. Chao. Some act as strong-willed, virtuous, and wise mothers, while others are vicious and spiteful. The second hero Di Xichen's mother, Mrs. Di, is a woman with good common sense who tries to manage her household with a strong hand.\textsuperscript{130} So is Mrs. Tong 童奶奶, the mother of Di Xichen's second wife Jiie 季姐. She handles with aplomb the professional mishaps of her husband, the silverannih Tong Qi 童七.\textsuperscript{131} Mrs. Xiang 相大娘子, Di Xichen's aunt, is one of the few characters to castigate Di Xichen's wife, the shrew Xue Sujie 薛素姐.\textsuperscript{132} Professor Xue's 薛教授 wife, Mme. Xue 薛夫人, personifies virtue and gentleness, while his concubine Ms. Long 龍氏, the mother of Sujie, is a rough and wayward character. Mme. Li 李夫人, a minor character appearing only once briefly, represents a model widow and mother who raises her sons to become high scholar-officials.\textsuperscript{133} Strong mother figures appear in both plots, but non equals Mme. Chao. Length of description, attention to detail, and narrative focus make her alone stand out in the foreground. A unique character among the mother figures of the *Tianyuan zhuang*, she appears as the heroine of the novel, in contrast to the shrewish and childless anti-heroine Sujie and the major male protagonists.

Heroinies from the Literary and Historical Context

Powerful women and goddesses also feature in other Ming novels. Guanyin plays the role of savior in the *Xiyou ji* 西遊記.\textsuperscript{134} The divine lady (Nüzuo nüjiao 女娲娘娘) reigns supreme in the cosmos of *Fengshen yanyi 封神演義*.\textsuperscript{135} In the *Shuishu zhuang* 水浒傳, the Mysterious Goddess of the Ninth Heaven (Jitian xuanmu 九江玄女)

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{123} Chen Xing 謝興, *Huiyuan gongzuo 惠源功德*, 1758 ed., 2.96a-100b.
\textsuperscript{124} See *TZZ* 23.341-46.
\textsuperscript{125} *TZZ* 57.825.
\textsuperscript{126} *TZZ* 90.1282.
\textsuperscript{127} *TZZ* 90.1289-90.
\textsuperscript{128} See *TZZ* 33.484-85, 489; 40.584-85; 48.702.
\textsuperscript{129} *TZZ* 55.70, 71.
\textsuperscript{130} The Chinese Vignes: A Literary Theme (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
\textsuperscript{131} *TZZ* 34.497-98.
\textsuperscript{132} Wu Cheng'en 梁承恩 (attrib.), *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Beijing: Zuojia, 1954).
\textsuperscript{133} *Fengshen yanyi 封神演義* (Beijing: Zuojia, 1956), c.g., 1.1-7.
\end{footnotesize}
rescues the hero Song Jiang 宋江. The sixteenth-century novel *Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅*, however, has no strong mother figure: the hero Xinmen Qing's 西門慶 principal wife Yueniang 月娘, the would-be mother, lacks the wisdom and power to make up for her husband’s deficiencies, herself seeking rather than giving spiritual protection. As the mother of Xinmen Qing’s posthumous son, Yueniang plays a major role in the early Qing sequel *Xu Jin Ping Mei 續金瓶梅* by Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (ca. 1599-1670). She dies a saint but never attains the aura of Mme. Chao. The *Xu Jin Ping Mei* portrays Yueniang as a woman in need of support and help, rather mocking the values of chaste widowhood. Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) classical tales of the *Linghui zhiyi 聊齋志異* also recount stories of widows in a mock-heroic and irreverent tone of voice. Mme. Chao ranks among the few most powerful heroines of Ming/Qing fiction.

There were other women in late imperial China who acted like Mme. Chao, Tan Yangzi’s mother Mme. Zhu had the reputation of making her family prosper by managing her household properly. The local gazetteer of Yucheng 城 in Henan 河南 province praises Ms. Qiu 秋氏, the second wife of the scholar-official Yang Dongming 楊東明 (1548-1624), for her charitable donations. Once she had more than one hundred rolls of cloth made into clothes for the poor. Many women, especially widows among the sectarian

118 Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢, *Xu Jin Ping Mei 闕金瓶梅*, in *Jin Ping Mei suzhu sanqian jiaochu* 金瓶梅續編三種 (Jinan: Qihui, 1988) 1:63.647. On Yueniang, see also Ogawa Yūichi 小川薫, “Chūgoku shōsetsu ni okeru dokkyō - toki ni Ōkō Tuki Pa Bei to Taishō kansei.”
117 Xu Jin Ping Mei, 50.482-84.
121 Guanshan jishu jing, 11-31b, 55a.
122 Xu Qin ying ying 喜慶妻 (comp.). *Yucheng xianyi 城縣志*, (1895; reprint, Taibei: Chengwen, 1976), 7.3a-5b. On Yang, see Goodrich and Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1546-47.
125 “Aus der fruchtbaren Erde wie eine Schatten.” 217-18, also perceives a “reduction of femininity” in the ideal image of the mother in late imperial times.
126 *YCR*, 52.466; see also 90-1285. *Pohui quanwen*, 27.1a-3a, 27.1a-17b.
127 *YCR*, 32.466.
The narrating voice portrays Mme. Chao not as equal but as superior to men. In its typical earthy way of expression, this reads:

A man who fails in his moral duties is a swine!
A benevolent woman is mightier than a hero. 148

In the late Ming world, we also hear other voices of literati inverting gender hierarchies and ranking woman at the top. The scholar-official Li Kun describes many exemplary women as superior to men, using phrases such as: “Even some heroic men cannot match her intelligence and courage.” 149 The writer Feng Menglong 鍾夢龍 (1574-1646) likewise commends such ladies: “Few have her intelligence and courage; not one in a million can match her firmness and endurance.” 150 In the early seventeenth century, Tan Yangzi's brother, the jiafu degree-holder Wang Heng 王衡 (1561-1609), 151 recalled that his grandfather, a magistrate, once said about his mother, Mme. Zhu:

This girl has the same bearing as me. But in intelligence and firmness, she surpasses me. Isn't this girl rather like a man? 152

Some late Ming literati were convinced that they could learn from a woman. 153 Wang Heng looked up to his mother as a model of virtue. He considered himself morally and intellectually inferior to her. 154 The scholars who became Tan Yangzi's disciples submitted to her as a teacher, seeking from her spiritual guidance, healing, and a cure for the ills of the world. In 1643, the scholar-official Qian Qianyi 乾嘉益 (1582-1664) praised Tan Yangzi's niece, the warriress Ms. Wang 王氏 (Wang Heng's fifth daughter), for her heroic military defense of Xindu 新都 city in Sichuan province at the side of her husband, the scholar-official Huang Yisheng 黃翼聖 (alias Zi Yu 子玉, 1596-1659), against the rebel leader Zhang Xianzhong during the reign period of the last Ming emperor. 155

The narrating voice in the Tanyuan jian 異煙卷 compares Mme. Chao to a historical figure, the heroic warriress Mme. Feng Bao 楊寶夫人, alias Mme. Xian 洗夫人/Duchess of Qiaoguo 瓊國夫人 (d. ca. 601 CE). 156 The Duchess of Qiaoguo was famous for her military exploits and her loyalty to the state. She played an important part in quelling rebellions and defending imperial power during the Sui 唐 dynasty's (581-617) pacification of South China. As a widow she became a local ruler. The people called her Sage Mother (shangmu 聖母) because she protected their borders and preserved peace. 157 Writing in 1603, Wang Heng likewise places his mother, Mme. Zhu, in the context of the Duchess of Qiaoguo, claiming that a heroine like her could be a savior in times of crisis. 158 Feng Menglong was another late Ming writer to sing the praises of the Duchess of Qiaoguo. 159

Like the Duchess of Qiaoguo, Ms. Wang, and Qin Liangyu in spirit, Mme. Chao struggles to save the nation. Mme. Chao does not take up arms, but her deeds help to maintain order in the empire. As Chao Liang warns the rapacious magistrate Ke Yishan: 160

If you again extort the tribute grain from the [commoners], they will either rebel or their corpses will all pile up in the ditches.

Chao Liang explains his mother’s motives for her philanthropy:

My mother seeks neither recognition from the authorities nor repayment from the commoners. She only hopes her native place will be safe and peaceful. 161

The narrating voice praises her achievements: while putting an end to disturbances, she succeeds in restoring the utopian world (taijing) of the past to some extent. 162 The narrating voice implies that she

148 丁零, 30.449.
149 156 梁 興, 25.257.
150 梁 桂龍, 智勇全集 [Jianguo: Jianggu guji chubanshe, 1986], 25.933.
151 On Wang, see Goodrich and Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 178; the editor's preface to the Wenhai reprint of Gouchan xiaoxiangyi gives his dates as 1564-1607.
152 Gouchan xiaoxiangyi, 6, 14.30a.
154 Gouchan xiaoxiangyi, 6, 14.34a, 35b.
155 Qian Qianyi 乾嘉益, Mu chou yue ji 改齋有琴集, Silva congkan ed., 37.5a-6b. On Qian, see Hommel, Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 148-50. On Huang, see Ma chin yue jie jia, 23.7b-9b, 31.1a-10a, 37.4b-5b.
156 丁零, 32.465.
158 Gouchan xiaoxiangyi, 6, 14.38b.
159 Zhining guanji, 25.526-27.
160 丁零, 90.1280.
161 丁零, 90.1281.
162 丁零, 32.466.
carries on the tradition of China's sages and perfect rulers— in the absence of capable men.

In this respect, the Yin yuan zhen, too, we watch how society at all levels craves the great mother as a savior. In this light, the image of Mme. Chao reflects a millenarian moment of collective anxiety and longing.