

Multi-layer Objecthood and Gender Performativity Manifested Through Shu-t'ung's Cross-dressing in The Plum in the Golden Vase

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Abstract: In addition to sexual politics and interrelationship, the medieval vernacular fiction *The Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅 establishes a social web by focusing on the exchange of objects. Recalling a historical tradition of male actors cross dressing as female roles in Chinese theatrical performances, I will compare the minor character Shu-t'ung with professional practitioners, and reflect upon Shu-t'ung's embodied femininity within the dialects of the real and the fictional. For Shu-t'ung's gendered body, I will extend the notion of the object to the objecthood manifested in characters of the novel. In this regard, I read Shu-t'ung as a human object that embodies the dynamics of circulation.

How does Shu-t'ung perform his objecthood from his gendered body? To approach this question, I will focus on one scene on cross-dressing in Chapter 35 of the novel, wherein Ying Po-chüeh asks Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to entertain guests with southern songs. Why does Ying Po-chüeh initiate this demand for Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to entertain him? How do female maids react to lending clothes to Shu-t'ung? How do the lyrics of the song relate to Shu-t'ung per se?

The comparison between Shu-t'ung and professionals leads me to reflect upon the degree of the authenticity of his femininity in a coerced performance, and the interrelation between his objecthood and gendered body. As gendered objects and gender constructs further formulate a figurative circulation of femininity, the novel has multi-layer objecthood manifested through Shu-t'ung's body, his song lyrics, and his forced performance. I argue that Shu-t'ung's body and his gender eventually serve as a sexually-neutral site for fabricated femininity and gestural performance of cross-dressing.

Besides a depiction of sexual politics and interrelationship, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* also establishes a social web by focusing on the exchange and circulation of objects. Just as Hsi-men Ch'ing describes the moving potentiality of silver:

“Money is something which: Likes movement and dislikes inertia. It will not allow itself to be immured in any one place. And it is designed by Heaven for human use. For every person who accumulates a surplus there will be anorectic who suffers a deficiency. It is very wrong, therefore, merely to pole up wealth and valuables.”¹

Similar to the ongoing circulation of money, we can see a pattern of the movement of objects that is intertwined with a narration of social interactions:

python robes are given to Cai Jing in the form as a birthday gift; Li Ping'er's money, jewels and clothes are transferred to Hsi-men Ch'ing's household and incorporated as part of Hsi-men Ch'ing's possessions. Under a dynamic frame of the circulation of object and social connection, I start to reflect on the relationship between objects and characters through an examination of the minor character Shu-t'ung in the novel. Extending the notion of the object to the objecthood manifested in characters, I consider Shu-t'ung as a human object that experiences the same process of circulation and exchange as those objects. Then I come up with a question for this paper: how does Shu-t'ung perform his objecthood as a human object in the novel?

In order to approach this question, I will particularly focus on one scene in Chapter 35 when Ying Po-chüeh asks Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to entertain guests with southern songs. I will reflect on Shu-t'ung's human objecthood by answering a series of subsequent questions: how does Ying Pochüeh demand Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to entertain him? How do female maids react to lending clothes to Shu-t'ung? How do the lyrics of the song relate to Shu-t'ung per se? I will first examine Shu-t'ung's objecthood through an examination of the text and a literary pattern of intertextuality in the novel.

Recalling a historical tradition of male dan cross-dressing as female roles in Chinese theatrical performances, I will compare Shu-t'ung with professional practitioners, and apply a binary of real and fiction to

¹ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. 1993. *The Plum in the Golden Vase, or, Chin P'ng Mei*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. Vol. 3. pp.381.

both the theatrical structure and Shu-t'ung's femininity. The comparison between Shu-t'ung and professionals leads me to reflect on Shu-t'ung's song, authenticity of his femininity in a coerced performance and a relationship between his objecthood and gender. As gendered objects and gender constructs further formulate a figurative circulation of femininity, the novel has multi-layer objecthood manifested through Shu-t'ung's body, his song as well as his gender. Shu-t'ung's body and his gender eventually serve as a sexually-neutral site for fabricated femininity and gestural performance of cross-dressing.

To begin with, how does Ying Po-chüeh asks Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to sing songs? During the feast of the Double Ninth Festival, Ying Pochüeh sees Shu-t'ung pouring the wine and says to him that:

“In his whole life, your Uncle Ying has never been able to abide drinking wine without a song to accompany it... Today, whatever happens, I won't drink this wine unless you sing one for me.”²

As soon as Shu-t'ung starts to sing southern songs, Ying Po-chüeh interrupts and further demands that:

“It won't do unless you step aside and put on your makeup and costume, like the actor who plays the female lead in a play.”³

Since Shu-t'ung already has homosexual intimacy with his master Hsi-men Ch'ing, Ying Po-chüeh in the scene appears to be a third person who steps into an existent relationship. When Ying Po-chüeh starts his statement as a self-called master in the place of Hsi-men Ch'ing, he treats Shu-t'ung as a servant—a human object—in circulation among male masters. Shu-t'ung's servanthood is hence related to the availability and circulation of an object. Ying's condescending tone produces a coercion mediated through his demand for a cross-dressing performance. His dictions such as “whatever,” “won't” and “unless” further embody a highly demanding tone that avoids negotiations and rejections with Shu-t'ung. From Ying Po-chüeh's point of view, Shu-t'ung's ability to perform outweighs his individual volition and thereby Shu-t'ung renders his objecthood through the utility of his performative capacity.

In addition to his intentional ignorance of Shu-t'ung's volition, Ying Pochüeh does not give voice to Shu-t'ung or invite the reader to approach Shu-t'ung's point of view. Since Ying deliberately denies reader's access to Shu-t'ung's volition, he becomes an unreliable narrator for Shu-t'ung. We cannot evaluate Shu-t'ung simply from his interaction with Ying Po-chüeh, nor can we categorize Shu-t'ung's sexuality from his compulsory performance or from limited narrative agency. Shu-t'ung's action to put on “makeup and costume” like a “female lead” does not come out of his own intention, but aims to please the guest and maintain a harmonious atmosphere for the feast. Although Gayle Rubin establishes a model of the exchange of women among men in his article “The Traffic In Women,”⁴ we cannot simply compare Shu-t'ung's circulation between Hsi-men Ch'ing and Ying Po-chüeh to those women in exchange, nor can we arbitrarily conclude that a circulation of Shu-t'ung among men enhances his potential femininity as if he is a counterpart of those women but merely with alternative gender. With limited narration of his volition, it is more objective for us to put Shu-t'ung in a sexuallyneutral position for now, but rather focus on his objecthood presented through a circulation concerning his sexual availability among men.

Moreover, it is noticeable that as soon as Ying Po-chüeh demands Shu-t'ung to sing songs and do cross-dressing, Shu-t'ung chooses first to interact with his master Hsi-men Ch'ing in a silent way:

Shu-t'ung remained where he was, merely looking to see what Hsi-men Ch'ing's reaction would be.⁵

Although Ying Po-chüeh does not give voice to Shu-t'ung, Shu-t'ung decides not to fully hide his volition, but attempts to negotiate with Hsi-men Ch'ing through eye-contact. An exchange of information through eye-contact allows the possibility to produce a moment of intimacy between the servant and his master, and creates a temporary privacy during a public feast. His cautious action to “[look] to see what Hsi-men Ch'ing's reaction would be” signals a queer moment as if a helpless child bargains and seeks authorization from his father, complicating his current servantmaster relation with Hsi-men Ch'ing and producing a subtle sense of homoeroticism. Shu-t'ung's action to seek permission from his master through eyecontact also resembles a gesture to bargain in a trade market and stresses Hsi-men Ch'ing's ownership and control over Shu-t'ung's volition. The figurative gesture of bargaining at the same time implies that Shu-t'ung positions himself as a trading object and hence consults Hsi-men Ch'ing about his availability for other people.

² Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.329.

³ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.329.

⁴ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex.” *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayan P. Reiter. New York: Monthly Reviews Press, 1975. pp. 157-77.

⁵ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.329.

Thus, failing to have a chance to narrate his interiority, Shu-t'ung becomes an objectified instrument to carry out the idea of the external other—his master. Although he possesses a tendency to express his volition through eye-contact, his behavior still mainly reflects Hsi-men Ch'ing's volition instead of his own.

After Hsi-men Ch'ing agrees Shu-t'ung to dress up as a female lead to sing southern songs, Tai-an borrows female costumes from maids for Shu-t'ung. How do female maids react to lending clothes to Shu-t'ung?

Tai-an first went to Chin-lien's quarters in the front compound and asked Ch'un-mei for the loan of some things for this purpose, but she refused. He then went to the master suite in the rear compound and approached Yühsiao, from whom he succeeded in borrowing four silver hairpins, an ornamental comb, a pin for the front the coiffure in the shape of a Taoist goddess, a pair of imitation lapis lazuli pendant earrings in gold settings, a blouse of scarlet chiffon that opened down the middle, a green skirt of heavy silk brocade, a purple gold lamé headband, and some rouge and powder.⁶

Chun-mei and Yü-hsiao react differently when Tai-an comes to borrow their costumes for Shu-t'ung. Ch'un-mei refuses to lend, but Yü-hsiao not only agrees to lend, but also offers extra “hairpins,” “comb,” “rouge” and “power.” We can consider Ch'un-mei's rejection as a normal reaction to Shu-t'ung's perverted crossdressing. On the other hand, Shu-t'ung's action to borrow costumes from maids also suggests that his male appearance and male body impedes him from performing femininity, so he has to fabricate his femininity by borrowing other women's possessions—a means to acquire external material access to femininity. Accordingly, Ch'un-mei's refusal to lend her clothes can also be interpreted as her unwillingness to ally with Shu-t'ung and to offer him access to her femininity on a material level. Thus, female clothes and pendants become a material embodiment of the femininity that guests expect to observe from Shu-t'ung. A circulation of female objects functions as a figurative exchange of femininity. Shu-t'ung's body—highly objectified—serves as a sexually-neutral site to replace his masculinity with femininity and to incorporate the femininity given out by Yü-hsiao.

After borrowing costumes and dressing up as a female lead, Shu-t'ung sings a song to the tune “Jade Lotus Blossoms.” Until this moment, we have access to directly approach Shu-t'ung's interiority through his first person narration instead of from the lens of either Ying Po-chüeh or Hsi-men Ch'in. How do the lyrics of the song relate to Shu-t'ung *per se*?

Scattered red flowers bob on the water;/The plums on the branch tips are small./For all this time my eyebrows have grown pale;/who is there to paint them?/It was the spring that brought this load of/sorrow in its wake;/Now that spring has gone, why has my sorrow/not dissipated?/Since our separation,/We are parted by distant mountains, distant waters. /Only on your account,/I have calculated the day of your return so often,/I have worn away the tip of my comb.⁷

The omniscient narrator produces a chance for Shu-t'ung to express his voice through a lyrical song. Imageries such “scattered red flowers” and small plums denote that spring has passed away and offer a temporal immediacy as they correspond with facts such as the current fall season and the feast of the Double Ninth Festival at Hsi-men Ch'ing's household. The personal object “the tip of my comb” particularly embodies the femininity of the narrator. It is understandable that Shu-t'ung might intentionally give himself a female tone as playing a female lead. Nevertheless, the content of the poem does not match his actual situation. Katherine Carlitz summarizes that “songs in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* can be used either realistically by the professional entertainers or dramatically, violating the conventions of fiction, at moments when the characters burst into song to express strong emotions.”⁸ “Jade Lotus Blossoms” seems to fit the second category, for it mainly depicts that a woman intensely pines for her lover or husband due to their geographical separation. However, although the dramatic use of the song presents strong emotions, Shu-t'ung does not correlate with the narrator because he does not have a fixed companion or experience a separation from his lover.

The inconsistency between the narrator and the content of the song reminds me of the text-stitching as a literary pattern in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. The text often borrows plays, poems and aphorisms from other works, and inserts them into its body paragraphs after signal words such as 有诗为证. Inserted contents lack compatible contextuality and render only a formal fluidity rather than a consistency of content. If following the literary pattern of intertextuality in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, we can interpret the distinction between Shu-t'ung and the narrator of the poem as a result of a gesture of text-stitching. Therefore, the poem does not reflect Shu-t'ung's volition as part of his first person narration, but serves as merely a textual insertion to satisfy a formal need of a southern lyrical song. As the novel fails to tailor itself to present Shu-t'ung's individual

⁶ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.329.

⁷ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.330.

⁸ Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. pp. 97-98.

interiority, Shu-t'ung loses the chance to voice out his volition and his song loses its meaning for the reader to infer his thoughts. His objecthood is not only enhanced by a lack of narrative agency, but also by his formal role as a narrative bridge between the two genres—novel and lyrics in a play.

Moreover, Shu-t'ung's cross-dressing and lyric-song singing further remind me of a tradition of male dan in Chinese drama. It is not uncommon for a male actor to dress up as a female lead in theatrical performance to perform femininity outside a female body. An action to act the other sex complicates theatrical performance with regard to a cultural operation of a binary of real and fiction. Siu Leung Li further explains a binary of real and fiction that “femininity and masculinity are notions constituted in performance, not essential qualities defined as real or fake given by nature.”⁹ Through an examination of classical practitioners' understanding of how to reach real femininity under an artificial frame of stage, I will compare Shu-t'ung with professional male dan to reflect on Shu-t'ung's meaningless poem, the authenticity of his femininity in a coerced performance as well as the relationship between his objecthood and gender.

Qing scholar Ji Yun once quotes an unsurpassed transvestite actor on the secret of his success in “acting woman”:

We who take our body as female must at the same time transform [hua] our heart-mind [xin] into female...I put oneself in the other 's position. I never take it as playacting but as real. People then all see it as real.¹⁰

From the point of view of a professional male dan, performing femininity signifies a becoming process of the state of real. He treats an artificial playacting as a representation of real life, his male body as a female one and his “heart-mind” as a female one. The fullness of putting himself in the position of a female produces a possibility for this transvestite actor to grasp the essence of femininity psychologically and reaches a real femininity on the level of “essence/psyche” rather than on the level of “form/appearance” [xing].¹¹ The full embodiment of femininity from external to internal reduces a mimetic dimension of performing femininity, but highlights a spontaneous manifestation of gendered features, which “people all see it as real.” The same emphasis on a transformation of femininity from outside to internal essence can also be seen in Ming playwright Tang Xianzu's instructions for younger performers: “The performer specializing in the female role-type should often think [changxiang] of herself/himself as a woman.”¹²

Nonetheless, Shu-t'ung establishes a sharp contrast with those classical professionals. Although his lyrical song on one hand does reveal his attempt to think from the point of a view of a female through his female tone and a seasonal correspondence, but Shu-t'ung on the other hand fails to grasp the fullness of transforming his mind into that of a woman. Not only his poem lacks a consistency with his own experience, but also the text echoes a common mimetic gesture of text-stitching in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. The gesture to borrow a text to render Shu-t'ung's thought lacks an attentiveness to the “essence/psyche” of a role type—the real transformation—and hence restricts Shu-t'ung's performance to a level of mere “form/appearance”—a performance of fictional femininity.

On the other hand, resonating with classical Chinese opera practitioners, Judith Butler points out that: “I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman.”¹³ Butler's negation of a constitutive role of clothes on femininity or gender sheds light on the connection between external embodiments and gendered identity. Material embodiments differ from gender as two distinctive categories. There is no correlation that more external objects enhance internal femininity. Accordingly, although Shu-t'ung borrows “silver hairpins,” “silk brocade” and “rouge” from Yü-hsiao,¹⁴ those objects do not constitute Shu-t'ung's real femininity, but only highlight the performative and fictional quality of his femininity on the level of appearance and formality.

Siu Leung Lee further elucidates the distinction between “clothes” and “woman” by asserting that: “Femininity or masculine (construct) has no necessary relation with being female or male (essence).”¹⁵ Gender crosses a normative binary of male and female so that gendered features lose their mutually exclusive connection with gender constructs. Shu-t'ung's cross-dressing validates the possibility of performing femininity outside a female body. Since both external female objects and a song of interiority understates the authenticity

⁹ Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003. pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*, pp. 164.

¹¹ Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. pp. 164.

¹² Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. pp. 163.

¹³ Judith Butler, “Chapter 8 Critically Queer,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 231.

¹⁴ Xiaoxiaosheng, and David Tod Roy. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Vol. 2. pp.329.

¹⁵ Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. pp. 166.

of Shu-t'ung's femininity in a coerced performance, guests actually does not expect femininity from Shu-t'ung's physicality or female costumes per se, but from how professionally Shu-t'ung can perform femininity by using those objects with female features. Just as Siu Leung Lee comments on female gender in his book that: "The 'pretty woman' on the Chinese operatic stages has almost nothing to do with biological sex: in theory and practice "she" can be convincingly and successfully played by either a female or male performer through a mastery of the artistry."¹⁶ "A mastery of the artistry" reiterates an actor's professional capacity to perform rather than the authenticity of the performance presented.

Therefore, gender (construct) becomes a site for performance of gendered features in cross-dressing. With regard to cross-dressing of male dan, Mathew Sommer also comments in his book that: "The prosecution of cross-dressing male prostitutes for the offense of *bu nan*—literally, 'being not male.'"¹⁷ Consequently, on the site of gender, not only femininity loses its authenticity in a coerced performance as evident in the case of Shu-t'ung, but also masculinity is reduced simply through a gesture to cover masculine body with female features. As both masculinity and femininity are downplayed here, Shu-t'ung's gender turns out to be a sexually-neutral site where femininity replaces masculinity on a male body, and where femininity loses its authenticity and reaches a level of appearance and formality.

As a consequence, an exclusive bond between male body and masculinity or between female body and femininity breaks down as gendered objects carry either femininity or masculinity, and transfer gendered features to other bodies. States of being female or male are materialized as objects in circulation: a figurative circulation of gendered features is produced under a pattern of object exchange in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Losing exclusive connection with gendered essence, gender constructs are able to serve as independent entities to either receive or give out those objectified gendered features. A circulation of gender (construct and essence) further understates Shu-t'ung's femininity, but rather enhances his sexually-neutral objecthood in a novel with multi-layer mechanisms of circulation and exchange, and turns his gender as a sexually-neutral site for gestural cross-dressing performance.

Through an examination of Shu-t'ung's cross-dressing as a female lead in Chapter 35 in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Shu-t'ung manifests his objecthood as a human object both figuratively and formally. Without sufficient narrative voice given by Ying Po-chüeh or Hsi-men Ch'ing, the reader can only approach Shu-t'ung through restricted narrative lens of Ying or Hsi-men. Shu-t'ung serves as a sexual object circulated among men and an objectified instrument to carry out the idea of Hsi-men Ch'ing. Furthermore, inconsistency and incompatibility between Shu-t'ung and his song complicate his objecthood, femininity and a literary pattern of exchange in the novel. Shu-t'ung's objecthood is enhanced not only by a lack of narrative agency but also by the formal role of his song as a narrative bridge between the two genres—novel and lyrics in a drama. In addition to his failure to perform real femininity, external female objects and a poem of interiority understates the authenticity of Shu-t'ung's femininity in performance. As female clothes and pendants become a material embodiment of femininity, a circulation of female objects functions as a figurative exchange of femininity. Shu-t'ung's body—highly objectified—serves as a sexually-neutral site to replace his masculinity with femininity and incorporate the femininity given out by Yü-hsiao. As both masculinity and femininity are downplayed, Shu-t'ung's gender (construct) turns out to be a sexually-neutral site where femininity replaces masculinity on a male body, and where femininity loses its authenticity but reaches only a superficial level of appearance and formality.

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¹⁶ Siu Leung Lee, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera*. pp. 180-181.

¹⁷ Matthew Harvey Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. pp. 119.

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