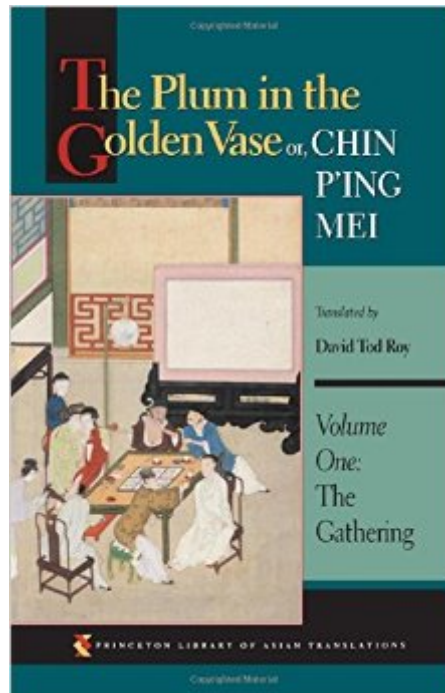


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The Plum In The Golden Vase Or, Chin P'ing Mei: Vol. 1, The Gathering



Synopsis

In this first of a planned five-volume set, David Roy provides a complete and annotated translation of the famous Chin P'ing Mei, an anonymous sixteenth-century Chinese novel 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. This work, 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.

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Customer Reviews

David Tod Roy's translation of the classic 16th century Chin P'ing Mei is awesome and right on the money. The story leaps off the pages - this is how this famous vernacular Chinese novel was meant to be read! Every element of the story is clear and concise in Roy's translation, allowing the reader to enjoy the plot and the fascinating characters. To briefly discuss the storyline, Chin P'ing Mei is a "spin off" from the classic Chinese novel Outlaws of the Marsh, and focuses on the trials and tribulations of the conniving seductress Pan Chin-lien and the new life she leads after murdering her husband. Some scholars of Chinese traditional literature will not like this allusion, but the story reads like a modern-day soap opera. The characters are lusty and scheming, and the general climate is electric. The general plot follows the intricate daily triumphs and frustrations of Hsi-Men Ching and his "harem" of six wives and concubines (among them Pan Chin-lien). The story is rife with

inter-household competition, infidelity, corruption, domestic abuse and eroticism. Characters are well developed, and the scenery is vivid. It provides a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the merchant class in 16th century China. It is easy to see how this novel has captured audiences for 400 years - and David Tod Roy's excellent translation will no doubt help it to endure for many more years to come.

Althgouh the masterful literary translation of Hong Lou Meng by Dr. David Hawkes and John Minford has raised the standard of Chinese novels in English immeasurably, Dr. Roy's translation of the Jin Ping Mei can stand on its own. Dr. Jonathan Spence was not kidding when he said that it read like a monograph. Scrupulous in details, Dr. Roy is perhaps too finicky in annotating every derivation of every line. Though such derivations are important, he seems to forget sometimes that the Jin Ping Mei is a novel: to read a text as densely annotated as Dr. Roy's sometimes becomes, to borrow David Hawkes' phrase, "playing tennis in chains." Despite a lack of elegance in places, Dr. Roy's contribution is immense, for with this frank translation he has communicated to the Western world one of the great works of Chinese social satire, warts and all.

David Tod Roy has done a wonderful job with this book. By rendering Jin Ping Mei into immaculately annotated English, he has made the book acessible not only to native English speakers, but to bilingual readers who may find the original's quirky colloquial Chinese difficult to follow. Jin Ping Mei itself is a book with many layers. Often dismissed as nothing but a book of smut and bedroom acrobatics (yes, it is full of this dear readers), Roy argues that it is also a tale of Confucian morals, and the consequences of failing to heed them. The story focuses on the town of Qing He (Clear Lake), and the household of a well-to-do young merchant named Ximen Qing. The book is also a treasure trove of details regarding the clothing, festivals, traditions, etc. of late Ming dynasty China. (While the author set the book in the late Sung dynasty, I think this is but a fig leaf. It was the Ming dynasty he himself lived in that he was thinking of all the time). Jin Ping Mei has something of a reputation in this corner of the world as an "erotic novel". Here, I would say it falls down. If you want smut, this is not the book for you.

David Tod Roy has done Chinese literature proud by producing a scrupulously exact translation of this classic in Chinese erotica. Like what a previous reviewer says, it is "clear and precise", bringing out the naturalistic details of the novel fully to the reader; yet, for all its accuracy, it reads exceptionally well. For introduction, Roy has written a well-argued essay on why Jin-Ping Mei

should be read as didactic literature, not as mere erotica, as it has for centuries. Jin-Ping-Mei's checkered history in Chinese literature doesn't disguise the fact that it is a very well written (and detailed) account of the rise and fall of an extended household, made obvious by corruption and its list of licentious dealings (both in Ximen Qing and his harem).

Dr. Roy consistently translates the word "cun" (寸), a traditional Chinese unit of length, as "inch." During the Ming Dynasty, the "cun" could actually vary between about 1.2 and 1.3 inches. Not to be indelicate, but given that a certain something on the person of one of the main characters is measured in "cun" and the size of this certain something is not unimportant to imagining his personality and abilities, it is perhaps unfortunate that Roy translated "6 cun" as "6 inches." Other than this trifling criticism, this is a "ä,•è% å¥ å-•" (very good) translation. Yes, the annotations are a bit excessive, as others have mentioned, but as they are published as endnotes rather than footnotes, they hardly interfere with the text itself at all. I have no compelling reason not to recommend this set.

This is an accurate translation, or as accurate as possible, of recension A of this novel, published in 1618. It is far superior to the translation by Clement Egerton, "The Golden Lotus," which follows the later, and inferior, B and C recensions. It includes the prefaces and other introductory material, and the full text of Chapter 1, which appear in the Chinese language Jin Ping Mei Ci Hua, the definitive A recension.

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