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SESSION 18: THE PRODUCTIVE USES OF GOSSIP AND RUMOR IN IMPERIAL CHINA

By Graham Sanders (edited by Jack Chen)

This panel attempted to think through a number of issues related to gossip and rumor in traditional China. Paola Zamperini of Amhest College presided over the affair in truly breathtaking Edwardian piratical style. Incisive comments were provided by Robert Hymes of Columbia University. Hymes asked the question of whether or not gossip was normative or subversive, suggesting that there was very little in any of the papers that could be taken as a subversive reading of gossip. Rather, gossip in each case tended to affirm or reaffirm normative social hierarchies and values.

The first paper, on early Confucian discourses on ming (name/fame) by Hajime Nakatani of McGill University, explored the way in which the doctrine of zhengming informed later discussions of naming in early philosophical discourse. Nakatani asked the question of the agency of naming — that is to say, who is it that has the authority to give proper names — and whether it might not be better to think of names as not given (thus suggesting an anti-nominalist position). Rather, names are heard or received by sagely figures who understand the proper (i.e., natural) relationship between names and things and do not force names upon things. Nakatani then looked ahead to the early medieval period and theorized that name becomes fame as a function of this tension between some kind of natural appellation and the way in which ming (as fame) is something bestowed upon an individual by others.

The second paper, by Jack W. Chen of UCLA, took up reputational networks in the early medieval period. Chen examined the way in which the Shishuo xinyu foregrounds struggles over reputation even in passages that are commonly cited as examples of qingtan, a supposedly pure and disinterested philosophical discursive practice of the period. What informs much of the anecdotal narratives of the Shishuo are, instead, preoccupations with character evaluation as a way of asserting prestige during a period in which the political sphere is no longer the sole determinant of status. Chen focused on the figure Xie An as the exemplar of Eastern Jin elite values, showing how his famed composure and his decision to remove himself from politics became the basis for his lasting reputation.

The third paper, by Paize Keulemans of Yale University, jumped forwards in history to late imperial China to take up the question of how scandal and gossip are spread through the Jin Ping Mei. Keulemans argued that while scandal is often thought of in visual terms, it is consistently represented as circulating through auditory means (wen, “to hear”) in the narrative of the novel. He also demonstrated, through an ingenious use of PowerPoint, how the fictional narrative shows the spread of information by highlighting the multiplying number of gossiping agents on the page as a scandalous tale is told and retold. It is, ultimately, the act of overhearing and transmitting scandal that allows the overarching narrative of Jin Ping Mei to become connected and to cohere. Moreover, the circulation of Jin Ping Mei itself takes on the form of gossip, as the text is transmitted as a roman à clef by an in-group of literati whose social identity is formed by their participation in the speculation of which characters stand in for which historical contemporaries.

The last paper, by Andrea Goldman of UCLA, looked to the huapu and the Pinhua baojian of late, late imperial China. She noted how theater connoisseurs enjoyed keeping track of affairs between patrons and actors through the huapu and, in more mediated form, through reading the Pinhua baojian as a roman à clef. Such gossip was aimed more at the patrons of the actors, than at the actors themselves, and as with Keulemans’s paper, it was suggested that the audience of such texts comprised a kind of social in-group formation, as part of a larger urban cultural imaginary of 18th and 19th century Beijing. Turning to the Pinhua baojian, Goldman noted that this novel was itself received as gossip and read as gossip.

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