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JIN PING MEI, CH. 51-60

OFFICIAL SUCCESS

DEATH AND SEX

THE DESCENT

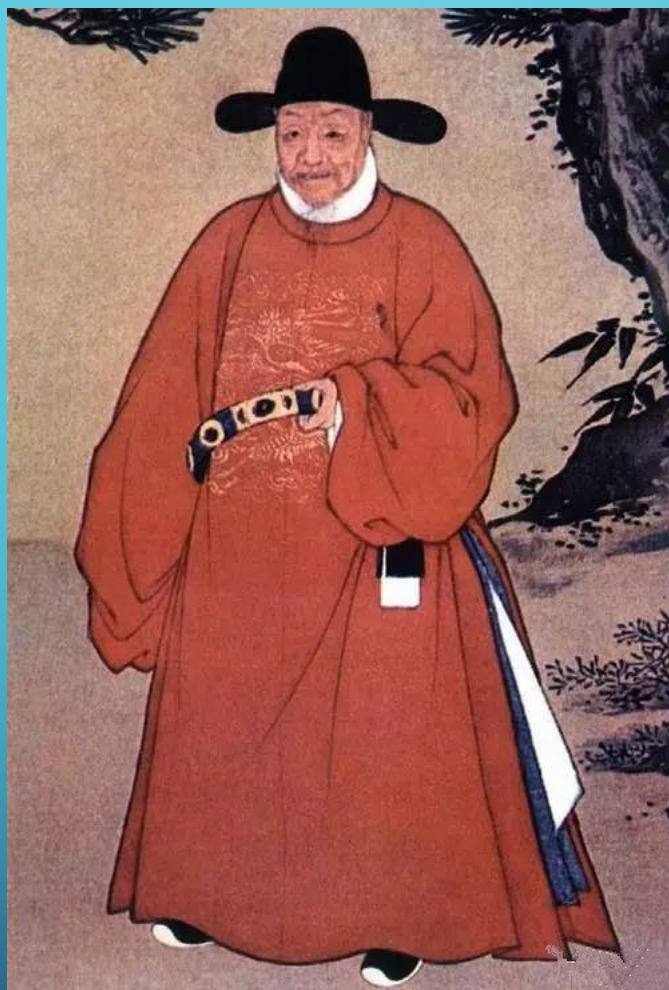
CH. 51: “A HINGE”

- “Starting in Ch. 51, the book starts to cool off, section by section. This chapter begins this process by bringing up the clues to the various main threads of this cooling off. For example, from Chin-lien’s tongue slips the deaths of Kuan-ko and P’ing-erh. Li and Huang’s perusal of the accounts foreshadows their failure to pay back their loan....This chapter is the hinge on which the subsequent 50 chapters turn.” Zhang Zhupo

HATS AS STATUS MARKERS



Ming Official Cap with Girdle



HSI-MEN CH'ING'S CAREER

- His first appointment to an official post coincides with the birth of Kuan-ko (“Official Brother”) in Ch. 30
- The death of this son in Ch. 60 comes soon after the trip to deliver birthday gifts to Ts'ai Ching, & the hiring of Licentiate Wen, who becomes his amanuensis, charged with drafting official documents, correspondence, etc.
- Wen is hired instead of Licentiate Shui, whose dismissal by another family for sexual misconduct with maids/pages foreshadows Wen's eventual firing
- Further promotions culminate in his being granted insignia normally limited to officials in the top four tiers of the bureaucratic hierarchy

Loyal and Pacifying Cap (ca.1535-)





INEBRIATION

- Alcohol is the first of the “four vices” (liquor, sex, money, anger) named in Ch. 1 of the “B” recension (ca. 1628-44) edition as the causes of human folly
- The raucous parties of Ch. 54, 56, 58 etc. describe unprecedented quantities of liquor (e.g. 30 cups that Ying Po-chueh must drink as a forfeiture in Ch. 54) consumed, and the effects that has on these drinkers (sleep, indigestion, etc.)
- Women (Chin-lien and Sun Hsueh-oh), the young (Ch'en Ching-chi), and several servants also become more conspicuously drunk in these chapters

FILIAL PIETY

- Ching-chi finally succeeds in seducing Chin-lien (if only momentarily), breaking the incest taboo and definitively offending the principle that the younger generations venerate, obey, & materially support their elders (“filial piety”)
- Yueh-niang, having procured the afterbirth of a male child from Nun Wang, ingests the ingredients on a “son day” (*Renzi*) in the hope of bearing a son, “Hsiao-ko” (“Filial Brother”), who is born as his father is dying
- Chin-lien’s fight with her mother in Ch. 59: a shocking breach of decorum

DOGS AND CATS

- Dogs are the objects of special scorn in Chinese culture, for their unthinking loyalty (which is equated with base, unprincipled servility)
- “Dog” (*goucai*) is the most common epithet hurled (in jest) at Ying Po-chueh by Hsi-men Ch’ing, and among all of the other sworn brothers
- Chin-lien’s “Snow Lion” is, unlike the “shitty” dog, clean enough to be able to spend the night with her; but in Zhang Zhupo’s comments, it is the embodiment of the “cold” that is descending on the household & novel after Ch. 50

DISCUSSION

1. Does Hsi-men Ch'ing's visit to the capital in Chapter 55 showcase a previously unseen ability to conduct himself properly in high society? Or instead, a knack for groveling in the presence of the most powerful official in the land? And what effect does this episode have, coming as it does just after the ribald, vulgar partying with Ying Po-chueh and the "sworn brothers"?
2. Does Miao Ch'ing's reappearance as a successful merchant seem particularly jarring, given his sordid record? Do you believe his gift of the two singing boys to Hsi-men portends further trouble?
3. Do you think Kuan-ko has an inherently sickly constitution that makes his survival unlikely no matter what happens? Or should his frailness and death be blamed squarely on Chin-lien (and the two incidents with the cats, even if one is inadvertent on her part)?
4. Do the medical diagnoses and prescriptions for Kuan-ko, P'ing-erh, and Yueh-niang seem similar to the doctors, herbs, and rituals in earlier chapters? Do you detect any changes in their efficacy or accuracy?
5. Has the Hsi-men household (servants, wives, Hsi-men himself, Ch'en Ching-chi, etc.) become more dissolute by the end of these chapters? Is there a noticeable breakdown in adherence to normative rules (even if these were perfunctory in earlier chapters)?