

DOCTORAL THESIS

The magician of reason, the plaything of enlightenment: grotesque fantasy and tabloid speculative fiction, 1900-1911

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ABSTRACT

The final decade of the Qing Dynasty, 1901-1911, witnessed a proliferation of works of fiction that incorporated, to a large extent for the first time, themes and images relating to material and technological progress. These “science fantasies” of global and interplanetary peregrination and travel across epochal time have typically been situated along various degrees of confederacy with the values and ideology of modernising China at large. This study however addresses the complex and oft-obfuscated relationship between much of this speculative fiction and the late-Qing tabloid press, which is more closely associated with the satirical, grotesque, narcotic and libidinal. By investigating the subverting and distorting of nominally positivist images like imagined futures, space travel and utopia, the dissertation explicates the possibility for these works of fiction to express a cynical and critical subjectivity toward the ideology of “modern China” that was taking shape at this time.

The study incorporates new perspectives on oft-encountered novels, like Wu Jianren’s *New Story of the Stone*, alongside more marginal texts, like the popular sequels to the classics authored by Lu Shi’e, and several unattributed pseudonymous works of short experimental fiction. Through close analysis of these texts, I argue that the arena of “tabloid speculative fiction” was thematically united at the level of their “grotesque fantasies,” in which the images of fantasy and the values of modernity were subverted by sexuality, lassitude and boredom. In highlighting this critical grotesquery, the study stresses the internal discontinuities that undergird the superficial homogeneity often attributed to late-Qing speculative fiction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Tables and Figures	viii

CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2: Serious minds and playful bodies in <i>New Story of the Stone</i>	40
CHAPTER 3: Orality, authority and the playful audience	85
CHAPTER 4: The Carnival of Capitalism in <i>The New Water Margin</i>	128
CHAPTER 5: It's Raining Men: Xiaoran yusheng and the self-consciousness of boredom	161
EPILOGUE	194
REFERENCES	204

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1	240
CURRICULUM VITAE	243