

Spring 2000

Book Review: The Money Demon

Andrea Kempf

Johnson County Community College, akempf@jccc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kempf, Andrea, "Book Review: The Money Demon" (2000). *Library Papers and Presentations*. 17.
http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Billington Library at ScholarSpace @ JCCC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Papers and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarSpace @ JCCC. For more information, please contact bbaile14@jccc.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

THE MONEY DEMON

By CHEN DIEXIAN

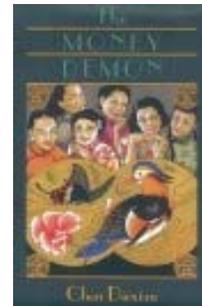
Translated by Patrick Hanan. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999. 294 pages, \$42 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paperback)

Andrea Kempf

The University of Hawaii Press series Fiction from Contemporary China has a dual purpose. First, it introduces to readers of English the fiction of some of China's most exciting new writers. Second, it makes accessible the masterworks of earlier authors who are unknown in the West. *The Money Demon* falls into the second category. Chen Diexian was a poet and a novelist as well as a businessman and inventor; he lived from 1879 to 1940, a time of cataclysmic change in China. By the age of twenty, he had over twenty published works to his credit, including numerous volumes of poetry and two novels. *The Money Demon*, which was originally published in 1913, is an autobiographical romance that chronicles his life and loves from childhood up to the age of twenty-two.

While the book is typical of Chinese romantic novels of Chen's day, it also falls easily into the coming-of-age genre common in Western literature. It gives a stunning picture of what it meant to be a young upper-class Chinese male in the nineteenth century. We first meet the young Chen, called Shan in the novel, at the age of seven living in a world of women. His life is directed by his father's first wife; his father's second wife, who is his birth mother; his nanny, Lu; a personal housemaid, Little Tan; numerous girl cousins; and above all a neighbor's daughter called Koto for the instrument she plays. Later, we also meet Shan's wife, of an arranged marriage, and Koto's mother, sisters, and friends, all of whom strongly influence Shan's behavior. In this fascinating window on the life of the Chinese gentry, the reader is able to view the place of women in society, the role of servants, the structure of the household, and how family finances were managed. In addition, the protagonist is not presented in a heroic fashion. As the author charts his amorous adventures, he describes himself as a shallow, somewhat selfish, utterly romantic young man who is easily distracted by a pretty face and whose business acumen is not highly developed—in short, a normal adolescent male.

What sets *The Money Demon* apart from most Chinese romantic novels is the money motif. Throughout the narrative, Shan blames his failures on the need for money. His great love, Koto, marries someone else because the rival has more money. His family is split apart over the management of his



► BUY NOW

father's estate. Mismanagement of money is a source of shame, and Shan's business failures are exemplary. Lack of money forces Shan to seek employment instead of pursuing the life of an idle gentleman. Subtlety is not an element of Chen's style. After each chapter or vignette, he tells the reader how the "money demon" has corrupted the behavior of the characters. This preaching is particularly ironic when in real life Chen gave up most of his literary pursuits after making a fortune by cornering the market on Chinese tooth powder. Yet despite the heavy-handed moralizing over money, and the jejune emotional life of the hero, *The Money Demon* is a charming narrative of a feckless young man falling in love over and over, with his cousin, his neighbor, his wife, loving all of them at once, hopelessly incapable of monogamy, and relishing every minute of his various infatuations.

In addition, the text is replete with Chen Diexian's poetry, used to illustrate the events he is describing. Thanks are due the translator, Harvard scholar Patrick Hanan, and the University of Hawaii Press for rescuing the novel from oblivion (it is the sort of literature that is deemed unacceptable by the P.R.C. government) and making it available to modern readers. With helpful notes to explain various literary references, an enlightening introduction, and an appendix containing the original version of the Koto story, the novel will delight both scholars of the period and readers who wish to travel to turn-of-the-century China.

Andrea Kempf, *a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, is an alumna of the Asian Studies Development Program of the East-West Center and a regular reviewer of fiction for Library Journal.*

11/29/2010

BOOK REVIEW OF SPRING 2000

Persimmon: Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture is published
by Contemporary Asian Culture, Inc., a not-for-profit educational organization.
46 East 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128
phone/fax [212-831-4751](tel:212-831-4751)
persimmon.mag@att.net