

RETHINKING IMMORTAL NARRATIVES OF FALLEN  
WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE TALE OF GENJI*  
AND CHINESE STORIES IN *TAIPING GUANGJI*

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**Abstract**

Comparative literature has been a popular discipline in academic research. However, comparative literary studies have focused mostly on Western-language literature, while less attention has been paid to literary works written in non-Western languages. Comparative studies between ancient Chinese and ancient Japanese literature have been especially rare in this discipline. In this paper, I shall undertake precisely such a comparative study. I will compare the transgressive drama of Fujitsubo in the *The Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki Shikibu, with stories of female immortals written by Chinese intellectuals. I argue that the poetics of transgression described in Chinese stories of transgressive female immortals resonate with Murasaki Shikibu's commitment to articulating intense desire. As a result, Murasaki Shikibu subtly imports this literary conception of transgression from these Chinese stories only to transform it into a bridge which connects the "unreachable" angelic woman with the profane man, a gesture which completes the narrative. The motif of transgression involves a much more intense way of exerting influence, I suggest, enabling the dialogue between heaven and earth to represent that between China and Japan.

**Keywords:** *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu, Fallen Women, Chinese Stories, Transgression, Influence

**Introduction**

In ancient Asia, China disseminated its literature, culture and religions to neighbors such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam, especially through the literary elites in those nations. This created what Haruo Shirane calls a "double culture,"<sup>1</sup> also known today as "the Chinese Characters Sphere". Acknowledging their cultural indebtedness to their larger neighbor, pre-modern Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese literati often drew upon Chinese literary forerunners when they were creating literary works. Thus, comparative literature has

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1 Shirane explains that "in East Asia, China was for more than a thousand years the dominant culture, particularly because of its writing system; the countries that surrounded it existed in a double culture, native and Chinese at the same time". Haruo Shirane, 'Terrorism, Culture, and Literature', *PMLA*, 117/3 (2002), 513-514.

a long tradition in East Asia, dating from the time they first built up relationships with China and other neighboring countries. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the dynamic literary relations among East Asian countries in pre-modern times. In this article, I will compare Chinese stories in *Taiping guangji* [Extensive Records of the Taiping Era]<sup>2</sup> with *Genji Monogatari* [The Tale of Genji] by the Japanese court lady-in-waiting known as *Murasaki Shikibu* (c. 973 or 978 – c. 1014 or 1031), to reveal how Chinese stories influenced *Genji* in various ways.

Let us first briefly survey the historical context for this type of ancient literary influence. In pre-modern Japan, courtiers played a dominant role in that epoch's literature since education was mostly an aristocratic privilege. After the charismatic Prince Shōtoku<sup>3</sup> (Shōtoku Taishi 574-622) became Regent of Japan, he dispatched students and monks to Sui Dynasty (581-619) China to study Buddhism, Confucianism, statecraft and law.<sup>4</sup> This activity was to peak in the eighth century when the Japanese central government had accumulated sufficient wealth and organizational capacity for more frequent overseas travel. This enabled the development of a stronger relationship with the prosperous Tang Empire (618-907) in China. This lasted until the Heian scholar Sugawara no Michizane<sup>5</sup> (845-903) suggested in 894 that the court of Japan halt dispatching of Japanese monks and students to China due to widespread civil war and social unrest during the late Tang Empire in 894.<sup>6</sup> During the hey-day of this cultural exchange over fifteen delegations of envoys were officially and successfully dispatched from Japan to Tang China.<sup>7</sup>

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- 2 *Taiping guangji* [太平广记 Extensive Records of Taiping Era] was compiled by Li Fang [李昉] (925-996) and other scholars in the court of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) at the behest of China's emperor. It consists of five-hundred volumes that have been sorted into ninety-two categories, such as immortals, ghosts, deities and reincarnation. It covers a huge number of legends and myths written down by Chinese intellectuals, and includes numerous oral materials.
  - 3 Shōtoku Taishi [聖德太子] was a nephew of Empress Suiko [推古天皇]. There are many legends about him that make him out to have been something of a saint. For instance, he was reportedly born in a stable, and could supposedly comprehend eight different conversations taking place at the same time.
  - 4 *Kan I Jūnikai* [冠位十二階 The Twelve-level Cap and Rank System] and *Kenpō Jūnana Jō* [憲法十七條 Seventeen-article Constitutions] are among the sorts of institutional borrowings from China. They were adapted to local Japanese conditions.
  - 5 Sugawara no Michizane [菅原道真] was a representative specialist in Chinese learning of the Heian Period. He composed numerous Chinese-style poems, which are collected in his private anthology *Kanke bunsō* [菅家文草]. After his wrongful exile which led to his death in 901, Kyoto went through plague and drought. Moreover, other disastrous events struck the court. People considered these to be the consequences of Michizane's angry spirit and built a shrine to console his spirit. Michizane later became apotheosized as Tenjin [天神], and is worshipped as the God of Knowledge and Scholarship.
  - 6 Ye Weiqu [叶渭渠], *Riben Wenhua Tongshi* [日本文化通史] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 77.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 76.

While these students and monks from Japan's lower echelons of aristocracy, traveled to China in pursuit of Buddhist scriptures, Confucian learning, and literary works, these same texts "traveled" back with them to an enthusiastic reception by intellectuals in the Japanese court. It is worth noting that Chinese influence extended beyond scholarly and literary matters. In particular, Emperor Saga<sup>8</sup> (786-842), the son of Emperor Kanmu (737-806), announced that the etiquette of the Japanese court, the casual clothing of men and women, and the way the lower classes greeted the upper classes should closely follow the practices of Tang China. He even replaced the names of the palace's gates with Tang-style names.<sup>9</sup> Emperor Saga's admiration for Tang styles and customs went even further for he was fascinated by Chinese poetry. Indeed, the fashion of appreciating and composing Chinese poetry in his court threatened to overwhelm other poetic forms. At Saga's royal command, the intellectual Ono no Minemori (778-830) compiled *Ryōunshū* (The New Cloud-Soaring Collection, 814), which was Japan's first royal anthology of Chinese-style poetry. In 818, Emperor Saga ordered another scholar, Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu (775-826), to compile another Chinese poetry anthology entitled *Bunkashūreishū* [Anthology of Splendid Literary Flowerings, 818]. Needless to say, the royal enthusiasm for Chinese literature was an indispensable stimulus to the flourishing of *kanshi* [Sinitic Poetry] and *kanbun* [Sinitic Prose].

Not only did the Heian courtiers compose poetry and prose in Chinese, they also incorporated Chinese poetic techniques, including metaphors and rhetoric, into their indigenous literature. This produced a kind of writing called *monogatari*, or fictional narrative. *Genji Monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji*, written by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu, is the most popular and widely-read fictional narrative in the Japanese literary canon. It has become such an iconic literary and cultural phenomenon in Japan that it has been revered as expressing the essence of Japanese aesthetics and identity. Murasaki Shikibu was very familiar with Chinese literature and culture. Her father, Fujiwara no Tametoki (died 1029?), was a celebrated poet and an intellectual in Chinese classics although he only possessed a relatively low position in the court. Growing up in an academic family enabled Murasaki Shikibu to access to Chinese literary works. She mastered the Chinese texts so well that her father lamented her being a girl because, no matter how well she did in Chinese learning, she would not be able to have a political career by being outstanding in Chinese learning.<sup>10</sup> Murasaki Shikibu lived in a period of the elite's fascination with Chinese culture, when Chinese studies were *de rigueur* in the Japanese court, so it was thus inevitable for her to adopt various Chinese elements within her own work. As a matter of fact, the Japanese scholar Maruyama Kiyoko has

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8 Emperor Saga [嵯峨天皇] is renowned for his accomplishment in calligraphy. Kūkai [空海], Tachibana no Hayanari [橘逸勢] and Emperor Saga are described as the Three Calligraphers in the Heian period.

9 Akiyama Ken [秋山虔] (ed.), *Ōchō Bungaku Shi* [王朝文学史] (3rd edn., Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2000), 13.

10 *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki* [紫式部日記], ed., Fujioka Tadaharu [藤岡忠美], *Sinpen Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū* [新編日本古典文学全集 abbreviated into *SNKBZ*] vol.26 (Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 1994), 209.

painstakingly tallied up one hundred and six citations of Bai Juyi's poetry in *The Tale of Genji*, not to mention many allusions to or citations of other Chinese classics, such as *Wenxuan* [Literary Selections], *Shiji* [Records of the Historians], and *Tang chuanqi* [fictional narratives written in the Tang Dynasty].<sup>11</sup> This paper focuses on the comparative study between *Genji* and various Chinese stories collected in *Taiping guangji* [Extensive Records of the Taiping Era]. What does Murasaki Shikibu inherit from Chinese works? What are the similarities and discrepancies between *Genji* and its Chinese precursors? What might be the present-day significance of comparative studies between ancient works of non-Western literature? I am aiming to answer these questions via contextualizing transgressive women's narratives within *Genji* and various Chinese stories.

### Women's Transgressions:

Many religious traditions have presented women as more transgressive than men. For Jews and Christians, Eve's weakness in succumbing to the Devil's temptations is one of the key reasons that humankind suffers. For Buddhists, women's bodies have often been viewed as obstacles to serving the Buddha. For Confucians, women are often considered a potential menace to the stable rule of the empire. Often, the female body is conveniently associated with transgression in these cultures, while men are routinely seen as the victims of female transgression. Given the fact that women have historically tended to be controlled by men, it is interesting how literary works abound with women who violate restrictive social conventions. In discussing the interrelation between transgression and the novel, Tony Tanner argues that the transgressive protagonists in novels "represent or incarnate a potentially disruptive or socially unstabilized energy that may threaten, directly or implicitly, the organization of society".<sup>12</sup> As for transgressive protagonists, female rule-breakers are very often conjured forth by dramatists and novelists.

However, we must further clarify the dynamics of transgression. Had Eve not harvested and eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, human beings would be living in ignorance and under the shadow of God. Similarly, from an Eastern religious perspective, if men were not tempted by the allure of women's bodies, they might devote themselves entirely to Buddhist sexual abstinence, thereby leading to the gradual extinction of humankind. As for the supposedly devastating effect that women can have on various Chinese governments, women arguably accelerate the demise of an old dynasty and thereby facilitate the rise of a new dynasty. In sum, it is as sensible to say that woman serves to maintain the vitality of humankind while pushing society past oppressive or outdated strictures as it is to denounce her waywardness. I argue that the notion of transgression has in fact little to do with women; it is more like a mechanism to control women.

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11 Maruyama Kiyoko [丸山キヨ子], 'Genji Monogatari to Chōgonka [源氏物語と長恨歌]', *Tōkyō Joshi Daigaku Shozoku Hikaku Bunka Kenkyūsho Kiyō*, 12 (1956), 2-5.

12 Tony Tanner, *Adultery in The Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) 3.

Freud's notion of the inevitable costs of civilization can shed some light here. In Freud's account, civilization requires us to control our primitive drives and it does so by injecting "a sense of guilt"<sup>13</sup> into us by which it sets up "an internal authority"<sup>14</sup> to monitor our actions. According to Freud, the "sense of guilt", called transgression or sin in religious discourse, originates from the fear of "loss of love" and of punishment by an authority figure.<sup>15</sup> From this we may infer that the "sense of guilt" or transgression is not inherently part of human nature. Instead, it is only a derivative of the process of civilization. Since transgression gives rise to this social repression affecting all members of society, women are naturally affected, but their transgression does not necessarily rise to the level of men's transgression. In any patriarchal era, men transfer the burden of transgression that society loads on them to women as much as possible, so that their suffering from transgression can be reduced. And what is more, the resulting heightened "consciousness of guilt"<sup>16</sup> of women is an effective tool for men to control women's behavior; as soon as a woman recognizes her transgression, she will see in herself "a need for punishment,"<sup>17</sup> which is when religion gains a firmer hold over her.

So if a sense of transgression is not intrinsic to human nature, why is literature, which is deemed by Aristotle to be an "imitation" of human society,<sup>18</sup> so fascinated with transgression? Not only Greek mythic heroes such as Oedipus and Prometheus, but also protagonists in European novels of the nineteenth century, for example, Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina, are all respected yet transgressive characters, according to the mores of their social milieus. Literature in East Asia also often expresses a fascination with transgression since the central figure in *Genji* is a man who, while being regarded as "perfect" in the tale,<sup>19</sup> is another transgressive hero. Here emerges a fundamental question: what is literature for? To tackle this I want to refer again to Freud. He explains that many human instinctual impulses remain unchanged despite becoming repressed by the civilizing process; these impulses are "preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances".<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, these repressed instincts are deeply buried and cannot be easily satisfied, owing to the sense

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13 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, tr. David McLintock (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 2010), 61.

14 *Ibid.*, 61.

15 *Ibid.*, 61.

16 *Ibid.*, 62.

17 *Ibid.*, 61.

18 Aristotle, 'Poetics' in Penelope Murray and T. S. Dorsch (tr.), *Classical Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 61.

19 In her diary, there is an entry about Fujiwara no Kitō who refers to Murasaki Shikibu as "Young Murasaki," and there she reflects, "how can a perfect woman as Murasaki exist while there is not such a perfect man as Genji". See *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki*, ed., Fujioka Tadaharu, *SNKBZ*, vol.26 (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1994), 165.

20 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 7.

of guilt usually associated with the sense of being critically observed by an external authority. How can we then unfetter these instincts so as to allow them some form of expression without paying the price of violating the law of society and triggering a sense of guilt? Freud seems to offer a tentative solution when he remarks that “modern literature deals predominantly with the most ticklish problems, which stir up all the passions and encourage sensuality, hedonism, and contempt for all ethical principles and ideals”.<sup>21</sup> I would argue that not only can modern literature do this, but literature of any era can serve as a channel for unchaining the passions that have been suppressed in accordance with various requirements of civilization. Literature often dwells upon transgressive protagonists and narratives so that we readers can better come to grips with our own desires through its narratives.<sup>22</sup> To borrow Peter Brooks’ phrase, through narrative our “displaced and unrecognized form”<sup>23</sup> of desire can be satisfied. Literature can thus indeed be an “imitation”, though it imitates not only daily life, but also buried human impulses — what Gabriele Schwab calls the “otherness.”<sup>24</sup> Literature mobilizes transgression as an indispensable cargo through which readers’ desires are reinvigorated so that, through the reading process, readerly transgression associated with one or more desires is expiated.

The foregoing allows the relation between transgression and literature to be restated: transgression constitutes creates? a need for literature and stimulates its development. At the same time, literature acts as a vessel to present and immortalize transgression and its significance so that it is not forgotten, regardless of the passage of time. Transgression then, in Wai Chee Dimock’s terms, endures “longer than the life span of any biological individual”.<sup>25</sup> For ordinary mortals, one of the few ways to achieve a version of immortality is to produce writings such as literature that will be handed down from one generation to the next. As civilization evolves, humans are often required to submit to social pressures and discard the parts of our nature that society deems unacceptable. However, we are still able to recognize ourselves, including our transgressiveness, and to more clearly perceive who we really are by means of reading literature of all kinds.

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21 *Ibid.*, 87.

22 Peter Brooks in his seminal book *Reading for The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* engages fully with the interrelation between desire and narrative. Peter Brooks, *Reading for The Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 37-61.

23 *Ibid.*, 58.

24 Gabriele Schwab, *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

25 Wai Chee Dimock, ‘Deep Time: American Literature and World History’, *American Literary History*, 13/4 (2001), 758.

### Heavenly Women, Fallen Angels

In both ancient China and Japan, the “fallen angel” motif was quite popular in literary works. The Japanese work of fiction, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, which was highly praised by Murasaki Shikibu as the ancestor of later fictional narratives, describes the story of a female immortal, Lady Kaguya, who comes down to Earth to atone for her “transgression”. The author of the *Bamboo Cutter* does not elaborate the “transgression” that Lady Kaguya has committed; it is as if his readers already have adequate information about its nature. The audience would have been adequately aware of such “fallen angel” stories as part of their cultural endowment. Nevertheless, when we compare Lady Kaguya with other “fallen angels” in the Japanese oral stories, we see that none of them come to earth because of “transgression.” For instance, there are two stories collected in the *Fudoki* [Records of Winds and Earths] which fall into the category of stories with a swan-maiden motif.<sup>26</sup> One is about a young man stealing the plumage of a female immortal who bathes in the river with her sisters. He hides her plumage and forces her to marry him. They get married and have four children but, as soon as the immortal finds her plumage, she returns to heaven. Another story is about an old couple who hide a female immortal’s plumage and force her to be their daughter. In both stories humans force a female immortal to stay on earth by depriving her of the plumage on which her ability to fly depends. So we see that in *The Bamboo Cutter*, it is exceptional when Lady Kaguya is punished with exile on earth to atone for her transgression. I argue that the “transgressive female immortal” is a literary influence imported from China. In *Taiping guangji*, there are six stories that tell of a female immortal resident of Heaven, who comes down to Earth to atone for a transgression that she has committed. This suggests that ancient story-tellers in both China and Japan were very interested in the possibility of a connection between Heaven and Earth, via “transgression”. In what follows, I will look closely at the Chinese stories in *Taiping guangji* as well as the story of Fujitsubo in *The Tale of Genji* in order to discover how some ancient Chinese stories were interpreted and transformed into Japanese narrative.

‘Zhao Xu’ first appears in *Tongyou ji* [Records of Mysterious Worlds],<sup>27</sup> and is then collected in *Taiping guangji*. As a young intellectual, Zhao Xu is quite diligent and familiar with Taoist learning. One night he dreams of a beautiful woman, who tells him that she is an immortal from Heaven and offers sex to him. Zhao Xu believes so strongly in the reality of this dream that he starts to prepare for the arrival of the young woman, and indeed she soon arrives in his room, immediately revealing her true identity. She tells Zhao that she is one of the lowest-ranking maidens in Heaven, leading a very tranquil and yet dismal life. Despite its apparent perfections, Heavenly life has brought her no deep satisfaction. She feels that she cannot openly share her unruly passions in Heaven, and instead entertains herself with licentious thoughts. Merely harboring such

26 *Fudoki* [風土記], ed., tr. Uegaki Setsuya [植垣節也], *SNKBZ*, vol.5 (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1997), 578 and 483. For more detailed study regarding swan-maiden motif, see Alan L. Miller, ‘The Swan-Maiden Revisited: Religious Significance of “Divine-Wife” Folktales with Special Reference to Japan’, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 46/1 (1987), 55-86.

27 *Tongyou ji* [通幽記] was written by literatus in the Tang Dynasty, but only part of it exists.

thoughts is a violation of the asceticism that prevails in Heaven, so she is ferreted out and temporarily banished from Heaven. The young woman not only marries Zhao Xu, but also brings him precious jewelry, never before seen on Earth. At the same time, she instructs him in how he can become an immortal. They have a wonderful life with each other until the day the young woman must return to Heaven again. She leaves without any hesitation, showing no enduring attachment to Zhao Xu.

Another analogous female immortal's tale is 'Cui Shaoxuan', also collected in *Taiping Guangji*. Cui's mother has a dream in which an immortal, who is riding on a red dragon, presents her with a purple box. Not long after having this dream, the mother gets pregnant, and nine months later gives birth to Cui.<sup>28</sup> Despite the fact that Cui grows up and marries a man named Lu Chui, she is one day approached by two immortals who advise her that she must return to Heaven. She thereupon tells her husband that although she was born to mortal parents, she is by no means an ordinary woman. She explains to him that the reason she is on Earth is because she violated the rules of Heaven by harboring desires that were out of keeping with heavenly asceticism. Her punishment for this transgression was to be ostracized from Heaven for a certain length of time. Impure desires caused Cui to be cast down from Heaven to Earth, but after a certain period of time she has to sever any bonds she has on Earth and return to where she belongs.

What we can learn from these stories is that in heaven it is forbidden for female immortals to have profane thoughts or desires. Of course Heaven is an invented world where, unlike the human world, there is no death or sorrow; it is a place marked by what Freud calls "a delusional reshaping of reality".<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, even in this delusionally perfect world, female immortals cannot escape suffering the feeling of love no matter how strictly it is proscribed by law. Regarding the relationship between sex and power, Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that "if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression".<sup>30</sup> In Heaven, where sex is strictly prohibited, a momentary thought about sex will be considered a sacrilege and a transgression which must be punished. Both of the young women in 'Zhao Xu' and 'Cui Shaoxuan' are female immortals who descend to this world from Heaven because they have been captivated and contaminated by thoughts that are unfit for Heaven. From these two stories we see that female immortals who dwell in Heaven are not allowed to feel lust or have any other sexual yearnings; if they do so they break the laws of Heaven.

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28 The dream of Cui's mother indicates the unusual characteristic of Cui, following the pattern of many extraordinary legends about unusual human birth. For example, the mother of Buddha dreamed about a white elephant striking her through her right axilla; the father of Akashi Lady in *Genji* witnesses the sun and the moon in his dream before his daughter's birth; the mother of Confucius gave birth to Confucius after having had sexual intercourse with a god in her dream. Readers can thus be prepared for the upcoming supernatural plot at the very beginning of the narrative.

29 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 19.

30 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, tr. Robert Hurley (Melbourne: Penguin Group, 2008), 6.

Transgressive female immortals must be exiled to Earth and marry ordinary men — as if the ruler of Heaven requires them to taste the bitterness of human love so as to purge their spirits as immortals. The main consequence of inappropriate desire is that these female immortals must pass through the defilement of earthly life. However, from a different perspective, human desires or transgressions are also what complete the female immortals' lives, providing them with what they longed for. In other words, transgression provokes a series of events through which they realize their wish to fall in love with ordinary men on Earth. Like myths, these oral stories were written down without the express aim of creating fiction per se. The transcribers were simply writing them down unselfconsciously, as if merely relating facts. However, in the same way that myths reveal or give expression to primitive human memories, a primitive discernment of the preciousness as well as the inevitability of love can also be inferred from these stories. The tales seem to be saying that if even immortals who live serenely in Heaven want to experience human love, how can ordinary human beings escape its allurements? At the same time, aside from this endorsement of love, a certain skepticism toward religion, laws, and societal constraints can also be glimpsed.

Various stories about Chinese female immortals crossed the maritime borders between China and Japan, and helped spur the author of *The Tale of Genji* to create a Japanese narrative about transgressive females. Murasaki Shikibu does not hesitate to endorse these transgressive characters within *Genji*, who seem to threaten the social order while pushing the narrative forward. As Gabriele Schwab notes, “poetic language, functions more like a resonating screen than an empty screen, thus providing tangible shapes, images, sounds and rhythms to mirror what would otherwise remain undifferentiated and inaccessible”.<sup>31</sup> Surely Murasaki Shikibu was familiar from an early age with the possibility of female transgression. However, without the poetic resources she draws from Chinese stories of transgressive female immortals, their transgression may have seemed “undifferentiated and inaccessible”. The poetics of transgression from the continent thus forms a sort of “resonating screen” for Murasaki Shikibu. In this way, she imports the tropes she needs to give expression to her own deep-running desire and her unruly intention to let this desire be heard. Through this covert trade in transgression from these Chinese stories she obtains narrative material to transform into a bridge that connects divinely “untouchable” women with earthly mortal men — a gesture which completes the narrative.

Brooks offers a hypothesis on the connection between desire and narrative that I want to adopt to explain the function of transgression in Murasaki Shikibu's narrative. Brooks says, “desire as narrative thematic, desire as narrative motor, and desire as the very intention of narrative language and the act of telling all seem to stand in close interrelation”.<sup>32</sup> He thus claims that desire drives readers and authors forward through narrative. But what is a desire, or why do we desire? A desire is formed when we

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31 Gabriele Schwab, ‘Words and Moods: The Transference of Literary Knowledge’, *SubStance*, 26/3 (1997), 110.

32 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 54.

desperately intend to keep something we possess; we also desire that which we lack in our lives; it is almost safe to conclude that a desire is often something we cannot completely fulfill. As a lady-in-waiting in the patriarchal Heian court, a certain degree of introversion was compulsory for this erudite woman, given her own particular circumstances;<sup>33</sup> Murasaki Shikibu harbored many unfulfilled and unexpressed desires to vent her sorrows and her outrages, or even to express her hope for happiness. Because she was unable to fulfill her desires in daily life, the narrative dealt with the sublimation of her desires. Her contemporary readership, largely women who were similarly fettered by societal constraints, also had unrealized desires and dreams and, for them, the relatively secure way of dealing with unfulfilled desires would have been to read a narrative such as *Genji*. Women in the Heian court were not entitled to participate directly in politics; instead, much of what they were allowed to desire related to obtaining security and status through intimate relationships with men. For Murasaki Shikibu and her contemporary readers, to seek or to desire more than a modest degree of fulfillment was to transgress the boundaries of propriety.

### **Fujitsubo: A Surrogate Mother as a Desirable Wife**

Fujitsubo is one of the most important female characters in *Genji*. She is the daughter of the former emperor, and greatly resembles Emperor Kiritsubo's dead consort, who is the mother of Genji. Emperor Kiritsubo decides to marry Fujitsubo because of this resemblance. Emperor Kiritsubo dotes on Genji and so, as much as he can, he keeps close to this young man and asks Fujitsubo, his new favorite consort, to cherish Genji as well. Having been told by an attendant that the young consort Fujitsubo<sup>34</sup> looks like Genji's dead mother, the young man inevitably enjoys being around her. Therefore, before Genji achieves adulthood, he spends much of his time in the company of Emperor Kiritsubo and Fujitsubo. Genji is amazingly handsome, while Fujitsubo is strikingly beautiful as well; she is often described as *kagayaku hi no miya*, the Sunlight Princess. As Watanabe Hideo points out in both Japanese and Chinese literary works, the sun and the moon are always regarded as the symbols of royalty.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the shining features of Genji and Fujitsubo manifest the sacredness of persons who have the potential of ascending to the throne.

“Radiation”, according to Roland Barthes, “is action at a distance, the highest form of power”.<sup>36</sup> It is no doubt significant that both Genji and Fujitsubo are “radiant” in their attractiveness. Murasaki Shikibu places Genji and Fujitsubo in proximity to

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33 Murasaki Shikibu was widowed at a relatively young age, and after her husband's death, she became a lady-in-waiting for Empress Shōshi. Yet she constantly felt conflicted about this because she was unwilling to take the job. Her possible romantic relation with Fujiwara no Michinaga was also a possible factor that increased her sufferings.

34 Fujitsubo marries Emperor Kiritsubo when she is sixteen. Genji is eleven at that time, merely five years younger than Fujitsubo.

35 Watanabe Hideo [渡辺秀夫], *Shika no mori* [詩歌の森] (Tokyo: Taishūkan Shoten, 1995), 12.

36 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (8th ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 36.

each other with a certain purpose, for they both have the same sort of power over each other. As soon as Murasaki Shikibu unfolds the first chapter of the tale, she reveals Genji's secret passion for Fujitsubo. The narrative is set up to mobilize the ambition to cross boundaries. Here I would like to quote Brooks again when he explains that "desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun".<sup>37</sup> Murasaki Shikibu's description of Genji and Fujitsubo's shining features sets up the conditions for a mutual arousal of desire between them — and it hints at the potential for transgression. Furthermore, Genji's desire overlaps with and sustains the desire of the reader. After all, it is one of Murasaki Shikibu's responsibilities to entertain her reader, to provide an outlet for her readers' desires.

As much as Genji wants to be with Fujitsubo, upon reaching maturity he is no longer permitted to see her nor to talk to her directly. Therefore his attachment to the emperor's consort comes to torture him intensely. When Genji's marriage to Aoi disappoints him, Genji is more infatuated with Fujitsubo than ever, and so he seeks to marry someone as perfect as Fujitsubo. For Genji, Fujitsubo is inaccessible, not simply because she is his step-mother, but more importantly because she is the wife of the emperor and thus belongs to the divine monarch who is regarded as god.<sup>38</sup> No matter how shining Genji is, he has not been part of the royal family since his father removed him from the imperial lineage in order to protect him. Fujitsubo's story thus very much resembles a fallen angel's. As Imai Hisayo has pointed out, both stories can be read as "fallen angel" stories that recount the love and eventual separation between a mortal man on Earth and a divine woman from Heaven.<sup>39</sup>

Following Imai I want to elucidate the clandestine love affair under the motif of the Chinese "fallen angel's transgression". At the same time I will refer to the law of morality expounded by Nietzsche in his *Human, All Too Human* in which a principle of equilibrium serves as a benchmark for judgments of law and morality. According to Nietzsche, "within a community in which all regard themselves as equivalent there exist disgrace and punishment as measures against transgressions, that is to say against disruptions of the principle of equilibrium".<sup>40</sup> For Nietzsche, "morality is nothing other than obedience to customs;" "evil signifies the same as 'individual,' 'free,' 'capricious,'

37 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 39.

38 The emperors of Japan are traditionally believed to be the direct descendants of Amaterasu Ōmikami, the sun goddess. The sun goddess sent her grandson Ninigi no Mikoto from Heaven to rule the Earth. Since the sun goddess has often been considered the leading deity of Shintoism, the Japanese emperors were naturally considered divine prior to Emperor Hirohito's renunciation of divinity in 1945.

39 Imai Hisayo [今井久代], 'Shiratoriotome — Hagoromodensetsu, tenninnyōbō tan [白鳥処女—羽衣伝説、天人女房譚]' in Masuda Shikego [増田繁夫], *et al.* (ed.), *Genji Monogatari Kenkyū Shūsei: Genji Monogatari ni okeru Densho no Kata to Wakei* [源氏物語研究集成：源氏物語における伝承の型と話型] (Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 2001), 166.

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Human, All too Human' in the supplementary material to *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed., Keith Ansell-pearson, tr. Carol Diethe (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 128.

‘unusual,’ ‘unforeseen,’ ‘incalculable’”.<sup>41</sup> In the Chinese stories, female immortals who exhibit even a wisp of mundane or mortal thought have violated the rules, or to use Nietzsche’s phraseology, have upset the heavenly equilibrium. For them to contemplate such “free” thoughts or feelings is to cross the dividing line between morality and immorality. However, the transgression between Genji and Fujitsubo and its consequent punishment manifest something more than mere secular morality regarding adultery. That would only forbid them to be romantically involved. In their case, something regarding the sacred as well as religious belief, including royal sanctity, is at issue, for it is mainly a religious prohibition which they have violated. To expiate this transgression, the punishment is internalized (what Freud calls the “sense of guilt”) rather than being a harsh, physical retribution from the wider community.

When the young Genji loses his mother and encounters a woman who looks just like her, he becomes attached to this new surrogate mother and the filial love for one’s mother develops into a passionate love for a paramour. If we look through the entire life of Genji, we see that the love for Fujitsubo informs every aspect of his character as well as influencing the narrative. In his search for a woman who is as perfect as Fujitsubo, Genji becomes intimate with many women, including Yūgao, Utsusemi and Lady Rokujō. He marries Murasaki (Genji’s official wife) because she is the niece of Fujitsubo and is young enough for him to groom her into another Fujitsubo. So the perfect wife Murasaki is merely a shadow of Fujitsubo; in fact, Genji’s discovery of Murasaki intensifies his desire for Fujitsubo. This reaches a climax in the ‘Young Murasaki’ Chapter when Genji finally realizes his years of longing and commits the ultimate transgression against the throne — adultery with the emperor’s wife. To make matters worse, Fujitsubo conceives his child after their secret tryst. The union of Genji and Fujitsubo is in effect that of a female immortal and a mortal male. Being the wife of the emperor, Fujitsubo belongs to the divinity while Genji retains the status of commoner. Female immortals grace their mortal partners with children and good fortune. In keeping with this tradition, Fujitsubo gives Genji a son through whose enthronement Genji attains imperial power which he otherwise lacked due to his low-born mother.

Despite the son’s striking resemblance to Genji, Emperor Kiritsubo knows or appears to know nothing of the affair between Fujitsubo and Genji; he even appoints the newborn prince Heir Apparent because he has always regretted not having been able to give the throne to Genji. But after Emperor Kiritsubo’s death, another son, Suzaku, ascends the throne while Suzaku’s mother Kokiden becomes the Empress Dowager; Genji, Fujitsubo and their son are not powerful enough to resist this new political faction. Even under such dire circumstances Genji still endangers himself by pursuing Fujitsubo yet more passionately. Confronted by Genji’s passion and the growing power of the opposing faction, Fujitsubo resolves to seclude herself as a nun so that she can shield Genji from religious orthodoxy and protect all three of them from potential dangers. Therefore, a woman who was once “exiled on the earth” returns to Heaven again.

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41 *Ibid.*, 133.

Murasaki Shikibu borrows the motif of the “fallen angel” from Chinese precursors, but she innovatively “swerves,” to use Harold Bloom’s term, in another direction where the earlier stories failed to go. That is to say, female immortals in the Chinese legends were exiled to Earth because of their transgression, but they are eventually cleansed of transgression and thereby manage to return to their original abode (Heaven) without further spiritual torment, and also without retaining any human emotions. Murasaki Shikibu’s invention offers us a fiction truer to life in having Fujitsubo fail to obtain any such inner peace, despite her renunciation of worldly pleasure and desire. After her death, she still faces the eternal suffering of birth and rebirth — the inescapable fate of humanity. Through the depiction of human suffering, Murasaki Shikibu questions the possibility held out by Buddhism and religion generally, that we can erase human emotions and seek protection through renunciation of the world. Through her tale, she questions the validity of any religious quest for happiness at the expense of the emotional life which, in Freud’s terms, she sees as “reducing the value of life”.<sup>42</sup>

Traditionally, female immortals who are temporarily exiled to Earth and have interactions with mortal men leave the earth without any attachments to their children and husbands. Because these stories of female immortals are part of an oral tradition, they do not describe any psychological underpinning or represent the deeper emotional levels of the characters. The compilers of these stories, like the Brothers Grimm, do not overtly attempt to create fiction as we know it. Murasaki Shikibu much more resolutely probes the inescapable human bonds that are our human fate. After Fujitsubo takes holy vows, Genji sends her a poem, which says:

Though I, too, aspire to give my heart to those skies where a clear moon  
shines, I should only wander still in the darkness of this world.<sup>43</sup>

Here Genji likens Fujitsubo to the moon and he expresses his willingness to emulate her religious renunciation. However, he cannot commit to this course because he wants to make sure that his son with Fujitsubo can attain the throne and that obsessive intention is for him the “darkness of the world”. In response to Genji’s poem, Fujitsubo expresses her bewilderment, which haunts her even though she has cut her bonds with this world:

What I have renounced covers the common troubles that beset us all, but, ah,  
when will even I truly give up the entire world?<sup>44</sup>

Entering into another world has definitely not relieved Fujitsubo’s agony, for she remains just as concerned about the safety and glory of her son as she had ever been previously. Murasaki Shikibu speaks through Genji and Fujitsubo of how even if the love between a man and a woman can be renounced with the aid of religion, the

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42 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 22.

43 Tyler’s translation, 212.

44 *Ibid.*

bond between parents and children endures. In Buddhism, every form of attachment to the human world is regarded as an obstacle to reaching peace, therefore even the bonds of life-long duty and affection between parents and children are also considered transgression. Unlike Chinese fallen angels, who can get rid of human emotions and go back to heaven without any hesitations, Fujitsubo cannot sever her ties with her son — that is the fatal barrier to a complete renunciation.

Fujitsubo and her son's predicament become worse when Genji is exiled to Suma, but with the aid of the Sumiyoshi Deity and the spirit of the deceased Emperor Kiritsubo, Genji regains his position at court while his son ascends to the throne. Genji and Fujitsubo become influential and guide the governing of the country.<sup>45</sup> It seems that they are never punished for their transgression; on the contrary, they attain the pinnacle of success in their country through their transgressive behavior. The glory that Genji and Fujitsubo achieve becomes the major target of Buddhists aiming to demonstrate the immorality of Murasaki Shikibu; they even speak of her being tortured in hell because of her immoral tale.<sup>46</sup> This clearly suggests that literary creation in itself is perceived as a threat to the law because it upholds social equilibrium and such a narrative is a revelation of human desires.

We need to bear in mind that Murasaki Shikibu, as a woman of the Heian Period, cannot, or will not, speak out against religion as, for instance, a modern scientist might; she simply wants to tell her audience about human desires and suffering. She knows how desires can lead to transgression and even to social instability, and she does not forget to punish her protagonists. On a snowy night, Genji talks with Murasaki about the women he has known or with whom he has been intimate and when he mentions the deceased Fujitsubo it is in a very affectionate way. After comparing Murasaki with Fujitsubo he concludes that no one will ever match Fujitsubo's unparalleled qualities, not even Murasaki, who has a great resemblance to Fujitsubo. Although Genji never tells Murasaki of his clandestine love affair with Fujitsubo, the way he praises Fujitsubo might lead an onlooker to suspect such an affair; and it seems that the spirit of Fujitsubo is displeased with Genji's words, appearing wrathfully to him in his dream. She says to Genji, "you promised never to tell, and yet what I did is now known to all. I am ashamed, and my present suffering makes you hateful to me!"<sup>47</sup> Evidently, "despite her

45 Genji adopts Lady Rokujō's daughter after Lady Rokujō's death. His brother-in-law, Tō no Chūjō has offered his daughter to Emperor Reizei (son of Genji and Fujitsubo), so Genji is worried that Tō no Chūjō might be more powerful once his daughter gives birth to a prince. Genji is eager to keep ahead of Tō no Chūjō, so he marries his adopted daughter to Emperor Reizei. In doing, association with the lineage of imperial blood will still be under Genji's control.

46 In the Kamakura Period [鎌倉時代] (1185-1333), the aristocracy that had been dominant during the Heian Period gave way to the samurai military elite; the Shōgun became the de facto ruler of Japan. Internecine wars broke out now and then, and many people in Japan were attracted to Buddhism. There are five major proscriptions in Buddhism, one of which is a ban on discussing things that are make-believe or otherwise false. Murasaki Shikibu was thus sometimes derided as someone who told untruths about inappropriate lust.

47 Tyler's translation, 375.

devotions, despite all the things she had done to lessen her fault,”<sup>48</sup> Fujitsubo’s spirit has no peace after her death and still suffers for her transgression even in the afterlife. All that her taking of the tonsure has guaranteed is the safety and the prosperity of her son and Genji.

In Murasaki Shikibu’s era, the Buddhist ideal of reaching the Pure Land after one’s death prevailed in the Japanese court — practically everyone longed to be redeemed and to be reborn in that Pure Land. Murasaki Shikibu herself always considered taking holy vows but she knew too well that it was not easy for a human being to wholly sever the bond to the world and to devote him or herself to the Buddha. To her, a flawed or imperfect renunciation could also hinder one from going to the Pure Land.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, although Fujitsubo intends to atone for her transgression through taking the tonsure, during this renunciation, she is still not able to liberate herself from the bondage of a mother to her son, nor from her attachment to achieving other secular aims at court. After her death, her spirit thus cannot be reborn in the Pure Land; instead, she suffers endlessly for her transgression, and for her weak-willed attempt to serve the Buddha. As I see it, Murasaki Shikibu is not condemning Fujitsubo. On the contrary she sympathizes with the sad and inexorable fate of women like Fujitsubo who are unable to sever their worldly attachments to husbands and children. Here the reader can detect Murasaki Shikibu’s ambivalent attitude towards Buddhism: on the one hand she keenly explores the idea of full renunciation in order to achieve eternal happiness, and on the other she emphasizes the inescapable fate of humankind of never attaining the ideal.

### Conclusion:

Transgression, especially if committed by women, is condemned and feared in most religious traditions that offer not only salvation but also punishment for these transgressive women. Transgression persists through literature, through narratives of all kinds: myths, legends, stories, tales, and other fictional narratives. In Chinese literary works, transgression also provides the conditions that connect the female immortal, formerly a remote and unreachable woman, to an ordinary male mortal. Even if they do not form a lasting bond, a dialogue or contact of some sort is made, because of the transgressive female. Murasaki Shikibu too catches and assimilates the motif of transgression and adapts the Chinese stories leaving this world behind her own tale, the *Genji*, in which she dwells entirely on women’s transgression and salvation.

For Murasaki Shikibu, it is difficult or even impossible for a woman to be saved by religion. This is because a woman cannot really shut herself off from human love and family bonds. We hear this in words spoken by the male character in the Broom Tree Chapter in *Genji*: “half-hearted refuge in religion is more likely to get you lost in

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48 *Ibid.*

49 *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki*, ed., Fujioka Tadaharu, *SNKBZ*, vol.26 (Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 1994), 210.

an evil rebirth than staying on the mire of this world”.<sup>50</sup> What differentiates Murasaki Shikibu from her Chinese predecessors is that she intentionally creates tension between religious ideals and flawed humanity. It is risky simply to conclude from this that she does not believe in religion. What can be concluded is that desire and transgression achieve sustenance through her tale. And unlike her Chinese predecessors, who do not address the issue of transgression explicitly, in composing the tale she makes transgression the driving force of her plot. This demands absolute honesty on her part so that she can explore both humanity and moral imperatives unflinchingly. In *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu’s poetics speak the truth about the human condition that she wholeheartedly endorses, rejecting neither transgression, nor desire, nor even religious strictures. Through her work, repressed human instincts receive fresh expression and timeless commemoration. In this sense, Murasaki Shikibu has become immortal through her narrative; she may not have gone to the Pure Land of Buddha after her death, but she definitely has gained a sort of eternal life within the realm of literature.

### **Biographical Note**

Dr. Jindan Ni is a lecturer of Chinese language and literature at RMIT university, Australia. Her research interest lies in comparative literature, Chinese and Japanese literary studies, second language acquisition and intercultural communication. She has published academic papers in Chinese, Japanese and English journals. She is also an active translator who has translated books from Japanese and English into Chinese.

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50 Tyler’s translation, 26.