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Final Paper: *Tang Xianzu and the Peony Pavilion*

Many literary works written during the late Ming dynasty reflect the rising literary theme of *qing* (love, emotion, or passion). Of these works, Tang Xianzu's signature play, the *Peony Pavilion,* gained immediate success amongst the public. The *Peony Pavilion* tells the story of how Du Liniang's experience with ultimate love leads her to transcend the boundaries of human life and death. In his preface of the *Peony Pavilion,* Tang Xianzu writes of ultimate love:

> "No one knows where love comes from, but once it comes, it goes deep. The living can die from it; the dead can be brought to life. And if the living cannot die from it or if the dead cannot be brought back to life, then it is not the ultimate love" (Owen, 882).

If Liniang is the very embodiment of ultimate love, then ultimate love has the ability to transcend life and death. Yet, life and death are not the only dimensions in which ultimate love can manifest. In fact, it is in the dream world where Liniang first finds Mengmei and falls passionately in love. Thus, dream serves not only an important role as a plot device, but also as a means for *qing* to be experienced in the most profound way.

Tang Xianzu's ideas of *qing* can first be traced back to his philosophical roots in the Taizhou movement. Founded by Wang Gen, the Taizhou school was a branch of Wang

Yangming's philosophy that emphasized an individual's innate goodness and knowledge, autonomy of the individual, and sagehood for all (Theodore, 855-865). Perhaps the most influential figure in Xianzu's intellectual development was Luo Rufang, one of Wang Gen's leading disciples. Xianzu studied under Luo Rufang twice, and in the years that Rufang served as Tang Xianzu's mentor, Xianzu formed a deep respect for his Rufang. Zuo Yuanbiao, a representative of Wang Yangming's school once said of their relationship: "[Xianzu] studied under [Luo Rufang] and had thoroughly grasped the essence of [Luo's] philosophy. However, owing to his carefree nature, [his ideas] were often disguised under different genres of his writing" (Cheng, 17). Yuanbiao suggests that many of the ideas that Xianzu picked up from his mentor's teachings were likely to have influenced his writings.

In Confucian tradition, the idea of *qing* (love, romance, emotion, or passion) was often juxtaposed with the concept of *xing* (human nature). *Xing* was the original state of nature endowed by Heaven and encompassed an individual's innate goodness (*liangxin*) and innate knowledge (*liangzhi*). If *xing* was to be "tranquil" water then *qing* was to be "flowing" water, sometimes unstable and volatile, giving way to *yu* (desire). It was not uncommon for scholars to use the phrase *xingshanqinge* (meaning 'human nature is good, whereas human feeling is bad') to describe the negative perception of *qing* when associated with desire (Cheng, 18).

During the late Ming, however, many scholars began to reinterpret the idea of *qing*. *Xing* was the "ruler of the mind-and-heart" (Cheng, 19). It was innate and natural and thus inherently good, while *qing*, or "overflow of the ruler of the mind-and-heart," provided a means for the expression of one's *xing* (Cheng, 19). In contrast to the old view that *qing* opposed *xing*, many Taizhou scholars came to believe that *qing* was compatible with *xing*, likened to two different sides

of the same coin. The idea of *qing* was cast into a positive light and its status elevated on par with *xing*.

In a letter to a friend, Xianzu once explained his personal thoughts on *qing* and *xing*: "Human nature (*xing*) can hardly be presented as good or evil, whereas human feelings (*qing*) can. Out of *qing* dreams are developed; out of dreams drama is composed" (Cheng, 22). It became clear that Xianzu's personal Taizhou philosophy diverged from his mentor's ideas. Whereas Rufang favored *xing* over *qing*, Xianzu preferred *qing* over *xing*. Xianzu believed that "love [was] the primary and essential condition of life" (Theodore, 276). Indeed, the; celebration and centrality of *qing* is apparent in the *Peony Pavilion*, as Du Liniang's sexual encounters with Mengmei are unashamedly depicted in the highly charged and erotic love scenes.

However, Xianzu who adds that "out of *qing* dreams are developed," suggests that "only in dreams can [one's] life and love find complete fulfillment" (Ko, 80). He maintains that the most passionate kind of *qing* can only be manifested in the dream world. In the *Three Wives Commentary*, Tanze, one of the female readers of the *Peony Pavilion* says: "When one lives day by day in the world of *qing*, one lives in dreams every day" (85). She alludes to the idea that *qing* is an unreal experience. To experience *qing* in a dream is euphoric and to experience *qing* in real life makes one's life unreal; it is like living in a dream.

Qing transcends life and death, however, that does not mean that one's experience of love remains unchanged as he or she travels between the dimensions of life, dream, and death. Du Liniang expresses her passionate desires in the beginning of the *Peony Pavilion* as she walks through the garden. She is enamored with the energy of spring time and relates that energy to her own beauty. Her interest in pursuing romance is later intensified by her dreams. As she travels

between the dimensions of life, dream, and death, Du Liniang's experience of love changes and transforms.

The female heroine of the story *Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang, is the beautiful daughter of a high official in Nan-an, Du Bao. She is aroused by the beauty of spring one day as she takes a walk through her family garden. She observes how "all the flowers have bloomed, but it's still early for the peony" (Owen, 885). The stirrings of spring fills her with passion and yearning, but it also makes her sad. She says: "I'm wasting the spring of my life, whose years flash past me" (Owen, 886). Liniang is young and unmarried, but she feels like the late to bloom peony in a garden of lush flowers.

Strolling through the garden, Liniang constantly compares herself to the beauty of spring. When Spring Scent compliments Liniang's dress, she replies: "My life long love of such, comes from my nature" (Owen, 884). Liniang is not oblivious to her own *xing* (nature). She is an innately passionate person, but she is also well aware that she is supposed to be a chaste woman and a filial daughter. As a woman living in a Confucian society, it is not only difficult but inappropriate for her to display her intense feelings of passion. She further states, "who sees my slumbering passion, so must I remain retiring and demure, but secret dreams will lead me where, unrolled unseen with the light of spring" (Owen, 886)? Liniang seeks passion in her life, but it is unattainable in her waking life.

Liniang soon falls asleep after her walk in the garden. In her dream, the young scholar Liu Mengmei approaches Liniang, and they make passionate love in the garden. The Flower God describes this scene in vivid detail: "the visitors suffer heartbreak, drenched under a rain of reds, and mortals are lured to be hung in dream" (Owen, 888). Here, Liniang is depicted as the lovesick

mortal who is lured by her sexual fantasies into the realm of dreams. In the dream world, she experiences the most passionate kind of love, as symbolized by the "red clouds" and is able to find a sense of release; she freely engages in the act of love making without restraint. She can fully express her *xing* in the dream world.

After awakening from her dream, Liniang becomes overwhelmed by a sense of loss. Indeed, she says that her dream was "one of those 'life-times lived in a dream'" (Owen, 891). The dream world is presented as timeless and ideal. One can live a lifetime in dream and experience events that feel more important than what happens to her in real life. Upon awaking, Liniang feels that real life pales in comparison to the dream world. She cries, "all spirit is almost spent, and since neither sitting nor standing pleases me, let me go off back to sleep" (Owen, 891). Liniang feels hopeless and expresses not wanting to live a life deprived of passion. What value is there in life if she cannot experience the passion she did in her dream? Inconsolable in reality, Liniang becomes so depressed that she pines away and dies.

There is no doubt that dreams serve as a crucial plot device in the Peony Pavilion. Liniang has to dream about her passionate desires of love before she can experience love in the real world. The dream is the catalyst to her death. In the underworld, Judge Hu is so moved by Liniang's declaration of love that he grants her spirit permission to wander the Earth in search of Mengmei. Liniang's ghost eventually finds Mengmei one night as he is falling asleep, and they make love upon Liniang's request. The once demure and shy Liniang now boldly confesses her love to Mengmei: "In this moment I give this precious body of mine to you. Do not betray this love I feel. My lifelong wish would be fulfilled if every night I could share pillow and mat with you" (Owen, 206). Here, we see a much different version of Liniang than the one we find in her first dream and sexual encounter with Mengmei. Liniang is no longer the shy and embarrassed girl who guards

herself against physical intimacy and the act of lovemaking. As a ghost, Liniang freely decides to give herself to Mengmei.

The fact that the second time that Liniang partakes in the act of lovemaking as a ghost is significant. The first time that Liniang and Mengmei have sex, Liniang is in a dream state. However, while their second sexual encounter indeed does not take place in a "dream" world, Liniang is still a ghost. She is neither alive nor dead. Because of this, Liniang is freed from the world of social convention and moral obligations. Thus, it is only through Liniang's dream-like existence that she is able to truly experience love in its most passionate form.

Dreams are also transformative and have the ability to elucidate the Way (self-enlightenment) for an individual in the real world. Self-expression (or *qing*) of one's *xing* is not exclusive to the dreamscape (although the experience of intense romantic passion is). The process of attaining such unrestrained self-expression, however, always starts with an impassioned dream. Liniang has two dream-like experiences before she returns back to the world of the living, and is "reborn" as a changed person. This transformation is most evident when she adamantly rejects her father's demand to break off her illegal marriage with Mengmei. Liniang has chosen Mengmei over her father, and in doing so, she proves that "love transcends ritual propriety and authority" (Cheng, 14). Liniang's willingness to break off her filial bond with her father is a testament to the depth and intensity of her love. In this way *qing* helps to strengthen Liniang's *xing*. The transformed Liniang who stands to reject her filial obligations to her father suddenly paints a stark contrast to the Liniang who once passively pined away from lovesickness.

Through Du Liniang's journey in the *Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu illustrates the power of ultimate love to transcend the boundaries of life and death. Yet, ultimate love can also manifest in

the world of dreams, and Xianzu points out that the most passionate *qing* exists in the sole reality of the dreamscape. Unrestrained by ritual propriety and strict social ethics, the dream world gives absolute reign to individual expression of one's *xing*. Furthermore, Xianzu shows that dreams are transformative and have the ability to elucidate an individual's Way. In pursuit of ultimate love, Liniang is able to transcend all three realms of life and death. Love manifests itself in different ways in each dimensions. Despite the fact that only in dream can Liniang experience love in its most uninhibited and passionate form, dream also serves as an equally important vehicle for self-expression and individual growth.

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