

Chinese “Helen of Troy”: the development of Qin Ke-qing’s tendency and fate in the Story of the Stone

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Abstracts: This study implements a praxis of relational comparison to reconfigure our understanding of 18th-century Sinitic vernacular fiction. Rather than evaluating Cao Xueqin’s masterwork through the standard linear progression of the Eurocentric novel, this paper establishes a cross-cultural triangulation between Homeric epic fate and late imperial allegorical structures. Specifically, I argue that Qin Keqing operates as a macro-cosmic somatic catalyst whose physical desire and early death drive the structural decline of the Jia clan. Drawing on Zhuangzi’s non-dualist philosophy of wuhua (物化 - the transformation of things), the study demonstrates that Keqing’s hyper-aestheticized bedroom functions as an active ontological threshold—resembling the performative “Ghost Gateway” (Guimendao) found in early Chinese drama. This spatial configuration creates a system of concentric spectatorship that actively destabilizes the objective gaze of the reader, transforming the act of reading into an ongoing, tactile performance of psychological transformation.

Among the twelve ladies of Jinling, there is one with “amorous looks” (David Hawkes 144) and “sportive heart” (144). She is Qin Ke-qing, a lady who is tangled with passion, lust and intelligence throughout her life. She lives for passion but also dies for passion. In *The Story of The Stone*, the author leaves prophecies in Chapter 5, uses homophone of her name and pairs “doublings” between her and Dai-yu, Bao-chai and Xi-feng respectively. With these techniques, Cao Xue-qin portrays Qin-shi’s lustful nature, leaves hints for hidden stories and foreshadows her disgraceful ending and suicide.

As the book features prolepsis to allow readers to continually anticipate characters’ fates, the prophecy poem, song and painting in Chapter 5 foretell the destiny of Qin-shi and reveal untold stories in Jia Family. Born with the family name Qin, which is homophonous with Qing in southern Chinese accent, Qin-shi is destined to be a sentimental type with excess passion. Hence, Cao Xue-qin uses “Qing”—love—to allude to Qin-shi in the prophecy: “Love was her sea, her sky” (135). This also resonates with words on the gate of The Land Of Illusion—“Seas Of Pain And Skies Of Passion” (130). Unlike Bao-yu’s “Lust of the mind” (146), Mrs. Passion is indulged in carnal lust. Her “excess love breeds wantonness” (135) and licentiousness leads to “retribution” (146) for the whole family. Qin-shi is adopted by Qin-ye “from an orphanage” (200). This questionable origin by no means matches the distinguished social status of Jia Family during the Qing dynasty. It is her vivaciousness and unresisting charm that allow her to get into the Jia Family, an inappropriate beginning that brings about endless troubles. Qin-shi resembles the “Helen of Troy”, for “[her] sportive heart [and] amorous looks [portend] the ruin of a mighty house portended” (144). She indeed has illicit affairs, extramarital and incestuous, with her father-in-law Jia Zhen and maybe also with her brother-in-law Jia Qiang. Not even avoiding suspicion, she improperly invites Bao-yu, another brother-in-law, to sleep in her bedroom. Despite the two obvious Don Juanes in Rong mansion Jia Lian and Jia Huan, there are more ridiculous and lewd acts in Ning mansion: Patriarch Jia Jing is devoted to “retorts and crucibles concocting elixirs” (74); Jia Zhen gets Qin-shi pregnant; Jia Rong has affairs with his mother’s two sisters. Long before Rong mansion begins to decay, the Ning mansion has already declined hopelessly. As the executive head of the family Qin-shi accounts for most of the responsibilities. Therefore, “[say] not our troubles all from Rong’s side came; [for] their beginning Ning must take the blame” (135); “[the] weakness in the line began with Jing; [the] blame for the decline lay first in Ning” (144). As the painting implies, eventually Qin-shi hangs herself in a tall building. Based on You-shi’s comments, Qin-shi is so “sensitive” (220) a lady that “the slightest little thing can upset her and set her brooding on in for whole days and nights together” (220). Hence, when her scandal of having her father-in-law’s child becomes public, shame and social judgment burden her with excessive worry and blame. Such pressure finally drives her to incurable illness and suicide. The title of the song “The Good Things Have An End” (144) summarizes the amorous Qin Ke-qing’s life. No matter how attractive she is, how pleasant she is and how capable she is, all the immoral love debts must be paid, a principle echoing the couplet in The Land Of Illusion—“Ancient earth and sky/Marvel that love’s passim should outlast all time./Star-crossed men and maids/Groan that love’s debts should be so hard to pay” (130).

Besides the prophecies, the homophone of Qin-shi’s name also predestinates her perpetual bond with love and her interrelationship with Bao-chai and Dai-yu. Her full name Qin Ke-qing suggests two extreme attitudes and consequences of love. If it is interpreted as passion that can be passioned, it means an affectionate person is addicted to the romantic world. Many figures in the book are caught by the net of romance and finally

lost themselves, such as Jia Rui, Qin Zhong and Qin-shi. On the other hand, if it is interpreted as using passion to overcome passion, it refers to an epiphany that one can achieve total disillusionment and “void” after experiencing passion and “forms”. This buddhistic epiphany not only resonates with the realization of Vanitas in Chapter 1, but also resonates with the significant theme of this book—“real events concealed” and “false words preserved”. Since this book is “a mirror of romance”, it aims to lead readers to free themselves from secular desires rather than indulged deeper. In *The Land Of Illusion*—a fairyland. Qin-shi has another identity as the younger sister of Disenchantment. Qin-shi is sent by her sister as a messenger of romance (Qing-shi) to enlighten Bao-yu’s awareness of romance as if she is a bridge that links all affairs between the previous life in Land Of Illusion and present life in “red dust”. Her other name Jian-mei means the combination of all kinds of beauty, which typically refers to the beauty of Dai-yu and Bao-chai in the book. Possessing the best parts of two top ladies, Qin-shi is a “Two-in-one” (146). This similar “apparition” (145) surprises Bao-yu when he catches first sight of fairy Ke-qing in *The Land Of Illusion*: “[her rose-fresh beauty [reminds] him strongly of Bao-chai, but there [is] also something about her of Dai-yu’s delicate charm” (145). Qin-shi is caught by heavy sickness at the end of her life, an “illness [caused] by too much worry affecting the spleen and causing an excess of wood in the liver” (227). This “excess of wood in the liver” (227) shifts her more to the Dai-yu part—weak and ill—and the main ingredient in the prescription—ginseng—resonates with Dai-yu’s Ginseng Tonic Pills.

As Qin Ke-qing partly resembles Dai-yu and Bao-chai, she also mirrors Wang Xi-feng and forms one pair of doubling. This parallel relationship implies Qin-shi’s ability to regulate household, compliments her gentle manner, embodies a hidden competition between these two “friends” and foreshadows the similar fates among her, Xi-feng and the Jia Family. Xi-feng administrates finance and keeps a house in Rong mansion; Ke-qing is the head of Ning mansion. They both possess the same amount of power and influence in each side. Although the book elaborately describes Xi-feng’s aptitude of keeping house and skips that part of Qin-shi, in light of the theme—“real events concealed”, Qin-shi seems to outshine Xi-feng according to minor details from the subordinates. Zhou Rui’s wife complains that Xi-feng “is a bit too strict with those beneath her” (157); however, when she praises Caltrop, she relates her to Ke-qing and says that “there’s something about this child’s face that reminds me of Master Rong’s wife over at the Ning mansion” (171). Such contrast within one person’s distinctive attitudes indicates the harshness and wickedness of Xi-feng and the mildness and gentleness of Ke-qing. Her good nature and outstanding capability earn her indisputable recognitions from both maids and masters, a tact echoing with Bao-chai’s “generous and accommodating disposition” (124): Grandmother Jia considers her as “the favourite among her great-granddaughters-in-law” (125); You-shi, who is supposed to hate and envy Qin-shi for stealing her husband, however regards Qin-shi as so sweet a person that “there isn’t anyone among our relations or among the older members of the family who doesn’t love her” (219). After the death of Qin-shi, Rong mansion is thrown into a disorder, a condition that serves as a foil to the order Qin-shi once maintains. When Jia Zhen earnestly requests Xi-feng to take charge of Rong mansion, she replaces Qin-shi and becomes feminine dominator in the family. Her smugness and pride cannot conceal her delight of losing one competitive rival and reveal that their former “friendship” is merely a sham. Furthermore, mirroring Mrs. Passion, amorous Xi-feng also possesses shady relations with brothers-in-law—Jia Rong and Bao-yu. Therefore, these two chief culprits, Xi-feng and Ke-qing, both account for the decline of the Jia Family. As Qin-shi’s death signals the bankruptcy of Ning mansion, Xi-feng’s death or downfall heralds the ruin of Rong mansion. The title of Xi-feng’s prophecy song—“Caught By Her Own Cunning”—corresponds to both ladies. Two intelligent ladies sacrifice the prospects of the family for their own selfish desires: one stirs up the ethical codes for the sake of passion; one is indulged in the accomplished feeling of wielding powers to enable illicit acts. Their cunning corrupt Jia Family both spiritually and economically. As Mrs. Passion dies for passion, Xi-feng might also end up wretched to pay off her illegal debts. Realized after death, Qin-shi attempts to admonish her “shadow” Xi-feng not to follow her wrong path and prepares for the crash of Jia Family from now, though Xi-feng forgets all the warnings.

Vertically, prophecies break linear narrative and force readers to read backwards. Gathering interrelated codes left by the author, readers piece together all hints and anticipate how Qin-shi realizes her destiny. Such a proleptic process keeps generating the feeling of *déjà vu* and reinforces the features of Qin-shi. Horizontally, there is no absolute border between individuals. Their interior connections intertwine their fates closely, so one can be another’s mirror image. Boldly breaking both the vertical line and horizontal line, Cao Xue-qin uses techniques such as prophecy, homophone and mirror images to let readers comprehend the rich image of Qin Ke-qing themselves.