

A CHARACTER-PAIR IN THE CHINESE NOVEL *QILU DENG*

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Abstract: This article investigates two female characters from the novel *Qiludeng* 歧路燈 (The Lantern at the Crossroads), completed in 1777. They were imagined as a complementary pair, therefore, the article will also address the literary concept of a “character-pair”, and its relation to the formal parallelism. We shall then note that the disposition and demeanour of this particular pair correspond with many traditional notions of female social roles, observed by modern anthropologists today. Finally, “character-pairs” in Chinese vernacular fiction will be recognised as distinct from the so called “doubles” in Western fiction of the nineteenth century.

Key words: Chinese literature, 18th century, vernacular novel, *Qiludeng*, gender, parallelism, character-pairs, doubles

The making of character-pairs who together form an ideal personality, is a common literary device in Chinese fiction of the Ming 明 and Qing 清 period. Nevertheless, it has not been much studied by literary historians. This article investigates a concrete example of such a pair which is based on both literary and anthropological notions. Once presented as a conference paper, it had been laid aside. Later, the book “Technology and Gender” referred to that paper at some length,¹ and incited its present written version.

¹ BRAY, F. *Technology and Gender. Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, pp. 349–51.

I. Stylistic and Structural Parallelism

Established scholarship maintains that character-pairs are a sub-category, or a modified form of parallelism. However, in Chinese literary theory, there is some ambiguity as to the uniform and intelligible definition of *parallelism*. Its history is too long, and the concept gradually acquired a broad meaning. Basically, parallelism refers to two similar entities combined together into a regular, symmetric structure. It is indispensable in the classical prose and poetry, but it has also penetrated into other genres.

The aesthetics of parallelism has appealed to the Chinese for centuries. Some reflections implying this ornament can already be found in *Zhuang zi* 莊子, The Inner Chapters. Paralleled segments were present in the embellished prose and poetry since the Han 漢 dynasty, and dominated in the *pianwen* 駢文 prose during the period of Disunity. The reputed reflection about parallels and creative writing was phrased in the 6th century AD by Liu Xie 劉勰 in his *Wenxindiaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons). In fact, this text was styled as the parallel prose, although it may not be quite apparent from the translation. The opening passage of chapter 35 goes:

“Nature, creating living beings, endows them with limbs in pairs. The Divine Reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary language, and in doing this it organises and shapes a hundred different thoughts, making what is high, supplementing what is low, and spontaneously producing Linguistic Parallelism.”²

During the Tang 唐 dynasty, labelled as the golden age of the regular poetry *shi* 詩, the rules of parallelism were codified.³ Along with the complex prosodic rules concerning the two parallel verses, there is also the stylistic rule that they consist of words which belong to the same grammatical category, and concurrently to the same semantic category, expressing contrary, complimentary, reinforcing, or other ideas. There should be a reciprocal connection between the two members of a parallel pair. In the words of François Cheng, “this form implies ... a network of correspondence and complement in which each element is linked simultaneously to its partner, with

² SHIH, V. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: A Study of Thought and Patterns in Chinese Literature*, p. 190. The problems of translating the terminology can be mentioned in this context. The original title of chapter 35 is *Lici* 麗辭, and it has been translated as “Linguistic Parallelism”. The term *li* means “parallel”, but also “adorned”. The term *dui* 對, which figures several times in the passage quoted, translated there as “a couplet” stands elsewhere for “[linguistic] parallelism”.

³ KAO, K. Rhetoric. In NIENHAUSER, W. (ed.). *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, p. 122.

the result that there is a continuous exchange between object and subject, and subject and object”.⁴

However, the principle of parallelism in Chinese literature does not merely concern style, and is not only exemplified through paired phrases in poetry and parallel essays, or the dialogue in *chuanqi* 傳奇 dramas. The forming of a regular couple in a text is favoured by the visual aspect of Chinese script, where each character is a complete entity and occupies an identical space, thus reinforcing the impression of a corresponding structure at first glance. The visual appeal for parallel couples extends to the symmetry formed by a pair of decorative objects, e.g. vases, on display. This concept of structural parallelism also excites movement in dramatic and fictional structure when whole blocks, or episodes, can be accurately located in the text in order to match or contrast. The *huaben* 話本 stories in Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 collections known as *San yan* 三言, 1620 – 1627, are arranged in corresponding pairs. As such, their coupling is the actual key to their interpretation, when one member of the pair discloses, or points at, the hidden meaning of the other. As an example of parallelism in drama, A. Plaks notes that *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion), 1598, by Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖, is “constructed on a grid of alternating scenes that contrast such qualities as elegance and crudeness, etc”.⁵ Also in Li Yu’s 李漁 criticism of drama, the balanced alternation and interpretation of the paired qualities was emphasised. Therefore, Plaks concludes that “we can rightly speak of the structural form of parallelism”.⁶

The principle of structural parallelism also implies a pair characters (personages) who are pursuing the same goal and acting a similar plot. For the sake of clarity, in this article they are termed character-pairs, or couples. They are based on the aesthetic conventions of formal parallelism. The full character merges through the differences, but also similarities between the two members of the pair. A notorious example of paired characters is Song Jiang 宋江 and Li Kui 李逵 from the novel *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳 (Outlaws of the Marsh). They share resemblances in physical traits, notably, their dark complexion, however are contrasted by their temperament and conduct. This is unravelled by the means of direct humorous conversations, and brief anecdotes. For example, in chapter 38, Li Kui, for whom even beef does not have a strong enough flavour, takes insult when offered fish, and he insists on eating mutton. Song Jiang, on

⁴ CHENG, F. Some Reflections on Chinese Poetic Language and Its Relation to Chinese Cosmology. In LIN, S., OWEN, S. (eds.). *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T'ang*, p. 34.

⁵ PLAKS, A. H. Where the Lines Meet: Parallelism in Chinese and Western Literatures. In *CLEAR*, July 1988, Vol. 10, p. 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

the other hand, gets dreadfully sick after consuming a little fish in the following chapter. The two anecdotes are not adjacent, but ought to be linked together in order to understand the proper meaning. It is only the interaction of one anecdote with the other that makes the degree of Song Jiang's feebleness, and that of Li Kui's coarseness, obvious. One character alone would not give a full description. Once these two characters get to know each other (in chapter 38), they are constantly driven together by chance, and even death cannot separate them for long. When one dies, the other is reminded in a dream that he should follow, and indeed he does (in the full version of the novel).

Another literary pair that cannot be omitted is Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 and Xue Baochai 薛寶釵, the leading female characters from the novel *Honglouloumeng* 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber). One overly sensitive and vulnerable, the other sensible and socially skilful, they would make a perfect self if united. Unwittingly, they both aim at the same goal to possess the ever elusive Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉. In his article about parallelism Plaks lists, but does not comment on, the pairs formed by Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 and Li Ping'er 李瓶兒 (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅), Sun Wukong 孫悟空 and Pig (*Xiyouji* 西游記), and Cao Cao 曹操 and Liu Bei 劉備 (*Sanguo* 三國).⁷

II. The Character-Pair Selected from *Qiludeng*

The couples to be discussed at length are from the vernacular novel *Qiludeng* 歧路燈 (The Lantern at the Crossroads) by Li Lüyuan 李綠園 who lived in 1707–1790. The novel has 108 chapters (*juan* 卷), the major portion (some 82 chapters) was written in the period between 1748 and 1756, and the rest was completed between 1775 and 1777. The break in-between was due to the author's official engagement. The text had been circulating in the form of manuscripts, until the contemporary literary critic Luan Xing 樂星 edited them and had the novel published, for the first time, in 1980.⁸

The purpose of the novel is didactic: it tells the story of a young man's moral decline, and his final rectification. The synopsis of the novel is as follows: Born into a gentry family of wealth and reputation, the main character Tan Shaowen 譚紹聞 lost his father early and grew up without correct moral guidance. His mother pampered him, the tutor she hired was irresponsible. As a youngster, Shaowen met bad companions and set on a downward path. He got involved in

⁷ PLAKS, A. H. Where the Lines Meet: Parallelism in Chinese and Western Literatures. In *CLEAR*, July 1988, Vol. 10, p. 60.

⁸ See the References to this article.

a succession of incidents which progressively became more serious, ranging from transgression to crime, e.g. counterfeiting money (chapters 75, 76). He would not have listened to those who admonished him, and in the course of two decades ruined his good name and brought his household to bankruptcy. In the concluding part of the novel, written after the twenty years' break, he suddenly reformed and regained his social position. Incredible as this may seem, it was a way of bringing the story to a happy ending.

The author makes a relatively rich use of character-pairs, and somewhat unusually, even of duplicate groups of characters. For example, the friend of Tan Shaowen's deceased father, and the senior servant in the Tan household are the pair of admonishers. There are two main tempters, who led the protagonist astray, they too can be seen as a reciprocal pair. The group of five scholars and a similar group of five neighbours, merchants, and artisans, also form pairs. In each case, the members of a pair are similar in disposition, they perform similar tasks, and have a similar function in the progress of the overall story. However, with every pair, one member is from the elite, i.e. has the gentry background, while the other is a commoner. Specifically, an urban commoner, since the city – Kaifeng 開封 in this case – offered a vast ground for misconduct, unlike a village environment. The social distinction is the basic polarity between the *Qiludeng* pairs of characters. The author, obviously, is convinced of the moral superiority of the gentry, and so the gentry member of a pair is always more honourable and better disposed. Or, if appropriate, he/she is less evil than his or her counterpart from the lower class. The dividing line made along a social distinction is not uncommon in other Chinese novels of the time.

The character-pair selected for the detailed analysis are Kong Huiniang 孔蕙娘 and Bingmei 冰梅, the wife and the concubine of the protagonist Tan Shaowen. Bingmei is a slave girl bought into the rich household in spite of some objections of the master, i.e. the main character's father, who in general considered maidservants to be ill elements in a family with an adolescent son (chapter 13). This one before long seduces her, and she gives birth to a male offspring (chapter 19). Sometime later, Tan Shaowen is married to Kong Huiniang (chapter 27), to whom he has been betrothed since childhood. Kong Huiniang immediately and spontaneously develops affection for Bingmei's baby, and the baby, as stated by the narrator, likes her better than his real mother. Meanwhile, the father dies and the now unrestrained Tan Shaowen continues his debaucheries. He gambles, drinks, creates debts, and even gets involved in criminal matters, thereby ruining his family's wealth and reputation. Kong Huiniang is too dutiful a wife to reprimand him openly, but as a result of her shaken nerves, she develops sickness which prevents her from conceiving a child (chapter 32). All the time, Kong Huiniang tries to reform her husband and gently persuades him to give up gambling (chapter 35). Her striving is to no

effect, and her sickness worsens, until she dies of consumption (chapter 47). It should be noted that according to traditional views, female illnesses are routed in anger and stress. Kong Huiniang, of course, became fatally ill because of her psychic condition. On her deathbed, she gives four precepts (always *four* in this novel) to the grieving concubine Bingmei. First, Bingmei ought to serve the mother-in-law; second, she ought to reform Tan Shaowen through agreeable means; third, she ought to make sure that the little boy gets an education; lastly, she should obey the new wife, be there any.

At first sight, the pair of Kong Huiniang and Bingmei are contrasted by their appearances: Kong Huiniang was tall, with an oval face, whereas Bingmei is plump, with a round face. The essential distinction between the two, however, is social. Born to an exemplary Confucian family, Kong Huiniang knows the proper conduct, and leads Bingmei in the same direction. In moments of controversy, Kong Huiniang has the right judgement, whereas Bingmei is often at odds, but she is obedient, and carries on Kong Huiniang's wishes even after her mistress's death. Their performance of proper Confucian attitudes in practice may seem somewhat forced and indeed, makes the two characters shallow.

Throughout the novel, their shared chief goal is to take care of the little boy, and to reassure that he, unlike his corrupt father, will study and succeed in examinations. The handling of this task reveals another distinction between the two young women, being the distinction of purity and pollution. The educational charges concerning the child are ascribed to Kong Huiniang, whereas the dirty charges are taken care of by Bingmei. In the traditional view, a woman is regarded as potentially harmful to a man by disrupting the balance of *yin* and *yang* elements in his body, through sexual intercourse. This role is left for Bingmei who becomes the carrier of all the "unclean" aspects attributed to womankind. The subject of physical intimacy between Kong Huiniang and Tan Shaowen is not touched upon, except the two occurrences when an inviting situation develops, but then Kong Huiniang quickly leaves her husband in order to do some housework. Last but not least, it is Bingmei who gives birth, and birth is connected with unclean substances – the mother is considered ritually unclean, too.

The notions of female pollution, described above, are based on what Emily Ahern observed in Taiwanese villages two centuries after the novel had been written.⁹ Interestingly, her findings comply with the relevant notions held by the author, or presumably, by Kaifeng gentry in the eighteenth century. As for the woman's social influence, also discussed by Ahern, she is commonly perceived

⁹ AHERN, E. The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women. In WOLF, M., WITKE, R. (eds.). *Women in Chinese Society*, pp. 193–214.

as a disrupter who may threaten family harmony, if she dominates her husband, disobeys her mother-in-law, is unkind to the concubine, etc. Kong Huiniang does neither, although her circumstances give her the power to do so. She possesses a stronger personality than her husband, second, she is aware of the foolishness of her mother-in-law, thirdly, she could easily be jealous of the concubine. She nevertheless always behaves respectfully and correctly, as expected from a Confucian epitome.

The primary task of Kong Huiniang is to look after the child's up-bringing. As her husband's primary wife, she was legally considered the mother (*dimu* 嫡母) of this child. Assuming the role of a mother, she was the person responsible for his correct progress and education, and she willingly accepted her obligation. Although she dies when the boy is still little, and Bingmei takes over her duties, we are perpetually reminded that Bingmei acts according to the four precepts of her deceased mistress. From this perspective, it is Kong Huiniang who indirectly contributes to the son's later becoming an official, and to the family regaining respectability. It remains somewhat controversial that Kong Huiniang herself had no child, since bearing a son is the essential role of a wife. However, in the traditional medical view, high class women were considered less fertile than low class women,¹⁰ hence the division of roles between Kong Huiniang and Bingmei in this respect, would seem "natural". Furthermore, as was mentioned, Kong Huiniang became very fond of the baby from first seeing him and in return, the baby liked her *better* than his biological mother (chapter 28). In her married life, Kong Huiniang ensured the proper upbringing of the eldest son, and managed to remain pure from the pollution of childbirth at the same time. Judging the matter from this angle, Bingmei's reason for existence in the novel is to make it possible for Kong Huiniang to stay forever a perfect and pure gentlewoman.

The pairs of characters, commonly encountered in Chinese novels, are distinguished by their social status. As F. Bray noted,¹¹ this particular pair of Kong Huiniang and Bingmei exceeds this formula, through the inclusion of the maternal role and its accurate division between the wife and the concubine. On the one hand, the moral guidance and the son's education, associated with purity and Confucian ethics, are carried on by the wife, on the other, sexuality and labour, associated with pollution in popular culture, burden the low class concubine. Hence the doubling of these two characters is not merely a literary conceit, but it also represents the physical and social duality of motherhood.

¹⁰ FURTH, C. Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China. In *Journal of Asian Studies*, p. 16.

¹¹ BRAY, F. *Technology and Gender. Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, p. 369.

Finally, the character Tan Shaowen's mother, who acts as the head of the household, deserves a comment. Her personality corresponds with the classical Confucian understanding of a woman's foolish nature, and the consequent potential harm. She means well, but due to her inborn foolishness, she spoils the moral development of her son. Luckily the household is not managed by her alone, but by a wise old servant, who had been trusted by the deceased master. Tan Shaowen's mother comes out as a negative actor in the plot, and she is here and then ridiculed, with the result of being better portrayed than the discussed pair of the two positive female characters who, understandably, are portrayed as shallow and somewhat forced. Whereas the mother seems quite real, the two young women are artificially modelled on Confucian ethics and views.

III. Pairing Versus Doubling

The pairing of two characters endowed with complementary distinctions is also familiar in Western classical literature. One beautiful example for many is Don Quixote de la Mancha, and his servant Sancho Panza, in the homonymous novel by Miguel de Cervantes, published in 1605. Notwithstanding their existence, the pairs of characters in European (and American) novel gave way to – from the nineteenth century onward – the so called doubles. The concept behind doubles, or *Doppelgänger*, does not match the character-pairs in classical literature. Therefore, in my analysis, I carefully avoid mingling the terms “doubles” with “character-pairs” as too often happens. The character-pair means coupling of two individual complementary characters, whereas the doubles represent duality within a single character, leading to the split of one personality into two. To put it still in another way, as for the pairs, two characters are to be perceived as one complex personage, in the case of doubles, on the contrary, one person is torn, to be perceived as two.

Doubles in European literature have emerged since Romanticism, and developed over the nineteenth century, bound to the paramedical and psychological discoveries. Typically, a subject is imagining a doubled self, or even a multiple self (in the twentieth century). The vehicles are frequently twins, siblings, a person and his cast shadow, reflection or portrait. The themes relate to orphanhood, isolation and escape. The sense of secrecy is always highlighted. Dualistic fiction imparts experiences of diversion, dispersal, abeyance and other negative phenomena.¹² Examples of doubling can be found in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by R. L. Stevenson, *William Wilson* by E. A. Poe, and many other works. In *The Shadow* by Hans Christian

¹² MILLER, K. *Doubles, Studies in Literary History*, passim.

Andersen, a poor, self-doubting Danish scholar sets off to Italy, and is attracted to a pretty girl. Being too shy himself, he sends his shadow to spy on her. Their transformation begins: the shadow takes over the role of the master, and the master effectively turns into his shadow, swapping their roles. At the end, it is the former shadow who marries the girl, quietly putting the scholar to death. He then settles down and lives happily ever after. A taste for truth and beauty, represented by the scholar, loses in the conflict with preoccupations of the mass mind, represented by the shadow.

The question concerning the presence of the Western type doubles in Chinese fiction presents itself. If they exist, they are a relatively recent phenomenon which has not entered the mainstream. Lu Xun's 鲁迅 prose *Ying de gaobie* 影的告别 (Shadow's Farewell) from the collection of poetic essays *Yecao* 野草, can be read in this way. Another such work is the story *Modao* 魔道 (Devil's Way), written in 1931 by the Shanghai based modernist Shi Zhecun 施蛰存, the writer who became influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis.¹³

As for the classical Chinese novel, I am not aware of having encountered any doubles of the type described above. However, there seems to be a certain similarity between doubles and the phenomenon known as transformation (*bian* 變), which is rooted in Buddhism, and was popularised by the tales of supernatural. In *Liaozhaizhiyi* 聊齋志異 (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio), the author makes plentiful use of transformation. He handles it in various ways, e.g. one bodily form is in sequence possessed by two beings (spirits). Or, one being occupies in sequence several bodily forms. The first variety is exemplified in *Changqingseng* 長清僧 (The Monk Everlasting Transparency).¹⁴ A young nobleman dies in an accident and his body is taken over by a wandering soul of a monk who has just died. The other variety is more frequently employed, and so there are quite a few examples. In *Qiaoniang* 巧孃 (The Shrewd Maiden),¹⁵ the protagonist is the spirit of a deceased woman. Eventually, although a spirit, she also dies, and can be heard weeping at her tomb. When her lover calls, she again reappears in a new human form, with a three-month old baby in her arms. The third variety is exemplified, for example,

¹³ Discussed by LEE, Wei-Yi. Psychoanalyzed Vacillation between and Entanglement of the Old and the New in 1930s Shanghai: the Sinicization of Freudian Psychoanalysis in Two Short Stories by Shi Zhecun. In *Comparative Literature Graduate Theses & Dissertations*, 2014. I am grateful to Professor Raoul Findeisen from Comenius University for pointing these two works to me.

¹⁴ PU Songling. *Zuben Liaozhaizhiyi* [Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio. Full Version]. Vol. 1, *juan* 1, pp. 6–7.

¹⁵ PU Songling. *Zuben Liaozhaizhiyi* [Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio. Full Version]. Vol. 1, *juan* 2, pp. 92–97.

by *A Bao* 阿寶 (Miss A Bao).¹⁶ The spirit simply leaves the body and wanders at a place desired, during which time the body is mindless, in the condition of sickness or agony. As soon as the spirit returns, the body regains its physical functions. In all the examples cited, the spirit left his/her body, but never divided into two opposite selves.

Conclusion

On the basis of what has been presented in this article, Kong Huiniang and Bingmei certainly form a literary pair. The reason for choosing them as the example of paired-characters is not alone for their literary aspects and merit, but also because of the cultural and social notions which conditioned their creation. My choice also intended to promote the novel *Qiludeng* which is not as well-known as it deserves. As for the literary device of character-pairs, their aesthetic principles are probably derived from structural parallelism, popular in Chinese literary creations. Finally, the antithetical affinity between the classical character-pairs and the much later device of doubles can also be approved of.

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¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 83–86.

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