

“HOMING CRANE LODGE” VERSUS THE STORY OF A PALINDROME: DIFFERENT WAYS OF REDEFINING QING AND EMPLOYING INVERSION

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This study offers a comparative reading of two romances, “Hui gui lou” 鹤归楼 (Homing Crane Lodge”) and *Hejin huiwen zhuan* 合锦回文传 (*The Story of a Palindrome*).² The former is a novella written by the famous Qing writer Li Yu 李渔 (1611-1680) during the first decade of the Qing dynasty.³ The latter is a *scholar-beauty* novel (*caizi jiaren xiaoshuo* 才子佳人小说) that has also been attributed to Li Yu, although its questionable dating and dissimilar ideological and artistic features suggest otherwise.

The existing publishing record and scholarship suggest that the attribution of *Palindrome* to Li Yu may be forged.⁴ Although the two

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² Hereafter referred to as *Palindrome*. In this essay, reference to the novel (Chinese original) is abbreviated as *HJHWZ* and followed by page numbers. The references to Li Yu’s “Hui gui lou” are given in two parts, the first part referring to the English translation “Homing Crane Lodge” (included in Patrick Hanan trans. *A Tower for the Summer Heat*), abbreviated as “HCL” and followed by page numbers, the second referring to the Chinese original reprinted in *Li Yu quanji*, abbreviated as “HGL” and followed by page numbers. Other English translations in this article are mine except where indicated.

³ “Hui gui lou” is included in Li Yu’s second collection of vernacular stories, *Shi’er lou* 十二楼 (*Twelve Towers*, or *Twelve Structures*). Since the collection carries a preface by Du Jun 杜浚 dated autumn 1658, this novella must have been completed by this date.

⁴ Sun Kaidi 孙楷第 was probably the first person to support the view that Li Yu was indeed the author of *Palindrome*. Sun indicates that a commentary made by Suxuan 素轩 at the end of chapter 2 is similar in its idea to what Li Yu said about the relationship between fiction and drama (i.e. that fiction is a blueprint of drama). The commentary also repeats Li’s vow that he will never take revenge by satirizing anyone in a play. Sun believes that Suxuan was Li Yu, although he does not explain further why he thinks so. This is not convincing because,

surviving Qing editions name Li Yu as the author, they were both published long after Li Yu’s death. The earliest extant edition dates to the third year of the Jiaqing 嘉庆 (1798, more than one hundred years after Li Yu’s death). A later edition, the Daoguang 道光 edition, published in 1826, is believed to be a revised version of the Jiaqing.⁵ Both editions also name a certain Tiehua Shanren 铁华山山人 as a later compiler/editor of the work.⁶ Except for Li Yu’s name appearing on these two early editions of *Palindrome*, the claim for his authorship is not supported by any biographical, commentarial, prefatory or other evidence. Given that false ascription was common, and that the boundaries between the author, the complier, and the critic were blurred and frequently crossed in Chinese vernacular fiction,⁷ it would be no surprise to discover that Tiehua Shanren, who was alleged to be the complier/editor a century later, was the real author of *Palindrome*, and capitalized on Li Yu’s name as the purported author for his own novel.

If a later writer did indeed forge Li Yu’s authorship, it would be expected that *Palindrome* presents values and styles that set it apart from Li Yu’s writings. Many scholars have already noted some ideological and artistic

first of all, there is no evidence apart from Sun’s speculation to prove that Suxuan was a pseudonym of Li Yu’s. Secondly, although the arguments made in this single commentary resemble those made by Li Yu in his *Yijiayan quanji* 一家言全集, the differences between *Palindrome* and Li Yu’s fictional writings are too substantial to support Sun’s claim. See Sun (1935; rpt., in *Li Yu quanji* 1992, vol. 20, 42-3). Cui Zien 崔子恩 also supports the theory of Li Yu’s authorship by making a comparison between *Palindrome* and Li Yu’s other writings, suggesting that the novel closely follows the “Li Yu model.” Cui’s claim is even less convincing because that which he categorizes as the “Li Yu model” is in reality the common convention for *scholar-beauty* novels. See Cui (1989, 66-82). Other scholars, such as Helmut Martin, Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang, and Wang Rumei 王汝梅 do not believe *Palindrome* was written by Li Yu. For their discussions, see Chang and Chang (1992, 232-4); and Wang, in *Li Yu quanji* (1992, vol. 20, 322-3).

⁵ Both Shen Yueling 沈悦苓 and Ma Zhanggen 马樟根, the editors of the 1988 and 1992 editions of *Palindrome*, indicate that the Daoguang (1826) edition is in fact a reprint of the Jiaqing edition (1789). Both Qing editions were published by Baoyan zhai 宝研斋. According to Ma, except for a few character changes and the deletion of nine pictures, the Daoguang edition repeats all the errors in the Jiaqing edition. Shen also mentions a Dawen tang 大文堂 edition that is likewise dated the sixth year of Daoguang. Shen believes that the Dawen tang edition also appears to be a reprint of the Jiaqing edition. See Shen, “Jiaodian houji” 校点后记, in *Hejin huiwen zhuan* (1988, 243-245); Ma, “Dian jiao shuoming” 点校说明, in *Li Yu quanji* (1992, vol. 9, 295). These views are echoed by Wang Rumei and Lin Chen 林辰. See Wang, in Ouyang Jian 欧阳健 et al. eds. (1990, 576-7) and Lin, in Liu Shide 刘世德 et al. eds. (1993, 151-2).

⁶ No information on Tiehua Shanren is available to us. Wang Rumei believes that Tiehua Shanren “may be an admirer of Liweng who liked Liweng’s fiction and was influenced by him” (可能是笠翁先生的一位崇信者, 比较喜欢笠翁的小说, 受笠翁作品的一定影响). See Wang (1992, 322).

⁷ For example, Patrick Hanan believes that one of the three collections of vernacular short stories edited by Feng Menglong 冯梦龙, *Xingshi heng yan* 醒世恒言, was mainly written by another compiler/editor, Langxian 浪仙 (pseudonym). See Hanan (1981, 120). Another good example is that the last forty chapters of *Honglou meng* are believed to be written by Gao E 高鹗, one of the two compilers/editors for the Cheng Gao 程高 editions of the novel.

differences of this novel from those known to be by Li Yu.⁸ As my study will show, these distinctions are further revealed when *Palindrome* is read side by side with Li Yu's "Homing Crane Lodge," a fictional piece with a similar theme and technique. My juxtaposed reading of these two works, one by Li Yu in the Ming and Qing transitional period, the other probably falsely attributed to him by a writer of mid-Qing, highlights the ideological and artistic incongruities between them, thereby reconfirming the belief that *Palindrome* is the work of another author. Moreover, by comparing the two texts in question, I intend to draw my reader's attention to a broader spectrum of issues, including the difference in values among writers and audiences from dissimilar historical and socio-cultural backgrounds. Other issues to be examined are the rhetorical discrepancy between an ironic twist of the *scholar-beauty* romance and a conventional representation of this genre,⁹ as well as the critical function of a later imitation to its model as a result of textual mirroring and response.

My analysis of the two fictional pieces will focus on their representations and interpretations of *qing* 情 (love, feelings) and on their employment of inversion as a rhetorical technique. However, before I bring out *Palindrome*'s critical departure from Li Yu's original in these two aspects, a summary of the shared themes and artistic devices of these two works is in order.

The Thematic and Artistic Similarities of the Two Works

Palindrome relates the story of a romantic hero's search for his soul mate (*zhiyin* 知音). The male protagonist Liang Dongcai 梁栋材 is a prodigy who gains fame by unravelling the poems concealed in a palindrome. The palindrome is the work of Su Huiniang 苏蕙娘, a gifted poet of the Dong Jin 东晋 (317-420) period. Su Huiniang was able to rekindle her husband's love by writing more than two hundred love poems and cleverly arranging them

⁸ For example, Sun Kaidi recognizes the artistic inconsistency of the novel, although he does suggest that Li Yu is the author. See Sun (1935, 43). Similarly, Wang Rumei thinks that although the style of the first and second chapters of *Palindrome* is close to that of Li Yu's writing, as a whole the novel is melodramatic and merely magnifies Li Yu's shortcomings, such as overemphasis on providing entertainment. See Wang (1992, 323). Wang also argues that despite Dun Jun's involvement with the commentaries and publication of much of Li Yu's fiction, there is no evidence of Du's knowledge of *Palindrome*; and therefore it is very unlikely that the novel was written by Li Yu. See Wang (1990, 576). Shi Changyu 石昌渝 makes an even stronger assertion: "Judging from its theme, plot structure, and language, [the style of *Palindrome*] is very different from the work of Li Yu (从题旨, 结构和语言来看, 与李渔的风格迥然有别). See Shi, in Liu Shide et al. (1993, 272).

⁹ In his book *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, Andrew Plaks states that one of the shared features of the four Ming masterpieces is their self-consciousness in relating to the past artistic tradition, which he terms as the "ironic revision of traditional narrative conventions" or the rhetoric of irony. See Plaks (1987, 25). A similarly self-reflective and ironic mode can be detected in Li Yu's works, as will be demonstrated in my analysis in this paper.

into reversible texts. Having obtained the upper half of this famous palindrome by chance, Liang is so impressed with Su’s literary creativity that his heart is set on finding a woman of equal talent and beauty. In his quest, Liang Dongcai turns down many marriage proposals and goes so far as to disguise himself as a woman to search for his ideal match. His “soul mate” turns out to be a pair — two cousins of equal beauty and intelligence. Liang Dongcai fatefully encounters Sang Menglan 桑梦兰 (the elder of the two cousins) who was mysteriously bestowed at birth with the lower half of the palindrome by a fairy. After a series of literary tests that prove their shared skill in deciphering the palindrome, Liang asks for Sang’s hand in marriage. But the consummation of their love is delayed by the machinations of Liang’s ungrateful cousin Lai Benchu 赖本初 and his co-conspirators. When Liang and Sang finally tie the knot, a rebellion breaks out in a far off territory of the empire. Liang Dongcai, who has just successfully taken first place in the highest level of the civil-service examination, is ordered by imperial decree to join the military mission in quelling the revolt. Meanwhile Lai Benchu (who, in collusion with the evil eunuch Yang Fugong 杨复恭, has become Liang’s mortal enemy) takes advantage of Liang’s absence to plot the assassination of Sang Menglan. Although the scheme fails due to mistaken identity, Liang is misinformed that Sang has been murdered. So when Liang pays a visit to Prime Minister Liu 柳 (his former mentor and Sang’s adoptive father), he is totally unaware that Sang is living there under Liu’s protection. Sang Menglan, who in the interim has met her younger cousin Liu Menghui 刘梦蕙 and recognized her rare talent and beauty, decides to persuade Liang Dongcai to take Liu for his second wife. But realizing Liang’s single-minded devotion to her, Sang devises a plot to deceive Liang into marrying Liu Menghui, by disguising herself as a ghost and making Liang believe that her “wandering soul” has returned and possessed Liu’s body. The novel ends with the hero happily reuniting with both of his wives, while the evildoers are justly punished by the imperial court or karmic retributions.

In sum, the sixteen-chapter novel is a fine example of the *scholar-beauty* romance,¹⁰ possessing all of the recognizable generic ingredients. It repeats the cliché of the predestined and ideal match, but by strictly adhering to literary conventions, the novel impresses the reader as a rather insipid work of limited originality.

However, when the novel is compared to Li Yu’s “Homing Crane Lodge,” the remarkable resemblance between the two is immediately noticed. Thematically, *Palindrome* can be paired with “Homing Crane Lodge.” Both, in turn, are an inversion of the romantic tale of Su Huiniang.¹¹ In contrast to

¹⁰ For discussions on the generic conventions of the *scholar-beauty* novel, see Miao Zhuang 2000; Martin Huang 2001; and Robert Yang 1982.

¹¹ While this story is only briefly referred to by characters in Li Yu’s “Homing Crane Lodge,” a full account is given in the prologue of *Palindrome*. According to the latter, around the Dong Jin 东晋 (317-420) period, Su Huinian, a fair lady of great talent, is happily married to Dou Tao 窦涛, an equally gifted young man from a distinguished family. The marriage falls apart when Dou dotes on a beautiful dancer, Zhao Yangtai 赵阳台, who he has

Su's story, which centers on the heroine, both "Homing Crane Lodge" and *Palindrome* turn upon the hero's quest for love — a love that is defined and eventually fulfilled by the act of creating or deciphering a palindrome. In many ways, Liang Dongcai becomes a trans-textual reflex of the two heroes in "Homing Crane Lodge." Like Li Yu's main protagonist Duan Yuchu 段玉初, Liang Dongcai wins his wives' hearts by composing or deciphering a palindrome. He also possesses the character traits and romantic sentiments of Yu Zichang 郁子昌, the second hero in Li Yu's novella.

The two fictional works share a more profound theme: the representation and interpretation of *qing* as both a private desire and a literary construct. As a private desire, *qing* is re-evaluated in relation to the Confucian teachings of the five cardinal relationships (*wulun* 五伦). The heroes' pursuit of *qing* is also situated in the context of Confucian public service and careerism. In both works, the young scholar-officials are forced by political instability and war to face the dilemma of whether to serve the imperial court or to fulfil personal desire and happiness. Their priorities reflect the authors' differing interpretations of *qing*. Similarly, *qing* as a literary construct, in both Li Yu's original and in *Palindrome*, can be viewed as a response to Tang Xianzu's 汤显祖 influential play, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (*The Peony Pavilion*). In Tang's play *qing* is sentimentalized and represented as a powerful force that transcends life and death. Both Li Yu and the author of *Palindrome* argue for a more grounded and rational *qing*, although their reasons for holding this position are significantly different.

Another striking similarity between *Palindrome* and "Homing Crane Lodge" lies in the important role the palindrome plays in the narrative. As a love token, the poetic text functions as a crucial element in narrative advancement. In the case of *Palindrome*, the text is Su's original; while in "Homing Crane Lodge," it is a reversible poem written by Duan Yuchu himself. In Li Yu's work, the hidden message in the poem foreshadows a reversal in the relationship between the hero and his heroine. In the forged piece, however, the appearance and disappearance of the palindrome is a metaphor for the union, separation, and reunion of the loving soul mates. Furthermore, the use of the palindromic form in both works acts as a self-reflection on their narrative structures, indicating the reversible nature of the narrative organization. In other words, like "Homing Crane Lodge," the textual construction of *Palindrome* is organized in such a way that its narrative structure is itself a palindrome.

taken as his concubine. Huiniang's jealousy of Yangtai and her resentment towards Dou eventually cause the couple's separation — Dou takes Yangtai to his new official post and leaves Huiniang behind. After years of estrangement, feeling remorseful and lonely, Huiniang weaves a palindrome into a five-color-brocade which she sends to Dou in an attempt to rekindle his love, believing correctly that Dou is the only one clever enough to decipher all two hundred love poems hidden in it. The palindrome reunites Huiniang and Dou Tao who, being touched by Huiniang's affection and amazed by her talent, leaves Yangtai for good. (*HJHWZ*: 303-5).

As a work that capitalized on Li Yu’s name, *Palindrome* demonstrates some “mimetic performances”¹² that may have been generated from “Homing Crane Lodge.” However, the novel remains fundamentally different from Li Yu’s original. In the process of emulation, a significant “transformation” has taken place in the forged piece. I now turn to the different ways that the two works represent *qing* and employ the technique of inversion.

From Devaluation to Moralization: Two Reinterpretations of Qing

Reading *Palindrome* side by side with “Homing Crane Lodge,” one is struck by the former’s endorsement of Confucian morality, a stand that the non-conformist Li Yu would not have taken.

Like most of Li Yu’s fictional writings, “Homing Crane Lodge” demonstrates Li’s cynicism towards Confucian moral teachings, which is readily apparent in the novella’s portrayal of the fictional characters, Duan Yuchu and Yu Zichang. Both heroes are self-serving characters who devalue the Confucian view of life, refusing to identify themselves by its conventional measures of success. To them, pursuing sexual fulfilment and conjugal bliss is a better alternative than striving for achievement through the three paths to “cultural immortality” promoted by Confucianism: moral self-cultivation, public service, and writing (*lide ligong liyan* 立德立功立言). Too practical and pessimistic to have Confucian ambitions, Duan Yuchu adopts a stoic attitude towards life, while Yu Zichang openly defies the Confucian view of the five cardinal relationships, and places the relationship between husband and wife above that of filial piety to parents and loyalty to the emperor:

... a man may forget every other attachment save his delight in his womenfolk, his sexual bliss, which is the area of Confucian doctrine set aside for our enjoyment. It differs from all other pleasures and must not be neglected under any circumstances. Inhibited as we are by the bonds of morality, we inevitably become bored and apathetic, which is why the Sages who opened the heavens and laid down our moral standards created this path for us and set it among the ethical relationships, enabling us to cast aside our prudish restraints. Moreover, if there were no husband-and-wife relationship among the Three Bonds, where would all the rulers and subjects, fathers and sons come from? And if the Five Obligations lacked such a relationship, how would we practice the virtues of filial piety, friendship, loyalty, and goodness? Obviously marriage is

¹² Gérard Genette used this term to describe how Virgil’s work is modeled on *Odyssey*. As he explains, the imitative work is a transformation that requires “a previously constituted model of generic competence drawn from that singular performance that is known as the *Odyssey*, one that is capable of generating an indefinite number of mimetic performances.” See Gérard Genette (1997, 6).

the most important of the Five Obligations, and we must not only marry young, we must marry well.

人生在世，事事可以忘情，只有妻妾之乐，枕席之欢，这是名教中的乐地，比别样嗜好不同，断断忘情不得。我辈为纲常所束，未免性情索然，不见一毫生趣，所以开天立极的圣人，明开这条道路，放在伦理中，使人散拘化腐。况且三纲之内，没有夫妻一纲，安所得君臣父子？五伦之中，少了夫妇一伦，何处尽孝友忠良？可见婚娶一条是五伦中极大之事，不但不可不早，亦且不可不好。（“HCL”：178；“HGL”：206）。

This reversal of hierarchy in the five cardinal relationships reflects Li Yu's intention to undermine Confucian moral values. Such an undermining is further manifested in the absence of filial piety and the devaluation of loyalty in the characterizations of his heroes. Since Duan Yuchang's family is only mentioned in passing and Yu Zichang's family is not described at all, their relationships to their parents are conveniently ignored. However, Li Yu's readers know all too well that his de-emphasis on filial piety is hardly accidental. Li Yu consistently expresses a profound ambivalence to Confucian ethics in his stories and writes more about his characters' subversion of those moral teachings than their adherence to them.¹³

In “Homing Crane Lodge” the cherished Confucian principle of loyalty is likewise devalued to the point of irrelevancy to its heroes. Set in the transitional period between the Northern and Southern Song (in Emperor Huizong's 徽宗 reign, 1101-25), a chaotic period that resembles Li Yu's own time, the story emphasizes how corrupt the emperor is at a time of national crisis, and how reluctant the heroes are to serve the collapsing government. Unlike the hero of *Palindrome*, whose ultimate goal is to pass the highest civil service examination and to be recognized and rewarded by the emperor, both Duan Yuchu and Yu Zichang try to avoid examinations. The constant war at the border with Jin 金, Liao 辽, and Xixia 西夏 and countless internal problems at the imperial court make officialdom a risky career that no longer attracts young scholars. Duan and Yu only take examinations when they are forced to by imperial decree. But politics and war are not the only perils of officialdom. The emperor (Emperor Huizong) is so corrupt that even the most innocent action can lead to disaster. In fact, both Duan and Yu risk the emperor's jealousy when they unwittingly marry the two most beautiful women in the capital — women whom the emperor initially wanted as imperial concubines. As punishment, Duan and Yu are sent to escort the Song annual tribute of silver and silk to the Jin on a dangerous journey that also cruelly separates the two young men from their brides. Portraying the emperor as undeserving of his subjects' loyalty and emphasizing the irrelevance of loyalty as a moral principle for his characters, Li Yu clearly

¹³ Patrick Hanan has also noticed Li Yu's ambivalence towards Confucian morality: “Although the basic requirement of a story for him [Li Yu], as for other vernacular authors, is that it relate a morally satisfying narrative, his narrator is sometimes heard to protest *sotto voce* about the moral demands of his stories, presenting us with a standard moral interpretation but also mocking it at the same time.” See Hanan (1988, 77-8).

questions this Confucian concept and the ideal of establishing oneself in public service.

Elsewhere too, Li Yu downplays the Confucian ideas of success and social hierarchy. Although in some of his works, especially in his plays, Li Yu did write about successful examination takers, the shared characteristic of most of his male protagonists, especially those believed to be autobiographically based, is that they are examination-outcasts. They replace the pursuit of officialdom, with the quest for sex and love, a switch to other professions, and a desire for reclusion. In his play *Qiao tuanyuan* 巧团圆, Li Yu even expresses the view, in the speech of a character, that the most desirable professions are those of conjurer, artisan, and merchant – professions that are conventionally inferior or insignificant, but which are in fact safer in an age of chaos and disorder.¹⁴ Some have suggested that Li Yu’s ambivalence toward examinations and political success is related to his bitterness toward his own failures in examinations.¹⁵ Others find consistency in his decision to stop taking examinations after the collapse of the Ming. In either case, Li Yu’s de-emphasis of the Confucian aspirations is evident.

Even though Li Yu lived through the dynastic change from Ming to Qing and witnessed the Manchu’s takeover of China, his fictional writings and plays show no trace of loyalist sentiment or nostalgia for the fallen Ming dynasty. This absence of dynastic loyalty sets him apart from many contemporary playwrights and fictional writers.¹⁶ As Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang have indicated, this may be due to a combination of Li Yu’s cautious handling of a sensitive issue and his objection to excessive moralizing in fiction and drama.¹⁷ Even so, in “Homing Crane Lodge” the reader senses a strong criticism and disappointment in the decadent government. It is not too far-fetched to say that Li Yu believed that, like the Northern Song under Huizong’s reign, the Ming dynasty was beyond saving and that the regime was doomed.

It is perhaps noteworthy that in “Homing Crane Lodge” Li Yu assigns the emperor the role of an interfering villain. Typically, as in *Palindrome*, the hero and heroine are repeatedly separated by one or two villains (such as Lai Benchu) before the couple is finally reunited. The imperial power, however, represents the ultimate seat of justice that punishes the evil and rewards the virtuous, thus bringing final closure to the story — *fengzhi wanhun* 奉旨完婚,

¹⁴ See Li Yu, *Qiao tuanyuan* 巧团圆, in *Li Yu quanji* (1992, vol. 5. 329-30).

¹⁵ See Liangyan Ge (1998, 127-52).

¹⁶ Many of Li Yu’s contemporary playwrights and fictional writers used their writings to express their suppressed nostalgia and Ming loyalist sentiments. For instance, the Qing playwright Li Yu 李玉 (ca. 1591-1671) wrote *Qingzhong pu* 清忠谱 and *Wanli yuan* 万里缘 to express his patriotism. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692) authored *Longzhou hui* 龙舟会 to glorify the legendary Tang Dynasty heroine Xie Xiao’e 谢小娥 and to express his contempt for turncoat officials. Moreover, some late Ming and early Qing novels such as Chen Chen’s 陈忱 *Shuihu houzhuo* 水浒后传 and Ding Yaokang’s 丁耀亢 *Xu Jing Ping Mei* 续金瓶梅 are also believed to use their sequels to express nostalgia for the fallen Ming dynasty and resentment towards the Manchu takeover of China.

¹⁷ Chang and Chang (1992, 221-4).

getting married by imperial decree, is a typical scene for such a clichéd finale. By turning the emperor into a villain, Li Yu reveals two layers of irony. On the one hand, he shows us how the power of justice is abused and becomes an evil power, and on the other hand, he makes the stock characters of “evil villains” and “just emperor” objects of ridicule.

Through his portrayals of Duan and Yu, who intentionally replace the typical Confucian ways of life and success with their personal pursuits of ideal matches and happy marriages, Li Yu presents his view of *qing* as an alternate path to self-fulfilment. Unlike some of the “disenfranchised” literati in the transitional period from Ming to Qing, who sought solace in the arms of a courtesan only after unsuccessful attempts to join officialdom, Li Yu’s characters demonstrate a desire to withdrawal from public life altogether, despite similarly taking the form of *seyin* 色隱, by falling into the arms of pretty women.¹⁸ Their reluctance to serve the Northern Song court and preference instead for *seyin* are obviously self-conscious acts of self-protection and political disillusionment. In “Homing Crane Lodge” pursuing *qing* is not in opposition to Confucian moral teachings, but it is certainly considered a more favourable choice than serving and paying allegiance to the regime of a corrupt emperor. To be sure, the choice of *seyin* by Li’s heroes is not so much a means of political protest or self-vindication as it is an instinct for personal survival and a desire to find individual happiness. Such a representation of *qing* reflects Li Yu’s hedonistic and escapist philosophy of life, “indulging in pleasures” and “casting aside worry” (*xingle* 行乐 and *zhiyou* 止忧), that serves as a mechanism to guard against hardship and frustration in times of war and disorder.

In *Palindrome*, the reader certainly does not see such a valuing of *qing* over Confucian principles of loyalty and public duty; neither does he or she sense the slightest dissidence toward Confucian moral teachings that we have noted in Li Yu’s original writings. On the contrary, *qing* is very much contained and defined in Confucian terms, and the romantic hero and heroines can be described as Confucian paragons. For instance, the male protagonist, Liang Dongcai, is idealized as an exemplar of Confucian virtues. Embodying the ideal of *neisheng waiwang* 内圣外王 (cultivating the self to govern the state), he rigorously observes the rites of the five cardinal relationships. An

¹⁸ According to Martin Huang, *seyin* is a term coined by some of the mid- and late-Ming literati in reference to their indulgence in *qing* and *haose* 好色 (love for pretty women) as a deliberate act of “withdrawal from public life.” Beginning in the mid-Ming period, increasing numbers of literati found themselves “disenfranchised.” The fixed quotas for ranking successful candidates in the examination system and the small number of bureaucratic posts were inverse proportion to the growing cadre of qualified educated men. Consequently, many were left without access to the traditional means of acquiring an élite status. It was quite common for those who were frustrated in their careers to seek solace in the arms of a courtesan. Literati such as Wei Yong 卫泳 (fl. seventeenth century) and You Tong 尤侗 (1618-1704) expressed the view that when a man can find no one to appreciate his talents and no opportunity to fulfill his genuine desires to seek glory and success in public service, he will seek compensation in the love of a pretty woman. For a detailed discussion on this concept, see Martin Huang (2001, 35-7).

only son, Liang is portrayed as exceptionally filial. Not only does he postpone his career to fulfil filial duty, he also refuses to become a private tutor to a rich family, in order to be available to his parents at all times. In contrast, Liang’s two orphaned cousins, who sought shelter in Liang’s home and became the adopted stepdaughter and step-son-in-law of the family, abandon Liang’s parents in hard times. An even more striking contrast to Liang’s filial piety is provided when the male cousin, Lai Benchu (whose name is a pun meaning “denying one’s origin”), changes his surname to Yang and becomes the adopted nephew of the corrupt but powerful eunuch, Yang Fugong. In so doing, Lai Benchu has committed the most shameful and unfilial act to his birth parents and ancestors.

Besides filial piety, loyalty is glorified in *Palindrome* as another principal characteristic of Liang Dongcai. He demonstrates his loyalty to the throne by protecting the emperor from an attempted coup d’état and from rebellions in feudal territories. When ordered by the emperor to join the campaign to put down revolts in Xingyuan 兴元, Liang Dongcai accepts the imperial decree without hesitation, despite the fact that he has just married and is merely a scholar with no military experience. Since loyalty and heroism are heavily emphasized in this episode, the lovers’ parting is downplayed. A moment that might bring eternal separation is described in only a few words: “shedding tears, Liang parts with his wife” (梁生洒泪分手) (HJHWZ: 441). The treatment is distinctly different from that in “Homing Crane Lodge.”¹⁹ In the military campaign, Liang Dongcai is portrayed as a Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 reborn, who single-handedly tricks the enemy into defeat.²⁰

In *Palindrome*, the moral makeup of the *caizi* and *jiaren* is not only highly emphasized, but also serves as a key love test for the couple. In chapters 7 and 8 Liang Dongcai’s estranged cousin Lai Benchu spreads a rumour that Liang has ganged up with Yang Fugong and become Yang’s adopted son. The affianced Sang Menglan must choose between breaking off her engagement and thereby preserving her moral integrity, or remaining true to her love, but at the price of moral contamination. Here, moral integrity is set in an opposed and paradoxical relationship to sexual love. When Sang is pressed to decide, she writes a verse in imitation of Qu Yuan’s 屈原 *Li sao* 离骚 (*Encountering Sorrow*), in which she expresses her determination to remain morally pure. Sang’s association of herself with Qu Yuan, the exemplar of loyalty and patriotism, is significant and symbolic. It affirms that a real *caizi* or *jiaren* is first and foremost a person of virtue, and that the *qing* or romantic sentiment between them can only be meaningful if it is in harmony with Confucian morality.

¹⁹ In “Homing Crane Lodge” Li Yu dedicated four pages to a depiction of the couples’ partings. Yu Zichang is described as doubling his tenderness and attachment to his wife, whereas Duan Yuchu is portrayed as exhausting all means to maintain a disguise of hardheartedness. See “HGL” in *Li Yu quanji* (1992, vol. 9, 217-221).

²⁰ Zhuge Liang is a legendary military strategist in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

In contrast to Li Yu's romantic heroes, Liang Dongcai is distinctive in his Confucian careerism. His name (梁栋材), read in rearranged order (栋梁材), becomes a pun for "pillar material," symbolizing his Confucian ambition and mettle. A child prodigy whose literary talent is recognized by Prefect Liu (a local official who later becomes the Prime Minister), Liang is offered a recommendation to the imperial court. But rather than taking this smooth path to officialdom, Liang insists on establishing himself by going through the arduous process of examination. He eventually passes the palace examination in first place. This not only attests to Liang's incorruptible character, but also proves that the author of *Palindrome* had faith in the civil service examination system. Such a belief is a departure from Li Yu's ambivalent attitude toward the examination system in "Homing Crane Lodge" and elsewhere.

If "Homing Crane Lodge" shows a cynicism about Confucian values — a propensity consistent throughout Li Yu's works — *Palindrome* seeks to affirm these moral values. Such a difference in the treatment of Confucian mores in these two works seems to reflect the dissimilar social and political circumstances within which they were written. Personally experiencing the collapse of Ming, Li Yu belongs to the generation of disillusioned and war-weary literati in the late Ming and early Qing periods. He witnessed as many senseless killings by Ming soldiers as there were by the Manchu forces. In less than two years, from 1645 through 1646, prior to the Manchus' final occupation, Li Yu's home regions (Jinhua 金华 and Lanxi 兰溪) were attacked and devastated three times by the retreating Ming troops and the turncoat Ming officers.²¹ "Li Yu, like other surviving locals, must have felt deeply confused, helpless, and betrayed. His idealism toward statecraft must have been shattered; his loyalty to the Ming must have been decimated."²² Li Yu's disenchantment with Confucian ideals, as expressed in "Homing Crane Lodge," thus can be explained by the historical and political times he lived in and by the turmoil of dynastic change that fundamentally shook the established orders and norms. *Palindrome*, on the other hand, wholeheartedly embraces Confucian statecraft and moral values, an attitude diametrically opposed to that of Li Yu. Such an embrace would more logically reflect a society in which Confucian mores were on the rise, as was the case in the mid-Qing. If the novel was indeed a production of the early Jiaqing period, as dated in its earliest edition, its celebration of Confucian values was very much consistent with the intellectual trends of that time. By then, although Neo-Confucianism sponsored by the Qing court as an instrument to win control over the intellectuals was outmoded, the Han learning of Confucianism started to dominate the intellectual horizon, and Chinese scholars were very much involved in reviving and reengaging Confucian heritage.²³

²¹ For detailed discussions on Li Yu's life, see Chang and Chang (1992, 9-128) and Shan Jinheng 单锦珩 (1992, 3-130).

²² Chang and Chang (1992, 60).

²³ For a discussion of social and intellectual conditions of the early and mid-Qing, see Hsu (1990, 68-89).

By reaffirming Confucianism, *Palindrome* also continued the tradition of redefining *qing* and assimilating it into the domain of public morality. From the seventeenth century onward, literati and fictional writers continuously tried to legitimate *qing* by emphasizing its compatibility with Confucian ethics. As Martin Huang has indicated, this containment of *qing* was promoted by philosophers such as Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 (1613-1682) and Dai Zhen 戴震 (1723-1777), and manifested in contemporary fictional writings (e.g. the scholar-beauty novels) and the plays of Hong Sheng 洪升 (1645-1704) and Jiang Shiquan 蒋士铨 (1725-1785). A characteristic common to these thinkers and literati was a desire to reduce the tension between the public and private interest by the promotion of *qing* as a Confucian virtue.²⁴ As is explained by Jiang Shiquan, “The five cardinal human relationships and other relationships all originate from *qing*. Those with *qing* will become loyal ministers and filial sons, men of virtue and righteousness, whereas those without *qing* will become disloyal ministers and bandits, ruthless and wicked men.”²⁵ In advocating an ethical basis for *qing*, Jiang argued the distinction between *zhengqing* 正情 (the proper *qing*) and *bianqing* 变情 (a transformed or improper *qing*). It is not difficult to see that *Palindrome* manifests what Jiang Shiquan advocated as *zhengqing*. In *Palindrome*, in order for Liang Dongcai’s love to epitomize *qing*, it must be predicated on his own impeccable morality and harmony with the five cardinal relationships. His moral rectitude (his filial piety, loyalty, virtue, and righteousness) is an integral part of his *qing*, for his desire is conditioned by Confucian precepts and serves to reinforce the moral order and social hierarchy.

Turning to *qing* as a literary construct, both “Homing Crane Lodge” and *Palindrome* take a critical stand against the kind of *qing* celebrated by Tang Xianzu in his *Mudan ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*). While the notion that *qing* transcends death is mocked in Li Yu’s novella, the famous motif of the “returning soul” (*huanhun* 还魂, in which the soul of the dead heroine returns to the human world to reunite with her lover) is also playfully evoked in *Palindrome*. However, as my analysis will show, the two works in question turn to rationalization for different purposes.

In Li Yu’s own time, “Homing Crane Lodge” was already recognized as a work that intentionally subverted the clichés of literary romance. According to Du Jun, the Qing commentator for both of Li Yu’s collections of short stories, the novella is a variant of the age-old theme of devoted love (千古钟情之变体). Du also believes that “The purpose behind this work is exceedingly profound and the way it accomplishes its objective is also remarkably convoluted” (用意最深, 取经最曲) (Du’s commentary to “HGL”: 233). Neither Du nor modern critics have directly compared Li Yu with Tang Xianzu. However, it is not difficult to see that Li Yu’s rather rational and secular representation of *qing* is a contentious response to Tang Xianzu’s literary interpretation of *qing*, an interpretation that became the most influential source of engendering the cultural cult of *qing* in seventeenth

²⁴ For a detailed discussion, see Huang (2001, 23-85).

²⁵ Huang (2001, 56).

century China. Tang's interpretation of *qing* was perceived by many of his contemporaries as well as later readers to elevate the power of *qing* to a level of metaphysical and physical transcendence. As C.T. Hsia indicates, "in both traditional and modern estimation T'ang [Hsien-tsu] is especially praised for his affirmation of *ch'ing* (love, feelings) ..." ²⁶ because "he makes a gallant attempt to defy time in *Mu-tan t'ing*. Through the death and resurrection of the heroine, T'ang Hsien-tsu asserts the triumph of love over time... ." ²⁷ Some of Tang's readers and critics see that, through his romantic heroine, Du Liniang 杜丽娘, Tang asserts the romantic supremacy of sexual love and distinguishes it, on the one hand, from the principle of *li* 理 (the metaphysical moral concept in Neo-Confucianism); ²⁸ and, on the other hand, from its opposite — pure carnal desire. ²⁹ Indeed, in several of the most memorable scenes of this play, *qing* is celebrated as a powerful spiritual force, a force that can transcend different realms, resurrect the dead, and renew life. The self-engendered sexual desire of Du Liniang brings her ideal *caizi* Liu Mengmei 柳梦梅 into her dream, to make love to her. After she dies of pining for Liu, her wandering soul returns to continue her love affair with Liu in the temple where he lodges. Their love eventually overcomes all obstacles, including the separation of life and death; she is resurrected from the dead and returns to the human world for her lover. As Tang Xianzu has indicated in his preface,

Love is of origins unknown, yet it runs deep. The living can die for it, and through it the dead can come back to life. That which the living cannot die for, or which cannot resurrect the dead, is not love at its most supreme" (情不知所起，一往而深。生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可以死，死而不可复生者，皆非情之至也)。 ³⁰

In "Homing Crane Lodge" the much celebrated Tang's solemnization of *qing* is undermined by Li Yu as he questions its power of transcendence: "Have you never seen two lovers part in death? Their rosy youth once gone, they come no more" (不见人间死别离，朱颜一去难再归) ("HGL": 204). To Li Yu, the overly sentimentalized *qing* celebrated by Tang Xianzu, is a paradoxical force with a destructive and subversive side. The paradox of romantic sentiment is revealed in Li Yu's portrayal of his mirror-imaged heroes. Duan Yuchu (断欲初 a pun for "nipping one's desire in the bud") is a cool-headed young man who treats love with prudence and rationality. Living in wartime, when separations between husbands and wives are common, Duan believes that ardent passions cannot last long. As the old saying goes, "A loving marriage does not last into old age" (恩爱夫妻不到

²⁶ Hsia (1970, 252).

²⁷ Hsia (1970, 253).

²⁸ See Huang (2001, 44).

²⁹ For instance, C.T. Hsia indicates that in Tang's last plays, *Handa ji* 邯郸记 (*Record of Handan*) and *Nanke ji* 南柯记 (*Record of Southern Bough*), sensuality unaccompanied by love is satirized. See Hsia (1970, 253).

³⁰ Tang Xianzu (1975, 1). The English translation is by Wai-yee Li in Li (1993, 50).

头). Thus, despite marrying the most beautiful girl in the capital, he makes sure their bedchamber passion is not too exuberant. After being forced to part with his wife and head for enemy territory, he behaves almost heartlessly, refusing to show any tenderness and attachment toward his wife. Even the poem that he sends to his wife from the front appears to be a letter of separation — it is actually a palindrome containing an opposite meaning when read in reverse. His seemingly callous behaviour is his way of protecting his delicate wife from the pain of longing. Expecting the worst, the couple find their fortune turning for the better. After eight years of torment in the enemy’s territory, Duan returns to his resentful but healthy wife. By unravelling the palindrome, Duan inverts the poem from a negation to an assurance of love, transforming the image of himself from a heartless husband to a prudent but sensitive lover.

In contrast, Duan’s best friend, Yu Zichang (欲自昌 a pun for “self-emanating desire”), is the incarnation of the sentimentalized *qing*. He has all the qualities of a romantic hero — gentleness, attentiveness, and passion. He is devoted to his beautiful wife in every way; yet he cannot save her from dying of grief, a depression caused by her longing for him. Their constant yearning and anguish eventually cost Yu his youthfulness, and his wife her life. The irony of the story is that the prudence and cold rationality of the romantic anti-hero, Duan Yuchu, have preserved the fullness of both his and his wife’s lives so that they can enjoy the future together. The ardour of the stock romantic hero Yu Zichang, on the other hand, destroys his love and kills his wife. The one who seemingly lacks *qing* regains love, while the one who is consumed with *qing* is destroyed by it, losing love forever.³¹

The central theme of the story reflects Li Yu’s practical view of life — that the only way to protect oneself in a troubled world was to compare oneself with people much worse off, and recognize one’s own relative good fortune. As Wai-yee Li observes, in contrast to the intense and self-reflective passion represented by Tang Xianzu in *Mudan ting*, in Li Yu’s works, he distances himself from the late-Ming seriousness, transforming it into a more complacent and measured hedonism and his mood is decidedly more pragmatic and ironic.³²

Li Yu’s paradoxical reinterpretation of *qing* in “Homing Crane Lodge” can also be viewed as a deliberate effort to breathe new life into the stock themes and literary norms prevalent in earlier texts. As a writer of many stories on sex and love, Li Yu played freely and endlessly with the various

³¹ The paradox of sentimentality and rationality is also a central theme in Li Yu’s play *Shen luan jiao* 慎鸞交 (*Be Careful about Love*). In this play, after discerning many fake “affectionate and dashing” lovers and experiencing uncountable short-term passionate affairs, the beautiful courtesan Wang Youqiang 王又孌 sets her sights on the cold-faced Hua Zhonglang 华中郎, believing that Hua’s prudence and self-control will bring her long-term happiness. Her friend Deng Huijuan 邓蕙娟, who falls in love with a stereotypical romantic *caizi*, does not share Wang’s view. In the end, while Wang happily marries Hua after a ten-year trial of their love, Deng is cheated and abandoned by her “affectionate and dashing” lover.

³² See Li (1995, 300-302).

polarized forms of love — love and lust, Puritanism and libertinism, asceticism and sensuality, romanticism and rationalism — so much so, that he transformed all the thematic norms and conventions established in earlier literature into something new. Undoubtedly, the urge to innovate played an important role in his ridiculing of Tang Xianzu's much sanctified literary interpretation of *qing*.

“Homing Crane Lodge” provides the reader of *Palindrome* with a trans-textual mirroring of how the latter represents the paradox of sentimentality and rationality, and how its author reads and comments on Tang Xianzu. To imitate Li Yu, the author of *Palindrome* presents a remaking of the *huanhun* motif. In chapter 12, Sang Menglan schemes to make Liang Dongcai believe that she is dead. The purpose of the plot is twofold: to test Liang's love for her and to trick Liang into marrying her cousin Liu Menghui. Sang disguises herself as a ghost, re-enacting the rendezvous between the ghost of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei in *Mudan ting*. When Sang fails to persuade Liang to marry Liu, she tricks Liang by promising that her soul will return and possess the body of her cousin Liu, an idea reminiscent of another story of *huanhun* by Ling Mengchu.³³ In this episode Liang Dongcai is ridiculed as a “naive reader” who takes *Mudan ting* and Ling Mengchu's story literally and truly believes that one's soul can return from the dead and be resurrected. His unsophisticated reading is mocked by his second wife Liu Menghui who reasons that “[t]he living is alive because she herself is alive; how can she borrow a body from another? If the dead is really dead, how is it possible to return her soul?” (生者自生, 何体可借? 若死者果死, 何魂可还?) (HJHWZ: 491). Here, although Liu Menghui sounds like Li Yu's rational hero and narrator in “Homing Crane Lodge,” a closer reading suggests otherwise.

Although playful, this remake of the *huanhun* motif is not intended to be ironic. The most poignant aspect of Li Yu's tale is that an over-sentimentalized *qing* destroys rather than renews love and life. In *Palindrome*, on the other hand, the mockery of the “naive reader” stops short of producing any ironic result or profound revelation. Sang Menglan's disguise as a ghost and her fraudulent soul-return are intended less to challenge literary conventions than to forward the narrative development and to create an opportunity for plot reversal, resulting in a happy ending. After Liang is tricked into marrying Liu Menghui, Sang reunites with Liang and reveals the truth to him. When Liang asks Sang why she devised such a scheme to fool him, Sang replies: “You disguised yourself as a woman to get a glimpse of me; why should I not pretend to be a ghost to play a trick on you?” (郎君昔日曾以男妆女, 难道我今独不可以人妆鬼?) (HJHWZ: 493). Sang's words self-

³³ The story is entitled “The Elder Sister's Disembodied Wandering Soul Fulfills Her Love Desire; the Younger Sister Recovers from Sickness and Continues the Previous Marriage” 大姐游魂完夙愿; 小姨病起续前缘. In this story, the romantic heroine Xingniang 兴娘 dies and becomes a “disembodied wandering soul.” She does not realize her love by coming back to life herself. Instead, she attaches her soul to her younger sister's body in order to consummate a sexual union with her lover.

reflexively reveal the author’s intent in crafting the scene: to create an opportunity to turn the tables. Sang changes her role from tricked to trickster, and consequently, Liang’s position is also reversed from deceiver to deceived.

In sum, although holding a critical attitude towards Tang Xianzu, the author of *Palindrome* significantly differs from Li Yu in reinterpreting *qing*. By diminishing Tang’s sentimentalized *qing*, Li Yu brings out the paradox of desire, emphasizing particularly the destructiveness of passion. By contrast, the author of *Palindrome* depreciates Tang and re-elevates *qing* by binding it to Confucian principles. While Li Yu rationalizes *qing* for individual interest and self-preservation, the author of *Palindrome* does so to transform private *qing* into a notion worthy of public sanction. While Li Yu’s work is distinctly ironic, showing how the dangers of radical subjectivity and representation of passion may be mitigated with a new emphasis on pleasure and playfulness, *Palindrome* fails to do so and the novel’s evocation of *Mudan ting* produces neither provocative intellectual probing nor generic renovation.

From Parody to Pastiche: Two Ways of *Fan’an*

In describing the narrative design of *Palindrome*, the commentator Suxuan underlines the reversible nature of the narrative:

This sixteen-chapter book starts and ends with the palindrome. The beginning and ending are like a circle, weaving into one piece. The novel itself can also be considered a palindrome” (一部十六卷书，以回文起，以回文结。首尾回环，织成一片。亦谓之一幅《璇玑图》) (Suxuan’s commentary to *HJHWZ*: 559).

Indeed, *Palindrome* impresses the reader as a carnival of covert and overt inversions, reversals of roles and plots, and dramatic shifts. The inversion of expected patterns or *fan’an* 翻案 is employed as the dominant mechanism in the narrative development of *Palindrome* as it is in Li’s work. However, these contrivances bear only a superficial resemblance to Li Yu’s frequent but artful employment of *fan’an*. While Li Yu’s use of inversion is intentionally ironic, the imitator’s flattering imitation aims at adding a meta-fictional dimension to the novel.

Fan’an, or inversion, as a literary device, is prevalent in Ming-Qing vernacular fiction. It can be employed internally, within the boundary of the narrative or literary text, but it is also frequently applied as a “trans-contextual” technique to engage two texts at the same time.

The internal type was widely used to create unpredictability in the narrative. In his “How to Read the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” Mao Zonggang 毛宗岗 (fl. 17th century) describes this function of the *fan’an* as *bian* 变 (reversal) or *xingyi douzhuang*, *yufu fengfan* 星移斗转，雨覆风翻 (making the stars move and the dipper revolve and causing rain to inundate things and wind to overturn them). Mao counts forty event reversals to

indicate the high frequency of inversion appearing in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.³⁴ Zhang Zhupo 张竹坡 (1670-1698), on the other hand, emphasizes another capacity of *fan'an* in his commentary on *Jin Ping Mei* that analyzes the “reversal of fortune” of two minor characters:

There are two characters in the *Jin Ping Mei* to whom the author devotes special attention and whose final fates are also noteworthy: Ch'un-mei and Tai-an. While she is still only one of the maidservants, the author indicates in numerous passages that Ch'un-mei possesses a sense of self-esteem and ambition that sets her apart from the others. While he is still only one among the many menservants, Tai-an is described by the author in passage after passage as being adept at pleasing people in everything he does. Why does the author insist on having Ch'un-mei become a lady of rank and Tai-an a man of wealth and position at the end of the book? In order that his novel on the theme of “heat and cold” should illustrate the reversal of fortunes.

《金瓶》内，有两个人特用意写之，其结果亦皆可观：如春梅与玳安是也。于同作丫鬟时，描写春梅心高志大，气象不同。于众小厮内，必用层层笔墨，描写玳安色色可人。后春梅作夫人，玳安作员外，作者必欲其如此何哉？见得一部炎凉书中翻案故也。³⁵

According to Zhang, the “reversals of fortunes” of the two minor characters reveal the irony of *Jin Ping Mei* — the paradox of heat and cold that governs the overall pattern of the narrative, manifested in the alternations of prosperity and decline, and of gathering and dispersion. Here, the purpose of internal inversion is to reveal the ironic discrepancy and ambivalent meaning of the narrative.

Fan'an, when used as a trans-contextual inversion, creates a distance between a pre-existing text and a later incorporating work. The trans-contextual inversion usually becomes the negation, cancellation, and reformation of what has been established and delivered in the pre-existing text. The ambivalent and paradoxical nature of inversion thus provides a meta-message that splits itself in a reflexive gesture, transforming and reorganizing the boundaries of its own discourse. The distance between the two texts also signals irony, but in this case irony is a trans-textual product. This type of inversion is abundant in Ming-Qing vernacular fiction. For example, the first chapter of the Chongzhen 崇禎 edition of *Jin Ping Mei*, in which Ximen Qing takes an oath of brotherhood with his “cronies,” is actually an ingeniously

³⁴ See Mao Zonggang (rpt. 1986, vol. 1, 12). For the English translation of this discussion, see David T. Roy, in David Rolston (1990, 173-8).

³⁵ Zhang Zhupo, in Hou Zhongyi 侯忠义 and Wang Rumei (1986, 76). The English translation is by David T. Roy in Rolston (1990, 209).

ironic reversal of the first chapter of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, where Liu Bei’s 刘备 becomes the sworn brother of Guan Yu 关羽 and Zhang Fei 张飞.³⁶ In Chen Chen’s *Shuihu houzhuan* (*The Sequel to the Water Margin*), the conclusion of the heroes’ marriages after occupying Siam can also be categorized as an intentional trans-contextual inversion. It targets the misogyny of the Liangshan 梁山 heroes in *Shuihu zhuan* and, at the same time mocks the *Houzhuan* heroes’ humble political and military victories (in contrast to the *Shuihu* heroes’ lofty ambition of taking over China).³⁷ In a much later work, *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚闲话 (*Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*), the writer Aina’s 艾衲 inversion turns several cherished legendary figures – the loyal ministers Jie Zitui 介子推, Fanli 范蠡, and the celebrated beauty Xishi 西施 – the objects of the author’s satire.³⁸

The trans-contextual type of *fan’an* may be familiar to Western readers acquainted with parody. Depending heavily on existing literary models and historical contexts, parody cannot be defined in trans-historical terms. However, certain common denominators exist in all ages and contexts. As Linda Hutcheon observes:

Parody is repetition, but repetition that includes differences: it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of “trans-contextualization” and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage.³⁹

The trans-contextual *fan’an* shares with parody a rhetorical strategy, pragmatic purpose, readership, and referentiality. Both create critical ironic distance, or establish a discrepancy between the implicit and explicit meanings of a text through inversion. Each needs a sophisticated reading public with the requisite knowledge and reading skills for recognizing and understanding them. Instead of imitating the objective world of reality, parody and its Chinese counterpart hold up a mirror to art. The shared pragmatic purpose is to

³⁶ In *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the same faith and aspiration bind Liu, Guan, and Zhang. Although from different backgrounds, they are all recruited by the imperial court to pacify the Yellow Scarves’ uprising. The novel romanticizes the joining in brotherhood of Liu, Guan, and Zhang in such a way that it actually becomes a much-told legend and a stock theme, even a part of the “hero code” in the novels of military romance such as *Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传 (*The Water Margin*). In the story of Ximen Qing, the romanticized brotherhood of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is mocked and undermined. In contrast to true heroes like Liu, Guan, and Zhang, Ximen Qing and his nine “brothers” are local hacks and rascals. The reason they join in brotherhood has nothing to do with lofty aspirations such as “performing duty to the Emperor” or “protecting the common folks of the land.” Ximen Qing’s money and power tie him to nine other ruffians. However, all of Ximen Qing’s “brothers” betray him as soon as Ximen dies. The irony of *Jing Ping Mei* not only caricatures the stock theme of “joining in brotherhood,” but also targets the characters of *Jing Ping Mei* with a combination of sober criticism and bitter nostalgia.

³⁷ See Ellen Widmer (1987, 51-77).

³⁸ See Hanan (1981, 191-206).

³⁹ Linda Hutcheon (1985, 37).

combine homage and satirical nose thumbing. There is such a close affinity between parody and the trans-contextual *fan'an*, that it is understandable why many scholars in the West have adopted the term “parody” to describe the kindred Chinese literary writings.

To judge by quantity and consistency, Li Yu is certainly a major practitioner and master of this mode of writing. In his salient study of Li Yu, entitled *The Invention of Li Yu*, Patrick Hanan has noted the instrumental role that *fan'an* plays in Li Yu's literary works (including drama, fiction, and the essay) and has listed a number of Li's clever inversions that target literary conventions, stereotypes, and stock themes. According to Hanan, Li Yu used inversion as a comic device and as a technique of literary innovation.⁴⁰ Indeed, as a master of *tuo kejiu* 脱窠臼 (breaking away from clichés), Li Yu employed the rhetoric of *fan'an* in such a way that it generated new from old, unfamiliar from familiar, idiosyncrasy from stereotype, and self from other.

“Homing Crane Lodge” is typical of Li Yu's playful and brilliant *fan'an*. In this work, inversion is continuously and simultaneously at work on multiple levels. On the linguistic level, Duan Yuchu's poem, speaking in two contradictory voices at once, presents a classic example of irony. The poem reads:

Your weaving showed a wife's affection;
But away with love—it's only wise!
All our passions end in parting;
Alone, I'll see suspicion rise.

文回锦织倒妻思，
断绝恩情不学痴：
云雨赛欢终有别，
分时怒向任猜疑。（“HCL”：204；“HGL”：223）

Eight years later, when Duan is finally reunited with his wife, he claims that this unfeeling poem not only served as a talisman that protected his wife from the torment of separation, but also intended to be a profound declaration of love when read in reverse:

Suspicion and doubt I caused to rise,
But our love I'll renew once I'm home.
Cold-hearted, I spurned your affection,
But with love I now weave a palindrome.

疑猜任向怒时分，
别有终欢赛雨云：
痴学不情恩断绝，
思妻倒织锦回文。（“HCL”：216；“HGL”：232）

Here, opposite messages of love and disinterest are nicely embedded in one poem. On the one hand, love is to be expressed as “un-love” (that is, the

⁴⁰ Hanan (1988, 50).

surest path to love is through indifference); and on the other hand, that romantic sentiment, when turned on its face, is disinterest (that is, extreme feeling leads to unfeeling). However, the poem only works as a talisman protecting love when it is believed to be its opposite. It is critical that Duan’s wife plays the role of “naive reader” who reads the poem literally and straightforwardly; otherwise, the protective effect of the poem would be lost.

Furthermore, on the narrative level, the story is clearly a reversal for its paired heroes. Whereas the romantic anti-hero Duan Yuchu attains the status of a true *fengliu* 风流 (romantic), the stock “romantic” character, Yu Zichang, is turned into an object of ridicule for not truly understanding the essence of love. “Homing Crane Lodge” switches the roles of husband and wife seen in Su Huiniang’s story, making the husband the desirer, the wife the object of desire. But since Duan’s wife is a naive reader, she also alters the character trait of Su’s husband who is an appreciative and sophisticated reader of the palindrome. In addition, “Homing Crane Lodge” turns the single love message of the palindrome in the original story into the paradox that love and unfeeling are sometimes one and the same, exhibiting their dialectical relationship.

As an ironic version of “trans-contextualization,” Li Yu’s story parodies the mysterious, sentimentalized, and transcendent *qing* that Tang Xianzu and his followers eulogized, upsetting the convention of romanticism in Chinese fiction and drama. To be sure, as parody, “Homing Crane Lodge” implies “at one and the same time, authority and transgression,”⁴¹ and both must be taken into account. By ironically imitating Tang Xianzu’s representation of *qing* (which is metaphorized in the character Yu Zichang), Li Yu’s story is ambivalent, simultaneously criticizing and valorizing the object of parody.

While the double-voiced nature of Li Yu’s story anticipates both naive and sophisticated readings, the author of *Palindrome* seems to offer only the former, ignoring Li Yu’s transgression of norms. As a text in which inversion is manifest, *Palindrome* focuses more on the playful and surprising effects of this technique rather than on its ironic potential. Using the palindrome as a metaphor and a model for its fictional world and narrative structure, *Palindrome* distinguishes itself as a “game story” — a narrative that possesses a kind of diegetical self-awareness, or self-reflexivity. It is a sycophantic imitation or a pastiche of Li Yu’s original.

Adopting a game model, the novel is framed as a palindrome, calling the reader’s attention to its self-evolving rules. The reader must learn the code in order to bring the fictive world into play. The palindrome becomes a running metaphor at both the narrative and meta-narrative levels. Just as the hero Liang Dongcai searches for his soul mate, the author too seeks the ideal reader for his novel. The relationship between the author and reader, like that of the hero and his heroine, is bound by a common understanding of the code of the palindrome. In the fictional universe, a perfect marriage is conditioned on the complementary talents of the characters in deciphering a palindrome; so too in

⁴¹ Hutcheon (1985, 69).

the sphere of fictional creation, the actualization of the narrative structure depends upon the reader's recognition of the pleasures in reversibility.⁴²

The parallel quests of the author and of his hero, as well as the connection between the two, are set forth from the very beginning of the novel. In chapter 1, after the narration of Su Huiniang's story, the novel relates the reappearance of the *xuanji tu* 璇玑图 (palindrome) after the turmoil of the An Lushan 安禄山 rebellion in the Tang dynasty. The poetic text has been cut into two. An anonymous soldier sells the upper-half to Liang Dongcai's father, but the whereabouts of the lower-half remains a mystery (it does not appear until chapter 4, when Sang Menglan's father digs it out of the family courtyard). Although Liang's father recognizes the artistic value of the palindrome, he cannot unravel its code. At this juncture, the narrator interjects that "True art must wait for its appreciator" (至文留与知音赏) (HJHWZ: 306). The statement is a self-reflexive meta-message. Not only does it clue the reader into how the story will unfold — that an appreciator will be found — it creates a parallel between the fate of the palindrome and that of the narrative. Like the palindrome, the narrative awaits a reader who can decode its mysteries. In so doing, the author of *Palindrome* actually treats both the palindrome and his narrative as "structures of communication" that are reciprocal and reversible. A significant leitmotif of the novel is the mysterious appearances and disappearances of the palindrome. At first the male and female protagonists independently acquire the two halves of the text in mutually mysterious fashions. Eventually, the complete palindrome is just as mysteriously taken away from them by a supernatural being who makes it "to fly up into thin air" (飞入空中) and disappear in the void. This leitmotif implies the fictionality of the novel, suggesting that the story, like any other "structure of communication," can be taken back and reversed. The novel as a fictional creation is taken back when the author declares that "a rare treasure cannot remain in this world; a remarkable piece of writing eventually returns to the void" (异宝不留人世, 奇文终还太虚) (HJHWZ: 558). What is even more interesting is that, after describing the sudden disappearance of the palindrome, the author immediately takes back this very depiction, saying, "this is later-day hearsay, I do not know whether it is a fact" (此是后来传闻的话, 未知有无) (HJHWZ: 558).

Structural reversibility is another prominent characteristic of *Palindrome*, although such reversibility is rather contrived and mechanical. Centred on the union, separation, and reunion of both the palindrome and characters, the narrative events exhibit a pattern of repeated inversions. The story advances towards union in the first four chapters where Liang Dongcai and Sang Menglan are engaged to be married and exchange the two parts of

⁴² This is reminiscent of the highly self-reflexive nature of *Honglou meng* (which hypothetically would have been published earlier than *Palindrome* if our assumption of a mid-Qing production is true). As Anthony Yu describes it, *Honglou meng* is "as much a story about a piece of stone (Stone as one protagonist) as it is about what the story is (Stone as script, as linguistic representation and fictive writing) and how it is to be received (the effect of reading Stone)." See Yu (1997, 111).

the palindrome as a token of their love. The first inversion, or a separation, occurs in chapter 5 as the villains are trying to get their hands on Menglang as well as the treasure. Chapter 9 presents a reunion when Liang Dongcai and Menglan consummate their marriage, but the narrative immediately turns to separation because Liang parts from Menglan on official duty. Another reunion appears in chapter 12 in which Liang’s second marriage finally unites him with his two wives. In the last four chapters of the novel, the reversals of narrative plot become more mannered and predictable: if there is a fake ghost in the previous chapter, there is a real ghost in the next; if the wrong person has been targeted, the right person must be found; an act of retribution for evil is sure to be inverted by repayment of a kindness; and a death caused by an avenging ghost is followed by the contrast of a birth awarded by an immortal.⁴³

Besides this structural reversibility, the imitator also engages in a game of repeated and dazzling role switches when he busies his characters with the episodes of adoption, name changing, fakery, mistaken identity, and masquerade. Sometimes the changes come so frequently, and are so intricate, that they confuse the reader. To illustrate my point, I will quote two passages from Suxuan whose commentaries on *Palindrome* are appended to the end of each chapter. As Suxuan comments it in his critique of chapter 10:

In the previous chapter (chapter 9), the villain pretends to be the hero, but in this chapter the hero takes the villain’s place by assuming his name. In addition, another villain disguises himself as the first villain. In the city of Xingyuan, there appears a fake Yang Dong, then another copycat, who claims to be Yang Dong, shows up in Fengxiang prefecture...

前卷既有小人假君子之事，此卷忽有君子假小人之事，又忽有小人假小人之事。如兴元城下有一假杨栋，凤翔府中又添一假杨栋...(HJHWZ: 463)

In the commentary to chapter 11, Suxuan describes:

Fang Yingbo [Liang Dongcai’s female cousin] pretends, one moment, to be Mrs. Yang, and the next moment, Mrs. Liang [Sang Menglan]. Taking turns, Sang Menglan disguises herself as Miss

⁴³ For example, while chapter 12 relates Sang Menglan’s fake death and “soul-returning,” chapter 13 recounts Lai Benchu’s trip to Hell where he meets the ghosts of his parents and relatives. Reversing the assassination of Lai Benchu’s wife by mistaking her for Sang Menglan in chapter 13, chapter 15 depicts the assassin’s second attempt of killing Sang for revenge and money. In chapters 14 and 15, Lai Benchu and other evil characters are punished by karmic retribution, and a local god saves Sang Menglan from being assassinated. The death of Lai Benchu who is killed by an avenging ghost (chapter 14) also forms a contrast to the birth of Prime Minister Liu’s son as the reward by an immortal for Liu’s virtues (chapter 13).

Liu and Miss Liu. And Liu Menghui first uses the name Miss Sang and next changes it to Miss Liu...

房莹波忽杨忽梁, 桑梦兰忽柳忽刘, 刘梦蕙忽桑忽柳... (HJHWZ: 481).

The principle of inversion is not only formulated and conventionalized in *Palindrome*, it is stretched to its extreme. As Wang Rumei has unequivocally argued, the author of *Palindrome* “was not able to imitate the best in Li Yu’s works; rather, he took the fault of an over-emphasis on ingenuity in Li Yu’s literary writings, and developed that, by taking it to an extreme” (未学得笠翁作品之真谛, 反而把笠翁作品过分追求奇巧的缺点加以发展, 走上了极端).⁴⁴

Wang’s statement brings our attention to a mutual “haunting” in literary texts. In his book, *Rereading*, Matei Calinescu uses the metaphor of “haunting” to describe a kind of rereading (intertextuality, or inter-textual dialogue) in which some texts are evoked in other texts, as expected or unexpected visitors. He further proposes that in the case of literary textual dialogues, not only do chronologically earlier texts haunt later ones, but that later texts also haunt earlier ones.⁴⁵ Although presumably a much later production, *Palindrome* generates a rereading of Li Yu. The novel haunts “Homing Crane Lodge” by its false attribution to Li Yu and its shared themes and artistic devices with this precursor. On the one hand, such a rereading favourably distinguishes Li Yu from the author of *Palindorme* in both ideology and technique; on the other hand, it inevitably highlights the weaknesses of Li Yu’s writing as a result of the later work’s textual mirroring and response. In particular, in reading *Palindrome*, one is frequently reminded of the problem of overemphasizing entertainment, a limitation that exists in all of Li Yu’s literary writings, but even more markedly so in his plays. Many scholars have criticized Li Yu for his exaggerated search for the uncanny while devoting his stories to plot and structure at the expense of profound characterization.⁴⁶ Since Li Yu believed that fiction and drama share artistic characteristics and conventions, he was also inclined to cross-genre borrowing in order to create melodramatic stories that he called “silent operas” (无声戏). In commenting on Li Yu’s work, Sun Kaidi writes: “Since [he] overly pursued novelty, [Li Yu] could not avoid being over-contrived” (命意过新, 则失之纤巧).⁴⁷ This is probably the irony of Li Yu! However, Li Yu’s overemphasis on entertainment probably had much to do with his efforts to cater to a popular audience, a limitation that Li Yu was unable to avoid as someone who depended on the sale of his writings for a living.

⁴⁴ Wang, in Ouyang Jian, et al. (1990, 576).

⁴⁵ Calinescu (1993, xii).

⁴⁶ See Wang, (1992) and Xu Shuofang 徐朔方, in *Li Yu quanji* (1992, vol. 20, 231-40).

⁴⁷ For a discussion on Sun Kaidi’s criticism of Li Yu, see Wang (1992, 322).

Conclusion

My comparative study of the two works in question supports the view that *The Story of a Palindrome* is not likely to be a work of Li Yu. The differences between “Homing Crane Lodge” and *Palindrome* are substantial in both their ideological and literary aspects. Whereas Li Yu is distinctly non-conformist, unconventional, and comic, the author of *Palindrome* is notably conservative, conventional, and prosaic. As illustrated in my analysis, when the two fictional pieces are read side by side, the incongruities in their interpretations of *qing* become impossible to ignore, as does each author’s differing uses of inversion.

These incongruities, however, bring our attention to a broader spectrum of issues – issues such as the difference in values as a reflection of dissimilar historical moments and intellectual trends; the rhetorical discrepancy between an ironic and a conventional representation of the *scholar-beauty* genre; and a textual dialogue between a literary text and its precursor.

As has been shown, although *Palindrome* pales in comparison to Li Yu, it has its moment of novelty, as it meta-fictionally reveals its narrative structure and self-evolving rules. The trans-textual nature of *Palindrome* also paradoxically reshapes one’s reading of Li Yu’s fiction, not only further highlighting Li Yu’s non-conformity and originality, but also casting a critical reflection on Li Yu’s overemphasis on entertainment and marketability.

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