The Return of “Peony Pavilion” in “Peach Blossom Fan”

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The popular usage of words in the vernacular can complicate intellectual discourse in interesting ways. In intellectual discourse certain terms are used with restrictive precision and carry a heavy weight of significance. Those same words often have much broader meanings and different associations in popular usage. The relation between the restrictive, intellectual usage and the broader, popular sense often points to interesting issues.

In the Chinese case I have in mind a common vernacular word, with a more restricted and precise sense in Neo-Confucian intellectual discourse and the pedagogy associated with it. This word is *xue* 學. As “study” *xue* is a concept that carries much intellectual weight. At the same time in the vernacular *xue* means to “imitate”; and it means to “study” or “learn” in a broad sense that includes objects of study that a Neo-Confucian program would like to exclude from legitimacy and the possibility of true “learning.”

The link between “study” and “imitation” is repetition, however different the motives and the presumed consequences for the student or imitator. Let me offer two parallel occasions. On the one hand we have a student learning the Classics by memorization and reciting what he or she has learned in a public setting, which was the norm in Confucian pedagogy; on the other hand, we have the professional performer memorizing an aria and voicing it in public—I would use the term “perform” but the meaning of “performance” is the question I want to get at. This too is *xue*, not quite the vernacular *xue* as “imitation,” but very close. What exactly is the perceived difference between these two social

phenomena, and what is the real difference? In other words, what is a performance and what is not?

We know that the former, Confucian learning, the student reciting the Classics, is supposed to be the "formation" of character by internalizing the texts recited and their significance; the other, the singer learning and repeating a song, is supposed to be mere "performance," learning to produce the illusion of meaning what one says. The primary difference between these two identical processes is the putative relationship between the person repeating the text and the "meaning" of what was repeated. The late Ming and Qing were all too aware that the young student memorizing the Classics could recite them as pure performance; and the considerable lore surrounding the impact of "Peony Pavilion" suggests that young women internalized the values of the play very much in the way that students reciting the *Analects* were supposed to do. So let us suggest that there is a problem in differentiating such acts of textual repetition, an instability in the distinction between its different kinds of significance.

This is in issue posed first in *Mudan ting* and taken up as a central problem in *Taohua shan*. Both *Mudan ting* and *Taohua shan* have early scenes in which the heroine does an oral performance of a memorized text. Those two performances represent precisely the two distinct situations of repeating a text that I mentioned above. In *Guishu* 閨塾 Di Liniang gives her recitation of *Guanju* 關雎, and her reading sets the action of the play into motion. In the equally crucial scene in *Taohua shan*, *Chuan'ge* 傳歌, Li Xiangjun performs Du Liniang's garden aria. In the consequences of both scenes something goes terribly wrong in the socially sanctioned relation between the young person repeating the text and the proper social role of the text. Although there are basic differences between the two cases, on one fundamental level the two scenes are alike:

in both cases the woman takes the words she repeats seriously: they become the "formation of character" in socially illegitimate ways.

Studying *Guanju* was supposed to be formative of character for Du Liniang. The problem is of course that Du Liniang reads beneath the level of sanctioned exegesis to a natural understanding of *Guanju*. Her "natural" understanding of the poem is situated between two extreme and antithetical readings: the tutor's mindless Confucian pedagogy and Chunxiang's ungoverned punning, anachronism and mere bawdry. Since *Guanju* was to have set the model for Zhou society by the perfect marriage, we might even interpret *Mudan ting* as a whole as an extended exegesis of *Guanju*, reconciling human nature and society from a late Ming perspective. From this late Ming perspective, human nature and Neo-Confucian pedagogy have drifted far apart. Du Liniang does not read as Tutor Chen wants her to read, but the audience recognizes on some level that she is reading correctly—beginning by asking the right questions. Most important, unlike the bad readings by Tutor Chen and Chunxiang, Du Liniang internalizes the text rather than explicating it, and she takes it seriously.

Li Xiangjun also internalizes the values of what she reads, and that is no less the motive force for the action in *Taohua shan*. Li Xiangjun, however, is memorizing the role of Du Liniang. Singing an aria from *Mudan ting* was supposed to be mere technical performance for the courtesan-in-training Li Xiangjun; as her mother Li Zhenli says, it is a means to make a living. The professional performer is not supposed to mean the words she sings; she is not supposed to take the text seriously. And yet Li Xiangjun takes the words and the role of the *dan* very seriously: she truly "becomes" a *dan* rather than "playing a *dan*," as she is supposed to. The difference between the student and the performer collapses here, and these two women—both characters in drama—are shaped by the words they repeat.

"Reading," "*du* 讀, as reading out loud, is quite simply repetition in the most elementary sense. Reading in itself, however, is not *xue*, whether imitation, learning a role, or Neo-Confucian "study." In the Neo-Confucian process of *xue* one becomes assimilated to models and internalizes values. The professional singer, however, also learns her texts verbatim; this too is *xue*, but a *xue* that is differentiated from serious *xue*. Rather than learning, the singer—as often a low-caste male as a low-caste female—"performs." What is the boundary here? The Ming answer—though it has roots in Song discourse—is *zhen* 真, the "genuine."

The singer-performer, however, is not permitted to be "genuine"—the best you can say is that he or she is "as if genuine" *ru zhen* 如真. The performer is condemned to illusion and eternal approximation. But this is not a stable solution: perhaps the singer truly *is* genuine and does indeed mean what he or she sings. That question haunts the song tradition and becomes a common motif in stories. This "haunting" possibility becomes a full affirmation in "Peach Blossom Fan": professional performers in that play generally are "authentic," in the sense of meaning what they perform in some way—and in the singular case of Li Xiangjun, truly becoming what she performs. Indeed from this late seventeenth century vantage point it seems that socially recognized *xue* becomes performance, and socially recognized performance is true *xue*. The elementary inversion is too easy, but it does suggest the instability of these terms.

The stated premise of *Mudan ting* is that so-called illusion is a subjective reality that is as real as objective reality. The more precise description from the play itself is that subjective reality can become social reality, indeed force its way into social reality. The marriage in dream presses its way into socially sanctioned marriage. It is not difficult to see here a transformation of the ideology of the *Shijing* in the *Guanju*:

the *Guanju* is not merely the literary expression of private feeling; it enters the world and accomplishes its "civilizing power" 教化. *Guanju* has the same effect in *Mudan ting*.

Tang Xianzu's choice of dream as the master-metaphor for theatrical illusion deliberately blurs the *artifice* of theater, its inauthenticity. Against dream's subjective reality we read the singing teacher Su Kunsheng interrupting Li Xiangjun as she sings Du Liniang's famous aria, telling her how to use her throat and phrase the lines. If the artifice that produces dramatic illusion disappears into illusion and then into reality in *Mudan ting*, artifice is foregrounded in *Taohua shan* and the relation between theatrical illusion and reality is infinitely complicated. The lesson of *Mudan ting* was accepted: the intensity of Li Xiangjun's illusion becomes a reality, as Du Liniang's does, but for Li Xiangjun that reality finally collapses.

I would like to argue that *Taohua shan* arguably the greatest play of the late seventeenth century, is essentially a rereading of *Mudan ting*, the greatest play of the late sixteenth century. When I say "rereading" I mean *xue* in the fullest sense. It is not only trying to learn from or reenact an early text and character in a later and very different context, it is also aware of the problems of *xue* itself. The situations in the two plays are very different, and yet any close reading on *Taohua shan* shows *Mudan ting* trying to emerge. In both plays subjective illusion achieves social reality; but in *Mudan ting* it opens into a happily ever after, while in *Taohua shan* it is an explicitly subjective or theatrical illusion, with Zhang Wei abruptly calling down the curtain, and dispersing the actors at the end.

Du Liniang is explicitly a foil and model for Li Xiangjun. In Li Xiangjun's first appearance on stage she sings the role of Du Liniang. The intention of Li Zhenli and Sun Kunsheng is that Li Xiangjun learns to merely sing the *role* of Du Liniang with its technical artifice and its

social purpose of providing a living both for Li Xiangjun and her "mother." It soon becomes clear that Li Xuangjun's relation to the role of Du Liniang is *xue* of a different kind—like so many other young women we who read *Mudan ting* and took it seriously. The social world around her would teach her to be inauthentic, but through the text she learns to be authentic; in an even more complex and sophisticated way, she reenacts Du Liniang's scene of learning the *Shijing*.

Li Xiangjun's first appearance in the role of Du Liniang is striking, as an adolescent young woman is imprinted with the role of the *dan*, the theatrical heroine. In the course of the following acts she truly becomes a *dan*, rather than a singer playing a *dan*. Other characters who were ambivalent or ambiguous, whose roles were complicated by ironies or doubts, are forced to become authentic in their roles by the true *dan*, Li Xiangjun as Du Liniang, the embodiment of romantic will. In her presence their ambiguities and ambivalences dissolve: they become the characters of her drama. This too is *xue*, supported by many stories in which those unsure of their identity and social role are shaped by their encounter with someone who is transparently the embodiment of a standard social role. In this Li Xiangjun repeats Du Liniang, who causes the other characters in *Mudan ting* to be actors in the "plot" of her own romantic comedy.

Mudan ting always hovers in the background of the romantic plot of *Taohua shan* (indeed the military plot also tropes on *Mudan ting*, with the successful defense against the Jurchens as the foil for the disastrously failed defense against the Qing armies, who proclaimed themselves the descendents of the Jurchens). There is symbolic death (as opposed to Du Liniang's real death); there is a portrait, no less symbolic, that calls the male beloved to seek her. But for me the most significant moment is when Li Xiangjun performs an aria from *Mudan ting* a second time, in the scene 選優.

The Hongguang Emperor has called for performers, and Li Xiangjun must go to the palace in the role of her mother, Li Zhenli, because her mother has sacrificed herself to become a concubine in Li Xiangjun's place. Recognized by her enemy Ruan Dacheng, he wants to make her perform the role of "clown," *chou*; but the Hongguang Emperor is immediately attracted to her. Like the audience, the Honguang Emperor sees clearly that she is a *dan* and not a *chou*. What is implied, but not explicit is the Hongguang Emperor's sexual claim on her: Li Xiangjun has maintained her chastity at all costs, but faced with an Emperor, even a ludicrously theatrical one, she has no choice but to accept sexual repetition.

She was supposed to play Ruan's *Yanzi jian*, a play about mistaken identities and problems of matching—as opposed to Du Liniang, who appears in various levels of being, but whose identity and proper mate are never in question. Li Xiangjun cannot play *Yanzi jian*; she only knows *Mudan ting*. This is a telling moment of *xue*: in philosophical *xue* you learn one role, while the actress must learn (*xue*) many roles. *Yanzi jian* appears throughout *Taohua shan* as the "bad play," as *Mudan ting* is the "good" play. There is much to be said about what makes *Yanzi jian* bad and *Mudan ting* good. Just to offer a suggestion: it has something to do with *Yanzi jian* and other late Ming dramas suggesting that lovers might be interchangeable (as indeed performers can change roles). The facts of theater and social ideology produce a serious conflict—a conflict exacerbated by the fact that theater may be closer to the actual way society works.

After receiving from the Hongguang Emperor the second "peach blossom fan," the double of the one for which the play gets its name, Li Xiangjun sings a brief aria from 尋夢, an act from *Mudan ting* about repetition and return.

為甚的玉真重溯武陵源，也只為水點花飛在眼前。是他天公不費買花前，則咱人心上有啼紅怨。咳。辜負了春三二月天。

The contextual richness of this aria is immense. First and foremost, it is ironic. Neither Du Liniang nor her double Li Xiangjun are particularly known for their irony. In the case of Li Xiangjun irony is potentially ruinous: the only thing that separates her from being the courtesan she is her utter lack of irony. When she sings her role, she means it. Only in *Xuanyou* does she learn irony. Perhaps her capacity for irony follows from her awareness that she is playing a role she cannot become: that of her courtesan-mother. In short, in this scene, for the first time, she is aware that she is an actress. But her supreme irony is in this aria from *Xunmeng*, using performance to satirize the Hongguang Emperor. The 買花錢 in *Xunmeng* is on one level literal: the Lord of Heaven gets his flowers free. Repeated in *Taohua shan* the 買花錢 is figurative: the money to buy a courtesan. The Hongguang Emperor gets his "flowers" free. In effect, here forced to act as *dan* for another man, Li Xiangjun admits that she is a courtesan, aware of her missing pay. After this she is sent off to learn *Yanzi jian*.

In this brief aria there is a "someone" implied behind the words who is using the words she speaks for a purpose. There is irony, and the irony is a courtesan's irony. Yet this is a woman who has never sold herself before. In face of the Hongguang Emperor she has to sing without pay, as she has to have sex without love. The Hongguang Emperor represents the limits of her power of self-definition, and suddenly she responds for a moment not as Li Xiangjun, but as the courtesan-performer.

Tohua shan is a mature and somewhat bitter rereading of *Mudan ting*. Kong Shangren noticed that those wonderful words of love's illusion

become reality are the words of an actress (or actor playing a woman). Those words can never enter social reality.