

3 **Springtime passion and literary tradition**  
4 **in *Peony Pavilion***

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9 **Abstract** *Mudan ting* (Peony Pavilion), written by Tang Xianzu (1550–1616) in  
10 the late sixteenth century, remains one of the most read and frequently performed  
11 **AQ1** Chinese drama nowadays. Best known for its depiction of *qing* 情 (love, emotions),  
12 the play is replete with allusions, topoi, and words of love. Building on my earlier  
13 work on reading *Mudan ting* as an intertext of love in *Passion, Romance, and Qing*  
14 (Brill, 2014), in this paper I discuss the complex concept of love in *Mudan ting*,  
15 focusing on the terms and concepts of love associated with the meanings of spring,  
16 and the difficulty in speaking about love as expressed directly by the playwright and  
17 **AQ2** through his female protagonist Du Liniang in the play. The paper also explores the  
18 strong presence and function of literary tradition in the process of discovery and  
19 communication of the meanings of love in *Peony Pavilion*.  
20

21 *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion, hereafter *MDT*), written by Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖  
22 (1550–1616) in the late sixteenth century, remains one of the most read and frequently  
23 performed Chinese drama nowadays. Replete with allusions, topoi, and words of love,  
24 the play is also a rich text for us to explore the emotions and states of mind in the late  
25 Ming world associated with the emergence and flourishing of the cult of *qing* 情  
26 (emotion, passion).<sup>1</sup> Building on my earlier work on reading *MDT* as an intertext of  
27 love in its sharing of a common world of words of love with other texts,<sup>2</sup> in this paper I

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> See Santangelo (2000) and Lee (2007), Chapter One “The Cult of *Qing*”.

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> See Tan (2014).

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28 discuss the complex concept of love in *MDT*, focusing on the terms and concepts of  
 29 love associated with the meanings of spring, and the difficulty in speaking about love  
 30 as expressed directly by the playwright and through his female protagonist Du  
 31 Liniang. The paper also explores the roles of literary tradition in the process of  
 32 discovery and communication of the meanings of love in *Peony Pavilion*.

### 33 “Love is the hardest to tell”: the complexities of *Qing*

34 By convention, the prologue (known as *fumo kaichang* 副末開場 or *jiamen* 家門) of  
 35 southern *chuanqi* drama introduces the playwright’s main motives in writing the  
 36 play and also contains a brief plot synopsis. It is typically performed by a supporting  
 37 male role. Interestingly, in the case of *MDT*, this male role appears to speak in the  
 38 voice of the playwright and opens the scene with the following lines:

39 (MALE, the Announcer, enters):  
 40 Abandoned by the busy world of officialdom I live in this leisurely world of  
 41 retreat.  
 42 I pondered a hundred schemes,  
 43 but there is nowhere one can find joy.  
 44 All day is spent in producing heartbreaking lines,  
 45 in all life love is the hardest to tell.

(末上) 忙處拋人閑處住。百計思量, 沒箇爲歡處。白日消磨腸斷句, 世間只有情難訴。

48 (MDT 1:1)<sup>3</sup>

49 One can therefore read the last two lines as Tang Xianzu’s address to the  
 50 audience on the main theme of the play: this is a play about love and romance. The  
 51 playwright informs us that “all day is spent in producing heartbreaking lines.” He  
 52 wants to convey words of love, but as he admitted, “in all life love is the hardest to  
 53 tell”, precisely because of its complexities.

54 Being a play about how a young couple’s love transcends the boundaries of life  
 55 and death, *MDT* has long been regarded as a paean to the power of *qing*. Tang  
 56 Xianzu said in his preface to the play:

57 The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at  
 58 its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life  
 59 one who has so died.

60 生者可以死, 死可以生。生而不可與死, 死而不可復生者, 皆非情之至也。<sup>4</sup>

61 The concept of *qing* in *MDT* is a broad concept referring to passion and sentiment  
 62 (the driving force of one’s emotions) mainly expressed through the discourse of  
 63 romantic love in the play. To propose that there is a kind of “love at its fullest” or  
 64 “ultimate love” (*qing zhi zhi* 情之至) implies that the author differentiates various

3FL01 <sup>3</sup> *Mudan ting* (hereafter *MDT*), 1:1. Unless otherwise stated, translation of *MDT* is cited from the version  
 3FL02 used in Tan and Santangelo (2014).

4FL01 <sup>4</sup> *MDT*, p.1. Translation from Birch (1980), “Introduction”, p. ix.

65 levels of love. The opposite of the ultimate or passionate love is the kind of love  
66 limited to the sensuous and the corporeal that must be fulfilled on the pillow.

67 This ultimate form of *qing* is embodied by the female protagonist Du Liniang  
68 杜麗娘, whom the playwright exalts as “a person who possesses *qing* or passion”  
69 (*youqing ren* 有情人) in the preface. The idea of love, however, is not readily  
70 understood by others or even by Du Liniang herself initially. As Tang Xianzu also  
71 said in the preface, “love is of source unknown” 情不知所起. Liniang had to  
72 undergo a process of discovery of her own springtime passion.

### 73 **Liniang’s self-discovery through literary tradition**

74 (Liniang looks about her, then lowers her head again and ponders): Ah,  
75 Heaven, now I begin to realize how disturbing the spring’s splendour can truly  
76 be! Those poems and ballads I read that spoke of girls of ancient times “in  
77 springtime moved to passion, in autumn to regret” – that was really no lie.  
78 Here am I at the double eight, my sixteenth year, yet no fine “scholar to break  
79 the cassia bough” has come my way. Now that I feel this sudden yearning for  
80 springtime passion, where shall I find a visitor to my lunar palace?

81 (作左右瞧介) (又低首沉吟介) 天呵, 春色惱人, 信有之乎! 常觀詩詞樂府, 古  
82 之女子, 因春感情, 遇秋成恨, 誠不謬矣。吾今年已二八, 未逢折桂之夫; 忽  
83 慕春情, 怎得蟾宮之客?

84 (*MDT*, 10:44)

85 Liniang’s discovery of her own emotions is closely linked with the spring season.  
86 Spring scenery causes melancholy. Liniang finds the splendour of spring annoying  
87 and disturbing (*chunse naoren* 春色惱人<sup>5</sup>), a new emotional experience that she  
88 does not quite understand. For a young girl with no prior experience in love, who or  
89 what may serve as her emotional guide?

90 Liniang appears to rely on ancient literary texts as her closest source of  
91 knowledge about love and emotions. She finds affirmation of her new experience in  
92 the poems and ballads that she has read, which spoke of girls of ancient times  
93 sharing the same experience of being moved to passion in springtime (*yinchun*  
94 *ganqing* 因春感情). One may also read this as Liniang’s act of borrowing  
95 legitimacy from the literary past in her new discovery of love: once she declared  
96 these literary texts as reliable precedents of her emotional experience (“that was  
97 really no lie”), she suddenly finds the confidence to speak directly about her  
98 yearning for springtime passion (*chunqing* 春情) and a lover (“a visitor to my lunar  
99 palace”).

100 Therefore, the process of Liniang’s self-discovery of her own emotions is  
101 dependent not only on the spring scenery, but more importantly it is reliant upon the  
102 influence of literary tradition. One should also ask: since the spring season occurs

5FL01 <sup>5</sup> Later in the same scene, she retells her emotional experience of spring to her mother using a slightly  
5FL02 different expression *chunxuan naoren* 春暄惱人 (the warmth and excitement of spring is annoying), see  
5FL03 *MDT*, 10:46.

103 every year, how or why is this spring different from other years in the mind of Du  
104 Liniang? As Liniang confessed:

105 Never till now did spring so stir my heart.  
106 There may be many low and high plastered walls,  
107 but spring desires fly and float about everywhere  
108 最撩人春色是今年。少甚麼低就高來粉畫垣，元來春心無處不飛懸。  
109 (MDT, 12:53)

110  
111 Once again, what makes this spring stir Liniang's heart is a literary text, the first poem  
112 in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Poetry), in the famous classroom scene in *MDT* (Scene 7)  
113 where one can trace Liniang's first awakening and initiation to *qing*. As Chunxiang  
114 spells out clearly later in Scene 9: "Oh, my poor young mistress, all because of that poem,  
115 she was lectured into passion." (小姐呵，爲詩章，講動情腸。)<sup>6</sup>

### 116 Conflicting discourses on spring

117 The same emotional reaction to spring as experienced by Du Liniang was not,  
118 however, shared or understood by everyone:

119 (Chen): What will be the purpose for this stroll?  
120 (Chunxiang):  
121 She laments for spring without any reason,  
122 and before spring hastens past,  
123 she wants to cast off her spring melancholy in the rear garden.  
124 (Chen): She should not do this.

127 (末) 爲甚去游? (貼) 他平白地爲春傷。因春去的忙，後花園要把春愁漾。(末) 一發不該了。  
128 (MDT, 9:39)

129 Tutor Chen's doubt and disapproval towards Liniang's spring melancholy<sup>7</sup> is  
130 subtly shared by Chunxiang, who in recounting Liniang's emotional experience,  
131 suggests that "she laments for spring without any reason". Tutor Chen then  
132 expounds on his point:

133 Chunxiang, by the grace of Heaven, I, your tutor, have enjoyed some 60 years  
134 of life, yet never have I felt any such thing as 'spring struck' and have never  
135 strolled in the garden.  
136 (Chunxiang): Why not?  
137 (Chen): You don't know that. Mencius said it well: The thousands of words of  
138 the Sage all come down to urging men to recover one's lost heart. If one keeps  
139 to the normal round, why should one feel 'spring- struck'? Why would one  
140 want a spring stroll? After you returned from the spring sightseeing, how can  
141 you lay down your heart?

6FL01 <sup>6</sup> MDT, 9:39. See Li (2004) and Volpp (2005) for analyses of this important scene in *MDT*.

7FL01 <sup>7</sup> Terms such as *chunshang* 春傷 and *shangchun* 傷春 appear multiple times in *MDT*. See relevant entries  
7FL02 in Tan and Santangelo (2014), pp. 254–255, 965–7.

142   春香，你師父靠天也六十來歲，從不曉得傷箇春，從不曾游箇花園。(貼)  
 143   爲甚？(末) 你不知 孟夫子說的好，聖人千言萬語，則要人“收其放  
 144   心”。但如常，著甚春傷？要甚春游？你放春歸，怎把心兒放？  
 145   (MDT, 9:39)

146   It is striking to see how Chunxiang and especially Tutor Chen interpret spring  
 147   differently, or to be precise, indifferently. There is a strong emphasis on *chun*  
 148   (spring) in this dialogue between Chunxiang and the Tutor, who each repeated this  
 149   word thrice in a single sentence, a feature noted by the keen eyes of the Qing  
 150   dynasty commentators.<sup>8</sup>

151   Tension between different reactions to spring can even be seen in the same  
 152   character, for example, in the case of Du Liniang earlier in Scene 3:

153   (Liniang enters, followed by Chunxiang bearing a tray with wine vessels):  
 154   The lovely oriole desires to sing,  
 155   with such radiance of spring in sight.  
 156   “How can this heart of a mere wisp of grass,  
 157   ever repay even a small amount of the kindness of spring light?”  
 158   (貼持酒臺，隨旦上) 嬌鶯欲語，眼見春如許。寸草心，怎報的春光一二！  
 159   (MDT, 3:7–8)

160   In the third and fourth lines, Liniang expresses her gratitude towards the kindness of  
 161   her parents, a clear allusion to the famous lines by the Tang poet Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–  
 162   814): “Who says that the heart of a mere wisp of grass, can ever repay the sunlight of  
 163   three springs” (誰言寸草心，報得三春暉。) One may assume that this is what  
 164   Liniang, the lovely oriole, “desires to sing, with such radiance of spring in sight” in the  
 165   preceding first and second lines. Yet, if we consider how the discovery and  
 166   communication of love in *MDT* is repeatedly linked to the spring season, Liniang’s  
 167   expression of her emotions may not necessarily be as straightforward as it seems.

168   As Paolo Santangelo has pointed out, spring (*chun* 春) is a loaded word heavy  
 169   with emotional associations in the play:

170   in its 72 occurrences in *Mudan ting*, alone or in compounds, it refers to love and  
 171   desire (*chūnxīn* 春心, *chūnfēng yīdù* 春風一度, *chūnguī* 春歸, *chūnhuái* 春懷,  
 172   *chūnmèng* 春夢, *chūnqiánbìng* 春前病, *chūnqíng* 春情, *chūnshāng* 春傷, *chūnsī*  
 173   春思, *chūnxiāo* 春宵, *chūnyì* 春意, *chūnyuán* 春園, *chūnzū* 春醉, *diǎnkān*  
 174   *chūnfēng zhè dìyīhuā* 點勘春風這第一花, *jīngchūn* 驚春, *shāngchūn* 傷春,  
 175   *xìyāo chūncuǒ* 細腰春鎖, *yīnchūn gǎnqíng* 因春感情, *yóuchūn* 游春) or to  
 176   beauty, youth and life (*chūn* 春, *chūnróng* 春容, *chūnsè* 春色, *chūnshān* 春山,  
 177   *chūnyān* 春烟, *chūnyún* 春雲, *sānchūn hǎochù* 三春好處, *xūdù qīngchūn* 虛度  
 178   青春, *yángchūn yǒujiǎo* 陽春有脚, clearly close to love and desire), with rare  
 179   exceptions, such as *chūnguāng* 春光, kindness of parents.<sup>9</sup>

8FL01 <sup>8</sup> See eyebrow commentaries in *Wu Wushan sanfu heping Mudan ting huanhun ji* 吳山三婦合評牡丹  
 8FL02 亭還魂記 (1694), upper *juan*, 23b and 24a, *Budeng daya wenku zhenben xiqu congkan* 不登大雅文庫珍  
 8FL03 本戲曲叢刊, pp. 90–91.

9FL01 <sup>9</sup> Santangelo (2014), p. 61.



180 In the context of *MDT*, the spring season is more commonly associated with love  
 181 and desire than with the kindness of parents. Furthermore, when orioles appear in  
 182 conjunction with spring, they usually allude to matters of romance. For instance, as  
 183 Chunxiang reveals the emotional state of Liniang after roaming in spring:

184 It is clear, from these two spring excursions, that you can't bear the upsetting  
 185 chatter of the swallows and orioles.  
 186 這兩度春游忒分曉，是禁不的燕抄鶯鬧。  
 187 (*MDT*, 14:63)

188 A more telling example can be found in Liu Mengmei's entry verse in Scene 10  
 189 which is clearly about romance:

190 (Liu Mengmei enters bearing a branch of willow in his hand):  
 191 "As orioles meet the warmth of the sun their singing voices mellow,  
 192 so when a man greets romance his smiling lips open.  
 193 Tracing the path full of fallen petals in the stream,  
 194 Ruan Zhao reaches Mount Tiantai and finds his goddess."  
 195 (生持柳枝上) "鶯逢日暖歌聲滑，人遇風情笑口開。一徑落花隨水入，今朝  
 196 阮肇到天台。"  
 197 (*MDT*, 10:44)

198 "As orioles meet the warmth of the sun their singing voices mellow." But the  
 199 lovely oriole (Liniang) in Scene 3 can only say that it "desires to speak or sing"  
 200 (*yuyu* 欲語) in view of the spring radiance. Perhaps what it really wants to say is not  
 201 what linearly follows in the subsequent lines about the kindness of her parents.  
 202 Rather, as with other instances in *MDT* where the oriole appears in the context of  
 203 spring, it is about matters of romance. In Scene 3, Du Liniang has yet to be initiated  
 204 into *qing*. One can argue that the instinctive response to spring (romance) she felt as  
 205 a lovely oriole (a beauty) might have been suppressed and overcome by a more  
 206 decorous reaction to spring light (春光) as the kindness of her parents she ought to  
 207 feel in her role as a daughter.

208 If there is unspeakable desire for love that the oriole wishes to sing, how may  
 209 such desire eventually be expressed?

## 210 Expressing emotions through words of the past

211 I came along this way with Miss Du, how is it that she is not with me now?  
 212 (He looks back and sees Liniang): Ah, Miss Du!  
 213 (Liniang rises, startled from sleep) (Greets each other)  
 214 (Liu) So this is where you were—I was looking for you everywhere!  
 215 (Liniang gives him a sidelong glance but does not say a word)  
 216 (Liu): I happened to break this branch of a weeping willow in the garden.  
 217 Maiden, you are so deeply versed in works of literature, would you compose a  
 218 poem to honour this willow branch?

219 (Liniang starts in surprised delight and is about to open her lips to speak but  
220 stops) (Aside): I have never met this young man before – what is he doing  
221 here?

222 (Liu, smiling): Maiden, I am dying of love for you!  
223 小生順路兒跟著杜小姐回來，怎生不見？(回看介) 呀，小姐，小姐！(旦作驚  
224 起介) (相見介) (生) 小生那一處不尋訪小姐來，却在這裏！(旦作斜視不語  
225 介) (生) 恰好花園內，折取垂柳半枝。姐姐，你既淹通書史，可作詩以賞此  
226 柳枝乎？(旦驚喜，欲言又止介) (背想) 這生素昧平生，何因到此？(生笑介)  
227 小姐，咱愛殺你哩！  
228 (MDT, 10:44)

229 In this scene, Du Liniang's initial encounter with her destined lover Liu Mengmei  
230 in her dream presents a series of contrasts: Liu's advance is met with Du's hesitance  
231 and doubt; his outspoken declaration of love stands in stark opposition to her  
232 silence. Liniang is portrayed as one who is “deeply versed in works of literature”  
233 (淹通書史), yet when asked to compose a poem to show her appreciation for Liu  
234 Mengmei (the “willow branch” punning on his surname Liu), we see that she wishes  
235 to speak but stops again. Words of love do not flow naturally for Liniang, especially  
236 to a man that she has not met before. Even after she gets to know Liu and does speak  
237 of her feelings, she often expresses her love through allusions and words of the past:

238 (Liniang): My scholar, while I was waiting for you, I assembled a pastiche of  
239 lines from Tang poems.

240 (Liu): I'm all ears.

241 (Liniang recites):

242 “I intend to request an able matchmaker to tell my love but I pity myself, [Qin  
243 Taoyu]<sup>10</sup>,

244 The cold moonlight and colours of the mountains are both pale. [Xue Tao]

245 Whose voice is it that sings the song of the Spring Returning? [Cao Tang]

246 A spectre returned to enchant the amorous Master Ruan [Liu Yanshi]”

247 (Liu): You are so talented.

248 (旦) 秀才，等你不來，俺集下了唐詩一首。(生) 洗耳。(旦念介) “擬託良  
249 媒亦自傷 [秦韜玉]，月寒山色兩蒼蒼。[薛濤] 不知誰唱春歸曲？[曹唐] 又  
250 向人間魅阮郎。[劉言史]” (生) 姐姐高才。

251 (MDT, 32:158)

252 The talented Du Liniang does not compose original words to express her feelings.  
253 Instead, she speaks of her love through the language of the Tang poets. More  
254 significantly, the need to seek a medium to express her love is also captured in the  
255 lines she borrowed. In the first line, she reveals her intention to “request an able  
256 matchmaker to tell my love”; in the third, she is keen to find out the voice that sings  
257 the yearning for love. In both cases, she does not tell her love directly.

10FL01 <sup>10</sup> Even though the names of Tang poets are now indicated in modern editions of MDT, it should be  
10FL02 noted that they do not appear in Ming editions. It was the early Qing dynasty commentators of the *Three*  
10FL03 *Wives' Edition* (1694) who identified the original author of each line in the pastiches in *MDT*. See Zeitlin  
10FL04 (1994), p. 136.

258 In this example, Liniang explicitly declares that she assembled a pastiche of Tang  
 259 poems (*ji Tang* 集唐). Most other cases of Tang pastiches in *MDT* are, however, not  
 260 clearly marked as such. In all but two of the fifty-five scenes in *MDT*, the concluding  
 261 exit verses are composed in the style of Tang pastiches as shown in the following  
 262 example from Scene 12<sup>11</sup>:

263 (Liniang): Where to seek my lover who at Wuling found fairy love? [Monk  
 264 Jiaoran]

265 (Chunxiang): The blame lies on the affections of a wanderer so soon out of  
 266 mind. [Wei Zhuang]

267 (Liniang): From now on I will always wander in my spring dream (love  
 268 longing), [Bai Juyi]

269 (Chunxiang): Regrets are forever tied to the heart. [Zhang Hu].

270 (旦) 武陵何處訪仙郎? [釋皎然] (貼) 只怪游人思易忘。 [韋莊]

271 (旦) 從此時時春夢裏, [白居易] (貼) 一生遺恨繫心腸。 [張祜]

272 (*MDT* 12:56)

273 Time and again, we are reminded by Tang Xianzu and his characters in *MDT* that  
 274 love is most complex and difficult to tell or comprehend. Literary tradition plays a  
 275 significant role in the discovery and communication of the meanings of love in  
 276 *MDT*. Du Liniang turns to ancient literary texts in order to seek affirmation and  
 277 legitimation for her inchoate understanding of spring passion. She also relies on  
 278 borrowed words from the past to express her feelings towards Liu Mengmei.

279 Tang Xianzu begins his play by telling us that “in all life love is the hardest to  
 280 tell” (世間只有情難訴). It is most fitting that just like the many pastiches in *MDT*,  
 281 even this very line that bemoans the difficulty to express love is itself also borrowed,  
 282 with a minor modification, from a Tang poetic line (世間只有情難說).<sup>12</sup>  
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11FL01 <sup>11</sup> On Tang’s use of pastiche, see, for example, Negayama 2001, Liu (2013), and Lu (2014).

12FL01 <sup>12</sup> See Gu Kuang’s 顧況 (ca.725-ca.814) poem titled “Song Li shiyu wang Wuxing” 送李侍御往吳興, in  
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