Springtime passion and literary tradition in *Peony Pavilion*

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

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

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1 See Santangelo (2000) and Lee (2007), Chapter One “The Cult of Qing”.
2 See Tan (2014).
discuss the complex concept of love in MDT, focusing on the terms and concepts of love associated with the meanings of spring, and the difficulty in speaking about love as expressed directly by the playwright and through his female protagonist Du Liniang. The paper also explores the roles of literary tradition in the process of discovery and communication of the meanings of love in Peony Pavilion.

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

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

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

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

(MDT 1:1)

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

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

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

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

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3 Mudan ting (hereafter MDT), 1:1. Unless otherwise stated, translation of MDT is cited from the version used in Tan and Santangelo (2014).
levels of love. The opposite of the ultimate or passionate love is the kind of love limited to the sensuous and the corporeal that must be fulfilled on the pillow.

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

Liniang’s self-discovery through literary tradition

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

(Later in the same scene, she retells her emotional experience of spring to her mother using a slightly different expression chunxuan naoren 春暄恼人 (the warmth and excitement of spring is annoying), see MDT, 10:46.)

Liniang’s discovery of her own emotions is closely linked with the spring season. Spring scenery causes melancholy. Liniang finds the splendour of spring annoying and disturbing (chunse naoren 春色恼人), a new emotional experience that she does not quite understand. For a young girl with no prior experience in love, who or what may serve as her emotional guide?

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

Therefore, the process of Liniang’s self-discovery of her own emotions is dependent not only on the spring scenery, but more importantly it is reliant upon the influence of literary tradition. One should also ask: since the spring season occurs...
every year, how or why is this spring different from other years in the mind of Du Liniang? As Liniang confessed:

Never till now did spring so stir my heart.
There may be many low and high plastered walls,
but spring desires fly and float about everywhere

Once again, what makes this spring stir Liniang’s heart is a literary text, the first poem in the Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry), in the famous classroom scene in MDT (Scene 7) where one can trace Liniang’s first awakening and initiation to qing. As Chunxiang spells out clearly later in Scene 9: “Oh, my poor young mistress, all because of that poem, she was lectured into passion.”

Conflicting discourses on spring

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

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

Tutor Chen’s doubt and disapproval towards Liniang’s spring melancholy is subtly shared by Chunxiang, who in recounting Liniang’s emotional experience, suggests that “she laments for spring without any reason”. Tutor Chen then expounds on his point:

Chunxiang, by the grace of Heaven, I, your tutor, have enjoyed some 60 years of life, yet never have I felt any such thing as ‘spring struck’ and have never strolled in the garden.

(Chunxiang): Why not?
(Chen): You don’t know that. Mencius said it well: The thousands of words of the Sage all come down to urging men to recover one’s lost heart. If one keeps to the normal round, why should one feel ‘spring- struck’? Why would one want a spring stroll? After you returned from the spring sightseeing, how can you lay down your heart?

6 MDT, 9:39. See Li (2004) and Volpp (2005) for analyses of this important scene in MDT.
7 Terms such as chunshang 春傷 and shangchun 傷春 appear multiple times in MDT. See relevant entries in Tan and Santangelo (2014), pp. 254–255, 965-7.
It is striking to see how Chunxiang and especially Tutor Chen interpret spring differently, or to be precise, indifferently. There is a strong emphasis on *chun* (spring) in this dialogue between Chunxiang and the Tutor, who each repeated this word thrice in a single sentence, a feature noted by the keen eyes of the Qing dynasty commentators.  

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

(Liniang enters, followed by Chunxiang bearing a tray with wine vessels):

“The lovely oriole desires to sing, 
with such radiance of spring in sight.

“How can this heart of a mere wisp of grass, 
ever repay even a small amount of the kindness of spring light”?

(貼持酒壺, 隨旦上) 嬌鸞欲語，眼見春如許。寸草心，怎報的春光一二！

(MDT, 3:7–8)

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

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


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8 See eyebrow commentaries in *Wu Wushan sanfu heping Mudan ting huanhun ji* 吳吳山三婦合評牡丹亭遺魂記 (1694), upper *juan*, 23b and 24a, *Budeng daya wenku zhenben xiqu congkan* 不登大雅文庫珍玩戲曲叢刊, pp. 90–91.

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

> It is clear, from these two spring excursions, that you can’t bear the upsetting chatter of the swallows and orioles.

(MDT, 14:63)

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

> (Liu Mengmei enters bearing a branch of willow in his hand):
> “As orioles meet the warmth of the sun their singing voices mellow, so when a man greets romance his smiling lips open. Tracing the path full of fallen petals in the stream, Ruan Zhao reaches Mount Tiantai and finds his goddess.”

(MDT, 10:44)

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

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

Expressing emotions through words of the past

I came along this way with Miss Du, how is it that she is not with me now?
(He looks back and sees Liniang): Ah, Miss Du!
(Liniang rises, startled from sleep) (Greets each other)
(Liu) So this is where you were—I was looking for you everywhere!
(Liniang gives him a sidelong glance but does not say a word)
(Liu): I happened to break this branch of a weeping willow in the garden. Maiden, you are so deeply versed in works of literature, would you compose a poem to honour this willow branch?
(Liniang starts in surprised delight and is about to open her lips to speak but stops) (Aside): I have never met this young man before – what is he doing here?

(Liu, smiling): Maiden, I am dying of love for you!

小生順路兒跟著杜小姐回來, 怎生不見? (回看介) 呀, 小姐, 小姐! (旦作驚起介) (相見介) (生) 小生那一處不尋訪小姐來, 卻在這裏! (旦作斜視不語介) (生) 恰好花園內，折取垂柳半枝。姐姐，你既淹通書史，可作詩以賞此柳枝乎? (旦驚喜，欲言又止介) (背想) 這生素味平生，何因到此? (生笑介) 小姐，咱愛殺你哩!。

(MDT, 10:44)

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

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

(Liu): I’m all ears.

(Liniang recites):

“I intend to request an able matchmaker to tell my love but I pity myself, [Qin Taoyu]10, The cold moonlight and colours of the mountains are both pale. [Xue Tao] Whose voice is it that sings the song of the Spring Returning? [Cao Tang] A spectre returned to enchant the amorous Master Ruan [Liu Yanshi]”

(Liu): You are so talented.

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

(MDT, 32:158)

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

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10FL01 Even though the names of Tang poets are now indicated in modern editions of MDT, it should be noted that they do not appear in Ming editions. It was the early Qing dynasty commentators of the Three Wives’ Edition (1694) who identified the original author of each line in the pastiches in MDT. See Zeitlin (1994), p. 136.
In this example, Liniang explicitly declares that she assembled a pastiche of Tang poems (ji Tang 集唐). Most other cases of Tang pastiches in MDT are, however, not clearly marked as such. In all but two of the fifty-five scenes in MDT, the concluding exit verses are composed in the style of Tang pastiches as shown in the following example from Scene 12:

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

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

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

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

(旦) 武陵何處訪仙郎? [釋皎然] (貼) 唯怪游人思易忘。 [韋莊]

(旦) 從此時時春夢裏, [白居易] (貼) 一生遺恨繫心腸。 [張祜]

(MDT 12:56)

Time and again, we are reminded by Tang Xianzu and his characters in MDT that love is most complex and difficult to tell or comprehend. Literary tradition plays a significant role in the discovery and communication of the meanings of love in MDT: Du Liniang turns to ancient literary texts in order to seek affirmation and legitimation for her inchoate understanding of spring passion. She also relies on borrowed words from the past to express her feelings towards Liu Mengmei. Tang Xianzu begins his play by telling us that “in all life love is the hardest to tell” (世間只有情難訴). It is most fitting that just like the many pastiches in MDT, even this very line that bemoans the difficulty to express love is itself also borrowed, with a minor modification, from a Tang poetic line (世間只有情難説).12

28 References

285 Primary sources


11FL01 11 On Tang’s use of pastiche, see, for example, Negayama 2001, Liu (2013), and Lu (2014).

12FL01 12 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 Quan Tangshi, 267.2967.

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