

A Comparative Study of *Hong Lou Meng* and *Moment in Peking*

HAN Jiaxin

Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

Hong Lou Meng and *Moment in Peking* are both well known novels home and abroad. Based on a comparative analysis, it can be found that these two novels have many similarities in the arrangement of structure, plot, characterization, and language style. Through a detailed analysis of these two novels, this paper explored the similarities and also discussed the factors for this phenomenon.

Keywords: Lin Yutang, *Hong Lou Meng*, *Moment in Peking*

Introduction

Lin Yutang is a famous literary writer in the 20th century. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature twice in 1940 and 1950. *Moment in Peking* is the most successful novel in his literary writing. Vivid life scenes, characters with different personalities, the essence of Chinese culture like Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, the life story of the ancient men of letters, and the excellent plot all make the novel a masterpiece of immortality. This novel tells the story of Zeng, Yao, and Niu three families in Peking from the Boxer Movement to the Anti-Japanese War in the past 30 years with their vicissitudes, which also intersperses with a lot of real history, such as the establishment of the Republic of China, the subsequent restoration of monarchy of Zhang Xun, the March 18th Massacre, the fall of the three northeast provinces, the outbreak of World War II, and so on. The whole novel has a clear structure, and different clues are interspersed alternately, which truly shows the changes of modern Chinese society. It is a rare book that records the real Chinese history.

A Comparative Study: *Moment in Peking* and *Hong Lou Meng*

In 1938, Lin Yutang came up with the idea of translating *Hong Lou Meng* but he felt that it was not appropriate at that time, so he decided to write a novel. Therefore, the seven hundred thousand words of *Moment in Peking* was born, which is not only Lin Yutang's painstaking work, but also his first full-length novel. In March 1938, Lin began to conceive its characters and plots, after five months of preparation, began writing in Paris in August, and finished his writing in August 1939 after a year (Lin, 2014, pp. 1-2). In this way, *Moment in Peking* was born, and it was destined to have numerous connections with *Hong Lou Meng*, which are mainly reflected in the content structure, characterization, and narrative techniques.

About the Form Plot and Structure

The structure is the most basic element in novel writing, and the quality of the plot naturally determines the readability of the novel. Lin Yutang adopted the same form of chapters as *Hong Lou Meng* in his novel, with a total of 45 volumes, which are divided into three parts. Titles of each chapter all outline the content of the whole chapter. Naturally, there are some similarities between the two novels in content. Take the following as examples,

HAN Jiaxin, undergraduate, Department of Business English, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China.

in the 9th chapter of *Moment of Peking*, “Only one person at the wedding is sad, and the night is lonely and desolate” (拜天地孤独不成偶，入洞房凄凉又心酸), and in the 13th chapter of *Hong Lou Meng*, “Qin Keqing is dead and Wang Xifeng is in charge of the Ning Mansion” (秦可卿死封龙禁尉，王熙凤协理宁国府); in the 23rd chapter of *Moment of Peking*, “The Niu family is in a state of poverty, and the Zeng family lives in comfort and entertainment” (牛家失势捉襟见肘，曾府燕居适性娱情) and in the 86th chapter of *Hong Lou Meng*, “The old official who took bribes reverse the verdict. Daiyu thumbed through the music book during the spare time” (受私贿老官翻案牍，寄闲情淑女解情书).

The story of *Hong Lou Meng* has a grand structure, complicated clues, multiple clues intersperse, and diversified plots. The story takes the four major families of Jia, Shi, Wang, and Xue as the background, the vicissitudes of the whole family as the main line, Baoyu and Daiyu's love story as the secondary line, and also includes the stories of various characters, such as three volumes of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling and the maids and the servants in the family. The novel's multiple story lines are developed in parallel, breaking the single-line approach of the previous single-line conception of Chinese novels.

Moment in Peking also has a larger structure, more interspersed clues, and a complex plot rather than a single one. Through the vicissitudes of the times and the ups and downs of the Yao, Zeng, and Niu families and characters inside, the novel vividly depicts the social life of China in the 40 years from the Boxer Movement to the July 7 War of Resistance. Like *Hong Lou Meng*, his novel also has a large number of characters, with 80 or 90 main characters and about a dozen girls whose stories are interesting to read.

In terms of content and plot, there are also many similarities. The plot of Grandma Liu Entering the Grand View Garden in *Hong Lou Meng* is very familiar to most of us, as is her image of the naive underclass. In her first time into the Rong Mansion because of the poor and hard family situation to find sister Feng, Feng gave her 20 taels of silver,

Grandma Liu first listened to them say that they lived a hard life and felt that they could not achieve her purpose. And when she heard that she could be given twenty Liangs of silver, she beamed with joy immediately and said, “We also know the hardships, but as the saying goes, ‘A starved camel is bigger than a horse.’” No matter how, a hair from your body is thicker than our waists. (Cao & Gao, 2009, p. 26)

Although Grandma Liu's words are coarse, her eloquent tongue is not negligent. When Grandma Liu saw people in the Rong Mansion the next few times, she made everyone laugh.

In *Moment in Peking*, when Mulan first married into the Zeng family, a distant relative of her great-grandmother, also from the rural community, came to the city to visit the bride for the first time.

The aunt took out a pair of glasses, put them on and said, “Niece, don't go. Let me look at you.” She stretched out her hands and looked her all over, then said, “I heard from Grandmother Jia that you are studying in a foreign school and are able to read and write. It is a good fortune to have such a learned wife”. (Lin, 2014, p. 236)

The aunt goes to town to visit her rich relatives, just like Grandma Liu entering the Grand View Garden. Although she has an naive appearance, but her words is very sweet, very pleasing.

About the Characterization

It is not surprising that people who have read *Moment of Peking* can always find that some of the characters in it have very similar personalities to some in *Hong Lou Meng*. Lin Yutang also mentioned in his letter to Yu Dafu the characters in the book that

Drawing an analogy between the characters in *Hong Lou Meng* and the characters in *Moment of Peking*, Mulan is like Xiangyun with Chen Yun's elegant character, Mo Chou is like Baochai, Hongyu is like Daiyu, Sister Gui sister is like Sister Feng without her greed and malice, Diren is like Xue Pan, Shanhu is like Li Zhi, Baofen is like Baoqin, Xuerui is like Yuanyang, Weizi is like Zijuan, Shixiang is like Xianglin, Aunt Li is like Aunt Zhao, and Afei is far better than Baoyu. Sun Manniang is a special character who is incomparable... (Shen, 1998, p. 252)

In the novel, Mulan, Lifu, Mo Chou, Shanhu, and other characters also talked about the *Hong Lou Meng*.

Mo Chou said, "The second-elder sister is talking about *A Dream of Red Mansions*. She sympathizes with Lin Daiyu." Tiren asked, "Oh, I know. The second sister-elder likes Lin Daiyu and the third-elder sister likes Xue Baochai." Sudan asked Tiren who she liked. Tiren says, "I like Jia Baoyu" and then asks Sudan who she liked. Sudan says she likes Shi Xiangyun. Mulan asked Lifu who liked, Lifu stopped for a while and said: "I don't know. Daiyu cries too much. Baochai is too capable. Maybe I love visiting Tanchun best. She is their two in one with Daiyu's talent and Baochai's character. But I don't approve of her way of treating her mother." Mulan shouted to Shanhu, "The Eldest sister, I know who you like, Li Wan! Isn't that right?" Shanhu said, "In that novel, everyone likes people who are like them." (Lin, 2014, p. 207)

The author arranges Shanhu to summarize that the characters in his book have all found that the people they like in *Hong Lou Meng* are somewhat similar to their own personalities, which further indicates that the author should learn from *Hong Lou Meng* in the arrangement of characters in his novel.

As for Mulan and Xiang Yun, Mulan is generous and cheerful without formality, free and easy, which is like Xiangyun. There are so many characters in *Hong Lou Meng*, only Shi Xiangyun lived an own true temperament. Even Cao Xueqin himself also said Shi Xiangyun fortunately was born bold, frank, and agile, so she will never let love affairs interfere with her, just like a bright moon shining. In *The Red Mansion Is Dazzling Red*, Zhou Ruchang, a redologist, once wrote a poem praising Xiangyun,

My favorite charcter is Shi Xiangyun, and no one can compare with her. Her talent, heroic spirit and ideas are unmatched. Xiangyun's talent is extraordinary, reflected in her not exclusive, good at riddles, wine, lyrics, each of which is brilliant. (2003, pp. 72-77)

At the same time, Xiangyun also has heroism. Only she dared to criticize Daiyu bluntly. When Xing Yuyan is wronged, she immediately questioned Yingchun. "Moreover, she likes to wear men's clothes, which shows that she is handsome, which is different from the 'weak' type of young ladies" (Zhou, 2003, pp. 72-77).

"The wine with clear taste... walking on each other's hands while drunk. It's a proper time to meet friends and relatives" (Cao & Gao, 2009, p. 20).

Mulan is exactly like Xiangyun. Several times in the novel mention Mulan desired to be a man from childhood who could go out to meet visitors, learn for being an officer, ride a horse, travel around the world famous mountains and rivers, and read all kinds of books in the world. Mulan like calligraphy is also showing the character, "Mulan love Wei stele, so Qiu Jian hard, sharp edges" (Lin, 2014, p. 178). She opposed foot binding and pursued freedom with courage and generosity. Even after she married into the Zeng family with strong Confucian feudal thoughts and gave birth to a child, Mulan still dared to pursue freedom, went to various tourist attractions to enjoy the scenery, and watched western movies at night, which other women did not dare and could not do at that time. Although she was scolded several times by her father-in-law, she still insisted on going to the movie and took Sister Gui to watch several times, and took Manniang out to collect dew in the park (Lin, 2014, p. 264).

About the Narrative Techniques

In terms of narrative techniques, poems and verses are the important ways to show the whole content both in these two noves. Especially in *Hong Lou Meng*, there are nearly 6,000 poems and verses words, most of which

are expressed through the characters' language. The literati also give a high appraisal to the poems in *Hong Lou Meng*. There is a saying in the *Bamboo Poems of Capital* (《京都竹诗词》) during the Jiaqing period of Qing Dynasty: "If you do not talk about *Hong Lou Meng*, it is useless to read all the poems and books" (Yisu, 1963, p. 354). Feng Qiyong praised in his book *Comment on A Dream of Red Mansions* that "*Hong Lou Meng* is a book with a wide range of knowledge, and its own connotation" (Feng, 2004, p. 32). Lu Xun also praised it as "getting rid of the old set, and very different from the previous novels" (Lu, 2012, p. 153).

In *Hong Lou Meng*, whether it is at a banquet or in spare time, the girls with Baoyu would gather together, set a theme, and then each of them should write a poem, and then make a competition. They also set up a poetry club named Begonia Poetry Club, which appeared in the 37th chapter when Jia Zheng was assigned to work in another place in this year, so Baoyu was even more extravagant and wasted his time. One day, he suddenly received a note from Tanchun, inviting him to set up a poetry club with Baochai and Daiyu. At the right time, Jia Yun sent two basins of begonia and named it Begonia Poetry Club. They have to take different nicknames for fun. They agreed to use "White begonia" to make poems with a limited rhyme of seven verses, and the result was that Baoyu was the last while Baochai and Daiyu were more adept at this. Li Wan appraised Baochai's poem as the first, which made Baoyu slightly dissatisfied. That night, Baoyu suddenly remembered that the poetry club would be more interesting if Xiangyun participated. The next day, Xiangyun was invited to join, and she wrote two poems about begonia that amazed everyone. Owing to the excitement, Xiangyun wanted to set up another club. Thanks to the help of Baochai, it was implemented smoothly. That night, Xiangyun with Baochai in the Hengwu Garden rest, agreed to make poetry about the chrysanthemum. So in Chapter 38, they wrote poems on the theme of chrysanthemum, and Daiyu's poem "Ode to Chrysanthemum" was rated first.

The indelible poetry haunts me from morning to night, so I wander around the fence or stop to lean against the stone and meditate alone. I accumulated inspiration on the tip of my pen, and described the autumn chrysanthemum in the face of the frost. In the mouth with the fragrance of chrysanthemum, I looked up to the moon to chant chrysanthemum. The paper is full of daily self-pity, who can understand my sadness through a few words? Chrysanthemum has been praised for its noble character since Tao Yuanming's evaluation.

无赖诗魔昏晓侵，绕篱欹石自沉音；毫端蕴秀临霜与，口角噙香对月吟；满纸自怜题素怨，片言谁解诉秋心；一从陶令评章后，千古高风说到今。(Cao & Gao, 2009, p. 161)

Throughout the novel, the poetry is closely linked to the story, and the two complement each other, so it reads poetic and gentle. Readers not only feel the poetic aesthetic, experience the author's writing skills, but also understand the plot. In summing up *Hong Lou Meng*, the Chinese famous scholar Liu Genlu said: "It is nothing to rely on, built entirely from scratch to a masterpiece. It is Cao Xueqin's unique genius creation" (2010, No. 009). Lu Xun once said: "In a word, after *Hong Lou Meng* came out, the traditional thinking and writing methods were broken" (Lu, 2005, p. 348).

In *Moment in Peking*, there are also times when the characters composed poems together taking the advantage of scenes to express their feelings, although they are not as many as in *Hong Lou Meng*. In *Moment in Peking*, like Cao Xueqin, Lin Yutang's wording is full of poetry when introducing the characters' clothes, surroundings, and other things, but it is not in the form of poetry. When Manniang and her mother came to Zeng's Mansion for the first time, Lin Yutang wrote about Zeng's screen and described,

The screen is inlaid with a picture of the palace of the Song Dynasty, the attic is soaring into the clouds, the mountains are standing far away, the autumn geese are crossing the sky, the palace ladies with exquisite hair and clothes in the building are sitting to play the flute, or standing in the gallery to watch the fish playing in the lotus pond.

屏风中镶嵌着宋朝的宫殿图，阁楼飞脊，耸入云汉，山峦远列，秋雁横空，楼中宫女，头梳高髻，衣着低领，或坐而吹箫，或立画廊观鱼戏莲池。(Lin, 2014, p. 103)

The text is not in the form of poetry, but the appearance of a series of four-character words in Chinese creates a poetic and hazy beauty of artistic conception, and the picture on the screen is vividly reflected in readers' eyes.

Once again, after the Yao family moved into the palace garden, several families gathered for dinner, Mr. Yao said: "Let me test you, you have seen the scenery in front of you. I'll make the first pair part and you'll make the second. The water encircles the mountain and the mountain encircles back 池鱼穿影影穿鱼". Lifu said: "The fish skewers the shadow and the shadow skewers back". Mulan said, "You use the word 'skewer', so you are going to skewer the fish back to do eat". Mochou changed the word "skewer" into "dive", "The fish dives into the shadow and the shadow dives back" 池鱼潜影影潜鱼. Mulan answered "Birds singing to trees and trees singing back" 鸟歌鸣树树鸣歌.... And Hongyu's part was called the best, "The idle stares at the beauty and the beauty stares back" 闲人观伶伶观人 (Lin, 2014, p. 292). With the passage of time, people would not gather together to make poems while eating; even Mr. Fu, a lover and talent of poetry, also said regretfully, "It is a pity that the current students do not write poems anymore. Otherwise, at this time, writing poems while eating crabs is really a great excitement of life" (Lin, 2014, p. 183). Although characters like Mulan no longer compose, is not making couplets also a very poetic thing?

Conclusion

Lin Yutang's lifelong pursuit and love for *Hong Lou Meng* inevitably influenced his own creation. The novel is similar to *Hong Lou Meng* in structure, content, characterization, theme, and philosophy inside. Therefore, *Moment in Peking* is also called the modern version of *Hong Lou Meng*. But the more important task of *Moment in Peking* is to convey the true situation of China to the people of the West in the form of a novel; the author said in the preface to *Moment of Peking*,

This book does not defend the perfection of modern Chinese life, nor does it expose its crimes. It is neither an ode to the old life nor an excuse for the new, which is quite different from the many recent so-called dark novels. It is only a description of how contemporary Chinese men and women grow up, how they live, how they love, how they hate, how they quarrel, how they comfort, how they suffer, how they enjoy themselves, how they form certain habits of life, how they form certain modes of thinking, and above all, how they adapt themselves to their living conditions in this earthly life in which man proposes and heaven achieves. (Lin, 2005, preface)

Therefore, we should see his actual contribution to introducing Chinese society and westerners. Dozens of books about China are not as effective as one authentic Chinese book... The book is a successful introduction to Chinese society and has great propaganda power (Lin, 2014, pp. 1-2).

References

- Cao, X. Q., & Gao, E. (2009). *Hong Lou Meng*. Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Publishing House.
- Feng, Q. Y. (2004). *Commenting on A dream of red mansions*. Beijing: Tuanjie Publishing House.
- Lin, R. S. (2014). *About Moment in Peking*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Lin, Y. T. (2005). *Preface to Moment in Peking*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press.
- Lin, Y. T. (2014). *Moment in Peking*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Liu, G. L. (2010). Yi Shi Yi Meng Shuo Honglou. *Study Times*, No. 009.
- Lu, X. (2005). *The complete works of Lu Xun*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Lu, X. (2012). *A brief history of Chinese fiction*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.

Shen, Y. B. (1998). *Collected criticism of Lin Yutang*. Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House.

Yisu (1963). *Volume 1 of Compilation of classical literature research data—Hong Lou Meng*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Zhou, R. C. (2003). *The red mansion is dazzling red*. Beijing: Writers Publishing House.