

Employment of Theme Props by Pu Songling in *His Liao Zhai Zhi Yi**

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The creative application of “theme props” by Pu Songling in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* achieved significant artistic effects. Classical Chinese fiction has long employed “theme props” to drive plot design, and Pu Songling further advanced this tradition by deepening the narrative through three typical methods: first, imbuing props with symbolic meanings and profound metaphors; second, using props as keys to resolve conflicts; third, employing props as mediums for plot twists and character relationships. Though seemingly minor, these props are closely linked to the core traits of characters, the development of the plot, and the trajectory of fate, resulting in compact story structures and clear narrative focus. This demonstrates Pu Songling’s mastery and innovative development of traditional narrative techniques.

Keywords: Pu Songling, *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, theme props, narrative technique, plot design, symbolic metaphor

Chinese ancient novels have a tradition of using “theme props” in the design of plots. The following are some examples of Chinese traditional fictions that operate plots with “theme props” and achieve outstanding artistic effects. In *Du Shiniang Angrily Sinks Her Treasure—Chest*, the treasure-chest is the “theme prop”. In *Shen Xiaoxia Develops Chu Shi Biao*, *Chu Shi Biao* links the experience of Shen Lian’s family over the past decades closely. In *Gu Ahxiu Gave an Article to the Temple in Charity; Cui Junchen Met His Wife Because of the Lotus Screen Coincidentally*, the lotus screen connects Cui Junchen with his wife surnamed Wang, who are far from each other. It was also related to bandits who kill people and steal goods, and victims waiting for revenge.

As the master of ancient Chinese short novels, Pu Songling employed the techniques of “theme props” with consummate mastery in his *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*.

Using Theme Props as Meaningful Symbolization and Deep Implied Message

The flowers in Yingning’s hands are very important props in this story, just like the flag of command behind

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the marshal on the stage of Peking Opera, and the two canopies (a symbol of rights and status in ancient China) behind the emperor. The flower is a phantom and is also an implied meaning of Yingning. The deep intention of her actions is always expressed with flowers:

When she saw Wang Zifu, she threw the flower on the ground, which was throwing the love token.

She asked Wang: Why do you keep the flower? Since you liked flowers, when you left for home, I'll let the old servant pick a big bunch of flowers for you! She mocked him up according to flowers and grass to let Wang express his love more enthusiastically and frankly.

She had a weakness for flowers because only flowers worth her love in the turbid world;

She punished the evil person under the tree of lilac and made the flower picker picked the thorns.

There was an eye-catching article in the story of *Punishment of a Greedy Official*; it was the concubine's hair. Although it did not go through the whole story, it played an important role. The grand coordinator of Hunan Province sent an assistant grand coordinator to escort 600,000 taels of silver to the capital city but the silver was lost in an old temple. A blind man told the assistant: "You will know what happened if you follow me". The assistant followed him and walked in a tall gate; there was a man with the traditional garb of the Han Chinese, not bothering to introduce himself and lead him arrives at the front of another high pavilion after seeing the pavilions. Then the assistant climbed up:

He suddenly found several pieces of human skin hanging on the wall, and the facial features on their face were full of smell. He was so creepy that he quickly retreated and returned to his own house. He thought: it seems that this time I have to leave my skin in this foreign land, there is no hope of survival. Realizing that death would be his ultimate fate no matter what he was going to do, he became resigned.

The next day, the man in Han dress came to ask him to leave and said: "You'll meet the ruler today." The assistant answered that he was ready for the meeting. The man got on a horse and rode very fast, followed by the assistant on foot. After a while, they reached a huge gate, such as one might find at the home of a governor. Many guards stood on both sides and the atmosphere was dignified. They entered a large hail and saw the king sitting facing the south, wearing an embroidered robe and a hat decorated with expensive pearls. The assistant knelt in front of him. The king asked: "Are you the official from Hunan who carried silver?" The assistant answered yes. The king said: "All the silver is here. It would be good of your boss to offer me the silver, although small in amount." The assistant cried and said: "The time that the grand coordinator gives me to find his silver has expired. I must be executed when I go back. How can I explain to the grand coordinator that the silver is here?" The king said: "That is not a big deal." He gave the assistant a large box and said: "Please give this to the grand coordinator and you will be safe." (*Punishment of a Greedy Official*)

The grand coordinator forced the assistant to look for silver and threatened to "punish him according to law" if he could not find the silver. He had the assistant bound "in an uproar and not letting him argue" after listening to the report firstly. However, when he looked inside the box, his face went pale with fear. He ordered the assistant unbound and said: "Losing the silver is not a big deal and you can go now". What had so much magic? It was the concubine's hair. It turned out that before this whole event took place, the grand coordinator slept with his beloved concubine. When they awoke, he found his concubine had lost all her hair. Inside the box, the coordinator found his concubine's hair. There was also a letter in the box which read:

You started as a small county magistrate, and now you are in such a big official position. You greedily accept bribes, and there is countless stolen money. I have checked the 600,000 taels of silver last time and put them into the warehouse. You should make up the original amount from your own pocket. This matter has nothing to do with the assistant. He should not be punished. I took your concubine's hair last time as a warning. If you don't comply with the order, sooner or later you will behead! Your concubine's hair is attached as proof! (*Punishment of a Greedy Official*)

The hair became the “proof” that operated the situation, accomplished with the denunciation for the avaricious official at the same time!

Using Theme Props as the Key to Solve Contradictions

Huo fell in love with Qing-E, who was beautiful beyond compare in the story of *Fairy Qing-E*. The process of their love was tortuous and complex. A tiny spade more than a foot long had played an important role in their separation and reunion. In a word: Huo came across Qing-E, the daughter of Assessor Wu, and fell in love with her. A Taoist priest happened to send him a tiny spade and said, it may be small but “it can penetrate solid rock”. The Taoist “took the spade and hacked at a stone in the wall, causing it to crumble like a piece of tofu”. Huo “suddenly realized that he could see the beautiful girl by digging a hole in her wall”, so he dug through layers of walls of Qing-E’s house, and slept by her couch. When Qing-E found him, she asked the women servants and the staff to come. The servants said: “This boy’s reputation and family background certainly would not dishonor you. It’s better to let him go and have him send another matchmaker”. Qing-E seemed to agree with this idea. When Huo left, “He asked to have his spade. Everyone laughed: ‘You little fool! You don’t want to leave the tool of your trade behind, do you?’” So the spade remained with Qing-E.

After experiencing setbacks, they got married. As soon as Qing-E came in, she threw down the spade and said: “Take this burglar’s tool away!” “Don’t forget our go-between”, laughed Huo. He cherished it very much and wore it every day. The spade came back to Huo again.

Assessor Wu, the father of Qing-E, was addicted to practicing a doctrine; he also asked his daughter to go with him together. After getting married for five years, the affection of the couple was good and they gave birth to a son. But Qing-E’s father let her pretend to be dead and confined her to practice a doctrine in the mountains. Huo happened to find the cave dwelling where Qing-E practiced. When he wanted to sleep with her, Assessor Wu said, “Your vulgar carcass is soiling my dwelling! Get away now!” He kept Huo outside. Huo “looked back and saw that there was no crack in the cliff. He was alone and didn’t know where to go”. Therefore, he had to take the spade out:

Huo was very angry, so he took out the small spade from his waist and worked hard to dig the stone wall. While digging, he scolded. In an instant, he was three or four feet deep. He faintly heard someone in the stone wall said: “What an evil person!” Huo dug more urgently. Suddenly, the two doors at the bottom of the cave opened and Qing-E was pushed out with a word “Go away!”, then the wall closed again. Qing-E complained: “since you love me as your wife, how can you treat your father-in-law like this? Who is the old Taoist who gave you this burglar’s tool so that you could pester me to death?” (*Fairy Qing-E*)

The small spade was not only a matchmaker for the hero and the heroine but also an imperial sword to defeat Assessor Wu, who was like “a monk named Fahai” (to describe someone who breaks up couples). It served as the lever of the construction and maintained the happiness of love between the hero and heroine as well.

Bai Yuyu is an odd and tortuous story about the emotion of separation and reunion around a scholar, a nymph, and a mortal girl. A god bracelet played a significant role in it. The plots are probably as follows:

Wu Qing’an was engaged to the daughter of a *taishi* (court historian) by the name of Ge.

One day, he dreamed that a *xiucai* named Bai Yuyu invited him to play in the heavenly palace. Wu slept with a maid in a purple dress and had a great time, and the maid gave him a gold bracelet as a keepsake.

When he awoke, “he straightened his clothes and felt something on the bed, it was the gold bracelet”. One

year later, the maid in purple sent him a baby, who was named Mengxian. Then Wu married Miss Ge; he left home and was not back two years later. Mengxian passed the examination and was admitted to the Imperial Academy at the age of 15. He looked for his father on his mother's orders. But he was ambushed by bandits on the way and was saved by a Taoist. The Taoist sent him a gold bracelet. Mengxian's mother told him: This belonged to your first mother. This showed the Taoist he met was his father.

After a year, a big fire occurred in the capital city and the fire was approaching the houses of Wu. The situation was very critical; suddenly a miracle appeared:

A year later, a fire broke out in the capital city. The fire continued for the whole day. The whole city dared not to go to sleep. Mengxian's family gathered in the courtyard and watched. The fire was spreading gradually and was approaching the houses of their neighbors. There was nothing they could do. All of a sudden, the gold bracelet on Mengxian's wife's wrist creaked and flew to the sky, expanding and covering the whole house roundly. The opening of the bracelet pointed toward the southwest. Everyone was shocked. In a moment, the fire came from the west and burned to the bracelet, then turned to the east. When the fire was far away and people thought the bracelet would not come back, suddenly the red light converged and the bracelet fell under the feet of Mengxian's wife. The city fire burned tens of thousands of houses. Seeing around, only Wu's house is safe. Only a small pavilion in the southeast corner was burned, and that was in the direction of the opening in the halo. (*Bai Yuyu*)

We can see the importance of the beautifully crafted bracelet with exquisite patterns in this story.

First, it was the love token of Wu Qing'an and the maid in the purple of heaven palace. It was also the connection of dream and reality

Second, after Wu leaving home, it represented him and brought the emotion of affection and appreciation to his wife, whose childhood name was Lin. It turned to the justice that the "Taoist" Wu did not forget human feelings.

Third, it became a Dharma Protector that kept the lives and property of Mrs. Ge and the whole family of Mengxian. When their neighbors all lost their homes in flames, only a small building in the southwestern corner of Wu was burnt, and that was in the direction of the opening in the halo. Not only that, because Mrs. Ge looked after Mengxian, who was sent by the maid, she also got immortality, "When Mengxian's mother turned fifty, people found she still looked like a woman in her twenties".

A small bracelet acted as a go-between and weaved into the dense structure network. It had a deep metaphorical meaning, which was placed with the continuous deep feeling between the couple, as well as a father and a son. It had great magic, which protected the lives safety and family possessions of the dutiful son and the virtuous woman.

Whether the flowers in Yingning's hand or the concubine's hair that was used by the king to frighten the grand coordinator; no matter the small spade sent by the Taoist to Huo or the gold bracelet gave by the maid in the purple to Wu Qing'an... On the surface, all of them seem like insignificant props, but if we think carefully we will find that:

They were closely linked with the personality dominant aspect of characters in stories;

They were connected with the development trend of the whole story;

They were intimately associated with the fate of the characters and the end of the story.

The role that these props play in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* is as same as the peach blossom fan painted by the blood of Li Xiangjun, the heroine in the story of *The Peach Blossom Fan*. It is a very interesting literature phenomenon that both Kong Shangren and Pu Songling lived in the reign of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty (1662-1723),

and they were scholarly writers of Shandong Province. They adopted the same conception without prior consultation when writing dramas and novels.

Using Theme Props as the Media of Plot Change and the Connecting Point Between Characters

The stories should be brief and turn wonderfully. We will yield twice the result with half the effort by the media of little props. In *Peng Haiqiu*, Peng Haogu met Juannniang in his dream. The immortal *Peng Haiqiu* made a three-year contract for them and gave her the silk scarf of Peng Haogu; the two people did not even know where the other side came from. Three years later, they met in Yangzhou. The first meeting seemed familiar, and the silk scarf was still here. In *A Red Scarf*, if Chen Bijiao did not pick up the red scarf of the princess, he will not write a poem on it. There was no way to get a crime, let alone to be the emperor's son-in-law. The red scarf was really Chen's reference.

The Crow Couple is a beautiful love story between a human and a bird. Is it strange that a human falls in love with a bird? The author lets the hero turn into a bird after putting on black clothes; then the bird clothes become a meeting point of the change between a human and a bird.

At the beginning of the story, the hero named Yu Ke got a suit of black clothes in a temple. After putting on the clothes, he turned into a crow. He and a female crow named Zhuqing "loved each other very much". Because Yu Ke "always accepted whatever food he was given without any suspicion" and was shot by the breast with a slingshot, then he "died that same day" and returned to his human form. When Yu Ke came and prayed in front of the temple again, he gave a great deal of food to his crow friends. To his surprise, "a bird landed on the ground in front of him, he had a look and found it had already turned into a beautiful lady in her early twenties". It turned out that she was Zhuqing, who had become a fairy in the Hanshui River (a tributary of the Yangtze River). They enjoyed a passionate moment like a separation of a couple for a long time. Afterward, Yu Ke followed Zhuqing to the south of Hanyang, Hubei Province, and returned home two months later. Zhuqing took out the black jacket and said: "When you missed me, just put on this jacket and then you will be able to come here. When you arrive, I'll take it off for you". After returning home, he missed Zhuqing, "he secretly put on the black jacket and two wings grew out from both sides of his body. He flew into the sky and reached Hanshui River within two hours". He flew to some buildings, and then Zhuqing came out and ordered the others to untie the ribbons on his black jacket. Yu Ke felt all the feathers fall off his body and he changed into a human. Zhuqing just had given birth to a baby, and Yu Ke, whose wife was infertile, had a son... The plots of the story turned from time to time and the author wrote with random transformation by using the jacket, which was like a pearl, circled first to the left and then to the right, searched for subtlety and creates mystery. How magical it is.

The design of *Zhicheng* also had its own originality. The essay began with the story of "water spirit borrowed the boat", which was diverse from the model that "somebody and what his personality was like" often adopted by other authors. This story was about an adventure of a scholar surnamed Liu, and the identity of "a king with a crown on his head" had become an ingenious description of the plots' composition. To begin with, the king was furious for Liu taking liberties with a maid, but then he was convinced by Liu's eloquence about Liu Yi who was called Dongting monarch. At last, the king appreciated Liu's talent and sent him a crystal boundary ruler used to free him from death. What's more, the king decided to marry the maid with purple socks named Zhicheng to Liu. It turned out "the king" was exactly Dongting monarch himself! In the separations and reunions of Liu

and Zhicheng, the writer created new styles to use “theme props” frequently. They were green socks and purple shoes → boundary ruler → boundary ruler → green socks and purple shoes:

Firstly, Liu heard “the king” of Dongting Lake called “Zhicheng” on the boat; he did not see her face but only her beautiful feet, for he was lying on the boat. “The maid wore green socks and purple shoes, her feet were as thin as fingers”; it seemed that the fairy must obey the regulation on foot-binding among the ordinary people unexpectedly. Liu was dissolute and he “griped her socks with his teeth”.

Secondly, because he bit the maid and was like a rogue drunk, the king of Dongting Lake would punish him. But Liu defended himself eloquently, the king appreciated Liu’s talent and gave him a boundary ruler to escape from death when sinking. Liu did not drown in the water damage because the ruler as expected.

Thirdly, after coming back to Wuchang (an area in Hubei Province), there was an old woman surnamed Cui who sold a charming and romantic girl, but she would not sell and even was given a thousand taels of silver. However, she would send the girl free to someone who had the crystal boundary ruler. So Liu took out the ruler; the old lady sent the pretty girl over by ship as expected.

At last, Liu ran to the boat in a hurry, for he was afraid the old lady swindled the ruler away without sending him the girl. But to his surprise, the girl sent by Cui was Zhicheng, who wore green socks and purple shoes on the boat of Dongting Lake:

Liu was very worried and dared not to believe it. He hurried to run to the boat, the girl and a servant had been there really. They greeted him with a smile. He was astonished because the girl wore green socks and purple shoes as same as the former maid on the boat, so he gazed at her hesitantly. The girl said with a smile: “How covetous you are, haven’t we seen before?” After hearing that, he simply bent down to spy and saw the indentation was still there. Then he said in astonishment: “Are you Zhicheng?” The girl covered her mouth and kept smiling. Liu bowed and said: “If you are a real fairy, please tell me earlier so as to clarify my confusion and worries.” Then the girl said: “To be honest, the person you met last time was the king of Dongting Lake. He admired your talent and wanted to send me to you. Because I am the maid that the princess likes very much, so the king had to go back and discuss it with her. Now I came here is by the order of the princess.” (Zhicheng)

The green socks and purple shoes not only act as the witnesses of the separation and union of two people but also the mark of recognition. After all, those things do not have magic strength to operate the destiny of people, so the boundary ruler appeared and substituted them to accomplish that.

In a word, the skillful application of “theme props” in *Liao Zhai* had made the stories concentrative and pithy, which could hold as much life as possible with such a short story. This method also made the principle line of the plots bright, and make the conception distinctive and not stereotyped.

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