

A Comparative Analysis of Bai Xianyong's Garden Tour, Startling Dream, and Tang Xianzu's The Peony Pavilion

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Abstract:

Bai Xianyong confessed that the creation of *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream* is inseparable from *The Peony Pavilion*. However, very few scholars have compared and contrasted the two. Therefore, this paper tries to compare and analyze the two from the perspectives of narrative and theme. The purpose is to explore the success of *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream* in becoming a modern presentation of the play *The Peony Pavilion*. From the narrative level, *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream* has similarities and differences with *The Peony Pavilion*. Moreover, Bai modernizes its creative techniques by incorporating stream-of-consciousness techniques. From the level of theme, Bai Xianyong explains the theme that life is like a dream in the modern context. Bai also pursues the loss and pursuit of the decline of Kunqu at a deeper level. This paper explores the creative mechanism of *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream*, and the intrinsic connection between the two, to fill the gaps in the corresponding fields.

Keywords: *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream*, *The Peony Pavilion*, Life is like a dream, Kunqu Opera.

1. Introduction

Garden Tour, *Startling Dream* is a representative piece in Bai Xianyong's book *The Taipei People*. Previous researchers have already studied its creative techniques and thematic presentation in great detail, not to mention *The Peony Pavilion* which is one of the "Four Great Traditional Theatre Plays". However, few scholars have compared and analyzed the two, exploring their intrinsic connections and influences. However, when referring to the conception and form of the novel *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream*, Bai once admitted that *The Peony Pavilion* occupies a decisive

position. *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream* complements *The Peony Pavilion* in terms of the novel's theme, plot, characters, and atmosphere [1]. Therefore, there is an inevitable connection between *Garden Tour*, *Startling Dream*, and *The Peony Pavilion*. Looking through the related literature, the researcher believes that *The Peony Pavilion* makes use of the technique of parallel bilinear lines at the narrative level and has the tendency of narrative spatialization [2][3]. On the contrary, researchers pointed out that Bai Xianyong not only chose the two-line structure [4] but also innovatively added the stream-of-consciousness

writing method. Thematically, *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* selectively gives voice to the author himself and the times. Therefore, the author tries to juxtapose *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* with *The Peony Pavilion*. From the similarities and differences of their narrative and thematic perspectives, the author tries to find out the successful fusion of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* under the influence of traditional theatre and modern creative techniques.

The Kunqu *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* is a seed buried in Bai Xianyong's heart. He once mentioned that the motivation for the creation of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* was to express the realm of the Kunqu opera *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* and the legend *The Peony Pavilion* in the form of a novel [5]. From this, it can be seen that Bai Xianyong used the legendary *Peony Pavilion* as part of his creative inspiration. With modern stream-of-consciousness techniques, he created the novel *Garden Tour; Startling Dream*. As Tang Xianzu said, "A dream becomes a dream because of love, and a play becomes a play because of a dream" [6]. The dream of *Peony Pavilion* and the dream of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* are in the same lineage. *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* is not only a dream of life, but also a deep search for the future of Kunqu.

2. The Juxtaposition of Two Lines of Narrative Structure

2.1 The Parallel Two-Line Structure of the Peony Pavilion

Two-line narratives are favored by writers for their intertwined and mutually reinforcing artistry and have long been commonplace in modern and contemporary literature. Tracing back to his roots, Tang Xianzu pioneered the use of dual narratives in the creation of operas. As a result, the popular *Peony Pavilion* was born.

The two-line art of *The Peony Pavilion* is manifested in the parallel interweaving of the love line dominated by Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei and the political line dominated by Du Bao. Unlike the compactness of the single-line chain structure of traditional theatre, the narrative rhythm of the two-line narrative structure will be greatly slowed down. Not only that, the author's portrayal of the characters will also be more delicate. In the first seven scenes of *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu devotes a great deal of ink to depicting the heroine Du Liniang's boudoir life, portraying Du Liniang's image of being confined by her family and depressed. It lays the groundwork for the subsequent plot of visiting the garden. The eighth play, *Persuading the Farmer*, on the other hand, is the first time that the political thread officially surfaces. The calm feudal family life has twists and turns. However, Du Bao's

move to go to the countryside to persuade the farmers is a prerequisite for Du Liniang's visit to the garden, which pushes the plot towards the climax of Du Liniang's dream. This is the first obvious plot point where the love line and the political line drive each other. The subsequent three scenes are interspersed in the main love line. In Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's emotional development through the ups and downs at the same time, Du Bao dominated the political line is also quietly advancing. It is not until the thirty-seventh performance that the main plot of the entire text is replaced by a political thread, formally presenting the political context in which the story takes place to the audience. However, the dual threads of *The Peony Pavilion* are more inclined to parallel narratives, and there is a lack of key points of connection between the love thread and the political thread. The emotional line between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei is not significantly connected to Du Bao's official politics, and Du Liniang's death due to love does not influence Du Bao's choices in his political career. Because of this, the love line and the political line are opposed to each other. Though interspersed with light and dark, the two threads run parallel.

2.2 The Intertwined Dual-Thread Structure of Garden Tour, Startling Dream

On the other hand, *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* also has two narrative threads: one is the reality thread that starts from Mrs Qian's point of view and unfolds according to the chronological development of the story in *Dou Gong Pavilion*. The other is the recollection thread that follows the flow of Mrs Qian's thoughts and is interspersed in the reality thread. To put it simply, both *Garden Tour; Startling Dream*, and *The Peony Pavilion* can be called a two-line structure. However, the two lines in *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* are more closely connected. Ouyang Zi believes that the author has made extensive use of the technique of "parallelism" to create the impression of "rehashing old events" or "recreating the past" [7]. In other words, through the technique of "parallelism", Bai Xianyong corresponds the reality with the characters and scenery in his memories. Through this way, he achieves the purpose of interweaving the two threads. From the perspective of the characters, the use of the "parallel" technique is most notable in the correspondence between Mrs Qian and Mrs Dou. Mrs Qian, who was once a star-studded lady, is similar to the overjoyed mistress of the Dou residence. Not to mention the similarity of sisterly love, and the same valiant general's men, even in the arrangement of the minor characters are also very fine restoration. From the perspective of the set, Madame Dou's lavish banquet coincides with Madame Qian's birthday banquet ten years ago, with the same crowds and the same splen-

dor. The similarity between the characters and the scenes makes Mrs Qian constantly reminisce, and the threads of reminiscence are constantly intertwined with the threads of reality. Mrs Qian is both revisiting her old garden and startling a boatload of dreams.

2.3 Comparison

The two threads of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* are designed to construct a beautiful dream, so in the first half of the text, the reality thread is the main thread. When the song “*Garden Tour; Startling Dream*” starts, Mrs. Qian’s dream penetrates quietly, the memories and the reality are no longer separated from each other. The structural setting of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* is similar to that of *The Peony Pavilion*. The difference is that the political line of *The Peony Pavilion* is more independent than the memory line of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream*. The political line is Tang Xianzu’s “subconscious deviation of his creative concept under the strong gravitational force of political ideals while constructing his concept of ‘love’ [2]. It is the expression of Tang Xianzu’s political ideals in his literary works and thus presents a different theme from the love line. Therefore, it presents a different theme from the love line. On the other hand, both the reality line and the memory line in *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* serve the same theme. The use of the technique of “parallelism” cleverly makes up for the fragmentation of the plot structure of *The Peony Pavilion*, which makes the whole text tend to be more as a whole.

3. Narrative Space and Narrative Perspective

3.1 Narrative Space

Comparing *Garden Tour; Startling Dream*, and *The Peony Pavilion* again from the narrative point of view, each of them has its characteristics and originality. The distinctive feature of *The Peony Pavilion* from the narrative point of view is its obvious tendency to spatialise the narrative. The presentation of space is divided into two categories, including the real space of the boudoir, the garden, and the society, and the surreal space of dreams, the underworld, and the psyche [3]. The so-called real space is the space where the real story takes place in the text. To a certain extent, it is also the micro presentation of the author’s reality. The boudoir, as Du Liniang’s main living space, is an important place for portraying the image of Du Liniang as an official lady at the beginning of the work. However, Du Liniang, the owner of the boudoir, does not have the freedom of body and mind when she is in it. The exhortation of female virtue and the restriction of traveling

imprisoned her. The garden space naturally came out to be the space for Du Liniang to get rid of the constraints, which is also the beginning of “the most affectionate” in *The Peony Pavilion*. The social space appears more as a twist in the plot, making the relationship between the two conform to the structure of rise and fall. The surreal space, on the other hand, originates from Tang Xianzu’s wild imagination, which turns the “supreme love” of the living to death and the dead to life from impossible to possible. The dream space is the outburst of Du Liniang’s repressed emotions and a sign of her awakening of female consciousness. Du Liniang meets her lover in the dream world, but the image of Liu Mengmei is not projected in reality. Not only that, Du Liniang’s and Liu Mengmei’s dreams are mutual. Even though they differ in time, they overlap in content. This is all a surreal manifestation of the dream space. Similarly, the underworld space is an expression of romanticism. It is because this emotion transcends life and death that the so-called “the most affectionate” can be interpreted. The psychological space can be regarded as the inner monologue of the characters. The author enriches the characters’ image through the inner portrayal, and the characters can also express their feelings most realistically and straightforwardly. Through the transformation of different spaces, Tang Xianzu “made the storyline of *The Peony Pavilion* intense and jumpy, the characters full and heavy, and the theme of the poem sublimated and prominent”, which is of high artistry [3].

3.2 Narrative Perspective

The uniqueness of *Garden Tour; Startling Dream* in terms of narrative lies in the author’s design of narrative perspectives. The progression of the three narrative perspectives is very natural. The novel opens with a third-person account of the many characters and events, which is interspersed with a first-person account of the main character, Mrs Qian. This gives the reader an overall grasp of the background of the story. At the same time, it renders the atmosphere of things different from what they are from Mrs Qian’s point of view and sets the emotional tone of the whole text. As the plot develops, the narrative perspective naturally transitions to Mrs. Qian’s point of view, and Mrs Qian’s touch touches the banquet in Nanjing ten years ago. Although it is not a revisit, there is a vague feeling of the past that lingers in the heart. The contrast between the present and the past further sets off Mrs Qian’s despondency today. Finally, Bai cleverly uses the technique of stream-of-consciousness to completely change the perspective of Mrs Qian’s thoughts, bringing the plot to a climax. Mrs. Qian’s consciousness flows along with the rhythm and melody of Kunqu “*The Garden Tour*”. It also flows past the birch tree where Lantianyu and Zheng

Yanqing had sex, and pasts the bed where General Qian lay before he died. In the middle of the recollections, the names of the songs and the lyrics of *The Peony Pavilion* are constantly interspersed. The fluidity of consciousness and the fluidity of the music are cleverly matched. Both of the two ultimately fuse the threads of reality and recollections into a perfect fusion. It can be said that *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* takes *Peony Pavilion* as a thread running through the whole text, which in turn drives the weaving of the dream. Memories rise and fall with the lyrics, weaving a dream of life for Mrs Qian. In short, Bai Xianyong is quite ingenious in his design of the narrative perspective, from third person to first person, and finally using the stream of consciousness technique. That is, the process is essentially a shift from the objective to Mrs. Qian's individual vision, and finally deeper into the character's consciousness. Incorporating the poetic beauty of Kunqu, *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* successfully blends Chinese aesthetics with Western techniques to express the philosophical theme that life is like a dream.

4. Theme: Life Is A Dream

4.1 The Presentation of Life as A Dream in the Peony Pavilion

Tang Xianzu once said that he had written "Four Dreams" in his life, and the work he was most proud of was *The Peony Pavilion* [8]. Dream is a very important image in *The Peony Pavilion*. Du Liniang, an official young lady who was kept in a deep bosom, dreamed of love because of her visit to the garden. She fell in love with the scholar Liu Mengmei in her dream, but woke up and died of her love. The dream is a visualization of Du Liniang's inner desire. It is the strong emotional instinct that enables Du Liniang to meet Liu Mengmei, another person in the world whom she has never met. Not only that, the dream is the beginning of their love. If not for the two identical dreams, how could the two renew their relationship after Du Liniang's death? Only under the power of surreality, Du Liniang can break free from the shackles of her feudal family. She pursues love, even breaks the class gap, and eventually ends up with Liu Mengmei. Therefore, the dream is the presentation of Du Liniang's own self, which is likewise Du Liniang's new life. But from another perspective, the most important moments in Du Liniang's life are realized in the dream. In other words, the dream is a kind of continuation of Du Liniang's life. Therefore, the author believes that the theme of life as a dream is also expressed in *The Peony Pavilion*, but this theme is more positive. Tang Xianzu affirms the pursuit of lust with the help of dreams and puts dreams in the same important po-

sition as reality.

4.2 The Presentation of Life as A Dream in Garden Tour, Startling Dream

In *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*, life as a dream is presented as the most important theme. The whole text is intertwined with memories and reality, illusory and real. That is to say that through the ups and downs of life, it expresses a sense of the impermanence of the world [9]. It gives people a strong sense of illusion, just like an intermittent dream. The Kunqu "*A Dream of Awakening*" strings together the life of Mrs. Qian, giving her endless glory and wealth and the favor of General Qian. However, when the song "Touring the Garden" ends, "*A Dream of Awakening*" takes the stage. Whose dream is awakened? Is it the dream of Du Liniang, who is in love with her lover Liu, or is it the dream of Madame Qian, who is having a birthday banquet in her Nanjing residence? Unfortunately, Du Liniang woke up from her dream and was martyred. However, in the end, she was still reunited with her beloved. And Mrs Qian is now left all alone. Perhaps the name of Madame Qian, Lantianyu, implies the tragic colors of "Jinse" [10]. When the glory and wealth of the past and the oaths and promises made in the past are all gone, the boundary between memories and reality will be blurred. The Dream is the dream of Mrs Qian, but it is also the dream of all the people in Dou Gongfu Hall. In the course of the drinking, the past is shattered, and the people have a great deal of power in the past. Therefore, the Kunqu in *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* exists as a symbol of the glorious past. The decline of Kunqu is also a sign of the decline of the Dou Gong Hall. Through the rise and fall of the world, Kunqu is still sung in the theatre of Dou Gongguan. Also, the theatre is nothing but a dream of life.

4.3 Comparison

Juxtapose *The Peony Pavilion* and *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*: "Life is like a dream" is only a small side of the theme of *The Peony Pavilion*, which is viewed by Tang Xianzu with a positive attitude. With the help of the dream, Tang affirms the part of human nature that is erotic, and praises the pursuit of love. Whereas, *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* takes "life is like a dream" as a real theme. The theme expresses the feelings for the rise and fall of personnel and the change of the world. It also presents the present state of affairs of the Kunqu Opera which is declining, to cause the readers to think about the future of the Kunqu. It also presents the declining status of Kunqu and causes the readers to think about the future of Kunqu.

4.4 The Social Causes of the Changing Nature of Topics

The common choice of the imagery of “dream” between the two is a manifestation of the same lineage under social change. The imagery of “dream” can be traced back to Chuang Tzu in the pre-Qin period. It is vertically also associated with Freud. However, both Zhuang Zhou’s dream of the butterfly and Freud’s dream can be said to be “alternative satisfaction of repressed wishes” [11]. In connection with *The Peony Pavilion*, the dream is the outlet of Du Liniang’s inner desire. However, Liu Mengmei is not Du Liniang’s lover in reality. They have never met. Therefore, from Du Liniang’s point of view, Liu Mengmei can be said to be the embodiment of her desires and a character compiled by the dream world to satisfy her potential desires. This is entirely in human nature and instinct. On the other hand, *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* does not strictly choose “dream” as imagery, but Bai Xianyong makes use of the technique of rendering the atmosphere of being in a dream to illustrate the theme that life is like a dream more vividly. On the other hand, the atmosphere of the dream is also echoed in *A Dream of Awakening*, linking the “dreams” of Du Liniang and Madame Qian together. It intensifies the sense of loss in the face of reality when waking up. The “dreams” of *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*, and *The Peony Pavilion* are in the same vein, showing the different demands brought about by social changes. *The Peony Pavilion* puts the resistance against the feudal forces into the dream world. It also uses surreal plots to turn the impossible into the possible, and to inspire people’s hearts. While *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* weaves the dream world with reality and memories. It visualizes the illusory feeling after the change of the world, as well as the deeper sense of loss and searching for the decline of the Kunqu Opera. These are the traces of social changes left on the two works, which also reflect the successful fusion of inheritance and innovation in *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*.

5. Conclusion

This paper probes deeply into the intrinsic connection between *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* and *The Peony Pavilion*, in terms of their creative mechanisms from the perspectives of narrative and theme. From the level of narrative structure, *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* chooses the same two-line structure. However, it distinguishes itself from the parallel two lines of *The Peony Pavilion*, making the two lines intertwine and present. From the level of narrative features, the spatialization of the narrative in *The Peony Pavilion* is quite innovative. *Garden Tour, Startling*

Dream, on the other hand, incorporates stream-of-consciousness writing on the basis of perspective shifting. Because of this, Bai weaves a beautiful dream world. In terms of theme, *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* puts the minor theme of *The Peony Pavilion*, “Life is like a dream”, into the central theme. *Garden Tour, Startling Dream* manifests different thematic demands under the social changes. This paper juxtaposes the novel *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*, and the legend *The Peony Pavilion*, which to a certain extent fills the gap in the corresponding field. However, the research angle is only one-sidedly selected in terms of narrative and theme. It is expected that in the future there will be more opportunities to compare and contrast the two more comprehensively, and to dig deeper into the success of the modernized presentation of *Garden Tour, Startling Dream*.

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