

**Performing the Everyday Life in *Ruined City*: Wife, Mistress, and Housemaid of a
Literary Celebrity**

by

Xiaomeng Cheng
Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2016

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Pacific and Asian Studies

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis presents a study of “performing the everyday life” in the writer Jia Pingwa’s well-known novel *Ruined City* (*Feidu* 废都). By adopting the sociologist Erving Goffman’s idea of dramaturgical interactions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, this thesis contends that the social interactions in *Ruined City* are all performed. I particularly pay attentions to the relationships involving the novel’s central character, the celebrity-writer and one of the four “cultural idlers” in Xijing, which is the ancient capital Xi’an the author lives in real life, Zhuang Zhidie, and the three women in his life—the wife Niu Yueqing, the mistress Tang Wan’er, and the housemaid Liu Yue. Considering Goffman’s idea, I consider Zhuang Zhidie performs various roles when he encounters with each of the women, and they in turn perform the corresponding role to fit in the performance environment Zhuang has regularized with his role and his definitions of situations. In a novel notorious for its graphic descriptions of sex, these relationships are also performed in sexual encounters, and presented with symbolic objects relevant to the characters' roles.

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Introduction

This thesis presents a study of “performing the everyday life” in the writer Jia Pingwa’s well-known novel *Ruined City* (*Feidu* 废都). By adopting the sociologist Erving Goffman’s idea of dramaturgical interactions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, this thesis contends that the social interactions in *Ruined City* are all performed. I particularly pay attention to the relationships involving the novel’s central character Zhuang Zhidie, the celebrity-writer and one of the four “cultural idlers” in Xijing (the ancient capital Xi’an, where the author lives in real life) and the three women in his life—the wife Niu Yueqing, the mistress Tang Wan’er, and the housemaid Liu Yue. Considering of Goffman’s idea, I consider Zhuang Zhidie performs various roles when he encounters each of the women, and they in turn perform the corresponding roles to fit in the performance environment Zhuang has regularized with his role and his definitions of different situations. In a novel notorious for its graphic descriptions of sex, these relationships are also performed in sexual encounters, and presented with symbolic objects relevant to the characters' roles.

Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 is one of the most popular writers in contemporary China; he has published over twenty novels and dozens of short stories and volumes of poetry since 1974. Jia started his career as a writer with a belief in his “commoner status 平民地位” and “folk perspective 民间视角.”¹ He comes from a poor peasant household in a small village, Dihua, Danfeng Country, Shangluo, Shaanxi. Growing up in the countryside gave him not

¹ Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. “Postscript” in *Old Gao Village* 高老庄. Beijing, People’s Literature Publishing House, 2008, pp. 359.

only a tough childhood but also a peasant identity. This identity accompanied Jia from the village in Shangluo to the ancient capital Xi'an. Moving to Xi'an to study literature at Northwest University in 1971, Jia became aware of a different standpoint to observe the world: "walking from the mountain to the city, getting to know how big the heaven and earth are, expanded my vision as a peasant."² That standpoint integrated with twenty years of life experiences as a writer in Xi'an, during which time he gradually evolved into a new city-dweller identity. His city identity combined with his peasant identity to create the writer Jia Pingwa whom we see and read from his works. Most of Jia's works are based on his life experiences as both a city-dweller and peasant; as he says, "what could I write about? For a long time, the countryside of Shangzhou and the urban and rural areas of Xi'an were the basis of my writing."³ The complexity of his identity makes Jia Pingwa interpret the world through two different discourses: from mountains and fields in Shangzhou, and from the money and desire in Xi'an. In either case, Jia puts most of his attention into presenting people's everyday experiences with characters such as Jin Gou in *Turbulence* as a countryside boy, whose everyday life represents the Chinese people's history of struggles during the early stage of reform and opening-up, or Liu Gaoxing in *Happy Dreams*, whose life story as a trash picker in Xi'an represents the everyday struggles of all rural laborers who search for a "better life" in the city.⁴ Jia's concerns with everyday

² Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. "Me amongst Rocks, Moon, and Beauty 山石, 明月, 和美中的我." *Zhongshan Literature Bi-Monthly*, vol. 5, 1983.

³ Jia, 2008, pp. 359.

⁴ Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Fuzao 浮躁*. Beijing, The Writers Publishing House, 2009. Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Fuzao*. Translated by Howard Goldblatt as *Turbulence*, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 1991. Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Gaoxing 高兴*. Beijing, Writers Publishing House, 2007. Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Gaoxing 高兴*. Translated by Nicky Harman as *Happy Dreams*, Seattle, AmazonCrossing, 2017.

life turn into stories that address everyday interactions between people in a more dramatic and melodramatic way.

Feidu, translated by Howard Goldblatt as *Ruined City*, is Jia's first novel based on a modern metropolitan lifestyle in Xi'an, illustrating Jia's acceptance of the duality of his identities and his understanding of everyday life of people in the big city.⁵ *Feidu* is his best-known and most controversial novel. First published in 1993, it was banned after one year. It was defined by the "anti-pornography office" as an "obscene book", written by the "rogue writer" Jia Pingwa. Critics called it "a pornography in contemporary China, which is clearly imitative of *The Golden Lotus*."⁶ They argued that the sexual depiction was no more than a market strategy as in other literature sold at the sidewalk stalls (*Ditan Wenxue* 地摊文学) to attract people's attention.⁷ Despite all this, the book was a 'best-seller' when it came out. Over a million copies were sold before *Feidu* was banned, and it continued to be consumed in an unauthorized version in private and semi-private book distribution channels.⁸ Supporters claimed that the book was a revolutionary piece "for the promotion of national potency."⁹ In 2009, the ban was finally lifted on this controversial novel. The book and the sophisticated background story got a chance to arouse the public's interests

⁵ Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Feidu* 废都 Beijing, Beijing Publishing House, 1993; Jia Pingwa 贾平凹. *Feidu* 废都. Translated by Howard Goldblatt as *Ruined City*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2015.

⁶ Liu Kehuan 刘克环. "Contemporary Pornographic Book, A Plagiarized Work 当代淫书, 仿袭之作." *Xie Zuo* 写作 2, vol. 21, 1994. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=3&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=XIZO199402009&db name=CJFD9495&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 兰陵笑笑生. *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅. Edited and translated by David Roy as *The Plum in the Golden Vases*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

⁷ Zha Jianying 查建英. "Yellow Peril." *TriQuarterly*, vol.93, 1995, triquarterly.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/about-triquarterly.

⁸ Xie Youshun 谢有顺. "Jia Pingwa talks about *Feidu* seventeen years later 贾平凹十七年后谈《废都》." *Wenhui Newspaper*, 30 July, 2009, book.people.com.cn/GB/69362/9750347.html

⁹ Wang Yiyan, *Narrating China: Jia Pingwa and his fictional world*. New York, Routledge, 2006. *University of Victoria Library*, voyager.library.uvic.ca/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=1789251.

again. However, the old scene of a buying spree was not easy to reproduce. China is now a very different market.

Still, it is very hard to give an acceptable place for *Feidu* in contemporary Chinese literature history. Because it was banned a few months after its first publication and the ban has only been lifted for eight years, there was a fifteen-year gap during which most readers could not access it by normal means. Some illicit copies even filled in those blank blocks with specific sexual descriptions that the author Jia deliberately adds in order to replace sexual descriptions. However, *Feidu* can be seen as demarcating when Jia became a popular writer. Before *Feidu*, Jia was characterized as an important contributor to “root-searching literature” (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学), and his writings in this early stage was interpreted as “literary nativism,” represented by the serial of *Shangzhou* that was rooted in the soil and the people he grew up with.¹⁰ *Feidu* broke the writing style and concerns that Jia has pursued for many years, especially the sexual content that he learned and wrote after watching pornographic movies. This caused widespread public concerns about his title as a “serious” writer, which in fact destroyed his reputation and led to attacks on him whenever a new book came out.¹¹ However, this book still signified that Jia had begun to re-examine his writing and try out different narratives in his story. In addition, the publication of *Feidu* also represents the difficulties he dealt with during that period. As Jia mentioned in the postscript, he spent a year in the hospital with hepatitis. Later, his sister moved back to his mother’s house because of the death of his brother-in-law. He then was

¹⁰ Wang, 2016, pp. 10-15. By literary nativism, she indicates “both the belief and the practice that literary writing should focus on constructing the native place and that the narrative style should continue and develop ‘indigenous’ narrative traditions.” It roots in local and tradition, cares about subjects who lives in such context.

¹¹ Ibid, 48.

locked in a series of lawsuits and scandals.¹² Moreover, for readers overseas, translation of Jia Pingwa's works is rare in comparison with other contemporary Chinese writers. At present, only six among his more than twenty works—*Turbulences*, *The Heavenly Hound*, *Happy Dreams*, *The Lantern Bearer*, *The Earthen Gate* and *Ruined City*—have been translated and published in English.¹³

Feidu is a story revolving around a famous local writer Zhuang Zhidie 庄之蝶, who lives in the fictional city of Xijing, which represents the ancient capital Xi'an. As one of four well-known "cultural idlers" (intellectual-celebrities), Zhuang Zhidie reaps the benefits from this social status as both a celebrity and writer. He earns popularity, admiration, even affection from this title. It mainly presents through Zhuang Zhidie's relationships with others, including the other three "intellectual" celebrity idlers, plus party officers, admirers, and women who are desperate to gain his attentions. Zhuang's story starts with an article written by an ambitious migrant named Zhou Min 周敏, who escaped to the city with his girlfriend Tang Wan'er 唐宛儿. Zhou's story was published in *Xijing Magazine*, the publishing house where Zhuang used to work, which helped Zhou use his name to get in and work there. Called "The Story of Zhuang Zhidie," this "best-selling" article tells the story of Zhuang's first crush on Jing Xueyin 景雪荫, a woman who used to work with Zhuang, but who has now become one of the middle-level cadres in the Bureau of Culture of Xijing. Based on gossip and rumors he heard from Zhuang's close friend Meng Yunfang 孟云房, Zhou wrote the story and published it without Zhuang's consent. Being described

¹² Jia, 1993, 520.

¹³ Mei Jia. "Growing interests in Jia Pingwa's works." *China Daily*, 25 May 2018. *Newspaper Source*, u.osu.edu/mclc/2018/05/26/growing-interest-in-jia-pingwas-works/.

as a woman who seduced Zhuang then abandoned him for a “better choice” irritates Jing, and she takes both Zhuang and Zhou to court. This lawsuit starts at the very beginning of his story and leads to his tragic death at the end. Zhuang is dragged into the mire of consequences that the lawsuit brought out. Trying to save his title and reputation, Zhuang sacrifices his dignity and self-respect, and lets himself indulge in sexual gratifications with different women.

Jia spent a great portion of his novel on relationships between Zhuang and different women. There are three major female characters involved with him: the wife Niu Yueqing 牛月清, the mistress Tang Wan'er 唐宛儿, and the maid Liu Yue 柳月. Everyday interactions centred around the protagonist Zhuang are performed in a very dramatic way, especially during his sexual engagements with these women. This creates a stage that allows Zhuang to perform different roles—as husband, lover, man of the house, and, most importantly, the famous intellectual.

This thesis looks at the stage-like quality of everyday life and dramatized sexual engagements between Zhuang and his women to explore and analyze the different roles Zhuang is performing, and how he negotiates with those roles and coordinates these performances with other characters on the stage. However, compared to previous studies of *Feidu*, this thesis will concentrate on women characters and explore the life of the protagonist Zhuang Zhidie from those women's life experiences—namely, Niu Yueqing, Tang Wan'er, and Liu Yue. These three women represent respectively different aspects of Zhuang's life as a famous male intellectual. Niu is the wife who devotes her life to Zhuang and family. She represents the family and all responsibilities that came with Zhuang's commitment to this woman. She is the mistress of the house, who has been given rights to

arrange Zhuang's domestic life but does not know how to regulate the housemaid Liu Yue. Tang is one of his admirers who later becomes his only mistress. She is jealous of Niu Yueqing's status as Zhuang's wife, but never act it out. She represents the sentimental part of Zhuang that he never experienced but cherished; she also signifies the love that Zhuang hardly had the courage to admit. Liu is the maid who is forced to have an affair with Zhuang. She shares some similarities with Tang both as women who are striving for their feelings. She represents every other woman who has sexual relationship with Zhuang, including Ah Can, but the one who was most used by Zhuang to express his power and privilege as a male intellectual. The thesis is structured into three chapters based on three types of relationships. Eventually, this thesis hopes to answer these questions: How is Zhuang Zhidie's celebrity-intellectual image reflected in each relationship between himself and these women? How do these women negotiate with Zhuang's social role as a celebrity-intellectual? What are their positions in Zhuang Zhidie's one-man show? What are their realities as reflected in their everyday performances as Zhuang's women?

The theoretical framework is inspired by micro-sociology, which examines how individuals are related and affected by each other and how they influence or are influenced by the society. Erving Goffman's theory on individuals' everyday performance is an important direction of micro-sociology, which aims to examine every detail of face-to-face interaction between individuals. This thesis will make extensive use of the vocabulary and method of social thinkers such as George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Erving Goffman. The protagonist is defined as the performer; the women are different audiences he played for and played with. Other concepts, including setting, personal front-stage, back-stage, and routine, will be individually unpacked and used to analyze each relationship.

If we traced back to ancient times, we could identify love and romance as essential elements in poems and fictions. *Classic of Poetry (Shi Jing 诗经)*, the oldest collection of Chinese poems that Confucius gathered and edited, dated back to the 6th century BCE, contains diverse descriptions about love, even fleshly desire.¹⁴ Wen Yido, Chinese poet and scholar, has discussed the existence of erotic elements in *Shijing* in his *The Notion of Sexuality in the Shijing (Shjing de xingyu guan 诗经的性欲观)*.¹⁵ The authors of the two great fictions *The Golden Lotus (Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅)* and *The Carnal Prayer Mat (Rou Pu Tuan 肉蒲团)* also spilled much ink on love and desire between characters.¹⁶ They proved that love and the body were acceptable topics for literature and the public during the Ming dynasty. Moving to the Qing dynasty, novels with love themes, especially “scholar and beauty romances” (cai zi jia ren 才子佳人), were gradually accepted by the greater public. Lots of great fictional novels were written and published during that period, such as *Ping Shan Leng Yan 平山冷燕* (1658), which is believed to be one of the most influential scholar-beauty romance fictions, and *The Fortunate Union (Haoqiu Zhuan 好逑传, 1624)*, which gives the scholar-beauty romance pattern more possibilities by adding the chivalric element into the scholar (caizi).¹⁷ Love and desire, no doubt, had become one

¹⁴ Paul Rakita Goldin. *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, pp. 1-14.

¹⁵ Zhong Xiaohua 钟晓华. “Wen Yiduo’s Researches on *The Book of Odes* Influenced With the Earlier Interpretation of Love Poems In *Book of Odes* 闻一多《诗经》研究对《诗经》中情诗读法的研究.” *Journal of Yunmeng 云梦学刊*, vol. 02, 2009. Cnki: b.38zhuobao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=3&CurRec=20&recid=&filename=YMXK200902024&dbname=CJFD2009&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

¹⁶ Lanling, 2015. Li Yu 李渔. *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, translated by Patrick Hanan, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

¹⁷ Qiu Jiangning 邱江宁. *Study of Scholar and Beauty Romance 才子佳人小说研究--从陌生化角度探讨其兴盛衰落的原因*. 2004. Fudan University 复旦大学, PhD thesis. Cnki, b.38zhuobao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=4&CurRec=5&recid=&filename=2004135198.nh&dbname=CDFD9908&dbcode=CDFD&yx=&pr=&URLID=. Richard C. Hessney. “Beyond Beauty and Talent:

part of the mainstream form in the late Qing period. The scholar-beauty genre occupied the main place; nevertheless, in some of those great fictions, the traditional beauties who came from well-off families transformed into famous prostitutes in brothels. Lu Xun categorized this type of fiction as “novels about prostitution” (xiaxie xiaoshuo 狭邪小说).¹⁸ Novels like *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* (*hai shang hua lie zhuan* 海上花列传) and *Precious Mirror that Ranks Flowers* (*Pinhua Baojian* 品花宝鉴, 1849) are representatives of this trend. Both works explore the relationship between licentious desire and romantic love. To achieve this, the “beauties” (*jiaren*) are no longer talented women from good families; instead, they are prostitutes in brothels dallied by different men. *Precious Mirror that Ranks Flowers* is particularly notable, as it breaks the heterosexual norms of the scholar-beauty romance genre and explores love in the context of prostitution and same-sex relationships during the late Qing dynasty.

After the May Fourth movement (1915-1921), the idea of love (qing 情) was changed by reformed discourses on love. Women’s liberation endowed both men and women—but especially women—with rights to pursuit “freedom of love”, a love not understood by traditional moral discourses.¹⁹ Freedom and romantic love had somehow become the tool for Chinese writers to enlighten people and fight against the restrictions of traditional moral codes. This is mostly represented through contradictions between family requirements and personal pursuits, such as in Ba Jin’s *Home* (*Jia* 家) and Ding Ling’s *Miss Sophia’s Diary*

The Moral and Chivalric Self in *The Fortunate Union*.” *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, edited by Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, 214-250.

¹⁸ Chloe Starr. *Red-light Novels of the Late Qing*. Leiden and Boston, BRILL, 2007.

¹⁹ Haiyan Lee. *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950*. Stanford University Press, 2006.

(*Shafei Nüshi Riji* 莎菲女士日记). When love joined with the mission of saving the nation, a new formula of love plus revolution was created.²⁰ The love history of the female protagonist Lin Daojing in Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun Zhi Ge* 青春之歌) is also the history of how she took the road of revolution. Love still held an important place in Chinese people's hearts as an essential part of human relationships. However, attitudes changed under the leadership of Chairman Mao in 1949. Not only sexual desire but all types of individual desire were interpreted as "bourgeois indulgence."²¹ While the strict surveillance that the Chinese Community Party (CCP) imposed on people seemed to ease after Deng Xiaoping's Open-Door Policy, the slow pace of change still frustrated individuals who desired the right to express passionate feelings toward other people. *Feidu* came out like a heavy downpour, broke the silence with unusually strong and graphic expressions of love and desire, which, in any case, gave Chinese people a chance to look at their desire and the dilemmas they faced in terms of modernization and urbanization.

Frank descriptions of various sex acts in the book give readers a chance to examine their inner feelings about sex and the body. They also remind Chinese society to pay more attention to the "muzzled" Chinese intellectuals. On the one hand, those blunt sentences force the intellectual community to rethink their sense of purpose. The 1990s was a very special and difficult period for Chinese intellectuals, who had just made a successful return to public life after ten years of suffering during the Cultural Revolution. Displaying themselves as the representative of the masses, Chinese intellectuals again stood at the

²⁰ Liu Jianmei. *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press, 2003.

²¹ Elaine Jeffreys. "Talking Sex and Sexuality in China," in *Sex and Sexuality in China*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys. London and New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 1-20.

centre as the public's voice.²² The trend of sharing the wounds and traumas of the Cultural Revolutions brought to the intellectual community became the mainstream of Chinese literature during the early 1990s. The power of creating meanings and formulating ideas has been taken back to the intellectual community. Along with the Open-Door reform in 1978, the idea of individual freedom and political liberalization began to take places in various public discussions. The concern of liberty gradually evolved into the central topic for Chinese intellectual community, which quickly turned into a democracy movement of intellectual calling for political reform that finally broke out into demonstrations. The protest that led by intellectual group quickly spread to major cities and continued for nearly six weeks, until June 4th demonstrators met a government crackdown on Tiananmen Square.²³ The Tiananmen event symbolizes Chinese intellectual community's political rights that traditionally accompanied them as being good servants of the emperor have been constrained. The power of giving meanings for symbols has been redefined and limited into a smaller space. They suddenly lost the social status granted by the CCP and the people, as well as their monopoly over public representation and discourse. In addition, beginning in the 1990s, Chinese society was washed over by the waves of marketization and consumerization. People's desire for better material conditions exceed their concerns on other aspects of life. Intellectuals lost their old audiences. Overwhelmed by this feeling of loss, Chinese intellectuals began to suffer from an attack of aphasia. They became blind, deaf, and even marginalized. Faced with this difficult situation, writer Jia portrayed Zhuang

²² Zha Jianying 查建英. *1980s: Interviews 八十年代: 访谈录*. Beijing, Joint Publishing 北京: 生活·读书·新知三联书店, 2007, pp. 7.

²³ Zhao Dingxin. *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2001.

Zhidie as a representative of Chinese intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century. In the book, Jia expanded Zhuang's struggles through interactions between different people to display the absurd and mundane aspects of intellectuals' life experiences. Jia used an individual expression style of language to tell Chinese society an erotic story, to present his concerns and worries about the survival of the Chinese intellectual group.

In fact, Jia Pingwa is not the first male writer breaking the taboo against mentioning sexual relations in his book. In his best-selling novel, *Half of Man is Woman* 男人的一半是女人, contemporary Chinese male writer Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 also portrays a young male intellectual character Zhang Yonglin 章永璘, his life story as a victim of Cultural Revolution, who spent the first half of his life in the labour camp as a political prisoner.²⁴ Zhang Yonglin's experiences of physical suffering and political oppression is narrated in the first-person account, which defines this story in the name of male existence that only embraces the protagonist Zhang's perspectives of perceiving and telling life. Especially, when it comes to the subject of sexual relations with women, Zhang's male narrative displays its "natural" superiority, by closely relating his sentimental world with his bodily experiences as a man. He is "half a man" because of his sexual impotence that caused by political oppression, later turns back into a "full man" from being a hero, his transformations are all initiated with his grip on power. There is no space for women characters to share his power, who are mere evidences to prove how complete the man is. Zhang Xianliang portrays a depressed male intellectual character who shares similarities with Zhuang Zhidie in the way of connecting power with sexual desire. Interestingly,

²⁴ Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮. *Half of Man is Woman* 男人的一半是女人. Beijing, The Writers Publishing House, 2000.

sexual desire seems to become an outlet for men to express emotional distress from losing power.²⁵

In addition, the May Fourth Movement brought more attention to women as an essential part of human society. In traditional Chinese culture, men held the supremacy, and were given license to dominate women in every way. Women lived at the bottom of society, and were destined to be kept in bondage by men and be their role as breeding machines for them. Under Confucianism, strict regulations suppressed Chinese women and their natural abilities. As one of the most powerful communities in traditional Chinese society, Chinese intellectuals owned the power to interpret Confucianism in any way they desired. The gender discourse they created imprisoned Chinese women within intellectuals' or men's immediate needs and fundamental concerns. Especially when it comes to contemporary Chinese society, like the one *Feidu* portrayed, women's image in Chinese intellectuals' view is still only about how they function to feed, care, serve, and protect the men.

Most Chinese and English studies of *Feidu* have focused on Zhuang Zhidie's identity as an intellectual, and how this identity makes him struggle between power and benefit—how he is restricted from the negotiation between tradition and modernity.²⁶ Only a few scholars developed works related to love and desire in *Feidu*. Zha Jianying published an

²⁵ See details in Zhou Kefen. *Unspoken Desire: Zhang Xianliang's Autobiographical Trilogy and The Contemporary Chinese Intellectual*. 2010. University of Victoria, MA Thesis. *UVicSpace*, hdl.handle.net/1828/2216.

²⁶ For example, Fei Bingxun 费秉勋. *On Jia Pingwa 贾平凹论*. Taipei: Shuiniu Chubanshe, 1992; Zheng Mingfang. *The Tragic Vision in Jia Pingwa's Four Novels of the 1990s*. 2004. University of British Columbia, PhD dissertation. <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0091890>; Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明. "Native, Culture, and Art of Castration: Discussions on Jia Pingwa from *Ruined City* to *Qinqiang* 本土、文化与阉割美学——评从《废都》到《秦腔》的贾平凹." *Contemporary Writers Review 当代作家评论*, vol.03, 2006. *Cnki*, doi: 10.16551/j.cnki.1002-1809.2006.03.002; Wang Yao 王尧. "Re-interpretation of *Feidu* and Discussion of the Intellectuals in 1990s 重评《废都》兼论九十年代知识分子." *Contemporary Writers Review 当代作家评论*, vol. 3, 2006, pp. 18-26. *Cnki*, doi: 10.16551/j.cnki.1002-1809.2006.03.003.

article, “*Yellow Peril*,” that mainly discusses the situation *Feidu* faced after the official ban and the writer’s interview with Jia Pingwa.²⁷ Yiyang Wang wrote her doctoral dissertation on Jia Pingwa as a controversial writer, focusing on his unusual way of narrating contemporary Chinese society. There are three chapters in Wang’s study that discuss *Feidu*, namely, “Cultural Landscaping,” “The Sexual Dissident,” and “Female Domesticity.” In the latter two chapters, Wang concentrates on the relationships between Zhuang and women. She organizes her analysis around the idea of “soft masculinity.” It is an idea that contrasts with the Western image of “tough guys with muscles;” it is a Chinese image of the gentle and frail-looking talented scholar (*wen rou shu sheng* 文弱书生), that Zhuang displays all the time. Because she focuses on the narratives and the protagonist, Wang puts less attention on exploring those women characters, especially their everyday interactions with Zhuang.²⁸

In this thesis, I will examine the protagonist Zhuang Zhidie’s performances when interacting with different women. I will focus on the roles each of these three women performed and represented during everyday interactions and sexual engagements with Zhuang. I contend that the discussions of the writer, story, and characters will support my further study of the relationship between women and the protagonist Zhuang Zhidie. Narrowing my focus on women characters, I hope this thesis will provide readers a different insight to understand the story of *Feidu* and to interpret not only from the standpoint of the protagonist Zhuang Zhidie as an intellectual but also as a man who lacks self-awareness regarding his attitude toward women. I will examine the following

²⁷ Zha, 1995.

²⁸ Wang, 2006.

questions: How does Zhuang perform different roles within different relationships? How does Zhuang recognize different roles he has to play? How does Zhuang recognize different women's roles in the relationship? How does Niu Yueqing perform her role as a wife? How does Tang Wan'er define her performances when she plays the "true love"? How does Liu Yue negotiate with Zhuang to achieve her personal transformation? In addressing these questions during the research process, I will be able to gather information and evidences to resolve my primary concern of the book: what realities of women are reflected in their performances of various social roles?

Theoretical Rationale

Interpreting fiction within a microsociology-orientated framework is not new. The origin of this method can be traced back to the discussion of the correlation between language and knowledge—that is, the sociology of knowledge or social constructionism. It is a discussion of human thought in various social contexts and how people in those contexts generated and then sustained the ideas they thought up.²⁹ However, the sociology of knowledge, because of the diverse modes each scholar has adapted, can be distinguished into different schools—namely, symbolic interactionism, which includes the dramaturgical mode Goffman produced; the labelling theory, put forward by Howard Becker; and the phenomenological school, such as in the work of Alfred Schutz.³⁰ Those schools, though

²⁹ Robert N. St. Clair. "Language and the Social Construction of Reality," *Language Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1982, pp. 221-236. *ScienceDirect*, [doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001\(82\)80006-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001(82)80006-5).

³⁰ Howard Becker came up with the idea of labeling, which refers to the process by which social majorities impose a negative label on "deviant" smaller groups, who act out of social expectations and cultural norms that the majorities have approved. See details in Becker's famous work *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1973). Alfred Schütz, as the founder of phenomenological sociology, expressed his concerns of "lifeworld," the common-sense people acquire and express in everyday life. For him, people get used to applying those common-sense, or typifications, to interpret the context in somehow meaningful way. Schütz calls upon an idea of "stock of knowledge" to help people understand how they engage in a social

concerned with diverse aspects of societal life, all come back to the essential level and bring the foci to how people make their lives meaningful by expressing and sharing their emotions through words. These gradually evolve into concerns about the relationship between language and meaning. According to symbolic interactionism, mostly formulated by Mead and Goffman, words are traced even back to symbols that give meanings and become tellings. Fictions or stories are made up of symbols that are meaningful when someone (in this context, the authors) organizes those symbols in a special way and make them become words to represent his or her way of interpreting social and historical context and expressing thoughts about society and human life.

In this discussion of human thought, scholars have approached the works of great writers such as Shakespeare and Henry James from this perspective.³¹ For instance, Maya Wakana applies Goffman's understanding of stigma and spoiled identity in interpreting Henry James's famous work *The Wings of the Dove*.³² Concentrating on Milly, Densher, and Kate's survival, Wakana comes out with a concept of "felt stigmatization." This is a premonitory or warning feeling that comes to individuals before actual stigmatization happens, signaling individuals to avoid situations that might hurt them. The idea of "felt stigmatization" gives readers a new way to look closely at the three characters' urgent need to save face, and as a result, to understand how emotional survival affects their attitudes

interaction, negotiate with the social situation, and make their responses reasonable and understandable. See details in Schütz's work *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. London, Heinemann, 1972.

³¹ For example, Marga Munkelt. "Performance and Life Analogies in Shakespeare Novels for Young Readers." *Critical Survey*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 33-48. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42751018. Maya Higashi Wakana. *Performing the Everyday in Henry James's Late Novels*. Burlington, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009. Alexander Gelley. "Character and Person: On the presentation of self in some Eighteenth-Century novels." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1980, pp. 109-127. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41467213.

³²Wakana, 2009.

and actions towards others. What Wakana has used is one of Goffman's insights into human interaction. As an important branch of microsociology, Erving Goffman's interpreting of everyday base interaction and dramaturgical approach have been used by symbolic interactionists to study role-playing and the act.³³ Goffman's sociological thinking offers a chance to read characters' consciousness within the everyday interaction: characters adapt to their different social roles, negotiate and respond to the moral imperatives of conflicts between the micro and the macro social orders, and consequently modify themselves in "performance" as popular actors and actresses. Individuals recognize each role they played on the stage as masks that they wear, or as their own true selves. There are some important concepts in Goffman's theory that need to be highlighted; namely, performance, setting, front and back stage, and routine.

Goffman compares an individual's face-to-face interactions to an actor's life on and off stage. The concept of performance is central to his study. It is based on the fundamental function of communication, give and take. Individuals set communications based on their definitions of the situation; however, in order to make those communications effective for their goal, which is to be accepted by their counterparts, they have to give the "perfect" explanation of who they are and what they are doing right now. For Goffman, the way of making effective explanations is making it "theatrical and contextual."³⁴ He also contends that social expectations affect individuals' understandings of situations, which "inform them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the 'is'."³⁵ Therefore, performance gives communications a broader meaning. It contains every action that an individual made

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, Anchor Books, 1959, pp. 3-4.

³⁵ Ibid, 13.

during a negotiation, considering the implicit or explicit existence of what is socially appropriate, by which he means “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.”³⁶ In this sense, performance can be interpreted as an individual constantly putting on various masks tagged with different names. The only way to make those masks look normal is to perform in accordance with the instructions that come with each mask.

After making clear the meaning of “performance”, the rest of the concepts become readily comprehensible. The concept of setting refers to objects on the stage when a performance is conducting. It represents all décor, physical layout, and other theatrical background items that help audiences gain a better understanding of information the whole performance hoping to deliver.³⁷ “Front stage”—specifically, personal front stage—denotes appearance and manner.³⁸ Appearance works as a sensor to help identify the performer’s social and ritual statuses. Manner refers to those stimuli that warn us of the performer’s role in the outcome. People highlight the positive image of themselves when communicating with others. They display great images that are desired by the public, just like actors on the stage.³⁹ Meanwhile, there is a back-stage individual who could drop her or his “role” and live in real life. Back-stage refers to the “no man’s land” where performers take off their masks and reveal their true selves.⁴⁰ There are social and moral requirements that are locked to different social roles. Actresses’ and actors’ performances have to

³⁶ Ibid, 15.

³⁷ Ibid, 23-24.

³⁸ Ibid, 22-30.

³⁹ Ibid, 34-50.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 111-140.

conform to the norms and standards each role carries, which gradually evolve into the “pre-established pattern of action” or “routine.”⁴¹

By applying these concepts, researchers can analyze a character’s routine performance in front of different audiences to identify her/his impression of the management process and then demonstrate how this character recognizes her/his role. Goffman’s stage theory and dramaturgical approach help me to rethink Zhuang’s role as a famous writer and the other roles he routinely played. In addition, there is a very interesting coincidence between Goffman’s dramaturgical thinking with the basic idea of constructing the story of *Feidu*, which is an exploration between fantasy and reality, as well as conscious and subconscious thinking. One of most outstanding points is how Jia named these characters in *Feidu*. For instance, the male protagonist Zhuang Zhidie’s name refers to the famous story “Zhuang Zi Dreams of a Butterfly,” in which the philosopher Zhuang Zi dreams of becoming a butterfly, but upon awakening, wonders whether he is a man who dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed it was a man.⁴² Associating the central figure with Zhuang Zi and the butterfly story serves to highlight the concerns that Jia wanted to express through the story of *Feidu*. A writer falls into a dream of being at the centre of the city and waking up with nothing left. Whether writer, husband, lover, or master, those masks he wore make him have different dreams and guide him to make decisions in accordance with the conscience that belongs to each mask; he is left wondering if he performs his roles, or if his roles perform him. That is Goffman’s discovery of fantasy and reality, also the story

⁴¹ Ibid, 16.

⁴² Chuang-tzu. *Chuang-tzu: The seven inner chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzu*. Translated by Angus Charles Graham. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981, pp. 61.

of *Feidu's* interests in exploring the border between the self-consciousness and social context.

Guided by this theoretical framework, I will apply textual analysis the character Zhuang Zhidie and his relationships with three women. The texts of their everyday interactions will be selectively addressed, creating a map of the character's desire to rule the interactions and dominate his and these three women's subjectivities and allowing us to follow the clues of the intellectual celebrity's mask. By introducing the sociological viewpoint to approaching *Feidu*, I intend to give viewers a new perspective to look closely at Zhuang and think about what kind of performer he is.

Literature Review

To understand Jia Pingwa's *Feidu*, it is necessary to read what critics have written about the author and this work. Although various scholars have produced works about Jia Pingwa and *Feidu*, most were written in Chinese with only a few in English.

Chinese-language works discuss the major events surrounding the book itself—namely, its banning in 1994 and the lifting of the ban in 2009. When the book first came out, reviewers praised *Feidu* as erotic fiction authentically depicting Chinese people's inner struggle with the contradictions of modernity and morality.⁴³ Others thought Jia's book was “clothed” in the cloak of “serious literature,” but told the same story as pornographic magazines.⁴⁴ For instance, Wu Liang argues that *Feidu* is an outdated fiction of old words

⁴³ See Sun Jianxi 孙见喜, *The Uncanny Genius Jia Pingwa 鬼才贾平凹*. Xi'an, Xi'an Publishing House 西安, 西安出版社, 1993; Wang Xinming 王新民, *Colourful Jia Pingwa 多色的贾平凹*. Xi'an, Shaanxi Publishing House 西安, 陕西人民出版社, 1993.

⁴⁴ For example, Yin Changlong 尹昌龙, “Kitsch and Self-entertaining—Discussions on *Ruined City* 媚俗而且自娱——谈《废都》.” *Who has been ruined in Ruined City 废都废谁*. Edited by Xiao Xialin 肖夏林. Beijing, Xueyuan Publishing House 北京, 学苑出版社, 1993, pp. 241-242.

and antiquated gossip, generated from a rural intellectual's "personal interests."⁴⁵ Wu points out that Jia's depiction of sex only involves the most superficial part in male-female interaction, without referring to any of the profound issues that Chinese people have to face. Sexual relationships in the book represent a philosophy found in a closed environment by a peasant writer of old times—a philosophy which, although idealistic, signifies the author's bias opposed to modern cultural and social morals.⁴⁶ Critics like Wu questioned Jia's intentions in describing the sexual relationships, asking whether they are only a marketing gimmick to boost an otherwise lacklustre story, or if they reflect the writer's desire for purity and humanity in intimate relationships. These critics believed that Jia did not understand the metropolitan lifestyle, and, consequently, his unique writing style disappeared in this book.⁴⁷ For my work, the opinions of both sides are crucial, because they reflect the public's and intellectuals' positive and negative first impressions and ongoing emotional/rational experience. However, I need to evaluate both critical positions carefully, because some critics were not objective in their assessment of Jia and *Feidu*. At the time of the book's publication, fierce debate dominated reviews, while the official ban in 1994 seemed to settle the discussion.

⁴⁵ Wu Liang 吴亮, "Towns, Scholars, and Conventional Novels: on Jia Pingwa's *Ruined City* 城镇、文人和旧小说——关于贾平凹的《废都》.", *Literature and Art Forum* 文艺争鸣, vol. 6, 1993, pp. 69-70. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=3&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=WYZM199306013&dbname=CJFD9093&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

⁴⁶ See Yi Yi 易毅, "*Ruined City: The Emperor's New Suit* 《废都》: 皇帝的新衣." *Literature and Art Forum* 文艺争鸣, vol. 10, 1993, pp. 47-49. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFQ&dbname=CJFD9093&filename=WYZM199305009&v=MDI2MTZyV00xRnJDVVJMS2ZZT1p1RmlqbFZyN05NalRSWTdLeEY5TE1xbzIYllSOGVYMUx1eFITN0RoMVQzcVQ=; Zhuang Fa 张法, "*Ruined City: Different Flavors of Success and Failure* 《废都》多滋味的成败." *Literature and Art Forum* 文艺争鸣, vol. 5, 1993, pp.50-52. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=70&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=WYZM199305010&dbname=CJFD9093&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

⁴⁷ Li Jiefei 李洁非, "Failure in *Ruined City* 《废都》的失败." *Contemporary Writers Review* 当代作家评论, vol.6, 1993, pp. 29-35. *Cnki*, doi: 10.16551/j.cnki.1002-1809.1993.06.004.

After 1994, studies of *Feidu* tended to avoid the topic of sex and began to concentrate instead on the protagonist's role as an intellectual. Wang Yao explored the relationship between modernity and intellectuals' self-identity in the 1980s.⁴⁸ For him, *Feidu* lets us access the intellectual's inner spiritual nature from a very different perspective. Jia captured the characteristics of 1980s Chinese society and created Zhuang to represent the intellectuals absorbed in morbid fantasies.⁴⁹ Studies after the book was banned focused on Zhuang's and Jia's roles as intellectuals, tracing their relationship to the reality of Zhuang's pain from conflicts between power and truth. The work of scholars provides a rich context for this thesis; it enriches my understanding of the protagonist's self-definition as an intellectual and the numbness he felt from both elite discourse and popular culture in the context of conflicts and transformation in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The fourteen-year ban ended in 2009, and readers can now buy *Feidu* in every bookstore. Current reviews of *Feidu* present a more diverse picture. Scholars like Wang Hongli interpret the text from a Daoist perspective;⁵⁰ others, like Guo Binru, compare the book with classic novels to determine whether *Feidu* is borrowing from a classical narrative style.⁵¹ Indeed, looking at the character setting, the plot, the sexual content, and even the writing context, Jia Pingwa's *Feidu* presents a similar picture with these classic works, especially *The Golden Lotus*. Xijing has the four cultural idlers; there are also four big

⁴⁸ Wang, 2006.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wang Hongli 王红莉. "Ruined City: Peripateticism and Salvation 《废都》：逍遥与拯救." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 当代文坛, vol. 4, 2010, pp.96-98. Cnki, doi: 10.19290/j.cnki.51-1076/i.2010.04.026.

⁵¹ Guo Binru 郭冰茹. "Ruined City and Narrative Traditions of Chinese Classic Novel 《废都》与中国古典小说的叙事传统." *Literature and Art Forum* 文艺争鸣, vol. 6, 2014, pp. 122-128. Cnki, b.38zhuobao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=15&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=WYZM201406018&dbname=CJFD2014&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

families in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Shi, Wang, Xue, and Chuan).⁵² Ximeng Qing in *The Golden Lotus* has relationships with five women: his wife, Wu Yueniang, the two concubines Pan Jinlian and Li Ping'er, and the maid Pang Chun Mei. Zhuang Zhidie in *Feidu* has similar relationships with five women characters. Zhuang Zhidie's wife Niu Yueqing is perfectly playing a socially expected wife, who feeds and supports her husband, even though they are not able to have a child. Ximen's wife Yueniang treats her husband in a same way, and wants to have a child eagerly. Zhuang's mistress Tang and Ximen's concubines Pan Jinlian both owns flawless feet that so beautiful that Zhuang and Ximen falls into love at the first sight. The housemaid Liu Yue, her role and even life story shares some similarities with Pang Chunmei in *The Golden Lotus*, who are sexually involved with the master and, at the end, marry to a more powerful man. *Feidu*'s plot builds on Zhou Min's article of Zhuang's relationship with Jing Xueying, which later turns into the lawsuit that drags Zhuang deeply into total defeat. *The Golden Lotus*'s story also leads by a lawsuit between Ximen and the brother of Pan's husband, Wu Song. In addition, similar to authors of these two great classic fictions, Jia uses the straightforward style of line writing to describe every detail in different scene, including the sex.⁵³ The sex in the book is now mentioned with more subtlety than previously. Various scholars have insisted that the sex in *Feidu* is not merely a strategy for attracting readers but an indispensable part of the book. They believe sexual descriptions in the book work as a way for Zhuang, even Jia, to express painful experiences when an intellectual wallowed in the mud of mundanity.⁵⁴

⁵² Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, approximately 1717-1763 and Gao E 高鹗, approximately 1738-1815. *Hong Lou Meng 红楼梦*. Changsha 长沙, Yuelu Press. 2012. Cao Xueqin and Gao E. *Hong Lou Meng: The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Translated by H. Bencraft Joly. Tokyo, Tuttle Pub; North Clarendon, Vt, 2010.

⁵³ Guo, 2014, 123.

⁵⁴ For Example, Xie Youshun 谢有顺. "Narrative Ethics of Jia Pingwa's Fictions 贾平凹小说的叙事伦理." *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 4, 2009, pp. 43-53.

Among all the critiques of *Feidu*, feminist criticism has not been affected by the ban or its lifting. When the book was first released in 1993, feminists were particularly critical of women's status in the book.⁵⁵ They consider women's existence in *Feidu* has been depicted as men, mostly Zhuang Zhidie, his demands of sex. In other words, women's bodies act as carriers for Zhuang's subjectivity rather than for themselves.⁵⁶ For instance, the failure of Zhuang Zhidie's marriage with Niu Yueqing is depicted as a self-inflicted problem that is only caused by Niu's misunderstanding of the husband's real needs of sex, not for continuing their bloodline or performing routine duties but for building an enjoyable sexual relationship. Her bad performance indeed has been depicted as the main reason of Zhuang Zhidie's sexual impotence. For feminists, *Feidu* is a story only about Zhuang Zhidie and his dominant status among women and their subjectivity. The women are tools enabling the protagonist to validate or approve himself.⁵⁷ Intimate interaction is indeed a dialogue

Cnki,

b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=17&CurRec=3&recid=&filename=XJZS200904011&dbname=CJFD2009&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=

⁵⁵ For example, Wu Liang 吴亮. "Ruined City: An Antiquated Work 《废都》——一部陈旧之作." *Theoretical Studies In Literature and Art 文艺理论研究*, vol. 3, 1994, pp. 14. *Cnki*,

b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=28&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=WYLL199401003&dbname=CJFD9495&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=. Su Kui and Guan Chunfang 苏奎 & 关春芳.

"Went Back to the Reconstruction of Male-Centrism: Reread on Jia Pingwa's *Ruined City* 回归男性自身的中心重构——重读贾平凹《废都》." *Masterpieces Review 名作欣赏*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 81-83. *Cnki*,

b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFQ&dbname=CJFD2007&filename=MZXS200702029&v=MjYyMjl0Yk1yWTIiYlISOGVYMUx1eFITN0RoMVQzcVRyV00xRnJDVVJMS2ZZT1p1RmlqZ1VMckpLRGZUZmJHNEg=.

⁵⁶ Gao Shuai 高帅. "Discussions on *Ruined City*: 'Sexual Diagram' and Loss of Women's Subjectivity 无处皈依的女体——谈《废都》'性图文'中女性主体性的迷失." *Anhui Literature 安徽文学*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 283-284. *Cnki*,

b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFQ&dbname=CJFD2010&filename=AHWA201010172&v=MTMzNjVMS2ZZT1p1RmlqZ1Y3clBKQ1hjYjdHNEg5SE5yNDVDWm9SOGVYMUx1eFITN0RoMVQzcVRyV00xRnJDVVI=.

⁵⁷ Wang Lin 王林. *Female Images in Grand Narratives of Chinese Contemporary Literature 中国当代文学宏大叙事中的女性形象书写*. 2007. Sichuan University 四川大学, PhD Dissertation.

b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=20&CurRec=3&recid=&filename=2008017288.nh&dbname=CDFD9908&dbcode=CDFD&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

between bodies that vent the desire for discourse.⁵⁸In addition, feminist criticism also discuss the relationship between various women in *Feidu*, which is believed as the part that displays the writer Jia Pingwa's understanding of women's subjectivity.⁵⁹ Women's perception on the self is bound up with their interpretation of Zhuang's experiences and their mutual understanding on bodily experiences. Both, in fact, are reflected from daily basis interactions between them and the man Zhuang Zhidie.

The book was translated and published in English in 2015 with the title *Ruined City*. Prior to this, *Ruined City/Feidu* was inaccessible to critics who could not read Chinese. The majority of English-language literature focuses on the writer Jia Pingwa himself and the intellectual's role in the book.⁶⁰ To some extent, *Ruined City* is a very important source for Western scholars to understand Jia Pingwa and his special way of telling stories. Those studies that discuss Jia and Zhuang's identity as intellectuals tend to use this identity and discourse as the entry point to interpret Chinese intellectuals' "aphasia" and to propose the reasons causing this "mental disorder."⁶¹ Most scholars are not attracted by the theme of the protagonists' sexual engagement in *Ruined City*, but instead are drawn to the depiction

⁵⁸ Quan Yaning 权雅宁. "Sex and City: Intertextual Writing in *Ruined City* 性与都: 《废都》中的互文书写." *Masterpieces Review 名作欣赏*, vol. 24, 2011, pp. 24-25. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=4&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=MZXS201121011&dbcode=CJFD2011&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

⁵⁹ Jiang Wenqin 蒋文琴. "Under the social gender perspective: a discussion on women's subjectivity in *Feidu* 社会性别角度下对《废都》中女性主体性的反思." *Masterpieces Review 名作欣赏*, vol. 36, 2013, pp. 44-45. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=7&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=MZXS201336018&dbcode=CJFDHIS2&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=

⁶⁰ For example, John E Stowe. *The Peasant Intellectual Jia Pingwa: An Historico-Literary Analysis of His Life and Early Works*. 2003. University of Toronto, PhD Dissertation. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305261414>. Zheng, 2004.

⁶¹ For example, Carlos Rojas. "Flies' Eyes, Mural Remnants, and Jia Pingwa's Perverse Nostalgia." *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol. 14 no. 3, 2006, pp. 749-773. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/208511. Wang Yiyan. "Elegy for Chinese High Culture: *Feidu* as Fictional Enculturation." *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, vol. 27, no. 8, 1995, pp. 165-94.

of society's paradigm shift caused by modernization.⁶² Western critics interpret Zhuang's sexuality as proof that he is part of his social group, as a traditional literati who keeps to the historical and cultural protocols and tries to live with it in modern Chinese society that has been tested by modernization and democracy, and the idea of soft masculinity connects Zhuang with the classical image of the scholar within the scholar-beauty pattern.⁶³

As discussed above, Chinese and Western theorists mostly rely on the protagonist Zhuang's identity as a male intellectual to explore the dilemmas that Chinese intellectuals faced at the end of a particular era. Little research exists discussing the importance of the novel's detailed sexual descriptions, and even fewer studies discuss Zhuang's recognition of the different roles he played in terms of the different women with whom he engaged sexually. Sexual engagements have not been studied as an informative part for understanding the life-experiences of the protagonist Zhuang. Thus, instead of focusing on one side of his life, I suggest that Zhuang is a person who plays different roles in his various social interactions—namely as a husband, lover, master of the house, and writer. In this study's micro-sociological view, Zhuang's everyday interactions through different roles are what Goffman calls performance; everything Zhuang says or does is performed.⁶⁴ In other words, Zhuang is an actor whose everyday life has a stage-like quality; he differentiates between “front-stage” and “back-stage” encounters, performs himself in accordance with the needs of a particular relationship, as well as requirements of the situation and responses from his female audiences. Borrowing Goffman's theories as a tool, I hope this study will deconstruct our previous assumptions about *Feidu* and Zhuang and

⁶² Wang, 2006.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 72.

⁶⁴ Goffman, 1959.

expose the contradictions between modernity and morality that confuse Zhuang and these women.

Organization of Chapters

This thesis will be organized around the three relationships between Zhuang Zhidie and women, as mentioned above, the wife Niu Yueqing, the mistress Tang Wan'er, and the maid Liu Yue. Each chapter will focus on one relationship. I will start with the wife Niu Yueqing in Chapter 1. Her statement of the roles she plays for Zhuang Zhidie, as both mother and wife, will be adopted as the logic that guides this chapter's analysis. Hence, this chapter will reveal what marriage means to both Zhuang and Niu and what efforts they have made to maintain the benefits and avoid the flaws that this marital relationship brings them. The second chapter is devoted to examining the protagonist's relationship with the mistress Tang Wan'er. I will consider the object of Zhuang's desire, which has been reflected in his affinity for Tang and her body. Symbolic elements, including the pear tree and feet, will be the clue that guides the analysis of their relationship. This chapter aims to uncover how both characters get what they need from this relationship. In the final chapter, I will focus on interpreting Zhuang's relationship with the housemaid, Liu Yue, and explore how the "egoist" Liu makes Zhuang realize the wicked side of his role as a famous writer. By looking at each of those relationships between Zhuang and his women, this thesis will be able to explore how his image as a literary celebrity was presented and how his other social characters, including husband, lover, and master of the house, serve his celebrity performance. At the same time, the subordinate positions of the three women characters

Niu, Tang, and Liu in Zhuang's celebrity will be illustrated. Finally, in conclusion, I will summarize the arguments and themes of the thesis.

Chapter 1: Niu Yueqing—as a wife: the tension between the role and the self

As a primary way of building social relationships, marriage provides significant meaning for human society. Marriage, as the bond of the family, concerns the vital interests of millions of households, men and women. From a macro perspective, it can be defined as “an unusually pervasive social institution that confers social status by joining social actors together in sexual and procreative partnership.”⁶⁵ Durkheim understood marriage as similar to all other social institutions that serve “as a protection against anomie for the individual.”⁶⁶ Marriage functions in modern society as a social contract binding two people together for sexual, affectional, economic, reproductive or other purposes. It now carries multiple aims and meanings and cannot be simplified as a “sexual and procreative partnership.” New ideas of marriage have also influenced modern Chinese society. Especially after China’s enacting of the Marriage Law in 1950 and the Open-Door Policy in 1978, modern Chinese society has witnessed a shift in the rules, roles, and expectations of a heterosexual intimate relationship. The new and contemporary marriage system officially admits equality between man and woman; in addition, moral standards, affected by Western ideas, have begun affecting marital sorting and people’s goals in a marital relationship.⁶⁷ However, for a nation that has carried its tradition and moral standard for centuries, modern Chinese marriage also retains some pressure from Confucian values.

⁶⁵ Liz Wilson. “Marriage.” *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, edited by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, vol. 3, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 947-954. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/ps/i.do?p=GURL&sw=w&u=uvictoria&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CCX2896200399&sid=summon&asid=f470f4e4d688f619f8af39e65913251d.

⁶⁶ Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner. “Marriage and the Construction of Reality.” *Diogenes*, vol. 12, no. 46, 1964, pp. 1–24. *SAGE Journals*, doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1177/0392192164

⁶⁷ For details, Jiang Dong. “China’s Latest Marriage Law Amendment and Family Property: Tradition and Modernity.” *Frontiers of Law in China*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2014, pp. 601-616. *HeinOnline*, doi: 10.3868/s050-

Traditionally speaking, marriage is the guarantee of the continuation of the family bloodline, of the provisioning of descendants. In the ancient Chinese context, marriage was written as 昏因 (hun yin), which has gradually evolved into 婚姻. Both characters in the current version have the radical 女, which represents the woman. To some extent, it stands to reason that it emphasizes the importance of a woman in a marital relationship. However, the two actions “marry with” 嫁(jia) and “married to” 娶(qu), which also share the woman radical, are still male-centred. Women are those who were acquired and given the passive position. Marriage is a male-centered performance in traditional Chinese discourse, one that embodies the social facts of a man acquiring a woman, taking her from her home, creating a new home centered around the man. Apart from its linguistic meaning, marriage was defined by *Li*, the book that disciplines rites and formalities, as a ritual that is a “bond of love between two [families of different] surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the services in the ancestral temple, and in its prospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line.”⁶⁸ As the basis of Confucianism, *Li* illustrates the main purpose of traditional marriage and strictly restricts its function from connecting two surnames in service of the family and the emperor, to building a safe ground that protects the lineage connections. Based on those three main characteristics, the definition of the traditional male-female marriage was created, which could be succinctly described as a family-oriented, male-dominant, and reproduction-aimed heterosexual relationship.

003-014-0038-0. And Yang Hu. “Marriage of Matching Doors: Marital sorting on parental background in China.” *Demographic Research*, vol. 35, no. 20, 2016, pp. 557-580. *DOAJ*, doi: [10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.20](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.20).

⁶⁸ “昏礼者，将合二姓之好，上以事宗庙，而下以继后世也。故君子重之。是以昏礼纳采、问名、纳吉、纳征、请期，皆主人筵几于庙，而拜迎于门外，入，揖让而升，听命于庙，所以敬慎、重正昏礼也。” See 礼记·昏义 (Book of Etiquette and Ceremony – Hun Yi), translated by John Steele.

This traditional ethic was challenged after the door that locked the nation from the outside world was forced open during the First Opium War in 1839. The May Fourth Movement in particular aroused suspicions of traditional culture and its influence on Chinese modernization. Because it was the traditional foundation, family ethics was naturally questioned. The idea of marriage freedom was introduced into Chinese society during this period. It promoted the significant correlation between freedom of love and marriage. Love was believed to be the substance of a marriage relationship; marriage instead was only a social construction that formed love into a social fact as currency and political organization.⁶⁹ The idea of marriage liberation advocated by May Fourth Movement inspired Chinese people to favour the role of romantic love in a marital relationship. Although consensual partnerships animated by love became another option after that time, coercive matches were still supported by the old ethical standard and could not be easily swayed. The May Fourth Movement did not achieve the ultimate goal of liberating couples who were dominated by the Confucian marriage framework, because the political and economic structure did not change completely.

It was not until 1950 that the first marriage law of the People's Republic of China was enacted, so that the old marriage system was officially eliminated, and the new socialist marriage law was born.⁷⁰ The new marriage law prohibited arranged, mercenary marriage and polygamy; these three main elements originated from thousands of years of Confucian tradition and still heavily affected Chinese people's way of understanding the world. However, new ideas about marriage and family that were imported from the West during

⁶⁹ Chen Dongyuan 陈东原. *Life Story of Chinese Women 中国妇女生活史*. Beijing, Commercial Press. 1928.

⁷⁰ Jiang, 2014.

the reform era did offer Chinese society the time and space to rethink other possibilities of this intimate relationship with social others. Willingly or not, ambivalence was created, especially for people living in the 1980s. This period holds special significance for contemporary Chinese. Pains and losses derived from the Cultural Revolution retained a huge effect in every aspect of social life, people hoped to find a space to breathe away from extremely harsh political restrictions; they wanted a life with hope for the future. The opening up of China and reform came just at that time; the dramatic economic development that was triggered by the reform and opening up to the world brought changes to the whole society. In the domestic field of marriage and family many new situations and problems appeared. For example, “love” gradually replaced “politics” and “revolution” and became the new keyword of a marital relationship. Married couples began to attach importance to communication and affectional pursuits. Women, as a part of society who are legally equal to men, are no longer satisfied with their social and family status in traditional culture and are beginning to pursue the new way of life. To address new concerns, the first marriage law was revised in 1980. Population control and freedom of marriage, including marriage and divorce, were two main themes of this new national law. The latter theme, in fact, led to the second wave of divorce since the founding of the PRC.⁷¹ Women have become a significant part of social labour; they are encouraged to take part in social activities and social achievements. It is an epoch that represents changes and an age full of contradictions. These contradictions made official ideology and conventional morality lose their overall

⁷¹ Qin Yan and Li Yajuan 秦燕, 李亚娟. “Marriage Law and Family Changes in 1980s 20世纪80年代的婚姻法律与婚姻家庭变迁.” *Contemporary Chinese History Studies 当代中国史研究*, vol. 3, 2003, pp. 8. *Cnki*, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=4&CurRec=2&recid=&filename=DZSY200303014&dbcode=CJFD2003&dbcode=CJFQ&yx=&pr=&URLID=

control of people (though unintentionally).⁷² On the other hand, the contradictions also make the old ideas of the world and family appear again in the public forum.

Our protagonist Zhuang Zhidie lives under those contradictions, as every social individual did in 1980s. However, he has one more identity: as a leading member of the Chinese intellectual group which traditionally possesses the power of language and creating symbolic meanings. Because of his status as the most respected and well-known scholar-like writer in Xijing, one of the famous four “Cultural Idlers” (*wenhua xianren*), his marriage with Niu Yueqing, of course, becomes famous as well.⁷³ Indeed, it makes his private affectional life as public as his writing, to be observed and even criticized by various social others. Public attentions somehow present themselves in a more high-pressure way. To match his fame and status, his marriage with Niu Yueqing also has to be flawless. What image they created as a couple must, at least, meet with social and moral standards, as the “role-model” for every other married couple in Xijing. In other words, their performances as a couple needs to suit, even exceed the social expectations of marriage. The social expectations indicated here introduce both traditional and modern protocols and suggest a system of ready-made typification of marriage based on love and sharing, while remaining family-oriented, male-dominated, and reproduction-aimed. In any aspect, being observed by societal prospects shape this marriage in a very theatrical way, which guides the couple to perform daily activities based on what society wanted to see, forcing them to cooperate as a performance team, as actor and actress, dramatizing aspects that are acceptable and

⁷² For more details see Xu Luo. *Searching for Life's Meaning: Changes and Tensions in the Worldviews of Chinese Youth in the 1980s*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002. HATHITRUST, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015055843778.

⁷³ *Feidu*, 1993, 13. *Ruined City*, 2015, 17.

concealing how their relationship truly is backstage, where audiences cannot see. Because she lives with the title of Zhuang Zhidie's wife, Niu Yueqing has learned all social facts that intimately relate to Zhuang's social status and uses them to guide her everyday interactions with all city inhabitants who already acknowledged her role as "somebody's wife."⁷⁴ Every action she takes can only actualize and mediate the taken-for-granted characteristics of Zhuang's social image. Niu Yueqing's own identity and personality as an individual woman, on the other hand, are concealed and even deconstructed behind the title of "the famous Zhuang Zhidie's wife."

Niu Yueqing is very different from other women in Zhuang's story; she possesses the title of "Zhuang's wife," which the mistress Tang Wan'er and the housemaid Liu Yue can only dream of obtaining. Niu also has a more "perfect" background than Zhuang's other women. She is a Xijing native and comes from a noble family. Her grandfather is the eccentric who helped General Yang Hucheng repel Liu Zhenhua, and her father "...created the Shuangren Fu Water district, distributing fresh water throughout the city by the wagonload."⁷⁵ Her marriage with Zhuang Zhidie looks like a classic romance, a girl of a noble family falling in love with a poor but talented young man and finally marrying him. Although there are no direct descriptions of their past before Zhuang became famous, besides the letter Niu wrote to him at the very end, we can tell that Niu Yueqing is no longer fully occupied with the social role as a daughter; she has left the glories of her family history behind and completely devotes herself to performing the virtuous wife role for Zhuang Zhidie.

⁷⁴ Berger and Kellner, 1964, 3.

⁷⁵ Feidu, 1993, 35. *Ruined City*, 2015, 39.

She takes good care of his daily life; she brews white vinegar herself because Zhuang Zhidie "won't even taste the smoky vinegar they sell on the street."⁷⁶ She fully controls every detail in their domestic life, as meticulously as the shopping list she made for hosting Wang Ximian and other friends, "two catties of pork, one catty of spare ribs, a carp, a tortoise, half a catty of squid..."⁷⁷ In addition, Niu Yueqing knows how to maintain good relationships with Zhuang's friends and admirers; when Zhao Jingwu expresses his fondness for pickled vegetables, she immediately "fetched a plastic bag, filled it with" the pickled cabbage that Zhao Jingwu liked and let him take it home.⁷⁸ What Niu Yueqing performs is irrefutably in conformity with the social expectations of a wife in a hetero-normative tradition. However, as a part of Zhuang's social reality, Niu certainly does not realize her position in her famous husband's show, as Goffman describes, a fixed "sign-equipment" that assembles on his celebrity-writer stage and decorates him as a traditional man of moral integrity.⁷⁹

Considering her title as the famous writer's wife, Niu has even came up with her own "philosophy" to perform the wife role: "being married to someone like him, I have to be both wife and mother."⁸⁰ She interprets her life as "Zhuang Zhidie's wife" not simply as being Zhuang's female partner, the one who loves, shares, and supports him, continues

⁷⁶ Feidu, 1993, 41. *Ruined City*, 2015, 45.

⁷⁷ Feidu, 1993, 80. *Ruined City*, 2015, 85.

⁷⁸ Feidu, 1993, 41. *Ruined City*, 2015, 46.

⁷⁹ Erving Goffman comes up with the term "sign-equipment" in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Pp 22-25). Accordingly, sign-equipment is a part of a performance's setting that can be observed by audiences during a performance. He distinguishes sign-equipment with sign-vehicle, the later term refers to expressive equipment that "intimately identifies with the performer himself...and follows the performer wherever he goes." I define Niu Yueqing who conducts performance with the role of Zhuang's wife as the sign-equipment on Zhuang's front-stage, which is fixed and observable. It accompanies Zhuang's performance and offers him with extra protection, which helps to defines who he is and what performance he will conduct.

⁸⁰ Feidu, 1993, 205. *Ruined City*, 2015, 211.

family bloodline for him, but also the maternal figure for him. A mother takes responsibility for all kinds of domestic work, including making white vinegar and a perfect shopping list for a small get-together, and further, serves his nurturing needs, dresses him, and even manages those threats that might hurt his reputation as a famous writer. Niu Yueqing's statement, in fact, demonstrates the characters she played on Zhuang Zhidie's stage as his wife and mother. It seems that she has fully accepted societal definitions of a "good wife" and disciplined herself even more strictly by taking on responsibilities as a mother. What makes her come up with such statement seems not easy to understand. Niu puts herself in an unusual position, in which she has to be examined by audiences regarding these two different roles that are conflicted in nature. In addition, as mentioned above, Zhuang Zhidie's celebrity-writer role pushed Niu as his wife into an even smaller box that guides her everyday performances as strictly as stage-quality presentations. In other words, Niu Yueqing is dealing with the dual-criteria that derives from social definitions of either mother or wife. Niu's way of conducting everyday life experiences under these dual pressures and overlapping roles will shape and define her until she proactively gives up one or all of them. This way of interpreting her character as a wife within the marriage somehow locks her into a prison built by herself from the minutiae of Zhuang's life.

In spite of her virtues, Niu Yueqing is still not perfect for a man like Zhuang Zhidie. Niu cares for nothing but her husband—not even herself. She pays zero attention to making herself more attractive, rarely wearing high heels and never wearing any makeup.⁸¹ She uses vulgar language and speaks in a sarcastic tone; she shrieks and complains when Zhuang takes bricks he picked up on the street back to their house, calling Zhuang's

⁸¹ *Feidu*, 1993, 40 and 42. *Ruined City*, 2015, 44 and 46.

antique-like bricks “filthy things.”⁸² She is not afraid of showing how she is less educated than her husband. While playing the idiom drinking game with Zhuang's friends during a lunchtime gathering, Niu makes a fantastic exhibition of how she does not fit into Zhuang Zhidie's social circle. They play an “intellectual” style of drinking game—referred to by housemaid Liu as “Idiom Solitaire,”⁸³ in which players take turns reciting idioms, using the ending of the idiom that the previous person gave to come up with a new one. A player who fails to produce an idiom must drink in penalty. In the novel, Zhuang and his friends play for three rounds. As the host and the most ‘knowledgeable’ person, Zhuang gives the first expression and recites a new one in each round. By contrast, Niu is the one who is forced to drink three times. She only can come up with daily expressions for a housewife like her, such as “plain prints” (素花布 *su hua bu*) and “it is good to laugh” (笑了就好 *xiaole jiuhao*).⁸⁴ She never bothers to spend time reading Zhuang's fiction and appreciating his artistic taste, claiming his books “don't draw me in.”⁸⁵ All these characteristics, presented in dramatic contrast to her intellectual celebrity husband, characterize Niu as an extremely plain, even dull, woman who has no education and never bothers to enjoy life or appreciate art. The only thing that makes her look alive is her desire for sex—a desire which also carries burdens of reproduction and is never fulfilled by her famous husband.

Niu does meet the standard of a virtuous wife but does not seem to live up to the traditional scholar-beauty romance pattern. She is neither as beautiful as Tang Wan'er nor as bright as Liu Yue, and these markers of inferiority foreshadow the end of her story. After

⁸² Feidu, 1993, 37. *Ruined City*, 2015, 43.

⁸³ Feidu, 1993, 97. *Ruined City*, 2015, 103.

⁸⁴ Feidu, 1993, 98. *Ruined City*, 2015, 104-105.

⁸⁵ Feidu, 1993, 137. *Ruined City*, 2015, 143.

finding out about Zhuang Zhidie's affair with Tang Wan'er, Niu chooses to forgive the husband and give him a chance to "get everything back on track." In return, she reaps her god-like husband's cruel betrayal. The official end is that Niu packs her bags and moves back to her mother's house. However, at the very end of the novel, Zhuang Zhidie sees a tabloid newspaper called "Strange News from Xijing" in the train station.⁸⁶ One item of news describes a woman's death from using corncobs to masturbate, finally dying with a corncob in her vagina. That woman might be Niu Yueqing, dying from attempting to remedy her sexual desire in an extremely brutal but pressure-free way.

So, this chapter will focus on wife Niu Yueqing's social roles as she describes them, as both wife and mother. To answer the questions "how does Niu come out of this motherly-partner interpretation of her position within the marriage?" and "how does she negotiate the tensions between these two roles?", this chapter will look at how each of her roles functions during the significant events of their marriage, analyzing her interactions with the protagonist Zhuang Zhidie and even the audiences of his show; it will also examine Zhuang and Niu as a married couple navigating both opportunities and threats to achieve the best result for maintaining the biographic realities that they have performed. Further, by discussing Niu's overlapping role-performances, I hope to show in this chapter where Niu's self stands within this famous marital relationship from the micro-sociological point of view, with reference to Mead and Goffman's discussions on individuals' social role and the self, as well as Berger and Kellner's study on marriage and social reality.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Feidu, 1993, 517. *Ruined City*, 2015, 519.

⁸⁷ George Herbert Mead. *Mind, Self, and Society*. University of Chicago Press, 2015; Goffman, 1959; Berger and Kellner, 1964, 1–24.

I see Niu Yueqing's statements of her dual identities as Zhuang's wife and mother as understandable. Marriage, like every other social arrangement, carries its own symbols and accorded meanings. It represents the new birth of a social relationship between two individuals; it also posits a new social reality that co-defines the people involved in this relationship and gives them new (but also taken-for-granted) roles, namely, wife and husband.⁸⁸ Individuals like Niu Yueqing and Zhuang Zhidie create a joint image based on the ongoing everyday conversation between them. Within these discussions, the realities of their marriage relationships will be gradually constructed through exchanging meaningful symbols in daily language that used to belong exclusively to each partner separately.⁸⁹ This is not only about sharing and communication as a married couple, but also about the effacement of the old personal reality, such as Niu's role as a daughter or a friend, rebuilding a new biographic reality in the course of a new marriage partner's demands. Same as Niu, Zhuang Zhidie's identity as a single and talented young man has also been effaced, which means, he now has to play roles as Niu Yueqing's husband and her mother's son-in-law.

However, the enhancement of the old relations and the creation of the new identities does not indicate that being married would empower either side and let him/her dominate the relationship. The process of dismantling and rebuilding, in truth, is a fair exchange based on personal will. Partners have to make "sacrifices" to ensure the partner shares the same socially constructed world with him/her. In Niu and Zhuang's situation, the stories before Zhuang becomes famous are unknown. As a result, the efforts he has made to validate Niu

⁸⁸ Berger and Kellner, 1964, 11-12

⁸⁹ Ibid, 4.

Yueqing's reality when their social connection was just beginning seems to have disappeared as he became more and more famous. What we can tell is that Zhuang was a respected writer complaining that Niu was a boring wife. However, supported by social definitions and expectations of a woman as a wife, Zhuang Zhidie as a man and a husband is "naturally" given the male priority to be the more significant other in the marriage relationship.⁹⁰ Thus, Niu's declaration of her multiple roles derives from the marriage reality with her husband Zhuang that enables her to be continually correlated with Zhuang Zhidie's definition of himself, mainly as the greatest writer of Xijing. In addition, Zhuang's attitudes and his needs become tangible validations for Niu Yueqing to understand whether her attitude and needs are reasonable and valuable. Moreover, although both of Niu's roles as wife and mother are produced in relationship to her husband, they are not all exclusive to him. She is the woman who plays the mother figure for Zhuang Zhidie, but she is his wife for every social other who has a connection with them. It is tantamount to saying that Niu distinguishes her audiences into two separate groups: Zhuang Zhidie and others. Accordingly, segregation between each audience group is the key to fostering a consistent impression and protecting the performer's selves to be displayed only during that performance routine. Goffman calls this "audience segregation," in which "the individual

⁹⁰ The concept of "significant other" probably derives from Mead's concept of the "generalized other." In his famous work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), Mead distinguishes children's socialization process into three stages: play, the game, and the generalized other. In the play stages, children play roles like mother or teacher, imitating their ways of interacting with other social roles. In doing so, children learn to put themselves into other's shoes and develop their understandings of different social roles. In the next game stage, children play games that require them to understand rules and codes that might affect interactions with others. During this stage, children begin to carry their own attitudes towards all others involved in that game. In the "generalized other" stage, children now have generated holistic attitude of the social community in which they live. It is an attitude about all others in the community, including him or herself. Compared to Mead's generalized other, Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953) significant other focuses more on smaller social groups. It is an attitude toward the most important person among all an individual's social relationships. This significant person and his/her attitude may change the individual's attitude toward the society and the self.

ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting."⁹¹ The "selves" suggested here are not multiple selves; one individual possesses various selves. Importantly, as social entities, we develop different selves when dealing with various social relationships; however, all experiences that come from those relationships with social others are based on our fundamental knowledge about ourselves, which accompanies us always, since we begin to learn about the world from the community we grow up in. This fundamental knowledge creates the solitary self, which is then cut into various aspects, hiding behind the various social identities we play. Hence, many aspects of ourselves are "cut" from the solitary one that is derived from the unified social experiences of our original community. In Niu Yueqing's case, her self has developed into two aspects; each of her selves lives behind the interactions with audiences and dialectically interplays to make the facts related to her roles as a wife and mother more effective and operative.

As Zhuang Zhidie's Caring Mother

When we think about what a mother figure looks like, the very first thing that comes to mind might be the view of her in the kitchen making our favorite food or asking us to finish the laundry before she gets home from work. The definition of the mother might have changed somewhat since women became an indispensable part of the labor market. Housework and child rearing are no longer solely women's responsibilities now. However, women continue to do most of it, especially in a country that has a long history of assigning women a full load of domestic work. Women's nurturing and domestic roles did not change

⁹¹ Goffman, 2008, 48-49.

a lot in 1980s Chinese society. Social expectations and societal experiences of the mother role spontaneously shape her position in the family in all ways and mark her behavior with a unified stereotype of devotion and sacrifice. This ultimately defines all women under the title of “mother” and simplifies all women to appear as reproductive vehicles and domestic servants.

Seeing her husband as a child, Niu has been preoccupied with all the responsibilities that a mother figure is assigned. Not displaying the physical beauty and warm femininity of Tang and Liu, Niu presents herself through her loud voice and rude language, complaining of all the "garbage" that her famous husband brings home out of his nostalgia. In a scene where Zhuang elaborates on the history of the brick and its heritage tracing back to the Han dynasty, Niu quips, “well, the flies in the house are from the Tang.”⁹² Her reaction to her husband’s actions seem not in accordance with her virtuous wife image; she expresses her strong dissatisfaction with him even in front of his confidant and audience Zhao Jingwu, who accepts the idol-writer performance that Zhuang Zhidie played *tout court*. That's not what a docile wife would do. In addition, Niu challenges not only his nostalgia and artistic taste, but also his manhood and intellectual superiority. Though his wife’s complaining places Zhuang in an embarrassing position, leaving him with no performance to act out in front of Zhao, Zhuang does not seem very angry with her, even as she crosses the line and threatens the idol-like identity. With “a pained look” that conceals how awkward he feels, Zhuang replies, "that comment is pure art. Your art cells don't catch fire till you're angry." He then asks Zhao to tie the brick onto the back of his scooter.⁹³ His 'counterattack' is

⁹² Feidu, 1993, 37. *Ruined City*, 2015, 43.

⁹³ Feidu, 1993, 37. *Ruined City*, 2015, 41.

expressed in a non-threatening and even submissive way, and his action of putting the brick on his motorcycle also demonstrates his willingness to compromise. Somehow or other, Zhuang behaves more like an obedient child than a dominant husband. His agency as the "master of the house" shows signs of folding under his wife's fury.

This is not the only time Zhuang expresses his total subservience to Niu. Later, during the lunch party that the couple throws for Wang Ximian, the richest of the four cultural idlers, intended to convince him to lend them money to publish a counterfeit novel that they can sell in their bookstore, Zhuang is again scolded by his wife.⁹⁴ Niu first scolds him for his "showing off" to Wang's wife by cleaning a fish in the kitchen, then for acting like "a turtle hiding its head" when he avoids asking for a loan.⁹⁵ Both times Zhuang does not fight back; the second time, in particular, when he is likened to a turtle—a serious humiliation—Zhuang replies with only a smile. Notably, Niu blames Zhuang for both "showing off" and "avoiding," which are two contradictory actions, respectively relating to internal or external action. Here, Niu makes an unequivocal statement of the division of labor each of them needs in this famous marital relationship, which appears to perfectly meet up with the inner-outer (*nei-wai* 内外) standard. The concept of *nei-wai* refers to the spatial opposition and conflict between public and private spheres.⁹⁶ From the opinion of social labor divisions and gender roles, it marks the binary between family and society and

⁹⁴ *Feidu*, 1993, 87-101. *Ruined City*, 2015, 92-103.

⁹⁵ The first scene is on page 87 (*Feidu*, 1993), 92 (*Ruined City*, 2015), the latter one is on page 88 (*Feidu*, 1993), 94 (*Ruined City*, 2015).

⁹⁶ Details from Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee. *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*. State University of New York Press, 2006. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture'. *EBSCOhost*, <http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=159747&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. And Cao Yan. *A Comparative Philosophical Feminist Identity Study of Chinese Women Intellectuals and the Educational Implications*. University of Tennessee, PhD Dissertation, 2008. http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/479

hence emphasizes the distinction between men and women. *Nei* refers to the domestic-related issues that have been assigned “naturally” to women; correspondingly, the concept of *Wai* signifies the public sphere of life, mostly men’s, which could be social or political. In Zhuang and Niu’s circumstance, the traditional *nei-wai* distinction seems to have been re-negotiated, since Zhuang is "showing off" by doing domestic work and silent on external matters, especially regarding money. It appears that the functions of the role of a wife have crossed the domestic sphere and moved into economic-related social activities, especially in the second case, when she "educates" Zhuang and asks Wang's wife for the money herself. The result of this renegotiation, however, fails to bring Niu’s role as a wife into the public dimension and in fact assigns more domestic-related works, or we should say Zhuang-related works, to her. Every performance Niu conducts is always family-oriented, even though she is not "quite sure what she has accomplished" after all.⁹⁷

At the same time, Niu deeply believes in the maternal side of her identity, so that she repeatedly expresses how she performs in a motherly way to take care of Zhuang and everything related to him. The language and symbols that she applied to compare herself unquestionably clarify the self that lives upon the mother-son connection rather than conjugal association with the husband, Zhuang Zhidie. Therefore, for him, she could be a "legless crab, so what else can she do but run around for his sake," or a servant, who is "picking out a dragon robe for an emperor's enthroning ceremony."⁹⁸ In the final analysis, everything goes back to her mother role, taking care of his well-being and preparing food for him.

⁹⁷ Feidu, 1993, 94. *Ruined City*, 2015, 100.

⁹⁸ Feidu, 1993, 223. *Ruined City*, 2015, 230.

Niu Yueqing's motherhood also projects supreme protectiveness over her famous husband. This is consistently present all through Zhuang Zhidie's lawsuit that was spawned by his teenage crush on Jing Xueying. Their love story was haphazardly composed and later published in *Xijing Magazine* in the form of a romance story, or more like gossip, by the outsider Zhou Min. For audiences who never have a chance to access Zhuang's personal life, this secret, irrespective of the genuineness of the information, seems like a game-changer for them. It moves their attention from the only reality that Zhuang performed as an upright writer to his private life where outsiders might never tread, a shift articulated by one character that Zhuang met: "I've read his works in the past but had no idea he's just like us."⁹⁹ Famous Zhuang has become 'civilized' like all other men who are sentimental and hold various earthly desires; he is no longer standing exalted and inscrutable on a high pedestal. Whereas the story is only the 'trailer' of Zhuang's romantic life for the audiences, the lawsuit was the blow that broke apart Zhuang's upright celebrity-intellectual persona.

Notably, when the lawsuit came to his door, Zhuang was not the one who realized the seriousness of the matter and saw it as an incident for his performances; wife Niu Yueqing was. She immediately began her journey of fixing Zhuang's broken reality and managing all possible risks that might cause further damages. Niu was still cooling down from a quarrel with Zhuang when she received the call about the lawsuit. After a short panic, she makes some bold but predictable moves.

Ignoring the cold shoulder, Niu Yueqing told Liu Yue to prepare some noodles, while she went inside to make the beds in each bedroom, wipe down the tables and chairs, spray some perfume, and light some sandalwood incense, making the place clean, bright, and

⁹⁹ Feidu, 1993, 64. *Ruined City*, 2015, 69.

cozy. Then she changed into a soft satin *qipao* and put on some makeup before sitting down beside him. She took out a pack of State Express cigarettes and handed it to him. “What a temper you have. You should have made some sort of noise when we came in, even if Liu Yue and I had been beggars.”¹⁰⁰

What is unexpected here is how calmly Niu performs; even a severe lawsuit could not stop her feeding her husband and cleaning the house. The consciousness belonging to the motherly persona jumps out right away and dominates Niu’s character. In fact, it keeps her performing domestic responsibilities in a moment of crisis, as well as later when the consequences emerge. Her reaction is indeed predictable, as she performed the motherly role all the way along. However, the tone and word choice come out quite unexpectedly, although she compares herself again with another social role, this time as a “beggar.” The meaning of her metaphor is tinged with a subjugated, even pleading emotion, along with her behavior of voluntarily wearing a *qipao*, a body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress, putting on some makeup, and passing Zhuang a cigarette—a vice she has always hated. Niu Yueqing appears to perform a wholly different self in this sense; the characteristics of her front-stage self, including appearances and manners, transmit remarkable information that seems to overrule her previous motherly performances, and turn her performance more toward a docile wife.

Niu’s unexpected actions puzzle Zhuang a great deal and drive him to ask her directly about them. She, does not bother to argue with him as usual and leaves with no explanation, until Zhuang goes through the material of his lawsuit.¹⁰¹ He seems remarkably calm, so he

¹⁰⁰ Feidu, 1993, 271-272. *Ruined City*, 2015, 278-279.

¹⁰¹ Feidu, 1993, 271, 16. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 33-34.

cleans the table with paper from the file of his trial. Noticing that her husband is not falling into panic but behaving sensibly, Niu is relieved and says to Zhuang, “I am glad you are not angry.”¹⁰² She again behaves seemingly in the opposite way to what she has performed to this point. The uncharacteristic performance that she conducts at this moment indeed is not hard to understand, considering her interpretation of the mother-wife character. Indeed, it even suggests the rule by which Niu picks either of her characters, based on her husband’s attitude and his immediate needs. Therefore, in this sense, Zhuang Zhidie is the one who makes the standards and decides the definition of their marriage.¹⁰³

Even though he seems not to give straightforward instructions, Zhuang’s attitude is the cornerstone of Niu’s later behaviors. Niu’s subordinate position in their marriage decides her agency in the whole show; she is Zhuang’s attendant, and now, she is desperately eager to confirm what her bright husband’s attitude is towards this life-threatening jeopardy. Hence, her wifely consciousness and motherhood are expressed in a hybrid way. The husband Zhuang’s attitude at this moment is the reason and condition that determines how she conducts and dramatizes her further performance. According to Zhuang Zhidie’s unflustered reaction to the lawsuit, Niu Yueqing immediately decides what character she needs to take on now, between mother and wife. She believes that she is now playing the wife role: “I am your wife, and I have to bring them up, even if they displease you;” however, her whole analysis somehow is presented in a motherly, loving way.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Feidu, 1993, 272, 23. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 4.

¹⁰³ In Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology (1959, pp. 97-99), he argues that there exists a “like-mindedness” directive role in a team performance. The director, as the one who differs from the others on performance capacity, understands the demand of a particular context of their performance. Thus, the director functions to help other teammates sustain their performance’s purpose and keep their conduct in line. He/she decides the line of performance, reminds teammates who is acting out of character, and brings him/her back into the performance.

¹⁰⁴ Feidu, 1993, 272, 24-25. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 6-7.

The conversation Niu started later is about two people, namely, Jing Xueying and Zhou Min. Zhuang wrote a not-so-clever letter to Jing after Zhou's article was published. Niu sees the letter as "a foolish move."¹⁰⁵ In her view, Jing is a vengeful type, not as "tender-hearted" a person as she is, who would use Zhuang's feelings against him—a prediction which, in fact, comes to pass.¹⁰⁶ Jing copied the letter and sent it to "the provincial and municipal leadership, the Women's Federation, the Standing Committee of the People's Congress, and all the cultural and art organizations." It will also later be used as a court evidence against Zhuang himself.¹⁰⁷ The way Niu enumerates the consequences of the letter is very tactful. Even though she keeps emphasizing her agency in this whole event as his wife, she, in fact, does not mean to put pressure on her husband. Instead, she thoughtfully makes sure Zhuang acknowledges the true intention of this conversation from her standpoint; no matter what happens, she is his tender-hearted wife and will support him at all costs. However, Niu also notifies Zhuang that she is aware of his ignorance of her significance as a partner in his celebrity show.

Then Niu brings out the second person crucial to the lawsuit, Zhou Min. She highlights the essential distinction between Zhou and Zhuang: Zhou is "not [a] reputable character," while Zhuang is a celebrity. Niu makes a very interesting comparison here. She compares Zhuang to a "tall tree" that "catches the wind [but]...also blocks the wind."¹⁰⁸ In contrast, she sees Zhou as "an ant that anyone could easily pinch to death."¹⁰⁹ For her, Zhou's

¹⁰⁵ Feidu, 1993, 272, 25-26. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Feidu, 1993, 273, 1. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Feidu, 1993, 273, 1-4. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 13-16.

¹⁰⁸ Feidu, 1993, 273, 8-9. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 23-24.

¹⁰⁹ Feidu, 1993, 273, 9-10. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 25-26.

troubled history is the best evidence to understand all the rest of his behaviors. She needs to help her husband make a clean break with Zhou so that his agency in the lawsuit becomes clearer. This provides a reasonable explanation of all Niu's unexpected but clear and logical moves. Niu's great desire to protect Zhuang leads her to take a subtler approach. This releases two signals—of her caring for the husband and of her immersing herself in her motherhood role—reminding Zhuang Zhidie of his needs and the responsibilities of his wife and this marriage. Goffman would have called her measures “defensive attributes” that help Zhuang remember his moral obligations to the marital commitment he made, preventing him from “becoming so sympathetically attached to the audience” Zhou Min, and as a result, keeping the solidarity within their mother-son-like relationship.¹¹⁰ Niu's efforts bring notable results, at least in the short run. Zhuang immediately admits his mistake and says to her, “but I won't if you say no.”¹¹¹

Her managing of the process is clearly effective; there are more great performances as a supportive mother that could be cited. For instance, she reminds her self-willed “son” of the lawsuit and his responsibility, updates related information daily with Zhou Min, and forces herself to welcome a group of book lovers who visit their home regularly with the judge; she becomes frightened and cries when she hears that her husband has heart trouble, and she represents her husband and visits the presiding judge.¹¹² Niu disciplines herself so well as a trustworthy mother who unconditionally supports her unfulfilled son; meanwhile, she keeps acting as the task-focused partner able to sustain the impressions that are crucial

¹¹⁰ Goffman (1959) believes that performers would conduct protective action after the performance lost its credibility. He calls the attempt of preventing “the occurrence of incidents and the embarrassment consequent upon them” as defensive attributes (212-228).

¹¹¹ *Feidu*, 1993, 273, 20-22. *Ruined City*, 2015, 280, 39-40.

¹¹² *Feidu*, 1993, 287, 273, 287, and 305. *Ruined City*, 2015, 284, 279, 294, and 311.

to them: Zhuang's "face" as an upright intellectual, and their reputation as a power couple. However, the lawsuit does not go the way they expect and almost goes out of control, forcing them to accept an olive branch from the mayor at the expense of the maid Liu Yue marrying the mayor's disabled son.¹¹³

Niu's carefulness is very noticeable to Zhuang, especially at this moment. As the lady of the house Niu is the only person who is suitable to discuss Liu's marriage with the mayor's family, and, most importantly, to ask the mayor and his wife for a favor regarding his lawsuit. However, Niu has just discovered her that her perfect husband's affair with Tang Wan'er, right before Liu's wedding. Not surprisingly, Niu takes up her caring mother role again. She goes to the mayor's house and plans Liu's wedding ceremony with the mayor's wife. After a short chat, she gradually illustrates her true aim.

Trying to remain casual, she gave a detailed account of the origin of the lawsuit and related the suffering brought on by the case, before repeatedly stressing that they were coming to the mayor for help, because they were simply at their wits' end. She talked fast without looking at the mayor's wife, but when she was done, she thought she might have sounded incoherent, so she repeated herself. *I can't care about saving face now, and I can't look at her face....* Her face was flushed when she finished, but she added:

Ai-ya! Listen to me. My husband told me again and again not to bring this up.

Why did I tell you all this? It's so embarrassing. Everyone's gossiping about him, and he can't sit still at home.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Feidu, 1993, 422. *Ruined City*, 2015, 427.

¹¹⁴ Feidu, 1993, 438. *Ruined City*, 2015, 443.

It can be said that Niu is pushing herself so hard that she tries to make the whole asking-for-a-favor act look natural and reasonable. She performs like a deeply troubled and embarrassed mother, who has no choice but to ask for help because of the son's irresponsible but, for her, acceptable behaviors. Thus, her acting mostly relies on "thoughtless" emotional revelation, such as her face getting flushed, talking quickly, repeating insignificant details, avoiding eye contact, and constantly using exclamatory words like "ai-ya" in her narration. Niu conducts her whole performance from a position of a mother who has no power to control her son's behavior but feels responsible for saving him from "unfair" suffering that might be caused by others' slander.¹¹⁵

It should be observed that Niu Yueqing lowers herself and her famous husband to match the status of the mayor and his wife during this conversation. She says that her husband "knows only about writing and nothing else...is totally incompetent away from his desk...leads a boring existence," and, most important, "can't compare to a section chief, not to mention the mayor."¹¹⁶ She seems to be devaluing her husband, but the truth is that she had to push the mayor upwards, where his power would not be challenged even by her husband Zhuang Zhidie. The truth of Zhuang as a celebrity that she was hiding from the mayor's wife and the facts of his lawsuit that she intentionally exposed to her made the mayor's wife to feel the stresses they suffered during the lawsuit and encouraged her to help them, regardless of the fact that Zhuang might have a greater reputation than the

¹¹⁵ Goffman (1959) introduced the idea of "communication out of character," by which he discusses the meaning of a performer's stress response that the performer believes to be an action stimulated by the environment. Goffman thinks the presence of communication out of character provides one argument for the propriety of studying performance in terms of potential interaction disruptions. See more details on 167-207.

¹¹⁶ Feidu, 1993, 438. *Ruined City*, 2015, 444.

mayor. Her strategy and foresight and using the maid Liu Yue as a bargaining chip successfully wins the mayor's promise.

To sum up, Niu's existence as a mother figure serves to explain why the dominant husband is willing to act like a submissive child. It seems like Zhuang's husband identity has been formed in opposition to his celebrity-writer identity. His omnipotence when he behaves as a writer has been erased by himself, which brings out the paradoxical side of his self to all his audiences. In fact, it can be interpreted in two ways: one, that he is aware of how submissive he is and intentionally acts like that; or, alternatively, that he is indeed controlled by his wife. This takes us back to the two extreme situations that Goffman describes at the very beginning of his discussion of dramaturgical performance. Accordingly, one can deeply believe what he/she has performed is the reality, so that impressions a performance brings to audiences are "the impression of reality."¹¹⁷ On the other hand, one can also doubt every action he/she takes on stage, performing to make audiences believe in what himself/herself does not have a stake in.¹¹⁸ Goffman develops the latter possibility even further, using the term "cynic" to describe the kind of performers who can not conduct a performance based on "sincerity." They might gain "unpleasant pleasure" by deceiving the audience; they might give performances and delude audiences only for "self-interest or private gain."¹¹⁹ In this sense, Zhuang Zhidie's unusual obedience could be either of these two possibilities.

Based on above discussions of Niu's characters, the previous explanation is more plausible. Zhuang's idol-writer social role is the kernel of his life, which cannot be easily

¹¹⁷ Goffman, 1959, 17.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 17-18.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 18, 5-14.

removed by social others, including Niu. The submissive characteristics that Zhuang sometimes presents somehow only arise when Niu immerses herself in motherhood. It can be argued that the obedient version of Zhuang is an illusive/deceptive aspect of his self that differentiates from the primary celebrity-writer identity. He performs it for particular reasons, for self-interest. Wang calls it “infantilization;” however, she contends that the mother group of women infantilizes him and indulges him to “behave irresponsibly.”¹²⁰ Here we think the infantilized Zhuang is a manifestation of his insincerity. The infantilized man wears the taken-for-granted social expectations of the husband identity as an armour, so that he can get away from responsibilities and comfortably enjoy the warm caresses of the wife Niu.

Zhuang’s agency in this teenage-like rebellion game indeed hinges on his needs in various conversations with the seemingly influential wife. It implies an “erratic” balance that exists in their conjugal relationship, more commonly seen in a mother-and-son relationship. The parent indulgently provides whatever the child asks for in exchange for the other side’s pleasant manner. It seems like a reciprocal balance. However, in Niu’s situation, it is not so equal as the real life mother-son relationship. Now, what he is asking for is that she satisfy his appetite for food and protect his performed celebrity-writer reality. Niu Yueqing, as a perfect motherly wife, behaves in conjunction with his immediate needs. What does she receive?

However, what distinguishes an infantilized adult man from a ten-year-old boy is the definition of reality that guides them to conduct their performances. As for Zhuang Zhidie,

¹²⁰ Yiyang Wang. “*Defunct Capital and Female Domesticity.*” *Narrating China: Jia Pingwa and his fictional world.* New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 99-100. *University of Victoria Library*, voyager.library.uvic.ca/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=1789251.

his reality is his social identity as a celebrity-writer, which he has already internalized as the most significant part of his self, giving him a degree of readiness to conduct a consistent performance routine. This suggests that before being a husband, he is first a celebrity-writer, even in the sub-world that is only about their marital relationship. Put the other way around, Zhuang Zhidie is not just playing the “cynical” extreme. He deeply believes in the impressions he created as an idol-like writer, so that all other characters he has to play as a social individual need to make way for his celebrity identity. We could say that he is trapped in an extreme situation, which is produced by his obsession with fame. His absolutely dominant position, as a husband and a celebrity-writer, empowers Zhuang's male ego, which disrupts the reciprocal balance between this couple. His definition of reality becomes the only fact of their marriage, which forces Niu Yueqing to "willingly" conform to his narrative with him and minimize her self to fit into the intensity of his demands.

The infantilized Zhuang accompanies Niu Yueqing wherever she goes, reminding her of the son-like husband's endless demands for food and support. This pushes Niu Yueqing to take on a mother character in their closed sub-world, and, at large, to be perceived as an inseparable part of Zhuang's celebrity-writer persona. In another way, it allows him, as Wang posits, to behave irresponsibly as a child and, finally, shift all domestic duty, including inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*), onto Niu.¹²¹

¹²¹ Wang, 2006.

As Zhuang Zhidie's Unfulfilled Wife

Quite apart from her successful embodiment of motherhood, Niu Yueqing also conducts a remarkable performance in her wife persona. This is illustrated through her unfulfilled sexual desire, as well as her special way of managing Zhuang Zhidie's affair with Tang Wan'er.

There are in total four sexual engagements between Niu Yueqing and Zhuang Zhidie in the novel, compared with Tang and Zhuang's six times. This appears to be a minimal difference; however, none of these intimate interactions fulfills either Niu or Zhuang's sexual demands and all four moments lack elements of love and harmony. Instead, the consistent theme is responsibility, no matter whether it is for childbearing or fulfilling marital sexual duty. In this sense, sexual intercourse between this married couple is no more than a task, at least for Zhuang Zhidie. His performances are somehow quite consistent, demonstrating a reluctant husband being forced to fulfill moral responsibilities to his wife and future family, even under the circumstance of dealing with impotence. Niu Yueqing, in turn, seems to play the more active role, pushing Zhuang to sexually engage with her; this is thoroughly illustrated in the very first sexual engagement between them.

It happens straight after a one-sided "conversation" between Niu and Zhuang about a secret formula that might "cure" Niu of infertility, which suggests the upcoming sexual intercourse and its ultimate goal of childbearing.¹²² This topic right away wipes out Zhuang's interests; however, the possibility of having a child activates Niu's enthusiasm. Therefore, Niu exerts much effort to arouse Zhuang, considering Zhuang's erection

¹²² Feidu, 1993, 62. *Ruined City*, 2015, 66.

problem. She "sprays on a bit of perfume, gets some hot water, and tells Zhuang to get out of bed and wash up and take off his clothes."¹²³ She has done everything to please her husband until he willingly climbs on the bed and turns the light out. When her impotent husband quickly ejaculates, their intercourse immediately comes to an end, long before Niu feels satisfied. It is no doubt an unsuccessful performance—especially for the wife, who has tried so hard to prepare. Her desires are unfulfilled—not only her desire to carry the family line, but also her desire for physical gratification. Her yearning for a child and demands for physical pleasure blend together, so that she loses the ability—or, we might say, the courage—to distinguish which one she wants the most. Dressing up physical desire with responsibility, to some extent, limits her ways of expressing it. Most important, it opposes the husband's immediate demands. By leading her husband through intercourse, Niu achieves the very opposite effect of her intention. This reduces a fully-aroused state of lovemaking into a game of "hide-and-seek," making herself look like the one who plays the seeker and the one who has the power to monopolize their sex life. However, in the following three physical engagements, her so-called dominant power is gradually proved not to exist.

The rest of their sex life all involves a third party. I am not suggesting that another individual physically engages with them, but that other persons are presented and acted out in the form of characters in stories that are told during the foreplay, based on what either husband or wife has seen or heard. The third party entering into their sex life, to some extent, makes Zhuang's sexual demands function "better." The next time their sexual intercourse starts, again it is at Niu Yueqing's initiative, although she does not express this

¹²³ Feidu, 1993, 61. *Ruined City*, 2015, 66.

verbally. She does touch Zhuang's hand to suggest her demand for sex, which makes him "turn his back in disgust."¹²⁴ However, when Zhuang later turns back to Niu to fulfil his responsibility, it is because he is aroused by an erotic story about Wang Ximian's wife:

When she worked as a salesgirl at a shopping center, she did it with a man after work behind the counter, and very noisily. When people looked to see what was going on, they saw her legs sticking up, so they banged on the door, but the two of them were oblivious. They hung on to each other until they were finished, even after people broke down the door and stormed in.¹²⁵

Accordingly, Wang Ximian's wife becomes the third person who is implicitly involved in their relationship. She, of course, does not actively attend; however, the report of her sexual activity, no matter whether it is reliable or not, is symbolized in the story by the narrator Niu Yueqing. Without permission, she "rationalizes" the third party's sexual performance to make it fit into her narrative. Niu exaggerates the depiction of erotic details, such as that the heroine made loud sexual moans and was "sticking up her legs," activating all Zhuang's sensations and finally stimulating his physical desire. This enables her husband to "gaze" the third party, mainly the other woman's sexual activities, by which Zhuang could ultimately experience sexual gratification, even though what he has "gazed" is mastered by the wife but still in the discourse of male narrative created by himself.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Feidu, 1993, 75. *Ruined City*, 2015, 80.

¹²⁵ Feidu, 1993, 75. *Ruined City*, 2015, 80-81.

¹²⁶ Laura Mulvey (1975) first came up with the term "the male gaze" in her study of male pleasure in Hollywood movies. It refers to the way of "looking" and "observing" that is only based on heterosexual male's account. Mulvey believes that Hollywood mainstream movies are produced in the "male gaze" way for the male actor and male viewer. Women, in this sense, are put into unequal conversation with the male actor and represented by male's consciousness as sexual objects for male gazer to obtain pleasure. See details in Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen, Oxford Journals*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18. doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Her husband's impotence seems to be cured by being a voyeur, so that Niu can have a chance to fulfill her sexual desire and familial responsibility. However, allowing her husband to satisfy his sexual demands through the role of voyeur effectively minimizes Niu Yueqing and her existence as a sexual woman, reducing her subjectivity to a by-product of his male desire. Her indulgent acceptance of bringing in this third party concedes a dominant status to the husband. It somehow gives him the sexual privilege to objectify other women who are brought into their sexual activities and framed as erotic objects. Liu Yue, as one of those women, later in Zhuang and Niu's interaction, is degraded as a sexual tool. Her existence as an individual is diminished to her "slender waist" and "ample hips." As long as it arouses the husband's sexual interests, Niu Yueqing's strategy works. The reality of sex that is supposed to develop from gratification, now, in fact, performs the role of creating narratives for masculine voyeurism. In other words, Niu Yueqing's sexual self, instead of arising from sexual subjectivity, is continuously shaped by Zhuang Zhidie's "special" sexual drive and immediate sexual needs. What she performs as an unfulfilled wife, in fact, could be seen as a result of unsuccessfully fulfilling Zhuang's demands. The sexual self that she made real has been trapped in Zhuang Zhidie's sexual framework.

Moreover, because of his unique sexual demands for a third party, Zhuang Zhidie feels he needs to try out his sexual narrative on other women. Thus, this time, he chooses to expand his sexual fantasy into a real-world third person, the mistress Tang Wan'er. After discovering the husband's affair with Tang, Niu's wife persona confronts unprecedented challenges that are different from any another incident, including his lawsuit. Zhuang Zhidie's incongruent performance of his husband role places Niu's wife persona at risk. It forces her to act out wife-related performances in an extreme form, full of disappointment

and dissatisfaction, that is precisely embedded in her struggles of dealing with anger, balancing unfulfillment, and later managing risks that would damage their shared image as a couple:

I can take any hardship regarding your life, your health, your career, and your future, but I won't stand for any fooling around. You were close to Jing Xueying, and I didn't say anything, did I? I could have washed my hands of the whole fiasco when she turned against you. She was an upright person who could be helpful in your career when you were friends. I am not the jealous type. But societal mores have degenerated to such a degree that the country is filled with women who love money, status, power, and their own pleasure. I won't allow you to waste time with them.¹²⁷

Niu is enraged. However, perhaps influenced by her mother persona, she chooses to admonish her husband and build the communication between them. Niu emphasizes the hard work she has done for him as a wife. What is more, she also brings out her loyalty as his wife, fully committed to their marital partnership. She is asking Zhuang to look at himself. Indeed, she forces him to face the reality of her social role, the partner who sustains and preserves everything related to the fact of their marriage. His status as a celebrity, in this sense, not only belongs to Zhuang Zhidie, but also to the connubial partnership they share. Niu makes a similar effort as last time when she found out about the lawsuit; she tries to differentiate his lover Tang Wan'er from other women and portray her as a 'gold-digger,' a product of a degenerating society, and does not hesitate to compare Tang to Jing.

However, it does not work as well as the last time, since Zhuang refuses to accept her performance of protectiveness. In the circumstances of the husband avoiding responsibility and instead becoming again the person who hides, she surprisingly decides to turn his attention back to the lawsuit. This indeed suggests Niu's attitudes towards Zhuang's affair

¹²⁷ Feidu, 1993, 433. *Ruined City*, 2015, 438.

with Tang; she might not see it as an incident worthy of her attention, unlike the lawsuit, which is a threat to her marriage or her personas. In other words, their adultery is a dark secret which is incompatible with both Zhuang and Niu's images of their selves and needs to be concealed in order to sustain Zhuang's reputation as a respectable writer. As a dark secret, his affair cannot become a part of Zhuang's everyday reality. Therefore, Niu Yueqing acts out her wife persona and temporarily leaves Zhuang's affair behind. In fact, she anchors her hopes on Zhuang Zhidie, on his commitment to their partnership, so that she can believe in the reciprocal dependency and familiarity in their partnership.¹²⁸ Hence, she cleans up and turns most of her attention back to the lawsuit.

Niu trusts in the "collusive understanding" they share as a marital couple, until she finds out that Zhuang is keeping contact with Tang and passing love messages with a dove.¹²⁹ She begins to lose the fantasy of love that possessed her since becoming Zhuang's wife and develops new aspects of self related to him. The self that lives in this persona loses its control over the related performance. She collapses and says to the housemaid Liu, "what do I have left? I'll tell you. I have nothing."¹³⁰ The emotional part of her has been taken down by her famous husband's deceptions. Now she has to give up all her love and conduct interactions for her audiences, who only recognize her as Zhuang's wife and believe in every impression she gives from the wife persona. Niu has to engage in a battle with

¹²⁸Goffman (1959) proposes the rationality of reciprocal dependency and reciprocal familiarity in a performance team. Reciprocal dependence links individuals who give the same performance together and creates levels of membership. Reciprocal familiarity derives from an unanimous aim of "impressional protectiveness," which provides the team some kind of intimacy. (82-83)

¹²⁹ Goffman (1959) points out that there are general reasons for co-operation between two or more performance (he concludes as team performance) that could be typified as "collusion" or "understanding." (79-80) In this paper, the marital relationship between Zhuang and Niu is read as a type of collusive understanding, which indicates that their relationship is built upon both collusion and understanding, mainly for Zhuang's social image as a celebrity intellectual.

¹³⁰ Feidu, 1993, 443. *Ruined City*, 2015, 448.

Zhuang Zhidie and the intruders Tang and Liu to defend and protect the reality expressed by her wife persona, which makes her herself.

In response, Niu again puts on the wife persona. This time, the makeup and *qipao* are not present in physical form, but become the true “mask” that Niu’s mother hopes her to wear.¹³¹ Her performance begins to be tainted by delusion. She has gradually evolved into giving a fixed performance of her wife persona. However, the delusional performance, on the other hand, emphasizes how she relies on this persona, which is strong enough to force her to compromise with Zhuang's untrustworthiness as both a husband and partner. The sensitive and irritable reality that used to be exclusively for herself is now partially accessible to audiences including Zhuang. To protect her partnership, Niu invites Tang to come over for a lunch party with Zhuang Zhidie, and she serves a feast to those who know about her husband's affair—she serves them pigeon, a symbol of love and secrets.

“What do you think? A rare delicacy, wouldn’t you say?” Niu Yueqing said. “I killed it myself. It was a smart bird that will make you smart after you eat it. It has very tender meat. Come, try it and see how I did.” She tore off the wings and placed them in Wan’er’s dish. “The wings are for you, Wan’er. Eating them will help you fly to the highest branch,” Niu Yueqing said. Next, she tore off the legs and placed them in Zhuang’s dish. “The leg is for you. See how nice and plump they are. Ah, what have I done? I forgot to take off the toe ring.” She followed that by giving the body of the pigeon to Liu Yue and put the head on her own plate. “There’s no meat in the head, but I’ve heard that eating a pigeon’s eyes will prevent myopia. I’ve been nearsighted for so long, I’ll give the eyes a try.” She reached over, plucked out the eyes, and put them in her mouth, saying as she chewed, “Delicious, so tasty.”¹³²

The whole meal is entirely designed in advance, Niu’s every word and action scripted and acted out, implicating the meanings and information she intends to communicate to the different characters in Zhuang’s affair. Her first target is the pigeon—an accomplice in the

¹³¹ Feidu, 1993, 40. *Ruined City*, 2015, 44.

¹³² Feidu, 1993, 447-448. *Ruined City*, 2015, 453.

affair, the pigeon passed the love letters. Usually a symbol of purity, in this circumstance, the pigeon symbolizes and highlights the husband's dishonesty and disloyalty. The contrast between the symbolism of the pigeon and the role that it performed serve as an ideal starting point to break the deadlock. Thus, Niu's act of killing and then stewing this symbol of Zhuang and Tang's love reveals her knowledge of the affair and communicates her determination to expose this inner secret to the parties involved. She also needs to inform the housemaid Liu Yue, who seemingly performs closely with her but is indeed a spy, sharing impressions with both parties for her own good.

By dismembering the pigeon into pieces and then intentionally assigning each part to certain individuals, Niu Yueqing deconstructs Zhuang and Tang's relationship and takes each participant's performance back. The wing, which goes to Tang's bowl, signifies multiple layers of insinuation. Taking off a pigeon's wing is tantamount to depriving it of flight; Niu Yueqing somehow strips Tang of the possibility of flying up into the branches and snatching the core of Niu's identity as the famous writer Zhuang Zhidie's wife. Niu is warning Tang of the likely result, if Tang acts against her "advice," by making it clear that she is aware of Tang's efforts, which have already been identified as 'gold-digging.' Meanwhile, Niu gives the leg with the toe ring to Zhuang Zhidie. It is a moral admonishment that asks him to adopt a very down-to-earth attitude and look at the troubled reality they are dealing with right now rather than devoting his energy to some hopeless, immature love. Even though she seems to be warning her husband by cruelly butchering his stolen love, she does not show any hint of blame and denouncement, which at the same time signals Zhuang that she is still performing her wife persona, remaining loyal to him as a trustworthy partner. Then she rewards the maid Liu Yue with the body of the pigeon

for her 'well-meaning intention' to snitch on Zhuang and Tang; letting Liu Yue join in their feast, however, is also a warning to her not to develop any similar emotional attachment to Zhuang or accept the same treatment as Tang Wan'er. Niu reinstates her wife persona as the only woman in Zhuang's house and the only heroine in his show. Hence, she treats herself to the pigeon's head, especially the eyeball, suggesting that she will always keep an eye on him.

One aspect of her self that develops from performing Zhuang Zhidie's loyal wife appears in her great ability to act out Niu Yueqing as an individual. She has fully taken up her performance and exercises her performance discipline as the loyal wife in order to efficiently activate the partnership; as a result, she sustains their shared image. However, this is not the only side of her wife persona; she is and will always be an unfulfilled woman who has been monopolized and made to perform according to her male's immediate sexual desire. In addition, Niu Yueqing's confident and serene performance reminds us of her perfect demonstration of motherhood when she was informed of Zhuang's lawsuit.

So, who is Niu Yueqing, anyway? Is she a mother or a wife? Those questions bring the discussion back to the very beginning, when Niu Yueqing clarified her philosophy of being a wife for a man like Zhuang Zhidie. She has to play both mother and wife for him. The whole process somehow cannot even be called a negotiation of partnership, as I proposed in the very beginning. Niu Yueqing's existence is a pre-defined subordinate reality in this marriage. The self, which supposes to develop from concrete experiences as one side of the marital partnership, stands in the way of performing the mother figure. Social expectations of motherhood spontaneously and simultaneously rectify Niu Yueqing's everyday act, which is supposed to be performed with the insight of a wife. Hence, the

experiences of a wife that society has provided are now partially taken away from her "voluntarily," admitting of the maternal instinct. However, the wife persona also does not perform so well. Her demands for sexual fulfillment have been stripped away from the husband's interests of gazing, which defines her sexual self as an objectified sexual tool. It seems the pigeon feast is the perfect show of her subjectivity and the self that lives in her wife persona, but it turns out to be a well-prepared self-disciplining that works to save her partnership with Zhuang Zhidie. The tension between her two personas no doubt exists, and this tension stops her true self from obtaining information and conducting various everyday performances. Especially when her performance sways back and forth between two personas, Niu Yueqing's subjectivity barely has a chance to be noticed by her and all her audiences. She must give her self up in exchange for being Zhuang Zhidie's woman.

Chapter 2: Tang Wan'er— Pear Tree and Feet: Identifying Woman's Body in Perverse Performativity

“Life is like a dream, so we'll just wake up from this dream and go on with our lives.”¹³³

This is what Zhou Min says to everyone who is dying to get information about his trip to Tongguan. He was sent by Zhuang Zhidie aiming to take Tang Wan'er back, after Tang went missing at the theater. Zhou asks everyone including Zhuang Zhidie, to stop pretending to be sad, because Tang Wan'er is his woman, belongs to him, and is his own dream. Indeed, Zhou is right; he is the man who gives her a chance to get rid of her plain, small-town life, to go to the big city Xijing, and taste a real metropolitan lifestyle. Zhou also introduces this woman to Zhuang Zhidie. However, he is only the person who reads bedtime stories to Tang. It is Zhuang Zhidie who makes her really fall into and experience the fanciful dream of Xijing, and finally she becomes a part of Zhuang's own fantasy. Tang Wan'er is more like the untouchable part of Zhuang's dream, the part that brings him extreme sexual pleasure and emotional gratification but which remains provisional, liable to fly away at any moment. As Zhou says, we must always wake from our dreams.

Every characteristic of Tang Wan'er differs from the wife Niu Yueqing. Tang's characteristics conform to the scholar-beauty romance pattern and make her more like the one destined for the famous writer Zhuang Zhidie.¹³⁴ Apparently, Niu does not meet the literatus Zhuang Zhidie's criteria of a “perfect woman.” Her appearance, ways of

¹³³ Feidu, 1993, 501. *Ruined City*, 2015, 504.

¹³⁴ The scholar-beauty romance pattern has been thought as a steadfast mode of classic Chinese literature, especially fictions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, that narrated the love story with same tone, even the same characteristics, as is basically reflected in the love between a scholar and beauty. See Guo Changhe 郭昌鶴. “Studies on Beauties and Scholars 佳人才子小說研究.” *Wenxue jikan 文学季刊*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1934, pp. 199–215 & vol. 2 no. 2, 1934, pp. 303–320; Wang, 2006, 99-100; Zou Ying, “Talent, Identity, and Sociality in Early Qing Scholar-Beauty Novels,” *T'oung Pao*, vol. 102, no.1-3, 2016, pp. 161-208. *BRILL*, doi: [10.1163/15685322-10213P06](https://doi.org/10.1163/15685322-10213P06).

expression, and even manners fall far short of the standards of classic beauty. As discussed in the previous chapter, the love and romance element between Zhuang and Niu has been eliminated by their day-to-day family troubles and responsibilities. To Zhuang, she is more like a partner who can share their history and difficulties, who is supportive and thoughtful enough to manage his successful male writer and intellectual image. However, as the most talented and respected writer in Xijing, Zhuang seems to be destined to meet a ‘better’ woman, a woman who truly ‘matches’ his fame and talent, and who is worth devoting his sentiments. Tang appears just in time.

They meet on July 13, at a lunch party that Zhou Min throws for Zhuang, whose reputation in the literati circle will give the newcomer Zhou a chance to work at the local magazine. Besides Zhou, there is another person who urgently wants to meet Zhuang. Zhou’s lover Tang has been curious about the famous Zhuang for a long time. She has asked Zhou for stories about the famous Zhuang many times, and even in the middle of sex with Zhou, she “was fantasizing... about Zhuang Zhidie.”¹³⁵ Before the party, Tang tries on almost every blouse and dress she owns, and she finally picks up a simple but elegant yellow dress, applies eyeshadow and lipstick, and carefully checks her outfit in front of the mirror. She seems as though that she intends to display all the feminine charm she can muster. It indeed works well.

In Zhuang’s eyes, Tang Wan’er is “the quiet flirt.”¹³⁶ He is attracted by this woman from the very first glance; he shows his interest in Tang by giving direct and deliberate descriptions of her appearances. It is something he never does for his wife. Accordingly,

¹³⁵ Feidu, 1993, 18. *Ruined City*, 2015, 22.

¹³⁶ Feidu, 1993, 32. *Ruined City*, 2015, 36.

Tang's curves are noticeable through the "tight light-yellow dress;" her skin is "glossy under a light coating of powder;" her "thin, arched brows almost seemed to dance;" her "long thin neck, like a piece of fine jade, is enhanced by her neck and high collarbones."¹³⁷ Those details together make Tang the sort of beauty who is "qualified" to make men passionately pursue her. Her appearance tells Zhuang Zhidie that this woman might fill in the 'romance' void in his talented-writer identity. In addition, the way Tang presents herself when she is interacting with Zhuang makes all other women, like Meng Yunfang's wife Xijie, appear boring and pale.

Tang is not only a beautiful and amorous woman who loves fashionable and colorful close-fitting clothes that display her body's advantages, but also a woman who knows how to behave to enhance her beauty. She is confident in her beauty, so that she is not afraid of comparing herself to all other women in Zhuang Zhidie's life, like Niu whose "eyes were smaller ...[and] mouth was bigger".¹³⁸ She speaks politely and acts elegantly; she always maintains her poise, even when she meets Zhuang for the first time, where she "holds her head high and... reaches out to shake hands" with the famous writer in a classic and generous way.¹³⁹ She is eloquent and accomplished in the art of conversation; she praises people she admires. For example, she asks Niu not to kill mosquitoes, because they "suck Zhuang Laoshi's blood and become learned." She also attacks those who would despise her; for example, when Wang Ximian's wife speaks 'highly' of her beauty: "if I were a man, I'd fight to the death to have you."¹⁴⁰ She loves reading, which enables her to combine

¹³⁷ Feidu, 1993, 36. *Ruined City*, 2015, 30.

¹³⁸ Feidu, 1993, 97. *Ruined City*, 2015, 103.

¹³⁹ Feidu, 1993, 26. *Ruined City*, 2015, 26.

¹⁴⁰ Feidu, 1993, 95-96. *Ruined City*, 2015, 99-100.

her fantasy of love with reality in a more romantic way. She reads *A Collection of Great Classical Essays* and believes that she is the woman with “style” (*tai* 态), a present-day Dong Xiaowan—a famous Ming Dynasty courtesan known as one of the Eight Beauties of Qinhuai (*qinhuai bayan* 秦淮八艳). She reads *Dream of the Red Chamber* and falls into a dream-like state in which Zhuang Zhidie truly belongs to her.¹⁴¹ She is an unfulfilled creature formerly stuck in the small dancing club back in Tongguan, until Zhou Min brought her to a luxury hotel and beautiful park, and finally she meets the illustrious Zhuang Zhidie in Xijing. Her dreams of romance and higher status seem to bolster her courage in leaving her family behind. The upper-class life to which she aspires becomes achievable the second she attracts Zhuang’s attention. Tang’s personality makes her a fresh and delicious “dish” for the romantically dormant Zhuang Zhidie. Tang’s characteristics revitalize his understanding of women: there are women who are different from Niu, who are able to awaken his desires.

Zhuang quickly falls in love with Tang and revels in the ecstasy she brings to him. Tang not only represents the awakening of Zhuang’s emotional demands, but also his expectations of sexual activity. Zhuang is overwhelmed by her, so that his impotence seems to be cured immediately; he has an erection and ejaculates in the toilet in Zhou and Tang’s apartment.¹⁴² Tang senses Zhuang’s additional interest in her from his unsolicited visit after the lunch party, as well as the unexpected gift he brings to her: a pair of black high-heeled shoes.¹⁴³ His performance gives her more confidence to believe she might have a chance

¹⁴¹ Feidu, 1993, 144 and 145 and 310. *Ruined City*, 2015, 139, 140, and 316. Cao and Gao, 2010.

¹⁴² Feidu, 1993, 32. *Ruined City*, 2015, 36.

¹⁴³ Feidu, 1993, 53. *Ruined City*, 2015, 123.

to earn Zhuang's love. Unlike the wife Niu Yueqing's country boy Zhuang Zhidie, the person Tang Wan'er has met is the famous writer, already glowing with status and prestige. However, Zhuang does not look like the famous writer who has appeared thousands of times in Tang's fantasies. He looks like the type of person who pays little attention to his appearance. He is a "small man," rides a woman's scooter, and wears "a dark red shirt over gray slacks and a pair of sneakers—with no socks."¹⁴⁴ He greets everyone, praises Zhou Min's slicked-back hair, which is carefully arranged, unlike his own messy locks. He also expresses his admiration for Zhou and Tang's apartment. He admires the yard, the pear tree, and grape trellis. He compares himself to a bird who is trapped in a prison-like flat. He even continues to talk with the rustic Tongguan accent after years of life in Xijing. The appearance and manner that he performs in front of new audiences, like Zhou and Tang, seems to contradict his great reputation as the most well-known celebrity-writer in town. His unruly appearance, approachable manner, and envy of normal lifestyles create a huge contrast to his reputation as a formidable talent, which, indeed, promotes his character as a successful but down-to-earth scholar and make his charm even more noticeable.

For his love as well as his reputation, Tang is willing to do anything, including getting an abortion to keep his name clean.¹⁴⁵ Having obtained this emotional and sexual connection with Zhuang Zhidie makes Tang Wan'er no longer content with her role as a secret lover. She wants to replace Niu Yueqing and be the woman who has the right to fulfill all of Zhuang's demands. In addition, the title of the most respected man's wife and the social status that comes with this title are very attractive. She asks for a deadline, for

¹⁴⁴ Feidu, 1993, 25. *Ruined City*, 2015, 29.

¹⁴⁵ Feidu, 1993, 392. *Ruined City*, 2015, 398.

how long before she could marry him; she wants to know when her dream can finally come true. For the woman he loves, Zhuang makes the promise again and again without a deadline. However, before he delivers on the promise, Niu finds out their secret, stews the pigeon who carried their love messages, and forbids Zhuang to meet his lover Tang, especially during his trial. What truly cuts their connection off, however, is not Niu's determination; rather, it is when Tang is taken away by her husband, imprisoned in the backyard, taken back to Tongguan, and repeatedly beaten and raped.¹⁴⁶ The romance between Tang and Zhuang is given an extremely brutal end. It is not hard to guess what will happen to her after she is stripped naked and left with no power. Everything appears to have returned to the earlier time, when Tang surrendered to her illiterate and boring husband. However, this time, she has been "given" the right to make a choice, between life or death. Zhuang Zhidie is separated from Tang, loses his lawsuit and his partner Niu, all of which are crucial to the celebrity reality that he relies on; hence, he no longer meets social expectations as a writer, husband, and even lover. Failing to fit into any of his social roles, Zhuang loses the sense of being a societal entity and loses the meaning of performing, which becomes the reason that later leads to his death at the bus station.

Indeed, as the first woman to earn his affection and sexual desire, Tang Wan'er means a lot to Zhuang Zhidie. In his story, what Tang represents is not only his desire for emotional fulfillment, but also his unfulfilled sexual gratification. The latter factor becomes essential to the criticism of *Ruined City*, from both domestic and foreign readers. Criticism primarily focuses on the subject of female sexuality and the female body, which is interpreted as separated from their subjectivity in the story. Clearly, as the one who awakes and satisfies

¹⁴⁶ Feidu, 1993, 499. *Ruined City*, 2015, 503.

Zhuang's sexual demands, Tang Wan'er has always been at the center of this discussion.¹⁴⁷ The way she behaves, eloping with Zhou or getting an abortion for Zhuang, makes Tang look like a modern woman who bravely pursues her own will. However, whether running away for love or being sexually tortured, her behavior and the impressions delivered by her performances are still all about feminine beauty and sexual charm. Her subjectivity is erased when she puts herself in line with men's sexual appetite, letting them dominate her body and then consciousness.

So, in this chapter, I will assess Zhuang Zhidie's extra-marital relationship with Tang Wan'er within the dramaturgical framework, especially Goffman's idea of dramaturgical idealization. I will focus on interpreting the subjectivity of both characters, especially Tang Wan'er, by examining two symbolic elements, the pear tree and the feet, which appear constantly from the very beginning to the end. Each of these two elements signifies various meanings, all of which are significant to their relationship. I hope to identify the ways in which those elements are chosen, and later how each of them is utilized. By analyzing their relationship, I will strive to explain how Zhuang Zhidie performs his character as a secret lover, how Tang Wan'er defines her performances when she plays the "true-love" on Zhuang's stage, and finally, what kinds of reality do they hope to deliver by performing as a unity.

Goffman believes that individuals tend to have their own focus and emphasis when they give a performance.¹⁴⁸ The quality of picking the key points from a performance demonstrates individuals' understandings of societal requirements for each social character.

¹⁴⁷ For example, Gao, 2010; Wang, 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Erving Goffman, 2008, 34-51.

Those abstract requirements, to some extent, express the idealized template different societies have come up with. The process of revising performances and playing up the societally celebrated aspects, Goffman calls dramaturgical idealization.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, performers tend to “offer their audience impressions that have already been idealized in several different ways.”¹⁵⁰ First, performers tend to “incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society,” according to its degree, which can be accumulated as at a ceremony, where everything is prepared and performed.¹⁵¹ So, each element within a performance would carry “the characteristics of a celebration,” so as far as the audiences accept the performance as a reality, reality for them becomes a ceremony.¹⁵² The moral value that has been rejuvenated and reaffirmed during the celebration reflects its significance to affect the validity and reliability of a performance. Second, idealization can be demonstrated through social mobility, including both upward and downward. In particular, in order to achieve upward mobility, individuals are required to give appropriate performances that are consistent with the special social value and expectation that the upper class or community maintained.¹⁵³ To achieve a goal of moving upward, levels of sacrificing need to be made for maintaining a consistent front-stage performance, the performance designed for special audience groups. Goffman emphasizes the importance of sign-equipment that supports performance management.¹⁵⁴ He states that properly applying sign-equipment that represents a particular social class could illuminate

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 35, 5-6.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 35, 24-25.

¹⁵² Ibid, 35, 26-35.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 36, 5-22.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 36, 23-35.

audiences' familiarity towards performance, for instance, "the status symbols through which material wealth is expressed."¹⁵⁵ However, there is also a "negative idealization," meaning the voluntarily assumption of a lower position during interactions with other characters in order to manifest the superiority of the counterpart.¹⁵⁶ Idealization could be a process, a performer in order to be consistent with the ideal standard, first, forgoes components that are imperfect, and then indulges in the world of ceremony as the standardized social self and generally lets go one of unfit ones.

Moreover, he also notes that there are many factors that lead to a discrepancy between reality and performance. First, Goffman believes that if individuals aim at giving a 'perfect' performance, which is in accordance with social understandings and expectations, they need to make sacrifices. Only isolating the imperfect part would make the whole show meet the ceremonial standard.¹⁵⁷ However, Goffman believes that those hidden parts paradoxically and secretly bring real satisfaction to performers. He illustrates profitable activities, in which unethical behavior maybe involved and then concealed.¹⁵⁸ Second, errors and mistakes, as elements that would bring catastrophic damage to the fact that performers have conducted through a long way of establishing reliability and credibility, are usually buried before the performance happens. Third, performers tend to present the final product, and deliberately hold back the productive process. The fourth contradiction is performers' habit of hiding audiences from "dirty works," which might be "physically

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 36, 24-25.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 39.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 41, 22-24.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 43.

unclean, semi-illegal, cruel, and degrading in other ways.”¹⁵⁹ In addition, he mentions that performers would take the risk of sacrificing some of the ideal standards when they have to include several in a play; in addition, the most visible standard is mostly chosen. Finally, Goffman points out that individuals tend to emphasize the part of the performance that is consistent with the ideal qualifications for the role; therefore, performed as great thespians who “happen” to share the same standard with audiences, they have no need to hide or conceal. To differentiate them from the normal, however, they have to be familiar with the specific rhetorical system for the role and create a reality in which they are born with the certification.

Pear Tree: Distorted Companion and Performative Love

Unlike classic literature’s love for the pear blossom, *Ruined City* seems to be a little bit more partial to the tree itself. The pear tree is mentioned several times in the story, more specifically in the part about Zhuang’s secret romance relationship with the mistress Tang. The tree was planted and grew in Tang’s yard, plump with leafy splendor in July, the first time they met; however, it was only left with gnarled branches and fallen leaves in autumn, when their relationship ended. The similarity between the changing shape of the pear tree in different seasons and ups and downs in Tang and Zhuang’s secret romance is not merely a coincident.

There is some kind of correlation between the tree and their secret relationship. The pear tree, as all other plants, suffers various adverse environmental stresses in its life cycle, such as wind, rain, even snow during the pageant of the seasons. All those pressures from nature

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 44.

change the tree from its outside appearances to its inside way of survival. Just like the pear tree, pressures from the outside world also willfully affect Tang and Zhuang's romantic relationship. Rain and snow come to them in the name of moral discipline, which subtly changes them from their outward appearance to the inside and forces their love to be subjected to all kinds of moral judgements. In addition, Zhuang Zhidie's social identity, as a respected celebrity-writer, pushes them to withstand much heavier rains and winds than 'normal' couple.

Zhuang's status as the famous and respected celebrity-scholar disciplines and restricts every Tang-related decision he makes on his stage. The special attribute of secrecy seems to take away Zhuang Zhidie's power of creating meaning through language. However, as the center and the hero of his celebrity-intellectual play, he would never allow himself to remain silent. Thus, he is not so much being silenced as choosing to be selectively silence. It is a strategy that helps him tactfully conceal facts that are incompatible with the image of self he has presented, and it allows him to preserve his desire for status, fame, and Tang Wan'er's body. To achieve this goal, Zhuang needs to differentiate a new aspect of his societal self that only aims to conduct performances and construct reality for Tang. The pear tree, in this sense, is more than a symbol of his romance relationship with Tang: it represents Zhuang Zhidie himself, a silenced substitute of his character as mainly Tang's lover.

In other words, he is the pear tree, the one that lived, flourished, and withered in Tang's yard as well as in her heart. In fact, a very clear statement of Zhuang's relation with the pear tree has been given when Tang expresses her yearning to Zhuang Zhidie; she is

“convinced that” the pear tree “was Zhuang Zhidie’s avatar.”¹⁶⁰ The pear tree trapped in her yard has held up all her emotions to her famous but secret lover, Zhuang Zhidie, especially the part that she could not express to Zhuang directly. This kind of open and straightforward writing technique let the appearance of the pear tree become more fluent and natural, but it also raises a series of questions. Why the pear tree? How does Zhuang perform the ‘tree?’ What reality has been performed through the tree? And what underlying meanings are concealed from Zhuang Zhidie’s performances but transfer from the symbolic element?

The pear tree appears twice during Tang and Zhuang’s first meeting, the only times that Zhuang and the tree appear at the same time. Zhuang praises their living environment and deliberately mentions the tree, which is indeed the very first time this symbol appears in the story. During the party, Zhuang makes some awkward joke at the expense of his best friend Meng Yunfang, saying he is one of those “disciples and neophytes” who hope to practice and then become masters. Tang is the only person who laughs.¹⁶¹ When they notice her chuckle is inopportune, everyone at the party, including Zhuang, looks at her. While she does not act as her usual self, she reveals that she is skilled in speaking and listening. Tang stops, turns, and then looks at the pear tree outside the window. At the time, the tree is still flourishing, “draped in green leaves,” but there is “a hole in its bent old trunk”¹⁶² There are some key elements in Tang’s description of the tree, namely, leaves, hole, bent, and old. As we know, this party is held on July 13th, which is the mid-summer; trees are supposed to be full of green leaves. In addition, it is also the time when Zhuang Zhidie is

¹⁶⁰ Feidu, 1993, 144. *Ruined City*, 2015, 150.

¹⁶¹ Feidu, 1993, 29. *Ruined City*, 2015, 33.

¹⁶² Feidu, 1993, 29. *Ruined City*, 2015, 33.

still the famous, respectful, family-oriented writer. His fame and prestige are like all those green leaves, covered around every part of him.

However, the latter three elements seem very hard to be substituted for Zhuang Zhidie's character at that time. "The hole on the bent old trunk" is the peculiar part of the image of an exuberant pear tree, which presents a striking contrast to the leaves. But it can be seen as modeling Zhuang Zhidie as an individual full of contradictions, just as the contrast of his appearance and manner that he performed when he interacted with Tang for the first time. The idea of contrast later has been emphasized again, when the close friend Meng Yunfang apprises Zhuang as a person who could "have whatever he wants" because of his fortune and status. Zhuang replies with "a forced smile" and says, "I may have everything, but I need to break the perfection."¹⁶³ What Zhuang wants to express here is his feeling of doubt and denial at his successful and respectful celebrity-writer role. He is questioning his well-built statement of character-image. Compliments give him leaves, but also bend him over and contribute to the unfulfilled hole that will always stress the famous Zhuang Laoshi a lot. This time the contradiction runs to his outside appearances, which Goffman termed the personal front stage, between his inward needs. The confidant Meng explains his puzzle with a physical phenomenon, symmetry breaking, which indicates that the emerging of small fluctuations changes the appeared symmetric system into a more stable or perfect one. In this sense, Zhuang is unhappy with the present status he is in right now, and only imperfection could fix his problem and bring him a new perfection.

¹⁶³ Howard Goldblatt translates "*po que*" 破缺 (*Feidu*, 1993, 29) as "seek perfection" (*Ruined City*, 2015, 33). *Po* means breaking or getting rid of something. *Que* means disadvantages and weakness. So *poque* in this sense could be translated as getting rid of disadvantages, as Goldblatt translated. However, it also can be read as breaking the perfection, and making a breach. This thesis will adopt the latter interpretation.

Those contradictions he constantly emphasizes, in one way, enrich his performance as a thoughtful writer and express his needs in an oblique way. Hence, the mystery of Tang's behavior, to some extent, can be solved. Tang is ostensibly performing to attract Zhuang's attentions by ignoring all other people's inquiries and showing them her perfect profile. On the other hand, she is also using the pear tree to alleviate her desire to look at Zhuang, the man pouring out wise words. Her performance itself is a contradiction between deliberateness and insouciance. She deliberately avoids Zhuang's gaze and attracts his attention, but unwittingly looks through Zhuang's luxurious leaves and discovers his unfulfilled inner world. As expected, her action fascinates Zhuang: he "was taken by the look on her face."¹⁶⁴ Her action also indicates their future development. Tang is the first woman who voluntarily looks inside Zhuang who is filled with sexual impotence and emotional isolation. She is also the first woman whose sacrifice of her body and mind have been noticed by Zhuang; later these are all used to fill up his "hole" and break his "perfection" while ignoring the moral code. Tang Wan'er's performance makes her meet the standard of a real woman in Zhuang's sight: they fall in love "naturally."

The second time that the pear tree appears is right after their first sexual encounter.¹⁶⁵ Tang is at home alone, with exquisite makeup, waiting for Zhuang Laoshi to knock at her door again. However, he does not show up as she expects, for days. Her other man, Zhou Min goes to the city wall to play his *xun* every night and refuses to take her to the dancing club. So, the pear tree in her yard is the one living being left that can accompany her. She takes off the makeup, messes up her delicate hair, drapes a nightgown over her naked body,

¹⁶⁴ Feidu, 1993, 29. *Ruined City*, 2015, 33.

¹⁶⁵ Feidu, 1993, 115. *Ruined City*, 2015, 122.

sits on the lounge chair under the pear tree, and loses herself in dreams. She wonders whether Zhuang Zhidie is no different than all other men in the world, who “simply want the memory of another woman added to [their] list of conquests.”¹⁶⁶ Then, Tang thinks of another possibility, based on Zhuang’s special social role, which carries different social expectations from most other men; she thinks, “as a writer...merely use me as material for something you were writing.”¹⁶⁷ She also compares Zhuang to men in her past experience, the “small-town character” Zhou Min, a rude husband who treats her like his property. Finally, she comes to a conclusion about the difference between the city and countryside, between knowledgeable or not, and between “a real man and a real woman.”¹⁶⁸ In all these possibilities, she is no more than an object, sharing no emotional foundation with those men. It seems that there is no other way in her knowledge to describe herself as an independent individual, whenever she encounters a man. She is a name on a list, material for providing inspiration, land waiting to be cultivated. However, she senses a possibility of happiness when she meets Zhuang Zhidie, who, she recalls, “was immensely loving and tender.”¹⁶⁹

This comparison, to some extent, makes her more confident of Zhuang’s love for her; Tang then masturbates under the pear tree.

She touched herself as she followed this line of thought, until she began to moan and groan, calling out to Zhuang. She was writhing and squirming on the chair...The chair creaked and inched slowly toward the pear tree; squinting at the moon through the branches, she fantasized that it was Zhuang’s face. As she flicked her tongue, she wrapped her legs around Zhuang until she was up against the tree trunk, where she moved, rocking the tree and swaying the moon, until one

¹⁶⁶ Feidu, 1993, 116. *Ruined City*, 2015, 123.

¹⁶⁷ Feidu, 1993, 116, 15-16. *Ruined City*, 123, 8-9.

¹⁶⁸ Feidu, 1993, 116-117. *Ruined City*, 2015, 123, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Feidu, 1993, 116, 19-20. *Ruined City*, 2015, 123, 21.

final, forceful push of her body before she went limp. Three or four pear leaves circled above her and then settled onto her body.¹⁷⁰

In this scene, the pear tree symbolizes more than Zhuang Zhidie in mental and emotional terms; it also serves as a symbol of his physical endowment. In Tang's fantasy, Zhuang Zhidie's face is not present in any part of the pear tree. Instead, she sees her lover's face in the moon that hangs over the branches, like those 'lonely wives' in classic poems who see their love through looking at the moon.¹⁷¹ What makes Tang different from those 'lonely wives' is that she immediately integrates her affectional yearnings for Zhuang into sexual desire and finds a way to vent those complex desires. Her unintentional actions during masturbation, such as, moving close to the tree and wrapping her leg around the trunk, all demonstrate her longing for Zhuang Zhidie, or more especially, for his male sexual ability and the sexual gratification she can obtain from interacting with him. However, because of his absence, the pear tree instead becomes the outlet for her demands of love and desire towards Zhuang. The pear tree, in other words, is the phallic symbol of Zhuang Zhidie and his male sexual capability. Interestingly, only a few days ago, he was still a man with erectile dysfunction; but now, in Tang's imagination, his male genitalia has suddenly 'evolved' into the trunk that no longer suffers from premature ejaculation, and his 'sperm' is enough to cover a woman's body.

¹⁷⁰ Feidu, 1993, 1-11. *Ruined City*, 2015, 123, 25-33.

¹⁷¹ E.g. Zhang Jiuling 张九龄, *Gazing at the Moon Thinking of Afar* 望月怀远, "海上生明月, 天涯共此时。情人怨遥夜, 竟夕起相思。The sea gives birth to shining moon, as the other end of the world shares this moment. This sentimental man resents a distant night, and the whole evening gives rise to longing." Translated by Frank Watson. *Poetrynook*, 2012. poetrynook.com/poem/member/zhang-jiulings-gazing-moon-longing-afar-300-tang-poems-91; Bai Juyi 白居易, *Everlasting Longing* 长相思, "思悠悠, 恨悠悠, 恨到归时方始休。月明人倚楼。Far is my longing, deep is my grievance, no end to my abjection, till we are reunited. Now, in the moonlight a solitary one stands." Translated by Fan Jinghua. *Poetry Chinese*, 2008. poetrychinese.blogspot.ca/2008/08/bo-juyi-everlasting-longing.html.

The affirmation of Zhuang's sexual ability does not seem to require a negotiation with her partner Zhuang Zhidie. She seems quite convinced by the successful but depressingly self-paradoxical image that Zhuang performed on his stage. His reputation somehow gives extra credit to his masculine performance, which affects Tang's judgment of any impression presented by his social status. This even influences her own standard of conducting a performance and constructing realities about her self-image. Therefore, what she has presented as a woman who is able to take control of her own sexual and affectional desire appears to be a lie. The truth is that she is making her love declaration in a phallus-dominated tone, by coming to the decision about Zhuang's love only through comparing him with other men with whom she had been sexually involved. And even in the self-pleasing process, she is still speaking with a phallic logic, more particularly, a causal logic related to sexual ability. The sentimental part of Tang as a woman who is supposed to be controlled by her subjectivity has been taken away by the dominant status of Zhuang Zhidie. Sex is the pivot point of their relationship, and Zhuang's social status as a celebrity-writer is the discourse of their erotic relationship.

The next scene in which the pear tree appears is the time when Tang finally confirms the correlation between the pear tree and her lover Zhuang Laoshi.¹⁷² As in the previous scene, Zhuang does not show up in person; this time he is 'quarantined' by Niu Yueqing in his flat, because of his foot injury. Tang Wan'er, again, waits and expects his arrival at home. She reads classic Chinese stories and is drawn into Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan's love story. She believes that her romantic story with Zhuang is the modern version of "Reminiscences of the Plum Shadow Studio." Zhuang Zhidie is Mao Xiang, a man of

¹⁷² Feidu, 1993, 144-145. *Ruined City*, 2015, 148-151.

literary talents, named as one of the Famous Four of the late Ming Dynasty (*Ming Mo Si Gong Zi* 明末四公子). Mao falls in love with the famous courtesan Dong Xiaowan, one of the Eight Beauties of Qinhuai (*Qinhuai Bayan* 秦淮八艳), and writes a prosaic fiction that describes their love story and his deep love for Dong Xiaowan. Tang Wan'er is "surprised" to discover that Dong Xiaowan and she both have the word "wan 宛" in their names; thus, she believes she is the new Dong Xiaowan, a woman sufficiently beautiful to attract talented scholars like Mao Xiang, like Zhuang Zhidie. She examines herself in the image of the classic standard of beauty, a beauty who was tailored by and for the literati. She again falls into the reality that Zhuang performs as a celebrity-writer. Unable to distinguish dream from reality, Tang sees Dong Xiaowan walking to her; she begins to miss her *caizi*, her talented scholar, Zhuang Zhidie, and moves into a fantasy with him.

In Zhuang's absence, the pear tree once again appears in her view. In Tang's imagination, the pear tree must be covered with pear blossoms in spring, or, at least, with snow in winter. In either scenario, the pear tree appears to be white, from flowers or snow, the color of purity and sorrow. The essential features of the tree that were described at the first meeting, "bent" and "old", are contradicted by the ones in Tang's imagination. It is a conflict between reality and fantasy; or in seeing the tree as Zhuang's symbolic representation, it becomes a contradiction between Zhuang Zhidie and Tang Wan'er. The whiteness of the pear tree demonstrates Tang's strong belief in her secret romance with the famous Zhuang Laoshi. In her heart, their love should be as pure as the white pear blossom; Zhuang should have the strength and power to embrace their love as the pear tree holds thick snow. In addition, the image of the pear blossom and snow also symbolizes her feeling of melancholy and frustration, which derives from all the well-performed facts of Zhuang's

celebrity-writer show. Those facts have been fully accepted by his audiences as a fundamental reality of him as a societal individual. It is the reality of fortune, fame, and talent, which only comes to be true when Zhuang is performing in accordance with his idealized self. One aspect of his performance that is specifically produced for his secret romance relationship with Tang can be read as a dark secret, an imperfection that could not be found by most of his audience, because it would break all facts he has built as the celebrity-writer. As Goffman puts it, it has to be isolated to meet the ceremonial standard and hid in darkness. Therefore, in any case, the pear tree, as a phantom she puts on her stage, will not create the perfect and fullest reality of love for her: “there are no blossoms nor any snow, and the leaf-covered tree looked emaciated, as sparse as her life.”¹⁷³ Diving into the fantasy, she somehow sees the rain in the book come into her real life:

When she read about rain, she got up and walked into the yard, where she found, to her surprise, that rain was falling. Gazing at the pear tree in the lonely rain, she was convinced that it was Zhuang Zhidie’s avatar. So, had he come here to wait for her long before she’d moved into this place? She wrapped her arms tightly around the tree for a while before going back inside, where she let a raindrop fall from her eye onto the open book.¹⁷⁴

Is it really raining outside? It seems more like Tang is crying. In her dreamy state, she is deceived into thinking that her tear is a raindrop, and the pear tree in her yard is Zhuang’s avatar. Thus, the pear tree, instead of her lover Zhuang, witnesses how she has pinned away from lovesickness. In this particular scene, Tang’s face with a tear is in keeping with the pear blossom in the classic poem, the one bathed in the rain, like Yang Guifei in “Song of Lasting Pain” (*Chang Hen Ge* 长恨歌): “her jade countenance was sad, and crisscrossed

¹⁷³ Feidu, 1993, 145. *Ruined City*, 2015, 150.

¹⁷⁴ Feidu, 1993, 145, 4-9. *Ruined City*, 2015, 150, 17-23.

with tears, like a pear blossom bathed in spring time rain.”¹⁷⁵ She, again, turns into the classic beauty who has been loved by ancient literati. She is now not only a modern Dong Xiaowan but also a modern Yang Guifei.

However, both of these classic beauties are concubines, and their love stories do not come to a happy ending. Dong died at age 28, after a long period taking care of her lover Mao Xiang; Yang Guifei was blamed for the An Lushan Rebellion and strangled to death. This seems to imply that Tang Wan'er's romance story might be another tragedy. Tang, as a modern woman, immerses herself in love stories that have been written in classical literature discourse and that are detached from the modern Chinese context. Her own fantasy of love with the writer Zhuang Zhidie is tightly bundled with the classic and traditional literature tradition. In one way or another, the secret lover Zhuang's role of famous writer-scholar, in fact, is the center of her fantasy. It pushes Tang to narrow her mind within a small space, in which only conventional literati can breathe and survive. It also forces Tang to become fascinated with literature that is written in his rhetorical system, that is consistent with his cultural status and controlled by his social group. In this sense, walking through her own love fantasy, which is supposed to be performed as a self-searching journey, now indeed becomes an action of letting “prisoners” like her out for a short relief. The prisoner no doubt is Tang Wan'er, and the prison is all social facts constructed within Zhuang Zhidie's classic literati discourse. Even though she has earned

¹⁷⁵ “Song of Lasting Pain 长恨歌” is composed by the famous poet Bai Juyi (772-846) in the year 806. It depicts the story between the Emperor Xuanzong of Tang dynasty and his favorite imperial concubine Yang Guifei. The poem contains 120 verses, “her marble features were sad and still, her tears were streaming down, she was a branchful of blooming pear, bearing the rain of spring 玉容寂寞泪阑干，梨花一枝春带雨” is the 99 and 100 line (translated by Stephen Owen, in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996). It uses visual image of white pear blossom in rain to metaphor Yang Guifei's face with tear, demonstrates her inner pain of loneliness and missing that comes directly from her face. Although she is struggling with her pain, tearful and sad, but to the reader is still a very beautiful image.

herself a chance to breathe by letting herself wallow in a dream, she is and will always be locked within the walls that are built with masculine power.

Zhuang Zhidie initially guides Tang to believe that the pear tree is the other form of him, which represents him performing the role of famous lover. Yet, his love has been silenced and has no chance to bloom, unless Tang can sacrifice her love and be the pure and white pear blossom that decorates his plain and boring celebrity-writer play. He now is not only the hero in the show and the director, the person who has the power to manipulate the show, but he has no need to show up. Zhuang's reality forces Tang's love fantasy to carry a cultural imagination that demonstrates a classic literati-beauty relation that is divorced from today's reality of women's body and identity.

The last time the pear is been mentioned is right after wife Niu Yueqing finds out about her husband's affair with Tang; she invites Tang to join them for a lunch that she cooked with the pigeon Zhuang brought Tang as a gift and they used to pass love messages to each other.¹⁷⁶ Tang falls into a sleep for three days after she figures out her guilt to the "housewife" Niu, because cheating with Zhuang has totally been cancelled out. She believes that Niu's cruel behavior of killing the symbol of their love discourse harms Tang's existence as Zhuang Zhidie's secret lover. The only power Tang had of making meaning from their love through conversations is taken away by Niu. She wakes up, goes to the yard, and leans against the pear tree:

The yard was littered with fallen leaves; more were drifting down from the branches. Autumn was in the air, and the cicadas has grown quiet. Night winds had turned the lush pear tree scrawny, and she sensed that her hips were losing their shape and her face had become gaunt. Life seemed to have lost its meaning,

¹⁷⁶ Feidu, 1993, 446. *Ruined City*, 2015, 453.

to the point that only the sighing wind was left to disturb the bamboo curtain at the door.¹⁷⁷

In this scenario, the pear tree's leaves fall without affecting outside forces; not like the last time, when the falling leaves were a form of Zhuang's sperm and symbolized his awakened sexual ability. The meaning of those falling leaves has altered. The leaves of the tree are falling, for it is already autumn. Zhuang's love for Tang Wan'er gradually fades away, as his wife calls for the relationship to end in order to keep his reputation clean.

Falling leaves make the pear tree lose its vitality, and Tang also loses hers. Her body makes a perfect illustration again, as the first time they met. Her hips and face, both representing the unique beauty that attracted Zhuang's attention from the very first glance, have now lost their charm with the disappearing of Zhuang's love. Her beauty seems to be nurtured by Zhuang's love; her body keeps its shape for her lover. Her subjectivity, instead, has been dismissed from constantly contributing to be identical with the ideal 'beauty' standard for the scholar. The pear tree, by this time, is no longer capable of symbolizing Zhuang Zhidie as a silent lover who accompanies her in the yard. And at the moment she received Zhuang's note saying "take care", Tang lost both her ability and possibility to be the pear blossom that decorates the tree and nature. The characteristics of humanity have been erased from the pear tree by Zhuang Zhidie himself; it now is only a particular tree that survives in a bleak scene of late autumn.

Even at the very end of their story, Tang does not have courage to look for her Zhuang Laoshi and question him directly; she is still looking for a substitute. She needs a new sign-equipment on her stage that is more able to symbolize Zhuang Zhidie from outside to inside

¹⁷⁷ Feidu, 1993, 456. *Ruined City*, 2015, 462.

than the one locked in her small yard. So, Tang leaves her house, goes to the “bridge outside the south city” to look for a certain tree.¹⁷⁸ This tree has a special shape that looks like an inverted “人” *ren*, a character that indicates human in Chinese. The last avatar she has found is still a tree, shaped like an inverted human, just like her secret lover, who tries so hard to ‘perfectly’ fulfill the ideal scholar standard but runs all important things in his life ‘upside-down’. The characteristics of depressed, impulsive, twisted, and absurd Zhuang Zhidie have been displayed by the inverted ‘human’ tree, which never has a chance to grow up inside Xijing city and deserves to be alone. This tree is, in fact, the true Zhuang, who used to perform himself as a pear tree that knows how to bloom and love; however, the truth is he will never be capable of love, because the only thing he truly cares about is being a famous and respected writer-scholar. This also implies that Zhuang would never come to meet her under the tree, or more specifically, meet her with the hidden self.

Foot: Sexual Fetishism, Repression and Perversion

In addition to the pear tree, women’s feet, especially Tang Wan’er’s feet, also appear several times in their story. Zhuang Zhidie has directly expressed his fascination with women’s feet more than once. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, his wife Niu Yueqing happens to have “wide, fleshy feet,” which definitely is contrary to Zhuang’s appreciation of beauty.¹⁷⁹ Zhuang often complains about his wife’s feet, especially when Niu calls the pair of shoes he gets from his friend Ruan Zhifei

¹⁷⁸ Feidu, 1993, 457. *Ruined City*, 2015, 462.

¹⁷⁹ Feidu, 1993, 42. *Ruined City*, 2015, 46.

“instruments of torture”.¹⁸⁰ He replies with his understanding of women’s feet: “feet are a woman’s most important feature. With unattractive feet, she loses three-tenths of her beauty.”¹⁸¹ Compared with Niu’s normal, even ‘ugly’ feet, Tang Wan’er’s feet are perfectly in line with his standard of beauty:

He was surprised by how lithe she was and noticed what a dainty foot she had. The transition from calf to foot was flawless, her instep so high it could accommodate an apricot. Her toes were as delicate as bamboo tips, starting from the long big toe and progressing down to the short little one, which was wiggling at that moment. Zhuang had never seen such a lovely foot, and he nearly let out a shout.¹⁸²

Zhuang was totally stunned by Tang’s beauty; thus, he decided right away that Tang had to be the new owner of the shoes, the same pair that did not fit Niu’s feet. As Ruan said to him, the shoes deserve a beautiful story; now it would all be about Tang. The careful description of Tang’s feet demonstrates Zhuang’s great appreciation. It also confirms Zhuang’s arousing interest in Tang, something he could never experience from his wife Niu. Moreover, Tang’s reaction, accepting the new shoes and throwing away her old ones without hesitation, is equivalent to encouraging his unusual interests. Thus, a taste of satisfaction brought on by his awakened sexual desire inspires Zhuang to celebrate, and he gets completely drunk. This implies that Zhuang and Tang’s ‘friendship’ would be re-defined soon. If we interpret a woman’s foot as the symbol of Zhuang’s awakening sexual desire towards this specific woman, as the inseparable part of the foot, the shoes indeed become endowed with a new dimension of meaning from this scene.

¹⁸⁰ *Feidu*, 1993, 42, 2. *Ruined City*, 2015, 46, 13.

¹⁸¹ *Feidu*, 1993, 42, 7-8. *Ruined City*, 2015, 46, 20-21.

¹⁸² *Feidu*, 1993, 53. *Ruined City*, 2015, 58.

The shoes from now on work as clothes that dress his unusual interests with a costume, that cover his abnormal desire for a woman's feet, which do not even belong to his wife. The shoes also conceal factors that might turn into a "mistake and error" that will make his performance of a celebrity-writer lose its credibility to all his audiences and his partner Niu Yueqing. In addition, the shoes work as a window for Zhuang to check and gaze on Tang's beauty openly and directly. At the same time, the focus of Tang Wan'er's beauty has been obscured; it again goes to her body as when they first met. Her beauty has been totally simplified into a single part of her body. Her subjectivity as a woman has been continuously re-negotiated and re-confirmed during this process, Tang Wan'er as a societal individual from now on has been minimized into a part of her own body: her feet.

Zhuang Zhidie definitely is not the first man who is sexually interested in women's feet. In fact, many literary works, both domestic and foreign, have paid special attention to women's feet and shoes. In Andersen's literary world, little Karen's red dancing shoes represent desire and sin.¹⁸³ In Cinderella, the prince uses a glass slipper to find his princess. Women's feet, especially small feet, play an important role in expressing and even defining women's beauty in traditional Chinese culture. Three-inch-long "Lotus feet" (三寸金莲 *sancun jinlian*) were believed to be the ideal shape and size of a true beauty. Chinese traditional literati expressed their great preferences for small feet and their related objects, including shoes and stockings. *The Golden Lotus*, as the representative of classic erotic literature during the late Ming dynasty, shows the author's extreme preference for women's feet.¹⁸⁴ Ximen Qing, the hero in *The Golden Lotus*, is also fascinated by beautiful feet. He

¹⁸³ Hilary Davidson, "Sex and Sin: The Magic of Red Shoes." *Shoes: A History from Sneakers to Sandals*. Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2006, pp. 272-289.

¹⁸⁴ Lanling, 2015.

always checks women's lotus-like feet before he flirts with them. For instance, in the second chapter, Ximen meets Pan Jinlian for the first time; he falls in love with her the second he sees Pan's feet. In the fourth chapter, Ximen directly expresses his interests to Pan's feet; he "raises her skirt, notices her beautiful delicate feet wearing a white silk high-soled shoes."¹⁸⁵ Women's feet seem to have a mysterious attraction for Chinese men; beautiful faces seem less attractive than lotus-like small feet. In Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊斋志异), women's feet are endowed with a function that makes men fall in love with her at the first glance.¹⁸⁶ In the "Qing Feng" story, the young scholar Geng Qubing falls in love with Qing Feng, a beautiful young woman who is actually a fox spirit. In order to show his interest in her secretly, Geng "stealthily pressed his foot on her little three-inch lotus under the table."¹⁸⁷ In the story of "Miss Qiao Na," a descendant of Confucius Kung Hsuen-li was attracted by a fox girl Qiao Nan after she cured his disease.¹⁸⁸ He sat alone, closed his book and did nothing but think about Qiao Na all day long. However, his strong affection for Qiao Na was easily taken away by a pair of "tiny feet encased in phoenix-shaped shoes" from a woman his friend introduced to him.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ 第一回 西门庆热结十弟兄 武二郎冷遇亲哥嫂 Chapter One: The Brotherhood of Rascals, "因她(潘金莲)自幼生得有些姿色, 缠得一双好小脚, 所以就叫金莲 She was his sixth child, and had been given her name because she was very beautiful even as a child. Her tightly bound feet were particularly charming. (25)"; 第二回 俏潘娘帘下勾情 老王婆茶坊说技, "往下看尖翘翘金莲小脚, 云头巧缉山鸦。鞋儿白绫高底, 步香尘偏衬登踏。人见了魂飞魄丧, 卖弄杀俏冤家 Her feet were graced by tiny shoes made like the mountain crow, with tips embroidered to look like the claws. Their high heels were of white silk, so that she seemed always to walk upon a fragrant dust (43);"

¹⁸⁶ See details in Liu Hui 刘慧. "A probe into the culture of fetishism on women's feet and shoes reflected in the Strange Tales from A Lonely Studio, 《聊斋志异》中女性足履文化含义新探." *Pu Songling Studies 蒲松龄研究*, vol.01, 2017, 49-58. Cnki, doi: 10.19330/j.cnki.1002-3712.2017.01.006.

¹⁸⁷ Pu Songling. "Fox Feelings/Qing Feng 青凤." *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio 聊斋志异*. A chapter translated by Susan Wan Dolling. *WordsWithoutBorders*, WWB, May 2004. www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/from-liaozhai-zhiyi.

¹⁸⁸ Pu Songling. "Fox-Fairy Jiaonuo." *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*. Translated by Denis C. Mair and Victor H. Mair. Foreign Language Press, 1989, pp. 25-37.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 1926, 25, 9.

In both stories, the relationship between women and their feet is directly displayed as a relationship between women's bodies and men's sexual desire. The foot and shoe indeed work as metaphors for male heterosexual desire. Freud briefly mentioned this in his discussion of perversion; he believed that fascination with a foot/shoe was an exemplary case of fetishistic perversion.¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, men, including Ximen Qing and Zhuang Zhidie, and their desire for sexual activities have been extended beyond the 'normal' regions of women's body, like the vagina, and developed into sexual fetishism of specific non-sexual body parts, especially the feet. As a result, women's sexuality has been minimized to a small section of their bodies during this process, parts that can be easily observed on daily basis.

Later on, Zhuang confirms his obsession with Tang's beautiful feet during their first sexual intercourse: "I desperately wanted to touch your feet that day when I gave you shoes."¹⁹¹ Interestingly, Tang behaves as though she knows about Zhuang's desire for her feet from the last interaction between them. So, she constantly offers glances to Zhuang Zhidie with hints that she has already noticed his special attention to her body and unusual curiosity about her feet. She wears the shoes Zhuang gave her as a gift at the very beginning, and she suggests that, "everything on me is five years old...except for the shoes," which are "brand-new."¹⁹² What Tang has demonstrated here with the old-new contrast is that she loves what Zhuang has presented to her, sees his perverted interest as normal, like all other kinds of appreciations of her beauty, and expresses her willingness to accept his feelings

¹⁹⁰ Freud, as cited in Keith McMahon. "Polygyny, Bound Feet, and Perversion." *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, 2012, pp. 159–187. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42636051.

¹⁹¹ Feidu, 1993, 85. *Ruined City*, 2015, 90.

¹⁹² Feidu, 1993, 82. *Ruined City*, 2016, 87.

toward her. Tang seems to be asking whether Zhuang likes the shoes she is wearing, but, in fact, she is asking for a confirmation of her beauty, of her attraction to Zhuang. What Tang presents is an image of a woman who tactfully dominates their romance and guides the man to sexually interact with her. However, her willingness to push and manage their relationship, conversely, signifies that she has unconsciously accepted the perversion of her sexuality. On the other hand, she consciously modifies her performances as an individual woman into a provider who willingly serves Zhuang's interests in the perverted demands of women and their bodies. Her following action proves the previous conjecture:

She then sat down in front of him on a stool, putting one leg in back and resting the other one limply sideways against it. With the toe of her shoe barely touching the floor, she wore the shoe halfway off to expose her heel as she tried to balance herself on the stool.¹⁹³

She knows what her feet mean to the man who sits opposite her; she also knows how to make use of her lovely feet as an advantage to completely obtain this man sexually, then sentimentally: the shoes, as a mask, cover the reality of his impotence and his sexual repression. This man needs to find an outlet to express his urgent demands for sexual gratification and release his depressed sexual self. She can be his tool. From now on, Tang makes her feet into a fixed sign-equipment and cipher that accompanies almost her every interaction with Zhuang. The truth is that her equipment achieves her goal, successfully attracting Zhuang's attention, so that he "could not keep his eyes off the dainty shoes."¹⁹⁴ Tang's performance could be interpreted as an effective attempt at social mobility, from down to up. However, it is more like her version of "negative idealization," sacrificing her body and minimizing her subjectivity to be consistent with the ideal standard in reality that

¹⁹³ Feidu, 1993, 83. *Ruined City*, 2015, 89.

¹⁹⁴ Feidu, 1993, 83. *Ruined City*, 2015, 87.

Zhuang Zhidie deeply believed as a traditional, high-status man. Besides, her sacrifice also embodies the full potential of sexual fetishism and sexual perversion, which make women like Tang Wan'er naturally accept their subordinate status to males, more specifically, to the male-scholar centered society, and then unconsciously affirm those male's status by self-cancellation.

In the second half of their story, after they become secret lovers, Zhuang experiences extreme gratification from sexual engagement with Tang Wan'er. Her feet seem to lose their previous symbolic meaning. Zhuang's sexual attentions generally move from the feet to the inner thigh, which is a bottom-up motion that gradually moves closer to her vagina.

He raised her skirt to write something on her thigh. She did not put up a struggle, letting him write while she powered her face in a mirror. When he finished, she looked down to see what he had written. "Worry-free hall," she read.¹⁹⁵

The words he wrote, "Worry-free hall" 无忧堂 (*wu you tang*), straightforwardly express the sentimental satisfaction he has received from the 'abnormal' sexual relationship with Tang. For Zhuang Zhidie, Tang's vagina makes him forget all his worries and troubles when playing all his other social roles, for instance, as a husband. In other words, Zhuang is honestly presenting his understanding of so-called love feelings towards Tang. For him, her performance as a woman who loves him with all her heart can be interpreted as she fulfilling his sexual demands and relieving him of daily suffering as a famous writer. Therefore, the meaning of a sexual activity is only carnal pleasure. There is no need for him to treat the sex with the secret lover as a ceremony, as in other social activities—no

¹⁹⁵ Feidu, 1993, 178. *Ruined City*, 2015, 184.

need to make space for his subjectivities produced from catering to social expectations—because he has already controlled his own subjectivity and has the power to confirm impressions he performed by himself. In addition, moving from her feet to her vagina also demonstrates that Zhuang has gradually gotten rid of the mask that covered his perverted sexual self, which arose from his incapability of building connections with his wife Niu. What confidence he plunders from sexual engagements with Tang Wan'er helps him to raise a new sexual self that can be expressed by playing with this symbol of women's femininity.

However, not surprisingly, as the object in this sexual ceremony, Tang Wan'er finds it difficult to ask for equality. She seems to be bound to a relegated position and be an object to be played with. As a result, the road of negative idealization becomes the only way for her, as Goffman believed, to achieve the perfectly standardized performance within the environment, in which the natural superiority of the male is demonstrated. In other words, the negative idealization that Tang made is a way for her to survive and ultimately gain advantage in Zhuang's show. It is her way of striving for a better life; it is also her way of submitting to the social fact of male superiority. The concept of negative idealization ostensibly contradicts Tang's performance, because by controlling she submits all herself, body and affection, to Zhuang's male power. The above two goals are, however, coherent, because they all belong to the context of a male-dominated society. It is their male power that forces women's like Tang to devalue themselves, then finally submit to a society they cannot contend with.

Ironically, after Tang has totally offered herself to Zhuang Zhidie, he takes off her high heels with his own hands. It happens right before Niu finds out about their affair; Zhuang

and Tang discuss the house-maid Liu Yue's marriage to the mayor's disabled son. Zhuang's behavior could be interpreted as a sign of his gradually disappearing interest in Tang. The sex they had at their last rendezvous looks more like the last fling; Tang's function of bringing Zhuang sexual gratification no longer has meaning for him. After this, Tang is taken by her husband and locked in their house back in Tongguan.

Her husband had stripped her naked and beaten her until her body was covered with welts. He wanted her to promise that she would be content to stay home with him, but she refused to say anything, neither yes nor no, so he tied her up and raped her over and over. He tortured her, burning her privates with cigarettes, cramming a flashlight.¹⁹⁶

Even the ending of her story could not break away from her body; the husband's brutal way of torturing and imprisoning her also has sexual meaning. It focuses on stripping her of feminine beauty and sexuality. He is another man like Zhuang Zhidie, who simply objectifies Tang as a social entity into her sexual ability. But for him, there is no need for a symbol, like feet and shoes, that obstructs him from expressing the absolute control of the relation between his sexual desire and Tang's body. More directly, he tortures her through hurting her vagina, which can easily be understood as a symbol of women's sexuality. Carrying the title of husband gives this man the supreme power to decide what Tang needs to suffer and submit. He indeed takes away her body first, then subjectivity, leaving Tang with nothing to look at in this male-dominated society.

For Zhuang, Tang Wan'er's beautiful feet and her elegant high-heels are erotic symbols that 'secretly' carry Chinese men's curiosity for sex and desire for women's bodies, which cannot be easily expressed in Confucianism culture. It is the product of a long-time sexual depression; it is also a product that helps Zhuang successfully release himself from a long-

¹⁹⁶ Feidu, 1993, 499. *Ruined City*, 2015, 502.

time sexual depression. The symbolic meanings of feet and other objects turn out to be rather vague terms for expressing men's sexual demands. Tang is immersed in an environment that gradually assimilates her belief in love and the future into a goal of making herself sexually attractive. As a result, the "negative idealization" she has achieved is more like a selection made self-consciously. It must be emphasized that Tang is her own heroine, but she is not the heroine in Zhuang Zhidie's story about defining himself as a celebrity-writer in Xijing. Her performance has been defined from the very beginning as an object to serve him to achieve the goal of *Po Que*. Her love story and "the lady of the house" dream are also objects that have no meaning beyond the realities that Zhuang Zhidie performs. So, at the very end of their story, after she has been taken away, Niu's mother, a crazy old lady, gives Zhuang the key to unlock the whole situation in his dream. Niu's mother asks where Zhou Min's woman is, and she tells Zhuang what she saw in her dream:

She was crying in a room; she couldn't move because her legs were bent... her privates were a bloody mess under a lock. I asked her why. Didn't she need to pee? She said it didn't affect her peeing, but it had gotten rusty from the urine, and she couldn't open it. I asked her to give me the key and I'd open it for her. She said Zhuang Zhidie has the key.¹⁹⁷

Tang's sexuality has been totally destroyed; a lock has been put on her vagina. Zhuang Zhidie, interestingly, becomes the person who could again release her from real pain. But this time the dream is not about his sexual desire or pleasure; it is more about releasing Tang's vagina from constraints, from men and their unfulfilled sexual desires. Zhuang has ironically been given this power to let Tang go, as the person who firstly locked her up. Regardless, bringing up the vagina again confirms that the significance of Tang Wan'er in this show is to represent Zhuang Zhidie's performance of sex, demonstrating the sexual

¹⁹⁷ Feidu, 1993, 513. *Ruined City*, 2015, 516.

aspect of his self as a man who experiences the whole process from sexual depression to sensual indulgence. Women, in this sense, are no more than a tool to awaken his sexual desire and later become an outlet for his unfulfilled sexual appetite. In one way or another, this illustrates that the performances that all other characters have conducted and that later become facts are all for promoting Zhuang Zhidie's role as a celebrity-writer in Xijing. Every single move the characters make in this play will affect the credibility of his social role as a celebrity-writer, even sexual acts.

Chapter 3: Liu Yue— Village Girl, Maid, Mistress, and the Wife of Mayor's Son: Searching for a position within the male-dominant society

Compared with the wife Niu Yueqing and the mistress Tang Wan'er, the housemaid Liu Yue is more like a "rebel," who always seeks to "progress" in one way or another, although the means she adopts to achieve her goal of personal transformation and liberation is not always morally acceptable. Liu Yue's behaviour is puzzling. She could give an infant sleeping pills, so that she would have time to dress and read; she also is willing to take care of Zhuang Zhidie, after he loses everything, including wife Niu's support and mistress Tang's love, and especially his reputation as a celebrity-writer. Looking at her self-contradictory behaviour and unfinished ending, we might see her rising from village girl to the wife of the mayor's son as more like an anti-progression, which does not involve improvements, or, fundamentally, as the expression of an egocentric person's selfishness. On the other hand, Niu seems to be the only woman in Zhuang Zhidie's whole life who always seizes the chance of being finally awakened by his self-protecting and self-despising behavior. Most critics tend to believe that her behavior and resulting development reflect an overall image of Chinese women in the 1990s, deeply affected by materialism and consumerism, lost under the weight of modernization, becoming creatures of material desire.¹⁹⁸ Some even describe Niu as an extreme symbol of materialistic

¹⁹⁸ For examples, Lin Liting 林丽婷. *Discussing the migration of female narrative in Jia Pingwa's Novels 论贾平凹小说女性叙事的迁徙*. 2015. Huaqiao University 华侨大学, Master Thesis. Cnki, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=0&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=1015974071.nh&dbname=CMFD201601&dbcode=CMFD&yx=&pr=&URLID=. Zhou Qianqian 周倩倩. *Jia Pingwa's Women's World 贾平凹笔下的女性世界*. 2009. Shandong Normal University 山东师范大学, MA Thesis. Cnki, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=29&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=1012338807.nh&dbname=CMFD2012&dbcode=CMFD&yx=&pr=&URLID=. Wang Lin 王琳. *The Male-dominance concealed by worship of women 女性崇拜掩盖下的男性中心主义*. 2010. Liaoning Normal University 辽宁大学, MA Thesis. Cnki,

worship. In order to maintain her upward mobility, from the lowest class to the upper class, she sacrifices herself, both body and soul, for the sake of material gain. For critics, Liu Yue seems like the classic “negative example” in Zhuang Zhidie’s world, compared to the virtuous wife Niu Yueqing, who is fully committed to the family, and the beautiful Tang Wan’er, who is committed to love. In this sense, Liu’s transformations become outcomes of either self-consciousness or determinism, rather than for the famous Zhuang Zhidie. However, others contend that those actions are indeed the male-dominant society forcing her to perform; they are results of women’s struggle in the shadow of revolution and reform in 1990s.

These impressions, in fact, interpret Liu Yue’s performances as a housemaid from both micro and macro standpoints. The former perspective focuses on her individual agency; the latter leans on the social structure and social forces of which the social actors, including Liu Yue, are mostly unaware, though they greatly affect their daily activities. What social forces demonstrate here is a similar idea to the concept of social expectation that I mentioned in the previous chapter. However, social forces analysis emphasizes more the ways social forces influence individuals remotely and force them to think and behave in specified ways. The discussion of Liu Yue, in one way or another, has become a debate about whether her subjectivity or the social forces are the reasons for the changes in her life. I contend that both ways of viewing this character are valid. However, for this project especially, the micro-way of analysis will be applied. The macro-way that focuses on the larger context, instead, could be interpreted as the background of this chapter’s analysis.

To address the questions “Does the maid Liu Yue achieve her personal transformation or does she not?” and “How does the transformation affect her way of searching for the self?”, this chapter will look at the distinct social roles that Liu Yue plays on her stage in the micro-sociological terms of the mind and self. Respectively, Liu’s roles are: a poor village girl recently arrived in the big city; a housemaid in the famous Zhuang Zhidie’s house; a housemaid having an affair with the man of the house; and the wife of the mayor’s disabled son. Through this analysis, this chapter aims to reveal how the maid Liu Yue negotiates with various characters during each of her transformations, and how she walks alone on her journey of self-discovery. In addition, this chapter will examine Liu’s social roles in different life phases from two planes in different dimensions. One plane is external and physical and could be directly observed from the character’s performance when interacting with all social others. As Goffman elaborated in his works, the performance includes the character’s appearances and manners that are consistent with social expectations towards the position he/she played. Goffman believed that performers have an everyday routine that is “a pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance” and will remain all the same when they play the role.¹⁹⁹ What is more, the preparation and later management of her performance will also be included in the external plane. The other plane is more internal, distinguished from the external body. The inner world of an individual is where she or he arranges information acknowledged from social interactions and finally raises the self, based on clues gathered from interactions, which is conscious and reflective of symbols and the corresponding meanings that exist in social

¹⁹⁹ Goffman, 1959, 16.

activity.²⁰⁰ Thus, in this sense, this chapter considers Liu Yue as a conscious social entity who consistently engages in various social interactions with different social others from diverse communities and classes, and who is capable of collecting and screening information, then adjusting and performing the different social roles that she encounters with various situations.

Sociologists like Simmel, Mead, and Goffman maintain the idea that the development of the self is achieved through the process of socialization. And the social interaction, especially face-to-face interactions, between individuals is the way in which the self is generated. As one of the earliest sociologists who drew people's inner world from psychology exclusively into the sociological area, Simmel insists that individuals' interactions with others are the way in which society is formed.²⁰¹ He emphasizes the exchange through interactions and believes that all forms of interaction involve different levels of exchange and reciprocity. The reciprocity of interactions gives both sides the idea of how they appear in each other's eyes, because, he contends, individuals have the ability to gather every piece of information for producing a social self from others' expressions. In addition, Simmel develops his discussion of individualization in modern society; he contends that the rise of exchange based on money changes individuals' membership in social groups from exclusive to elective.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Sociologists such as Simmel and Mead have discussed how the individual generates the self in their works. Mead especially discusses the meaning of self behind the socialization and distinguishes the individual ego "I" and the socialized self "Me". For details, see Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff, Illinois, The Free Press, 1964, pp. 409-424. *Archive.org*, <https://archive.org/details/sociologyofgeorg030082mbp>. George Herbert Mead, 2015.

²⁰¹ See Simmel, 1964, pp. 3-57.

²⁰² For details, Simmel, 1964.

Affected by Simmel's thinking, Mead has developed his theory of the social self, focusing on how various interactions with different social groups affect the process of establishing the self.²⁰³ He distinguishes the concept of 'Me' from the 'I'. For Mead, the 'I' is the individual ego; it is the tacit knowledge people already have about what we see from the society. 'Me' is the next phase of 'I'; it is the socially constructed 'I,' the individual gains others' impressions of her/him during interactions, and then generalizes a concrete idea of the "I." The self, meanwhile, is the combination of the "I" and "Me," which emerges out of the social activities in which the individual is involved. The self represents the balance of the individual ego and others' expectations and impressions that supports people to negotiate with the social reality and become involved in the socialization process.

Moreover, he also asserts that symbols in social life carry various meanings for the individual to understand society. According to him, individuals rely on their understanding of significant symbols and related meanings to enable a conversation in the context of experience. The mind, in fact, emerges through this process, and it can be seen as a practice of interpreting certain objects into meaningful symbols. Being able to read symbols requires participants' instant reflexivity to universal symbols and gestures and mutual understanding of the same ideal behind the gesture and symbol. Mead believes that insofar as the process of the individual makes reaction to each symbol appear during interactions, then self-consciousness will function. In other words, the self would arise from individuals' social interactions, based on their understandings of meanings that various symbols carry. Getting involved with social activities, in fact, earns people chances to obtain social

²⁰³ For details, Mead, 2015, 62-100.

experiences, by which she/he can confirm the diversity of a social unit that balances functions of multiple and overlapping social roles.

In addition, in his study of children's socialization process, based on family relationship, Mead proposes the concept of "generalized others," by which he refers to "the organized community or social group that gives to the individual his unity of self."²⁰⁴ It was later developed by Harry Stack Sullivan into the term "significant other."²⁰⁵ Modern technologies affect individuals' goals and the way of receiving others' perceptions of themselves. Influences on children's socialization, in Mead's analysis, cut across the family boundary; as a result, the "generalized others" from the "organized community," their perceptions, in fact, have been fragmented into significant others' expectations.²⁰⁶ In other words, "significant other" refers to all others who have important relationship to an individual; one's perceptions influence the individual's way of performing in one way or another. Based on all their studies, Goffman developed a closer study of this relationship; he concludes that social life is the process by which people move backward and forward in between the 'front stage' and 'back stage' and dress themselves to create impressions of others. To some extent, this process indeed reflects the routine through which individuals modify the self along with impressions from interactions with others. According to sociologists mentioned above, the existence of the social process of behavior takes logical priority; the self instead is reproduced from the process.

²⁰⁴ Mead, 2015, 71.

²⁰⁵ Harry Stack Sullivan. "The interactional and situational approaches." *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, edited by Harold T. Christensen. Chicago, Rand McNally, 1964.

²⁰⁶ Leonard S. Cottrell and Nelson N. Foote. "Sullivan's contributions to social psychology." *The Contributions of Harry Stack Sullivan*, edited by Patrick Mallany. New York, Science House, 1952, pp. 190-191.

There is a long history of the role of the maid in the scholar-beauty romance story and later erotic fictions.²⁰⁷ For instance, Hong Niang in *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xi xiang ji* 西厢记) perfectly demonstrates a faithful servant. In addition to taking care of Cui Yingying's daily life, Hong Niang also plays the go-between for Yingying and Zhang Sheng. She is not the matchmaker of this couple; also, Hong Niang used to stand on the opposite side to Yingying's mother, who disapproves of their love and marriage from the very beginning.²⁰⁸ She was loyal to Yingying's mother, her mistress; also, she never doubts her responsibility as Yingying's maid. However, after Zhang Sheng saved Yingying from Sun Feihu and Yingying's mother went back on her promise of marrying Yingying to Zhang Sheng, Hong Niang decides to switch her role as an observer to a participant. She spares no effort to help Cui Yingying get together with Zhang Sheng. She passes secret letters, gives advice and suggestions, and even takes blame for them. Her existence is to create the conditions for the heroine to meet, fall in love, and marry the hero. Her personality definitely displays support for Cui Yingying; however, her life is also locked up in the relationship between Zhang and Cui.

²⁰⁷ See details in Wang Yunhui 王云慧. *Study of the role of maid in scholar-beauty fictions from Ming and Qing dynasty* 明清才子佳人小说中婢女形象研究. 2007. Yangzhou University 扬州大学, MA thesis. Cnki, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD2007&filename=2007149462.nh&v=MTM5MDZLZlIPWnNGaXptVWI3SVYxMjdHYks4RjlYS3JaRWJQSVI4ZVgxTHV4WVM3RGgxVDNxVHJXTTFGckNVUkw= 2007. Li Tingting 李婷婷. *The Study of the Role of Maid in Classic Literature in Qing Dynasty* 清代言言小说中的婢女形象研究. 2012. Soochow University 苏州大学, MA thesis. Cnki, b.38zhubao.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?QueryID=9&CurRec=1&recid=&filename=1012388464.nh&dbname=CMFD2012&dbcode=CMFD&yx=&pr=&URLID=.

²⁰⁸ Wang Shi-fu. *The Story of the West Wing* 西厢记. University of California Press, 1990.

Unlike Hong Niang, Fei Hong in *Golden Boy and Jade Maiden* (*Jiao Hong Ji* 娇红记) carries more personal emotions.²⁰⁹ As the maid of the heroine Wang Jiaoniang, she happens to fall in love with Jiaoniang's lover Sheng Chun. After Sheng turns her down, Fei Hong becomes jealous. Her jealousy peaks when she finds Jiaoniang's shoes in the study. Feihong thought the shoe was the evidence of their secret meeting after her mother and the mistress, Wang Wenrui, forbade them to see each other, so she went to Jiaoniang and asked her. Fei Hong even threatened to give these shoes to Wenrui. Her query was taken as a false accusation by Jiaoniang, as an excuse to ruin her love for Sheng Chun. However, when she realized that Jiao Niang had devoted all herself to an unconditional and irrevocable love for Sheng Chun, after Wenrui went back on what she said of marrying Jiaoniang to Sheng Chun, Feihong chose to stand at Jiaoniang's side. Fei Hong helped Jiao Niang look for Sheng Chun and set up secret meetings for them. In the end, Jiaoniang died from an illness and Sheng Chun committed suicide by self-starvation. Fei Hong, in this case, has been somehow released from the emotional shackles that her role of a faithful maid put on her. At least, she has the courage to reveal her emotional demands as an individual, which had been dismissed by the expectation of being a faithful servant to her master.²¹⁰

Pang Chunmei in *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅) is another example, but she successfully avoids the maid's fixed fate—as a faithful appurtenance in the scholar-beauty

²⁰⁹ Meng Chengshun. *Jiao Hong Ji* 娇红记, edited by Xuejing Zhang and Liu Yousheng, translated by Paul White. New World Press, 2002.

²¹⁰ For details, see Richard Wang. "The Cult of Qing: Romanticism in Late Ming Period and in the Novel *Jiao Hong Ji*." *Ming Studies*, vol. 1994, no. 1, 2013, pp. 12-55. *Taylor & Francis Online*, doi: 10.1179/014703794788763727.

romance pattern—giving this role another possibility.²¹¹ Because of her beauty and personality, Chunmei attracts the hero Ximen Qing’s attention. But the impetus that finally makes her sexually engage with Ximen is her mistress Pan Jinlian’s connivance. Pan is the one who makes her function as a concubine, while retaining the name of maid. “Sharing” the same man with Pan gives her a chance to build a good “friendship” with her. Later, Wu Yueniang, the first wife of Ximen, finds out about Pan’s affair with Chen Jingji; she sells Chunmei to Zhou Xiu, who is the general of the garrison stationed in Qinghe, as a punishment to Pan. However, Zhou falls in love with Chunmei and makes her the woman of the house after she gives birth to his son. Although Chunmei dies at the end, because of indulging in sexual pleasures, she indeed successfully changes her life track from maid to mistress. Liu Yue’s story, to some extent, shares similarities with Chunmei’s as she progresses from a maid to the wife of mayor’s son by surrendering completely to the already-existing social structures and forces.

The beginning of Liu Yue’s story sounds very similar to that of Tang Wan’er. Both women start their performance as village girls, who finally get chances to explore new lives in the big city. However, unlike the mistress Tang, Liu Yue’s key to opening the door that starts her new life is not a man, but a job. Before she met the famous Zhuang Zhidie, Liu Yue is a nanny from a poor rural family in Shaanxi Province, employed by a working-class household in an old residential compound with many other families. Coincidentally, this compound happens to be the one that belongs to Zhuang’s confidant Zhao Jingwu and would soon be torn down by mayor’s order for a new gymnasium. As a collector of the past, Zhuang Zhidie was invited by Zhao to reminisce about history and collect antiques in

²¹¹ Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, 2015.

this old-style courtyard dwelling where Liu Yue and her employer live. During this short visit, Zhuang glances at Liu Yue through the bamboo door curtain; he sees “a woman in red, sitting on the steps across the yard, rocking her baby in a cradle and reading a book.”²¹² Her beauty and performance attracts him right away; he shares his interest in Liu Yue with Zhao Jingwu and asks him to look for a maid for his family, someone from her village who looks like Liu Yue. Later, when Liu Yue comes to look for Zhuang Zhidie by calling his name directly and asks him for a piece of calligraphy, the confident Zhao Jingwu mentions Zhuang Zhidie’s special “offer” of hiring someone like her. Liu’s response of immediately offering herself pleases Zhuang Laoshi.

Although she has signed a work contract with the family, Liu Yue shows up at Zhuang’s door during the party he threw for Wang Ximian and his wife. From that moment, she smoothly transitions into the third stage of her life, from a nanny to the housemaid of the famous Zhuang Zhidie. Liu completely assimilates into Zhuang’s everyday life and becomes the participant and observer of his performance as the celebrity-writer, the husband, the boss, and the friend in the household. Being able to access Zhuang’s private life also provides Liu with a chance to discover his secret romance with Tang Wan’er. By hiding their secret, Liu becomes an accomplice to Zhuang and Tang’s affair, and finally becomes sexually involved with Zhuang Zhidie herself. This seems to change her role from a maid to a “sister” of the mistress Tang Wan’er. Being Zhuang’s new fascination lets this girl temporarily forget who she really is and emboldens her to contradict the woman of the house. However, the man who gave her the chance to enter this dream also wakes her up;

²¹² Feidu, 1993, 45. *Ruined City*, 2015, 49.

Zhuang Zhidie slaps Liu in the face to remind her of her responsibility and not forget her place as a maid in a famous man's house.

As the other audience and participant in Zhuang's life, the wife Niu Yueqing also notices these little changes in the beautiful maid. Niu decides to get rid of Liu Yue by marrying her to a relative's son who lives in suburbs. However, Zhao Jingwu again coincidentally changes Liu Yue's life: he asks Zhuang whether Zhuang can "grant" Liu Yue to him. The agreement between Zhao and Zhuang again drags Liu Yue back to reality, so she gives up her ambition of being Zhuang's wife and accepts her fate with Zhao Jingwu. However, Zhao Jingwu is not the only person who is intrigued by Liu's beauty. At the turning point of Zhuang Zhidie's lawsuit with Jing Xueying, the mayor's disabled son Dazheng shows his great interest in Liu Yue, asking Zhuang whether he can let Liu marry him. Zhuang gives this choice to Liu Yue, and she chooses to abandon Zhao and marry Dazheng right away. After that, Liu Yue moves to the mayor's house, gets a job at Ruan Zhifei's dancing club as a model, and becomes "friends" with foreigners. Liu Yue is the only woman who voluntarily chooses to leave Zhuang Zhidie when she has the chance, a chance that offers her a new life among the truly upper-class; however, she also is the only one who takes care of Zhuang after he loses the lawsuit and all his fame. She is the most ambitious, but is also the most caring one. Those contradictions are deeply rooted in her life and make her a creature of desire, affection, intelligence, and ambition, which makes her self-searching process more interesting for readers to explore.

Phase I: from a village girl to nanny of working-class family

Other than what Zhuang sees through the bamboo door curtain, there is no direct depiction of Liu Yue's appearance while playing the role of either village girl or nanny.

What we can learn all comes from Zhao Jingwu's narration; however, Zhao's information about her is also second-hand, heard from the other neighbors in the compound, and mostly focusing on the manners and personalities she displayed during interactions. Accordingly, Liu Yue changed in a very short time; she is a "fast bloomer."²¹³ This is her first time working in the city. So, "when she showed up, she was dressed in handmade clothes; she kept her eyes down around people; and you couldn't get a word out of her."²¹⁴ Her appearance and manner remain within her old role, as a village girl. The huge differences between urban and rural areas, from dress and appearance to mannerisms and behaviour, temporarily throw Liu Yue into limbo. Reflections from other social beings directly transform into social pressures and remind her what rules from this social class are differentiating her from her old self. The old role is no longer acceptable in new social interactions, the same as her handmade clothes and unapproachable manner. Then, this scene happens, as related by Zhao Jingwu:

Then one day, while her employers were at work, she went into the closet and tried on the mistress's dresses, modeling them in the mirror. A neighbor spotted her and told her she looked like the actress Chen Chong (Joan Chen). 'Really?' she said before bursting into tears.²¹⁵

Apparently, Liu Yue does not intend to let audiences notice what she is doing in the mistress's closet, which is more a back-stage behavior that needs to be conducted privately. The act of purposely avoiding audiences supports her consciousness, confirming the

²¹³ Feidu, 1993, 50. *Ruined City*, 2015, 55.

²¹⁴ Feidu, 1993, 50. *Ruined City*, 2015, 55.

²¹⁵ Feidu, 1993, 50-51. *Ruined City*, 2015, 55.

possibility of new “facts” about city lifestyle and a new “face” that belongs to the title of nanny. However, the neighbor’s inopportune intrusion breaks the fixed boundary between her on-stage and off-stage identities which, to some extent, puts Liu Yue in an extremely isolated and embarrassing situation. It can even be described as an incident which, as Goffman argues, breaks the pre-established performance pattern of her as a village girl. Liu Yue is now in an unprepared state caused by interacting with an audience in her private space. Furthermore, when the intruder makes a comment on her new appearance, which she has stolen from others “like the actress Joan Chen,” this unexpectedly gives away her old belief in the village girl Liu Yue and this fact is built upon the role a final warning—what new audiences will accept is an actress-like city girl. Her tears signify the feeling of being left out when the new life brutally tears apart the old belief that was produced with her identity as a village girl Liu Yue.

Those tears, in fact, contain several layers of meaning. First, they show how panicked Liu is at being forced to interact with an audience and be observed under such conditions when she is stealing another performer’s appearances—namely the mistress’s dress. Liu’s tears also show her self-questioning—questioning whether she looks like Joan Chen in the mistress’s dress, who she used to be, who she is right now, whether she is the mistress or the famous actress, and whether she could finally become the mistress (even become Joan Chen herself). There are many possibilities suddenly jumping out for a village girl like Liu who used to have no choices in life. Thus, her reaction to the neighbor seems undoubtedly logical. It is more like a rhetorical question than an answer—a question she is asking the neighbor (the intruder, and now the new audience) and also asking herself. It is self-doubt, and self-confirming. She doubts the old village girl, who was raised through interacting

with all other villagers and “village-style” socialization patterns, submissive and avoidant of eye contact. She also confirms with the audience a new social role: that of the city girl, who is born from her, from the real city dwellers’ perceptions, and, most important, who is as confident and beautiful as the famous actress. The whole process indeed symbolizes Liu Yue’s first transformation, from village girl to city girl, and kicks off the start of a series of transformations. With this transformation, the following story Zhao narrated sounds more reliable:

When she received her first wages as a nanny, the mistress told her she should send some back to her family, since life was so hard for farmworkers. She didn’t. Instead she spent it all on clothes. Clothes make the woman; a saddle makes the horse. Overnight she became a dazzler. Everyone in the compound said she did look like Chen Chong, and she grew livelier by the day. Her personality changed drastically.²¹⁶

What Zhao noticed is evidence of Liu Yue’s change, although it is very superficial and focuses on her appearance as a beautiful woman. However, spending the first salary all on herself is a very significant performance that later grounds her new personality as a nanny in a city. The image of Liu Yue from Zhao Jingwu’s description carries a sign of selfishness, especially when it derives from the contradiction between filial piety and modern lifestyle. Liu Yue would rather spend her first wages on new clothes and dresses to make herself better than support her family of origin that represents the poor, backward, rural version of herself. Her action, in fact, has betrayed the core Confucian tenets of traditional Chinese culture: filial piety “Xiao”. Together with the story Zhao told at her first appearance in front of Zhuang Zhidie, when she gives the infant in her care sleeping pills so that she would have more time to do her own things, Liu Yue’s new image for her

²¹⁶ Feidu, 1993, 50-51. *Ruined City*, 2015, 55.

metropolitan audiences seems to be on full display. She is a now self-serving creature who is not restricted by morality and who uses her young and beautiful body as an advantage to attract others.

Moreover, through reporting his impressions of Liu Yue before and after, Zhao Jingwu also emphasizes and reinforces his status as a male observer, especially through his comparison between a woman and a horse. This inappropriate comparison highlights the male gaze, male perspective, and male voice. The word “dazzler”, which Zhao uses to describe this new version of Liu Yue, connotes both praise and expectation. Hence, in addition to all the pressures of her new urban lifestyle and expectations she learns from various social communities, Liu Yue also confronts the stresses of being a lower-class woman in the male-dominant society. “Self-serving” now contains a new definition of “self-preserving.”

All these changes that burst Liu’s belief in handmade clothes and unapproachable bearing also break up her old self that was balancing atop the village beliefs and girlhood views of her small world. It all starts from the mistress-imitation game she plays by herself, which later evolves into a full-blown famous-actress act. Her old self, hidden behind a village-signifying face, is questioned in pretending to be a city woman and famous actress. Whereas before Liu was truly incapable of taking on the perspective of either role, now she is actively focusing on performing, and later mentally assimilating, the perspectives of both roles. Liu Yue’s identity achieves its own transformation through this whole process; in fact, a borrowed self exists as an extension of another person, but indeed customized into her version. Liu Yue’s problem now becomes how to achieve the value of her new self; fortunately, she meets the famous Zhuang Zhidie; she displays all her advantages to this

powerful man and tactfully recommends herself when Zhao mentions that Zhuang wants to hire a maid. It is here that Liu Yue's life story moves into its second phase.

Phase II: from a nanny to maid of the famous Zhuang Zhidie

There is an important element in Liu's nanny story: the contract she signed with the family, which was firstly bought out by Zhao Jingwu on Zhuang's behalf, when Liu revealed her intention to work for Zhuang.²¹⁷ Her intuitive reaction to Zhao's query reflects the possibility that she might breach the old contract. However, this dampens Zhuang's eager interests right away, as he considers the consequences that might result for Zhao and himself. In fact, the discussion of the contract signifies the impending transition in Liu's life. Her intent of upward mobility is confirmed; something like a contract cannot even be called an obstacle. So, when Liu comes to knock on his door in a very short time, Zhuang Zhidie seems surprised.

The first social interaction Liu Yue has as a maid in Zhuang's house starts right away, after she knocks on his door. Behind that door is the very party that the mistress Niu Yueqing threw for Wang Ximian's wife, and to which she invited most of Zhuang's close friends—including the secret lover Tang Wan'er. Her immediate involvement in these significant interactions and higher social classes presents both a challenge and opportunity for Liu Yue. It tests her ability to adapt to the new maid role without any preparation; it also gives her an opportunity to leave a perfect first impression on all these upper-class audiences, who might become her future allies and "supporters." In this sense, this party is one of the most significant scenes, which perfectly demonstrates how Liu manages the

²¹⁷ Feidu, 1993, 50. *Ruined City*, 2015, 53.

transition from a nanny to a maid in the famous celebrity-writer's house and how she performs her new role on the front stage.

The changes in Liu's appearance are apparent; although not directly portrayed in this interaction, they are presented mainly through comparisons that her audience makes. Xia Jie, Meng Yunfang's wife, compares Liu to a princess; later, everyone at the party compares her to the ceramic statue of a Tang dynasty chambermaid, and asserts that "the maid resembles Liu Yue...the facial features were modeled after her."²¹⁸ Meanwhile, Meng Yunfang, Zhuang's confidant and the only male engaged in this conversation, compares the maid to a concubine and advises him to "be careful."²¹⁹ The princess comparison is a simple and straightforward compliment that Xia Jie came up with before getting to know her personality, while the "Tang dynasty chambermaid" comment also comes from Meng's wife Xia. Before she blurts it out, there is a description of the chambermaid's appearance, with "hair piled high above a brightly rouged face...upwardly slanting eyes and long, slender eyebrows."²²⁰ Accordingly, Liu Yue's appearance could be simply drawn.

Whereas the previous two comparisons seem like direct praise, the one Meng whispered to Zhuang is more like a warning—although praising Liu's beauty, it hints at the potential 'side effects' of infidelity and romantic distraction. Again, Liu's performance in the new role of maid has been discussed and judged only based on her beautiful appearance, just like Zhao Jingwu did when she was still a nanny. However, Liu Yue does not give any reflection that contains strong emotional change, unlike the time she was compared with

²¹⁸ Feidu, 1993, 93. *Ruined City*, 2015, 99.

²¹⁹ Feidu, 1993, 93. *Ruined City*, 2015, 99.

²²⁰ Feidu, 1993, 92-93. *Ruined City*, 2015, 99.

the actress Joan Chen. Although she feels somehow related to the chambermaid, she responds with bashfulness and silence. There are two possible explanations for her performance: first is that, unlike the old village girl, the new Liu Yue is habituated to her audiences' compliments, after successfully casting off the old village girl role. In addition, her confirmation of the new maid role, which begins the second she betrays the old employer and knocks upon Zhuang's door, and then finds the connection with the Tang chambermaid, needs to be performed in a consistent manner. Bursting into tears apparently no longer conforms to the current stage she is on and the persona she owns.

Realizing Zhuang is throwing this party, Liu actively asks to help. She might realize this is a perfect chance and needs to be seized. It gives her the opportunity to present her appearance and manner as an eligible maid, rather than a village "nobody," in front of every guest who belongs to Zhuang's social class—it is an opportunity to make them remember her, because they later might become useful resources. Liu Yue discusses her relationship with Niu Yueqing and comments on their sharing of the character "Yue" in their names, which means "moon" in Chinese. Instead of approaching the mistress or raising herself up, she tactfully chooses to emphasize her role as the mistress's employee: "I was destined to work for you."²²¹ Liu's reflection shows Niu appropriate respect and confirms her future position in Zhuang's house, which pleases Niu. In the conversation that follows, Niu shows her acceptance by calling Liu "sister." Liu, again, does not accept this title right away; rather, she reinforces her original persona as a country girl, puts Niu in a much higher position, like a grownup in the family who can curse and even hit her. Her behavior of voluntarily minimizing her own presence, taking up the lowest position in this family,

²²¹ Feidu, 1993, 90-91. *Ruined City*, 2015, 96.

empowers the mistress Niu with a feeling of control that she could not obtain from Zhuang Zhidie.

In addition, in this conversation, Liu Yue also brings up Niu's greatest concern as Zhuang's wife, which is Zhuang's reputation, which is the foundation of his family; without hesitation, Liu declares her willingness to protect it. What manners Liu Yue has presented so far are perfectly in accordance with the mistress Niu Yueqing's criteria. Somehow, Liu's presentation of a maid in Zhuang's family is fully set up during this conversation. Credited for previous preparation, she rushes to help Niu wash the vegetables in the kitchen, she looks more natural and reasonable. Especially when she is applying body language, "pulling her hair into a ponytail" and "rolling up her sleeves," an image of a hardworking and thoughtful girl becomes even more vivid and specific.²²² Moreover, her consciousness not only presents a clear understanding of the essential difference between the maid and the mistress but reveals her capability of knowing how to behave in different situations to earn credits for the employer couple. Most of her conversations with Zhuang's guest are initiated to promote Zhuang and Niu's best image. For instance, when everyone is teasing Zhuang for his special invitation to Liu to read in his study, she ingeniously eases the master's embarrassment by, again, emphasizing her essence as a maid "cleaning up here every day," and insists that she "cannot become a writer," and expressing how she feels satisfied and thankful to breathe the knowledgeable air.²²³ Later, during the lunch, Zhuang proposes a toast to each guest following the sequence of their social status, from Wang Ximian's wife to Zhao Jingwu; at last, he raises the glass to Liu Yue; not

²²² Feidu, 1993, 91. *Ruined City*, 2015, 97.

²²³ Feidu, 1993, 93. *Ruined City*, 2015, 99.

surprisingly, she turns the new master down and asks him to toast the mistress first.²²⁴ Her action seems to hurt Zhuang's face in front of everybody, but, in fact, she is earning herself dignity by offering respect to Niu Yueqing and eliminating the side effects of Zhuang's special attention to her performance as a maid.

It can be said that Liu Yue as a highly conscious social entity has safely survived the transition phase from nanny to maid and has perfectly achieved her transformation from outside inward. The reality presented through her performance, mostly beautiful appearance and self-minimized manner, persuades most of her audiences, makes them believe in her current value as a qualified maid. During this process of modifying the self according to the social requirements, Liu's previous self also achieves its transformation. Her new self in this phase has the possibility to access meanings behind various symbols in the upper-class discourse. Those symbols are monopolized by Zhuang's community; they not only are weapons that stop outsiders from stepping over the boundary, but they also reinforce their exclusive social status. By engaging in conversations with several members from Zhuang's community, Liu is given opportunities to peep into their rhetorical training, which makes all members in their group understand each other's meaning whenever a unique symbol that outsiders do not understand appears. Observing how the upper-class exchange their symbols and corresponding meaning, in one way or another, gives Liu a model for future imitation and learning for her future climbing up. On the other hand, it lets her be convinced by the new identity and its resulting expectations and responsibilities. These forces push her to confirm what the new social community thinks of her and, as a result, the new self is emerging through the balance between her new social

²²⁴ Feidu, 1993, 96. *Ruined City*, 2015, 102.

identity and her own understanding of the role of a maid. These two layers of forces, from herself and society, seem to contradict in some way; however, they indeed blend Liu Yue's old self which she borrowed from the previous employer and the famous actress Joan Chen with the new social identity as a maid, and finally into a new Liu Yue. This new Liu can truly be recognized as a social production by audiences from various social classes and as a new self-recognizable individual. This new self grows even bigger in further interactions and begins to display distinguished personal characteristics during her perfect-maid performance.

One example is her discussion with Niu Yueqing about Zhuang Zhidie's writing style.²²⁵ After Niu Yueqing expresses her ambivalence toward Zhuang's writing, Liu Yue first disagrees with her mistress and points out what she read in some books she read previously; then, she comes up with a 'crazy' idea that sets Niu thinking right away. Liu Yue states that she believes Zhuang Zhidie is "sexually repressed," which the mistress Tang mentioned during her very first sexual intercourse with Zhuang. However, for most of women in Zhuang's story, it is a fact that they were not able to admit or, at least, are not willing to admit. This conversation, to some extent, has a crucial meaning for Liu Yue's self-establishing journey in Zhuang's story. First, that she is sufficiently brave to speak this secret of Zhuang's impotence to Niu's face demonstrates that she knows it might be the truth. All Liu wants is a confirmation from Niu, who is supposed to be emotionally and sexually close with Zhuang. However, she underestimates Niu Yueqing's loyalty. Moreover, from this conversation, Niu Yueqing begins to notice Liu Yue's unique understanding of and unusual interests in her husband. Besides the beautiful and attractive

²²⁵ Feidu, 1993, 137. *Ruined City*, 2015, 143.

Tang Wan'er, there is now another woman who lives close to Zhuang and who might affect her partnership with Zhuang Zhidie.

Their conversation further evolves into a discussion of the role of the wife, after Liu Yue unintentionally discovers Zhuang's affair with Tang Wan'er.²²⁶ The virtuous wife Niu Yueqing patiently deals with all the crises that Zhou Min's article brought upon Zhuang's reputation; she states her responsibility as both wife and mother to this man. For a character like Niu Yueqing, it sounds somehow reasonable; however, as a witness to Zhuang's affair, which also does not fit into the framework of Zhuang and Niu's partnership, Liu Yue expresses her observation of Niu's function to Zhuang Zhidie: "you also have to be his daughter and his courtesan."²²⁷ The social roles Liu brings up, namely, daughter and courtesan, are a sharp satire on both Niu and Zhuang. "Daughter" signifies the fact of their infertility and Zhuang's strong and abnormal interests in every woman around him. "Courtesan," on the other hand, implies Tang's affair with Zhuang and the sexual pleasure he cannot obtain from the wife Niu Yueqing. Now, Liu is able to share her understanding of Zhuang's social function with the mistress, which demonstrates that she has already felt fully in control of her current role, and the future self has begun to develop on top of the old one. She is not simply able to respond to social interactions from the role of maid; she is now able to create new interactions to reinforce her performance. This prediction, in fact, is verified in her later interactions with Zhuang Zhidie.

²²⁶ Feidu, 1993, 205. *Ruined City*, 2015, 211

²²⁷ Feidu, 1993, 205. *Ruined City*, 2015, 211.

Phase III: from a maid to the wife of mayor's son

Because of his foot injury, Zhuang is locked up by his virtuous wife in his own flat, which gives Liu and him space to develop a new connection, besides that of “a domestic helper and her employer.”²²⁸ Interactions under this name seem to lose their deserved status; sexual attraction between woman and man gradually come to dominate. Liu Yue, to some extent, seems to show her interests in this famous man who she stays with and serves on a daily basis. Therefore, when Zhuang Zhidie asks her to sing, Liu sings a folk tune called “Holding Hands”: “When you hold my hand, I want to kiss your mouth; holding hands and kissing, we walk down the alley to the south.”²²⁹ It sounds like a story of budding romance between lovers; however, this love is only confined to holding hands and kissing, which is no possible way to feed Zhuang’s sexual appetite, which has been opened up by sexually engaging with Tang. What he really wanted is the pleasure that only could be obtained from being a predator of acquiescent women and their bodies. As the maid, Liu’s reaction firstly is surprise and embarrassment; she even worries about Niu’s reaction and her job as the maid: “Dajie will be mad at me when she comes home. She’ll send me away.”²³⁰ Insofar as Zhuang is flirting, Liu Yue still acknowledges that she is only a maid and is fearful that “names will be besmirched.”²³¹ She also responds to him with repeated status confirmation, like she used to do to Niu Yueqing: “why would you be interested in a maid from the countryside?”²³²

²²⁸ Feidu, 1993, 146. *Ruined City*, 2015, 152.

²²⁹ Feidu, 1993, 147. *Ruined City*, 2015, 152.

²³⁰ Feidu, 1993, 147, 12-13. *Ruined City*, 2015, 152, 21-22.

²³¹ Feidu, 1993, 147. *Ruined City*, 2015, 152.

²³² Feidu, 1993, 21-22. *Ruined City*, 2015, 152, 33-34.

However, combined with her later statement of virginity, her refusal and self-protection seem to contain more meanings; the question she asks Zhuang is somehow in tune with the one she asked the neighbor: “Do I really look like Joan Chen?” “Are you really interested in me?” Liu again drops into the endless self-contradiction and self-questioning. She then realizes that the origin of this yes-or-no question is that this famous man wants to sexually interact with her, because of true feelings or venting desire. The paragraph of her analyzing whether she should be sexually engaged with Zhuang Zhidie provides traceable evidence of how Liu Yue interprets gains and losses after making the leap.

As a celebrity, he’s met plenty of people and seen a great deal. If he really cares for me, I’m young enough to become the mistress of the house, and he’ll treat me well if that doesn’t work out. He’ll give me a positive reference, if I seek a good job, maybe even a husband, in Xijing. But if he is so spoiled by his fame that he thinks he can have any woman he wants, I’ll mean nothing to him and will be the big loser.²³³

She picks up the best and worst situation and, accordingly, acquires possibilities that might be acceptable for her. There are some key words that require additional attention, including “mistress,” “reference,” “job,” “husband,” and “loser.” Those words summarize Liu Yue’s whole upward mobility process—especially “job” and “husband,” which could be interpreted as the ultimate goals of her whole life. Fortunately, both are achieved, as she predicted, as the best result of sacrificing her body to Zhuang. Whether or not Liu finally becomes a loser is a question to which nobody could offer a correct answer—including Liu herself. Even though this whole self-analysis is only a backstage self-talk, it is similar to her trying on the old mistress’s dress: those words are also symboling minor changes in her consciousness.

²³³ Feidu, 1993, 156-157. *Ruined City*, 2015, 162.

Whether she becomes the mistress, finds a good job, or marries a good husband, they are all benefits she gains from other reflective individuals who have performed each of these roles and shared their experiences with people like her. However, because of the community she is in, the social experiences they provided have already been processed with special values that are exclusive to their social class. In addition, Liu, as a woman can only acquire information from women; those possibilities she mentioned also point out the situations of other women in Zhuang's community. They are all somebody's wives. For woman like Liu Yue, being a famous literati's wife has become a huge award for her, so that she could hire a housemaid like herself, or wear fashionable clothes like Xia, use expensive skincare products like Wang Ximian's wife, and be respected by all others like Niu Yueqing. Her way of thinking and acting now has carried marks of Zhuang's community that are generated from daily interactions with Zhuang and his friends. Liu now is modifying herself with Zhuang-valued experiences. Getting a decent job, on the other hand, seems to be the other option, as her old employer has chosen, becoming a saleswoman in a department store. Those new social experiences make Liu no longer satisfied with the benefits of her current role as a maid; she definitely does not think being a maid is a good job anymore. Zhuang Zhidie's offer comes at this time. Although it is only an excuse for Zhuang to satisfy his desire of continually being sexually active and the center of attention, it still can be a ladder for Liu to move to a higher social status. Understanding Zhuang and her own demands, a man like him is taken down from his pedestal and now only carries a quality of being her stepping stone.

From this moment, the characteristics of Liu Yue's personality become even clearer. The first mission she is on is dressing herself up as in previous times and testing her female

charm. She spends all of the thirty yuan, which Niu Yueqing gave to her as a travelling expense to find Zhuang Zhidie in the town, on “a pair of stockings and, adding some of her own money, a pair of white leather sandals and some dark sunglasses.” Instead of being mistaken for Joan Chen, she is thought of as a “streetwalker” by a young man who flirted with her in a snack shop.²³⁴ Her female charm is tested, but in a very embarrassing way. The contradiction between her previous beginning, praised as the famous actress, and now, seen as a streetwalker, demonstrates the difference between her old self and the new one. It is more obvious in the contrast to her subsequent reaction. Though she is embarrassed by a nobody, she does not cry as usual; instead, she “gave him a charming smile, pointing at herself with her right thumb and then wagging her pinkie before spitting on it.”²³⁵ She is now confident with her appearances, comments that are made by a nobody from the street can no longer influence her belief on herself. Those confidences, at the same time, empower her to fight back. Apparently, Liu is not her old self; she is confident enough to sneer at someone who humiliated her, even though this “someone” is a city dweller. Her target needs to be a man who can be the “thumb,” rather than a pinkie (nobody). Zhuang Zhidie as the center of his community could be the one, a thumb who she can easily access.

Before she found a chance to engage with him, Liu Yue discovers Zhuang’s affair with Tang when she walks in on the couple engaging in sexual intercourse.²³⁶ She did not stop them or run away immediately; she instead chooses to watch them through the slit of the door. In doing so, Liu breaks the boundary that Zhuang created for segregating outsiders from his exclusive performance for his secret lover Tang. However, watching a show not

²³⁴ Feidu, 1993, 266. *Ruined City*, 2015, 273.

²³⁵ Feidu, 1993, 266, 16-17. *Ruined City*, 2015, 273, 16-18.

²³⁶ Feidu, 1993, 327. *Ruined City*, 2015, 332.

intended for her turns Liu into an intruder and detractor. In this role, Liu interprets the couple's sexual involvement from the viewpoint of how many material assets Tang acquired from Zhuang Zhidie; she mocks how insatiable this woman is. Erotic details, especially seeing the flow of libidinous waters "between Wan'er's legs," are what generate panic and force her to face the truth.

Undressing her former idol Zhuang Zhidie by watching him asking Tang to beg him to give her more, sucking on her breast, having an erection, and falling into ecstasy, combined with the panic-like emotion she feels, Liu further develops her feelings into some strange sensational and emotional dilemmas that she has never experienced before: Is he still my master, the man I read and admired? What is my role when I am watching? If I am still "me," should I watch this? If I am not, then who am I now? The situation of questioning the performer's real role, in fact, is the result of breaking the "audience segregation," which indicates the performer's distinct performance routine as different social selves to special groups of persons. With Liu, Zhuang mainly plays the master of the house, leader of their scholarly group, and well-respected writer; however, for Tang Wan'er, he is the paramour. Therefore, when Liu Yue "ran into" their sexual intercourse, the balance between Zhuang's previous roles has been broken. Now, as a trespasser, Liu needs a lot of time and emotional energy to rebuild the right attitude to react to Zhuang's new impressions, which he has only performed as Tang's secret lover. In addition, Zhuang's special weight as the idol in her heart also makes her question her own role as the maid in his house.

The mixture of various emotions gets Liu Yue stuck in the strange status that derives from the name of voyeur and deprived observer. In one way, Liu becomes the third participant in Zhuang and Tang's sexual intercourse. The meanings behind their language

and behavior within the state of fully aroused loving-making directly stimulate Liu and make her feel “as if drunk.” In fact, observing Zhuang and Tang’s negotiation of sexual pleasure and both participants’ sensual and emotional reactions through the eyes of a voyeur accidentally raises Liu Yue’s sexual self.²³⁷ Recalling the “virgin statement” she made when Zhuang was attempting to seduce her for the first time, Liu in fact is not sexually initiated. The symbols of interacting with a loved one in her mind can only include “holding hands” and “kissing,” as in the song she sang to Zhuang. Thus, when she embodies the role of the voyeur, Liu finally frames her idea of sex. Falling into an “intoxicated” state of sexual imagination, Liu crumples to the floor and bumps into the door, a series of physical responses that indeed illustrate her sexual self beginning to react. This sexual aspect of her self functions in a way that hinders Liu, acting in the former times as an audience who observes interactions for collecting information and contributing to an understanding of the performer. In other words, when Liu still thinks she is observing as an audience, she in truth is watching for herself to acquire knowledge of sex.

However, Liu does not learn as the child who gradually studies the world and finally creates her/her own understanding about the self; Liu Yue enters the last two stages of her learning process toward sex in a more “fast-track” way. Later, when Tang Wan’er pushes Zhuang Zhidie into Liu’s room naked, and Zhuang tries to have sex with her, she “briefly tried to stop him, then let him take off her pants.”²³⁸ The paradox of her attitude towards

²³⁷ Keith McMahan, “Eroticism in Late Ming, Early Qing Fiction: the Beauteous Realm and the Sexual Battlefield.” *T’oung Pao*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1987, pp. 217-264. *Brill*, doi: [10.1163/156853287X00032](https://doi.org/10.1163/156853287X00032). In McMahan’s article, he distinguishes the third eye of a sexual act into three different categories, namely, the detracting observer, the deprived observer, and the participating observer. Accordingly, the deprived observer is the third participant of a sexual intercourse, in a way of observing. He defines it as ““who is not involved but wants to be.” The third participant as any of the three roles rob the privacy of two lovers, verifies their sexual act for the readers, and relieves the moral burden on participants.

²³⁸ *Feidu*, 1993, 328. *Ruined City*, 2015, 333.

being sexually engaged with Zhuang Zhidie may seem hard to understand. It even seems like that Liu is playing hard to get in order to be noticed by Zhuang. In fact, this paradoxical way of behaving can be seen as an illustration of the contradiction between her intention of accepting Zhuang and her awareness of the man's certain purpose of having sex with her. That purpose would make her silence from the two most important relationships in her life as a housemaid: her relationships with Zhuang and Niu. In the first case, Liu becomes an accomplice in Zhuang and Tang's affair. However, because she was forced to be involved, she could not share the same position as Tang Wan'er, which offsets the possibilities of obtaining so-called love from Zhuang. Her right to speak has also been taken away by her function as a concealer of Zhuang's affair and a sexual tool to offer Zhuang more options to vent his desire. As Liu argues later, she is indeed a victim. In terms of her relationship with Niu, having sex with Zhuang makes Liu Yue a traitor, no matter what the conditions are. In this sense, the reliability and credibility of her words now have been dismissed. Her right of speaking is again taken away, because Niu will not trust her anymore.

Because of her reluctant acceptance, the relationship between these three people undergoes an earth-shattering change. Liu Yue, without a doubt, becomes sexually engaged; then, Tang Wan'er switches to the "voyeur" and watches Zhuang and Liu's sexual engagement at the door. But, for Tang, she's not a student, as Liu is; she is not watching for curiosity and pleasure; rather, she is watching out of obligation to manage the situation, reduce the risk of exposure, and control her secret lover's sexual and affectional interests in another woman. Thus, she hugs Liu right after they finish and informs her that

“you and I are real sisters now.”²³⁹ Tang appears to be interpreting sexual intercourse with the same man as some kind of shared relationship that brings Liu close to her. By “sacrificing” her man to another woman, Liu can finally become her accomplice, and they can take the wife Niu Yueqing down together. However, Liu Yue does not seem to accept Tang’s “kindness.” Indeed, she believes in her role as victim and blames all performances conducted out of her character as a maid on Zhuang and Tang’s immoral relationship. She also seems to know what Tang Wan’er is planning; she mercilessly rips off the mask of this “hypocrite” and makes clear that she knows what this sex is truly for: “simply shutting me up.”²⁴⁰ Making clear her role as a victim in this “accident” and losing the chance to “win him on her own at first,” Liu Yue cries.

This is the second time she cries in the novel. As in the previous occurrence, Liu Yue’s tears expose the weak and powerless side of her role. This time, however, she is crying as both a victim and a maid. As the victim of the master’s affair with Tang Wan’er, Liu is crying for herself to become the “fig-leaf” of others’ genitalia. As the maid, she’s crying for herself, because she has lost the chance to earn the master’s body and sentiment, after he initially expresses his feeling. Her tears, in fact, are productions of the mixture of strong and complex emotions like resentment, regret, and shame. Those intensive emotions suddenly leave Liu marooned on a desert island. In addition, Tang’s sisterhood offering in actual fact strikes Liu once more. Recalling Liu’s consideration when Zhuang showed his interests in her, she has claimed her goal, Zhuang or another good husband. There is no plan to share this important man with another woman, especially one who comes before

²³⁹ Feidu, 1993, 328. *Ruined City*, 2015, 334.

²⁴⁰ Feidu, 1993, 328. *Ruined City*, 2015, 334.

her. So, Tang's invitation is more like a message to Liu, which notifies her that she's already one step behind of Tang. Liu is definitely clear about what role Tang is playing in this farce.

Liu Yue begins to realize that her well-established performance as a good maid who works for both Zhuang and Niu has been damaged. She cannot conduct any reliable performance under these conditions. In addition, Tang's existence notifies her that her chance of being Zhuang's wife is completely impossible. She is caught in an odd dilemma, both her way of continuing to perform the maid's role or of moving upward to replace Niu have been cut off. In addition, unlike previous times, there are no audiences like the neighbor and Zhuang's community this time, who can offer her supportive reflections that confirm their expectations as audiences to her performance. The only audience who is still willing to believe in her performance is Zhuang Zhidie. As the person who assisted Liu to successfully complete her transformation from a nanny of a working-class family to a housemaid of the most famous writer's household, Zhuang appears to stand out again for her. In such a predicament, Zhuang's trust and care still make him a "lifesaver," who offers her reasons to keep performing in the show that is centred around him, even though his trust is built upon sexual demands towards Liu Yue. Because his support does come with conditions, Liu needs to modify her old performance as a maid in accordance with his new expectations as a sexual partner who satisfies his desire whenever he needs. However, Zhuang's way of performing his need for sexual fulfillment is somehow sentimental. Impressions that are dressed up with sentimental appearances rationalize his demands for an outlet for his desire into an urge to have a lover. Zhuang's spoiling her seemingly points in a new direction for her further development: she might still have a chance to replace

both Niu Yueqing and Tang Wan'er. So, Liu Yue puts her role as a maid behind her and lets herself indulge in a new possibility. She begins to "think quite highly of herself" and "disobeyed Niu Yueqing on several occasions and nothing Niu Yueqing said to her made a difference in her attitude."²⁴¹

Giving a performance that is divorced from all social disciplines and expectations of the good maid moves Liu into a role that does not fit into the understood framework of other performers and all audiences, especially Zhuang's wife Niu Yueqing. The conflict between her own expectation of becoming Zhuang's wife and Niu's expectations of a good maid as she previously performed that role spins out of control. It bursts out into a huge fight, after Niu finds out that Liu made herself look like the mistress of the house and invited "girls from her hometown" to come over and have a party at Zhuang's house without her permission.²⁴² Liu, of course, continues acting out of her character, which forces Zhuang to step in.

After sleeping with him, Liu thought she had become his favorite, so she defended herself with her head high, spraying him with spittle... "You see? If she treats you like that, how do you think she behaves with me? Does she even act like a domestic helper? She's more like my own mother!" Zhuang slapped Liu gently. She froze monetarily, staring wide-eyed at him, and when her status in the home finally became clear to her, she slumped to the floor and banged her head until her forehead bled.²⁴³

That slap seems like an action conducted by Zhuang in the absence of other choices in order to defend Niu Yueqing's status as the mistress of the household. However, considering his affair with the housemaid, it is more likely self-preservation in front of Niu

²⁴¹ Feidu, 1993, 329, 19-20. *Ruined City*, 2015, 335, 14-16.

²⁴² Feidu, 1993, 330. *Ruined City*, 2015, 336.

²⁴³ Feidu, 1993, 332. *Ruined City*, 2015, 337-338.

to keep his dark secret and her partner's unconditional support safe. Indeed, it works; the slap not only stings Liu's face, but also injures her trust in Zhuang. She wakes up from the dream of being Zhuang's favorite and of taking Niu down. For Liu, receiving her only audience's reflection on the new performance in which she firmly believed, and in such an embarrassing way, makes her aware that she was getting out of line and pursuing an impossible transformation. Her self that is produced from Zhuang's demands for a maid and sexual partner directed her into a "fake" transformation. Now, she has realized the role she plays in Zhuang's show can only be as the maid.

However, Niu firmly believes that Liu Yue has already become a different person. To keep Zhuang's reality of a celebrity-writer safe, Niu decides to get rid of Liu by marrying her off to the son of her cousin in a suburb of Xijing. Zhao Jingwu, the person who brings Liu to Zhuang, again comes to "save" Liu from going back to her old fate; he asks Zhuang if he can "give" Liu to Zhao.²⁴⁴ Zhuang lets Liu know Zhao's intention of marrying her; she says yes, after a brief contemplation.²⁴⁵ Not until the mayor's wife mentions the interest of the mayor's disabled son Dazheng in marrying her does Liu still believe Zhao will be her future husband.²⁴⁶ Zhuang tells her, "I have another candidate in mind, his looks can't compare with Zhao's, but ten Jingwus wouldn't be his match in terms of social status and financial situation. And your residency could be arranged right way. I'll be straight with you: it's the mayor's son."²⁴⁷ This is a very tactful introduction; Zhuang compares the mayor's son with Zhao Jingwu before he brings out his status. "Social status," "financial

²⁴⁴ Feidu, 1993, 353. *Ruined City*, 2015, 360.

²⁴⁵ Feidu, 1993, 373. *Ruined City*, 2015, 380.

²⁴⁶ Feidu, 1993, 423. *Ruined City*, 2015, 429.

²⁴⁷ Feidu, 1993, 423, 13-15. *Ruined City*, 2015, 429, 12-16.

situation,” and “arranging her residency,” all those conditions are perfectly in accordance with Liu’s idea of a “good husband,” who can assist her to move upwards in this big city. Then, the most important thing about Dazheng is his role as the only son of the most powerful man in the city. However, Dazheng has some imperfections—he has a crippled leg. Liu gives an interesting reaction when she gets to know this surprise from Zhuang Zhidie’s vivid illustration.

Her eyes lit up. “The mayor’s son?” She immediately shook her head. “You are toying with me, aren’t you? Why would the mayor’s son want to marry me? I considered myself blessed to be working at your house and having had something with you for a while. I can’t possibly have many good things happen to me. ... So that is it. He is disabled. You are selling me defective goods.” ... Zhuang saw two sparkling teardrops roll out of her eyes beneath her long lashes.²⁴⁸

It can be said that Liu is going through some complex emotional changes, from ecstasy, to self-questioning and doubt, and finally to grief. The emotions she experiences when she receives the news are shown on her body, signalled by her facial expression of “eyes lighting up,” the physical action of “shaking her head,” and the falling of her teardrops. Coincidentally, all these changes share some similarities with the turning point of her first self transformation from the village girl to a city nanny. She is excited to look like the famous Joan Chen and to have a chance to be the most powerful man’s daughter-in-law. She questions whether she is good enough to deserve such praise and status. Nevertheless, in the “looking like Joan Chen” circumstances, she does not state clearly what is in her head but only answers the neighbor with a question of “really?” As I discussed above, it is more than a question of confirming whether the audience is giving a reaction based on reality that she has transmitted through performance; it also is a question for herself: does

²⁴⁸ Feidu, 1993, 423-424. *Ruined City*, 2015, 429, 17-37.

she deserves a better life? The way that Liu poses such a question changes following the arising of different selves in different development stages. The one-word question of “really” is consistent with her performance as the shy and diffident village girl. However, this time, as a different Liu who has fully developed all possibilities of the role of housemaid, even including having sex with the master of the house, she is now confident enough to express her uncertainty to Zhuang face-to-face. Rather than asking him whether he is teasing her directly, Liu chooses to phrase the question as an affirmative statement with “aren’t you” tagged onto the end. She believes Zhuang is making fun of her; however, she remains a little bit hopeful of moving further upwards. The idea of looking for confirmation from her audience still stays the same as earlier when she asked the neighbor, which demonstrates the self has begun to move back and forth between the role she plays on and the other role she might play in future.

Then, she asks why a man like the mayor’s son is interested in a housemaid like her. The way Liu organizes language is very “her.” She ensures that the audience who interacts with her share the idea of her current status every time. Recalling how she behaved when visiting Zhuang’s house as a good housemaid for the first time, she emphasizes how she perfectly adjusted herself to meet the standard of a hard-working housemaid whenever she interacted with Niu. Now, she confirms everything she has obtained from Zhuang and what Zhuang has offered to her by saying she is “blessed to be working at your house and having had something with you for a while.” In saying this, she explains why she wanted to ask for reasons: I am not saying that I am not acting out of my character as your maid, but I so appreciate this that I dare not to expect too much. In addition, she also defuses potential

concerns that her only audience might have, which are produced from being suspicious of possibility that she is leaving them for whatever reason, while helping her upward mobility.

However, when Liu realizes that her chance of achieving the dream of a good husband requires her to settle for “defective goods” and in exchange for protection of Zhuang’s reputation, she again breakdowns and cries. Those tears show how weak and depressed she is, and those grief-like feelings are not only from shock at the huge discrepancy between what she expected from such a man of high status like Zhuang Zhidie and the reality of his disability, but also because Zhuang failed to act in accordance with her expectation of the man she physically and emotionally loves. Liu needs a reason to give up all she has had under the title of a housemaid for the famous Zhuang Zhidie. That reason may also verify her position in Zhuang Zhidie’s show, even as an object that can be exchanged for a “better” possibility. So, she “rushed to his arm” and put the question to Zhuang, “do you think this will work?” and “will it work?”²⁴⁹ Those questions she throws out look like very simple yes-or-no questions; however, the word choice of “work,” in fact, carries similar meaning as the word “really” that she used in her first transformation. It is a question she is asking both Zhuang and herself. Will this work to provide her with a better life? Will this work to give her up in exchange for his own reputation? Also, the body contact they shared somehow demonstrates that Liu knows how her body fascinates Zhuang, which might as usual affect him making the decision based on immediate desires. However, Zhuang now has been controlled by the strong desire to protect his performance of the celebrity-writer. He “looks up at the book case before nodding.”²⁵⁰ Liu now has the reason

²⁴⁹ Feidu, 1993, 424, 6-7. *Ruined City*, 2015, 430, 1-4.

²⁵⁰ Feidu, 1993, 424, 9-10. *Ruined City*, 2015, 430, 4-5.

to put the role of a housemaid behind her, because the character who gives the foundation of the role she is playing has made his decision without making eye contact or saying a word.

Thus, Liu replies to him, “I believe my luck is going to change for the better. I can feel it, really. I felt that way the moment I arrived in this city. Go tell them Liu Yue is willing.” In this statement about her fate Liu summarizes her whole story of pursuing increased status and power. She appears suddenly never to have asked questioned about the actions she conducted as all her selves in each phase, as a village girl, nanny, housemaid, and maybe as the wife of mayor’s son in the future. Because under all these social titles Liu has kept the self the same. The self here is the balance of the individual ego “I” and the socially constructed “Me,” as Mead contends. We can call it the “essential self,” the self that underlines all her actions no matter which of her social roles.²⁵¹ This essential self guides her face through all the challenging moments and carries her through every turning point of transformations since “the moment she arrived in this city.” It somehow manifests itself in the form of “luck,” as she said.

However, there is one thing that needs to be thoroughly examined: her statement of the essential self. There are indeterminacies in each of her performances, some of which finally evolve into threats that raise audiences’ concerns about the performances conducted under the self. Those concerns indeed revise her idea of self, and even raise a new self as the sexual one. Modification for transformation of self seems to contradict the idea of essential self. However, I contend that modification helps reinforce the understanding of essential self. As Mead puts it, the self is the balance of “I” and “Me,” even though the “Me” is

²⁵¹ Anselm L. Strauss. *Mirrors and Mask: The Search for Identity*. The Sociology Press, 1969, pp. 33.

shaped by audiences' reactions, which carry certain values that only belongs to their social group. The individual ego is also adjusting within this context. The balance still exists. So, what those transformation have truly revised are aspects of the essential self that give birth to certain position that carry special social expectations. In Liu's case, her audiences vary from farmers, city dwellers, and celebrity-scholars to political figures; she keeps modifying her performance in accordance with their expectations of her identities, as a daughter, nanny, housemaid and finally daughter-in-law. Each of her identities directs one aspect of her self all of which exist for the essential one, the better one. Her essential self is not displayed in an affirmative way; the idea of "better" itself has some uncertainties. In her case, it is presented in the framework of social stratification, which differentiates people into higher or lower status based on socioeconomic data.

Zhuang Zhidie is a very exceptional figure in Liu Yue's whole way of searching for more aspects and obtaining definitions of her self. He can be seen as one of her audiences—sometimes her only audience—and also as an indeterminacy in her performance. His audience role has been confirmed by all impressions he has accepted from Liu, when she plays the housemaid and even the sexual partner. However, the latter role makes him more like an indeterminacy, which could give rise to a new aspect of Liu's essential self. The first is the awareness of her sexual self, which later even develops into her sentimental side, affecting her ability to pursue a "better" self. To some extent, those exceptions push Zhuang's role to another level. His decision would affect Liu's way of acting, leading her to offend Niu with rude remarks or consider giving up the chance to marry the mayor's son. His great influence on Liu marks him with all characteristics of the "significant other" for her. Thus, the reason why Liu Yue chooses to state her understanding of the essential

self verbally is to confirm the future performance she will conduct as the mayor's daughter-in-law. Thus, she begins to "ride off in that car without even looking around," and to "make herself everyday, try out new looks, and whenever she could, she went back to her room to look at herself in the mirror and practice her stockpile of smile."²⁵² In addition, changes not only emerge in her appearance, but also in the way she behaves, such as buying much more food than the family needs and wasting most of it, and "cutting into conversations when she felt like it, sometimes interjecting comments while eating an apple."²⁵³

However, Zhuang's tremendous energy in reversing Liu's predetermined performance reveals its capability again after she has fully devoted herself to her hopes as the mayor's daughter-in-law. Zhuang and Liu have sex on the eve of her wedding:

Suddenly the door to his study was pushed open, and in walked Liu Yue, a bright red bathrobe, her damp hair gathered in the back in a white kerchief, her freshly washed face smooth with a red glow. But she had painted her brow, applied eye shadow and put a thick layer of crimson red lipstick on her lips, which looked as full and round as an apricot.²⁵⁴

Clearly, Liu Yue is well-dressed to show off all her feminine charms. Zhuang is impressed by her beauty again as previously (as when their affair started), and says to himself, "she is incredibly pretty, particularly after a hot bath on the night before she's to become a bride."²⁵⁵ Except her beauty, which has been praised by Zhuang several times, the event that will lead to a transformation of her social identity also makes appearance more attractive. However, this perfect performance cannot affect Zhuang's strong will to

²⁵² Feidu, 1993, 429. *Ruined City*, 2015, 435, 10-11; 23-26.

²⁵³ Feidu, 1993, 430. *Ruined City*, 2015, 435, 26-30.

²⁵⁴ Feidu, 1993, 469, 4-7. *Ruined City*, 2015, 464, 9-14.

²⁵⁵ Feidu, 1993, 459, 7-8. *Ruined City*, 2015, 464, 14-15.

play only a master of the house. This time, what truly shakes his performance is his conversation with Liu:

“Do you really think I’ll be happy?” “Yes, I do. You’ll be happy.” He nodded, eliciting sarcastic laugh from the girl. “Thank you very much, Zhuang Laoshi. You’re the one who gave me happiness.” ... “Stop it, Liu Yue. She didn’t win my heart. I was the one at fault. Don’t you think I ruined her? Everything is over now.” “If that’s what you think, then haven’t you also ruined me? You’re marrying me off to the mayor’s son. Do you really think I can love him? I will have to close my eyes to marry him. It was you who changed Tang Wan’er and me into real women and gave us the courage and confidence to start a new life. And in the end, it was you who ruined us. But in the process, you also ruined yourself, your image, and your reputation, along with Dajie and this family.”²⁵⁶

This conversation could be divided into two parts: namely, “real happiness” and “destruction.” The first part focuses on whether Liu could finally be happy after she marries the mayor’s son. She answers negatively without any hesitation. Zhuang’s irresponsible blessing-like answer makes Liu angry; she even behaves in ways that she never has previously. She laughs at him sarcastically. Liu performs in a way that she has already denied Zhuang’s reliability, at least as an audience. She seems not to care whether her performance is out of character, either as the maid or the wife of mayor’s son. In fact, rather than playing either of her roles, Liu is conducting her performance as a character that seems to never have functioned previously. Later, when Zhuang expresses penitence for all his past actions that “ruined” Tang Wan’er, his secret lover, Liu’s “unknown” character makes a very impressive statement. She wants him to know that he also ruined her. She explains the whole process of being “ruined” to Zhuang, from nothing to real women and then nothing again. She was sexually engaged with Zhuang of his own accord; she acted out of

²⁵⁶ Feidu, 1993, 459-460. *Ruined City*, 2015, 464-465.

her character as a good servant to be considered his favorite one; she also marries a man she will never love to save his reputation.

She makes her whole life Zhuang-related, which reconfirms Zhuang's status as a significant other for Liu, so that he could have the ability to create and destroy a new aspect of life that later evolves into impressions of the various new social roles he gave to her. In this sense, the new "character" that functions to direct her to give such performances can be interpreted as the expression of her essential self that, to some extent, is created by him. Many aspects of her essential self, in fact, are generalized in the context of Zhuang's show as celebrity-writer; they are all subjected to effects rooted in male-centred values, especially Zhuang-centred ideas. Those values exist as social forces that make a highly conscious social entity like Liu Yue behave as the men propose. Thus, she believes that her essential self is created by Zhuang as her "new life," which is then destroyed by his irresponsible behavior.

Her statement indeed declares the last transformation of Liu's social role; as she said, the old self designated for Zhuang has been ruined; she has no choice but to act consistently with the social expectations of her future role. The collapse of her past will still "stay in this room" with Zhuang Zhidie; her new aspect will conduct a performance "under that cripple." Thus, after marrying Dazheng, Liu Yue achieves her dream to be the real city resident, who lives with all advantages of higher social status. She even has a job in Ruan Zhifei's dancing club. However, Liu Yue seems to lose the meaning of her performance after she gets everything but loses her significant other. When Meng Yunfang goes to the

dancing club to look for her, he cannot tell which girl she is: “each one of them looked like Liu Yue; when the music ended, she was not among the girls leaving the dance floor.”²⁵⁷

Liu Yue lost all the things that made her a highly recognizable person; she is only one of those strangely-dressed girls. Although she still gives performances as the wife of the mayor’s son, which shows her empathy to the man who lost everything, this chapter contends that here is the end of Liu’s performance. Her character loses its vitality after the conversation with Zhuang. During the process of being created and then ruined, Liu Yue generates various aspects of her self, which lead her to turning points in her performance of different social identities. Those turning points give her chances to achieve her personal development of upward mobility. Liu Yue, no doubt, conducts successful performances when she finishes each phase of her transformations, even though during this process, the indeterminacy of her performance evolves into the significant other who affects every decision she makes in the performance. It can be said that Liu Yue achieves her personal transformation under the guidance of the essential self that aims to lead her to a better life. However, as the other two women in Zhuang’s show, she has not avoided the fate of being affected by him; she has even let him become her significant other. At this level, should we say her way of pursuing the essential self is a total failure? The answer is no. As proposed at the beginning of discussion, I believe that there is a social structure and resulting social forces that cannot be realized in our daily life, because they influence individuals’ everyday lives in disguised ways. Male-domination, in this case Zhuang-domination, is the fact that cannot be noticed but truly brings consequences to her way of searching the self. Thus, there is no answer to the question of whether Liu is a positive or negative example in

²⁵⁷ Feidu, 1993, 493. *Ruined City*, 2015, 497.

Xijing: she is only a woman, as all others who are struggling to understand who they really are in such a complex world.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have explored Jia Pingwa's controversial fiction *Feidu* (translated by Goldblatt as *Ruined City*) from the perspective of micro-sociology, mainly Erving Goffman's idea of dramaturgical sociology. As Jia's first fiction of city life, *Feidu* represents his understandings and concerns about urban life experiences as a newcomer to Xi'an and a newly-famous writer. Although some critics insist that attentions and fame the book gained are all because sexual relations between the protagonist and various women that break the taboo against discussing sexual desire. This fiction, as all Jia's other works that concern everyday life, still can be seen as his attempt to make a novel represent life, but this time, Chinese intellectual community's life. By concentrating on the protagonist literary celebrity Zhuang Zhidie's relationships with three important women characters in his life as a show performed on the stage of ancient capital Xijing, I set the premise that every act each character conduct is performed. I examine the way Jia characterized his protagonists and their life performances for negotiating with others, generating impressions about the self. Besides, based on women's experiences that are reflected from their everyday interactions with the male protagonist, other themes, including gender relation, subjectivity, love, and sex, have appeared. Those subjects help me solve questions that I proposed at the very beginning.

In Chapter One, Zhuang Zhidie's role of husband and his relationship with his wife Niu Yueqing was analyzed, examining Niu's functions as caring mother and loyal wife. I found that the idea of "significant others" was helpful in understanding the tension between Niu's motherhood and partnership. Jia's protagonist, Zhuang Zhidie, uses his privileges as a husband and literary celebrity to make himself the significant other in Niu's life. His

demands of food, protection, and sex decide what role Niu needs to adopt and perform. The idea of self-discipline, self-monitoring, and self-sacrifice are deeply internalized within Niu's relationship with Zhuang Zhidie. The idea of traditional Confucian-oriented marriage ethnics, which are defined as family-oriented, male-dominated, and reproduction-aimed, remain its place and monopoly women's fate in the name of being a "good wife."

In Chapter Two, Zhuang Zhidie's role as secret lover and his relationship with the mistress Tang Wan'er was explored through examining the symbolic meanings of the pear tree and of feet. The idea of negative idealization helped here in understanding the mistress's performances to incorporate with the socially accredited values of a woman. Tang's subjectivity as an individual woman has been erased from herself as she became a sexual symbol that aroused Zhuang Zhidie's sexual desire and represented Zhuang's ability to be a man. Women's unconditional sacrifice is still a symbol that continues to demonstrate Chinese intellectuals' total controlling of women. Their sexuality has been objectified into certain part of their docile body to cooperate with male intellectuals' perverted sexual desire.

In Chapter Three, in discussing Zhuang Zhidie as master of the house and his relationship with the housemaid Liu Yue, I have drawn on the work of Simmel and Mead, because they address the process of socialization at the individual level and concentrate on identifying the position of self within the socialization process. Unlike the other two women in Zhuang's story, Liu Yue seems like the only one who achieves personal transformation. However, as I have illustrated in the analysis, Liu Yue's transformation was still under Zhuang Zhidie's control. The way Liu interprets the "better life" is still controlled by the significant other Zhuang Zhidie. The power of interpreting women's self-consciousness is

controlled by male intellectual. Women's fate, under such condition, is still dominated by male intellectuals who regulate sexual morality and produce meanings for body and identity.

By interpreting Jia Pingwa's *Ruined City* through the male protagonist Zhuang Zhidie's life performance with women characters, I conclude that Zhuang's social role as a literary celebrity is the only reality in every character's life. In other words, there is no such place in *Ruined City* for those women characters to conduct performances only based on their subjectivities. Women's relationships with each other are also based on social roles that Zhuang Zhidie gives to them; so, their understandings of each other's subjectivity, in fact, develop from their own perceptions of Zhuang's performances of a male intellectual. Zhuang Zhidie's will has the power to dominate women in the role of wife, mistress, and housemaid.

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