

ROU PUTUAN AND THE INTRICACIES OF BAOYING: AN ANALYSIS OF KARMIC RETRIBUTION WITHIN LI YU'S EROTIC NOVEL AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH CONVENTION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the usage of karmic retribution (baoying 報應) within Li Yu's 李漁 (1610-1680) erotic novel Rou putuan 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat). On a level of text structure, I analyse how to recognise occurrences of "coincidence". Through the analysis of three key events, I attempt to determine whether or not coincidence can be rationalised by a retribution structure coordinating the story. The final purpose of this article is to determine how and why Li Yu evokes this retributive device of baoying.

KEYWORDS: Li Yu, Rou putuan, karmic retribution, baoying.

INTRODUCTION

Li Yu's 李漁 (1610-1680) 17th-century work *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou putuan* 肉蒲團) belongs to the genre of the erotic novel. The theme of the erotic novel revolves around a libertine who fully indulges himself in sexual pleasures and is, through the intricacies of karmic retribution (*baoying* 報應) eventually punished for this licentiousness. Through the analysis of three key events, I attempt to determine whether or not coincidence can be rationalised by a retribution structure coordinating the story. The final purpose of this

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article is to determine how and why Li Yu evokes this retributive device of *baoying*.

KARMIC RETRIBUTION

Since its introduction in China during the Han-dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the Buddhist doctrine has had an undeniably large influence on social life and culture of China (Wu and Stevenson 2011: 471). The Buddhist idea of karmic retribution points to the idea that in order to transcend the wheel of reincarnation one tries to accumulate religious merit by performing good deeds. However, Buddhist retribution was not quite the same as the traditional Chinese belief in the workings of Heavenly Will as illustrated by, for example, the Mandate of Heaven, which was not a force *inherent* to man himself but was an external force that expressed its loss of confidence in the current ruler through the occurrence of for instance natural disasters, famine or rioting landlords. A hybrid form of retribution hence evolved when ideas of Buddhism and traditional Chinese beliefs came together. I will attempt to pin down the cardinal traits of this hybrid idea of retribution through a discussion of retribution within Chinese narrative.

BAOYING WITHIN CHINESE POPULAR NARRATIVE

The fundamental Buddhist doctrine of karma entails an inevitable relationship between cause and effect, like a plant (effect) will inevitably grow from a particular seed (cause), hence the Chinese word *yinguo* 因果 (reason/cause-fruit/result). It is an inherent relationship and there is no intervention of “outside agents”, a “morally sensitive heaven”, or any “movement of pneumas” (Brokaw 1991: 31). As pointed out by Kao, karmic retribution used in Chinese fiction, *baoying* 報應, or “the response” is indeed also inherent in a certain action or in the cause and “its working is essentially impersonal and non-volitional” (Kao 1989: 130), but can and often does manifest itself in agents and is exactly the result of a “morally sensitive heaven”, as I will make apparent when analysing *Rou putuan*. Within a narrative structure, *baoying* is an external force of an inevitable response to the actions by a certain character through the workings of a Heaven which can manifest itself in all sorts of ways including other characters and even diseases.

A crucial point in understanding the way Chinese fiction can and

is believed to be formed and popularised by Buddhist influences, especially karmic retribution, is that a man's life was *subject* to these laws (Brokaw 1991: 31). But that did not mean an individual had nothing to contribute to the path of one's life or that the fate of men was determined by these laws. It meant quite the opposite. Because of the rigidity of these laws "the individual did the evaluating for himself and took charge of his own fate" (Andres 1988: 343). The possibilities for an author immediately become apparent. An author can use aforementioned laws of retribution as a motivation for (perhaps volitional) actions performed by characters and the non-volitional effects within the story, without losing credibility as a skilled writer. Seventeenth-century writers, who had to build on a long tradition of retribution frameworks within narrative starting from the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279), needed to be innovative in order not to appear repetitive. The variation and rearrangement of these conventional themes or "codes" and "formulas" which result in new and innovative ideas, is a skill easily overlooked by critics.² It can even be argued that success in any sort of narrative springs forth from the variation in the details of the codes and formulas that go into it and which are familiar to the intended audience. "Without expectations in the first place we could not appreciate the variations" and there exists an *expectation* for the disruption of one's own expectations when reading a complex work of fiction. This disruption or frustration will manifest itself as a sensation of 'surprise' (Abbott 2008: 58–60). Within the narrative structure, *baoying* plays with a different aspect of expectation and will often be interpreted as 'coincidence' by readers unaware of its influence.

COINCIDENCE WITHIN NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Linguist Uri Margolin aptly summarises Van Dijk's chapter on the theory of action, stating that "actions are consequently intentional objects which come into their own only once the question 'what kind of actions is it?' is satisfactorily answered" (Margolin 1986: 209; Van Dijk 1977: 167–187). But there can never be given a single answer to this question and the observable parts of acts might be highly "ambiguous" (Van Dijk 1977: 182). The answer thus seems to depend largely on the interpretation of the reader. But what if this answer cannot be satisfactorily answered at all? Then actions or events

2 Porter Abbott employs this terminology when talking about convention and expectation of readers. See *The Cambridge Introduction of Narrative*, especially chapter 5.

might not be consequently intentional objects, therefore appear to be random and the reader might interpret them as *coincidental*.

For my own convenience I accept the premise that the agents in the narrative are human beings capable of making decisions on reasons acquired by cognitive processes and therefore have an own 'will'. For that reason, acts and events can be consequently linked on basis of the mental properties of the agents. The occurrence of coincidence in a text, which can bring about a similar sensation with a reader as does the unresolved tension created by the author withholding information (because in both cases there is an ostensible lack of coherence between events), can therefore leave the reader with "a strong feeling of duality of perception". This will subsequently lead "to the formulation of a new ad hoc set of rules by the reader, or to the exclusion of this text from the realm of texts amenable to psychological inferences according to any set of rules" (Margolin 1986: 207). So if the missing information is not supplied by the author, the tension is not dissolved. The question naturally arises: how does one interpret actions or events of which the motivation, it seems, is left unexplained?

Of course, some actions in cultures where part of the conventions are unknown to us might be difficult to interpret (Van Dijk 1977: 183). So when looking at Chinese texts we have to keep in mind the aforementioned conventions of Chinese writing regarding retribution. Events might appear coincidental because they do not happen as a consequence of deductive reasoning from a pool of physiological or mental properties that characterize a certain agent. They happen because of the working of a divine system of retribution which is "bound by the rule of response" (Yang 1957: 298). Or in the words of Kao (1989: 135):

If 'chance happening' could have such a moral effect and implication, how could it be simply random and meaningless? What appears as a coincidence in a reality governed by the baoying causality, has in fact the force of a moral necessity.

and later on: "according to the tenet of karmic nemesis [these] coincidences are inevitably determined" (Kao 1989: 135). Therefore, in my analyses I look for these coincidences and then try to determine whether or not this lack of coherence can be rationalized by a philosophical ground of karmic retribution or *baoying* narrative structure.

THE STORY

The narrative of *Rou putuan* describes the sexual adventures of the handsome, clever and exceptionally lustful protagonist Vesperus (Weiyangsheng 未央生). One morning Vesperus meets the solitary monk Lone Peak (Gufeng 孤峰), known for his extreme physical denial. Upon discovering the exceptional intelligence of the scholar and his immediate comprehension of all his words, Lone Peak fears that these excellent feats will be wasted because the good looks of the protagonist will only lead to sin. Lone Peak tries to convince Vesperus to cast aside his attachment to sensual pleasure and join him in spiritual cultivation. But Vesperus has made up his mind and before even considering cutting ties with this world he tries to marry the most beautiful woman in the world (*jiaren* 佳人) and become the greatest genius (*caizi* 才子).

The story starts with the admonition of the monk, the first stitch of the motif of retribution woven into the narrative structure, and ends with the enlightenment of our protagonist. Because of this structure, signified by the monk, the entire story is embedded in a framework of Buddhist retribution. Because of this retribution narrative framework, all the events that compose the story are steered and shaped towards the final chapter of enlightenment and the crucial moment of the self-castration. The monk aptly summarizes the function of the narrative between his advice and the final enlightenment by stating in the second chapter: "[go] and gain enlightenment on the carnal prayer mat" (*RPT* 20). The tension, that can only be resolved by this inevitable ending of enlightenment, is deliberately put in the story by Li Yu as shown by comments of the narrator in the second chapter: "If you wish to learn what becomes of [Lone Peak], you will have to keep on reading until the final chapter, in which he reappears" (*Ibid.* 21). This structural strategy evoked by Li Yu sets the novel apart from other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century erotic novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅) and *The Embroidered Couch* (*xiu ta ye shi* 繡榻野史) in which the retribution is "inadequate and applied without sufficient literary justification to the libertine's excess" (Hanan 1988: 124). In *Rou putuan* the retribution structure is anything but inadequate and is exactly the literary justification for the behaviour of certain characters and continuity between events.

For the selection of pivotal events concerning *baoying*, I look for *coincidence*. I defined coincidence as a phenomenon that becomes apparent to us because of a lack of coherence in the structure of events and between

different or successive events. The result is that actions or events might not be consequently intentional objects at all and appear to be random. When determining whether or not *baoying* took part in shaping the event structure or explaining this ostensible coincidence, I define *baoying* as the external force of an inevitable response to the actions by a certain character through the workings of a Heaven which can manifest itself in all sorts of ways or agents.

ANALYSIS OF THREE KEY EVENTS

The first significant moment concerning *baoying* structure is the meeting between Vesperus and the Knave (Sai Kunlun 賽昆崙), who will be the biggest facilitator of Vesperus' sexual objects as well as the reason for Vesperus' male enhancement surgery later in the story: an important step towards his final self-realisation and enlightenment. Vesperus just left his first wife Jade Scent (Yuxiang 玉香) for his further 'education' and is staying at an inn in the countryside. The two male servants that he has taken along fall ill and out of fear of being seen by women while walking around town without an escort by his side would harm his reputation, he decides to stay in his room. Then all of a sudden the Knave makes an entrance by inviting Vesperus for a drink in his room. The two hit it off and before long they are together scheming Vesperus' next sexual endeavour.

Meaningful to our analysis is the apparent lack of coherence between events. Both his servants happen to become ill, he and the Knave are *coincidentally* staying in adjoining rooms of the same inn, and the meeting is of cardinal importance considering the unfolding of events later in the story. In fact, the discussion on women between the Knave and Vesperus can be seen as the *poti* 破題 of the entire story, which is a term referring to the first two sentences that introduce the theme in the traditional Chinese eight-part essay *bagu* 入股 (Hu 2006: 199). This "meeting by chance" is even noticed by Vesperus himself: "Perhaps meeting him today means that I have an exceptional destiny in store for me and Heaven has sent a supernatural being to help me achieve it" (RPT 46). Which is a significant thought for a couple of reasons. Firstly, we notice Vesperus himself thinks of his own fate as controlled by some external power. Secondly, he accepts that this Heaven can manifest itself in other (super)human beings, as for example the Knave. And thirdly, because of this chance meeting, he feels he himself is on the right

path. As for narrative structure this indeed is the right path: the path to the final chapter of self-realization and enlightenment.

If one views the illness of the servants, the time and place of the meeting as being directed by the external force of a retribution framework covering the narrative, the lack of coherence between events is not the result of inadequacy on the part of the author but the playful use of *baoying* which ties the events together, while simultaneously providing a more profound meaning to this chance meeting. Here the working of *baoying* is a response to actions by Vesperus: ignoring the monk's warning and his departure for his sexual quest. Its working is directed at shaping Vesperus' path towards enlightenment. An interaction and interdependence between narrative structure and *baoying* thus becomes apparent and inseparable.

The second event worth analysing, also noted by Wu and Stevenson, is when Vesperus' first wife, Jade Scent, ends up in one of the capital's brothels and "through the intricacies of karmic retribution, her clients happen to include the husbands Weiyangsheng [(Vesperus)] has cuckolded" (Wu and Stevenson 2011: 483). The high degree of coincidence of this event is immediately apparent and needs no further deliberation, but its consequences are evident too: Vesperus only goes to the capital because he hears about this prostitute from the wives of the cuckolded men. This leads to Jade Scent hanging herself upon seeing her husband (Vesperus), out of shame and fear of the law. Within the narrative structure this event is essential because it signifies the start of Vesperus' self-realization and the beginning of the end of his quest for sexual indulgence: when seeing his dead wife, Vesperus shows no real remorse but realizes that there is no escaping the retribution for his actions. He then remembers the monk's admonish and becomes Lone Peak's disciple. In this instance we notice a similar working of *baoying* as in the first event: *baoying* acts as the guide towards enlightenment. Moreover, the moment that Vesperus moderates his behaviour because of his epiphany and fear of retribution, is a prime example of behaviour adjustment caused by the *baoying* framework, forced upon the characters by the author. Vesperus' decision is, therefore, made 'rational' by supplying a philosophical ground of karmic retribution or *baoying* narrative structure.

The third and last event is not striking because of its lack of coherence in relation to its surrounding events. On the contrary, it is the result and direct consequence of the preceding events, and is in fact the result of the *baoying* structure: the self-castration. As aptly pointed out by Andres, the self-castration is not a breach of character consistency. Imprudent decision

making and overindulgence are cardinal character traits of Vesperus (1988: 106-121). The decision of cutting off his surgically enlarged organ is based on the argument that it is the root of his desire and by cutting it off, the desire will be eliminated. This argument entirely contradicts the Buddhist idea of desire, which springs from the mind and not the body. Cutting off his organ would therefore be useless and counterproductive, making this decision rash but reminiscent of his previous ones. The self-castration does not however, as Andres argues, eliminate desire or, as claimed by Ge, eliminate the desire of the entire narrative (Ge 1998: 145). This is merely a *shift* from sexual desire towards a desire for religious enlightenment. Because of the extremism of his methods, this is quite consistent with the character's behaviour throughout the narrative, but there is no elimination of desire. In the end of the narrative the tension "between erotic desire and social and moral values" is *not* resolved and Li Yu "regards such tension as a permanent part of the human condition" (RPT xi).

This reading of *Rou putuan* offers a satisfying consistency of character, explains the pivotal and elemental workings of *baoying* within narrative structure and resonates with Li Yu's ideas on writing and convention, as shown in the last section of this article.

CONVENTION AND NOVELTY

Li Yu's relationship and engagement with tradition begins with his intended audience. Because of his economic dependence on his patrons, Li Yu's status within society was a "parasitical" one, which undeniably influenced his way of writing (Zhang 2005). The one aesthetic principle Li Yu insists on the most, not only in his writing but in every single aspect of his life, is novelty. Every form of plagiarism, even repeating himself, was absolutely inadmissible (Hanan 1981: 167). A contradiction immediately arises between the expectations of the intended audience and Li Yu's own literary and aesthetic preferences. The audience is familiar with a classical literary tradition which is constructed on the interdependency of literary allusion and in which borrowing from and references to the classics are the rule rather than the exception. Li Yu, on the contrary, "stressed the value of originality in literature more than any other Chinese critic" and "never appealed to ancient authority" (*Ibid.*: 167).

Although innovation is absolutely pivotal to Li Yu's writing, he has definitely not fully cut himself loose from tradition and convention. Li Yu was

a master of planning and deliberateness in his writing and his use of parody and the playing with literary convention is not a coincidence, but a literary device that he consciously evokes. In fact, the entire narrative structure of *Rou putuan* is based on traditional opera (*xiqu* 戲曲), draws on the form of the *bagu* essay and plays with the theme structure of the *caizijiaren* 才子佳人 novel (Hu 2006). Moreover, Li Yu uses the conventions of retribution to masterfully mirror and create correspondences between events in the story (Hanan 1988: 127-128).

I argue, exactly because of his attitude with regards to tradition, the use of *baoying* narrative structure is simply a result of Li Yu's reliance on and his playfulness towards literary convention. A reason for adopting retributive devices might even have been to meet the requirements of publication (Wu and Stevenson 2011: 484). Despite the fact that the incoherence between events within *Rou putuan* can be satisfactorily explained as being the result of the workings of *baoying* and my claim that Li Yu purposely used *baoying* to construct his narrative structure, does not impose *baoying* is the driving force behind any possible moralistic or didactic idea woven into the fabric of the narrative structure of *Rou putuan*. I claim this retribution structure is nothing more than a convention evoked by Li Yu with great vigour and ingenuity, and if there is any moral or didactic value to be found within the story it does not derive from the retribution system or Li Yu's own belief or disbelief in heavenly retribution. It is in the overturning of every expectation of the reader, tradition and convention where Li Yu's literary and comedic strength lies.

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