

# Elapse of Time and Seasons in *Dongjiejyuan Xixiangji*

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## 1. Introduction

The short *chuanqi* 傳奇 story (“tales of the strange”) *Yingying zhuan* 鶯鶯傳 by Yuan Zhen 元稹, friend of the famous Mid Tang 中唐 poet Bai Letian 白樂天 (Bo Juyi 白居易), describes the tragic love of the hero and heroine, Zhangsheng 張生 and Yingying 鶯鶯. The story also has significance in literary history due to the wealth of autobiographical elements it includes.

In the subsequent Song 宋 dynasty, the story *Yingying zhuan* circulated still further in the form of lyrics, such as *Shangdiao Delianhua Guzici* 商調蝶戀花鼓子詞 by Zhao Lingzhi 趙令峙 of the Northern Song 北宋. Later in the Jin 金 dynasty, it underwent relatively large-scale adaptation, being set to the theme of the popular folk narrative of the time, *Zhugongdiao* 諸宮調. This was the work *Zhugongdiao Xixiangji* 諸宮調西廂記 said to be written by a certain First Graduate Dong (*Dong Jiejyuan* 董解元, *Jiejyuan* being an alias for an intellectual of the time, whose actual name is unknown), or *Dong Jiejyuan Xixiang Ji* 董解元西廂記, abbreviated to *Dong Xixiang* 董西廂. *Dong Xixiang* not only had an appreciably more complex plot than the original short story *Yingying zhuan* insofar as it was expanded to several times the length and new characters were added to it. Also, it is well known that while the original had a tragic conclusion in which the hero and heroine parted, an important change of events in the plot paved the way for a happy ending and marriage. The *zaju* 雜劇 play *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 by Wang Shifu 王實甫 of the Yuan 元 dynasty, which is considered the greatest masterpiece of Chinese drama, is a dramatic work based on *Dong Xixiang*. In terms of content, however, the play scarcely differs from the short story.<sup>1)</sup>

Yingying’s story is worthy of special mention in the history of Chinese literature. *Yingying zhuan* has a history of adaptation, from a

short story, to a folk narrative, to a play, covering over five hundred years of Chinese history, from the Tang dynasty to the Yuan dynasty, and transcending the differences between genres. So it is only natural that the differences in content of these respective works have in the past attracted the attention of numerous people. Therein, comparisons between the folk narrative *Dong Xixiang*, which is the actual turning point in the story's history of adaptation, and *Wang Xixiang*, still widely popular today, have produced interesting insight into Chinese literary history. On the other hand, research into how *Dong Xixiang* was adapted from the original *Yingying zhuan*, has been limited to the change in plot from tragic finale to happy ending and, needless to say, with regard to detail, much remains that is worthy of discussion. When considering the adaptation process, it would seem that of the three works, the most important is indeed *Dong Xixiang*.

In this paper I shall draw attention to how *Yingying zhuan* was adapted into *Dong Xixiang*, in particular as regards differences in the elapse of time between incidents in the two works and the distinctive function of the seasons. It is my intention thereby to investigate an aspect of the creative conception behind *Dong Xixiang*.

## 2. Elapse of time in *Yingying zhuan* and *Dong Xixiang*

The plot of *Yingying zhuan* unfolds, beginning with Zhangsheng, who, traveling for study purposes, calls in at the Pujiusi 普救寺 Temple in Puzhou 蒲州 where he happens to meet Cui Yingying 崔莺莺, a distant female relative lodging there. After a while, the pair go on arranging secret rendezvous, but about the time Yingying's mother comes to know of this, Zhangsheng goes up to the capital alone to take an examination. Thereafter, there is an exchange of letters and the plot ends in disaster. *Dong Xixiang*, with the exception of its ending, is roughly the same, but there are small yet important differences between the two. Let us trace their movements, based on the original texts.

### (a) *Yingying zhuan*

First, the commencement of the story is set in the sixteenth year of Zhenyuan 貞元 (800). In the spring of that year, Zhangsheng encounters Yingying at Pujiusi Temple in Puzhou. Then

On the 14th day of the second month, [she] awaited the moon in the

Western Chamber.<sup>2)</sup>

Here the pair first arrange a secret rendezvous.

On the 18th day of the second month, Hongniang 紅娘 came, supporting Miss Cui. Thereafter, for ten days, there was no news [from Yingying. Then Zhangsheng went to where Yingying was and, with him] leaving secretly in the morning and entering secretly in the evening, together they stayed in the previously mentioned Western Chamber for about a month.<sup>3)</sup>

Thus, four days later, on the 18th of the second month, Yingying's maid Hongniang appears before Zhangsheng with Yingying and the pair make contact. Thereafter, following a space of about ten days in which nothing happens, the pair have a series of secret rendezvous in the Western Chamber where Yingying is staying, this continuing for approximately one month. So the date would have reached the end of the third month.

Not long afterwards, Zhangsheng was to go to Chang'an 長安.<sup>4)</sup>

Zhangsheng goes to the capital, Chang'an. The date must be the end of the third month or the beginning of the fourth month.

Some months later he went to Puzhou once more and again spent several months with Miss Cui.<sup>5)</sup>

After several months had passed, Zhangsheng returned to Puzhou and continued his secret rendezvous with Yingying for several months. The seasons must have passed from spring through to autumn.

Presently, with the examination season approaching, Zhangsheng had to go west again.<sup>6)</sup>

As the time for the examinations was getting near, Zhangsheng again parted from Yingying and went to the capital. This was also in autumn, as is shown in the text below.

The following year, being unsuccessful in the literary competition, he lingered in the capital.<sup>7)</sup>

The following year, that is the seventeenth year of Zhenyuan (801), as Zhangsheng was unsuccessful in the examination, he stopped in the capital. That this happened in spring is made clear from the text below.

Since last autumn, I have felt dazed as if I had lost something... The spring wind is often fierce, so keep up your strength by eating well.<sup>8)</sup>

These are the beginning and end portions of the letter which Yingying sent to Zhangsheng in the capital. From these it may be understood that the pair parted the previous autumn and that it is now spring.

Handsome Panlang 潘郎 outshines any jewel, while the gentle grasses of the central courtyard first wither under the snows.<sup>9)</sup>

This is a section from the *Ode to Miss Cui* (*Cuiniangci* 崔娘詞) composed by Yang Juyuan 楊巨源, a friend of Zhangsheng who saw Yingying's letter. Panlang is the famous handsome man of Jin 晉, Pan Yue 潘岳, here indicating Zhangsheng. Since the grass in the courtyard is said to have withered with the snow; consequently, the season is early spring.

A year or so later, Miss Cui had already given herself to another.<sup>10)</sup>

About a year later would make it the eighteenth year of Zhenyuan (802). When Zhangsheng once again visits Puzhou, Yingying is already married to another man. Disaster has struck.

To summarize the above, the couple Zhangsheng and Yingying meet in the spring of the sixteenth year of Zhenyuan. After a brief and secret affair with one parting and a second meeting, they do not have their final parting until autumn. The spring of the subsequent seventeenth year, Yingying sends a letter and in the eighteenth year, they meet with disaster. The following shows how these events are presented in *Dong Xixiang*.

(b) *Dong Xixiang*

In *Dong Xixiang*, the story begins one year later, in the seventeenth year of Zhenyuan.

In the middle of the second month of the seventeenth year of Zhenyuan, Zhangsheng reached Puzhou. (I. 1)<sup>11)</sup>

According to Ying's poetic journal, it was the fifteenth day of the same month, the third or fifth night of the bright moon, or the night of the fifteenth. And on that night there was the entry 'Waited for the moon in the Western Chamber.' (IV. 16)<sup>12)</sup>

That this was the fifteenth day of the third month is made known by the text below. It is late spring, one month later than in *Yingying zhuan*.

From then on, he left secretly in the morning and entered secretly in the evening, for about half a year. (VI. 1)<sup>13)</sup>

Although the text is the same as in *Yingying zhuan*, the period of time is lengthened to half a year from the one month in *Yingying zhuan*. Thus the pair's secret rendezvous continue from the third to the ninth month. The seasons pass from spring through to autumn.

The examinations being near, [Zhangsheng] was to go to the examination hall. (VI. 13)<sup>14)</sup>

Zhangsheng's clearly parted from Yingying and went to the capital to take the examination in the ninth month, in late autumn.

The following year Zhang Gong 張珙 took the third place in the examination. (VI. 27)<sup>15)</sup>

(Gong is, in *Dong Xixiang*, Zhangsheng's given name.) In the spring of the following year, the eighteenth year of Zhenyuan, Zhangsheng achieved the splendid examination result of third place. Converting the failure in *Yingying zhuan* into a pass seems to be a preparatory move leading up to the happy ending.

On the fifteenth night at the end of spring, Yingying thought, 'On this very night last year, I waited for the moon in the Western Chamber., (VII. 2)<sup>16)</sup>

This is when Yingying thinks of Master Zhang in the capital. This makes it clear that the night she waited for the moon in the Western Chamber the previous year was at the "end of spring," that is, the third month.

With the arrival of spring came Yingying's old longing, and as she remembered Zhangsheng, she gradually wasted away. (VII. 3)<sup>17)</sup>

In the spring, hankering after Zhangsheng, Yingying grows thin. In *Yingying zhuan*, at this juncture she writes Zhangsheng a letter, but here she does not do so.

From then on until autumn, there was no communication at all. Yingying wrote a letter and secretly sent a manservant to deliver it to Zhangsheng. (VII. 5)<sup>18)</sup>

She waited and waited for Zhangsheng, whom she knew to have passed the examination in the spring and expected to have returned already, but he did not return and no news came of him. Yingying waited from spring until autumn and only then sent a letter to Zhangsheng.

After Junrui 君瑞 passed the examination, he was made a Hanlin academician 翰林學士 on account of his talent. He stayed quietly at home because of illness, not recovering until the autumn. (VII. 6)<sup>19)</sup>

Junrui was Zhangsheng's pseudonym. He did not return to Yingying or send her a letter because he was laid up with sickness in the capital.

Since last autumn, I have felt dazed as if I had lost something... The chill of autumn is severe, so keep your strength up by eating well. (VII. 8)<sup>20)</sup>

The text of Yingying's letter is the same as in *Yingying zhuan*, but because the season is autumn rather than spring, the line "The spring wind is often fierce" from *Yingying zhuan* is changed to "The chill of autumn is severe." This change of season may be understood as intentional.

Handsome Panlang 潘郎 outshines any jewel, while in the frosty cold of the central contryard the leaves begin to fly. (VII. 9)<sup>21)</sup>

This also appears in Yang Juyuan's poem in *Yingying zhuan*, but for the same reason as in the previous item, the season in the second phrase is changed from spring to autumn. In the denouement which follows, unlike in *Yingying zhuan*, the pair, who manage to meet again after all the trials that they have been through, are happily united and the story concludes with a happy ending, as has already been mentioned.

Thus, to trace the unfolding of the plot in *Dong Xixiang*, after the pair

meet in the spring of the seventeenth year of Zhenyuan and continue their secret rendezvous until the autumn, in the spring of the following eighteenth year, Zhangsheng is successful in the examinations, but becomes ill. Yingying waits until the autumn and then sends Zhangsheng a letter and the two are reunited. Thus, in *Dong Xixiang*, the duration of the story is spread over two years, with the spring and autumn seasons being clearly contrasted, which may be seen as a pivotal development in the storyline. That this arrangement of the seasons was deliberately intended by the author is clearly shown, especially in the changed phraseology of Yingying's letter and Yang Juyuan's poem. But why was it that the author of *Dong Xixiang* laid emphasis on the seasons of spring and autumn, even to the extent of changing the original time settings?

### 3. Seasonal presentation in *Dong Xixiang*

In *Yingying zhuan*, while the story may be said to follow the progression of the seasons through spring and autumn, there is no special emphasis on this point. With the exception of such things as Yang Juyuan's poem, there is not the slightest connection made between the change of seasons and the recurrent emotions of the characters. In *Dong Xixiang*, by contrast, not only is the contrast between spring and autumn even more distinct than in *Yingying zhuan*, but there is also frequent poetic association between human emotions and the seasons, giving the reader a strong impression that the story as a whole is unfolding within the cycle of the seasons.

This kind of unity between the mood of the seasons and human affairs is already apparent in the suite set to *Panshediao* 般涉調 which forms the preface to this work (I. 2). Following the description of the various natural phenomena of spring, summer, autumn and winter, with their shifting changes, the transience and fickleness of human life is likened to the passing of the seasons:

Taipingzhuan 太平賺

The four seasons follow each other in succession. With the flow of time, years pass by imperceptibly. Do not hanker after what you had. A century-long human life is as the morning dew, nought but a trifling thing.<sup>22)</sup>

This prefatory verse could well be said to presage the unfolding of the subsequent story within the passing of the seasons.

Sure enough, in the narrative of the story which follows, the factual details of the various incidents and the emotions of the characters are accompanied in concert by descriptions of seasonal natural phenomena, the seasonal descriptions being used as devices to present human emotions effectively. For instance, after Zhangsheng has first set eyes on Yingying, the backdrop to his pensive mood is described as follows:

Douyehuang 豆葉黃 *to the tune of* Shuangdiao 雙調

Light spring shade and weather that stirs flowers into bloom. The rain falls softly and the breeze blows gently. By the flower garden fence, outside the hanging window-shutter, the sky clears after rain, the flowers are flushed with deep red and the willow sways with new greenery.

The bees gathering nectar come two by two and the playful yellow orioles go in pairs. The scene before him cuts him to the quick and fills him with longing. In sickness he encounters spring, without a home in the world, lone traveller. <sup>23)</sup>

Here the situation of the hero, traveling alone and sick, and the inconsolable feelings brought upon him by the woman he has only just met is all the more profoundly and effectively expressed by the joyous atmosphere of late spring and the vitality of the bees and birds flying in pairs. Thus, contrasting the natural phenomena of spring with the loneliness of the hero suggests his despair.

This method of intensifying the representation by contrasting external scenery with internal human emotions, commonly known as “mutual generations of scene and emotion” (*jing qing xiangsheng* 景情相生), was traditionally a frequently used conventional rhetorical figure in classical Chinese verse. The verses in *Dong Xixiang* followed the traditional devices used in early poetry, such as Tang *shi* 詩 and Song *ci* 詞, with the influence of Song *ci* being particularly recognizable. In fact, Verses in *Dong Xixiang* frequently borrow famous lines verbatim from Song *ci*. The following is an example:

Yuyichan 玉翼蟬 *to the tune of* Dashidiao 大石調

The moon palace guest, off to the imperial capital, is on the verge of say-



ing farewell on the heath at the edge of the city.

“It just so happened that Yingying and I shared a love-nest for a while, but already we must part for me to make my name. What a fate! In vain I grieve, repeatedly sighing, for I cannot bear a casual parting. Thus I have suffered from loneliness quite enough, how can I bear to face the late autumn season?”

The rain suddenly ceases and at dusk the wind grows cold. In the withered willow, the baleful cry of the cicada is heard. Now, at the time of parting, who knows when they will meet again. With the sleeve of his upper garment, he wipes away an endless stream of tears. He knits his brows in despair. How hard it is to part! No matter how many romantic feelings he may chance to have, where can he express them?

*Envoy*: Say not that a man’s heart is like iron. Have you not seen a stream choked with red leaves? They are tears of blood from a departing man.<sup>24)</sup>

In this scene, in parallel with the late spring reverie following the first meeting, the sadness of parting and the late autumn scene are described in terms of “mutual generation of scene and emotion.” Lines such as “How can I bear to face the late autumn season?” “The rain suddenly ceases,” “The baleful cry of the cicada.” “No matter how many romantic feelings he may chance to have, where can he express them?” are practically identical with those already employed by the renowned early Northern Song poet, Liu Yong 柳永 in his famous *Yulinling* 雨霖鈴, as follows:

The chill cry of the cicada is unremitting. Dusk falls on the pavilion where the traveler is farewelled and the violent rainstorm ceases. ...How then can I endure the lonely season of autumn? ...However many romantic feelings I may have, to whom may I express them?<sup>25)</sup>

Moreover the lines: “Have you not seen a stream choked with red leaves? They are tears of blood from a departing man”<sup>26)</sup> are in the same way adapted from the *ci Shuilongyin* 水龍吟 by Su Shi 蘇軾 of the Northern Song: “Look carefully! They are not scattered willow catkins, but the tears of one who departs.”<sup>27)</sup> For that matter, at this juncture the later play by Wang Shifu, *Xixiang ji*, has: “At eventide, who is it who

paints the frosty woods, suffusing them with crimson? They are the tears of one who departs.” Thus in Act IV, Scene 3, *Duanzhenghao* 端正好, the expression is clearly taken from Su Shi’s *ci*.

Such direct and indirect borrowings of expressions from Song *ci* and other poetry throughout the whole of *Dong Xixiang* are a striking characteristic of the work. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *Dong Xixiang* is a story told in the spirit of Song *ci* “mutual generation of scene and emotion” style.

Seasonal presentation in terms of “mutual generation of scene and emotion” is, of course, possible with reference to any season, spring, summer, autumn or winter. However, the most fitting seasons to represent subtle changes in mood, such as the joy of meeting or the sorrow of parting are those when seasonal change is most easily sensed, spring and autumn, more especially late spring and late autumn. It is certainly no accident that the bulk of verse since ancient times that exploits this device is concentrated on spring and autumn. The particular focus in *Dong Xixiang* on spring and autumn, or more narrowly on late spring and late autumn, with major incidents (and the concurrent emotions of the characters) occurring in those seasons. Although this can already be seen to some extent in the original work, *Yingying zhuan*, in *Dong Xixiang* it is more consciously and effectively developed. Consequently, to this end, use is made of a large measure of seasonal representations in the style of Song *ci*.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the adaptation of *Dong Xixiang* from *Yingying zhuan*, the original story, the seemingly rather humorous exaggeration of the characters (particularly extreme in the cases of Zhangsheng and Hongniang), unexpected plot development and the insertion of a large measure of battle scene, may be said to be popular literary devices.<sup>28)</sup> Thus, the relatively simple content of *Yingying zhuan* is not simply padded out, but is rather transformed into an entertaining work with complex plot development capable of grabbing the attention of readers and listeners. The change of ending and the like are only links in this development.

On the other hand, *Dong Xixiang*, in narrating such a popular literary tale, makes use of seasonal representation of mood in the style of traditional classical verse. Thus, in juxtaposing a plot which could be characterized as entertaining, though somewhat burlesque, with emotionally-

charged classical verse, a kind of discordant harmony is produced. A great deal of the charm of *Dong Xixiang* must surely lie in this. Moreover, with its skilful blend of colloquial and literary phraseology, the use of language in this work is fascinating.

These devices, which were probably consciously employed by the author of *Dong Xixiang*, were taken up by the *sanqu* 散曲, the new verse form of the successive Yuan dynasty, and by the arias in the same *sanqu* form employed in the dramatic genre, the *zaju* 雜劇. For instance, in *zaju*, in scenes where principal characters appear on stage for the first time, the seasons and corresponding human emotions are often brought into focus, often scarcely connected with the unfolding of the plot. Thus, interesting issues of literary history are raised: how did popular literature with its colloquial language, consisting of short stories, plays and folk narratives become elevated in status during the Song dynasty and introduced somehow into the sphere of classical verse, which was derived from earlier traditional literary language? And how did classical verse, for its part, respond to the new genre of popular literature? A detailed analysis of these topics is beyond the scope of this paper, but I hope to take it up at another opportunity.

As *Xixiang ji*, in the Ming 明 scholar Li Kaixian's 李開先 *Cinüe* 詞謔 (Verse Banter), was called *Cuishhi chunqiu* 崔氏春秋 (The Spring and Autumn annals of Miss Cui), later generations often took it for another "Spring and Autumn Annals". It was apparently related to the Confucian Classic, the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals), and in fact that classic's moral teaching of "cramming much meaning into subtle wording" was detectable in the play.<sup>29)</sup> All the same, the observation that the story in the work unfolds in accordance with the changes of season from spring through to autumn may be a valid causal attribution.

## Bibliography

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### Notes

- 1) For *Dong Xixiang*, see Akamatsu Norihiko 赤松紀彦 *et al.*, *Tokaigen Seishoki Shokyūcho no Kenkyū* 董解元西廂記諸宮調の研究, 1998, Kyukoshoin 汲古書院.
- 2) Akamatsu 1998, p. 107.
- 3) *Ibidem*, p. 107.
- 4) *Ibidem*, p. 108.
- 5) *Ibidem*, p. 108.
- 6) *Ibidem*, p. 108.
- 7) *Ibidem*, p. 108.
- 8) *Ibidem*, p. 109.
- 9) *Ibidem*, p. 110.
- 10) *Ibidem*, p. 110.
- 11) The text is from Akamatsu 1998. The figures following the *juan* 卷 numbers refer to the paragraph numbers in this work. p. 54.
- 12) Akamatsu 1998, p. 241.
- 13) *Ibidem*, p. 306.
- 14) *Ibidem*, p. 326.
- 15) *Ibidem*, p. 350.
- 16) *Ibidem*, p. 354.
- 17) *Ibidem*, p. 356.
- 18) *Ibidem*, p. 360.
- 19) *Ibidem*, p. 362.
- 20) *Ibidem*, p. 368.
- 21) *Ibidem*, p. 373.
- 22) *Ibidem*, p. 48.
- 23) *Ibidem*, p. 95.
- 24) *Ibidem*, p. 328.
- 25) *Quan Song Ci*, 1965, p. 21.
- 26) *Ibidem*, p. 277.
- 27) Wang Shifu 1978, p. 151.
- 28) See Tanaka Kenji 1954 and 2000.
- 29) Zhang Renhe 1995, “*Biecheng Chunqiu*” 別稱春秋 (the alternative title *spring and Autumn Annals*).