



[Edited Transcript]

KAN, Qian (Director of the Online Confucius Institute at The Open University)

Welcome to Modern Chinese Literature Online Book Club session 7. Today we're going to discuss *Mister Lover* by Wang Xiaobo, translated by Eric Abrahamsen. So now, without any further ado, I hand over to Emily.

Emily Jones (Paper Republic)

Thank you. Thank you to Qian and Lucy and to everyone at the Open University for inviting us to collaborate on the Book Club. For those of you who've joined the previous ones, you'll know that this is our seventh session and we're delighted to have the opportunity to bring a few more different authors to you all.

As well as the book clubs, for those of you who don't know Paper Republic, we are a UK-based charity and as the logo says, we are all about promoting Chinese literature in English translation. If you go onto [our website](#), we have a database which lists different Chinese authors, their works, their translators and translations. And if you do spot any updates, please do send them our way because we're always looking to make it more current and more accurate. We also have published in the last couple of years a [guide to contemporary Chinese literature](#). We've got some interesting essays about different topics, about Chinese literature, but it also has a sort of biographical index of Chinese authors at the back, which is fab, and you can buy that on as an e-book, but also as a paper copy, a real book. We also work with young translators; we're working with the [Anthea Bell Prize](#) to run the Chinese language annual competition for secondary school students. And I guess the bit of Paper Republic that you will probably be most familiar with because of the book club: the short stories, poems and non-fiction that we publish and make available all completely free to read as part of [Read Paper Republic](#). We had [a series that was focused on food](#) that we published last year and we are currently working on a new series with a collection of poems and short stories all around the theme of home and that will be coming soon in the next couple of months. So do please keep an eye out for that. So that's a little bit about us. There are some links here which I will put into the chat later on as the conversation opens up. We have a newsletter, which is just about to get resurrected, so if you sign up soon, you'll get a new a new issue of that. And as I did say, we are a charity, so if you do feel that you can

[donate](#) a little bit of money that would be much appreciated. We put all of that towards funding the translation and editing costs of our *Read Paper Republic* series.

So I am going to hand over in just a second to Jason who's going to talk a little bit more about Wang Xiaobo. For those of you who don't know his work, he was born in 1952, so he was caught up in the Cultural Revolution and was actually sent as an 'educated youth' to work on a farm in Yunnan in the late '60s. He published his work, his book [Golden Age](#) in 1992, first of all in Taiwan, but swiftly afterwards in China and it was a big success at the time. Sadly, Wang Xiaobo died in 1997, quite young, only 44, of a heart attack. There's a really interesting [article on him](#) and his life and his work and his marriage. It's based very much on interviews with his wife. I've got some links which again I'll pop them into the chat later and that's well worth the read and probably much more interesting than listening to me read out a biography. I thought for those of you in the UK that you might be interested to know that there's a collection of essays called [Pleasure of Thinking](#), which were written in the '90s and talk about Wang Xiaobo's thoughts on reading and talking and silence in the Cultural Revolution, about being operated on by a textbook, all sorts of different things, and that that is coming out in the UK at the end of this month. So, if you have enjoyed the story and want to read a bit more of his work, I would point you in that direction. And of course we have [Wang in Love and Bondage](#), which was co-translated by Jason and Hongling, who we have here today.

I thought I would at this point stop talking for a little bit and hand over to Jason to talk a little bit more about Wang Xiaobo.

Jason Sommer (Translator)

Thank you, Emily. I'm going to read just a little bit about his life and then I'll hand it over to Hongling, I think.

Wang Xiaobo's devoted and large following, especially for his fiction, only came well after his untimely death at 45 in 1997. During his life, his public writing career spanned only his final six years. In 1991 The United Daily News of Taiwan gave him their Novella Award, but what he was known for in China was his satiric essays published in that period. They tackled almost all the issues of the day - the collective hysteria of the Cultural Revolution and its variations in the new era, a call for a rational and scientific spirit, the fate of 20th Century Chinese intellectuals, Cultural Conservatism in China and the West's cultural relativism, feminism, homosexuality, the environment. The positive attention he'd attracted for his essays, with their sardonic wit and logical playfulness, did not extend to his fiction, which was largely ignored by the literary establishment. This was certainly a matter of his unprecedented style - heavy ironies flatly delivered and metafictional elements - as well as the content: which included dystopian future settings, and a treatment of sexuality that was frank, irreverent, even comic. The indifference of the literary establishment was also due to his being an outsider. He was never a member of the Chinese Writer's Association, which was state-run and not connected to the universities where interest in Wang was centred and through which it grew dramatically.

His family background was conducive to his outsider status, providing both life challenges and literary benefit. His father Wang Fang Min was a famous logician, labelled an alien-class element and purged from the party in 1952, the year of Wang Xiaobo's birth. So when Wang Xiaobo parodies the language of logic in his fiction, he is working with something of a family

dialect. His father's library included classics of western literature which Wang read, and he had a particular - and telling - fondness for the work of Mark Twain.

Wang, like most of his contemporaries underwent "peasants' re-education" - labouring in the Yunnan province countryside--and went to university only after Mao's death in 1976, at Renmin University, following a period of factory work in Beijing. He studied in the U.S. from 1984-1988 at the University of Pittsburgh, earning an MA in comparative literature. On his return to China, he would teach at Peking and Renmin universities but left teaching and at the time of his death was one of the very few freelance writers working in China.

His marriage to the noted sociologist [Li Yinhe](#) was a significant intellectual partnership for him: he collaborated with her in a ground-breaking sociological study of male homosexuality in China and the influence of her expertise in Foucault and sexuality can be traced in his fiction, in which sex and power and punishment figure prominently.

In the aftermath of Wang Xiaobo's passing more than a hundred newspapers reported the loss of an original thinker and literary pioneer. His trilogy -The Golden Age, The Silver Age and The Bronze Age - sold 80,000 copies in its first printing and was designated among the ten most influential books of 1997. That same year saw the publication of the essay collections *My Spiritual Home* and *The Silent Majority*, which remain best-sellers. In the decades since there have been articles, public celebrations, tribute fiction from young writers—a book titled "Running Dogs at Wang Xiaobo's Door" – and what began as a cult following has ripened into a full and wide-spread recognition of Wang Xiaobo as a major figure in Chinese letters.

Emily Jones

Thank you very much, Jason. I'm just going to move on and we're going to come on now to talk about the story itself, which hopefully some of you will have had a chance to read, obviously, [Mister Lover](#) by Wang Xiaobo, it was translated by [Eric Abrahamsen](#), who is a trustee and Chair of Paper Republic. Now, he's even further west than Jason and Hongling, so it's the middle of the night for him so, we're really delighted, Hongling, that you're able to join today and introduce Wang Xiaobo in detail. I'm going to hand over to you now just to introduce the story a little bit for those of you who haven't had a chance to read it.

Hongling Zhang (Translator)

Thank you, Emily. *Mister Lover* is one of Wang Xiaobo's early work, featured in his first collection of short stories, *Tales of the Tang*. This collection draws entirely from the legendary tales of the Tang dynasty found in the [Taiping Guangji](#), or the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*. *Taiping Guangji* is a massive compilation of over 7 000 stories from the early [Song Dynasty](#), filled with supernatural tales about Buddhist and Taoist priests, immortals, ghosts, and various deities. Unlike legendary stories from other dynasties, the Tang legendary tales are celebrated as major literary works and have inspired many writings across later generations, including Wang Xiaobo's *Tales of the Tang*. The collection was his first attempt at publishing, but it didn't sell well, partly because he wasn't well-known at the time. In fact, it wasn't until his untimely death in 1997 that he gained widespread popularity.

From his essays and miscellaneous writings, you wouldn't guess Wang was all that into classical Chinese literature, yet he had a special interest and deep love for those Tang dynasty stories. He didn't just craft a collection of short stories inspired by them but also

wrote three novels that infused the Tang tales with modern thinking. Many readers wonder why he was so drawn to Tang legends. Some think it's tied to his immersive reading of his father's eclectic collection as a child, along with his creative endeavours while studying at the University of Pittsburgh. His mentor there, the historian [Xu Zhuoyun](#), was an expert in legendary tales in classical literature. Wang Xiaobo helped him map out how these stories evolved. They went from the strange tales of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, through the Buddhist stories of the Tang dynasty, to the folk tales and popular novels of the Song and Ming dynasties. Approaching these historical materials from a novelist's perspective, Wang found abundant inspiration for his fiction. More importantly, the free-spirited essence and the fantastical imagination inherent in the Tang legends resonated deeply with him. Wang Xiaobo's versions of these legends carry his unique signature; he keeps their mythic and entertaining quality but mixes in contemporary and postmodern touches. He adds a dash of dark humour, absurdity and parody, exploring the themes of love, power dynamics, and S/M, truly making them distinctly his own.

Take *Mister Lover* for example. It draws its prototype from the Tang legend of *General Pan*, which tells the story of a young girl who is adept at scaling walls and rooftops. She steals a precious pearl from General Pan in the capital. Wang Xiaobo sticks to the core story – the pearl goes missing and is eventually found, and we've got the seasoned detective of the capital and the spirited young female thief. But he takes it much further and introduces many other characters and details. He changes the pearl's owner from General Pan to the Emperor and transforms the wealth-bringing pearl into a magical bone bracelet that allows the Emperor to experience extraordinary scenery without leaving the palace. The aging detective becomes a striking reeve in his prime named Wang An. He also adds two significant women to the story: the Empress and Wang An's wife. Meanwhile, the city girl thief is reimagined as a spirited and untamed girl from the deep mountains, untouched by worldly affairs. The story introduces complex dynamics not seen in the original, like the domineering and submissive relationship between the Emperor and the Empress, the masochistic and sadistic dynamics between Wang An and his wife, and the platonic love that transcends physical desire between the young girl and Wang An. Additionally, the narrative brings in a spiritual bond between the Emperor and the Ceylonese monk, as well as a common journey shared by the Emperor and the little girl: the Emperor's fascination with the new worlds and the girl's commitment for green love. None of these elements were present in the original text.

I hope I didn't reveal too much about the story, so now I'm just eager to shift the spotlight to you all and listen to what everyone has to say.

Emily Jones

Thank you so much Hongling for that introduction. We've got some questions that are on the screen now.

Questions to get us started

- Do you think the Emperor's bracelet has symbolic meaning? Does the meaning change? Why can the bracelet make him happy?
- The story defines Xiao Qing's love as "green love." What kind of love do you think that is, and what colours would you use to describe the love of Wang An's wife, or the Empress's?
- There are different metaphors for love used – the relationship between a boat and water; the snow-white skeleton in the green grass of the deep mountains. Which metaphor resonates more with you?
- Do you think the story is male-centric? Is the love that Wang An's wife and Xiao Qing have for Wang An an adoration of patriarchy or a subversion of it?
- Did you notice how recurrence is used in the story? Take the successive threats of punishment and actual punishment as an example: what does it mean in the story and does the meaning change with recurrence?



While that's opening up, I just wanted to open the floor to everybody to see if anybody has any comments or questions about the story to get us started. Robert, please go ahead.

Robert McCormick (Participant)

Thank you. I wondered whether it mattered whether you've read any of the original kinds of stories to get some frame from where he's starting from?

Hongling Zhang

I don't think so because you know, since he has departed from the original stories so much, and I think without any background in the Tang Dynasty stories, you can understand all his Tang Tales because it's very modern and also, it's very ... I mean, Jason and I we talked about this yesterday, how even this story has universal themes. I think people from every background can understand that. It's a difficult story, but you can access the story, you don't need to have the historical backgrounds.

Jason Sommer

If you're talking about just the general background and flavour of the story, even without knowing anything about the Tang dynasty, it reads like - or the setting anyway - reads like a fairy tale that that would be familiar to nearly any culture, I would think. However, when Hongling does do the comparison, it's a sort of window on Wang Xiaobo and his thinking really, when you when you compare the original to this. It's illuminating for literary discussion, but it's not necessary for enjoyment of the story, I think.

Emily Jones

Thanks for a great question, Robert, to get us started. We have Shaomian with her hand raised. Do you want to come off mute and ask your question?

Shaomian Deng (Participant)

I would just like to have some comment because I'm a follower or disciple of Wang Xiaobo. I really love Wang Xiaobo; I've read nearly all his essays but have never read his novels. So, it's very interesting to read this novel. It's interesting to have this opportunity to expose me to this novel. If you ask me which English writer I would compare him with I would say [Ian McEwan](#), because I think his novels are very complicated for me to understand. So very similar to Ian McEwan and some of his novels. I think they're quite difficult for me to understand because they're exploring all sorts of human beings, feelings that maybe I haven't experienced or I'm not familiar with as a native Chinese, from my upbringing, my educational background. There are a lot of things, human feelings that I haven't explored, but I think that's what he's exploring, what the novel is exploring. So, it's very similar to [Enduring Love](#). It's a movie as well as a novel. *Enduring Love* is by Ian McEwan. It's very similar to that type of a novel. So that's how I would compare, although I don't understand completely, but that's my feeling. I just want to share this feeling with you. Thank you.

Emily Jones

Thank you. That's a really interesting comment. I don't know Hongling, Jason, when you've translated Wang's work, if you also felt a parallel to other writers and if that's a helpful thing for you as translators?

Jason Sommer

The things that that we translated weren't about the Tang Dynasty, weren't set there. There's a future setting and the writer that most came to mind as a matter of style rather than setting or plot was [Joseph Heller](#), the author of [Catch 22](#). You sometimes hear Wang referred to as the Chinese Joseph Heller, for the sort of postmodern style of the flatness of the delivery and the deep ironies and the absurdism of it. That was a writer that came to mind, but I was mostly thinking about style in the effort to translate. I can't think of a writer who parallels his plot interests or his subject interests.

Hongling Zhang

I know that Wang Xiaobo really admires the French writer [Marguerite Duras's](#) [The Lover](#). Mainly because the novel was translated by a great Chinese translator. In fact, he actually said that he had to find the rhythm of modern Chinese language from that translation, and I'm pretty sure that he read that novel many times. I mean, in many of his stories. You can feel, read, the rhythm and the lyrical but simplistic language that are present in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and I think he also admired the Italian writer [Italo Calvino](#) - [Invisible Cities](#). A couple of my friends mentioned that, in this story the monk talks about the faraway wondrous sights, and some of my friends said it reminded them of *Invisible Cities*, which I think really makes sense. But I think in general, Wang Xiaobo was a very well-read writer, and he was influenced by so many writers from different countries. And that's why I think we're here to talk about him, and that's why after twenty-seven years, people still remember him and like him.

Emily Jones

Thank you. There's an interesting comment in the chat about [Jean Genet](#) being perhaps a bit of inspiration for Wang Xiaobo, which is a really interesting thought.

I wondered if we could talk a little bit about the story. There's one thing that struck me. I don't know how many other people in the conversation today feel the same, and that is the interesting relationships between men and women in the story. There's a question here about whether we think the story is male-centric. Is the love for Wang An an adoration of patriarchy or a subversion of it? It struck me reading it that there is no simple answer to that, that it's a really interesting, delicate take on power and relationships between the sexes. Eric mentioned to me that this story is quite unusual for Wang Xiaobo. Often, Eric said, his characters, his male characters, are often quite weak. And Wang An in this story is quite not weak. He's quite virile and masculine, whatever that means really. ...

Jason Sommer

... Hairy.

Emily Jones

Yeah, and hairy, yeah, very hairy. They talk about that a lot. So, I don't know. I think it's a really interesting story for that reason because it is just sort of playing with people's perceptions of the relationships between the sexes. And I will stop there because I can see that we have a hand up.

Robert McCormick

I completely agree, Emily, but reading this, I kept making notes of all the animals that people are compared to. And I know in some of the other like in in [Pu Song Ling's *Strange Tales*](#) there's all these women who are foxes and actually the power dynamic of that is the trickery - the men are almost played for fools sometimes and maybe describing these characters as different animals de-sexes system to a certain extent, between sort of predators and prey, and I felt myself feeling that Wang An is having circles run around him by these different creatures. So, I agree. I think that was a really fascinating element of the story. I don't know if anyone else agrees or disagrees.

Emily Jones

Thanks.

Jason Sommer

Certainly, the young girl is compared at one point to a cheetah. She's not hunted, she's a hunter, and she has both the power, a sort of force, a physical power to scale buildings and sneak around. But she's also got 'power' power. It seems she is a kind of interesting mix of things. And, of course, she allows herself to be captured at one point. So, she has a lot of the power and she relinquishes the power. And the word 'play' is a signal one in this story, Wang Xiaobo was at play with many ideas and power is one of them: power and its differentials and its use. Who's the victim and who's the agent shifts around here very, very interestingly, I think.

Emily Jones

It's quite a surprising story, isn't it? When you meet the young girl at the beginning, you think, well, she's just a young girl. And then the layers and the complexity get revealed, and it surprises you at every turn. What struck me was that what you think it's going to be about at the beginning is not how it turns out. And that's lovely. That's just so interesting.

Han Xu your hand is up.

Han Xu (School of Psychology and Humanities)

Hello everyone actually I have a question about the translator's translation strategy of culturally specific items. I read the story carefully and I noticed some details about the translation of culturally specific items. For example, the word 午門 (*wumen*) in the text is translated as 'Meridian Gate'. But for example, another words 'Jing Zhaoyin *yamen*'. And for this '*yamen*' only the Pinyin is used. I think 'Meridian Gate' maybe doesn't help the English reader to me. And another question is the Empress's name. It's translated as 'Childe-mother'. I just think because 梓童 (*zitong*) is just a title of the Empress in ancient China, do you think just using the Pinyin or just 'my Empress' might help reader to understand it, Emily?

Emily Jones

Thank you so much. Really interesting question. If this is all right with you Hongling, I don't want to speak for Eric, but he did brief me a little bit on some of his word choices so I'll try and pass on what he said to me and then perhaps, Hongling, you can comment on your perspective on that. I don't know if you would have read the introduction, the 'Childe-mother', is a title invented by Eric as a translator to refer to the way the Emperor refers to the Empress. So, it's a second person pronoun 汝 (*ru*) and no one really knows where it comes from. Eric sort wanted to convey a sense of the archaic-ness, if that's a word, of that pronoun, and settled in the end on 'Childe-mother' - said 'childe' being a really old word for a son of nobility - and he was trying to get across, that the Empress is obviously the mother of the Emperor's children, but she's also gets a proper title because she's the Emperor's consort. But he said, looking back on it, it might have been just a bit 'clever' and rather than anything else. I think it's one of those things that as a translator you struggle with and you settle on something in the moment and then when you look back on it twenty years later, you might have second thoughts. But that's what he was trying to do. He was trying to get across a sense of this is an archaic title. It's a level of respect, but it's also signifying her role in some way. Hongling, I don't know if you want to comment as well on that.

Hongling Zhang

I think in general, Eric's translation retains the original style and the charm, but the classical references are hard. I mean hard for every translator. You know, about this 'Childe-mother' thing, the Chinese term originated in the Han Dynasty. Even in terms of modern Chinese people's knowledge, that's a very old word and I had to look it up to find the origin of the word. It actually it does mean 'mother', it tries to work, tries to emphasise the Empress's duty is to bear children for the Emperor, because that's the most important thing for a

dynasty. I think the original 青 (*qing*), so for me, Child-mother is okay, but I don't know how English readers will take that.

[The translation reads] 'Jing Zhaoyin *yamen*', I think Eric used the italics to emphasise that word, which means - you know, if you want, you can look up 'yamen'; it's pretty common translation of 'yamen', I think inside the field of sinology, but people outside that field might not know. But I don't have the problem with the translation of 'Jing Zhaoyin'. I think Eric just did a transliteration of that word. 'Jing Zhaoyin' actually means 'the male of the capital' if you just translate the word like based on the sound. Some people might mistake that as a personal name, so I do have, you know, some different thoughts about that.

A few other things. I think one thing that mainly caught my attention is the translation of 'stinking ninth'. Actually, I think Erik mentioned that in the [introduction to the story] on your website. That word comes from [The Cultural Revolution](#). Yes, '[stinking ninth](#)' comes from The Cultural Revolution. The way that they put the intellectuals into the low ninth rank is not actually an invention from The Cultural Revolution, it originated in the Yuan Dynasty. And also, in Wang Xiaobo's original text, he didn't really use the word 'stinky ninth', he used the word 'low ninth class', so I don't know why Eric used ... probably because of the 'stinking ninth' during The Cultural Revolution probably made a deep impression on him or other people, so naturally, when you say 'low ninth class', immediately you think about the 'stinking ninth' class during The Culture Revolution. And I have some different opinions about that too. So that's my understanding of that.

Emily Jones

Thank you. That's great. Does that answer your question?

Han Xu

Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. It's very clear. Thank you.

Emily Jones

Any other comments or questions?

Perhaps we could talk about the love a bit. There's a couple of questions that are on screen about love. There's quite a lot of mention of different types of love throughout the story. There's 'green love', there's different metaphors, some of them quite striking the boat in the water was quite startling when I read it and I don't know if anyone's got any thoughts on those metaphors and which version of the love resonated more with them. Perhaps not. Jason, do you have any thoughts on that?

Jason Sommer

I do have lots of thoughts on it, but once again, I'm not going to land anywhere because it's again, at play, he's at play with these kinds of love. There's physical love: the boat in the water is the opposite of platonic, that set of imagery. And the green love, though, is something else that is not attached to human physical love. So, they're opposed to one another and really at play all over the story, but with the young woman, the young thief, she seems to be edging towards a kind of physical love. Her approach to Wang in the story. It seems like it's going in that direction and then it doesn't. That potential is played with, seen

as forbidden, approached, and then withdrawn. So what? Once again, it seems that at the heart of it what kind of love we're exploring at any time in the story is indeterminate. It's very interesting that way. And the images that encapsulate that love, especially the skeleton in the green grass is striking, but in the end, perplexing, admitting of many possibilities. It's a story that's fun to talk about, but the discussion never just closes down, it doesn't snap shut, it just keeps opening, I think.

Emily Jones

Yeah, for sure. Absolutely. We have a hand up. I don't know if you want to add to the discussion about love or make another point.

Robert McCormick

Hello. Yeah, it's me again. Thanks. I really agree with you Jason. I was looking and sort of searching for the 'greens' because I saw the question and I think, for me, what struck me was how the juxtaposition of this green and white or green and clear love - like when we meet Qing - she's crushing these caterpillars, right, which for me - I get images of green. And then later on in the story, he's deciding, he's watching this white butterfly - which is obviously the mature form of these caterpillars that we've seen crushed by the adolescent girl - the butterfly is destroyed, and the Empress as well, who's often described as having this jade-like transparent white skin and she actually has a grim end. And I thought, yeah, that like you say, with the bones and the grass, and the water metaphor. But the closest he gets to Qing is getting in the tub with her, and he's shocked when she washes his clothes. When he finds out it was in this algae-rich water, and it's almost as if he can't quite decide if he wants the green or the white - not sort of mixing metaphors too much - unclear whether he wants the muddy, messy green style or all the clean water. I don't know if that makes sense.

Jason Sommer

The idea of clean and dirty and the boundaries throughout the story, I mean that water is at the edge of a ruined part of the city, which itself is bounded by a strip of green area that's a dying strip. So, there are all these different sort of areas that feed this idea of boundaries, and boundaries crossed, and boundaries between people crossed, and that pond that the clothes come out so beautifully from is foetid, is stinking, but somehow this young woman is able to transform it. She's a figure out of nature who travels into the city, over the boundaries of the city, and back again, you know, and is able to transform something that's not quite the green world, in the form of that water into something that works like the more pure, the more green of the green world. It's very interesting in that way too - just transgressions and just travel between ideas and places and over borders.

Emily Jones

Thank you. As a question that I don't know the answer to in the chat, I don't know, Hongling, if you know which character is used for the name Qing?

Hongling

It's 青 (*qing*) as in 'green'.

Emily Jones

Qing is green, so no radicals, yeah?

Hongling

I also want to comment on the different types of love. The story, even though it's just a short story, it has so many things that you can explore. But I think one of the main things is about love, right? That's why that's why we're talking about this. So, Emily, you mentioned that the metaphor like Wang An's wife mentioned the boat and the water. When we think about that, it involves two parties, right? It's kind of dependent, it's an interactive relationship. While Qing's definition of love is a snow-white skeleton in deep green grass and that's a very, very striking impression. I think everyone who reads that part will feel struck by that image, but it's also a very solitary image. So, I think green love is the kind of love, that seems more abstract, it doesn't involve any physical desire, of course, whereas the boat and the water, that's more like all human love or societal love. And also, the green love happens when Zhao Jing encounters the skeleton, and the skeleton, of course, in a way, it definitely represents death, but we don't really know what the skeleton experienced before. Where does the skeleton come from? So yeah, anyhow there's so much more to talk about, love, but I don't know if we have time for that.

Emily Jones

Qing, as in green also kind of means young as well, doesn't it? So, there might be something about adolescence and, you know, it's less mature. So, there's all these kinds of different levels and complexities to this green love, I think, which is really interesting that you might not - if you don't know Chinese - you might not pick up on at first, which is just fine. It makes it a really interesting metaphor.

Hongling

Jason, it goes to what you said yesterday about how Qing is like a fairy, a trickster, right?

Jason Sommer

Yeah. She has special powers and can travel anywhere really without hindrance. The idea of people and the love that has to be transmitted, and communicated, and goes back and forth. The boat in the water. There's also the idea throughout the story of who can feel what other people feel, which of course relates to love, but also to the Ceylonese monk who imbues these ... or gives these beads to the Emperor and that Emperor can then cross over into another life. He can see the green world that he's isolated from through the eyes of the monk. Something happens that crosses the boundary between people. That bears upon what's possible in in love, I think, in the story: who can cross over and feel what other people feel. It's almost magical at times. The bracelet is of course, imbued with something like magic, and this magical young girl who can cross over to any world she wants. Palace or city or forest. It's very tantalising, all of it.

Emily Jones

Absolutely. I think we've probably got time for one more question or comment if anyone has anything as I know that. We're stopping at one.

KAN Qian

I'm late because I couldn't raise my hand while sharing the screen, can I just come in with one question? it's really such a fascinating, perplexing story, actually. I wonder whether one of you could comment on the last discussion topic because I'm really interested in this question about how recurrence is used in the story. Can one of you comment on that please? And also, another comment, when you talk about the girl's name, Zhaoyin, it really strikes me that Wang Xiaobo thought very hard about this name, you know, and chose this name very carefully, and that that is very interesting.

Jason Sommer

Yeah, well, recurrence seems to deepen things in the story and make them more complicated. There's the threat of punishment, of gelding, constantly coming up. And it's mooted and withdrawn, and mooted and withdrawn, and establishes the Emperor as somebody who is indecisive, who has all this power and doesn't quite know what to do with it. I'm trying to think of other things that repeat. I've already spoken about how many times people go through borders or boundaries, too, and it establishes the fact that there are these borders and boundaries that need to be gone through. Perhaps that bears upon the idea of love in the story. I think it does. But it's also power.

Emily Jones

There's a question in the chat box about the Emperor, who seems central in some senses. Just to add to that question about the Emperor, one of the things that I loved is - I think it's in the first paragraph - it's a line about the Emperor having absolutely everything and so he had a mild case of depression. I think it sort of sums it all up. It makes you even think, is this whole thing, just a set up by the Empress to give the emperor his kicks? It's just layer upon layer again. So, I just wondered, any last thoughts about the emperor?

KAN Qian

I'm afraid we probably have to stop here, Emily. Thank you very much for chairing.

I just want to use this opportunity to tell people, the audience, to thank you as well for engaging, and then to let you know about some very good high-quality courses in Chinese language and culture we have at the Open University. If you have friends or contacts who want to learn Chinese, to be able to read some fascinating stories in the original language. To take a start learning some beginners Chinese. We have a brand new [Beginners Chinese](#) at Level 1, undergraduate level, open for registration. This is an online course with supported learning with twenty students per tutor. It will have online tutorials with tutor support - marking the assignments - and now we have print book as well. And we also provide additional conversation classes at weekends for this credited module. We also have a lot of [short online 16-unit courses](#) in both language and intercultural competence, and a short course in [Chinese business Culture Essentials](#) as well.

Finally, just to let you all know about our forthcoming talks.

- On April 17, we have a conversation with Bill Elder, who is our Associate Lecturer in French, and he's talking to detective fiction author and playwright [Simon Brett OBE](#). The topic is '[Crime fiction, past, present and future](#)'.
- And then on Thursday 23rd of May, we have a public lecture. The topic is 'China's transformation in the Anthropocene'. I actually had to check up this word, it means 'the impact of human activities on the environment'. [Dr James Warren](#) and [Professor Stephen Peake](#) - both of them are in our STEM faculty - are going to give this talk.
- The eighth session of our book club will continue, and we haven't decided a date yet, so please keep an eye in our [events page](#). It will be sometime in summer or in autumn.

So once again, thank you, Emily. Thank you, Hong Ling and Jason for a most interesting, really fascinating discussion about Wang Xiaobo and his story. I hope it has made some of our people in the audience want to read more about Wang Xiaobo's work. So, thanks to all of you for coming and goodbye.

[End of transcript]