
Why Write It Again? Classical Language Rewritings of Preexisting Biji and Xiaoshuo Stories in the Qing Dynasty

Aude Lucas*¹

¹Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie Orientale (CRCAO) – Collège de France, CNRS : UMR8155, Université Paris VII - Paris Diderot : ED131, École Pratique des Hautes Études [EPHE] – Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale - UMR8155 Collège de France 52, rue du Cardinal Lemoine 75005 Paris, France

Abstract

In Qing China, literati published many "small talks" (*xiaoshuo*) and "pen jottings" (*biji*) collections, among which one of the most famous is *Zibuyu* (*That Which the Master Does Not Discuss*) by Yuan Mei (1716-1797), that was first published in 1788. A few stories from *Zibuyu* are to be found in another 18th-century collection, *Qiudeng conghua* (*Collected Talks of the Autumn Lamp*) by Wang Jian (unknown dates, licentiate in 1736). Interestingly enough, the earliest xylographic edition of *Qiudeng conghua* is dated from 1780, which renders it difficult to establish who between Yuan Mei and Wang Jian first wrote these stories. This paper will mainly focus on one narrative that implies a dream experienced by Jiang Shiquan (1725-1785), who was a friend of Yuan Mei's. However, if the close connection between Yuan and Jiang could point out to Yuan's earliest authorship of the story, it also raises the issue of how the story circulated prior to *Zibuyu*'s publication, up to the point that a lower official such as Wang Jian knew about it.

Both versions of the story are written in the Chinese classical language and offer a very similar narrative. However, a close line-to-line comparison through digital tool offers a rigorous and precise view on textual variations between one text and the other. This comparison shows with accuracy which characters the author of the rewriting decided to keep and those he changed, and one may then ponder on the reasons of such modifications. The line-to-line comparison of *Zibuyu* and *Qiudeng conghua* versions of Jiang Shiquan's dream reveals that except for a few key words, Yuan and Wang used completely different wordings, a fact that is somewhat surprising given the Chinese taste for verbatim quotation. Each narrative insists on specific elements of the story, which could highlight each author's primary concerns. Wang's textual version is much more verbose than Yuan's and it presents more plot twists. Provided that it was a rewriting of Yuan's version, it would follow a mid-Qing tendency for longer and more complex narratives in the rewriting of preexisting *biji* and *xiaoshuo* stories, that displayed way more detailed and visual narrative depictions. One may thus sense a paradox for Qing authors, who evidently wished to offer new and more abundant narratives, while at the same time they stuck to previous patterns. However, Wang's additions are not as extensive as other authors of the Qing had done with some pre-Qing narratives, which raises again the question of why one author would feel the need to publish a story that was

*Speaker

released just a few years earlier. Is it that he believed that his own personal literary style and features of imagination could bring something new? All these issues question the literary production of premodern China, a period during which authors still wrote in the classical language but were making attempts to find in-depth ways to renew literature.

Aude Lucas obtained her doctoral degree in 2018 from Université Paris Diderot, where she also taught Chinese language. Her research broadly deals with the emergence of a subjective expression in xiaoshuo and biji literature of the early and mid-Qing period. Her dissertation, financed by a French "contrat doctoral" at the Doctoral School 131 and by a doctoral fellowship bestowed by the Chiang-Ching Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, encompassed late imperial dream narratives of the Chinese literature of leisure. Her dissertation was awarded with two doctoral dissertation prizes, by the Association française d'études chinoises and by the Institut des Humanités, Sciences et Sociétés of Paris Diderot ("Prix Robert Mankin"). She carried on her research on dream motifs in xiaoshuo and biji through a postdoctoral project conducted at the École française d'Extrême-Orient in 2019. She taught Chinese history and classical literature at the Université de Strasbourg for two semesters between 2019 and 2020. She completed a postdoctoral project as a visiting fellow of the Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung (Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) that dealt with the failure and/or reinvention of traditional motifs in oneiric predictions, aiming at highlighting how authors of premodern times questioned usual prophetic and dream interpretation patterns and subverted them in inventive rewritings.