

# Escape from the World of Reality into the Utopian World of Classical Chinese Culture: Analysis of the Two Worlds of the Novella *Dumplings* by Li Shijiang

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**Abstract** The emerging post-1970s Chinese contemporary writer Li Shijiang's novella *Dumplings* (2018) describes in a minute way the escape from the real world into the utopian world of classical Chinese culture. This essay analyzes its complicated time sequence and its intermittent use of stream of consciousness. Its style can be characterized as a mixture of bitter irony and meticulous description. *Dumplings* is founded on the opposition between the cruel reality and literary allusions to romances, mostly three classical Chinese novels *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and *A Journey to the West*. In *Dumplings*, the theme of escape is presented through an original use of time and language, also via echoes from classical Chinese novels.

**Keywords** *Dumplings*; Li Shijiang; middle age crisis; Utopian World; escape

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Li Shijiang is an emerging and prominent young writer in contemporary China. He was born in Ningde, Fujian province in 1974. He is one among the post-1970s writers group and is one of the powerful and potential writers among them. In 1997 he graduated from Beijing Normal University. Since then he has written and published a lot. He published four works in Taiwan: *Free and Easy Wandering*, *More False than Love*, *Flesh* and *They Are All Terrific*. In mainland China, he has

published more than ten novels, such as *The Golden Coach* (2022); *Free and Easy Wandering* (2005), which won him the prize of “Outstanding Young Talent” of Chinese Literature and Media Award of 2005; *Happiness, Longevity and Spring* (2007); *Chinese Department* (2010); *Three Brothers* (2013); *The Magical Aunt Feng* (2013); *Quite Unusual: Chinese Department Series No. 2* (2017). In 2014, he published a collection of short stories and novellas *The Old Man and Wine*. In recent years, he has also published in literary journals several crux novellas such as *Six Murderers*, *Two Murderers*, *Crime Culprit* and *Chinese Knots*. *Six Murderers* has been adapted to a film with the same title and it is to be on show. He also wrote and published several historical novels, such as *He Kun: Bosom Friend of the King* (2006), *Living like Cao Cao* (2007), *Cao Cao: My Life* (2012), *Three Lanes and Seven Alleys* (2010). Li Sijiang also writes poetry. Some of his poems are published in newspapers and poetry magazines. He is often classified as one important member in the “Lower-Half Body Poetry School,” which stresses oral language writing and rebellious spirit. Li Shijiang’s writing style changes a lot in his whole writing career. In his early period he has a passionate and satirical style in his direct flesh-writing and body-writing. In his later period, he consciously changes his writing style, writing in a meticulous and patient way, such as in *Happiness, Longevity and Spring*. Generally speaking, the early period mentioned in this essay indicates the years from 2000 to 2007. This essay focuses on his novella *Dumplings* which was first published in No. 8 of the journal *Youth Literature* in 2018.

The novellas *Dumplings* does not have a strong plot. It consists of three parts. Just as most of the novels in the early period, the story uses the first-person narration. But different from the novels in the early period where the narrator “I” is named “Li Shijiang,” the author’s real name, this novella doesn’t give the narrator “I” any name. The story has three main characters who are all friends: the narrator “I,” Mr. Fu and Mr. Yu. They are three men living in a small city. They are all in their middle age. The narrator is a writer who has a ten-year-old son and always lives in and out of the small city frequently. The narrator thinks a lot about his past and present life and he has a lot of anxieties about life and his own health. All through the text, the narrator is calm, observational, thoughtful, ironical, disillusioned and melancholy. The second character is Mr. Fu, who comes from Taiwan to live in this small city. He once reacted strongly against the government in Taiwan, and coming to this small city, in order to live in his way in a classic cottage on a hill in a park, once more he rebels strongly against the administrative organization. He is dumb or chooses to be dumb. He lives lonelily with his daughter and has only a few friends. He has a scar on his left face. He always picks up fallen petals from the ground

and then washes and awakens them in a special way. The narrator also picks up petals and put them in a pillow which can help him sleep better. The third character is Mr. Yu. Years ago, he suffers from illness and quitted his job for recovering his health. He has wife and daughter, and he cooks each meal carefully for himself. He has an aged mother who suffers from brain block but is not willing to stay in the nursing home. He has to persuade his mother patiently to stay in the nursing home. All the trifles, chores and events the three middle-aged men have encountered in their lives are described in detail. The first-person narrator seems to have much patience. Scattered among the text is the narrator's occasional ironical comments and thoughts on his past and present status of life. Although there is much fatigue, disillusionment and disappointment, anyhow there are still some active gestures in the action of picking up fallen petals, having tea, having beef rice-noodles, strolling around the city and preserving health in every possible way. From a bold, reckless and passionate young man in the early period to a meditative, melancholy, disillusioned and fatigued man in his middle age, the narrator is going through the purgatory stage of his life.

All through the text, the disillusionment, anxiety and melancholy are expressed in a very constrained and passive way, quite different from the writings in Li Shijiang's early period where there is much passion, active revolt and carnival spirit. This story has a very sudden ending without any prediction. Mr. Yu, on a Spring Festival's Eve on the way of sending Mr. Fu a bowl of dumplings, turns over the dumplings on the ground. The dumplings, dusted and dirtied, cannot be eaten any more. Thus only at the end of the story appears "dumplings," the title word. The dirtied and dusted dumplings are just like middle age which is filled with disappointment, disillusionment and exhaustion.

The three parts of the story echo each other in a very natural way with a lot of foreshadowing hints. The first part writes about the narrator's encounter with Mr. Fu while picking up the fallen petals. Then the narrator goes with Mr. Fu to the cottage where he and his daughter live. The narrator talks a lot to Mr. Fu. But when he intends to break the bamboo twig in the yard, the narrator is thrown out by the angry Mr. Fu. The narrator also sees Mr. Fu drying the petals in the yard. The second part writes about the narrator's having tea in the teahouse downstairs. And from the gossip of the teahouse, the narrator knows a lot about the history of the classic cottage. Then the narrator goes again to the cottage and sees Mr. Fu awakening the flowers in a special way. The third part writes about the narrator's encounter with Mr. Yu and their past and present associations. The narrator and Mr. Yu have beef rice-noodles near the park. And from Mr. Yu, the narrator knows more about Mr.

Fu and his cottage. The narrator has a recollection of once going out with Mr. Yu for an excursion by car. Then the narrator has a recollection of going together with Mr. Yu to visit his mother in the nursing home one month before. On their way back from the nursing home, Mr. Yu mentions his overturning the dumplings and making them fall on the ground, dusted and dirtied. Then the whole text comes to the end suddenly with the description of Mr. Yu's going down from the mountain after the overturning of the dumplings.

This essay points out that in this novel, there are two worlds: the world of reality and the utopian world of classical Chinese culture. And the main symbol for the culture is plum blossoms, a special and lofty flower in traditional Chinese culture. Yu Yingshi in his essay *The Two Worlds of "Hung-lou meng"* says, "Two worlds in sharp contrast to each other are created by Ts'ao Hsueh-ch' in his novel *Hung-lou meng (The Red Chamber Dream)*, the two worlds which, for the sake for distinction, I shall call Utopian worlds which, for the sake for distinction, I shall call the "Utopian world" and the "world of reality." These two worlds, as embodied in the novel, are the world of Takuanyuan and the world that existed outside it. The difference between these two worlds is indicated by a variety of opposing symbols... Throughout the book mention of these two worlds constitutes a most important clue which, if grasped intelligently, will enable us to understand the significance that lies behind the author's creative intentions" (222). Inspired by Yu Yingshi's view, this essay believes that there also exist two worlds.

This essay will first analyze the complicated time sequence and the intermittent use of stream of consciousness. It then continues to analyze the language style: a mixture of bitter irony and meticulous description. Then the essay reveals the oppositions between the cruel reality and the alluded romance of three classical Chinese novels (*A Dream of Red Mansions, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and *A Journey to the West*). In this way the theme of escape of escape into the utopian world of Chinese culture is fully revealed.

### **Time Sequence in the Text**

The events in the first part of the novella happen within one day before Spring Festival. It is winter. On the day, the narrator meets Mr. Fu while picking up the fallen blossoms in Nanji Park and he then visits Mr. Fu's cottage. In the cottage, in the narrator's talk to Mr. Fu the dumb person, the narrator tells about his experience of making love to a woman when he is an undergraduate. The events in the second part happen within two days. The two days must be shortly after the day mentioned in the first part. For the first day, the narrator has tea and chats in a

teahouse, intending to meet Mr. Yu there but in vain. From the chatting in the tea house, the narrator gets to know more about Mr. Fu's cottage. For the second day, the narrator goes again to Mr. Fu's cottage, watching him awakening the flowers by washing them in the running water. The events in the third part happen sometime after the two days described in the second part. The events happen within one day. But there are two separate recollections. On the day, the narrator meets Mr. Yu who has just dealt with the funeral of Mr. Yu's father-in-law. Then they two go to the gate of Nanji Park. On the way, they have beef rice-noodles in one of the booths. And from the conversation with Mr. Yu, the narrator gets to know more about Mr. Fu's rebel and resistance. Then there is the recollection of a weekend excursion to the countryside. At last there is the second recollection of the trip of the narrator and Mr. Yu to the nursing home to visit Mr. Yu's old mother one month ago. The action in the second recollection should have happened a little earlier than the excursion in the first recollection. On the way back by car, Mr. Yu tells the narrator his journey of climbing up the hill on an eve of Spring Festival (It must be several years ago) to bring a bowl of dumplings to Mr. Fu. Mr. Yu says on the slippery slope he overturns the dumplings and they get dirtied and dusted. Then Mr. Yu overlooks the whole city and sees the exploding fireworks. He then goes down the hill. Then the whole text suddenly comes to a stop. It stops at a time point in the past. And it can be noticed that the time in the third part goes backward step by step by the narration of the main action and the two recollections of previous events. Roughly the time proceeds chronologically in the three parts. Yet all through the whole text, there scatter the flashbacks of the narrator's middle school life and life after all the schools. And there are recollections as recounted in the third part. And there is the description of the narrator's psychological activities. The physical actions mix with the psychological activities perfectly. The technique of stream of consciousness is adroitly used by the author. Time flows slowly forward in the three parts, with some small streams deviating and going back. It is like a tree growing tall upward, with some branches extending upward or curling around the trunk. The arrangement of the time sequence has enriched the theme and connotation of the text.

### **Language Style of *Dumplings*: A Mixture of Bitter Irony and Meticulous Description**

In the early period of Li Shijiang's writing, his style is very unique: passionate, sarcastic, and direct flesh-writing or body-writing with intense focus on sexual desire and the satisfaction of primal human urges. Just as the award ceremony speech of the prize of "Outstanding Young Talent" of Chinese Literature and Media Award

of 2005 has said, “The writing of Li Shijiang is a real language carnival. He is good at converting the repressed passion into narrative motivation, and interpreting the courage facing humble experiences as self-satirizing. His language is sharp and poignant and full of elation. His view on life is penetrating and piercing. And he can perfectly unite the playing style and sincere spirit. He has recovered the primitive way of novel writing: to find amusement in daily life and to describe the trivial matters splendidly and magnificently. His novel *Free and Easy Wandering* published in 2005 truly faces the abundant desires, the joy of rebellion, cold heart and the unknown contentedness of a wanderer. And the novel has provided the epoch evidences for the wanderer’s self-degradation. He has deeply dissected the texture and grain of life. And he has left a batch of forthright and unadorned soul specimens for the world where loftiness and dirtiness coexist. As a secret talent who has been veiled for many years, Li Shijiang, with his appearance, will forcefully subvert the ossified and outmoded order of contemporary Chinese novels” (Editor 93).<sup>1</sup> However, Li Shijiang’s language style has a big turning and change in his work *Happiness, Longevity and Spring* published in 2007. In this novel, he delineates patiently and minutely the life of the countryside in a village in the south-east coast. In his “Notes on Creative Writing (Preface)” in this novel, he says, “Patience, clumsiness, honesty and meticulousness, these are the qualities for writing a full-length novel I now can think of” (Li, *Happiness* 1).<sup>2</sup> Since then, he has multiple styles in his writings. This is also a big challenge for him. He is making progress in all these changes and challenges.

All through this novella *Dumplings*, there is the minute description of the small city, the narrator’s hometown. It describes the scenes in Nanji Park, the cottage, the hill, the small shops and booths outside the gate of the park. The author seems to have a lot of patience in all these descriptions. The language style seems to have changed completely and it seems to be totally different from that of the author’s early stage. But if scrutinized deeply it can be found that the Language of *Dumplings* has retained some of the characteristics of the early period: passionate,

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1 此处中文原文为：“李师江的写作是真正的语言狂欢。他善于把压抑的激情转化成叙事动力，把直面卑微经验的勇气解读为自我嘲讽。他的语言锋利毒辣，充满快意，他对生活的看法一针见血，而且能将游戏的风格和诚恳的精神熔于一炉。他恢复了小说写作的原始作风：从日常生活中发现趣味，把小事写得壮观、辉煌。他出版于2005年度的《逍遥游》，真实地面对了一个漂泊者丰盛的欲望、叛逆的快乐、寒冷的内心以及不为人知的自得，并为他的自我沉沦提供了时代的证据。他对生活肌理的深刻解剖，为这个高尚和污秽共存的世界留下了一批大胆率真、毫无修饰的灵魂标本。作为一个被遮蔽了多年的隐秘天才，李师江的出现，将有力颠覆中国当代小说僵化而陈旧的秩序。”

2 此处原文是：“耐心、笨拙、诚实、细心，这是我目前能想到的要写好一个长篇的质素”。

ironic and poignant. For example, in the first part, when the narrator meets Mr. Fu while bending down to pick up the fallen petals, it says, “The scene, to put it clearly, is like two bears who, bending down to look for food, when raising their heads, suddenly found themselves both on a narrow road” (Li, “Dumplings” 25).<sup>1</sup> The comparison of two men with two bears is very sarcastic. And the author is also good at self-satirizing. When the narrator greets Mr. Fu and doesn’t get his reply, it says, “I felt ashamed at my mindless greetings—as if when you greeted an environmentalist, you felt you yourself also an environmentalist. Such an illusion was really a shame” (25). And the author is good at irony. When the narrator in his childhood wants to leave home and worries about the fish, it says, “I always thought that when I grew up and left home nobody would change water for these fish and take care of them. What should I do? The fact was that in order not to trouble me the fighting fish died before I grew up” (25-26). And some similes in the text are very unemotional and indifferent where there should be some emotions. When once the narrator as an undergraduate makes love to a woman he happens to meet in the dancing hall, “Quite naturally, I hugged her and put her on a stone, just like putting a flat fish upon the frying pan” (26). This simile is cold and calm enough and it indicates the narrator’s seemingly indifferent attitude toward life. And when the narrator tells Mr. Fu he has divorced three times, it continues to say, “I spoke with such alacrity! My life seemed to be manipulated by my tongue. I could get away from any status of entanglement” (26). It shows the narrator’s impatience and doubtful thoughts about the relationship between real life and language. Later, at the end of the second part the narrator, with a more sincere attitude, tells Mr. Fu, “I haven’t divorced for three times. I only tried to divorce with the same person for three times and I didn’t succeed. Sorry for the former exaggeration” (29). The former play of words makes the narrator have the illusion of running away from any trouble. The narrator’s later correction shows the courage to face the truth in life. The narrator has realized that escape by way of language exaggeration is useless. Maybe this correction is the narrator’s, or the author Li Shijiang’s reflection on his former language style prevalent in his early period. Then no wonder this novella’s language style is mainly minute and patient description. At the end of the first part, the narrator thinks of the nourishing effect of the petals, “Mr. Yu said that petals helped to comfort the heart and make people quiet and tranquil. I believe what he said, not from a medical perspective, but from a psychological perspective, or more loftily, from a religious perspective” (27). The push from “medical,” to “psychological,” and finally to “religious” indicates the

1 All the citations of the original text are based on the essay author’s translation of the novella *Dumplings* (李师江: 《饺子》, 《青年文学》8 (2018): 24-31).



narrator's helplessness in facing life. And all this is stated in a bitterly ironic way, which is typical of Li Shijiang's early writings.

In the second part of the story, in the narration of action there insert some of the thoughts of the narrator. The narrator's thoughts appear naturally and calmly all through the text. They are the reflection of his attitude toward life in middle age. According to the text, when the narrator is young, he is actively indulged in life and has consumed both energy and health. Coming to the middle age, the narrator feels disappointed and disillusioned, only desiring to preserve health in every possible way: petals for sleeping upon, tea for clearing the heat. It says, "Originally I liked to have black tea for it was good for the stomach. Later I had white tea for it could help to clear the heat and wash the lungs. In fact I didn't know whether the tea had such effects or not, yet belief was better than disbelief. If you believed in nothing, the days would be too superficial and floating. While young, I believed in nothing and trudged through a bloody road in order to look for a trustworthy bulk, only to find the vast blankness ahead" (27). The loss of belief in life makes the narrator worried. And the narrator is not able to find a relieving belief in life. Thus the narrator turns to believe in something substantial, such as tea's function for preserving health.

And in the second part, there is the satirical comment on the attitude of the people of the small city. They aspire something splendid and often ignore the ordinary life around themselves. It says, "People in a small city loved to know about great events, such as who had written the inscription on a certain stone in the park, which national leader had once traveled here in which year. As to where the dustman from the residential building came from, they often didn't have the intention to know about" (28).

There is also in the second part the anxiety and helplessness in not understanding his ten-year-old son. It says, "Usually he didn't like to chat with me. Only when he was extremely bored, he would telephone me. For a child of ten years old, you didn't know about his boredom at all" (28).

And the narrator gets fatigued and bored with the routine of the small city. The narrator wants to harvest something or find something interesting while strolling on the streets at night. Yet the narrator finds nothing except a tired man. And there is the cold conjecture about the man, "Maybe what he had done was a very trifled and tedious job and at this moment the job was done for a certain phase so that he could go back home. And his family should have eager expected this moment. Maybe he was only a lonely man going back home for a sleep after prostituting. Who knew! In brief this suspectable and thin man seemed to make me harvest something" (28). It shows the narrator's extreme boredom and impatience in the small city.



And in the second part, there is the description of the psychological activities where the narrator is facing himself boldly. In the subsequent narration, it says the narrator has done some jobs outside and finally decides to return to the small city to focus on writing. Still, the narrator wonders if it is another form of escape from life. So the narrator says, "Moving my life from reality to paper, could this be an essential escape? I had not been able to answer the question for several years" (28). Then in the subsequent narration of the narrator's watching Mr. Fu's action of awakening the flowers, there insert the plot of the narrator's mother coming to the middle school to tell him that she has decided to leave home. Then for the first time, the word "escape" falls upon "my" mind, "My heart tumbled for a whole night in order to accept the fact. The next morning one word fell firmly on my heart: escape. That was the fruit of my arduous thinking. That was the way for dismissing the pains in the youth" (29). Then it continues to talk about the narrator's following life, which is actually a series of escapes, "While I was in middle school I wanted to graduate as soon as possible. When I was in university I wanted to leave it sooner. It had not been suitable for me to stay in any community. I really felt bored. After graduation I went to Fuzhou, then continued to escape to Beijing, then to Guangzhou, then back to Beijing, at last again to the small city in the home town. In such a repetitious way escape had become the habit" (29). Thus up until the end of the second part, the narrator's helpless and poignant attitude toward life is partly explained. Generally speaking, the paragraphs of the second part mentioned above are the description of psychological activities in the technique of stream of consciousness. They are a mixture of irony, satire and sincere statement, which has retained the characteristics of the early period while shifting to sober, patient and honest description.

In the third part, the unique language characteristics of the early period are also scattered in the text. The third part mainly talks about the narrator's present and past associations with Mr. Yu. There is the further explanation of the status of the narrator's present life. The narrator is worried and always has the same kind of nightmare, "But what led to my headache was a kind of dream that I was not able to get rid of. After I left school, I had the kind of dream repeatedly: I was at the eve of preparing for an exam. Yes, a very important exam, it should be the entrance examination for college. After the final battle I would be able to run away from a certain kind of life. But just before the eve, a ghost came to disturb me. It wanted me to be frightened, to leave and to be unable to take part in the exam. I couldn't see the ghost but knew his intention. It scared me with all kinds of horrifying sounds to make me leave. In the same kind of dreams, the ghost was sometimes the pig Bajie

in *The Journey to the West*. He was running after me holding a spike-tooth rake in his hand whereas I couldn't exert any opposing measure. After waking up, I felt paralyzed in hands and feet. And I felt rejoiced that by luck this was only a dream" (30). And the text continues to write about the narrator's thoughts: "In the recent few years I liked to write in a strange small city. I had no friends. Or I had one or two friends and met them occasionally. A person was hurled in a strange place. The crowd and environment were both strange. It was like just coming out from a womb without any past or harm. The indifference to sorrow or joy had made an illusion of a thorough escape. I felt it a kind of escaping method" (30). Here there are the minute description of the dream and the sincere writing about his escape to strange cities which have shown the author's shift to honest and patient writing.

In the subsequent narration of the third part, it writes about Mr. Yu and the narrator's visit of the nursing home. While Mr. Yu is meeting and talking with his mother, the narrator strolls around the gate. There is then the description of the environment's quietness and loneliness. "The sharpest perception in the yard was quietness. The lawn was **quiet**. The equipment for exercises was **quiet**. There parked a storage battery car in the parking lot not far away. It seemed so **quiet** as not to be able to move. The wooden couch on the long corridor was hard, and **quiet**. Why did I feel the former wooden equipment that had been made was soft? Incredible. When there was no person seen around the empty space, then there was only loneliness left" (31). The successive word "quiet" repeated four times indicates the loneliness felt by man in the surrounding.

In fact, since his work *Happiness, Longevity and Spring* was published in 2007, Li Shijiang has tried to adopt a more objective and patient way of narration. In this novel, Li Shijiang has continued to adopt the calm, objective and simple style of writing while retaining some characteristics of the writings in his early period which are passionate and ironic. The critic Zhang Ning, after reading *Happiness, Longevity and Spring*, comments that the post-70s writers' passion, anger and impulsion have been consumed and used up completely. And he thinks that they have entered too early into middle-age writing or even old-age writing. Li Shijiang does not agree with Zhang Ning's idea. He thinks Zhang Ning has misread his work *Happiness, Longevity and Spring*. He says, "Zhang Ning is accustomed to my style of holding strength in each sentence. And he is not used to my present modest style...I know, Zhang Ning thinks the sharpness and dash in my writing have disappeared completely. But I myself feel that when self-expressing narration turns to a description full of panoramic control, a larger creative power is rising from my

inner heart” (Net 1).<sup>1</sup> In this novella, Li Shijiang’s style, generally speaking, is a continuation of that in *Happiness, Longevity and Spring*. Meanwhile, this novella still keeps some language features such as the passionate and sarcastic tone in the early period. While in *Happiness, Longevity and Spring* Li Shijiang writes more about the daily routine and chores and events in the peasants’ life (it is narrated in the third-person), in this novella, Li turns more frequently into the inner heart of the characters, especially the psychological activities of the first-person narrator “I.” This transitional period from passionate writing to meticulous and patient description shows, the appearance of, just as Li Shijiang himself says, “a larger creative power.” And this novella also shows Li Shijiang’s in-depth thinking about middle age crisis with the meticulous description and intermittent appearance of bitter and ironic sentences.

### **Oppositions between Alluded Romance and the Cruel Reality: The Use of Classical Chinese Novels for Outer Opposition and Inner Connection**

In this novella, there are several allusions to the classical Chinese novels written in the Ming or Qing dynasty such as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and *A Journey to the West*. At the beginning of the novel, when the scene of picking up fallen petals from the ground appears, the Chinese readers will naturally think of the famous scene “Daiyu Weeps over Fallen Blossoms by the Tomb of Flowers” in Chapter 27 of the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* written by Cao Xueqin in the Qing dynasty. In the novel, Lin Daiyu is one of the main female characters. She lives in her maternal grandmother’s big family since her mother dies. Later her father also dies and she stays in the big family until she dies. She loves Jia Baoyu, her cousin. She loves him so deeply that she always quarrels with him for in the beginning she is not sure about Baoyu’s love for her. One time, after she is refused by Baoyu’s servants out of misunderstanding to enter Baoyu’s residence yard, she goes out to the garden to pick up some fallen flowers from the ground and buries them under ground, for she fears that the flowers and petals will be tread upon and get dirty. She wants to keep the flowers pure, just as she wants to get her heart pure and unpolluted by any secular consideration. There is great self-pity and pride in this scene. And there is the simile between the fallen blossoms and Daiyu herself. And the versatile author Cao Xueqin has written down a famous ancient-style poem “The Song for Burying the Fallen Flowers” in Chapter 27. It

1 此处原文是“张柠看惯了我以前句句发力的语言，对这次不露锋芒的写法不适应……我知道，张柠认为我的文字的锐意已经全消。可我自己觉得，从自我表白的叙述转向全局控制的描写之后，一种更大的创作力正在我内心产生。”

says:

As blossoms fade and fly across the sky,  
Who pities the faded red, the scent that has been?  
Softly the gossamer floats over spring pavilions,  
Gently the willow fluff wafts to the embroidered screen.

A girl in her chamber mourns the passing of spring,  
No relief from anxiety her poor heart knows;  
Hoe in hand she steps through her portal,  
Loath to tread on the blossom as she comes and goes.

Willows and elms, fresh and verdant,  
Care not if peach and plum blossom drift away;  
Next year the peach and plum will bloom again,  
But her chamber may stand empty on that day.

By the third month the scented nests are built,  
But the swallows on the beam are heartless all;  
Next year, though once again you may peck the buds,  
From the beam of an empty room your nest will fall.

Each year for three hundred and sixty days  
The cutting wind and biting frost contented.  
How long can beauty flower fresh and fair?  
In a single day wind can whirl it to its end.

Fallen, the brightest blooms are hard to find;  
With aching heart their grave-digger comes now.  
Alone, her hoe in hand, her secret tears  
Falling like drops of blood on each bare bough.

Dusk falls and the cuckoo is silent;  
Her hoe brought back, the lodge is locked and still;  
A green lamp lights the wall as sleep enfolds her,  
Cold rain pelts the casement and her quilt is chill.

What causes my two-fold anguish?  
 Love for spring and resentment of spring;  
 For Suddenly it comes and suddenly goes,  
 Its arrival unheralded, noiseless its departing.

Last night from the courtyard floated a sad song---  
 Was it the soul of blossom, the soul of birds?  
 Hard to detain, the soul of blossom or birds,  
 For blossoms have no assurance, birds no words.

I long to take wing and fly  
 With the flowers to earth's uttermost bound;  
 And yet at earth's uttermost bound  
 Where can a fragrant burial mound be found?

Better shroud the air petals in silk  
 With clean earth for their outer attire;  
 For pure you came and pure shall go,  
 Not sinking into some foul ditch or mire.

Now you are dead I come to bury you;  
 None has divined the day when I shall die;  
 Men laugh at my folly in burying fallen leaves,  
 But who will bury me when dead I lie?

See, when spring draws to a close and flowers fall,  
 This is the season when beauty must ebb and fade;  
 The day that spring takes wing and beauty fades  
 Who will care for the fallen blossom or dead maid? (Tsao 399-400)

The melancholy and romantic tone runs through the whole poem. And Chinese readers might expect the same tone in the action of picking up the fallen blossoms at the beginning of the novella *Dumplings*. And in the second part, the narrator goes to Mr. Fu's cottage to watch him awaken the flowers by putting them in the running water. All these details might lead to a romantic story about the pursuit of spiritual purity. But it turns out that the narrator and Mr. Fu only use the blossoms for keeping healthy by putting them into pillows. The strong opposition between

the pursuit of spiritual purity and the pursuit of physical health creates a humorous and cynical effect. The cruel reality is that middle age means the decay of health. Yet it cannot be said that the action of picking and washing flowers has not a tint of spiritual pursuit. When the narrator sleeps on the pillow filled with plum blossoms, he feels he is sleeping on a spring mountain. And then the narrator thinks of his middle school life and he goes on to reflect on his life as a writer, his constant escapes and his worries. A light melancholy air permeates all the thoughts, although the melancholy is not as deep as in “The Song for Burying the Fallen Flowers.” For Mr. Fu, although he also uses the fallen blossoms for health, yet his action of picking and awakening flowers is also his unique way to keep his own life style and spiritual purity. In the third part, the narration of Mr. Fu’s fierce rebel against authority and pursuit of freedom echo with his picking and washing flowers. For both the narrator and Mr. Fu, the cruel reality is middle age crisis: personal dilemma in physical health and spiritual pursuit. Thus in the opposition between the alluded romance and cruel reality, middle age crisis both in body and spirit sticks out.

Apart from *A Dream of Red Mansions*, this novella also uses Pu Songling’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* in the Qing dynasty to create the opposition. In the second part, it says the cottage where Mr. Fu lives used to be the outdoor scene of the TV series “Liaozhai” adapted from *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. This work of Pu Songling’s is a collection of bizarre stories. The stories are mostly about the moving love between a beautiful female ghost and a young man, a young intellectual. The hidden allusion is that the man living in the cottage might run into a romantic love. But the cruel reality is that Mr. Fu fights fiercely with the security guard of the park in order to stay in the house after the lease is due. And he later also fights with the administrative staff for the protection of the surrounding trees, flowers and grass. He even smears his own excrement on the bamboo shoots in case the passers-by destroy them. His rebel against society creates a strong opposition against the expected romance. Yet there is an innate connection and kinship between Mr. Fu and those young intellectuals: they both want to pursue personal freedom and realize their own dreams in their unique ways. Mr. Fu achieves this through fighting, which has led to the scar on his face. Those intellectuals achieve the aim through love with a pretty female ghost. The use of the classic fiction *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* has the same effect as *A Dream of Red Mansions*: they both create an outer opposition and inner connection.

In the third part of the novella, when the narrator sleeps on the pillow filled with plum blossoms, he thinks of his constant nightmare after he leaves school:

a ghost comes to disturb him just on the eve of an important examination. The ghost sometimes is the image of the pig Bajie in the classical fiction *The Journey to the West*. It says, “He was running after me holding a spike-tooth rake in his hand whereas I couldn’t exert any opposing measure” (30). This nightmare shows the narrator’s anxiety about life. *The Journey to the West* tells about the story of four people going west to get Buddhist canons. The four people include the monk Tangseng who is modelled after the real monk Xuanzang in the Tang dynasty, Tangseng’s senior apprentice the monkey Sun Wukong, the second apprentice the pig Bajie, and the third apprentice Shaseng. It is a dangerous journey and each time they encounter a crisis, Sun Wukong can help them get out of the danger. Bajie can also help to fight the ghosts and demons. Bajie in the fiction has a monstrous image. With his weapon spike-tooth rake, he can be very frightening, especially for children. The use of the image Bajie can show the anxiety and pressure of the narrator. And, *The Journey to the West* alludes to a spiritual journey to pursue truth. The mention of this classical fiction can also allude to spiritual journey, spiritual crisis and the painful pursuit of truth. And in *The Journey to the West*, Bajie is the positive hero who runs after monsters together with the other apprentices, although he is sometimes lazy and greedy of eating. But in the narrator’s dream, Bajie becomes a monster who runs after “me,” the prey. The interchange and opposition between Bajie as a hero and monster indicate the narrator’s confusion and anxiety. As a deserter from jobs and a meditative writer, the narrator is facing his own middle age crisis and anxiety.

In conclusion, in *Dumplings* the theme of escape is revealed through mixed styles, and echoes from classical Chinese novels. In the meticulous and patient description of *Dumplings*, one discerns several layers in the first-person narrator’s emotions. The plot is pushed forward naturally by the narrator’s emotions. Psychological life is described in the form of stream of consciousness. Time in the text appears first as a straight line but then reveals numerous branches moving back, thus uniting past and present organically. The language betrays a remainder from an earlier period marked by passion and irony, and adds to this a later period style marked by patience and meticulousness. The opposition between literary allusions to classical Chinese novels (*A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and *A Journey to the West*) and the cruel reality helps strengthen the theme of escape and spiritual pursuit. The essay points out that the narrator of *Dumplings* is in the process of going through a difficult journey as a writer and man. And in this novel, two worlds are vividly presented: the world of reality and the utopian world of classical Chinese culture. The theme of escape in *Dumplings* has



been presented wonderfully in the novella that reaches the level of a well-written modernist novel.

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