

Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

Becoming a Couple

Conversations and Couple Narrative in the Novella

Jiao Hong ji

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Abstract This paper examines the configuration of the romantic couple in Song Yuan's Yuan-period novella *Jiao Hong ji* in the context of the earlier model set by the Tang dynasty classical tale *Yingying zhuan*. It focuses on the analysis of conversations between fictional lovers in order to examine how intimacy and the characters' search for a shared experience of mutual acknowledgment are performed within the main plot. Shifting away from the model set by *Yingying zhuan*, the work of Song Yuan newly addressed the issue of love's place in Confucian sentimentality, allowing the troubled emergence of a narrative of the couple.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Silent Legacy of Yingying. – 3 Conversations in *Jiao Hong ji*: Towards an Aesthetic of the Ordinary. – 4 Conclusion.

Keywords *Jiao Hong ji*. The Story of Jiaoniang and Feihong. Song Yuan. Chuanqi. Yingying zhuan. The Story of Yingying.

1 Introduction

Jiao Hong ji 嬌紅記 (The Story of Jiaoniang and Feihong) is a long *chuanqi* 傳奇 narrative written by Song Yuan 宋遠 (zi Meidong 梅洞) and dated to the Yuan 元 dynasty (1279-1368).¹ It tells the love story of a young and talented man named Shen Chun 申純 and his gifted maternal cousin Wang Jiaoniang 王嬌娘, from its faltering beginning to the tragic deaths of the two lovers. The story enjoyed great success in later centuries, particularly during the

1 During the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1911) dynasties, the novella *Jiao Hong ji* was attributed to at least two other different authors, besides Song Yuan, namely Yu Ji 虞集 (1273-1348) and Li Xu 李翹 (15th century). On the authorship of *Jiao Hong ji*, see Itō 1977, pp. 75-79; Chen Yiyuan 1997, pp. 20-27; Chen Guojun 2005.

Ming dynasty, when it was adapted into several plays and reprinted within many narrative anthologies and popular encyclopaedias.²

The popularity of this novella during the Ming was certainly linked to its focus on desire, marriage and the heroic motif of the lovers' double death, but it was also the result of formal changes in the composition of narrative, particularly in the extensive combination of prose and verse that created the textual illusion of a dramatic performance.³

In the past, research on *Jiao Hong ji* was rather limited, and it was only recently that the important role played by this novella in the history of pre-modern literature has been given due attention.⁴ Previous studies have discussed mainly the erotic theme elaborated in

2 According to Itō (1977, pp. 83-86), the first existing attested reference to the novella *Jiao Hong ji* dates to the Yongle 永樂 reign period (1403-1424) of the Ming dynasty and is found in the story *Jia Yunhua huanhun ji* 賈雲華還魂記 (Jia Yunhua Returns from the Grave) in the collection *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話 (Sequel to Tales Told by Lamplight) by Li Changqi 李昌祺 (1376-1452). Gao Ru's 高儒 bibliographic catalogue *Baichuan shuzhi* 百川書志 (The Book Catalogue of the One Hundred Streams, preface 1540) contains evidence of the circulation of the text in a single edition format in two juan. See Gao [1540] 1957, p. 90. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the novella was included – at the expense of more or less significant editorial changes – in several narrative anthologies and popular encyclopedias such as *Yan yi bian* 艷異編 (Tales of Love and Wonder), *Yanju biji* 燕居筆記 (Leisure Life Notes), *Xiugu chunrong* 繡谷春容 (Spring Vistas From the Brocade Valley), *Huazhen qiyán* 花陣綺言 (Literary elegance in romance), *Yijian shangxin bian* 一見賞心編 (Beautiful Sight Compendium), *Qingshi* 情史 (History of Love) down to the late Qing collection *Nü Liaozhai zhiyi* 女聊齋誌異 (The Female Records of the Strange), to name but a few. Chen Yiyuan (1997, pp. 32-36) lists at least seven or eight dramatic adaptations of the novella from the Yuan dynasty to the Qing, among which Liu Dui 劉兌 (fl. 1383)'s *zaju Jintong yunü Jiao Hong ji* 金童玉女嬌紅記 (The Golden Boy and the Jade Girl, or the Story of Jiaoniang and Feihong, printed edition from the Xuande period, 1426-1435) and Meng Chengshun 孟稱舜 (1599-1684)'s *chuanqi Jieyi yuanyang zhong Jiao Hong ji* 節義鴛鴦嬌紅記 (The Story of Jiaoniang and Feihong and of Chastity and Integrity in the Mandarin-duck Tomb, prefaces 1638 and 1639) are the most popular ones. For an English translation of Meng Chengshun's play, see Meng 2001.

3 The novella is generally considered the first example of the narrative sub-genre known as *zhongpian chuanqi xiaoshuo* 中篇傳奇小說 (medium-length novels), a development of the short-story in classical language (*chuanqi* 傳奇) of the Tang and Song dynasties, which spread and gained popularity during the Yuan and Ming periods. See Chen Yiyuan 1996, pp. 1-33; Chen Dakang 1998; Li 2004. The two main formal characteristics of this genre are the length of the text (texts total 15-20,000 characters) and the extensive use of verse within the narrative. In terms of formal features, the novella *Jiao Hong ji* totals more than seventeen thousand characters and contains about sixty poems in all main poetical genres.

4 Zhang Peiheng, Luo Yuming (1997, vol. 3, pp. 166-172) were among the first scholars to discuss at some length the novella *Jiao Hong ji* in their history of Chinese literature. In their opinion, Song's work marked a new development in narrative creation in the context of traditional literature (p. 168). A few earlier studies dedicated to *Jiao Hong ji* included the groundbreaking work by the Japanese scholar Itō, in 1977, the first to acknowledge the important role played by this novella in the revitalization of the *chuanqi* narrative genre during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, followed by Ichinari 1995, and the article by Wang (1994) on the late Ming 'cult of *qing* 情' (passion, emotion, love). For some recent contributions see Ding 2005, Carlitz 2006, Wang 2006, Bisetto 2011.

the novella, and more recently the function assigned to poems in the overall narrative structure.

Critics have generally praised the novella for the elaborated psychological characterization of the main characters, and particularly of the female protagonist Wang Jiaoniang. The pre-eminence of the female roles in the narrative is underscored by the titles that were commonly used to designate the work, even though this aspect can also be related to the *chuanqi* narrative convention to name stories according to the female protagonist.⁵

Jiao Hong ji however is not only the story of a single heroine (Jiaoniang) and her rival-turned-helper supporting character (the maid Feihong 飛紅), but it is primarily a narrative telling the process of formation of a romantic couple and the recognition of its state of being. For all the twists and turns of the plot, the story centres firmly on the performance of the couple's narrative.

In this essay I will focus on the analysis of some key conversations between lovers in order to examine how the novella creates the world of the couple by allowing readers to linger over the crucial condition of mutual knowledge and shared experience between fictional lovers. As I will highlight in my analysis of *Jiao Hong ji*, these dialogical components are the primary place where the acknowledgement of the lovers' status as a couple is negotiated and its aliveness performed for the pleasure of the reading audience.

2 The Silent Legacy of Yingying

The scene of the first encounter between (future) lovers is an essential, and likely universal, feature of romantic narratives.⁶ In *Jiao Hong ji* the encounter between Shen Chun and Wang Jiaoniang bears significant resemblance to the corresponding scene in the Tang 唐 dynasty tale *Yingying* 鶯鶯傳 *zhuan* (The Story of Yingying) by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831), undoubtedly one of the most important and problematic love narratives of Chinese literature.

5 Besides *Jiao Hong ji*, other titles associated with this novella are *Wang Jiao* 王嬌 included in the anthology *Qingshi*; *Yonglu Jiao Hong* 擁爐嬌紅 (Hugging the Stove, or Jiaoniang and Feihong) in the Lin Jinyang's 林近陽 edition of *Yanju biji*; the long title of an annotated single edition format known as *Xinqie jiaozheng pinghi Shen Wang qigou yonglu Jiao Hong ji* 新鐫校正評釋申王奇選擁爐嬌紅記 (Newly engraved, amended and annotated edition to the Story of Jiaoniang and Feihong, or the story of the marvellous encounter between Shen Chun and Wang Jiaoniang (Hugging the Stove); *Jiao Hong shuangmei* 嬌紅雙美 (The two beauties, Jiaoniang and Feihong) in the anthology *Huazhen qiyang*; *Shen Houqing Jiao Hong ji* 申厚卿嬌紅記 (The story of Shen Houqing, Jiaoniang and Feihong) in *Xiugu chunrong*; *Jiao Hong shuangmei quanzhuan* 嬌紅雙美全傳 (The Complete Story of the Two Beauties, Jiaoniang and Feihong, Qing edition). See Ōtsuka 1985; Chen Yiyuan 1996, pp. 85-88.

6 For a study on the first encounter scene in Western literature, see Rousset 1989.

The Tang era tale sets the lovers' first encounter within the context of the banquet that Yingying's mother, Madam Zheng, offers to thank Mr. Zhang for his help during the military uprising that has threatened her family. The scene is mediated by the presence of Yingying's mother, while no form of direct communication between Zhang and Yingying is exchanged, except for the ritual obeisance the girl is asked to pay to Zhang as an older member of the family. The narrative focus is on Yingying's reluctance to present herself to Zhang, which delays her entrance to the scene. A direct exchange between Zhang and Yingying is completely avoided, even though the narrator hints at the relevance of this aspect for the narrative framework when, at the end of the scene, he notes that «Zhang tried to draw her into conversation, but she wouldn't answer him» 張生稍以詞導之, 不對 (Owen 1996, p. 194).

Even a cursory reading of the scene of the first encounter between Shen Chun and Jiaoniang reveals the degree of indebtedness of *Jiao Hong ji* to *Yingying zhuan*. Except for the background details – the scene is now set in Wang's residence and not on the grounds of a temple, and Shen is visiting his maternal relatives and not meeting them by chance – the basic schema of the scene is the same: Jiaoniang refuses to enter the hall to present herself to Shen, and she eventually appears only after an angry rebuke from her mother. In this scene as well, the two cousins do not talk to each other, but differently from the Tang tale, the reader is now left with no visible hint of Jiaoniang's emotional reaction and the narrative focus rests firmly on Shen Chun.

The intertextual reference to *Yingying zhuan* in this opening section of *Jiao Hong ji* is more than a simple thematic convention. It actually projects the overall figure of Yingying (and her storyworld) onto that of Jiaoniang. To a certain extent, the author is offering the reader a shortcut to accessing Jiaoniang's (mental) fictional world, considering that, as argued by Palmer (2004, p. 41), narratologically «it is much easier to access a storyworld if the reader can apply knowledge of other storyworlds that are constructed in similar ways».

The interrelationship between the two narratives continues in the background of *Jiao Hong ji*, and it is explicitly mentioned in a quick reference to the story of scholar Zhang and Cui Yingying in the letter Shen Chun wrote to Jiaoniang after his first separation from her. But most significantly, the shadow of Yingying's storyworld continues to project itself onto the figure of Jiaoniang, particularly in her intense fear of being abandoned, which motivates the repeated pledges of love and solemn vows of fidelity she asks Shen to perform (Bisetto 2011, p. 553).

From the perspective of the whole narrative configuration, however, this intertextual link also marks the signpost of a forking path that takes the story of Jiaoniang and Shen Chun along an alternative path to the one elaborated in *Yingying zhuan*. And the primary constituent of the new narrative is represented by the couple's conversations.

The fictional pair of young cousins narrated in *Yingying zhuan*, scholar Zhang and Cui Yingying, is certainly one of the most enigmatic and fascinating couples in Chinese literature. For generations, past and present, the sudden break that brought this romantic relationship to an unsuccessful end has made readers sigh out of indignation and disappointment, while the cultural and literary legacy of this narrative continued to cast its shadow over later romantic fiction up to the 18th century masterpiece *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber).

Part of the enduring fascination of the tale lies in the elusiveness that characterizes the world of the pair of lovers as a couple. The story is cleverly crafted so as to almost screen the world of the couple from the reader's view and to leave many questions concerning the lovers' attitudes towards each other unresolved. What is particularly striking in this narrative is the absence of performed conversations between the two lovers. Communication is either addressed to other characters, or, in the case of the two lovers, it is never represented in the form of a real dialogue but rather as a monologue. Therefore, dialogical parts show Zhang talking to his friends and to Yingying's maid (Hongniang 紅娘), while the only person talking within the boundaries of the couple is Yingying – through the poems she wrote, the harsh rebuke she gave to Zhang during their first tryst, the comforting words she spoke to him prior to his departure for the capital, and finally the long letter she wrote pleading her case after she realized that the long separation meant the end of their relationship. In all these situations Zhang is left mute. Thanks to this artful configuration of narrative discourse, the words spoken by Yingying end up having no 'partner'; they are words towards someone that is presented nonetheless as an 'other'. It is significant that at the end of the passionate night the two lovers spent together, the narrator describes the scene observing that no word was uttered during the whole night 終夕無一言 (Yuan s.d., p. 4014).⁷

3 Conversations in *Jiao Hong ji*: Towards an Aesthetic of the Ordinary

A great part of the narrative in *Jiao Hong ji* focuses on the couple's interaction in the form of dialogues and poetical exchanges. As previous studies have pointed out, dialogical scenes and poems constitute the building blocks of the rich psychological texture of the novella. The role of these

⁷ The original text does not give a definite indication of the subject of this sentence, while in translation the subject is generally assumed to be the female protagonist, Yingying. Owen translates it: «She had not said a word the entire night» (Yuan 1996, p. 196), while Levy renders it: «Elle n'avait pas proféré un mot de la nuit» (Yuan 1997, p. 108), therefore recognizing that of Yingying as the only active voice in conversations within the boundaries of the couple.

discursive components, however, is not limited to that of textual cues in characterisation, but they also help to create the illusion – and the pleasure – of the everyday, which constitutes one of the aesthetic achievements of the work.

The overall plot of *Jiao Hong ji* turns on the progressive enlargement of the main plot of the lovers' piecemeal process of mutual knowing, or in other words, what, in my telling of it, constitutes the couple's narrative. All the events that delay or block the lovers' union – the initial opposition to marriage by the Wang family, the erotic threat represented by Feihong and later by the hungry ghost that seduces Shen Chun by assuming Jiaoniang's appearance, and even the intervention of the powerful official who, by demanding Jiaoniang's hand, puts an end to the marriage plan of the two lovers and to their lives – actually help to replicate and deepen this process of knowing in the eyes of the lovers themselves, the other participants in the storyworld, and of course the reading audience.

The length of the narrative is therefore only secondarily related to the linear progression of the marriage plot, because it rests as well on the repeated creation of episodes that complicate and replicate the basic narrative geometry in order to show the couple at play.

Conversations and poetical exchanges are the place where both plot advancement and slowness of pace are modulated in the narrative. They allow readers to witness the process of the negotiation of boundaries in the formation of the couple and enjoy the pleasure of its vibrancy and aliveness.

In her study on conversations in Western comedy, narratologist Kay Young (2001) has proposed a general classification of dialogical exchanges between fictional lovers based on two main categories defined as 'crux-conversations' and 'word-plays'. According to Young, the first type includes conversations that are event-defining moments marking the turning points in the couple's narrative. As such they represent indispensable points of arrival for the full development of the plot and function as structural nodes that create and develop both the couple and its narrative. Following the linear progression of the storyline, they may be further classified into first-time conversations, middle conversations (i.e. the mutual acknowledgment of love) and final conversations (or end-conversation) (pp. 37-63).

'Word-plays', on the other hand, allow narrative to take a rest. They do not operate in terms of plot advancement (or at least not primarily), and what they actually achieve is the piecemeal performance of the couple's aliveness (pp. 64-85).

Of course, as is always the case when categorizing, 'crux conversations' and 'word-plays' define prototypical cases of dialogical interaction between fictional lovers, while actual examples may suggest a more nuanced reality. However, they have the undeniable advantage of highlighting the different ways a narrative may use to convey the necessity and urgency of partnering.

Conversations and poetical exchanges between Shen Chun and Jiaoniang

represent one of the key components of *Jiao Hong ji*. The scene of the first conversation between Shen Chun and Jiaoniang is narrated shortly after their first encounter. It is introduced by a short narrative passage that describes the emotional response aroused in Shen by his earlier meeting with Jiaoniang and his ardent desire to reveal his feelings to her. The scene takes place one evening when Shen catches sight of his beloved cousin embroidering by the window,

一夕，嬌晚繡紅窗下，倚牀視荼蘼花，久不移目，生輕步踵其後，嬌不知也，因浩然長歎。生知其有所思，因低聲問曰：「爾何於此仁視長歎也，將有思乎？將有約乎？」嬌不答，良久，乃曰：「兄何自來此？日晚矣，春寒逼人，兄覺之乎？」生知嬌以他詞相拒，因應曰：「春寒固也。」嬌正視，逡巡引去，生獨歸室。無聊，乃書《點絳脣》一詞於寓室之東，以寓意焉。(Song s.d., p. 981)

One evening Jiaoniang was embroidering by the window. Leaning on the window, she looked at the flowers of the Rose-leaf bramble and for a long time did not pull her gaze away. The young scholar stepped silently behind her, while she, still unaware of his presence, sighed profoundly. Knowing that she was concerned about something, he asked in a low voice: «What are you doing here, looking up and sighing? Are you thinking of someone? Do you have any rendezvous?» Jiaoniang did not reply and after some time she eventually asked him: «Why have you come here? The day is already late and the spring chill is still biting. Don't you feel it, cousin?» He knew she changed the subject to reject him and replied: «The spring chill is stubborn». She looked at him squarely and withdrew hesitatingly, while he returned to his lodge. Feeling dejected, he composed a song to the tune «Dian jiang chun» on the eastern wall of the lodge to convey his feelings.

This first conversation falls neatly into the category of 'crux conversations'. It sets the couple narrative in motion, and above all it successfully develops the dynamics of shared conversations as performances that create a condition of mutual knowledge, the acknowledgment of the other as other but also as partner.

There is no doubt that this is no ordinary conversation: Its meaning exceeds the sum of the explicit verbal statements conveyed by the two participants. The set of questions addressed by Shen in his opening line stands out for the straightforwardness of his insistent enquiries, almost bordering to rudeness. They reflect his assertiveness in showing his emotional engagement to Jiaoniang, but they offer as well an interpretation of the girl's behaviour. The act of sighing is unequivocally decoded as an index of longing, an enactment of Jiaoniang's rich emotional disposition to which the narrator alluded earlier in the narrative when he noted that Shen «Observed her behaviour and found that there was always something unfathomable in her way of talking, smil-

ing and behaving. He thus knew she was a very passionate person». 生因察其動靜，見嬌言笑舉止，常有疑猜不定之狀，生知其賦情特甚也 (Song s.d., p. 981).

The reaction of Jiaoniang is also heavily charged with emotional overtones. The silence she opposes to these questions in the first instance, and the statement she adds after a while to change the subject of the conversation, both violate the rule of 'relevance' (in Gricean terms) in social interaction and try to deny Shen's power over the conversation.

Shen's reply to Jiaoniang, however, is the real turning point of the conversation as a fundamental moment of couple formation, because it is the point where he presents himself as a conversational partner. By clinging to Jiaoniang's linguistic message, but at the same time by stretching its meaning to a figurative level (the key word here is the term *chun* 春, 'spring', a conventional trope for love), he asserts once again his concern to control the topic and redirects the conversation towards the thematic frame from which he started, asking once again for acknowledgement, asking therefore to be recognized as a 'present other'.

The lovers' reciprocal acknowledgment will be fully verbalized only later in the narrative, in a wholehearted conversation in which the two cousins mutually reveal their feelings of love. This scene is commonly referred to as the 'hugging the stove' scene. It is set on a cold spring day. Jiaoniang is sitting alone by the stove, when Shen Chun enters her room holding a spray of pear flowers. The girl turns her head to look at Shen but remains seated, and consequently Shen throws down the blossoming spray. Startled, the girl slowly rises to pick up the flowers and asks Shen:

「兄何棄擲此花也？」生曰：「花淚盈量，知其意何在？故棄之。」嬌曰：「東皇故自有主，夜屏一枝以供玩好足矣。兄何索之深也？」生曰：「已荷重諾。無悔。」嬌笑曰：「將何諾？」生曰：「試思之。」嬌不答因謂生曰：「風差勁，可坐此共火。」生欣然即席，與嬌偶坐，相去僅尺餘，嬌因撫生背曰：「兄衣厚否？恐寒威相凌逼也。」生恍然曰：「能念我寒，而不念我斷腸耶！」嬌笑曰：「何事斷腸？妾當為兄謀之。」生曰：「無戲言。我自遇子之後，魂飛魄揚，不能著體，夜更苦長，竟夕不寐。汝方以為戲，足見子之心也。子每見子言語態度，非無情者，及予言深情味，則子變色以拒我，豈可不解世事，而為是沾嬌哉？諒屢繆之跡，不足以當雅意，深藏自閉，將有售也。今日一言之後，餘將西騎矣。子無苦戲我。」嬌因慨然良久，曰：「君疑妾矣，妾敢無言，妾知兄心久矣，豈敢固自鄭重以要君也，第恐不能終始，其如後患何？妾亦數月來諸事不復措意，寢夢不安，飲食俱廢，君所不得知也。」因長吁曰：「君疑甚矣，異日之事，君任之，果不濟，當以死謝君。」生曰：「子果有志，則以策我。」嬌未及答，俄然舅自外至，生因起出迎舅，嬌乃反室，不可再語。(Song s.d., pp. 983-984)⁸

8 This translation has been elaborated on the base of Birch's translation of the corresponding passage in Meng Chengshun's drama. See Meng 2001, pp. 65-70.

«Why did you throw these flowers down, cousin?» «The flowers are brimming with tears - replied Shen - Who knows what they are thinking? That is why I threw them away». «The Queen of the East knows what she is about. It is enough to set up a sprig of blossom to appreciate its beauty for an evening: why do you seek for more?» asked Jiaoniang. «You favored me with your promise - answered Shen - Don't go back on your word». «A promise of what?» asked the girl laughing. «Just think about it». Jiaoniang did not reply and added instead: «The spring breeze is strong, you can sit here by the stove with me». He happily reached the seat and sat down at a short distance from Jiaoniang. «Are your clothes warm enough?» asked the girl patting his back, «I am afraid the chill will strike you». «How can you be concerned about me feeling cold but not about me being heartbroken?» said Shen promptly. «What threatens to break your heart? - asked Jiaoniang laughing - I will help you think it out». «Don't tease me - said Shen Chun - Ever since we met my two souls earthly and ethereal have completely deserted me and I have lost all control. The pain is even worse at night, when I lie sleepless through the darkness hours. Your play, just now, is enough to know your intentions. Every time I meet you, over and over I analyze your words and actions, and it seems you are not without some feeling for me. But as soon as I speak of what I deeply feel your manner changes and you reject me. Can it really be your naiveté in worldly affairs that causes this? Or is it a way to put on airs? Forgive my clumsiness, I can't measure up to your delicacy of mind; it will be best for me to bury my secret thoughts deep in my heart. I will speak them this once and then take my leave. Don't tease me». Upon hearing his words, Jiaoniang heaved a long sigh and said: «Since you harbor these suspicions of me, how can I refrain from speaking out? I have long known what is in your heart, otherwise how could I express myself so openly in order to urge you? I only fear that we can win no lasting union and dread what evils may befall in the end! I too this past months have been too distraught to concentrate on anything, sleepless or with troubled dreams, able neither to eat nor to drink, but what have you known of this?» At the end she heaved a long sigh and added: «Since you harbor deep suspicions of me, all further matters are entrusted to you, and if they fail, I shall recompense you with my death!» «Since you have such a firm determination, cousin - said Shen - please help me work out a plan». Jiaoniang had not replied yet when her father came back home from the outside and Shen went to greet him, while Jiaoniang returned back to her room, having no possibility to talk any further.

This conversation shares many basic elements with the first conversation discussed above. The figurative domain is strengthened by the multiplication of textual references to the spring season (the pear blossom spray; the

Queen of the East; the spring breeze). The first part of the conversation duplicates the interactional dynamics between Shen Chun and Jiaoniang (straightforwardness vs silence) already seen at play in the first conversation. Shen's reference to the 'promise' Jiaoniang made to him in a previous meeting, when she agreed to share with him half of the lampblack she was using for her make up, is again an assertive interpretation of the girl's behaviour. The short reference to this event is important because it assigns a history to their relationship, or in other words it recovers the memory of something that has happened between the two as a moment of a partnered story. Through this reference Shen Chun is demanding recognition. Jiaoniang's reaction (her silence and the following reference to the spring breeze, as well as the mocking attitude displayed shortly after) is a softened replica of the attitude she assumed in the first conversation, in that it tries once again to weaken Shen's authority over the conversation but proves once again to be ineffective. His assertiveness is now revealed in the sincere confession of love he addresses to her. It is politely masked in the self-denigrating stance he assumes, but it is also openly revealed in the repeated use of the imperative form «Don't tease me!» (*Wu xi yan* 無戲言) at the beginning and at the end of his statement, a statement which is actually a piecemeal retracing of the history told by the narrator up to that moment. Jiaoniang's reaction is now the open acknowledgment of this history, a reality she can no longer keep silent (*Qie gan wu yan* 妾敢無言).

The trajectory of this history, from the first encounter down to the 'hugging the stove' scene, is encapsulated in the change in the forms of address used by Jiaoniang toward Shen Chun in the course of this conversation. When she starts talking after Shen's confession of love, she addresses him as *jun* 君 (you) in place of the form *xiong* 兄 (cousin) used in earlier interactions, and from this moment on she will prefer to use it almost until the end of the narrative. This shift in codes marks Jiaoniang's acknowledgment of her new relationship to Shen.

The history behind this shift is narrated in the long sequence of fleeting encounters, micro-conversations, and most of all poetical exchanges, that unfolds between these two 'crux conversations'. Here, narrative becomes 'lazy': It lingers over different manifestations of the emotional bonds between the two characters and it elects poetry as the favourite communication channel between the lovers, and what the reader is invited to experience is the ordinary story, the general story, the bit-by-bit formation of a couple.

4 Conclusion

Jiao Hong ji can be defined as a 'lazy' narrative in the sense that it curtails the space of action while creating another kind of space, that of the intimacy of the couple, made of tiny and recurrent moments of mutual acknowledgement between lovers. The interplay of 'crux conversations' and 'word-plays' – to borrow Young's terminology – helps to create a narrative that – from beginning to end – rests firmly on a single element: the creation and the aliveness of the romantic couple, and the pleasure derived from it. Its obvious outcome is the pursuit of happiness, a happiness that does not necessarily belong to the world of narrative, rather a happiness that is outside the boundaries of narrative and the human world (Young 2001, pp. 8-9). A happiness that is actually and simply the point of arrival of a longer process of performance, as aptly noted by the narrator at the end of the narrative: When, the day after the lovers' burial, the former maid Feihong catches glimpses of Jiaoniang and Shen Chun sitting in what used to be the girl's room, chatting and smiling one in front of the other «The day after, Feihong was passing near Jiaoniang's lodge when she had the impression to see Jiaoniang and Shen in the room, talking cheerfully to each other» 抵舍之明日，因與小慧過嬌寢所，恍惚見嬌與生在室相對笑語 (Song s.d., p. 1010), we have the final, blissful, realization of the couple's 'ordinary pleasure'.

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