

# Austenian Spirit in Chinese Comedy of Manners: Discovering a Neglected Female Influence on Qian Zhongshu

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**Abstract.** As soon as the play *Forging the Truth* (Nongzhen chengjia, 1943) written by the Chinese scholar Yang Jiang (1911-2016) premiered during World War II, critics considered the work to be the second milestone of the Chinese comedy of manners. This comment is unsurprising since Yang had a longstanding scholarly interest in the British comedy of manners tradition, especially those by Jane Austen (1775-1817). Also an academic and writer, Yang's husband, Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), after watching the play, began writing his only published novel, *Fortress Besieged* (1947). Given Qian's inseparable fellowship with Yang Jiang, his irrefutable grounding in Chinese and European arts and letters, and exploration of how marriage impacts the individual in the novel, one wonders why scholars have not recognised even one female author among his source influences. This article establishes a link between Austen and Qian by integrating biographical accounts, a scholarship work Yang had done, and close readings of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Yang Jiang's *Nongzhen chengjia*, and Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*. By looking at their adaptations of the comedy of manners genre, this article expands on a common quality the three works all share: the duality of playful irony and intelligent compassion.

**Keywords:** Comedy of manners, comedic spirit, Qian Zhongshu, Jane Austen, Yang Jiang, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Fortress Besieged*, *Nongzhen chengjia*.

## 1. Introduction

In 1938, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910-1998), who had just finished his B. Litt. Degree at Oxford University, returned to his homeland China [1]. Yet it was not until 1944, in the midst of the Sino-Japanese War, that he started drafting his only published novel *Fortress Besieged* (圍城, 1947) after watching a five-act comedy *Nongzhen chengjia* (*Forging the Truth* 弄真成假, 1943), written by his wife, Yang Jiang 楊絳. Also a literary scholar who specialized in foreign literature, Yang observed Jane Austen's (1775-1817) *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), commenting that the British author explores social manners through discussions of relationships and marriage, ultimately revealing its social landscape and human nature [2]. Strangely enough, this comment is equally applicable to her own work and to her husband's *Fortress Besieged*.

Given Qian's double identities as a scholar and an author with a diverse educational background, many scholars have identified the source textual influences in *Fortress Besieged*. Among these influence, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, Homer, Fielding, Maugham, and Voltaire are identified in mainstream theories [3]. However, one wonders why scholars have not recognised even one female author as an influence, considering Qian's many pages of reflection

on how being a part of marriage impacts the individual and especially given his personal married life spanning sixty-three years until his death. In light of the "inseparable" connection between Yang Jiang and Qian Zhongshu, Yang's devout appreciation for Austen thus comes into the picture [4].

Qian, Yang and Austen were unanimously interested in the way people behave and the deduction of characters' behaviors via external speech and actions [5]. The collective interest is a special literary tradition called the comedy of manners. Being a type of comedy, the humor of the tradition relies chiefly upon "elegant verbal wit" and repartee—or "sparkle of the dialogue"—a witty, conversational give-and-take that resembles a type of fencing match [6-9]. This article focuses on these three comedies of manners, arguing for a subtle but profound correlation between their respective authors and investigating the duality of playful irony and intelligent compassion common to all three works. To establish this link, the essay starts with a brief introduction to the comedy of manners genre through a close reading of Austen's most widely-read novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, followed by an analysis of that same spirit in Yang Jiang's *Nongzhen chengjia* and Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*.

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## 2. Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

The comedy of manners genre originated in the New Comedy of the Greek Menander, c. 342–292 BC and was then developed by the Roman dramatists and Shakespeare. During the Restoration period (1660–1700), Molière (1622–73) and William Congreve (1670–1729) were but two authors who advanced the tradition shortly before Jane Austen's time. Although Austen was never active in any literary circles, as an extensive reader, her assimilation of this genre is evident in her own comedy of manners.

Among the six novels she completed during her short life - all of which are set in rural England and focus on very ordinary diversions such as balls, dinner parties, or books - *Pride and Prejudice* is the most widely read. In this novel, Austen focuses on the Bennet family of the gentry class, its daughters and their romantic relationships and marriages, detailing how Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy overcome their initial prejudice and settle into a union. Despite the novel's limited scope, it still resonated with readers across the globe, including in socialist China where Yang Jiang became one of its main proponents. During her husband, Qian Zhongshu's, freshman year at Tsinghua University 清華大學 in the early 1930s, a professor had already assigned it as a textbook [10].

Austen would have been surprised by this international success, having expressed in a letter to her sister Cassandra on 4 February 1813:

The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story [11]. (my emphasis)

This can be considered the author's own mockery of such criticisms of her work, which valorizes the playfully ironic tone and key phrases—"light," (as opposed to "solemn") "bright," and concise (versus "stretched-out") as the four essential features that compose the essence of her *Pride and Prejudice*.

The most overarching and profound irony in the novel occurs on Elizabeth herself. Her repulsion towards Darcy starts when she overhears Darcy declaring the punishment it would be to dance with any woman in the ballroom other than those of his same social-economic class and criticizes Elizabeth as "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt [him]."[12] This first impression is further confirmed when she learns about Darcy's despicable treatment of his childhood playmate, Mr. Wickham and how the same man dissuaded the marriage between her sister and her favored suitor, Mr. Bingley. Until Darcy clarifies this misunderstanding, Elizabeth rallies others to join her in her condemnation of Darcy. Her wounded pride, the exact quality for which she detests Darcy, snowballs into prejudice.

Besides, another kind of irony is omnipresent in the dialogues. Bennet's cousin, Mr. Collins, who will inherit the family estate after the former's death, is a classic example. His excessive etiquette and awkwardly exaggerated loquacity for flattering overflows from his

first meeting with the Bennets. Not only are the girls objects of his "admiration," but so are "the hall, the dining-room, and all its furniture ... "[13] Every commendation would have been welcome by Mrs. Bennet, whose life focused exclusively on finding appropriate husbands for her daughters, but "for the mortifying supposition of his viewing it all as his own future property." [13] For the sake of inheritance, Mrs. Bennet is cooperative when she senses the possibility of Mr. Collins proposing to one of her daughters. However, understanding the subtleties of the situation allows readers to understand why Elizabeth rejects his marriage proposal, and even find humor in Mr. Collins's perception of the refusal as "young ladies[']" trick for someone she "secretly mean[s] to accept." [14]

The second key feature of the Austenian comedy of manners is its "light[ness]." The setting, solely devoted to a portion of rural landscape and a dozen of people, already limits the novel's scope. In addition, the omniscient narrator neither moralizes with "long chapter of sense" nor condemns the personality flaws she identifies with the character, but instead devotes her attention to precise observations. In so doing, readers are offered the same objectivity which the narrator has. British scholar D. W. Harding considered Austen a "delicate satirist" who reveals "with inimitable lightness of touch the comic foibles and amiable weaknesses of the people whom she lived amongst and liked." [15] This light-heartedness is complemented by Austen's precision which is also omnipresent in the characters' speeches and actions. For example, while Mr. Bingley is a gentleman with "easy, unaffected manners," [16] his sister Caroline is mean and hypocritical. Assuming Darcy to be an ideal future partner, her "wit flow[s] along," [17] a kind of wit in her relentless (often failed) attempts to draw Darcy's attention. Austen, by putting forth the claim, clearly captures this character with great with great precision. [18,19]

The last key feature in Austen's letter to Cassandra, "bright[ness]," is evident in Elizabeth—to whom Austen referred as "my own darling child." [20] — a sprightly heroine according to Lewes. [21] For instance, when Jane catches a cold on her way to dine with Mr. Bingley at his Netherfield Park, feeling anxious to see her sister recover, Elizabeth is determined to walk the three miles herself. Regardless of Mrs. Bennet's warning that she would risk getting dirty on the trip and therefore be unreceivable at such an estate, Elizabeth is so athletic that she insists that the distance is nothing when "one has a motive". [22]

However, the lightness in her strokes neither makes the novel whimsically happy, nor is the narrator distant and indifferent to the folly; instead, Austen bases the entire narrative on an "unyielding core" as she contains a mature standard for what and how to ridicule. [23] For example, she specifies on her targets of ridicule via Elizabeth: "I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies... I laugh at them whenever I can." [24] She has a set of what the British fiction writer and critic C. S. Lewis refers to as inner "principles" [25] to judge what is "good" or "folly." So when there is laughter, she is aimed at behaviours that contradict with her principles, a collision that is of course

undesirable since the reality is incompatible with expectations. Nevertheless, Austen's "light[ness]," "bright[ness]" and concision reveal her hopefulness and composure for this unsatisfying situation. The author gives some characters the opportunity for redemption, most memorably during Elizabeth's first visit to Darcy's Pemberley after his clarification. As she drives through "a beautiful wood stretching over a wide extent... gradually ascended for half-a-mile, and then found [herself] at the top of a considerable eminence,"[26] so do readers have a few breaths of rural fresh air, looking forward to hearing their reconciliation.

The combination of this playfully ironic tone, the "light[ness]," "bright[ness]," and concision depicting flawed human nature make *Pride and Prejudice* a particularly remarkable comedy of manners. These features are in fact noted by later authors, such as Yang Jiang, who are interested in Austen. Despite a similar kind of flaw that is equally present in her works, they both, as this article argues, inform a clam and hopeful attitude towards the undesirable reality.

Yang Jiang: *Nongzhen chengjia*

In the fall of 1952, after a century-long struggle against foreign invasions and civil wars, Yang Jiang had just been assigned a position in the Chinese Academy of Literary Studies 文學研究所. Collaborating on a list of works of scholarly interests, fellow researchers hushed Yang at her mention of Jane Austen, who seemed out of scope given the general focus on Karl Marx. [27] With the social context of national insecurity and censorship in mind, Yang's defense of Austen could be considered an act of bravery.

She likewise exhibited her predilection for Austen when her close friend, Wu Xuezhao 吳學昭, inquired about her favourite authors. She cited a few names and brief comments for each, starting with Jane Austen. [28] Scholars have also noted this influence, alongside that of Henry Fielding (1707-1754) and William Thackeray (1811-1863), whose work also demonstrates weaknesses in human nature and advocates for justice and honesty. [29] Yang's time in Oxford, though only as an auditor, further encouraged this exploration. These travels and studies resulted in her publication of an academic article *What's so good about it?* where she elaborated on her impression of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Many of the observations she makes regarding Austen in this article are equally applicable to her own writing, where "comedy of manners" is something she draws on early in her argument.[2]

Despite the common perception of Austen's work as a romantic novel, Yang argued in her critical essay that the Elizabeth-Darcy story is only a means to an end. *Pride and Prejudice* aims to depict people's manners, which further reflects their character, taste, and disposition. Yang cites the famous opening line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." [30] However little is known about this man, the surrounding families already take him as "rightful property" who could potentially be owned by one of their daughters, an

absurdity that instantly aligns marriage with social considerations.

Yang's comments about Austen's comedy of manners are consistent with her own literary creation. The play *Nongzhen chengjia* was written during the Sino-Japanese War. After watching the play, a much-esteemed academic and playwright Li Jianwu 李健吾 (1906-1982) regarded the work as the second milestone in authentic Chinese comedy of manners created out of mundane modern reality. [31] The short, five-act comedy features Zhou Dazhang 周大樟, who appears to be a perfect man—handsome, educated and wealthy, freshly returned from abroad with a doctoral title, with great professional ambitions (). The play follows his multiple romantic episodes, ending with an elopement where the bride, Yanhua, realizes too late that Zhou is an imposter. While the public has been aware of Zhou's actual condition since Act Three, they witness Yanhua's astonishment at the sight of Zhou's "talented and virtuous" mother—no more than a plain, uncultured woman—and his so-called mansion—merely a shabby space up in an attic. This ludicrous discovery leaves the heroine no other choice than mockingly complimenting Zhou's artistry of transforming his situation 改造環境的藝術.

Yang Jiang juxtaposes the lower class and the upper class through the use of Dazhang, the imposter. Unlike Mrs. Bennet in Austen's work, whose daughters' marriages are her sole ambition, in Yang's fictional world, gender is reversed when Dazhang chooses wealth over love. Still, this value is similar to the former one, which also serves to connect the range of social class the author displays. In essence, the idea of the social class is in line with how Yang evaluates Austen, using marriage as a pretext to probe further into characters' values and inner resources. In addition to the resemblance in theme, Yang and Austen both mock characters' lack of self-awareness. Yanhua, delighted at the thought of her success in reclaiming Dazhang,[32] soon realizes her marriage is doomed, making her a subject of ridicule since she has reaped what she sowed. Zhou claims an unyielding entrepreneurial spirit in guarding his ambition and transforming his situation in defiance of society's expectations 環境由我改造. [33] Before witnessing the reality of his house, his optimism demands our respect; however, the philosophy is practiced in an unexpected way. From his point of view, he is not lying because everything he says is grounded in reality. For example, his uncle does own a store, only that the International Department Store is a romanticised version of a shabby grocery store. In this case, ironies in *Nongzhen chengjia* are essentially similar to the ones in *Pride and Prejudice*. Whether they are Elizabeth, Mr. Collins, Zhou Dazhang or Yanhua, self-righteousness or self-importance is always implicitly laughed at by the narrator who knows well more are at work in the picture. Given the implicit humor in these episodes, Yang shares Austen's propensity to observe and to "divert" [34] herself with people's manners. Yang Jiang compared the private talks between Elizabeth and Jane with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, [2] where they constantly try to extrapolate someone via the limited clues they received.



[2,35] She identified with Austen because of her passion for detective novels, for she and Qian Zhongshu loved to mimic Holmes and Watson. [36] As she outspokenly admitted in a personal essay: "the ways of the world and the complexity of human relations are even more delightful and intriguing than the bright moon and the clear breeze." [37] Out of the utmost interest in studying human nature, Nongzhen chengjia is ironically amusing and is characterized with a delicate playfulness.

The play does not intend an elevated, superior and indifferent judgment towards the characters. Nongzhen chengjia was one of Yang's plays written during the fall of Shanghai in an attempt to make a living. [38] Even though comedies might seem meager in comparison to the constant threats of bombardments, Yang indicated otherwise: having survived the period without turning to the foreign invaders, a few laughs were a sign that people never lost faith, and always sustained optimism through the ravage of war. [39]

The author's admiration of the spirit is candid when looking at the text. Although Dazhang's persona is largely constructed on lies, he remains resilient and optimistic in his poverty. At a dinner scene, Zhou coaxes his mother who is embarrassed by their lack of food, claiming that the sourness of the flour is actually serendipitous as it removes the need for adding vinegar. [40] This is but one example of how Yang Jiang's characters are laughable but never arrive at the point of being despicable, [41,42] a complexity which triggers a bitter laugh [43] that is neither cynical nor overflowing with hatred or a tearful sympathy. [44] Against the harsh war-time context, Yang perceives flawed human nature; however, with an optimism by heart, which is her firm discordance against the reality, the wise and witty observer [45] puts herself in people's shoes and passes on intelligent realizations about her perception and the complexity of the world without moralising. In short, the features identified in her novel concurs with the way she comments on her predecessor's *Pride and Prejudice*.

### 3. Qian Zhongshu: Fortress Besieged

Any discussion of Yang Jiang is inseparable from that of her husband, Qian Zhongshu. Their connection started with sharing readings soon after their first meeting in March 1932 on the Tsinghua campus. [46] In 1935, Qian was awarded a scholarship to pursue his studies at the University of Oxford and later at the University of Paris, where Yang followed him. Upon their return to China in 1938 due to their concern for the Sino-Japanese war, the loss of family and poor prospects [47] was followed by a series of political movements such as the Cultural Revolution. Throughout this turbulent social context, they remained devoted to studying letters, collaborating and inspiring each other. In addition to her biographical accounts which made Qian more accessible, she collected and organised his Manuscripts 錢鍾書手稿集 which contained virtually all his preparatory work. This rich reference source even contains reading notes for Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Very significantly, the first time Qian revealed to Yang his idea of writing *Fortress*

*Besieged* was after he returned home from watching *Nongzhen Chengjia*. [48]

Qian Zhongshu started writing *Fortress Besieged* in 1944. [49] Set in the war context, the novel details Fang Hung-chien's 方鴻漸 relationships with several female intellectuals and his career development, including the picaresque actions and encounters on his journey from Shanghai to the interior in search of academic job opportunities. The novel begins with the protagonist returning to China after four years of studying in Europe, with a forged doctoral certificate to please his father-in-law. Immediately, we can see resemblances with Zhou Dazhang of Yang's play: both studied abroad; both are charlatans who fake their doctoral titles, and both hide their deceit by acting refined. Hung-chien even "denounc[es] the Ph.D. title having absolutely no practical value," but nevertheless convinces himself about the virtue of lying. [50] This example is reminiscent of Zhou, who lies based on his belief that one's attitude decides one's situation.

While *Fortress Besieged* was published in 1947, it was not introduced to western scholarship until the 1960s when Chinese critic, C. T. Hsia 夏志清, contended that the novel is "superior to any classical Chinese novel in the satiric tradition." [51] Qian's mastery of satire is indeed apparent at the plot level. For example, to ease his emptiness and wounded pride [52] after being deceived by a woman on the ship returning to China, Hung-chien turns to his suitor, Miss Su 蘇小姐. Yet, when he meets his true love, Su's cousin, Miss Tang 唐小姐, he has to avoid Miss Su (who expects a proposal from him) and jealous attacks from Su's suitor. This complex love triangle characterizes Hung-chien as the titular city under siege. Adapted from a French proverb which likens "fortress besieged" :

Le mariage est comme une forteresse assiégée;  
ceux qui sont dehors veulent y entrer, et  
ceux qui sont dedans veulent en sortir.

(Marriage is like a fortress besieged: those  
who are outside want to get in, and those  
who are inside want to get out.) [53,54]

Tragically, Hung-chien's heart's desire (Tang) is never answered, yet things that always cause him to dawdle in life are things that he does not wish to dawdle over (an unwanted suitor Miss Su and jealousy from Su's suitor against Fang). When he completely estranges this absurd situation to seek a fresh start, it continues to haunt him in a modified form. [55]

In this case, Qian's irony does more than invoking ripples of laughter towards the hero's folly; it is equally bitter in establishing a Sisyphus-like tragedy, forever laden with an endless game. [56]

The title sets the tone for his respected satiric fashion, which is then furthered by the numerous truthful, precise and entertaining ironies. Take the example of Miss Pao 鮑小姐 who at the start of the narrative is "[w]earing only a scarlet top and navy blue, skin-tight shorts; her red toenails showed through her white, open-toed shoes." [57] Her eye-catching avant-garde look is shocking compared to traditional Chinese women's dress code, so the fellow travelers crack jokes behind her back, where some call her

"truth"—since "the truth is naked...But Miss Pao wasn't exactly without a stitch on, so they revised her name to 'Partial-Truth.'"

The ironies juxtapose with poetic elements, which are self-evident for Qian's compassionate sentiment. Interlaced throughout the narrative, the tender images strongly contrast with the piercing humor intended to expose fallibility of human existence [58] to balance the distress the absurd world may have summoned. The author's close friend Zheng Chaozong 鄭朝宗 went as far to argue that these images mean to counteract and purify the ugliness in human nature. For instance, [59]

Dark clouds had already fanned in the sky, disclosing here and there a few stars. The storm sounded like a man greedily gulping his food; the broad open sea of the daytime had now been completely digested in the even vaster night. Against this background the tumult in a man's heart shrinks to nothingness. Only a well of hope for the morrow, which has not yet descended into the vastness, illuminates itself like the speck of light from a firefly in the dark depths of boundless, roaring waves. [60] (my emphasis)

Although the poetic image is likeminded with Qian's ironies in terms of their minute and precise brushstroke, each serves distinct functions: the former reveals of beauty, while the other ugliness. In fact, the frequent juxtaposition means that the author is sensitive to the world and open to every human experience, engaging readers' compassion at the same time.

The examples of Miss Pao and the landscape depiction offer readers a window into the wide range of subjects under Qian's examination—from people (of differing cultural origins and professions) to objects, landscape, animals. [61] Conscious of the absurdity of the fortress besieged predicament, the author, objective and intelligent, has a bird's-eye view on events and settings. As he declares, he maintains an intellectual distance with the characters via ironies, while striving "not [to] forget they are ... still human beings with the basic nature of hairless, two-legged animals." [62] This recognition leads him to "refine" dissatisfactions into "substances of happiness," [63] or something to make jokes about, by adopting a humorously ironic point of view. Quoting Qian himself: "a breath of fresh air is what he has brought to a boring life." [64]

The duality of irony and intelligent compassion makes more sense when looking at the context of *Fortress Besieged*, which can be found in Yang's writing on the subject, where readers learn that Qian would show her the developing manuscript every night, eager to see how she would react. [65] Furthermore, clues in the novel also support specific biographical influences. For instance, there is an inn owner who casually refers to the maggots on rotten meat as "meat sprouts", which is reminiscent of an anecdote Yang had shared with Qian. [66] The parallelism between Zhou Dazhang and Fang Hung-chien then further attests to the fact that Yang's play is the prototype of *Fortress Besieged*, demonstrating that Yang's integration of *Pride and Prejudice* was passed on to her husband. Essentially, *Fortress Besieged* contains an Austenian "serious core" [67] behind the humor. Despite

disparate cultures and eras Qian, Yang and Austen had, the article contends that the same quality is at work to connect them as "soul mate[s]".

## 4. Conclusion

Qian Zhongshu with his impressive background in both Chinese as well as European arts and letters can be understood as a bridge between the study of these two distinctive literary traditions. Having contributed to Chinese literature, his writing scheme on western literature, [68] his proper field of study, was forever delayed. However, equally a noted scholar and writer, Yang Jiang also serves as a bridge to Qian's studies.

From these close readings of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Nongzhen Chengjia* and *Fortress Besieged*, a collective interest in social manners with an emphasis on marriage can be discerned. Drawing from her own words, Austen's writing style is light, bright and concise, features along with comical ironies that affirm a set of internal, unyielding principles for conduct. Despite laughing means a collision with the absurd outer reality, she finds a way to entertain herself by casting playful remarks on folly and inconsistency, in general pre-setting a calm and hopeful atmosphere for her narrative. Biographically, Yang Jiang demonstrates the same interest in people and behaviors. The playwright is just as candid in laughing at characters' limited vision; but by putting her writing under the harsh war-time context, readers realise that these same moral shortcomings demand compassion and respect. Her husband Qian Zhongshu takes a broad range of objects under his satire to stage the unsatisfying reality, when he juxtaposes these sharp yet truthful ironies with poetic depictions to imply a hopefulness.

Whether it is Austen's lightness, Yang's contained mellowness or Qian's vast potential for emotional experiences, these authors juxtapose entertaining ironies and an intelligent understanding or compassion, a balance that in turn suggests a calm, wise and witty perspective shared by all. The essay concludes with a case of impact from Yang's Austenian element on Qian's novel-writing scheme. To further the research, future investigations might contextualize them under their backdrop of revolutions raging on China and UK. Alternatively, the intertextuality between the Qian-Yang couple may again offer surprising discoveries which are of cross cultural significance like the one the connection with Austen brings about.

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