The embodiment of Qian Zhongshu's *Guan Zhui Bian* in an internet novel: Xuanxue and metaphor

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Abstract

As an iconic intellectual, novelist, translator and poet in the 20th century, 钱钟书 Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) was not only celebrated for literary aptitude, epitomised by his chef-d'oeuvre 围城 *Wei Cheng* 'Fortress Besieged' (serialised 1946-1947), but also for his unrivalled erudition, multilingualism and critical acumen. Qian Zhongshu was versed in Chinese and Western studies, encompassing literature, philosophy, psychology, history, aesthetics, etc. Qian Zhongshu's commendable scholarly research can be exemplified by an encyclopaedic masterpiece entitled 管锥编 *Guan Zhui Bian* 'Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters' (1979), which is constituted of a prodigious amount of reading notes and essays written in concise, recondite Classical Chinese. Notwithstanding its self-deprecating title, *Guan Zhui Bian* has attained critical plaudits. In a web-based time-travel novel 上品寒士 *Shangpin Han Shi* 'A Top-Ranked Impoverished Scholar' (2009-2011) composed by a writer pseudonymised as 贼道三痴 Zeidaosanchi, the author deployed elements from *Guan Zhui Bian*, which defies the stereotype that male-authored and male-oriented online narratives are prone to be 'feel-good writing' marked by 意淫 *yi yin* 'lust of the mind; mental pornography'. To be more specific, the author drew on Qian Zhongshu's elaboration of 玄学 *xuanxue* (Lit. 'learning in the profound') and analyses of metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

钱钟书 Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), an illustrious intellectual, novelist, translator and poet, was an iconic comparatist and humanist of the 20th century. Qian Zhongshu was celebrated for unparalleled erudition, scepticism, multilingualism, creative fertility, critical acumen as well as a myriad of laudable fictional works, prose writings, familiar essays and literary criticism (Gunn, 1980, p.243; Huters, 1982; Zheng, 2010; Zhang, 2013, 2014), exemplified by a prose collection 写在人生边上 *Xie Zai Rensheng Bianshang* 'Written in the Margins of Life' (1941), a short story anthology 人·兽·鬼 *Ren Shou Gui* 'Human, Beast, Ghost' (1946), 也是集 *Ye Shi Ji* 'This Also Collection' (1984) and 槐聚诗存 *Huai Ju Shi Cun* 'Collected Poems' (1995) (Rea, 2010; Zhang, 2018; Qian, 2020). The research on Qian's works, as an academic subfield, is dubbed 'Qian studies' (钱学 Qian-*xue*) (Fuehrer, 2001; Ji, 2020). The visual adaptation of Qian's magnum opus into a popular television serial in 1990 rendered Qian famed nationwide (Zhang, 2013), and hence a 'Qian Zhongshu craze' (钱钟书热 Qian Zhongshu *re*) in the 1990s (Fuehrer, 2001; Zhang, 2012; Qian, 2015*)*.

Qian's chef-d'oeuvre, 围城 *Wei Cheng* 'Fortress Besieged' (serialised 1946-1947), has been granted the ultimate accolade as a satirical masterpiece that creates an exquisite microcosm of the turbulent society plagued by the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945) (He 2021). In stark contrast to his peer writers, such as 张爱玲 Zhang Ailing (aka Eileen Chang, 1920-1995), who captured predicaments of quotidian people from both ends of the social spectrum during a transitional period (Louie, 2012; Shen, 2012; Wang, 2012; Lee, 2017), Qian highlighted the psychological status of the academe in modern China in non-political narratives, by means of mocking fictional characters and censuring traditional social norms and foreign imperialism in occupied Shanghai (Xu, 2023). In *Fortress Besieged*, Qian sophisticatedly deployed the Chinese vernacular, drawing on an array of possibilities for wordplay in the language (Huters, 2015), and the novel epitomises Qian's penetrating insight into the degradation of humanity, idealism and interpersonal interaction, especially romantic and matrimonial relationships (Zhu, 2010; He, 2021). *Fortress Besieged* is characterised by Qian's cynicism, cosmopolitan visions, literary sensibilities and unequalled comprehension of modernity, and he embedded the novel is embedded into modernism in world literature, thereby conveying his subjectivities and the prosperity of modern Chinese literature (He, 2021). As adulated by a renowned critic and literary theorist 夏志清 Hsia Chih-tsing (1921-2013), *Fortress Besieged* is 'the most delightful and carefully wrought novel in modern Chinese literature; it is perhaps also its greatest novel' (Hsia, 2016, p.441).

Apart from literary aptitude and attainment, Qian was also extolled for his wondrous scholarship, reflected by 谈艺录 *Tan Yi Lu* 'On the Art of Poetry; Discourses on Art' (1948), 宋诗选注 *Song Shi Xuan Zhu* 'The Selected and Annotated Song Dynasty Poetry' (1958) and 七缀集 *Qi Zhui Ji* 'Patchwork: Seven Essays on Art and Literature' (1985). Among Qian's scholarly works, 管锥编 *Guan Zhui Bian* 'Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters' (1979) is an encyclopaedic masterpiece comprised of approximately 1,500 reading notes and concise essays (Idema, 1998).

Albeit being an academic work, the influence of *Guan Zhui Bian* can be attested from an internet novel entitled 上品寒士 *Shangpin Han Shi* 'A Top-Ranked Impoverished Scholar' (2009-2011) (Trans. Mine). *A Top-Ranked Impoverished Scholar* (henceforward *Scholar*) is the chef-d'oeuvre of an obscure writer 郑晖 Zheng Hui (1972-2015), who was pseudonymised as 贼道三痴 Zeidaosanchi (Lit. 'A Devious Taoist with Three Addictions') by virtue of his obsessions with writing, reading and Go (围棋 Weiqi). Since embarking upon his writing career in 2001, Zeidaosanshi (henceforward Xiaodao)[1] had published a myriad of fiction concerning Go, Chinese martial chivalry (武侠 *wuxia*)[2] and in particular, history, exemplified by *Scholar* and 皇家娱乐指南 *Huangjia Yule Zhinan* 'A Guidebook on Royal Entertainment' (2008-2009) (Trans. Mine), which render him one of the pioneers of online historical fiction (The Paper, 2015; Li, 2019).

Guan Zhui Bian

Guan Zhui Bian is written in Classical Chinese (文言文 *Wenyan Wen*), viz. the written form of Archaic Chinese ranging from the end of the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) era to the end of the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) dynasty (Wang 1962/2001: 1, Norman 1988: 83). In addition to Classical Chinese, Qian was equally competent at Vernacular Chinese (白话文 *Baihua Wen*) advocated by 胡适 Hu Shi (1891-1962) and 陈独秀 Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) during the New Culture Movement (新文化运动 *Xin Wenhua Yundong*) (Norman, 1988, p.134; Idema, 1998; Feng, 2005, 2009; He, 2006, pp.2-3). Qian's linguistic prowess and cross-cultural awareness can be further indicated by a range of quotations in *Guan Zhui Bian*, which are in various Western languages, such as English, Latin, French, German, Italian, Greek and Spanish (Jin, 2012; Campbell, 2014). Although the vast

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[1] The writer deployed Xiaodao (Lit. 'little Taoist') to denote himself, which is a gender-neutral first-person reflexive pronoun used by Taoist practitioners in a self-deprecating manner (Zdic.net, 2023).
[2] Please see below for further discussion.

majority of Qian's writings are composed in Chinese, he was well-versed in Euro-American literatures and manifested Chinese-centric literary cosmopolitanism in terms of disseminating rhetoric and construals cross-culturally and cross-linguistically via literary creations, and he endeavoured to 'strike connections' (打通 *datong*) between Chinese and foreign texts and theories (Rea, 2010, 2015a) as well as between literary, historical and intellectual traditions (Campbell, 2014; Ji, 2020). The purposes of Qian's 'striking connections' are to investigate traditional Chinese letters via novel perspectives obtained from Western works, and to explore universal tendencies in language, thought and aesthetic principles (Egan, 1998, pp.20-21). Qian also preponderantly contributed to a modernised approach of expression, by means of integrating Chinese and Western aesthetic discourses through his competence in both traditions (Huters, 2015).

Guan Zhui Bian can be regarded as the embodiment of Qian's pioneering East-West studies, seminal literary criticism and inordinate amount of erudition and wisdom, which encompass literature, psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, historiography and cultural anthropology (Ye, 2001; Zhang, 2005, p.1; He, 2006: 147; Rea, 2010). *Guan Zhui Bian* is enriched by classics of Chinese literature, history and religion, as well as Western treatises on social and natural sciences, ranging from interpretations of 周易 *Zhou Yi* 'Book of Changes' (aka 易经 *Yi Jing* 'I Ching') and 左传 *Zuo Zhuan* 'Chronicle of Zuo' to references to Aristotle's *Poetics* and Hegel's misconstrual towards the Chinese language (Zhang, 1985, 2013, 2014; Fuehrer, 2001; Wong, 2022). *Guan Zhui Bian* contains thousands of citations of Western works, and Qian's endeavour to broaden *Guan Zhui Bian*'s humanistic scope can be further manifested by his investigation of visual arts of painting and calligraphy in the book (Egan, 1998, p.5, 2015). Moreover, *Guan Zhui Bian* is imbued with a multitude of allusions and quotations, the dexterous application of which inspires readers to reflect on history and culture in a novel context; Qian's meticulous scholarship also enables the transmission of ideas between China and foreign countries and between China's past and present (Zhu, 2010).

Guan Zhui Bian is seemingly constituted of ten books or compilations, viz. 1) 周易 *Zhou Yi* 'Book of Changes', 2) 诗经 *Shi Jing* 'Book of Songs', 3) 左传 *Zuo Zhuan* 'Chronicle of Zuo', 4) 史记 *Shi Ji* 'Records of the Grand Historian', 5) 老子 *Laozi* 'Laozi' (aka 道德经 *Dao De Jing* 'Tao Te Ching'), 6) 列子 *Liezi* 'Liezi', 7) 焦氏易林 *Jiaoshi Yi Lin* 'The Forest of Changes', 8) 楚辞 *Chu Ci* 'Verses of Chu', 9) 太平广记 *Taiping Guangji* 'A Collection of Ancient Novels in China', and 10) 全上古三代秦汉三国六朝文 *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao Wen* 'Complete Prose of the Three Eras of Remote Antiquity, the Qin, Han, Three Kingdoms, and the Six Dynasties'. Nevertheless, Qian's comments on a specific text are not limited to the relevant section—*Guan Zhui Bian* should be regarded as a kaleidoscopic excursus elaborating life and various constructs, instead of merely a commentary on classical texts (Kroll, 2000). By virtue of the voluminous comments on a profusion of subjects and fields, it is difficult to divide and define *Guan Zhui Bian* according to any library catalogue system (Zhang, 2014). It is notable that *Guan Zhui Bian* does not accord with any hegemonic system of thought either, in that Qian was punctilious in details and poly-interpretability, yet refused to systematise (Motsch, 1994; Idema, 1998).

Notwithstanding its meritorious attainment, the title of *Guan Zhui Bian* indicates Qian's modesty. Through entitling this anthology literally as 'The Pipe and Awl Chapters', Qian made a reference to a narrative in the pivotal philosophical-Taoist anthology 庄子 *Zhuangzi* 'Zhuangzi' of the Classical (5th-3rd c BCE) period (Hansen, 2021), which recounts an act of measuring the height of the sky by surveying it through a pipe and the depth of the earth by poking it with an awl—Qian intended to emphasise his insufficient knowledge and hence 'limited views' (He, 2006, p.24; Campbell, 2014; Zhang, 2014; Egan, 2015).

The underlying structure of *Guan Zhui Bian* is featured by a combination of literary and critical practice, which defines Qian as a creative writer (Rea, 2010). Apart from a veritable cornucopia of research fields, *Guan Zhui Bian* is written in allusive Classical Chinese and modelled on the traditional genres of 'random notes' (笔记 *biji*) and 'discussions of poetry' (诗话 *shihua*) (Lynn, 1999), which undeniably renders it recondite. According to Qian, the rationale is to trial the comparability between the immemorial form of the Chinese language and state-of-the-art conceptions (He, 2006, pp.3-4). More significantly, *Guan Zhui Bian* was composed in obscurity

during the Leftism-dominated Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution ('Cultural Revolution' for short) between 1966 and 1976 (Zhou, 2005, p.10; Zhu, 2010)—as propounded by 雷颐 Lei Yi and 曹星原 Cao Xingyuan, the non-revolution-themed scholarship manifests Qian's unstinting devotion to academic research and unparalleled valour (Lei et al., 2016), in that *Quan Zhui Bian* defies against the prevailing Communist credos and acts of 'Attack on the Four Olds' (破四旧 *Po Si Jiu*), viz. the Maoist eradication of 旧思想 *jiu sixiang* 'old ideas', 旧文化 *jiu wenhua* 'old culture', 旧风俗 *jiu fengsu* 'old customs' and 旧习惯 *jiu xiguan* 'old habits' of the exploiting class in the imperial era (Harding, 1980; Mann, 2004; Ho, 2011; Mittler, 2013). In other words, *Guan Zhui Bian* demonstrates inconsistencies between Qian's literary sensibilities and critical intelligence and the rhetoric and cultural climate of the Mao era, in which he embedded history, society and life into the so-called 'ten years of turmoil' (十年动乱 *shinian dongluan*) (Lynn, 1999; Zhu, 2010; Rea, 2015). Significantly, through entries such as those pertaining to Taoism (aka 'Daoism') and the Taoist classic *Laozi*, Qian indirectly expresses 'social criticism' concerning stringent doctrines, worship of Mao Zedong and cynical manipulation of the masses during the Cultural Revolution (Hu & Chen, 2010; Egan, 2015).

In 1998, *Guan Zhui Bian* was rendered into English by Ronald Egan, a professor of Sinology who has selected, abridged and introduced the book and supplemented the text with findings lists, a bibliography of cited works as well as an index of titles, proper nouns and terminologies. Additionally, the translated version of *Guan Zhui Bian* has been re-divided into six parts, viz. 1) General Issues in Aesthetics and Criticism; 2) Metaphor, Image, and the Psychology of Perception; 3) Semantics and Literary Stylistics; 4) On 'Laozi,' with Reference to Buddhism and Other Mystical Philosophies; 5) The Demonic and Divine; and 6) Society and Thought (Idema, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Kroll, 2000; Fuehrer, 2001). It is notable that as an accomplished translator himself, the self-deprecating English title *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* is rendered by Qian and later adopted by Ronald Egan (Egan, 1998, p.1, 2015).

Scholar and internet literature

Scholar is categorised as an internet novel. In the 1990s, the advent of a digital era in China witnessed marginalisation of serious literature while proliferated production and consumption of online literature (Cayley, 2002; Zhang, 2003, pp.230-255; Ouyang, 2011; Tian & Adorjan, 2016), which was reflected by emergence and visibility of web-based popular literary works as a supplement to mainstream literature (Li, 2007; Ren & Montgomery, 2012). Development of networked and programmable media has nurtured legions of amateur authors as well as an elephantine readership in cyberspace (Rifkin, 1998, p.177; Zhang, 2011; Bai, 2013): by June 2023, there have been approximately 528 million virtual literature readers, accounting for 49.0% of the 1.079 billion internet users (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2023). Although the vast majority of internet writers are non-professional, a considerable number of them have attained critical acclamation and prodigious commercial success, exemplified by a Taiwanese author pseudonymised 痞子蔡 Pizicai (the nom de plume of 蔡智恒 Cai Zhiheng, aka Tsai Chih-heng) who published the epoch-making romance 第一次的亲密接触 *Diyicide Qinmi Jiechu* 'The First Intimate Contact' on a local Bulletin Board System in 1998 (Chao, 2012, p.14; Inwood, 2016), 南派三叔 Nanpaisanshu (the nom de plume of 徐磊 Xu Lei) who is celebrated for an award-winning tomb-raiding adventure series 盗墓笔记 *Daomu Biji* 'The Grave Robbers' Chronicles' (Liang, 2014; Wen, 2016), and a female writer 流潋紫 Liulianzi (the nom de plume of 吴雪岚 Wu Xuelan) whose historically-themed 后宫: 甄嬛传 *Hougong: Zhen Huan Zhuan* 'The Legend of Zhen Huan' has been adapted into a phenomenal television serial as a representative of the 'rear palace' (后宫 *hougong*) writing (Inwood, 2016; Yang, 2018).

Digital literary works in China are hosted by a range of profitable and non-profitable virtual communities and literary websites (Hockx, 2005; Yin, 2005; Chen et al., 2008; Tse & Gong, 2012), such as China's first dedicated literary website 榕树下 *Rongshu Xia* 'Under the Banyan Tree' established in 1997 (Hockx, 2004; Kong, 2005, p.178-180; Ouyang, 2018). In sharp contrast to *Rongshu Xia* that accommodates a mixed-gender readership, there are platforms targeting

specifically at readers of a certain gender. For instance, a leading website hosting female-oriented writing is 晋江文学城 *Jinjiang Wenxue Cheng* 'Jinjiang Literature City', which is famed for Boys Love (耽美 *danmei*) narratives featuring male-male emotional and erotic entanglements (see Wang, 2020, 2021a, 2021b and 2021c for detailed discussions); 91% of its approximately 59.57 million registered users are female (Jinjiang 2023). *Scholar*, however, was serialised on 起点中文网 *Qidian Zhongwen Wang* 'Qidian Chinese Website' that is regarded as more of a male-oriented platform accommodating fiction pertinent to history, horror, digital games, the military, science fiction, etc (Ji, 2020; Qidian, 2023).

One of the most well-established and fully-fledged online literary genres is 武侠 *wuxia*. *Wuxia* is a multifaceted construct denoting knighthood, heroism and martial chivalry (Liu, 1967; Huanzhulouzhu, 1991, p.7; Teo, 2009: 2; To, 2019), and its ideals encompass loyalty, charity, valour, fidelity and peace (Du, 1968: 63; Wang, 1988; Teo, 2009, pp. 73-74, 2012). As a modern genre, *wuxia* literature is correlated with and inspired by traditional mores and precepts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Li, 2011; Fu, 2012; Rehling, 2012), and one of the most prominent figures in Chinese *wuxia* literature, 金庸 Jin Yong (the nom de plume of 查良镛 Zha Liangyong, aka Louis Cha Leung-yung) (1924-2018), composed novels that had inspired a multitude of popular films, television serials and video games (Hamm 2005, Liu 2020). As for *wuxia* cinema, it thrived in the Shanghai film industry in the 1920s, essentially after the success of 火烧红莲寺 *Huo Shao Honglian Si* 'The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple' (1928) (Teo, 2009, p.29), and its contemporary prosperity is represented by a film 卧虎藏龙 *Wo Hu Cang Long* 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' (2000) directed by 李安 Li An (aka Ang Lee) (Klein, 2004; Dilley, 2014). Apart from *wuxia*, Chinese web literature also contains four subcategories, viz. 玄幻 *xuanhuan* 'Eastern fantasy', 都市 *dushi* 'urban', 仙侠 *xianxia* 'Chinese immortal swordsman' and 网游 *wangyou* 'online game' (Chao, 2012, pp.114-149). Additionally, there is a relatively marginal subgenre dubbed 种田文 *zhongtian wen* (Lit. 'farming writing') (see Wang, 2021d for detailed discussions). As for *Scholar*, it is a typical 'time-travel' (穿越 *chuanyue*) narrative, in that it recounts the time travel of a travel lover from the contemporary society, who becomes an impoverished yet intelligent adolescent in the Eastern Jin (317-420 CE) dynasty.

Given the fact that there is a veritable cornucopia of digital novels released in cyberspace every year, a proportion of them are ineluctably attributed to an imputation of low quality. Web-based fiction is sometimes regarded as 'feel-good writing' (爽文 *shuangwen*) that strives to enhance reading enjoyment via unrealistic plots and exaggerated depictions (Shao et al., 2016; Y. Shao, 2019; H. Shao, 2020). Some male-authored and male-oriented narratives are pejoratively or teasingly dubbed 种马文 *zhongma wen* 'stud fiction' (2013, p.10), in that the male protagonists are blatantly described to possess stud-like virile prowess and sexual attraction to include various female characters into their 'rear palace' (Feng, 2013, p.38). Some web-based pulp fiction, therefore, are referred to as YY 小说 *YY xiaoshuo* 'YY fiction', in which YY is an abbreviation of the Romanised spelling of a terminology 意淫 *yi yin* 'lust of the mind' derived from one of the Four Great Classical Novels (四大名著 *Si Da Mingzhu*) of Chinese literature, viz. 红楼梦 *Hong Lou Meng* 'Story of the Stone'; in a contemporary context, YY denotes 'mental pornography', viz. explicit mental exploration of salacious sensual pleasure (Cha, 2012, p.225; Hockx, 2015, p.112; Inwood, 2016). It is notable that YY is not limited to sexuality—in essence, the subjective fantasies enable readers' (and authors') fulfilment through an authorial 金手指 *jin shouzhi* 'golden finger'. 'Golden finger' is originally a web-game terminology denoting players' cheating (Wang, 2021), whereas in the field of online literature, it refers to surrealistic devices and favourable environments, which allow protagonists to reverse history or conquer the past via futuristic technologies and/or occult powers, or to travel to (or live in) worlds 'built upon air' (架空 *jiakong*) (Feng, 2013, p.38, 93; Inwood, 2016).

There is no denying the fact that as a web-based novel targeting at online readers, *Scholar* indeed exhibits attributes of 'feel-good writing'. For one thing, the protagonist Chen Caozhi is a quotidian man from the modern society, yet after time travel to the Eastern Jin dynasty, he is equipped with peerless acumen, memory, long-sightedness and aptitude for a range of activities prevailing

nearly two millennia ago, even including military and diplomatic competence. By virtue of the conspicuous 'golden finger', the impoverished hero becomes a high-ranking court official, despite the restrict social hierarchy and class stratification in imperial China. For another, the hero is described to have 'extraordinarily handsome appearance' (容貌俊美非凡 *rongmao junmei feifan*), and he marries two beautiful and talented aristocratic wives and then takes two concubines.

Notwithstanding the nonrational storylines and depictions, *Scholar* has been granted the ultimate accolade by Xiaodao's readership. First, in stark contrast to his counterparts who compose narratives 'built upon air', Xiaodao meticulously investigated historical facts and demonstrates them in a prodigious quantity and in a faithful fashion (Song, 2022). Second, Xiaodao deliberately chose Eastern Jin as the narrative's setting, yet as a distinct historical period known as Six Dynasties, Wei and Jin (220-420 CE) dynasties and Northern and Southern (420-589 CE) dynasties are not suitable for 'feel-good writing' due to lack of appropriate events. In order to produce reading pleasure, Xiaodao enabled the protagonist to defy stringent social norms and class-based oppression, so that his experiences resonate powerfully with readers in a modern context (Li, 2019; Yihuozhishe, 2017). Third, Xiaodao successfully represented the distinctive characteristics of the Wei-Jin upper class and literati who were featured by 风流 *fengliu* 'style or panache; spontaneous charm', epicene countenance and comportment, as well as consumption of a toxic 'elixir' of youth/longevity called 五石散 *Wushi San* 'Five-Mineral Powder' (Tang, 2013; Chen, 2017; Li, 2017; Lagasse, 2018; Hong, 2019). Xiaodao deployed myriads of references to personages and recreates them into main or supporting characters in *Scholar*, such as an intellectual 何晏 He Yan (196-249 CE) who was renowned for transvestism and addiction to the prevailing Five-Mineral Power (Qiu, 2005; Cao & Liao, 2008; Xie, 2017). Fourth, *Scholar*'s language style is archaic, consistent with its historical setting (Li, 2019; Yihuozhishe, 2017). In the Wen-Jin period, there was an illustrious anthology 世说新语 *Shishuo Xinyu* 'Recent Anecdotes and the Talk of the Age' compiled by 刘义庆 Liu Yiqing (403-444 CE), which captures *fengliu* deeds, cultural ideologies and social mores of the educated elite (Felt, 2014; Sanders, 2014). *Scholar*, therefore, is adulated as 'the *Shuishuo Xinyu* in the digital era' (Li, 2019).

Xuanxue

During the Six Dynasties, 玄学 *xuanxue* (Lit. 'learning (*xue*) in the profound (*xuan*)') flourished and comprised the curriculum of the imperial academy. *Xuanxue* scrutinises 'three texts of profundity' (三玄 *san xuan*), viz. *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and *Book of Changes*, unravelling the cryptic notion of Tao and the natural world, including fundamental concepts being (有 *you*), non-being (无 *wu*) and oneness (一 *yi*), as well as supplementary ones like virtue (德 *de*), naturalness (自然 *ziran*), non-deliberate action (无为 *wuwei*), transformation (化 *hua*), names (名 *ming*), actualities (实 *shi*), etc (Chai, 2020; Rošker, 2020). Since *xuanxue* is discrepant from the partisan Taoist school, it is widely labelled as 'Neo-Taoism' (Chan, 2019). *Xuanxue* paves the way for the development of Chinese philosophy, especially the amalgamation of cosmological ideas of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, as well as social, political and moral credos of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in the Song (960-1279) dynasty (Sellmann, 2020).

In *Guan Zhui Bian*, Qian's scrutiny of Wei-Jin *xuanxue* can be attested from 老子王弼注 *Laozi Wang Bi Zhu* 'The Wang Bi Recension of the *Laozi*' that is an all-important treatise on *Laozi* and the metaphysics of 王弼 Wang Bi (226-249 CE) (Wagner, 1989; Hong, 2019). In Wang Bi's commentary, an emphasis is placed on abstract metaphysics, while Tao, the pivotal insight of *xuanxue*, is construed as a static, abstract and ineffable reality (Chan, 1991, p.45; Fox, 2020). According to Wang Bi's postulation, all beings are established upon nothingness (Chan 2020); being palpably influenced by a Taoist philosopher 王充 Wang Chong (27-100 CE) whose magnum opus is 论衡 *Lun Heng* 'Balanced Discourses' (Xu, 2021), Wang Bi posited that *ziran* provided everything, including Tao, with inborn attributes (McLeod, 2020).

In *Scholar*, Xiaodao portrays a list of scenes pertaining to 清谈 *qingtan* 'pure conversation; high-minded debates' between the protagonist and other informed characters. *Qingtan* denotes

refined societal and intellectual argumentation of the upper-class elite (Chan, 2020), and *qingtan* and *xuanxue* are regarded as two distinctive and interwoven terminologies of the Six Dynasties (Lo, 2019). As acknowledged in an author's note, the foundations of most *xuanxue* discourses in *Scholar* are the relevant analyses in *Guan Zhui Bian*.[3] For instance, one of *Scholar*'s chapters is entitled 白马非马 *Bai Ma Fei* Ma 'A White Horse Is Not a Horse', the namesake of a proverbial philosophical paradox attributed to 公孙龙 Gongsun Long (floruit 284-259 BCE), which remains fathomless after two millennia, even though the arguments in his 白马论 *Bai Ma Lun* 'Treatise on the White Horse' are not recherché (Hansen, 1976; Thompson, 1995). In *Guan Zhui Bian*, Qian draws on references of the paradox in 战国策 *Zhanguo Ce* 'Intrigues of the Warring States' compiled by 刘向 Liu Xiang (77-6 BCE), 韩非子 *Hanfei Zi* 'Writings of Master Han Fei' composed by 韩非 Han Fei (280-233 BCE) and 新论 *Xin Lun* 'New Discourses' composed by 桓谭 Huan Tan (circa 20 BCE-56 CE). In this case, Qian's argumentation and treatment of logic focus on linguistic forms of the arguments (Vetrov, 2018).

Another elaborate *qingtan* scene in *Scholar* concerns the Confucian 仁 *ren* 'benevolence; humanity'. *Ren* constitutes the 'five constants' (五常 *wu chang*) with 义 *yi* 'righteousness', 礼 *li* 'propriety', 智 *zhi* 'wisdom' and 信 *xin* 'faithfulness' (Wilkinson, 1996; Huang, 2013; Chen, 2018; Tan, 2018), and it serves as a quintessential creed of the Confucian ethical system (Ames, 1991, 2011; Neville, 2011; Slingerland, 2011; Chen, 2013; Wong, 2020). Inextricably intertwined with 爱 *ai* 'love' and 恕 *shu* 'generosity' (Chen, 2013, 2018; Nguyen 2018), *ren* is regarded as an essential merit of a Confucian 君子 *junzi* 'gentleman' (Van Norden, 2002; Hourdequin, 2013; Walsh, 2013), as well as the primordial source of virtues and societal harmony (Slingerland, 2011; Chen, 2013; Terjesen, 2013). As can be seen from Example (1) from *Scholar* and Example (2) from *Guan Zhui Bian*, the fictional characters' discourse regarding un-*ren* is adapted from a statement extracted from *Laozi*, and Xiaodao's depiction is analogous to Qian's argument. In Example (2), to demonstrate the first kind of un-*ren*, Qian drew on two of the Four Books (四书 *Si Shu*) of Confucian precepts and the cardinal scriptures of Confucian zeitgeist and credence, viz. 论语 *Lunyu* 'Analects' (circa 5thc BCE) and 孟子 *Mengzi* 'Mencius' (4thc BCE) (Gardner, 1984; Kieschnick, 1992; Baldick, 2015; Hunter, 2017, pp.1-2; Van Norden, 2019; Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). In Example (2), Qian illustrated the second type of un-*ren* with a quotation from an immemorial medical treatise 黄帝内经 *Huangdi Nei Jing* 'Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon', which is attributed to the iconic, semi-mythical emperor 黄帝 Huangdi circa 2600 BCE (Sigerist, 2015; Curran, 2018).

(1) 谢道韫翻开《明圣湖论玄集》, 唇边带着一抹谑笑, 声音一改婉约低沉, 清泠泠地道: "……我与陈郎君持此刍狗论, 请诸葛公子问难。"……陈操之 "噢" 了一声, 说道: "不仁有两, 不可不辩, 一如《论语阳货》之 '予之不仁也' 或《孟子离娄》之 '不仁暴其民', 此不仁为凉薄凶残也; 其二如《素问》之 '不痛不仁', 此不仁为麻木痴顽也。前者忍心, 后者无知, 天地不仁, 盖类后者。"

Xie Daoyun opened Chen Caozhi's *Mingsheng Lake Collection on Xuanxue*. With a contemptuous smile on her face, she said coldly: '…Mr Chen and I support the "straw-dog" proposition from *Laozi*. Mr Zhuge, please start your argument.'…Chen Caozhi took the floor: 'There are two types of un-*ren*, which must be debated. An example of the first type is "Yu is un-*ren*" from *Analects*, and another example is "un-*ren* rulers mistreat people" from *Mencius*; this type of un-*ren* means cold-blooded and cruel. An example of the second type is 'unpainful while un-*ren*' from

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[3] In the note, the author acknowledged that 'most discussions on *xuanxue* in the text are from *Guan Zhui Bian*. I'm sorry for having plagiarised from Mr Qian Zhongshu' (文中所涉老庄玄谈, 大多出于《管锥编》, 抄袭抄到钱钟书先生头上, 小道惭愧) (Trans. Mine).

Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon; this type of un-*ren* means numb and dumb. The former type is unsympathetic, yet the latter type is ignorant. In 'heaven and hearth are un-*ren*', it means the latter.

(*Scholar*. Vol

3. Chapter 3. Trans. Mine)

(2) "天地不仁, 以万物为刍狗; 圣人不仁, 以百姓为刍狗"……"不仁" 有两, 不可不辨。一如《论语·阳货》之 "予之不仁也" 或《孟子·离娄》之 "不仁暴其民", 凉薄或凶残也。二如《素问·痹论》第四三之 "不痛不仁" 或《广韵·三十五禡》之 "儍偢、不仁也", 麻木或痴顽也。前者忍心, 后者无知。"天地不仁" 盖属后义, 如虚舟之触, 飘瓦之堕, 虽灭顶破额, 而行所无事, 出非有意。

Heaven and earth are inhuman and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs. The sage is also inhuman and treats the people as straw dogs.
–*Laozi*, Chapter 5

…The phrase *buren* 不仁 ('inhuman') actually has two different meanings, which should be distinguished. The first meaning is as in the *Analects* statement, 'How inhuman Yu is!,' or in the *Mencius* passage, 'A ruler who is inhuman does violence to his people.' It refers to a cold-hearted attitude or vicious action. The second is as in the *Yellow Emperor's Medical Classic on the Origins of Disease*: 'the illness is neither painful nor *buren* ('unfelt'),' and the statement in *A Comprehensive Rhyme Dictionary* that 'to be unaware is to be *buren*.' The first meaning describes cruelty, while the second describes insentience. Laozi's statement that 'Heaven and earth are inhuman' utilizes the second meaning. When an empty boat collides with something or a tile falling from a roof hits someone, even if it knocks a person on the head and injures him, the event is random and not purposeful.

(老子王弼注.五章. *On 'Laozi'*. Trans. Egan 1998: 269)

Xiaodao's description of the *qingtan* scene in Example (1) retains Qian's reference to *Analects*, *Mencius* and *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*. Nevertheless, the citation from 广韵 *Guang Yun* 'Extended Rhymes' (in Example (2)), a rime dictionary compiled in 1008 under the patronage of Emperor Zhenzong of the Northern Song (968-1022) dynasty (Wang & Smith, 1997, p.3), has not been included in Example (1). The reason lies in that *Guan Zhui Bian* is a scholarly work, whereas *Scholar* is an internet novel under the 'time-travel' subgenre. Although the author was punctilious in historical facts and enriches the narration with details in terms of custom, architecture, law, clothing and culinary delights in Eastern Jin, he was aware that expatiating upon abstruse research findings would not necessarily accommodate readers consuming 'feel-good' fantasies. Similarly, in the narrative, one of the protagonist's two wives is 谢道韫 Xie Daoyun (circa 340-399 CE), a poet, calligrapher and philosopher of the Eastern Jin dynasty (Liu & Xu, 2000, pp.148-149), yet the author placed an emphasis on her notable background, elegant demeanour, outstanding talent and devotion to the protagonist, without rendering the narrative too academic.

Metaphor
As can be seen from Example (2), Qian drew on two metaphors[4] concerning an empty boat and a falling tile to clarify the appropriate interpretation of 'heaven and earth are un-*ren*'. In *Guan Zhui Bian*, Qian exhibited persistent interests in poetic uses of language, especially figures of speech such

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[4] It is worth mentioning that the two analogies in Example (2) are, strictly speaking, similes, owing to the existence of 如 *ru* 'be like'. This example is consistent with an observation that '[w]hatever metaphors Qian knits, he tended to use similes' (Zhu 2010: 225). In this paper, I follow Zhu (2010) and use the terminology metaphor (比喻 *biyu*) to denote both figures of speech.

as metaphor, hyperbole, symbolism and synaesthesia, and he analysed these devices from the perspectives of human perception and imagination, rather than language itself (Egan, 2015). In his 旧文四篇 *Jiu Wen Si Pian* 'Four Essays Composed in the Early Times' (1979), Qian regarded metaphor as the root of literary language, and in his own writings, he had indeed employed a wide range of lavish metaphors to convey logic and witticisms (Zhu, 2010).

In *Guan Zhui Bian*, there is an entry entitled 比喻有两柄亦有多边 *Biyu You Liang Bing Yi You Duo Bian* 'Metaphors Have Two Handles and Several Sides'. According to Qian, the multifacetedness of metaphors is prevalently attested in disparate works; if it occurs in the same work, it is deployed to manifest changes (Zhou, 2005, p.128). Moreover, Qian highlighted the application of extended serial metaphors entailing diverse images for the portrayal of a single object or phenomenon, and in his own familiar essays, the serial metaphors intensify readers' comprehension of an idea or a state from various perspectives (Zhu, 2010; Egan, 2015). In *Scholar*, Xiaodao's use of metaphors is consistent with Qian's postulate. For instance, in Example (3), apart from comparing the emerald flute and fair fingers to fresh bamboo and white jade respectively, which are stand-alone metaphors, the author created a series of metaphors regarding the high-pitched tune, by comparing it to a rainbow, fireworks and an unremitting river. This series of metaphors paints a vivid portrait of the magnificent tune and enables readers to visualise it from multiple perspectives. The author also deployed another metaphor to describe the low-pitched tune by comparing it to fragile fibres of lotus roots, which is disparate from the series of metaphors regarding high-pitched tune and hence the salient change.

(3) 这存世两百年的古箫碧绿莹澈, 仿佛是新斫下的翠竹制成的, 柯亭笛六孔跳跃着的修长手指也如白玉琢成——孤山绝顶, 秋风萧飒, 缕缕箫音藕断丝连, 绵绵不绝, 曲意翻新出奇, 箫音低下去、低下去, 众人屏息凝神, 似乎缈不可闻, 但深涧幽咽, 细听可辨, 突然, 宛若彩虹飞跨, 又似烟花骤起, 箫音陡然拔高, 高到让人担心箫管会被吹裂, 夭矫凌空, 盘旋飞舞, 又安然无恙地平缓下来, 箫音流逝, 情感聚拢, 音乐之美有如滔滔江水, 让人油然生出逝者如斯、生命短暂之感。

This two-hundred-year-old flute was so emerald that as if it was made of newly-cut bamboo, and the fair, long fingers playing the flute looked like white jade. On the top of the isolated mountain and in the sharp autumn wind, the flute tune was like tender, long fibres of lotus roots, and the implied meanings were stunningly creative. When the volume was down, the tune was like subdued whimpers in a deep valley, so everybody held their breath and listened carefully. All of a sudden, the tune surged like a rainbow or fireworks, to an extent that the flute might crack. The tune danced gracefully, ascending to the sky and lowering down smoothly. While the tune flowed away, the emotion gathered around. The beauty of music was like an unremitting river that evoked listeners' cherishment of the transient life.

(*Scholar*. Vol 1. Chapter 33. Trans. Mine)

Qian propounded a universal poetic device that accords with a universal principle of human perception—in particular, Qian accounted for the construct of 通感 *tonggan* 'synaesthesia', by means of drawing a comparison between acoustic and olfactory elements (Zhou, 2005, pp.129-131; Egan, 2015). In Example (4) extracted from *Scholar*, Xiaodao employed synaesthesia, in that an acoustic tenor, viz. the elegant tune, is compared to a visual vehicle, viz. a flowing river. It is notable that synaesthesia can also be attested in Example (3): the sound in the narrative is compared to a range of objects that have been seen by readers in real-world contexts.

(4) 峰峦寂寂, 远湖无声, 一缕箫声因风而起, 柔和秀雅的乐音缓缓流淌, 时而一个短促的回旋, 就仿佛山涧遇石萦绕迂回, 然后继续潺潺流泻。

It was silent in the mountains and the faraway lake was peaceful. A piece of flute tune arose with the wind. The gentle and graceful tune flowed slowly, and it sometimes made a quick turn, like a river passing a rock in the mountain and carrying on.

<div align="right">(Scholar. Vol 1. Chapter 7. Trans. Mine)</div>

Furthermore, Qian posited that the significance of metaphors is not invariant: when used for argumentation, particular metaphors can be substituted by others, whereas in poetry, metaphors are irreplaceable in terms of manifesting tenors and poets' emotions (Zhou, 2005, pp.125-127). In Example (5) extracted from *Scholar*, the author intended to illuminate the protagonist's wearisome process of practising calligraphy, so he employed two analogous, interchangeable metaphors, namely practising Go and climbing a steep mountain, to illustrate his point. Additionally, the second metaphor contains an embedded metaphor comparing scenery to a picture, which is more poetic and thus more irreplaceable.

(5) 陈操之并不着急, 对此他有体会, 就好比围棋, 在长棋之前, 会有一段时间见谁输谁, 棋境窘迫, 但熬过这段时间, 某一日会突然发现自己棋力长进了, 先前那些与他水平相当的对手都被一一砍翻; 又好比徒步攀登险峰, 山路陡峭, 背包沉重, 大汗淋漓地上了峰顶, 蓦然回首, 千峰拱列, 壮丽如画——需要的是只是刻苦和坚持。

Chen Caozhi was not anxious. He was fully aware that practising calligraphy was like practising Go: prior to competence, one had to experience constant losses, but he would suddenly notice his own improvement and outshine his rivals. It was also like hiking in a perilous peak: despite a steep climb and a heavy rucksack, once one reached the summit covered in sweat, he could appreciate numerous splendid mountains that were like a picture. All he needed was diligence and persistence.

<div align="right">(Scholar. Vol 1. Chapter 27. Trans. Mine)</div>

CONCLUSION

As an encyclopaedic masterpiece, the significance of *Guan Zhui Bian* lies in not only its erudition and insightfulness, but also its influence on literary and non-literary works, such as *Scholar*. Albeit being a web-based time-travel novel, *Scholar* cannot be construed as one of the 'stud fiction' or 'YY fiction' that equip heroes with impregnable virility and prowess via the conspicuous and sometimes surrealistic 'golden finger'. There is no denying the fact that as a male-authored and male-oriented online narrative targeting at internet users who might tend to consume pulp fiction, *Scholar* ineluctably exhibits characteristics of 'feel-good writing', exemplified by the protagonist's unmatched acumen, aptitude and appearance and hence his success and polygamy. Having said that, *Scholar* is still meritorious by virtue of the author's punctilious scrutiny of numberless historical facts and personages in the Eastern Jin dynasty and his representation of them in an accurate manner. It is notable that Xiaodao deploys the analyses of *xuanxue* and metaphor in *Guan Zhui Bian*. In *Scholar*, there is a range of scenes concerning societal and intellectual argumentation during 'pure conversation', such as philosophical and political debates pertaining to 'a white horse is not a horse' and the Confucian *ren*. The depictions in the narrative bear similitude to Qian's elaboration in *Guan Zhui Bian*. As for metaphors, apart from employing them in his own literary and scholarly writings, Qian also demonstrates comprehension of metaphors in *Guan Zhui Bian*, along with other poetic uses of language. Metaphors in *Scholar* can reflect Qian's theory that 'metaphors have two handles and several sides', as well as his understanding of synaesthesia. Therefore, digital literature, epitomised by *Scholar*, is not necessarily 'feel-good writing' that ingratiates itself with online readers, so it deserves more literary criticism.

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