

The Peach Blossom Fan: A Symbol of Fate and Liberation

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Abstract

The Peach Blossom Fan uses the peach blossom and the fan as symbols to depict Li Xiangjun's journey from entrapment to resistance, and from romantic love to transcendence. The peach blossom symbolizes Xiangjun's fate, while the acts of gifting the fan, staining the fan, painting the fan, sending the fan, and tearing the fan represent her active resistance against fate and her process of self-awareness. By analyzing Li Xiangjun's entanglement with fate under the peach blossom imagery and her transcendent struggle embodied in the "fan dance," this paper reveals the close connection between individual destiny and the socio-historical context. It explores an individual's resistance and self-transcendence in the face of adversity, thereby clarifying how this character transcends the traditional image of women in Chinese literature.

Keywords

The Peach Blossom Fan; Li Xiangjun; Peach Blossom; Fan

1. Introduction

The Peach Blossom Fan, a masterpiece by Kong Shangren in the Qing Dynasty, is renowned for its intricate weaving of a love story with the historical narrative of the Southern Ming Dynasty's downfall. Central to this drama are the potent symbols of the peach blossom and the fan, which are inextricably linked to the fate and agency of its protagonist, Li Xiangjun. This paper examines how the peach blossom imagery represents Li Xiangjun's predetermined fate—her beauty, her suffering, and her constrained existence—while the fan's journey—through gifting, staining, painting, sending, and tearing—charts her path of conscious resistance and ultimate transcendence. Through this analysis, we aim to illuminate Li Xiangjun's evolution from a celebrated courtesan constrained by her circumstances to an individual who asserts her will, challenges authority, and ultimately achieves a form of spiritual liberation, thereby transcending conventional literary portrayals of women in her era.

2. The Entanglement of Fate under the Peach Blossom Imagery

In *The Peach Blossom Fan*, the peach blossom pattern on the fan is a portrayal of Li Xiangjun's fate, a symbol of her inner world and life experiences. The peach blossom, with its delicate, captivating beauty and short lifespan, vividly illustrates Xiangjun's enchanting yet trapped and lonely destiny. The bloom of the peach blossom symbolizes her youth and beauty, while its withering foreshadows her misfortunes and tragic end.

2.1. The Perfect Symbol of Youthful Beauty

The enchanting quality of the peach blossom makes it a perfect symbol for Li Xiangjun's youthful beauty. As a famous courtesan in Qinhuai, Li Xiangjun attracted numerous literati with her exceptional talent and beauty. She was like a blooming peach blossom, radiating captivating splendor along the Qinhuai River.

In the scene "Sleeping with Fragrance", Hou Fangyu, having taken refuge in Nanjing and received support from Ruan Dacheng, meets Li Xiangjun. As affection grows mutually, Hou Fangyu gives Xiangjun a pure white palace fan as a token of their pledge and improvises a poem on it: "Vermilion towers line the winding path. The young master rides his Fuping carriage for the first time. The streamsides are full of magnolia trees. But they cannot compare to the peach and plum blossoms in the east wind." The contrast between the "magnolia trees" (Xinyi shu) and the "peach and plum blossoms" (Tao Li hua) highlights the brilliance and vitality of the peach blossom, praising Li Xiangjun's youthful beauty. The dissatisfied remark by Su Kunsheng, "So we are inferior to peach and plum blossoms, and are merely magnolia trees?" further strengthens this contrast, emphasizing the unique status of the peach blossom as a symbol of feminine beauty.

While inscribing the poem, Hou Fangyu sighs, "Such fragrant peach and plum blossoms. Are all inscribed upon this palace fan," directly pointing to the intention of using the peach blossom's radiant bloom and captivating fragrance to describe Xiangjun. This depiction not only showcases Li Xiangjun's beauty but also highlights her youthful aura and moving charm.

This tradition of using peach blossoms to metaphorize female youth and beauty has deep roots in Chinese literary history. The line "The peach tree is young and elegant; Brilliant are its flowers" from "Tao Yao" in the *Classic of Poetry* is a classic depiction of a young woman's beauty. The peach blossom imagery in *The Peach Blossom Fan* inherits and develops this tradition. Through Hou Fangyu's inscribed poem, the peach blossom becomes tightly intertwined with Li Xiangjun's image, making her portrayal as a youthful beauty more vivid and striking.

2.2. The Witness to a Peripatetic and Ill-Fated Life

The beauty of the peach blossom is always transient. With the passing of spring, the blossoms soon wither. This brief yet splendid life process bears a striking resemblance to the fleeting youth of women. Consequently, the peach blossom became a

common image used by literati to depict the evanescence of female youth and a troubled fate. In *The Peach Blossom Fan*, the peach blossom also becomes a witness to Xiangjun's bumpy and wandering destiny.

In the scene "Sending the Fan", she uses the peach blossom as a metaphor for herself, lamenting the misery and helplessness of "the peach blossom's fate is thin, wandering at the fan's bottom." The lyrics of the *Jin Shang Hua* further intertwine the peach blossom's delicate beauty with its drifting fate, the spring breeze's lazy smile and the flowing water's sorrowful float, forming a picture filled with sadness and resignation.

She is trapped. In the exit poem of the scene "Selecting Excellencies", Li Xiangjun's predicament and helplessness are fully revealed: "The song ends, the crowd disperses as the sun sets west; Desolate in the palace corner, a household alone. Even if the spring breeze wanted to enter, it finds no way; The Changmen Gate imprisons the green peach blossoms." The "green peach blossoms" (Bi Tao Hua) here are not only a metaphor for Li Xiangjun's beautiful yet fragile life but also a portrayal of the tragic fate of her and her sisters, imprisoned deep in the palace to learn opera, stripped of their freedom.

She and the other sisters were confined within the deep palace, cut off from the outside world, unable to enjoy freedom and happiness. They were like those imprisoned green peach blossoms, beautiful yet destined to live in loneliness and desolation. This situation is not only a personal tragedy for them but also a profound reflection on the fate of women in that era.

In fact, Xiangjun is both trapped and self-trapped, having no other choice but to confine herself to maintain her integrity. When Hou Fangyu sought refuge in exile and his whereabouts were unknown, Xiangjun was forced to remarry. Facing irresistible coercion, she declared, "I would rather endure cold and hunger than step down from these green stairs," vowing not to descend the stairs to preserve her purity and dignity, a testament to her powerlessness and desperation.

She is also lonely. In the scene "Inscribing the Painting", the peach blossom imagery is meticulously used, appearing four times to profoundly symbolize Li Xiangjun's loneliness and suffering. The opening lines, "The fair one's fragrance cold, the embroidered bed idle; A courtyard of peach blossoms blooms, she shuts herself alone," create a sharp contrast between the blooming peach blossoms, full of spring vitality, and the "fair one's fragrance cold" and "shuts herself alone," highlighting Li Xiangjun's solitude and loneliness. The blooming peach blossoms set off her isolation and desolation, making the peach blossom a symbol of her lonely fate. The exit poem, "Returning to the Red Chamber, my mind is lost; Idly discussing poetry and painting on a late spring day. The beauty and the young master have drifted away; A tree of peach blossoms is just like last year," serves both as a summary of the preceding plot and a deep reflection on Li Xiangjun's destiny. The peach blossoms still bloom, but the beauty and the young master have scattered, intensifying the sense of

change and the pathos of Li Xiangjun's loneliness and suffering. The peach blossom, as a symbol, runs throughout, vividly portraying Li Xiangjun's loneliness and hardship.

3. Transcendence through the Fan Dance

If the peach blossom on the fan represents Xiangjun's inescapable destiny, then the journey of this fan itself carries her transcendence over that fate. In *The Peach Blossom Fan*, the key plot points involving the fan include its gifting, staining, painting, sending, and tearing. Through this progression, Xiangjun moves from emotion to Dao, from the awakening of love to the cognition of her own life, demonstrating the gradual transformation of her self-awareness.

3.1. Gifting the Fan: The Awakening of Love

The gifting of the fan marks the beginning of the love between Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangyu. Hou Fangyu uses a poetic fan as a token of their pledge. Although he is initially attracted only by Xiangjun's beauty and talent, for Xiangjun, this signifies an important stage in her life as a singing courtesan.

In traditional society, women's marriages were often strictly constrained by family, society, and Confucian norms; they usually had no choice but to passively accept arrangements made by their clan or parents. However, Li Xiangjun was different. She possessed her own political leanings and aesthetic standards; she longed to find a gentleman of talent, sentiment, and unwavering integrity as her partner. In her interaction with Hou Fangyu, Li Xiangjun was attracted not only by his talent but also moved by his political ideals and personal charisma. She saw integrity and moral uprightness in him, considering him a trustworthy and reliable partner. Her union with Hou Fangyu, to some extent, reflects her autonomous choice as an individual. This choice was based not only on love but also included the pursuit of shared political ideals and talent, thereby achieving a transcendence over the traditional female role.

Beyond marrying an admired scholar, Xiangjun also hoped this would bring future happiness. In the fan inscription scene, Xiangjun is deliberately arranged as the one who holds the inkstone. This itself becomes a ritual, symbolizing the vow and pledge of love. By participating in this form, assuming the role of an assistant in the rite, she also bore witness to her own expectations for love.

In this process, she is no longer a weak woman passively accepting the arrangements of fate but begins to actively pursue her own love and happiness. This embodies Li Xiangjun's transcendence of the traditional, passive, and reserved view of love for women. She dares to pursue her own love, unbound by traditional ethical codes.

3.2. Staining the Fan: Resistance against Coercion

The staining of the fan occurs in the scene "Guarding the Tower". Yang Longyou acts on behalf of Tian Yang to forcibly take Xiangjun as a concubine. Xiangjun vows to die rather than descend the stairs, brandishing the fan wildly back and forth. Yang exclaims: "How formidable! A single poetic fan seems like a sharp sword for self-defense!" The isolated and vulnerable Xiangjun, under endless pressure, erupts with the courage to resist. Just as a poetic fan is usually merely a companion for reciting poetry and enjoying the moon, in a critical moment it becomes a sword for self-defense. Here, the poetic fan is not just an object but a symbol of Xiangjun's love and identity. She uses it to demonstrate her steadfast belief in love and to affirm her identity. When Yang Longyou presses for the forced marriage, Xiangjun uses the poetic fan as a weapon, resolutely defending her love and dignity. This action is not only a challenge and rebellion against Yang Longyou but also a brave defiance of feudal ethics and coercion. The fan is stained with blood, becoming a vessel for Xiangjun's intense emotions, her anger and resolve reaching their peak.

In fact, even before "Guarding the Tower," Xiangjun had already demonstrated her independence and insight through the act of "Rejecting the Dowry". She possessed genuine ideals and noble integrity, unwilling to be manipulated and played with. When she saw Hou Lang immediately change his attitude towards their political enemy Ruan Dacheng, referring to him respectfully as "Venerable Ruan" and readily agreeing to mediate on his behalf because of material gifts, she, though a new bride, was angered. She directed her anger at her beloved, reproaching him for not "setting aside public duty for private favor." She resolutely declared, "These are the Ruan family's things, Xiangjun will not use them," throwing the pearls, jade, hairpins, and skirts all over the floor.

The scene "Rejecting the Dowry" portrays Xiangjun's capability for action, while "Shou Lou" portrays her steadfastness. What she steadfastly guards, besides love, is her own political stance and moral integrity. The staining of the fan, through the resistance against coercion, further stimulates Li Xiangjun's self-awareness. She understands that her value lies not in attaching herself to a man but in her own existence and dignity as an independent individual.

3.3. Painting the Fan and Sending the Fan: Self-awareness and Mastery of Life

The scenes of "Painting the Fan" and "Sending the Fan" in *The Peach Blossom Fan* reveal Xiangjun's inner struggles and growth, profoundly depicting Li Xiangjun's recognition and grasp of her own destiny at a mature stage of her life.

In the scene "Ji Shan," Xiangjun, guarding the empty tower alone, meets Su Kunsheng and Yang Longyou. Through the peach blossom fan that Yang Longyou painted for her by adding branches and leaves, she achieves recognition of her own fate. She sighs: "Alas! The peach blossom's fate is thin, wandering at the fan's bottom. Thank you, Master Yang, for portraying my likeness." Lamenting the peach blos-

som's ill-fated and wandering is both a symbol of her own destiny and an expression of her self-pity and helplessness. Li Xiangjun gains a more genuine understanding of her own life. She sees her helplessness and fragility as a woman in turbulent times. This awareness makes her more clearly recognize her situation and limitations. However, this recognition is not a compromise with fate but rather a momentary emotional outpouring. After enduring the ordeals of rejected matchmaking and forced marriage, Xiangjun reflects on her life experiences. Though painful, she does not abandon her steadfast adherence to love and dignity.

The lyrics in Yuan Yang Sha express her reluctance and hope for the future: "On the Third Day of the Third Month, Liu Lang arrives, Hand in hand we descend the dressing tower, And eat our fill of peach blossom congee." Unwilling to remain alone in the empty tower, letting her youth wither away, she chooses to send the fan to Hou Fangyu to express her longing and anticipation. Through the act of sending the fan, Li Xiangjun conveys her heartfelt feelings to Hou Fangyu, while also demonstrating her existence and dignity as an independent individual to the outside world. She refuses to be bound by fate, instead choosing to bravely pursue her own happiness and ideals.

"To love life after recognizing the truth of life" – at this moment, this undoubtedly points to a full personality harvested after richer life experiences.

3.4. Tearing the Fan: The Elevation of Realm

The tearing of the fan occurs in the scene "Entering the Dao". The final song says: "See how the two part ways. Not even casting a parting glance. Thanks to my tearing the Peach Blossom Fan to shreds. No more will the infatuated worms spin soft silks to bind themselves ten thousand times. White bones, blue ashes, long overgrown with wormwood; Beneath the Peach Blossom Fan, we send off the Southern Dynasty. If not for revisiting the dream of rise and fall. Where could the intense passion of lovers be dissolved?"

The lovers, after enduring countless hardships, separations, and the pain of longing, finally reunite unexpectedly on Qixia Mountain following the collapse of the Southern Ming dynasty. Their joy is therefore immense and understandable. However, this personal reunion is immediately framed and ultimately dismantled by the larger historical context. Just as Hou and Li are bitterly recounting their feelings of separation and longing while facing the peach blossom fan, the Daoist priest Zhang Yaoxing tears the fan, throws it to the ground, and angrily scolds: "Bah! You two infatuated worms! Look, where is the state? Where is the family? Where is the ruler? Where is the father? Is it only this root of romantic passion that you cannot sever?" This shocking shout severs their infatuation, enabling them to see through the emptiness of history and the illusion of life. Both sever the ties of affection and enter the Dao, becoming renunciates.

The peach blossom fan, as a witness to the love between Hou Fangyu and Li

Xiangjun, has always been the link of their emotional connection. However, against the backdrop of a lost country and ruined home, the destruction of this peach blossom fan not only symbolizes the dissolution of their love but more profoundly reveals the heavy sense of life's emptiness and historical tragedy. At the moment of "tearing the fan," personal emotions and the fate of the nation are closely intertwined; the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual in the torrent of history are fully revealed. When Daoist Zhang Yaoxing tears the fan and casts it down, angrily scolding the two for their infatuation, their love is mercilessly torn apart, symbolizing the immense impact of the nation's rise and fall on individual destiny. The destruction of the peach blossom fan is a farewell to the beautiful past and a confrontation with the harsh reality. It makes Li Xiangjun realize that personal emotions seem so insignificant in the face of the righteousness of the nation and its people. Her eventual choice to enter the Dao is both a farewell to her own love and a profound reflection on the fate of the country and the emptiness of life.

Before this, her resoluteness and boldness were mostly manifested in the pursuit and steadfastness of love. After innumerable hardships, when reunion is finally achieved, she decisively tears the fan, withdraws from the mundane world, abandons past emotional entanglements and worldly disturbances, and focuses on self-cultivation and spiritual pursuit. Moving from emotion to Dao, from the awakening of love to the cognition of self-life, at this moment, she truly achieves a renovation of her personal realm. This is also what sets her apart from those sentimental women in Ming-Qing dramas.

Kong Shangren explicitly stated his writing purpose in the "Brief Introduction" to *The Peach Blossom Fan*: "To borrow the sentiment of separation and reunion, to express the feelings of rise and fall." Therefore, although this play uses a love story as its vehicle, what it expresses is not merely romantic love between men and women, but a broader societal connotation. The protagonists' love is closely related to politics. The reason Li Xiangjun possesses a concept of love that is free, loyal, and independent is precisely that her heart holds not only personal affection but also great love for her country. Her love is intimately connected with politics; the righteous cause of the nation supersedes everything. This is also the result of Kong Shangren's creation. He uses the character of Li Xiangjun to project his own profound thoughts and pursuits regarding history and society. Li Xiangjun's clarity and self-possession in the face of love, and ultimately even her abandonment of personal affection by entering the Dao, are expressions of the author's self-awareness: the state has perished, what use is a family? Against the turbulent social background, Kong Shangren externalized the focus of his creation, causing personal emotions and experiences to yield to the nation, history. And Xiangjun, as a woman within this national history, though fully aware of her destined, peach-blossom-like fate of withering entanglement, still dances through life with the fan. In the progression of gifting, staining, painting, sending, and tearing the fan, she realizes the gradual trans-

formation of her self-awareness, ultimately achieving transcendence over herself, and also over the traditional image of women.

The convergence of the fan and the peach blossom is the resonance of personal destiny and national fate. After tearing the fan, she leaves for the Peach Blossom Spring.

4. Conclusion

Through the intricate symbolism of the peach blossom and the fan, *The Peach Blossom Fan* presents a profound exploration of destiny and individual agency. Li Xiangjun's journey, mapped onto the peach blossom's bloom and withering and the fan's physical journey, transcends a simple love story or tragedy. Initially symbolizing her youthful beauty and predetermined fate as a courtesan—beautiful yet transient, admired yet constrained—the peach blossom imagery sets the stage for her struggles. However, the fan becomes the medium through which she actively engages with and ultimately transcends this fate. The acts of gifting, staining, painting, sending, and finally tearing the fan mark her evolution from romantic awakening, through political resistance and self-assertion, towards a profound cognitive mastery of her life, culminating in spiritual liberation. Her final act of tearing the fan and entering the Dao, prompted by the recognition of the vanished state, signifies the ultimate prioritization of historical consciousness and spiritual freedom over personal attachment. Li Xiangjun thus emerges not as a passive victim of her circumstances but as an active agent who challenges feudal constraints, asserts her political and personal integrity, and achieves a transcendence that redefines the traditional literary portrayal of women, thereby exchanging the entangled fate of the peach blossom for the transcendent peace of the Peach Blossom Spring.

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