

Religious and Numinous Practices in the Novel Pomegranate Bloom

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ABSTRACT

A novel entitled 石榴花开 *Shiliu Huakai* 'Pomegranate Bloom' (Trans. Mine) (2019) falls into a literary subgenre 乡土文学 *xiangtu wenxue* 'native-soil literature' and it is composed by a Shandong-born fictionist 耿雪凌 Geng Xueling (1968-). Apart from salient folk attributes painting a vivid portrait of the rural area of southwest Shandong, *Pomegranate Bloom* is also featured by numinous depictions pertaining to paranormal forces and occult deeds. To be more specific, the narrative encompasses rituals and deities of the institutionalised Taoism and Buddhism, practitioners of esoteric arts and magical powers correlated to popular religion, animal worship and shamanistic curse, a veritable cornucopia of divinatory acts, as well as folk remedies that are surmised to be justified by traditional Chinese medicine. To some extent, this work indicates the 'unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism' as well as the harmonious coexistence of institutionalised (sub-)religions and folk religion. Albeit being a work representing the 'native-soil literature' in contemporary China, *Pomegranate Bloom* has not attracted enough critical attention, so in this research, I scrutinise this novel from a hermeneutic perspective, discussing religious and numinous practices depicted in the narrative.

Keywords: animal worship, divination, folk religion, institutionalised religion, traditional Chinese medicine

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese literature during the 20th century entails preponderant preoccupation with and representation of the local (乡土 *xiangtu*), the discourse of which encapsulates cultural authenticity and modern consciousness (Duara 2000, Wei 2019). Modern Chinese literature can be epitomised by a fictional subgenre dubbed 乡土文学 *xiangtu wenxue* 'native-soil literature' in 1935 by 鲁迅 Lu Xun (1881-1936) (Kong 1997, Liu 2017), a meritorious writer, essayist, poet, translator and literary critic in the 20th century (Sun 1986, Cheng 2013: 3, Harpham 2013, Wang 2016). As a leading figure of native-soil fiction (Duara 2000, Yu 2019), Lu Xun has composed a myriad of works embodying nostalgic and lyrical rustic simplicity, exemplified by 故乡 *Guxiang* 'Hometown' (1921), 阿Q正传 *A Q Zhengzhuan* 'The True Story of Ah Q' (1921), 社戏 *She Xi* 'Village Opera' (1922), 祝福 *Zhufu* 'The New Year's Sacrifice' (1924), etc (Cheng 2013: 140, Wang 2016, Hutters 2020: 267).

In the contemporary era, an illustrious Shandong-born writer of the native-soil literature is the 2012 Nobel Prize laureate 管谟业 Guan Moye (1955-), who is more celebrated for his pseudonym 莫言 Mo Yan (Lit. 'Do not speak') (Flood 2012a, 2012b, Duran and Huang 2014). Although being extolled as an avant-garde writer with revolutionary literary dogma (Riep 2003, Laughlin 2012, Xu 2018), Mo Yan deploys fully-fledged traditional genres and conveys indigenous culture and imaginary nostalgia in his writing (Wang 1993a, 1993b, Leenhouts 2003). Mo Yan's prolific creation of native-soil fiction is comprised of 白狗秋千架 *Baigou Qiuqianjia* 'White Dog and the Swing' (1985), 红高粱家族 *Hong Gaoliang Jiazu* 'Red Sorghum' (1986), 透明的红萝卜 *Toumingde Hongluobo* 'Transparent

Red Radish' (1986), 天堂蒜薹之歌 *Tiantang Suantai Zhi Ge* 'The Garlic Ballads' (1988), 丰乳肥臀 *Fengrufeitun* 'Big Breasts and Wide Hips' (1995), 檀香刑 *Tanxiang Xing* 'Sandalwood Death' (2001), etc (Duke 1993, Riemenschneider 2012, Knight 2013, Chen 2014).

In this research, I investigate a native-soil novel entitled 石榴花开 *Shiliu Huakai* 'Pomegranate Bloom' (Trans. Mine) (2019), which is composed by another Shandong-born fictionist, 耿雪凌 Geng Xueling (1968-) (China News 2019, Zhang 2019, Hou 2021). Owing to its literary aptitude and artistic value, *Pomegranate Bloom* (henceforward *Pomegranate*) has attained critical accolades (Zhang and Fu 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Apart from *Pomegranate*, Geng's chefs-d'oeuvre also include 大麦小麦 *Damai Xiaomai* 'Barley and Wheat', 牌坊街旧事 *Paifang Jie Jiushi* 'A Chronicle of Paifang Street' and 关于一次自杀事件 *Guanyu Yici Zisha Shijian* 'On a Suicide Incident' (Trans. Mine), all of which are marked by native-soil representation appertaining to Shandong (Liu 2015, Cao 2017, Xie 2017, Shandong Writers 2019).

As a work of contemporary Chinese literature, *Pomegranate* manifests features of the distinctive 'native-soil literature', yet it has not attained much critical attention. Therefore, in this research, I explore this work, focusing on characters' religious and numinous activities in the narrative.

2. METHOD

The novel *Pomegranate* has its setting in wartime and Maoist Shandong, and it concerns a rural woman's perpetual childbearing of nineteen offspring during her impoverished life, which is rife with a quagmire of slaughter, famines and cataclysms (China News 2019, Geng 2019: 1-6, Zhang 2019, Hou 2021). *Pomegranate* features legions of multi-faceted characters, the vast majority of whom are based on real people (Geng 2019: 305-306, Meng 2020). The protagonist, as implied by her name Pomegranate, is the incarnation of robust vitality and reproductive capability, and her nineteen offspring, all of whom are named after crops, signify apprehension about hunger, which functions as one of the pivotal themes of *Pomegranate* (Shao 2018, Meng 2020, Hou 2021). As stated by Geng, she is intent on manifesting the authentic culture in southwest Shandong via humanistic and encyclopaedic representation (Geng 2019: 310), so the narrative encompasses a veritable cornucopia of cultural components, represented by traditional customs, social norms, funeral rituals, wedding ceremonies, historic sites, trade activities, culinary delights, as well as flora and fauna (Zhang and Fu 2019a, 2019b). Geng illustrates history, the masses and daily trivialities in a detail-enriched, imagery-provoking fashion, painting a vivid portrait of her hometown in the last century from various perspectives (Shandong Writers 2019, Zhang and Fu 2020). In addition to elaborate depictions in graphic detail, Geng also equips *Pomegranate* with concise yet compelling sketches (Shao 2018, Meng 2020).

The narration of *Pomegranate* is characterised by plain dialectal and slang expressions, and the language abounds with colloquial idioms and nursery rhymes prevailing in southwest Shandong, which renders the work robust and saliently captures and highlights local culture (China News 2019, Zhang 2019). In terms of the narrative style, it is inspired by a novella 画匠王 *Huajiangwang* 'Huajiangwang Village' (Trans. Mine) composed by 李佩甫 Li Peifu (1953-), which also has its setting in the countryside (Geng 2019: 307). In this paper, I explore *Pomegranate* from a hermeneutic perspective, analysing the text through close reading.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pomegranate abounds with representations of an institutionalised religion, viz. the indigenous Taoism (aka Daoism), as shown in Example (1). Apart from the religious allusion in Example (1), the author also paints a vivid portrait of myriads of Taoism themed temple fairs (庙会 *miaohui*) existing in the narrative's setting, by elaborating religious practices and expatiating names of Taoist deities.

It is notable that Example (2) contains terminologies appertaining to the Sinicised Buddhism of alien provenance, namely 经幡 *jing fan* ‘prayer flag’ and 梵乐 *fan yue* ‘Buddhist music’ (Zdic.net 2024a, 2024b). Therefore, I propound that the depiction concerning the harmonious coexistence of Taoism and Buddhism encapsulates contemporaneousness of institutionalised religions and their sub-religions since the Tang (618-907 CE) dynasty, which is dubbed 儒释道三教合一 *Ru Shi Dao sanjiaoheyi* ‘unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism’ (Smith 1978, Cohen 1992, Brook 1993, Teiser 1996, Gentz 2011, Shahar 2013, Norenzayan 2016). There is no denying the fact the Confucianism is not explicitly described in the novel, whereas practices and norms according with principles such as 仁 *ren* ‘benevolence’ and 礼 *li* ‘propriety’ have indeed indicated such a well-established ethical system.

(1) 过年, 石榴挑一只最肥的青山羊剥了煮了, 炖一锅羊肉汤, 敬天敬地敬各路神仙, 给一窝盼年的孩子打馋虫。

During the Lunar New Year, Pomegranate picked the fattest goat, skinned it and made a pot of soup. After offering the soup to Heaven, Earth and the immortals, she fed her children who had been yearning for a new year feast.

(Geng 2019: 75-76. Trans. Mine)

(2) 相传老子诞生在农历正月十五, 后人祭之, 便把这天定为马家寨庙会日。紧跟马家寨庙会, 又兴起了天爷、天地、玄帝、火神、风神、峨眉姑娘等庙会。每逢庙会, 马家寨周边南至归德、开封, 西至濮阳、曹州, 东至徐淮, 北至济宁, 方圆数百里的善男信女蜂拥而至, 香火车马长达数十里。五里长街, 经幡飘飘, 梵乐阵阵, 红男绿女, 摩肩接踵, 人声鼎沸, 甚是热闹。

It was said that Laozi was born on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, so his followers set this day for Majiazhai’s temple fair. Afterwards, there emerged temple fairs for Heaven, Earth, Xuanwu God, Fire God, Wind God, Emei Goddess, etc. On temple fair days, devout men and women flocked to Majiazhai from other counties and provinces, forming miles of queues. With Buddhist music as background sound, legions of religious devotees chattered and walked on a long street full of prayer flags.

(Geng 2019: 16-17. Trans. Mine)

Apart from the Taoist philosopher 老子 Laozi (aka Lao-tzu, circa 6thc BCE) (Example (2)), whose chef-d’oeuvre is the canonical classic 道德经 *Dao De Jing* ‘Tao Te Ching’ illustrating Taoist precepts and ethos (Chan 2000, 2018, Kirkland 2004: 42, Waley 2005: 20-21, Nadeau 2014: 65), Pomegranate also pertains to a Taoist deity 太上老君 Taishang Laojun ‘Supreme Venerable Sovereign’ (aka 道德天尊 *Daode Tianzun* ‘Heavenly Lord of Dao and its Virtue’), who is one of the three highest divinities in Taoist hierarchy (Wong 1997: 55, Mou 2012: 129, Hu 2013: 202), as in Example (3). Instead of illuminating Taoist thought and practice, Example (3) highlights the supernatural facet of Taoism.

(3) 当年, 我六舅和一帮造反派小子砸了老君庙, 几个人把老君爷塑像搬到院子里要劈了烧, 一个革命小将一斧子下去把老君爷头像砍下来, 老君爷头像骨碌碌滚好远, 老君爷的身子被扔在火里烧。说也怪, 砍老君爷的小将被自动弹跳的斧子砍伤了脚, 用火烧老君爷的小将被扑面而来的火球烧着了, 火球追着那小将跑。...那个砍老君爷头像的小将后来烂了一双脚, 成了跛子, 跛子在老君庙重建之后来到庙里, 做了虔诚的信徒。那个被火球追赶的小将因为惊吓和烧伤, 不久就丢了小命。

In that year, my uncle and other young Red Guards smashed the Taishang Laojun Temple and planned to chop the statue for firewood. A Red Guard chopped off the statue's head with an axe, and another Red Guard tossed the headless statue into fire. It was creepy that the former hurt his feet with the axe, and the latter was badly burned by the roaring blaze...Afterwards, the former's feet festered and he was crippled, and he became a devout Taoist after the temple was rebuilt. The latter died of terror and burning soon after the incident.

(Geng 2019: 292. Trans. Mine)

Pomegranate is also featured by a seamless integration of institutionalised religion and folk religion, aka popular religion (民间宗教 *minjian zongjiao*). 泰山娘娘 Taishan Niangniang 'Lady of Mount Tai' in Example (4) denotes a Taoist goddess appertaining to the sacred Mount Tai in Shandong, viz. 碧霞元君 Bixia Yuanjun 'Primordial Sovereign of the Azure Cloud', who is also a folk deity of childbearing and has attracted legions of devotees in north China since the Ming (1368-1644) dynasty (Che 1993, Liu 2004, Song 2007). In addition to the folk element regarding the Lady of Mount Tai, Example (4) also demonstrates folk conduct concerning exorcism and occult activities, as well as a practitioner of esoteric arts and magical powers. Similarly, another paradigm appertaining to spirit possession and divine intervention is in Example (5).

(4) 她家正屋门桌子上, 放着一尊一尺多高的泥塑泰山娘娘像。娘娘慈眉善目, 前面放一只碗大的香炉, 后面墙上贴着一张黄裱纸, 上面写着“泰山娘娘之灵位”。不断有人来上香, 请娘娘驱鬼招魂, 治病免灾, 看阴宅阳宅。泰山娘娘处处显灵哩。泰山娘娘就是我七姨。七姨说的话就是泰山娘娘说的话, 七姨的旨意就是泰山娘娘的旨意。

On the table in her living room, there was a thirty-centimetre-tall clay statue of the kind-looking Lady of Mount Tai. There was an incense burner in front of the statue and a piece of yellow paper showing 'Tablet of Lady of Mount Tai' behind the statue. People kept coming to ask the versatile goddess to exorcise, cure illness and advise on feng shui. My aunt was the goddess—she spoke on behalf of the goddess and announced her orders.

(Geng 2019: 182. Trans. Mine)

(5) 她奶奶说, 黄河水倒就是黄河里的冤魂野鬼, 他们死后像人一样在水里游走, 身躯在水面以下, 头发漂在水面, 碰见过河的人就拉住做替身。她奶奶多次警告她, 夜里千万别去故道边, 看到河水里有东西漂着别去捞, 听到人叫你名字别答应, 一伸手一答应水倒就把你拉走了。...牛运仓那次也吓破了胆, 一直昏迷不醒, 是他奶奶请巫婆跳了大神, 傍晚拿耙子去故道捞魂才醒过来的。

According to her grandmother, those who drowned in the Yellow River became ghosts and wandered around as if they were still alive. They kept their bodies under water while hair floating on the surface. They dragged passers-by into the river to substitute them. Her grandmother always warned her to stay away from the Yellow River at night and never touch anything floating on the water. It was strictly forbidden to respond if you heard someone calling your name, or you would be pulled into the river...Niu Yuncang was frightened into a deep coma, so his grandmother went to find a witch for exorcism, and finally brought him back to consciousness after summoning his soul with a rake in the evening.

(Geng 2019: 59-60. Trans. Mine)

In terms of Example (6), it depicts rites regarding the Kitchen God and alludes to the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity in popular religion. The Kitchen God is surmised to palpably impinge upon households' forthcoming blessing and doom by means of reporting to the Jade Emperor prior to the Spring Festival, so sacrificial offering for statues, memorial tablets or paper simulacrum of the Kitchen God as well as his horse are indispensable—in particular, sweets offered to the Kitchen God function as glue to seal the divinity's mouth, thereby circumventing defamatory utterances (Wei 2011: 12-14, Phillips 2013, Liang et al 2021). Analogously, Example (7) involves another folk divinity 火神爷 Huoshen Ye 'Fire God', who is regarded as a significant personage in Chinese popular religion (Leeming 2005, Yang et al 2005: 209).

(6) 腊月二十三, 老灶爷上天报告的日子, 天挨黑给老灶爷烧香许愿念念碎, 老灶爷您是一家之主, 有饭您先吃, 有事您先知。又剁几节谷秆拌了麸子给老灶爷马吃。一把草一把料, 吃得小马啾啾叫, 您二十三日走, 初一五更回, 上天言好事, 在地保平安。老灶爷您保佑俺妮子平安啊。

The twenty-third day of the last lunar month was the date the Kitchen God went back to Heaven for annual reporting. In the evening, they burned incense, offered sacrifice and prayed to the Kitchen God. They also prepared straw and grain chaff for the god's horse. They prayed: 'Dear Kitchen God, this is for your horse. While you are away between the twenty-third and the fifth next month, please put in a good word for us in front of the Jade Emperor. Please also keep us safe and bless our daughter.'

(Geng 2019: 97. Trans. Mine)

(7) 临睡前, 她又说, 咋不死了你! 怂货! 这话九舅妈也不是说过一遍两遍了, 说过多少遍, 她自己不知道了, 像一句口头禅, 九舅妈说过之后都意识不到她说过这话了。九舅妈忘了这是大年初一的晚上, 离地三尺有神灵, 上天的神神鬼鬼都还没走远呢, 有些压根儿就还没有走, 像火神爷, 要等着初七放鞭放炮送他他才走。天庭遥远, 路途寂寞, 这些神啊鬼啊, 他们也希望路上捎个伴啊。

Before going to bed, she cursed again: 'Go to hell, you prick!' She could not remember how many times she had cursed her husband like this, and it almost became her catchphrase. But as the saying goes, 'Gods live three feet off the ground'—she forgot that it was the first day of the new year, so gods and spirits had just left or were even still lingering, like the Fire God, who would not set off until hearing the sound of firecrackers on the seventh day of the new year. It was a long, lonely journey back to Heaven, so gods and spirits welcomed the newly-deceased as company.

(Geng 2019: 217. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, occult activities in Pomegranate are indicated by Example (8) that expatiates Shamanic curse. In Example (8), the protagonist's reaction to her sons' decease is irrational, in that she resorts to witchcraft and vents her odium on a simulacrum cursed with pins.

(8) 一九四五年夏天, 石榴的大儿子二儿子, 一个五岁, 一个四岁, 在失踪两天之后, 尸首在黄河故道里浮上来...两个儿子死得不明不白, 石榴认准了是有人把她儿子投了河, 姥爷说, 可不敢瞎说, 兴许是孩子自己掉河里淹死的, 兴许是二鬼子祸害的, 是二鬼子的反间计。哑巴吃黄连, 只能咬碎牙往肚里吞, 石榴的仇恨只能发泄在一个用麦秸扎的小人身上。石榴亲手埋葬了两个小儿子, 和两个小儿子一起埋葬的, 还有那个扎满钢针的麦秸小人。

In the summer of 1945, Pomegranate's two sons, aged five and four respectively, were found floating on the Yellow River two days after missing...Pomegranate had no evidence, but she insisted her boys were murdered. Her husband said: 'Don't be silly! Maybe the kids fell into the river and drowned themselves. Or maybe it was the war traitors who did it. They sowed discord.' Pomegranate could do nothing but vented her hatred on a doll made of straw. She buried her small boys by her own hand, along with the doll full of pins.

(Geng 2019: 56. Trans. Mine)

Mythology pertaining to celestial bodies also constitutes a preponderant facet of folk religion exhibited in Pomegranate. For instance, 牛郎 Niulang 'Cowherd' and 织女 Zhinü 'Weaving Maid' in Example (9) denote the stars Altair and Vega respectively, both of whom are mythological figures derived from a renowned romantic folk tale (Idema 2012, Wang and Bailey 2018); Example (9) also alludes to 七夕 Qixi 'Qixi Festival; Double Seventh Festival' that is interconnected to popular religion and celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month (Sun 1985, Liu et al 2008: 122-123, Bedford 2009).

(9) 她看见勺子柄朝向东南的勺子星, 看见亮灿灿的天河, 没找见牛郎织女星。牛郎织女在偷偷相会吧。

She saw the Plough facing the southeast and the bright Milky Way, but not Altair or Vega—maybe the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid were dating secretly.

(Geng 2019: 3. Trans. Mine)

Apart from Altair and Vega, the correlation between celestial bodies and folk religion is also embodied by worship of the moon. In Example (10) extracted from the narrative, pomegranates serve as oblations to the moon during the Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节 Zhongqiu Jie), one of the most preponderant traditional festivals, which evolves from the immemorial moon worship (Roy 2005: 282, Wei 2011: 48-49, Wang 2017). In addition to the Mid-Autumn Festival in Example (10), the moon worship can also be attested from rituals of ethnic minorities, whose veneration for the moon constitutes a holistic construal of nature worship and is inextricably intertwined with Shamanism (Mackerras 1984, Jin 2011, Fu 2021: 25, 77-78).

(10) 石榴树每年结的石榴有碗口大, 中秋节, 她娘摘了石榴敬月娘娘。

The pomegranates were as large as bowls. Every Mid-Autumn Festival, her mother picked pomegranates and offered them to the moon.

(Geng 2019: 11. Trans. Mine)

The popular religion in Pomegranate is also characterised by local features. In Example (11), the author elaborates villagers' special worship of two goddesses among 七仙女 qi xiannü 'seven daughters of the Jade Emperor', who are honorifically referred to as 姑姑 gugu (Lit. 'father's sister') in the dialect of southwest Shandong. Moreover, simulacrums representing the deities are made of sorghum that constitutes indigenous flora and fauna in Shandong.

(11) 在黄河故道一带, 正月十五有“撑姑姑讨年成”的习俗, “姑姑”是天上的仙女七姐六姐。七姐六姐要在十五晚上请, 请之前还要先扎好七姐六姐的金身。傍晚, 有一个年长的女人领着七个姑娘, 抬着花供和七姐六姐金身, 去村子里的十字路口跪请七姐六姐下凡。...她们用高粱莛子扎出七姐六姐身子, 给她们剪了花花绿绿的纸衣裳, 又用高粱秸秆给七姐六姐扎轿子。

Around the Yellow River, there was a custom to pray to two goddesses during the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. People made effigies for the sixth and seventh goddesses in Heaven and invited them to manifest. In the evening, seven maidens, led by an elderly woman, carried sacrifice and the effigies to invite the goddesses to manifest at the village's crossing...They made the effigies with sorghum leaves and made colourful paper clothes for them, and they also made miniature sedan chairs with sorghum stalks.

(Geng 2019: 142-143. Trans. Mine)

Pomegranate is replete with depictions of animal worship, as can be seen from Example (12), in which the revenge of a personified weasel is portrayed in a paranormal and enigmatic manner. I propound that the depiction in Example (12) is consistent with a well-established perception that the comportment of weasel spirits is marked by rakishness (Li 1948, Liu 2007). Since the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty, five types of animals, including weasels, have been worshipped in Shandong and northeast China, which are collectively dubbed 五大家 Wudajia or 五大仙 Wudaxian 'Five Great Families', viz. foxes, weasels, hedgehogs, snakes and rats, corresponding to 狐黄白柳灰 hu huang bai liu hui 'fox, yellow, white, willow and grey' (Kang 2006: 4, Liu 2007, Pedersen 2014).

(12) 他放扫帚时又看见了那瓶子久效磷。一只黄鼠狼后腿立着，两只前爪抱着那瓶子久效磷，黄鼠狼仿佛就在那里等着他。它在昏黄的灯光下眼里闪着幽幽的光，仰着一脸笑，像和他熟络得很，朋友似的，望着他。他从黄鼠狼爪子里接过那瓶久效磷，像从朋友手里接过酒瓶子，扬头灌进喉咙里。喉咙里火辣辣的。瓶子落在地上，嘭一下，碎了，像完成某种使命似的，黄鼠狼也像完成某种使命似的，哧溜一声没影了。...都说，木匠刨树的那天，不知道从哪跑过来一只黄鼠狼，一只又大又健壮的黄鼠狼。黄鼠狼不怕人，停在那里看树看木匠，也看九舅，九舅一铁锨把它拍死了。...九舅一个人吃了，还把剥下来的皮挂在了屋墙上。黄鼠狼也叫黄皮子，都说，有灵性得很。

When putting the broom back, my uncle saw the bottle of Monocrotophos again. A weasel was standing on its hind legs and holding the bottle with two paws, as if it had been waiting for him. Under the dim light, there was a gleam in its eyes, and it was grinning at him like an old friend. He took the bottle of Monocrotophos from the weasel, as if he took a bottle of alcohol from a friend. He gulped it down and felt a burning sensation in his throat. The bottle fell on the ground and smashed into pieces, like an accomplished mission. The weasel vanished into thin air, like an accomplished mission too...Days ago, when the carpenter was felling the tree, a big, robust weasel came to watch. It did not fear humans, but my uncle killed it with a shovel...My uncle ate its meat and hung its skin on the wall. Weasels were also called 'yellow skin', and they were believed to have magical powers.

(Geng 2019: 218-221. Trans. Mine)

Moreover, animal worship in Pomegranate is epitomised by the act of deploying statues of three-legged toads to beckon wealth (Example (13)), which complies with popular religion and folklore credence. In traditional Chinese culture, a three-legged toad seating itself on a pile of golden coins and having a coin in its mouth signifies prosperity, the legend of which is derived from a Ming anthology 列仙全传 Liexian Quanzhun 'Complete Biographies of Immortals' (Obuchová 1999, Yang 2016).

(13) 翡翠玉蟾摆在她家钱庄的柜台上，招财哩。

The jade toad was placed on the counter of her family's private bank, because it was believed to be able to summon money.

(Geng 2019: 37. Trans. Mine)

As for Examples (14-15), although they do not exhibit animal worship explicitly, they epitomise the masses' reverence and terror for turtles and grasshoppers. In Chinese culture, turtles are inextricably intertwined with divination, religion and traditional Chinese medicine, and hence are construed to be enigmatic (Liu 1992: 126, Keightley 2008, Chen et al 2009). In Example (14), barbarous retribution against a couple is ascribed to their slaughter of a giant turtle. As for grasshoppers, they are conjectured to be macabre by local villagers in southwest Shandong (Example (15)).

(14) 都说老鳖灵性邪性哩, 是真灵性邪性。四牦牛奶奶看着脸盆大的老鳖说, 千年王八万年龟, 这得是老鳖精了, 可吃不得, 赶紧放了。...四牦牛后来两条小腿都用锯子锯掉了, 他只能匍匐在地爬着了。四牦牛的媳妇长了一身一脸的鱼鳞癣, 晴天还好过些, 逢上阴天下雨, 更是奇痒难忍。他奶奶一遍遍地捋着小脚坐在地上哭, 作孽呀, 报应呀。

It was said that turtles were indeed supernatural. It was a very big turtle. Fourth Yak's grandmother told him: 'Turtles live for thousands of years. This one must be a devil. Don't eat it. Let it go.' ...Afterwards, Fourth Yak's both legs were amputated with a saw, so he could only crawl on the ground. His wife had ichthyosis all over her body and face: it was endurable in sunny days, but it was painfully itchy in bad weather. His grandmother often sat on the ground and started to cry while stroking her bound feet: 'They deserve! It's retribution!'

(Geng 2019: 243-244. Trans. Mine)

(15) 到处都是蚂蚱的尸体。密密麻麻, 一堆一坨, 填满了沟壕和田垄。土埋。火烧。火烧的香气在空气中东一头西一头乱窜, 像小抓钩抓挠着肠胃。没有人敢吃, 都说有毒, 都说吃了死后变大肚子蚂蚱。

There were dead grasshoppers everywhere—myriads of them filled trenched and fields. Apart from burying, people also burned them. The smell of burning grasshoppers was so good, but nobody dared to taste, because they were told that grasshoppers were poisonous and those who ate them would turn into grasshoppers too.

(Geng 2019: 40. Trans. Mine)

Divination is manifested in Pomegranate by means of feng shui. For instance, Example (16) entails beliefs and taboos of graveyard feng shui as a quintessential construct in Chinese geomancy and cosmologies: to be more specific, the geography and landscape of a burial site palpably impinge upon the departed person's descendants and beget a burgeoning or ill-starred household (Obringer 2005, Um 2009, Wang 2011). It is noble that Example (16) contains a correlative construal of 势 shi that denotes broader encompassing topographical areas and functions as a preponderant component of the feng shui theoretical framework (Paton 2007, 2021).

(16) 石榴家香火不旺, 后继乏人, 多平庸之辈, 都说是气数叫石榴占尽啦, 还说石榴家祖坟风水不好。姥爷死后在龙门口踩了新坟, 埋在龙门口了。龙门口, 是皇帝老儿待的地方, 是龙子龙孙待的地方, 平头老百姓压不住, 压不住, 气势就败了。

Pomegranate's children were all mediocre, and people said it was because she took all the luck. They also believed it was because of her husband's grave: he was buried in an extremely propitious venue that was for the exclusive use of royal members, but he could not enjoy as an ordinary man, so his family was doomed.

(Geng 2019: 240-241. Trans. Mine)

Pomegranate also alludes to traditional physiognomy conjecturing that one's facial countenance and manifestation serve as preeminent omens auguring their fate (Kohn 1986, Wu 2009: 183, Ling 2015, Shi and Wu 2016, Wang 2020: 15), as in Example (17).

(17) 要说, 姑娘长得也不难看, 看着, 还精明利索, 就是颧骨高, 俗话说, 女人颧骨高, 杀人不用刀, 命硬。

To be fair, that girl was not ugly and actually looked quite clever, but she had high cheekbones. As the saying goes, 'A woman with high cheekbones can kill others without a knife'.

(Geng 2019: 211. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, Pomegranate abounds with divinatory axioms prevailing among the masses, as in Examples (18-21). For instance, the prophecy concerning the correlation between decease and specific ages in Example (20) is ascribed to the fact that two illustrious Confucian sages, Confucius and Mencius, died at the age of seventy-three and eight-four respectively (Wang 2009). As for Example (21), it conveys a strong sense of predestination.

(18) 也许真应了那句“见女人生孩子, 不吉利”的谶语, 那个马少爷没能活着走出来。...冰天雪地的腊月, 他和三舅去临沂泗水卖鞭炮, 回来的路上, 人和地排车一起栽进深沟, 他摔断了腿, 回来后没几天发烧烧死了。石榴说, 马少爷给他接的生, 马少爷把他带走做伴了。

That Master Ma indeed died, so perhaps the prophecy was true, 'It is inauspicious to witness childbirth'...On a freezing day, on his way back from Linyi selling firecrackers with my uncle, he fell into a deep ditch with his wheelbarrow and broke his leg. A few days later, he died of a high fever. According to Pomegranate, the late Master Ma helped with his birth, so he took him away as company.

(Geng 2019: 78-79. Trans. Mine)

(19) 那天晚上, 大麦走后石榴眼皮就跳, 是右眼跳。左眼跳财, 右眼跳灾, 石榴心烦意乱, 掐一截秫秸糜子把右眼皮撑住了。夜里还做了梦, 梦到月亮湾里一大一小两条红鲤鱼跳到了堤岸上。

That night, after Barley left, Pomegranate's eyelid kept twitching, and it was the right eyelid. As the saying goes, 'Eyelid twitching on the left bodes fortune; eyelid twitching on the right bodes disaster'. Pomegranate was upset, so she put a sorghum stalk on her right eyelid to stop the twitching. In her dream at that night, two red carps, a big one and a small one, jumped out the Moon Bay onto the bank.

(Geng 2019: 157. Trans. Mine)

(20) 二奶奶今年七十三, 身体硬朗着呢, 一进门, 九舅就说, 二奶奶起得早吧? 都说七十三、八十四, 阎王不请自己去, 看您这身子骨, 再活个十年八年没事儿!

The old lady was seventy-three years old and in good health. Upon entering her house, my uncle asked her: 'Are you well? As the saying goes, "Those who are seventy-three and eighty-four years old

visit the King of Death without invitation". But you look so healthy, and I'm sure you'll live for at least eight years!'

(Geng 2019: 215. Trans. Mine)

(21) 麦芽跪下给我磕了头。麦芽说,姐,那天我真是昏了头了,我忘了我是从麦粒坟上来的了,我忘记了我男人刚过头七,我身上是双重重孝,我害了姐夫。我原谅麦芽了吗?原谅不原谅都没有意义,我男人死了,殁了。我不能说,没有麦芽,我男人死不了,没有麦芽,他也许会遭遇另一种意外,另一种死亡。就像石榴后来说的,阎王要你三更死,你就活不到五更天。

Wheat-Sprout got down on her hands and knees and apologised to me: 'Sis, it was all my fault. I forgot that I just went to Wheat-Grain's grave and my husband just died seven days ago. The two ghosts around me killed your husband.' Had I forgiven Wheat-Sprout? The answer was meaningless. My husband died. I could not blame Wheat-Sprout for my husband's death. Without her, he might have a different accident and die in a different way. As Pomegranate said later, 'If the King of Death summoned you at midnight, you would not stay alive until dawn.'

(Geng 2019: 264. Trans. Mine)

Paranormal conduct in Pomegranate is saliently embodied by folk remedies related to traditional Chinese medicine, and the folk prescriptions employ indigenous flora and fauna, as can be seen from Examples (22-24). Notwithstanding the gruesomeness, some folk remedies recorded in Pomegranate is extracted from the encyclopaedic masterpiece 本草纲目 Bencao Gangmu 'Compendium of Materia Medica' that is a well-established herbology treatise composed by 李时珍 Li Shizhen (1518-1593) in 1578 during the Ming dynasty (Stercks 2008, Huang and Qiu 2014). For instance, according to Compendium of Materia Medica, dandelions, as mentioned in Example (22), have anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial efficiency to clear away heat, purge fire and relieve toxic material (Muluye et al 2014, Guo et al 2021), so I postulate that the protagonist's act of boiling dandelions to treat her children's symptoms of inflammation is not groundless. Other remedies in Examples (22-24), however, are not necessarily evidence-based.

(22) 孩子生病,石榴有的是土办法。积食胀肚子,石榴走七家,每家要一块剩窝头,拿回来在锅里炒糊了,冲水给孩子喝;有一年五舅小鸡鸡疼,撒不出尿,石榴到谷子地里薅看谷老熬水灌他喝,连着喝了七八天,五舅撒尿顺畅了;头疼脑热夜哭,她用婆婆丁熬水用茅根熬水给孩子喝,用缝衣针在火上烧了扎舌根,扎一口污血出来。

When her children fell ill, Pomegranate had lots of indigenous methods. When a child had maldigestion, she asked for a piece of steamed corn bread from seven neighbours and stir-fried the seven pieces into burnt, and then she fed the child with the burnt power. Once a boy could not wee, so she boiled ripe millet and fed him with the water for seven to eight days until he recovered. When a child suffered from inflammation and cried at night, she boiled dandelions and perotis, and released the blood on the child's tongue with a needle disinfected on fire.

(Geng 2019: 75. Trans.

Mine)

(23) 民间自古就有用生白扁豆去皮研末,米汤送服堕胎的偏方,还有用壁虎、蛇蜕皮研末,拌酒饮下的偏方。

There were folk remedies for abortion since time immemorial. One consisted of skinless white hyacinth beans and rice soup, and another one consisted of geckos, snakeskin and alcohol.

(Geng 2019: 139. Trans. Mine)

(24) 黑夜里麻雀睡在挂到树杈上的干地瓜秧里面, 用手电筒对着麻雀眼睛照, 一伸手就能抓住了, 有时候一只, 有时候两只, 捉了麻雀, 石榴就领着我往麦芽家里走。石榴敲碎麻雀的脑袋, 把热乎乎的脑浆涂在麦芽麦粒溃烂的冻疮上。石榴说, 麻雀热脑浆能治冻疮。

At night, sparrows slept in sweet potato plants hanging on trees. If you aimed their eyes with torch light, you could easily catch one or two sparrows. Pomegranate brought the sparrows we caught to Wheat-Sprout's home and broke their heads. She smeared sparrows' warm brain tissues on Wheat-Sprout's frostbite, as she believed the skin would heal.

(Geng 2019: 247. Trans. Mine)

4. CONCLUSION

As a work of native-soil literature, Pomegranate is characterised by its setting in the rural area of southwest Shandong as well as folk practices and dialectal expressions. Significantly, Pomegranate abounds with a multitude of numinous depictions regarding paranormal powers and occult activities. First, the narrative encapsulates the harmonious contemporaneity of Taoism and Buddhism, which can be regarded as part of the 'unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism'. Second, the narrative manifests a seamless integration of institutionalised religion and popular religion, by means of expatiating folk divinities, Shamanic curse, spirit possession and exorcism. Third, worship of animals is described in the narrative, which is inextricably intertwined with Taoism and popular religion. Fourth, the narrative is replete with divinatory deeds, exemplified by feng shui, physiognomy and prevailing axioms. Fifth, there are folk remedies and local prescriptions recorded in the narrative, some of which can be attested from Compendium of Materia Medica, an illustrious treatise on traditional Chinese medicine.

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