



# Phantom in the Mirror: Can Xue's Deconstruction of Self in *Old Floating Clouds*

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**Abstract**— *Old Floating Clouds* is a novella by contemporary Chinese writer Can Xue. Through the daily relationships between neighbors, husband and wife, father and daughter, lovers and mistresses, colleagues and friends, the novel shows that people have become caught in a web of jealously hating each other. The image of mirror plays an important role in the novel, and peep exists in every corner of the novel. In addition to being a mirror of objects, the human mind is also a kind of mirror in the interweaving of each other, and the relationship between self and others is constantly deconstructed and reshaped. This paper will use the “Mirror Stage” theory of psychoanalysis to explore and examine how the protagonists use the mirror to explore and examine themselves, and how they gradually become self-alienation and division in the mutual peeping with others. The mirror is not only a tool to peep at others, but also a reflection of the protagonists’ inner anxiety and self-examination. During the process of peeping, people try to find self-identification and comfort, but eventually fall into a deeper self-loss and spiritual dilemma.



**Keywords**— *Avant-garde, Mirror Stage Theory, Old Floating Clouds, Self-alienation, self-deconstruction*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Old Floating Clouds* is a masterpiece written by Can Xue, which first appeared in China magazine in 1986. Can Xue, an avant-garde writer in contemporary Chinese literature, is famous for her unique literary perspective and profound philosophy. Her works often break the traditional aesthetic concept and reveal the complexity of human nature and the cruelty of society with absurd and strange brushwork. In this novel, Can Xue builds a world full of indifference and hatred. Everyday relationships between neighbors, husband and wife, father and daughter, colleagues and friends become twisted and bizarre. People hated and guarded each other, as if they were plunged into an endless abyss of darkness. The behavior and

psychological state of the characters such as Xu Ruhua, Geng Shanwu, Mu Lan and Lao Kuang are vividly depicted by Can Xue.

This paper is inspired by the famous psychoanalyst Lacan’s Mirror Stage Theory, which explores the process by which the self is formed through the “mirror image”, that is, through the help of “the other”. The Mirror Stage Theory is divided into “front mirror period” and “mirror period”. The former focuses on the fact that infants before the age of 6 have not formed sensing and perception of the outside world, while the latter refers to the fact that from the age of 6 to 18 and later, infants begin to see their own images through the reflected surface of the mirror and begin to form self-awareness and self-identity. This

cognition is fragmented and has not yet formed a unified self-concept in the imaginary order. The baby sees the image in the mirror as a part of himself and builds an initial self-identity by interacting with the image in the mirror. As babies grow and develop language, they begin to enter the symbolism order. At this stage, infants not only realize that the image in the mirror is themselves, but also begin to understand the meaning of language, symbols, and social norms. Language, as a symbolic thing, provides infants with new tools for constructing self-concepts. They confirm their own identity and value through the eyes and words of others, and gradually form a more complex and stable self-identity to explore the relationship between themselves and the outside world. The real order is a realm that runs through the whole life process of the individual, and it transcends the boundary between the imaginary and the symbolic order. In real order, individuals not only recognize the mirror image as their own image, but also begin to explore deeply their self-worth, identity, and place in society. With constant growth and experience, the individual enters the real order, a constantly changing realm that contains elements that cannot be fully understood and controlled. In the real order, individuals are constantly faced with new challenges and opportunities and need to constantly adjust their self-identity and coping strategies (Lacan 3).

The mirror plays a crucial role in this novel, as it is used to peep at others. Mu Lan hangs a mirror on the paper mulberry tree to peep at the life of her neighbor Xu Ruhua. The two spy on each other through the mirror, and the mirror becomes a reflection of the character's inner anxiety, as well as the character's process of examining themselves and others, and the negative emotions and depressed feelings are amplified by the mirror. Self-consciousness is gradually alienated under the reflection of the mirror, and this alienation is not only reflected in the individual psychology, but also reflected in the distortion and repression of human nature by modern civilization. The others and themselves in the mirror are constantly distorted and reorganized, the characters' cognition of themselves and others is constantly changing, the dark and decadent things are gradually excavated from the depths of people's hearts, the self is alienated in this formation process, and people themselves are also

objectified in this endless review. The outside world and nature are no longer reassuring objective worlds here. It is one of the main culprits that lead to the alienation and objectification of the human self, and man gradually becomes one with the decaying nature. This paper will analyze Can Xue's use of the mirror and various deconstruction of the characters' selves from the aspects of mirror and self-seeking, mirror and the others, illusion in the mirror and self-fragmentation, and create the abnormal and broken dream-like spirit in the extremely dangerous state of interpersonal relations, and show the alienation of self-consciousness of people.

## II. MIRROR AND SELF-SEEKING

The book *Old Floating Clouds* presents a depressing picture of the lives of the two couples, Mu Lan and Geng Shanwu, Lao Kuang and Xu Ruhua, who cross and peep at each other as neighbors. Everyone tries to find self through dependence on and resistance to others and things, but all end in failure. In the middle of their misplaced husband and wife relationship and lover relationship, it's unable to find positive mutual feelings.

Take Geng Shanwu and Xu Ruhua for example, they have been looking for self-identification like the "floating clouds", erratic, still young but tortured by life decline. Geng Shanwu attempts to stay away from his wife in the constant dream, mulberry tree flowers, dreams, cucumbers, worms, including Mu Lan are all like mirrors to peep at him, in the face of life, family, neighborhood and work pressure, life is snooping on him, he cursed the voyeur but was questioned by the street children "who you scold!", father-in-law's peep and hostility to him also gives him mental pressure; Xu Ruhua faces the pressure and surveillance of her husband, neighbors, mother-in-law and parents, and also feels powerless and suffocated in life, work and family. She is sensitive, silent and lonely, and tries to seek spiritual affirmation and resonance, but ultimately fails, and finally chooses to close herself. These two people are not only in the process of being constantly examined, but also become a peeper to peep at others. Mental and physical changes have occurred on them. Such two people have intersected, trying to find the shadow of self from each other. Geng Shanwu secretly sends death sparrow to Xu Ruhua, and the two people have the same

dream, only Geng Shanwu heard and cared about Xu Ruhua's muttering, they have the same sense of nothingness of life and the sense of loss of self, this may become their reason for meeting stealthily. The turtle in the dream struggled in the mire, the red fruit of the mulberry tree sucked up the spirit of the people, so that people drifted into the mire of life, the spirit could not settle. Just like the lives of Lao Kuang and Xu Ruhua, as well as the life of Mu Lan and Geng Shanwu, the latter's child is also erratic, with thinning hair and seemingly too old to be a child.

Mu Lan spies on Xu Ruhua's family through the mirror hanging on the mulberry tree, and Xu Ruhua's family spies on Mu Lan's family through the mirror in turn. The result of this unhealthy cycle is that when people observe others through the mirror, they define others and are also defined by others. The alienation and hostility between each other are intensified, and they not only fail to find each other's advantages, but also have more in-depth understanding of the shortcomings and darkness of each other's life. They gain a deeper understanding of the shortcomings and inadequacies of the other person's life, and this peeping eventually feeds into deeper issues in their own lives, inspiring boundless jealousy and malice. The perspective of "the man next the door" and "the woman next the door" constantly appears in the work, and the speaker constructs the other people with the speaker himself as the subject, which is a deliberate expression of the observation and peep of people to people, and gives people a sense of narrative subject monism in language, as if these characters are looking at each other in the mirror, and all have a common nature, like the division of a general subject.

Xu Ruhua's mother and Mu Lan both spy on Xu Ruhua's home, and Mu Lan says:

"Someone's disturbing all the neighbors. Pretending to be mysterious to show off her lofty character. Just think about it, and you'll see there's nothing but emptiness in her mind" (Can Xue 203).

Whether peering through a mirror or with a slip of paper, the surveillance of each other actually reflects the emptiness of the human spirit, or a twisted desire to control, to probe deeper, it's perhaps the distortion and control of the self. What tormented Xu Ruhua may not be

so much those flowers and other people as herself, she closes herself up, and her own existence is a torture in herself (Lei Jian 62). And Geng Shanwu is more illusory, he has a two-sided nature and is capable of insight into the nature of life and the cruelty of human nature. But in the face of the secular, he is extremely weak and wants to find his own self from others. He is a person who can "clear understanding of his own behavior", and this understanding also makes him "distinguish himself from other beings" (Can Xue 109). Can Xue once said: "Geng Shanwu is more superficial, his realm is always in the swing, not as hard and pure as Xu Ruhua" (Can Xue 110). These two individuals strive to find themselves and seek solace in one another, yet the very essence of their selves condemns their fate to tragedy. All the mirrors that spy on them --- and that they, in turn, use to spy on others --- weave together into a net. This net encloses the vain, wandering soul that resides within every person, a space where the self merges and eventually withers away, laying bare the inherent pain of existence.

### III. MIRROR AND THE OTHERS

According to the theory of existentialist philosopher Heidegger, from the perspective of time latitude, the journey of life from birth to death can be marked with the following sections: "Having Been—Dasein—Potential Being—Death", in short, life is a kind of existence "born to death" (Heidegger 292-293). The world described by Can Xue is an alienated world. Geng Shanwu and Xu Ruhua are by no means alienated selves since their existence. When they come into this world, the people and surroundings around them are both the "others" who feel alien to them and the "others" as defined in Dasein. These others are a good interpretation of the concept of "hell is other people". For the two people, these others constantly exert mental pressure on them, peep at them like a mirror and peel off their shells, which is the cause of self-alienation. Fighting against such "others" ultimately leads to defeat and the loss of social identity; in turn, this self-alienation corrodes the individual's sense of self, reducing them to a terrifying phantom of their former self.

Xu Ruhua is terrified of her mother's peeping, and her mother becomes a dark shadow behind the tree, haunting her and leaving her a note to oppress her

spiritually. As her stress crystallizes, she begins to see phantoms and chooses to close herself off:

“Trembling as she arose, she opened a crack in the curtain with her finger. She saw a flickering shadow wrapped in black and seeming to grin hideously. Though both the door and the window were covered with iron bars, Ru-hua was frightened. Not daring to turn on the light, she lit her flashlight every now and then and peered under the bed, behind the door, on the ceiling, in fear her mother might hide in the most unexpected places” (Can Xue 202).

Geng Shanwu goes mad under the pressure of his wife and father-in-law. They look at him through the mirror of the examining mind, and think that he has been incompetent and insane, but the mirror works in both directions, Geng Shanwu sees them through their eyes, and also sees himself through them:

“ ‘ Why did you laugh at me?’ he asked later.

‘Because you’re a fool.’

‘And you?’

‘How can I be a fool? I couldn’t discover your foolishness if I were a fool.’

‘I see.’

He’d seen through her, but she didn’t know it. She still played the old tricks. He felt delighted to have laid her bare” (Can Xue 211).

This dialogue makes it impossible to tell who the fool is and deconstructs the narrative logic of the other and the self. The line between the other and the self becomes blurred (Shoshana & Liang Xiaodong 54). If Geng Shanwu saw through his wife, how could he be a fool? Wasn’t Mu Lan just as foolish for failing to realize her husband had seen through her?

No one pays heed to this ambiguous extramarital relationship, and the people around them are themselves in a bizarre mental state. Lao Kuang depends on and fears his mother, and the mother seems to have become his shackles; Mu Lan peers darkly into Xu Ruhua’s life, surrounded by jealousy, anxiety and absurd emotions; Mu Lan’s father is a scoundrel, and is cold and mean to his daughter and son-in-law, demanding money from them and spying on their lives; Xu Ruhua’s mother, haunted by the pain of her own past misfortunes, projects that suffering onto her daughter --- who failed to live up to her expectation of becoming an engineer. She fixes her gaze on Xu Ruhua

relentlessly, weighing heavily on her life and constricting her existence. The two of Geng and Xu are under scrutiny and pressure from their families and neighbors, and these “others” around them reflect their own mental trauma to the two through the mirror. In the process of judging and examining each other and themselves, the two can’t see each other and themselves clearly, one of them has closed herself, and the other has become an illusory phantom in the mirror.

Xu Ruhua’s impression of Geng Shanwu is:

“Looking at her familiar wrinkled body in the mirror, she vaguely recalled the long, thin figure of the man. In her memory his image was too elusive to catch” (Can Xue 214).

These two people’s self-alienation occurs under the prying eyes of others, they cannot meet the requirements of others, nor can they integrate into the needs of society. They try to form themselves with the help of these external things but eventually become an old empty shell, which reflects the persistent mental harassment that haunts every character throughout the novel. Anxiety becomes the only thing that can be determined, but for all people, the source and right of anxiety can not be grasp, it is those unfortunate past and experience left these wounds, the past has become the past, but the spiritual trauma continues to exist. People look at others through the mirror, each person is the other, each person’s self in the process of defining others has been blurred, through the mirror’s peeping, the boundary between the other and the self becomes blurred, too. The peeper is both the other and the self-observer. As people spy on others, they also look at themselves. This dual identity makes their cognition of the other and the self confused and ambiguous.

Because of the existence of peeping, the relationship between the other and the self becomes tense and antagonistic. The long-term peeping and anti-peeping behavior led to self-sealing and shrinking, and Xu Ruhua gradually closes herself up and no longer communicates with others under the long-term peeping and being peeped at. Her spiritual world has become barren and empty, and finally goes to the fate of death. Geng Shanwu also gradually loses himself in this environment, becoming depressed and powerless.

#### IV. ILLUSION IN THE MIRROR AND SELF-FRAGMENTATION

Mu Lan peers into the life of her neighbor Xu Ruhua through a mirror, and Xu Ruhua and her family in the mirror become the objects of her peeping. This kind of peeping is itself a kind of illusion, because the peepers always interprets the life of the person that been peeped through their own subjective perspectives. After Xu Ruhua learned that she was peeped at, her life seemed to become a stage, and all her actions were amplified and distorted in the mirror. This sense of being peeped at makes her feel uneasy and anxious, which is further exacerbated by the phantoms in the mirror. From the perspectives of different characters, the others become an illusory illusion: in Xu Ruhua's eyes, Lao Kuang and Geng Shanwu are "things like shadows", and Xu Ruhua feels that she is a dry empty shell covered with reed stalks; Geng Shanwu can clearly perceive the cruel nature of human nature in his wife as well as others who laugh at him; Mu Lan despises Geng's incompetence and coldly peeps at his privacy.

In addition, there are many illusory scenes in the perspectives of the characters, such as the white flowers, the red mulberry with full juice, the withered leaves, the reed stalks bursting inside the body, and the mosquitoes flying around. The description and repeated appearance of these images make people shocked and the hair stands on end. The dream also becomes a kind of mirror in the text, Geng Shanwu's dream, and the above various mirage-like scenes are all confused by the fragments of speech. People seem that have never really been able to communicate in real sense in the novel, words weave a web of terror and anxiety, and people prey on each other, constantly moving, hiding, sneaking, fleeing from the peeping eyes in windows, cracks in doors, holes in walls, and mirrors (Shoshana & Liang Xiaodong 54).

Therefore, under this kind of depiction and presentation, the core ideas of Can Xue are gradually revealed, the alienated and broken selves of each character are revealed, and people's spirits are gradually alienated in the process of spying on others. Freud, one of the founder of psychoanalysis, once proposed that the potential dream has always been constrained by the ego, and only when the person is in the state of sleep, the "ego" as the inspector partially relinquishes its control over brain activity,

allowing the forbidden and suppressed wishes to come to the level of consciousness in a disguised and distorted form. Some emotions and desires find distorted expression in dreams, where the "subconscious" lurking deep within the mind comes to the fore --- and this very process plays a crucial role in the formation of the self. But the broken language of Can Xue and the broken description of the subconscious make one realize that the self has been distorted, broken, and dried up for the characters in the book. Milan Kundera said that novel examines not reality, but existence. Existence is not what has happened; existence belongs to the realm of human possibility, which all that human beings can become. In the fictional reality constructed by Can Xue, people's physical existence is not the focus of attention; instead, her relentless exploration lies in the shaping of the spiritual realm. The existence and fragmentation of the self are repeatedly emphasized to reflect the alienation of human nature in modern society, the estrangement and confrontation between individuals, the noisy and perilous social environment, and the absurdity of the self as well as its struggle to persist. In this way, Can Xue's novels embody the profound implication of "hell is other people."

#### V. CONCLUSION

Can Xue said that the characters in her novels are the result of her personal personality split, self-contradictory creations. But pay attention to one thing: the most ragged, the most "negative" characters are often the most essential, the deepest, the characters with the most passion. There are many characters in the novel, and the central character is not obvious. Can Xue's portrayal of the characters is just like describing the subconscious mind, which is complex and changeable, and the external flesh of the characters are not important. The generally broken spiritual world connects these characters together, reflecting a universal spiritual alienation. Can Xue integrates the image that she wants to reflect in her inner world into her work, so that every character has this imprint, and they are like the different sides of one subject, and finally returns to the illusory spiritual world. Too artistic expression makes Can Xue's works have a certain gap with the real context of people's lives. She likes to equate everything in her novels directly with arts, which should be the biggest problem in

Can Xue's novel criticism that it is difficult to communicate and dialogue with people (Wang Tianqiao 57). However, it is undeniable that Can Xue has achieved success in showing the self-alienation of people in modern society. Many writers use literature as inspiration to awaken humanity and self. For example, Gong Zizhen, Lu Xun and others tried to let people "gaze at one's own reflection in the mirror" to explore the obscured and distorted self through literature, so as to awaken people's inner humanity. Literature is like a mirror: in any era, it reflects others and allows people to see themselves, while the phantoms in the mirror --- both others and the self --- awaken people's attention to the alienated and traumatized spiritual world.

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