

Allegorizing the existential crisis in modern China: Qian Zhongshu's philosophical novel "Fortress Besieged"

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CHINESE NOVELS/XIAOSHUO 小说 AS PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

The interconnection between literature and philosophy has been a distinctive feature of *wen* – the Chinese writing process as one of literary creation (Zhang 2004 33–42). To investigate this intertwining relationship, it is essential to examine the etymology of *wenxu* 文学, the Chinese equivalent of the English word *literature*, which means any single body of written works as its Latin root *literature/litteratura* indicates. The Chinese¹ word *wenxue* consists of two characters, i. e., *wen* 文 and *xue* 学. According to Chinese philologist Xu Shen's analysis, the character 文 originally signifies crossed strokes in painting that may be used as adornments (Xu 1978, 185). In the oracle bones scripts, the character *wen* 文 is written like *ren* 人 (human), while in the bronze scripts, this character is written in a shape that looks like a human body with paintings on it. In the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC), the character *wen* 文 acquired broader connotations such as “the interweaving pattern of the five colors” 五色成文而不乱 (Wang 1977, 507) in the records on Chinese musical rituals, and the “fabrication of various matters” (物相杂 故曰文) (Anonymous 2010, 319) in Confucius's exegesis of *Yi Jing*, or *The Book of Changes*. From these examples, we can see that *wen* 文, in a broad sense, applies to both collective and individual aspects of human life such as political rituals, governance regulations, arts, and personal choices of dress, speech, and behaviour. As Zhang Shaokang puts it, “anything that has the characteristics of fabrication or decoration could be called *wen* which may be compared to the concept of “mei” [beauty]” (2004, 4).

During the Qin (221 BC–207 BC) and Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), Chinese literary writings were broadly divided into the two stylistic categories of poetry and prose (Chu 1990). The literary genre that is equivalent to the Western concept of fiction, which is narrowly defined as “[invented] narratives that are written in prose (the novel and short story)” (Abrams 1999, 94), is called *xiaoshuo*, literally ‘small talks’. Under the tradition of literary-philosophical interconnection in Chinese writings, *xiaoshuo* was included in the category of philosophical writings (Lu 2000, 4). According to Lu's ground-breaking study on the history of Chinese fiction, the term *Hsiao-shuo* (*xiaoshuo*)² was first used by the Warring State Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369 BC–286 BC) when he spoke of “winning honour and renown by means of *hsiao-shuo*” (Lu 2000, 1). As Lu Xun understands it, Zhuangzi uses this expression to mean

“chit-chat of no great consequence” (1), which has a different connotation from the later acquired meaning of “legends and fables having no basis in historical facts and counter to the Confucian tradition” (1–2).

Lu’s study not only traces the change of meaning of the term *xiaoshuo* in Chinese literary history but also reveals the close connection between Zhuangzi’s philosophy and novel writing in Chinese literary history, which is further investigated by Liu Jianmei (2016) in her recent study on the influence of Zhuangzi in modern Chinese literature. As Liu maintains, “Zhuangzi’s first and foremost concern is the absolute freedom of the individual” (4), while “Confucians value human affairs and interpersonal relations above the individual” (4). The central theme of Zhuangzi, i.e., the spirit of freedom, can be compared to Isaiah Berlin’s two concepts of liberty, especially negative freedom, which means “the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others” (Berlin 2002, 169).

Liu acutely points out that Zhuangzi has been both “the lamp and the mirror” (2016, 11–13) that has enlightened, inspired and reflected modern and contemporary intellectuals’ different positions³ since their iconoclastic revolution against the Confucianist value system. More noteworthy are the concurrences of the dominant Confucianist collectivism, Daoist individualism, and the influence of Western philosophical thoughts in Chinese novels written in the first half of the 20th century that marks the beginning of modern China (Spence 1991, 200–205).⁴ The same historical period has also witnessed the introduction of Western philosophical thoughts into China via the first generation of Chinese overseas students on The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, which is described as “the most important scheme for educating Chinese students in America and arguably the most consequential and successful in the entire foreign-study movement of twentieth century China” (Ye 2001, 10).

To investigate the intertwining relationship between Chinese philosophy and its Western counterparts, I will analyze Qian Zhongshu’s philosophical novel *Fortress Besieged* (1946–1947), which illustrates the existential crisis of the modern Chinese people. A prolific scholar in Chinese classical studies, Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) discussed the intersection between literature and philosophy from a comparative perspective between the East and the West in his representative work *Guang Zhui Bian*, which is translated and published as *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (Qian 1998).⁵ According to Yang Yi, the former director of Chinese National Institute of Social Sciences⁶, Qian Zhongshu’s scholarship in *Limited Views* represents the height of academic research in 20th-century China (Yang 2005, 203–205). It is Qian’s research methodology of *datong* [striking the connection] that has inspired my own research methodology of “constellating world literature” (Huang 2013) which investigates the universalizing poetics beyond national and disciplinary boundaries. The philosophical references and existential reflection on Chinese intellectuals in *Fortress Besieged* have drawn scholarly attention in recent years. As Taiwan-based scholar Xin Jinshun points out, this novel “surpasses its time as it connects the cultural itineraries of Chinese intellectuals after the May Fourth Movement with the universal fate of the human kind” (Xin 2014, 220).

The novel *Fortress Besieged* was first serialized in the monthly literary magazine *Wenyifuxing* [Literary Renaissance] starting in 1946. Structured in nine chapters, the novel *Weicheng* (hereby referred to as *Fortress Besieged*) was written by Qian Zhongshu during his stay in Shanghai between 1944 and 1946 (Yang 1994, 362). This novel depicts the life experiences of its protagonist Fang Hongjian, who returns from his study tour in Europe, stays in Shanghai during wartime, undertakes a long journey to the Chinese inland to take up a teaching position at a university, and then returns to Shanghai as a defeated and disillusioned man. Since its initial publication, the novel *Fortress Besieged* has been widely circulated within China. It was published as a book in 1947 and republished twice in the following two years (Yang 1992, 234). Its biting wit and critical commentary of social issues immediately gained itself wide currency and a highly contentious response. On the one hand, the famous playwright Li Jianwu asserts that *Fortress Besieged* is “a new *Rulin Waishi* [The Scholars]” that presents a realistic and satirical sketch of Chinese scholars during the Chinese Anti-Japanese war (Yang 1992, 234–237). On the other hand, this novel was strongly dismissed as a “perfumed powder shop” (Luo 2017, 14) that presents “no life but only the blind, low, restless, animal-like desire that could be found in the Shanghai Zoo”, and it “overlooks the class struggles in every competitive society” (14).

While the novel had been relatively invisible in modern Chinese literary history on the mainland between the 1950s and 1970s and banned in Taiwan till the 1980s (Zhou 1980), it was internationally promoted by American-based literary scholar Hsia Chih-tsing, who praises it as “the most delightful and carefully wrought novel in modern Chinese literature; it is perhaps also its greatest novel” (1999, 441). With a careful reading of the original Chinese text rendered into his own English translation, Hsia states that “the author [is] a master of similes... also a symbolist” (459). To Nathan Mao, one of the English translators of this novel, it is “a comedy of manners with much picaresque humour, as well as a scholar’s novel, a satire, a commentary on courtship and marriage, and a study of one contemporary man” (Mao 1979, 394). From these comments we can see the rhetorical and poetic aspects of this realistic fiction that interweaves Qian’s own life experiences and his keen-eyed observation of his country and country men (Yang 1994). The key question to be discussed in this article is the novel’s overarching allegory: the “fortress besieged” that consists of three key images that appear in various parts of the novel: the walled fortress in Chapter 3, the broken-down door in Chapter 5, and the old ancestral clock in Chapter 9.

MAN’S NEGATIVE FREEDOM WITHIN WALLED REALITIES

The key image of the allegory and the title of the novel, *Fortress Besieged*, was first mentioned during a dinner of Chinese scholars who all had experience of studying and working overseas. The host Zhao Xinmei works as the political editor of the Sino-America News Agency. Due to illness, he had not taken up the position of section chief of the foreign office in the Guomindang government that had moved to Chongqing after he had returned from his studies in USA (Qian 2005, 60). Fang Hongjian and Su Wenwan had been college classmates majoring in Chinese literature,

but the latter went to Lyons to study for a doctorate in French literature. As for the two other guests, Dong Xiechuan was a famous poet and military attaché returned from his office at the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic, and Chu Shenming a philosopher who had managed to collect letters from almost every famous Western philosopher in the early 20 century except for Henri Bergson, as Bergson “dreaded having strangers come to pester him and kept his address confidential” (93).

A dialogue about similes of marriage takes place after the discussion topic shifted from Chu Shenming’s acquaintances with Western philosophers to their marital problems as the narrator discloses: “Socrates’ wife was a shrew and poured dirty water on her husband’s head. Aristotle’s mistress rode on him like a horse, telling him to crawl on the floor naked, and even making him taste the whip. Marcus Aurelius’ wife was an adulteress, and even Ch'u Shen-ming's pal Bertrand Russell had been divorced several times” (100). Chu continues to explain that Bertrand Russell “quoted an old English saying that marriage is like a gilded bird's cage” (Qian 1994, 100). In response to this English analogy, Miss Su introduces the French expression of a “fortress besieged” where “[t]he people outside the city want to break in and the people inside the city want to escape” (101). In her response to Chu’s display of self-declared friendship with the world-renowned philosopher, the dignified Miss Su, who “had studied French literature at Lyons” and “had written her dissertation on eighteen Chinese poets of the colloquial style” (16), demonstrates both her erudition in French culture and her affection for the protagonist Fang Hongjian, whom is taken to be a rival in love by the dinner host Zhao Xinmei, Miss Su’s childhood friend and avid suitor. However, Fang showed no interest in the topic of marriage for fear that he might be forced into the trap of marrying this woman whom he pretended to woo only to get closer to her young and innocent cousin Miss Tang Xiaofu. Fang’s love triangle ends bitterly when he cowardly absconds from Miss Su after kissing her on the lips without any further commitment. In the novel, Fang finally married Miss Sun Roujia, a college graduate who traveled with Fang and Zhao to a newly founded college in China’s interior that offered them teaching positions. Unremarkably, their marriage quickly goes sour after the couple’s return to Shanghai where their respective families live.

Such a storyline might easily give readers the impression that this novel is “a typical love story” as maintained by Hong Kong-based literary historian Sima Chang-feng (1980, 72). However, this novel goes further to investigate the philosophy of life beyond marital problems and thus may be considered a modern version of *Xueren Xiaoshuo*, or the Scholar Novel, which got its name from its distinctive subject matter (returned students from overseas), abundant literary and cultural references, and refined language style. Using this novel to illustrate the interconnection between literature and philosophy in modern Chinese literature, I argue that the image of the fortress besieged is not merely a simile of marriage, rather, it serves as an overarching allegory about the existential dilemma of human beings in modern China, as Qian Zhongshu clearly states in his preface when this novel was first published in 1946:

In this book I intended to write about a certain segment of society and a certain kind of people in modern China. In writing about these people, I did not forget they are hu-

man beings, still human beings with the basic nature of hairless, two-legged animals. The characters are of course fictitious, so those with a fondness for history need not trouble themselves trying to trace them out (2005, xi).

As the above quote demonstrates, this novel depicts scholars and ordinary people in war-torn 1930s China. To better illustrate my argument, it is important to revisit the use of allegory in literary texts: “[a] narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the “literal,” or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification” (Abrams 1999, 5). According to Jeremy Tambling, the allegory, which “says one thing and means another” (2010, 8), was resented by Plato. This is expressed through Socrates in the *Republic* when he says that “children cannot distinguish between what is allegory [*hyponoia*: ‘undersense’, ‘undermeaning’] and what isn’t” (Plato 1955, 116). From this comment, Tambling discerns the “split between literature and philosophy” in Plato’s warning that the allegorical language of literature, carrying double meanings, may destabilize the language of philosophy in its delivery of the “truth” needed for building his ideal political republic (2010, 9). Paradoxically, it is in *Republic* that Plato tells one of his most famous allegories, i.e., “The Cave”, in which a group of prisoners can see only shadows cast by a fire behind them in a long cave and take the reflections as true reality (Plato 2009, 51–56). This allegory of the cave could be read as an analogy for education which does not give vision to one’s blind eyes, but instead transforms one’s perspective of things. Meanwhile, it “also represents the state of humans; we all begin in the cave” (Annas 1981, 252–253).

If Plato’s allegory of the cave illustrates the epistemological limitation of humankind, Qian’s allegory of the fortress besieged represents the *ontological dependence*, or *existential dependence* in human relations (Lowe 2010), as Descartes asserts: “[b]y substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other things for its existence” (1985, 210). In the same light, the invisible and imaginary walls in the besieged fortress that divide one’s life goals and their realization are mutually dependent. The people outside of the fortress are all striving for their respective list of life goals including knowledge, marriage, career, power and wealth, only to regret what they have lost during the process of pursuit once they are inside the walls. In a spatial and epistemological sense, the outside and inside are mutually defining as a pair of ontological dependent entities.

In Qian’s existential allegory of the fortress besieged, all the 72 characters face the intrinsic problem of the universal human condition that requires everyone to make a choice with the inevitable thought that this choice has been made at the expense of something unknown. Such an existential dilemma is inescapable, since even one’s indecisiveness is a decision made. The good-natured yet “completely useless” (Qian 2005, 207) protagonist is an authorial creation serving to exemplify this passive state of human kind in every aspect. As underlined by Qian Zhongshu during his discussion with two writers who were adapting this novel into a television series, “Fang Hongjian is a passive protagonist. *Things happen to him*”⁷ (Sun 1992, 210). Echoing her husband, Yang Jiang vividly describes him accordingly: “Fang Hongjian is a man

with a soft heart, a weak mind, a bit of talent yet little capability. He has a rather passive character” (210).

Fang Hongjian thus allowed his emotional life to “drift with the tides” as different female characters come and go. He writes to his father to break off his arranged engagement with Miss Zhou, yet quickly withdraws his weak protest when his father threatens cut off financial support. On his returning ship journey to Shanghai, he had a short affair with Miss Pao, the fiancée of a medical doctor. Just after Miss Pao leaves the ship, Hongjian becomes the companion of Miss Su, who fills his emotional void before he falls for her cousin. On his way to the Chinese interior with his travel-companions, he is unconsciously attracted to Miss Sun, but the engagement with Miss Sun at their work place is stimulated by their co-workers’ nosy and bossy interference as a result of Miss Sun’s calculated manoeuvering. Even their wedding in Hong Kong is urged by Zhao Xinmei with the awareness of their *de facto* consummation on their way back to Shanghai. It could be safely said that never once does Fang Hongjian stand up for his freedom of love.

Apart from Hongjian’s history of love and marriage, there are several other examples from Fang Hongjian’s intellectual pursuits to show why he was referred to as “a worthless sort” (Qian 2005, 12). In college, Fang gave up civil engineering and switched from sociology to philosophy before “finally settling down as a Chinese literature major” (12). During his three-and-a-half-year stay in Europe, Fang Hongjian only loitered about in three universities in London, Paris and Berlin before returning to China. The “Carleton University” PhD diploma that Fang brought home was counterfeited by an Irishman in New York City.

From a comparative perspective, Fang Hongjian’s incapability of action against his life challenges, if not “the trait of moral cowardice” (Hsia 1999, 443), may serve as an example of Isaiah Berlin’s concept of negative freedom – absence of interference in a person’s sphere of action (Berlin 1969, 16). One has such negative freedom when actions are available to one without any obstacles, barriers or constraints. In Fang’s case, he was always driven toward the opportunities given to him like doors left open in the city wall. Even his job offer from San Lü University was the result of Zhao Xinmei’s unsolicited recommendation to the founding president, with the intention that his rival will be tempted to leave Miss Su for his career.

Interestingly, in Berlin’s discussion of the two concepts of liberty, there is a metaphor of one’s “inner fortress/citadel” that is very similar to Qian’s allegory of the besieged fortress: “[t]he rational sage [...] has escaped into the inner fortress of his true self seems to arise when the external world has proved exceptionally arid, cruel, or unjust” (Berlin 1969, 139). Alternately put, when one is unable to do what one wishes (as in Berlin’s concept of positive freedom), he may exercise his negative freedom to escape the pressure of the world. This somehow passive gesture, as I see it, may be compared to the Daoistic concept of *wuwei* [no-action], which is “action in tune with the spontaneous tendencies (*ziran*自然) of things, minimizes interference and artifice, remains sensitive to the unfolding of circumstances” (Coutinho 2015, 159).

To a large extent, Fang Hongjian lives his life in a *laissez-faire* way, as he always reacts in accordance with the natural tendency. He takes up the job offer in order to

free himself from the control of his father and in-laws. On their eventful journey to the inland university, Fang Hongjian and Zhao Xinmei even become close friends after they clear up the misunderstandings about their rivalry over Miss Su's affections. Zhao shares with Hongjian details of Miss Su's wedding where Miss Tang appeared as the maid of honour. To console his new best friend, the heart-broken protagonist reveals his rationalized sense of loss with the reference to the fortress besieged simile first brought up by Miss Su:

I still remember that time Ch'u Shen-ming or Miss Su said something about a "fortress besieged". [...] Remember the old saying that a dog loses the juicy bone in its mouth when it goes after the reflection of the bone in the water? When your dream comes true and you marry your sweetheart, it's as though the bone has entered your stomach and you then pine for the never-to-be-seen-gain reflection in the water (Qian 2005, 148–149).

Here, Fang's analogy of the dog derives from an Aesop fable entitled *The Dog and his Shadow*: "A dog, bearing in his mouth a piece of meat that he had stolen, was crossing a smooth stream by means of a plank. Looking in, he saw what he took to be another dog carrying another piece of meat. Snapping greedily to get this as well, he let go of the meat that he had and lost it in the stream" (Aesop 1896, 9). However, the moral message in Aesop's story that one should not be too greedy and lose what one already has, is lost in Fang's version which blends with the main theme of the Chinese folktale *The Monkey Reaching for the Moon* based on a Buddhist fable (Zhu 2011), which reminds its readers to differentiate between reality (the moon) and illusion (the moon's reflection in the water). Using such a refashioned fable, Fang Hongjian gives his own interpretation of the fortress besieged simile laden with the Buddhist belief that the cause of suffering is one's unsatisfied desire in the form of craving. To eliminate suffering, one could either keep the objects of desire out of sight or let go of the desires. Still, as Fang Hongjian rightfully points out, the root cause of human existential crisis is the insatiability of human wants like the empty vastness beyond the broken-down door – a symbol of the interdependence of reality and desires that appears toward the end of the university professors' journey to their "West Paradise", with reference to the Chinese canonical classical novel *Journey to the West*.

On the eve of the arrival, both Fang Hongjian and Miss Sun feel that they are being haunted by the ghosts of children who had been buried at the site of their inn. The haunted nightmare lingered on after their departure, creating a dark omen in their new working environment. At this point in the middle of the novel, Fang has achieved another of his important life goals to become an associate professor at a national university. The subtle attachment between Hongjian and Miss Sun has been gradually established during the one-month journey, hinting at a possible stable relationship in the future. Our protagonist is about to enter the fortress through a door that opens to him, knowing that nothing awaits him on the other side. Unlike the intense situation in a fortified walled city surrounded with armies, this broken-down door reflects the relaxed emptiness of a typical modern man facing "new possibilities for experience and adventure", "frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as

“everything melts” (Berman 1988, 14). The narrative has so far followed the typical structure of a Bildungsroman that concerns the protagonist’s moral and psychological growth. However, it is also about the complete devastation of Fang Hongjian’s achievements in four stages of life, i. e., education, love, career and marriage (Xie 1989, 77). As Theodore Huters observes, it is Qian Zhongshu’s design to both give “an intricate representation of late 1930s elite China as a realm of difference” and to “destruct the very world it depicts” (Huters 2015, 226).

The moment of epiphany happens in the novel’s last chapter with the third important allegorical image – the old-fashioned pendulum wall clock that Hongjian’s grandfather had bought and promised to give him. Hongjian’s father believes that the clock is “extremely accurate” and “only seven minutes slow every hour” (Qian 2005, 355). This clock, as I see it, projects Hongjian’s failure to find his own position by “grasp[ing] the essence of both traditional and modern cultures” (Goldman – Lee 2002, 249) in 1930s China distinguished by its “critical neo-traditionalism” (15). The same ancestral clock also symbolizes the temporal structure of the literary world built in this novel beginning on one morning of June on the French liner *Vicomte de Bragelonne* crossing the Indian Ocean. The then cheery bachelor Fang Hongjian was returning to his homeland with hopes for a better future. Now, the same person is married, workless, famished and fatigued in the middle of a winter night. He regrets the fight with his wife; yet finds himself too weak for any immediate solution except to sink into “the primordial sleep of mankind that is also a sample of death” (Qian 2005, 388) to shut himself off from reality. If only the clock could have been unwound, and the wrongs could have been undone! Yet this is how the story ends with disenchantment: “[t]he irony and disappointment of men unintentionally contained in this out-of-date timepiece went deeper than any language, than any tears or laughter” (Qian 2005, 389).

My analysis of the philosophical allegory of the fortress besieged in Qian’s novel has shown the intersection between literature and philosophy in modern Chinese literature, which is also the main reason for the phenomenal popularity of this novel and its adapted television series in contemporary China. In 1980, the novel was republished in Beijing and immediately became one of the bestselling novels in contemporary China (Huang 1992). In 1990, with Qian’s permission, the television series of *Fortress Besieged* was produced and later broadcast on the Central China Television’s Channel 1. All 10 episodes began with the off-screen voice narrating Yang Jiang’s epigraph: “The people outside the city want to break in and the people inside the city want to escape. That is what one wishes for mostly in one’s life, no matter whether it is for marriage or for a job” (Sun 1992, 210). In today’s China, the word *weicheng* [fortress besieged] has become one of the most frequently used metaphors in public discourse referring to one’s crucial choices in life.

In his influential introduction to Chinese philosophy, Fung Yu-lan enthusiastically summarizes the philosopher’s challenge: “[o]ne must think about the unthinkable, yet as soon as one tries to do so, it immediately slips away. This is the most fascinating and also most troublesome aspect of philosophy” (Fung 1966, 337). With three vivid allegorical images from a fusion of horizons, Qian Zhongshu’s

novel *Fortress Besieged* meets this ultimate challenge by creating a concrete allegorical image that gives its readers the mental space to begin their own philosophical investigation.

NOTES

- ¹ In this article, I refer to the Chinese writing system as the “Chinese language” (hanyu 汉语) with the full knowledge that the spoken languages of China are largely diversified. I use the pinyin system and the simplified characters that have been the official practice in the People’s Republic of China, while keeping the different transliteration in the citations. Unless specified otherwise, all the English translations are mine.
- ² Hsiao-shuo is the Wade-Giles romanization of 小说, xiaoshuo in Pinyin system.
- ³ Among these intellectuals studied by Liu Jianmei are Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Hushi 胡适, Lu Xun 鲁迅, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Lin Yutang 林语堂, Fei Ming 废名, and the contemporary Chinese writers Yan Lianke 阎连科 and Gao Xingjian 高行健.
- ⁴ Since the Han Dynasty (25 AD–220 AD), Chinese intellectuals had been trained to write fabricated essays in a highly concentrated Imperial Examination System based on the Confucian canons. In 1906, this examination system was abolished with the permission of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), and later nearing the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912).
- ⁵ For more please read the introduction to *Limited Views* written by world renowned sinologist Donald Egan, the current head of Department of East Asian Studies at Stanford University.
- ⁶ Yang Yi is currently working as chair professor at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Macau.
- ⁷ This italicized line was originally in English.

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Allegorizing the existential crisis in modern China: Qian Zhongshu's novel "Fortress Besieged"

Philosophical novel. Qian Zhongshu. Fortress Besieged. Existential Crisis. Allegory. Modern China.

Beginning with an overview of the interconnection between literature and philosophy in modern Chinese literature, this paper analyses the novel *Fortress Besieged* (1947) written by Qian Zhongshu, a polyglot Chinese scholar of East-West comparative literature and philosophy. It compares the novel's overarching allegory, i. e. a fortress besieged, in juxtaposition with the philosophical allegories about the mutability and limitations of human life. It concludes with a reflection on the seminal influence of this novel in contemporary Chinese society where “fortress besieged” has become an everyday word referring to one’s existential crisis.

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