

On the Art of Characterization in *Dream of the Red Mansions*

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Dream of the Red Mansions, or *Honglou meng* (hereafter referred to as *Dream*) has been generally acclaimed as one of the world's masterpieces. In his preface to Wang Jizhen's second abridged English version of the novel, Mark Van Doren comments:

Much here will strike a western reader as strange, and naturally so, since a Chinese household of the eighteenth century is about as far away as the imagination can travel. But quite as much will not be strange; indeed, since the story is truly great, its essential features will be recognizable because they are features of the human mind and heart, which neither time nor place ever seems able to alter. (1)

This "truly great novel" has lent itself to numerous interpretations and misinterpretations ever since its public appearance. And, in recent years, with the rediscovery of several earlier manuscripts, the book has drawn even greater attention of literary critics in both China and abroad and has been studied from every conceivable aspect and perspective. In the

People's Republic of China, most prevalent is naturally the Marxist interpretation, namely, that the author, Cao Xueqin, a victim of China's feudal society, uses his own life experiences to illustrate the evil and corruption of a decadent, ducal household which symbolizes the decline and fall of imperial China. Some Marxist critics also insist that the novel is essentially a reflection of "class struggle" or "revolt against feudal marriages." (2) Whether or not one can fully accept such extrinsic reading of the motif of the *Dream*, one must admit that Cao Xueqin's work is indeed a work of art with many dimensions, pregnant with meaning, and rich in implications. No doubt there is social and political awareness, but the greatness of the novel does not hinge upon any single extrinsic matter. Rather, it is the combination of many factors which contributes to the universality and timelessness of this highly complex novel that C.T. Hsia believes to be "the only work of Chinese fiction that invites valid comparisons with tragic masterpieces of western literature." (3)

While not denying the extrinsic values read into the novel, I would like to suggest that the crowning glory of its success lies in the author's profound insight into human nature and his true-to-life delineation of the characters that people the rarefied realm of the *Dream*. Most successful, however, is his depiction of the female characters. Compared with the women, even Baoyu, the male protagonist of the novel, appears

pale and shadowy. To make a simple analogy, the *Dream* may be structurally compared to a precious necklace, with Baoyu as the string linking together the individual female characters, which are the pearls that determine its real worth. I further suggest that this novel, like Li Ruzhen's *Jinghua yuan*, is a feminist work on women, in contrast to those male-oriented novels such as *Shuihu zhuan* and *Sanguo yanyi*. The underpinning feminism I perceive in the *Dream*, however, is not a new revelation. In the *Qinlong Jiaxu Zhiyanzhai* edition, its editor, having stated that the motif of a novel is usually inherent in its title, mentions *The Twelve Golden Hairpins* (metonym for women) of *Jinling* as one of its alternate titles. (4) That women were both the motive and rationale for Cao Xueqin to write the novel is clearly stated in the author's own words, quoted in the first chapter of the book. Unfortunately, they are left out in all translations but one.

The following is my own version of this passage:

In the humdrum of *life*, I have achieved nothing worthwhile. Suddenly, I recalled those women folk of my youth. Having scrutinized them one by one in my mind, I came to the conclusion that their intellectual capacity and personal conduct all far surpassed mine. It is useless for me to regret or feel ashamed that I, of the masculine gender, dignified with beard and eyebrows, could not measure up to those of the

gentle sex, wearing skirts and hairpins. Now I have decided to write a book to announce to the world how, having been brought up in the opulence and luxury of my ancestral house and under the auspices of imperial favor, I had refused parental guidance and teachers' instructions. As a result, I have wasted half of my life without acquiring a single skill. Although I am guilt-ridden by my failures, I have had the honor of knowing excellent persons among the opposite sex. Therefore, I must not for the sake of concealing my own shortcomings allow them to be buried under the dust of oblivion. (5)

The author's justification for writing this novel gives me reason to concentrate on the female characters in the *Dream*. I shall confine my discussion to the three leading ladies — namely, Xue Baochai, Wang Xifeng, and Lin Daiyu. I single them out from the twelve major characters not only because of their tripodal significance in the deep structure of the novel, but also because they could arouse the strongest emotional responses in the reader.

Contemporary critics frequently intimate that the success of characterization in fiction is largely due to the writer's comprehension of Freudian psychology or psychoanalysis, which greatly enhances the author's technique of characterization. However, through his unsurpassed genius, Cao Xueqin has

breathed life into his characters without making use of psychological terminology. His characters are indeed three dimensional, each with her own particular physical features and temperament. They are so convincingly drawn, that one is inclined to agree with those critics who insist the Cao's female images are directly fashioned after life models, the female companions of his youth. On the other hand, one may argue that the author of the *Dream*, in creating his female characters, may have anticipated those psychological theories and foreseen the close correlation between the static components of human physique and the dynamic components of temperament explicated and expounded by a group of famous constitutional psychologists in their theories.

After years of research and somatotyping, William H. Sheldon, the noted Harvard constitutional psychologist, concluded that differences in temperament may be much more closely related to physical constitution than had been previously recognized. (6) For the three primary morphological components, Sheldon and his associates coined the terms endomorphy, mesomorphy, and ectomorphy. (7) According to Sheldon:

Endomorphy means relative predominance of soft roundness throughout the various regions of the body. When endomorphy is dominant, the digestive viscera are massive and tend relatively to dominate the bodily economy. The digestive

viscera are derived principally from the endodermal embryonic layer.

Mesomorphy means relative predominance of muscle, bone, and connective tissue. The mesomorphic physique is normally heavy, hard, and rectangular in outline. Bone and muscle are prominent, and the skin is made thick by a heavy underlying connective tissue. The entire bodily economy is dominated relatively by tissues derived from the mesodermal embryonic layer.

Ectomorphy means relative predominance of linearity and fragility. In proportion to his mass, the ectomorph has the greatest surface area and hence relatively the greatest sensory exposure to the outside world. Relative to his mass he also has the largest brain and central nervous system. In a sense, therefore, his bodily economy is relatively dominated by tissues derived from the ectodermal embryonic layer." (8)

For the characteristic traits of temperament, Sheldon identifies twenty specific traits for each of the three somatotypes. Briefly, chief among the characteristic traits for the endomorphs are: relaxation in posture and movement; sociophilia; amiability; greed for affection and approval; complacency; tolerance; evenness of emotional flow. Characteristics of mesomorphs are: assertiveness of posture and movement; love of adventure and

risk; lust for power and dominating; callousness and ruthlessness; general noisiness. The ectomorphs are restrained in posture and movement; hypersensitive; overly fast reacting; anti-social and unpredictable; apprehensive and insecure; inhibited; restrained and secretive of feelings; fond of solitude and privacy; poor in health and sleep habits and troubled by chronic fatigue; obsessed with the apprehension of death.

Although Sheldon's experiments were conducted mainly among men, we are told women follow *a similar pattern with minimal variations*. (9) The same perception that led Sheldon to his findings is shared by the author of the *Dream*, who anticipated constitutional theories in his characterization of women of eighteenth century China. Scholars of *Hongxue* (Redology) cannot *fail* to recognize that Baochai, Xifeng, and Daiyu are personifications of the three somatotypes described by Sheldon.

In appearance, all three are extraordinarily beautiful, but each is distinguished from the other by her peculiar charm. The appearance of Xifeng is introduced in Chapter 3 by the newcomer, Daiyu, who takes note first of her noisy and brash manner before observing her features. "Everyone else around here **seems to go** about with bated breath," thought Daiyu. "Who can this new arrival be, who is so brash and unmannerly?" This observation is followed by a lengthy description of Xifeng's colorful, glamorous but loud attire, which

bedecked her slender, upright (possibly angular) body. "Triangular eyes that slant upward at the tip like the phoenix give a hint of harshness even in a smile, but laughter can be heard before those crimson lips are parted." Such is Daiyu's impression of Xifeng, nicknamed "Peppercorn" because of her pungent temperament and aggressive behavior, typical of a mesomorph. (10)

The ethereal beauty and fragile constitution of Daiyu as seen through Baoyu's eyes are definitely indicative of the ectomorph's physical appearance and psychological makeup:

Her mist-wreathed brows at first seemed to frown, yet not frowning. Her passionate eyes at first seemed to smile, yet were not merry. Habit had given *a* melancholy cast to her tender face; Nature had bestowed a sickly constitution on her delicate frame. Often the eyes swam with glistening tears; Often the breath came in gentle gasps.

In stillness she made one think of a graceful flower reflected in the water. In motion she called to mind tender willow shoots caressed by the wind.

She had more chambers in her heart than the martyred Bi Gan and suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi." (11)

In contrast to Daiyu, Baochai is

unmistakably an endomorph. Even though she is not obese, she is admirably soft and plump as described in Chapter 28, where Baoyu insists on seeing the bracelet of scented red beads she has on her arm. As she struggles to pull it off from her chubby, snowy white arm, Baoyu observes to himself admiringly: "If such an arm belongs to Daiyu, I might have a chance to caress it someday. What a pity that it is hers." (12) Unlike the descriptions of Xifeng and Daiyu, the imagery used in describing Baochai falls short of the eloquence of poetry; instead it resorts to a traditional stereotype: "Her face is like a silver disk. Lustrous her almond-shaped eye, she needs no penciling for willow *leaf* eyebrows, no rouge for her cheeks or her crimson lips." (13)

The physical contrast between Baochai and Daiyu is further illustrated by the author in the couplet which is the heading for Chapter 27. Hawkes fancifully rendered it as: "Beauty Perspiring sports with butterflies by the Raindrop Pavilion; And Beauty Suspiring weeps fallen blossoms by the Flowers' Grave." (14) The same couplet is translated indirectly by Yang Hsien-Yi as: "Pao chai Chases a Butterfly to Dripping Emerald Pavilion; Taiyu Weeps Over Fallen Blossoms by the Tomb of Flowers." (15) Neither is faithful to the original which reads: "Guifei playfully pursues a butterfly to the Emerald-Drop Pavilion; Feiyan mourns fallen blossoms by the grave of Flowers." Here, instead of using Baochai's and Daiyu's names,

the author uses classical allusions to [Yang] Guifei and [Zhao] Feiyan, the morphological prototypes of Baochai and Daiyu, because these two historical beauties of the past are noted for their antithetical physical attributes: Yang Guifei (which, incidentally, happens to be Baochai's nickname) is acclaimed for her plump, voluptuous beauty, whereas Zhao Feiyan is proverbially known *for* her delicate, ethereal grace.

As expected, all three women are as different in temperament as they are in physical appeal. The mesomorphic Xifeng, nicknamed "Peppercorn," sharp in wit as well *as* in tone, is assertive and aggressive, swift of motion, and quick to act. Ambitious, efficient, cold and cruel, *she* excels in administrative talents. She is best described as amoral rather than the epitome of evil. Since she was brought up in her childhood like a boy and married at an early age, she might very well fit Baoyu's claim, that women can be cruel and vicious as men, once they get married and become contaminated. Xifeng is admired, hated, and feared, but never truly loved. Subconsciously, she may recompense her real need for love with lust for power and greed for gold. Her dominant position in the *Rongguofu* is partly due to her administrative ability and partly to her manipulation of the Matriarch, and her rise to power begins with her supervision of the *Ningguofu* during Keqing's funeral. During this period she reveals her ruthless streak and trafficks in the illegal

business that leads to her eventual downfall.

By comparison, Baochai is placid and even-tempered. She is always praised for her good sense and amiability. In the eyes of the elders she is a paragon of virtue, because she respects authority and the status quo, and is eager to win approval. She is popular among the servants, as well as with her cousins, because she is sociable and goes out of her way to show her generosity and consideration. But she is complacent and ready to compromise even to the point of victimizing herself in the end. Fully aware of the deep affection Daiyu and Baoyu have for each other, she nevertheless consents to marry the boy and to lend herself to the great deception. This dubious duplicity of behavior does not deviate from the norm of the endomorphs; it adds complexity to her otherwise amiable personality. C. T. Hsia, however, absolves her as "the victim of a cruel hoax." (16)

The characteristic traits of the ectomorph are most evidently displayed in Daiyu, whose delicate constitution, poor health, hypersensitivity, and super intelligence are constantly and repeatedly described. Apart from the constitutional factors, her personal misfortune and precarious circumstances seem to collude with nature in molding her peculiar temperament. Having been orphaned at an early age, living in the household of her maternal grandmother necessarily contributed to her feeling of insecurity. This sense of insecurity intensifies upon the arrival of

Baochai, whose opulent family background and charisma only accentuate her own antisocial behavior and alienation. The praise showered on Baochai and the hint of her "gold and jade destiny" increase her fear of losing the only person she loves. Clinically, she has all the symptoms of a neurotic. Her jealousy, suspicion, and unpredictable behavior only bring suffering to Baoyu and herself and alienation from the Jia family. Subconsciously she needs Baoyu's reassurance of love; but, when he demonstrates it, she loses her temper, possibly because her own emotions are too tense and too taut to be plucked. The restraint to which she subjects herself causes her uncontrollable tearfulness, chronic fatigue, constant insomnia, and untimely death. Her apprehension of an early death is projected in the dirge for the fallen flowers in Chapter 27, in which she asks: "Today I bury the flowers and people laugh at my folly. But who, I wonder, will bury me, when I am dead and gone." Daiyu's personal integrity and uncompromising nature are also symbolized by the flowers in this poem; "In pure essence they came; let them depart in purity. Not to be sullied in the murky water of the stagnant ditch." (17)

Judging by the brief analyses offered above, one can see that all three girls, as human beings, are flawed with psychological hangups and personal phobias. As artistic creations, however, they are flawlessly depicted. Using Sheldon's findings as touchstones, one can recognize in

these women representations of the three somatotypes, without labeling them as such. This novelist of eighteenth-century China exemplified in his characters the correlation between human physique and temperament, a correlation which contemporary constitutional psychologists have confirmed by somatotyping and experimentation.

But Cao Xueqin's creative acumen is not confined to his skill in characterization. His novel as a great work of art may be described as "a seamless cloak of heaven (*tianyi wufeng*)," to borrow a Chinese phrase. To a casual reader, the book may seem to be structurally formless; some students have even criticized it as being amorphous in structure, containing too many characters, too many subplots, and too many unsolved mysteries. Yet, a closer examination reveals that its extraordinary merit lies in its very complexity and ambiguity. The interplay of reality and illusion, fact and fantasy, gives it the quality of a dream, and yet it touches upon a number of serious social, political, and religious issues in the guise of fiction. Its thematic significance shifts like the dynamic patterns of a kaleidoscope, subject to the reader's individual perception. Be that as it may, women remain constant as the nucleus of those changing designs, no matter on which plane the novel is appreciated. Women are undeniably the underlying motif of this multi-themed symphony. As such, Cao Xueqin has, indeed, succeeded in rescuing the women of his youth from the dust of oblivion.

NOTES

1. Wang Chi-chen, tr., *Dream of the Red Chamber* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. vii.
2. Ho Qifang, "On the *Dream of the Red Chamber*," *Chinese Literature*, No. 1 (January, 1963), 65-66.
3. C. T. Hsia, "Love and Compassion in *Dream of the Red Chamber*," *Criticism*, V (Summer, 1963), 267.
4. See Cao Xueqin, *Qin long Jiaxu Zhiyanzhai Chongping Shitou ji* (original manuscript in photocopy), 1795 edition.
5. *Ibid.* (Hong Kong: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 3.
6. W. H. Sheldon, *The Varieties of Human Physique: An Introduction to Constitutional Psychology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), pp. 5-6.
7. *Ibid.*
8. W. H. Sheldon, *The Varieties of Temperament: A Psychology of Constitutional Differences* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), p. 26.
9. W. H. Sheldon, "Constitutional Factors in Personality," *Personality and the Behavior Disorders*, ed. Joseph McVicker Hung (New York: Ronald Press, 1944), Vol. I, pp. 526-45 *et passim*.

10. *Honglou meng* (Hong Kong: Guangzhi shuji, n.d.), Vol. I, p. 35.
11. David Hawkes, tr., *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. I, pp. 102-03.
12. *Honglou meng, op. cit.*, p. 434.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Hawkes. Vol. II.
15. H. Y. Yang and Gladys Yang, trs., *Dream of Red Mansions*, Vol. I, pp. 288.
16. C. T. Hsia, *op, cit.*
17. *Honglou meng, op. cit.*, p. 412.