REFLECTIONS OF DESIRE: THE POETICS OF GENDER IN
DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER*

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Abstract

Woven into the structure of the Dream of the Red Chamber is an exploration of the self-expressive values associated with the late imperial cult of qing and an explicit warning about the self-destructive potential of desire. Rather than being rooted in biological sex, Cao Xueqin's polysemous use of gender reflects the competing visions of Confucian orthodoxy and the cult of qing. This paper analyzes the structural and ideological values associated with masculine and feminine in Dream to argue that manipulation of gendered identities was an explicit aspect of the poetics of eighteenth-century xiaoshuo fiction.

In our eagerness to find reliable descriptions of daily life in premodern China, social historians, especially those interested in gender studies, have turned to xiaoshuo 小说 fiction for glimpses of practices and desires now distant from us. It is unusual to find a study of eighteenth-century China that does not cite Cao Xueqin's 小说 (ca. 1715-1763) masterpiece The Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng 红楼梦; also known as The Story of the Stone, Shitou ji 石头记) to illustrate its points. The relative lack of Chinese historiographical

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1 For convenience, I refer to the novel by its better-known English title Dream of the Red Chamber, although I predominantly work with the 80-chapter Shitou ji manuscript. Despite detailed comparative analyses of style and diction, there is still no consensus as to how closely Gao E's 120-chapter edition, entitled Dream of the Red Chamber, incorporates or reflects Cao Xueqin's original text or vision. Pagination refers to Cao Xueqin 小说, Honglou meng zazhipu jishen 红楼梦八十回续本, eds. Yu Pingbo and Wang Xishu (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1985). Translations are my own unless noted.

While the concept of realism still stands as one of the defining features of the classical European novel, it is now generally accepted as referring to a specific aesthetic code. In the Chinese tradition, one of the highest praises given to a lively prose is that it is like a painting which suggests vivid rather than realistic detail. James J. Y. Liu discusses this absence of a theory of mimeis in Chinese Theories of Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 49-73. Also see Marston Anderson, The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1-26.

3 Relying too much on Dream as a source for reconstructing eighteenth-century elite society is similar to the tautological process by which biographies have been constructed for Cao Xueqin, a historical figure about whom virtually nothing is known except what has been extrapolated from the novel.
and symbolic underpinnings which shore up the verisimilitude of the novel's central fictional world. Yingshi Yu's analysis of the two worlds in Dream has inspired many interpretations of the novel as a moral allegory about the clash between purity and pollution. Recently, Angelina C. Yee has synthesized both these approaches in her study of counterpoise in the novel. Whereas Plaka restricted her discussion of bipolar complementarity to the thematic categories identified in traditional novel criticism, Yee expanded her scope to consider how gender is central to the process in which Cao gradually laid out themes and values in a kaleidoscopic arrangement of characters and events that appear as opposites, doubles, and mutual complements. She follows Yingshi Yu in sketching out the dualistic structure of the novel in which a degenerate masculine world is counterpoised against an idealized feminine world. As she discusses the real aesthetic complexity of bipolarity is brought out in the way pairs and groups of characters, most importantly the emotional and delicate protagonist Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉 and his ruthless aunt Wang Xifeng 王熙凤 form dynamic complementary axes. In this way, Yee describes Xifeng standing “at the crossroads of the masculine and feminine worlds” where she “underpins, shapes and qualifies [Baoyu’s] world of poetry” (648). While acknowledging my debt to Yee's analysis of the symbolic and structuralist uses of gender, I am struck by how Cao simultaneously destabilized and subverted the social and physical boundaries which separate masculine from feminine even while he utilized them as categories of meaning. My analysis hinges on the aesthetic and ideological meanings imbricated in the deployment of gender. Rather than reflecting some essential biological difference rooted in male and female, gender is an unstable term that is a prominent aspect of the novel's shifting aesthetic surface and central to Cao’s narrative development of the concept qing 情.

Even the most casual reader is struck by the fluidity of the connection between physical sex and gender in the novel. In addition to his predilection for things feminine, Baoyu is several times mistaken for a girl and often states that he would prefer to be one; his female cousin Shi Xiangyun 史湘云 loves to dress as a boy (49,528); and Wang Xifeng, who is as delicately beautiful as any of the women in the novel, was raised as a boy, is sometimes described as masculine, shares her name with a man, and displays a remarkable competency in manipulating the broad networks of power and relationships that typically exclude women. The somewhat arbitrary distribution of gender identities within the aristocratic Jia family is staged more fully by the troop of girl actresses who are released into the garden world in Chapter 30. Just as the social world of the garden reaches its apex, Baoyu decrees that Fangguan 方官, one of the actresses who specializes in male roles, should be called by a male name and permanently dressed in boy’s clothing. The cousins Xiangyun, Li Wan 李纨, and Tanchun 堇春 quickly follow suit and rename the actresses who are in their service (63.705-6). During this same scene, Baoyu receives a note from his intimate friend the nun Miao Yu 妙玉, who points to the ambiguity of her own identity as “neither monk nor lay, neither male nor female” (僧不僧, 俗不俗, 男不男, 女不女, 704). Clearly, within the aestheticized world of the garden, just as the cousins assume the roles of poets, painters, fishermen, and farmers, they play at gender, too. Baoyu’s femininity, Lin Daiyu’s 林黛玉 hyperfemininity, Shi Xiangyun and Wang Xifeng’s variations of masculinity, and most especially the mutability of the gendered performances of the actresses, indicate that Cao’s depictions of gender exploit a performative and aesthetic impulse that is not founded on any biological basis. The claim that gender is culturally constructed can no longer be

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1 Andrew H. Plaka, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), especially 43-53. Complementary bipolarity is the aesthetic impulse based on jiantai duality whereby an event or detail of one type is balanced by a complementary scene, such as a description of isolated desolation following a large and joyous banquet. Multiple periodicity is a cyclical structure based on five-elements cosmology.


4 See especially Chapters 13-15 when the two are repeatedly juxtaposed through the events of Qinshui’s death and funeral, and Chapter 25 when both are victims of a curse and go mad simultaneously. For a detailed discussion of the complex complementarity that links them, see Yee, “Counterpoise,” 638-50.

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viewed as controversial. Yet a variety of conflicting meanings can be ascribed to masculine and feminine within one cultural context. My analysis of *Dream* examines how Cao's use of gender reflects the tension between two major discursive traditions, the cult of *qing*, which emerged as an important counter hegemonic philosophical and aesthetic movement during the late Ming dynasty, and Confucian orthodoxy. Orthodoxy treats social roles as ritual precriptive and links the proper performance of the five hierarchical relationships (steadfast and devoted) directly to the continuation of the larger social and cosmic order. The parallels conventionally drawn between the five relationships (parent and child, ruler and subject, elder and younger siblings, husband and wife, and friend and friend) imparted to domestic relationships a public significance which makes the Western distinction between public and private irrelevant in discussions of the traditional Chinese family. From the perspective of ritual, the family was the moral microcosm of the state and not a refuge from it; in this sense, the hierarchical structuring of male-female relationships endowed gender roles with an explicit ritual aspect. The Confucianized subject expressed his or her rectitude through the most intimate of the relationships, those between parent and child and between sexual partners; as handbooks on domestic rituals spell out, the actants in these relationships should strive to minimize any private or subjective (i.e., affective bonds (*qing*)) in order to make their behaviors conform to the orthodox ideal. Authors and commentators of fiction from this period frequently made use of the allegorical trope in which the male subject, and by synecdochic analogy, his household, function as a microcosm of the state.

An alternate tradition, based on Daoist ideals of purity through retirement from public roles, constructed certain areas of the domestic compound as a refuge from orthodox public duties. In literature, painting, and architecture, the scholar's studio and the literati garden were established as microcosmic and highly personal Daoist retreats. This philosophic and aesthetic strain largely existed alongside the dominant Confucian order. However, during the sixteenth century, in reaction to what was seen as the excessively rigid institutionalization of Neo-Confucian values, a number of influential writers and philosophers promoted the private and subjective as alternative to and even morally superior to orthodoxy. The literature and art of the late Ming and Qing are filled with images and characterizations which seen from an orthodox perspective scream decadence but also bespeak an effort to resist orthodox norms and create a moral system which allowed greater room for individual autonomy. The values at the heart of Grand Prospect Garden (*Da guan yuan* 大覲園) in *Dream* follow many of the ideals and iconographic codes adopted by this diffuse counterhegemonic movement, while the world of Baoyu's father, trenchantly named Jia Zheng 賈政 (government, a character phonically and etymologically linked to *zheng* 正, orthodoxy), reflects dominant Neo-Confucian ideology. As I argue in the following sections, very different meanings were attached to gender within these two ideological systems, and Cao wove both into his richly textured masterpiece.

The Cult of *Qing* and Late Ming Counterhegemonic Responses to Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy

Although *qing* is commonly translated as affect or feeling within the context of late Ming intellectual history, the connotations of this polysensuous word are so broad that it often defies translation. In pre-Mencian usage, *qing* referred to facts or reality as opposed to reputation (*ming* 名, *wen* 文, or *sheng* 声); as a modifier it meant genuine, in contrast to false (*weyi* 謊). In many early texts *qing* and *jing* 真, essence, were written interchangeably. By the first century CE, the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs* (*Mao Shi dao* 毛詩大序) established the Confucian hermeneutic practice of reading an individual's

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10 For one of the classic texts of social constructionism, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1990). See n. 12 below for examples of Butler's work extended to a premodern Chinese context.

11 Francesca Bray makes this point beautifully in her description of how a child "internalizes the hierarchies of gender, generation, and rank that are marked by the walls and stairs and practiced in the rules and etiquette of receiving guests, performing rites of passage, and going about daily tasks," *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 92.


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which informed orthodox Song Neo-Confucian usage of the term: first, that qing became identified as subjective and selfish desires in contrast to a selfless love of humanity; and second, that qing emanated from the yin aspect of the self.22

Even in the classical period, to those one category of meaning was to silence other associations. Based on a survey of texts from the Book of Changes (Yi jing 宜經) to Yuan Mei's 秦牧, 19th-century, Siu-kit Wong compiled thirteen definitions of qing which I have reduced to four main discursive groupings.

Physiological: the body of emotions with which the individual responds to his or her environment, as in the modern qingqing 情情, emotion, often reduced to the single emotion of romantic love.

Spiritual: the true and real inner spirit, always positive, contrasted to external artificiality.

Phenomenological: a morally neutral usage to describe discrete and unique phenomena in contrast to the universal and unchanging Truths (理). As in the vernacular shuangqing 情情, affairs, matters, or qingshuang 情情, conditions.23

22 Not everyone agreed with the categorization of qing as yang and qing as yin. For example, Wang Chong, Wang Shu (27-ca. 100) cites Liu Xiang 李向 (79-8 BCE) approvingly to argue that since qing are active expressions of human nature they should be classified as yang, see “Beijing plan” 千金策, in Yang Shihuo 杨世鹤 ed., Lantang ji 叛唐紀 (Taipei: Shihoe shu, 1962), 65-66.


This, in conjunction with the association of qing with inner spirit, became an important aspect of the defense of the fictionality of xiaoshuo. As Sheldon Hsing-
Aesthetic: always positive, a true aesthetic sensibility, disposition, or intellectual interest, as in the vernacular qingqing 倫情, interest, appeal.

Qing thus paradoxically refers to objective reality and subjective reactions to external stimuli, as well as a transcendent merging of the two in the lyric dissolution of the boundary between self and other (quanzuo 足我合). That the word qing carries such different connotations depending on context makes it particularly ambiguous; this is especially true of discussions of the emotions which span a continuum from subjective and selfish expressions of sexual desire to the selfless love and obligation one feels for a family member. Qing is simultaneously the basis for ideal social interactions and the selfish urges which threaten to destroy the social order. As we shall see, late Ming and Qing writers increasingly treated its most popular and suspect meaning, romantic love, qingqing 爱情, as analogically representative of otherwise unrelated meanings. Because of the frequent ambiguity in its usage, intentional and not, I leave qing untranslated except where there is a precise English equivalent.

The late Ming cult of qing grew out of a philosophical movement which was highly critical of what was perceived to be the excessive rigidity of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism (lixue 理学). In addition to the growing frustration among the elitist that the rewards of participation in the Confucian bureaucracy were becoming increasingly unreliable, there was also a concern that the pressures of preparing for the examination had substituted a curriculum of rote memorization in place of morally transformative study.26 The three-school syncretism (sanjiao 聖教合) which swept through the sixteenth-century in-

La has written, by highlighting its very fictionality, the commentaries to the Shihhu zhuan are better able to appreciate its psychological and descriptive truthfulness” (From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994], 137).


26 For rates of success in the bureaucratic examination system, see Ping-ti Ho, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 186-90; for the Qing dynasty, Benjamin A. Elman estimates that of the total two million candidates who participated in the examination system, 1.5% made it to licentiates, and 0.01% made it the highest level metropolitan examinations (“Changes in Confucian Civil Service Examinations from the Ming to the Ch‘ing Dynasty,” in Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900, eds. Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 117). Wang Gen 王 (1483-1581) attempted to reinsert a moral aspect to examination preparation by suggesting that the examinations test knowledge of ethics as well as personal conduct (L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976; hereafter DMB), 1394).

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28 See Wei-Ming Tu, Neo-Confucian Thought in Action (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) for a discussion of the importance of syncretist thought to Wang Yangming’s intellectual development; also see Edward Ch’en, Chiao Hung and The Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in the Late Ming (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and the essays collected in de Bary, ed., Self and Society in Ming Thought.

29 In a famous debate with Qian Dehong 钱德洪 (1495-1574), another of Wang Yangming’s disciples, Wang Ji took liberties with Wang Yangming’s “Four Sentence Thought” and broadened it to argue that evil is external to human nature. Huang Zongyi 黄宗羲, Ming bunan 明儒學案 (Taipei: Shihj shuju 1981; hereafter, MBXN), I.101-102; translated in Julia Ching, Records of Ming Scholars (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 114-117. The debate is discussed in Chung-ying Cheng, New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 481-503.
important as a cross-over figure between the worlds of intellectual history and fiction and drama. Although the authenticity of the many commentaries to novels and drama ascribed to him is questionable to say the least, Li Zhi was closely associated with the values espoused in vernacular fiction. The frequency with which his name appears on editions of vernacular fiction clearly indicates that publishers believed that an association with Li Zhi would be good for business (and judging by the number of recent editions with a “Li Zhuowu” commentary attached, the connection still works). Li Zhi’s influential friendships with the playwright Tang Xianzu and Yuan Hongdao 易安道 (1568-1610) of the Gong’an 公安 School further establish him as a vital link between late Ming intellectual trends and the production of literary values and aesthetics. Despite the vilification of Li Zhi undertaken by the Qing historian Huang Zongxi, he should not be understood as a demagogue who tried to undermine the entire Confucian ethical system. He did attack Song Neo-Confucianism with particular vehemence, but this was in part motivated by his urgent plea for efficacious moral activism. While he may have been anomalous for the acidity of his attacks on the status quo, Li’s criticisms of institutionalized Neo-Confucian orthopraxy as spiritually bankrupt were unique neither to him nor the late Ming. In his highly polemical writings, Li Zhi set up an opposition between adherence to orthodox ritual, which he saw as constructing a false self-presentation, and desire, which he associated with authenticity (chao 燙). This opposition

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29 Luo Rufang’s biography can be found in DMB, 597-78.

30 For another well-known literatus, He Xinyan 何之炎 (1517-79) who also recognized Yan Jun as his teacher, see DMB, 513-15, and Ronald G. Dinerberg, The Sage in Society; The Life and Thought of Hu Hsien-ts (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974).

31 MRXA, 54.34; Ching, Records of Ming Scholars, 187-88.
Between orthodoxy and desire, or its sentimentalized form *qing*, is echoed in the structures and content of both *Peony Pavilion* and *Dream*.

Li Zhi valued an ability to “live in the present” (*dangxian* 直下), to react spontaneously and effectively to situations without the mediation of trained responses. He argued that contemporary practices of self-cultivation made officials useless, for “all they understand is bowing and saluting; they sit squarely all day as if they were molded of clay.” At worst, ritual could become a hypocritical performance based on a false external standard that would mask a person’s true self, as in the case of those who affect virtue to hide their venal intent. In a tone of disdain echoed two centuries later by Jia Baoyu of *Dream*, Li associated the rote memorization of classical learning with widespread spiritual corruption:

> Since people are false (jié), there is nothing that is not false. In this way, if you use false speech to talk to a false person, the false person will be pleased; if you tell false matters to a false person, the false person will be pleased; if you discuss false writings with a false person, the false person will be pleased. If everything is false, everyone will be pleased.

In place of this artificial, externally derived moral standard, Li Zhi substituted the innate “childlike heart” (*tongxin* 童心), a concept central to his definition of the authentic. According to Li, the childlike mind has a natural and spontaneous understanding of the good and is thus the true source of authentic morality. This attribution of a natural wisdom to youth is widely reflected in late Ming and Qing romances in which the compassionate courage of the young protagonists is frequently shown to be more ethical than their parents’ rigid adherence to ritual. Li Zhi’s most extreme claim was that authenticity, a term which can also be translated as the true, is subjectively determined and based on enlightened selfishness (*jié*). In contrast to Neo-Confucianism, which taught people to extinguish their subjective bias, Li Zhi argued that enlightened selfishness motivates people toward self-improvement. In Li Zhi’s writing, desire, which in orthodox Neo-Confucianism is antithetical to Principle, is made into a productive force which drives people to acquire wealth, study, and even achieve enlightenment. One of the most radical shifts made by Li Zhi was that he rooted the concept of the good, authenticity as expressed through enlightened desires, in the material self.

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88 Li, Funlu, “Yinji wangshi,” 190.
89 Li, Funlu, “Fu jiao ruoohou,” 51-52.
90 Li, Funlu, “Tongxin shuo,” 118.
93 See n. 10.
feminine (2.19). 47 Both he and his double, Zhen Baoyu, value girls more than men; although they were not the first to reverse the normative gender hierarchy and idealize young women in Chinese culture, the Baoyus may be the most adamant spokespeople to proclaim the inferiority of men. 48 As they put it, girls are formed from the spiritual essence of creation (wuru zhi ling) while men are made of creation’s leftover dregs. 49 Jia Baoyu not only believes that “girls are made of water, and boys are made of mud,” but Zhen Baoyu insists that by their very presence they make him feel more alert.

“I must have two girls with me when I study so that I can understand the characters and my mind will be clear. Otherwise my mind will be confused” (2.20).

The concept of “girls” has numinous powers. All Zhen Baoyu has to do is yell out the word “girl” and he becomes oblivious to the pain of his father’s beating. His girl “madness” (chaitai) is so excessive he instructs his pages,

“The word ‘girl’ is very precious and pure, it is even more sacred than the expressions for Buddha or the [Daoist] Primal Celestial Excellency. It is important that you don’t soil this word with your coarse, stinking mouths. But whenever you do need to use it, you must first rinse your mouths out with clear water and fragrant tea” (2.20-21).

Despite Baoyu’s passionate defense of girls, it is not a reliable category of meaning for him. Toward the end of the eighty-chapter novel, Jia Baoyu passionately distinguishes between unmarried girls and married women:

“How is it that as soon as these people [girls] marry a fellow, they are infected by his male air (qi) and turn into bitches? They’re even worse than men!” (77.873)

In actuality, neither age nor marital status predicts Baoyu’s admiration for women, as demonstrated by his intimacy with Qin Keqing,
who is married to his cousin Jia Rong and Wang Xifeng, who is married to his cousin Jia Lian. Paradoxically, given Baoyu's expressions of admiration for the purity and emotional refinement he claims is concentrated in girls, he is surprisingly tolerant of several women associated with the family, including the figuratively linked Xifeng, the You sisters, and Xue Pan's wife Xia Jingui, who, in increasing degree, exhibit the destructive and depraved qualities of the stereotypical shrew.

Clearly, Baoyu is not a reliable informant on his own values; his behaviors often contradict even the most passionate of his pronouncements. Nor are all positive qualities associated with femininity reserved for biological girls; a chain of young men, identifiable by their femininely delicate good looks and depth of feelings, form an alternate web of sensibility that balances the world inside the garden. This group of beautiful men who blur the boundaries between male and female include the two Baoyus, Qin Zhong and his brother Qin Zhong. Several traditional commentators note the obvious pun in their names to qing, and one glosses Qin Zhong's name as the "seed of qing" (qingzhong 情种). The visceral intensity of Qin Keqing's connection to Baoyu and Wang Xifeng is brought out in the scene where she appears in both their dreams at the moment of her death and Baoyu awakes from his dream spitting blood. The first time they meet, Baoyu is symbolically married to Keqing; he is ushered into her bedroom, which is decorated with erotic objects, and placed in her bed. It is in her bedroom, calling out her childhood name, that Baoyu is sexually initiated and introduced into the World of Illusion, where he discovers the intertwined values of qing, sentiment, and lust (yu 淫). Keqing is not important to Baoyu alone; on a narratological level, her death surpasses all other ritual moments in the novel, including the imperial concubine's visit home, Baoyu's marriage, and the deaths of the elders Jia Jing and the matriarch Jia, in motivating the most complete listing of the all the male members of the Jia family (15.128). The placement of a full genealogy at the moment of Keqing's death is striking because such a formal presentation of names typically occurs only at moments of great ritual significance. In addition to underscoring the perverse degree of honor the Jia family pays her, it suggests Keqing's importance as a central cypher which connects the interlocking narratives of Xifeng's ambition, Baoyu's qing, Jia Zhen's sexual licentiousness, and Jia Zheng's Confucian ritualism, as well as highlighting the danger implicit in qing. As is hinted by the illustration of her hanging in the registers of love Baoyu examines in Chapter 5 and by Red Inkstone's discomfort with earlier versions of the chapter, Keqing's untimely death stems from her incestuous relationship with her father-in-law Jia Zhen. Although Keqing's reputation seems to be untainted by the incest, she elicits a broad range of improper responses from the Jia men. The crucial role of Qin Keqing as the person who simultaneously introduces Baoyu to the World of Illusion and the registers of qing as well as to sexual experience demonstrates the dual nature of the qing explored in Dream, as a redemptive aesthetic bond and as self-destructive sexual desires. That Qin Keqing's beautiful younger brother Qin Zhong, "the seed of qing," through whom Baoyu continues his connection to Keqing, similarly dies from desire in Chapter 16 further undermines any clear distinction between the purity of qing and transgressive desires, despite the protests of Baoyu and many readers to the contrary.

The "two worlds" analyses of Dream follow Baoyu's statements in assuming a correlation between the world of the garden and purity

birthday of Lady Wang's maid Jinchuan 全惠, who had drowned herself in disgrace after Baoyu had flirted with her in his mother's presence; and Chapter 66 where Baoyu joins Jia Lian in persuading Liu Xianglian 刘湘莲 to marry You Sanjie 夏三姐.

34 Red Inkstone's comments suggest that an earlier manuscript showed Qianshi committing suicide in shame (ZYZ, 240, 243). Baoyu, a proclaimed passionate lover of purity, is not ignorant of this blot on Keqing's reputation, as is revealed when he overhears the family retainer Big Jiao use the slang phrase pahui 弄灰 ("crawl in the ashes") in reference to Keqing's relationship with Jia Zhen (7.80).

35 The Huhua zhuren commentator tellingly blames Qin Zhong for initiating Baoyu's interest in male homosexuality (literally, male beauty, name 男色, SJPB, 9.132).
and girls as separate from the corruption outside the garden; however, within the fluid, associative aesthetics of the novel, this distinction is not reliable. The quality that most seems to distinguish those who are welcomed into Grand Prospect Garden and those who are excluded from it is a willingness to enact, embody, or support the aesthetic qualities associated with qing.55 The garden is a mise-en-scène of qing based on a celebration of beauty, nature, affect, pleasure, the feminine, and an aesthetic tendency toward the erasure of boundaries. This aesthetic consciousness, called a lyrical subjectivity by Kao-yu Kung and Wei-yee Li, blends taste and affect to realize the most positive aspects of qing. In this idealized state, the individual consciousness seeks to transcend the boundaries which separate the self from external phenomena and replace them with an awareness of and empathy for the other. 36

Balancing the positive aesthetic qualities associated with qing in Dream, however, are those aspects of the term which resist and oppose the normative values of Neo-Confucianism. Baoyu’s goals of maximizing pleasure, beauty, and intensity of emotional connection are directly opposed to the orthodox values of restraint, dedication to achieving public goals (gong 公) rather than private desires (jiu 私), and compliance to ritualized forms of social interaction. In ritual, difference and distinction (fenbi 分別), rather than affection (qing), are the foundation of relations between self and other. These Confucian values are represented by Baoyu’s father Jia Zheng, whose sensibilities are revealed in his name. As mentioned earlier, Cao Xueqin followed Tang Xianzu and other Ming writers in contrasting an idealized world of qing to repressive Confucian practices. Within this oppositional structure, the proponents of the cult of qing championed and appropriated the feminine as a position from which to resist and attack orthodox ideology. Their idealized depictions of women and femininity are part of their broader attempts to define themselves and their values outside the dominant Confucian discourse. As in Li Zhi’s writings, however, the desire to defy Confucianism resulted in the development of a vocabulary which can be read as the inversion of orthodox discourse rather than a true alternative to it. In contrast to Confucian texts which historically projected a fear of loss of control, both sexual and political, onto the image of the sexual temptress who toppled household and dynastic house, narratives of qing championed beautiful women as sites of personal and cultural redemption.

The case of Xiao Qing, a beautiful and frail young concubine unknown during her lifetime but who became a cause célèbre after her untimely death in 1612, illustrates how one sensitive, beautiful, and talented woman became the embodiment of qing.57 In many senses, the circumstances of Xiao Qing’s death actualize the passionate events of Tang Xianzu’s Peony Pavilion. She died as a result of her cumulative emotional fragility, caused in part after being overcome while reading Peony Pavilion and in part by the jealous attacks of her husband’s primary wife.58 A double martyr to the two emotional complexes of empathy and virtuous resentment, Xiao Qing follows Du Liniang in her corporeal devotion to passion. Tellingly, it was only after death that this unknown concubine assumed a culturally significant existence, for her death (similar to those of Du Liniang and Lin Daiyu) was the proof of the depth and selfless purity of her emotions. The historicity of Xiao Qing, 小青, whose name forms a rebus for qing, has been debated from the seventeenth century to the present; however, as Ellen Widmer has written, part of her appeal derives precisely from the way her characterization straddles the conventions of fiction and historiography.59 Xiao Qing surpassed Du Liniang in being a real life poster child of qing: she was young, female, beautiful, delicate, literate, had an exceptional depth of feelings nurtured on poetry, and died faithful to her passions. This blending of history and art made of her tragic life a text better than fiction on which her husband and generations of other literati recorded their appreciation and empathy. Furthermore, as Judith Zeitlin has written, Xiao Qing provided a literary model which Wu Ren 吳人 expanded to an even more rarified aesthetic level in his “Three Wives’ Commentary” to Peony Pavilion (Wu Ren 小漪 jie ping Mu dan ting huan hu jie 吳人山三婦合評牡丹亭海縫記) published in 1694, in which the voices and actions of his three stunningly beautiful wives merge into one text.60 How different are the fictionalized lives of these talented and beautiful women?

55 Her patronage of Baoyu’s indulgence in qing perhaps explains why Wang Xifeng is able to move in and out of the garden community even though her marital status, crudeness, avance, and illiteracy should exclude her from Baoyu’s inner circle.
56 The scene in which Baoyu is so entranced by his concern that the actress scratching her lover’s name in the dirt is getting wet from the rain that he is unaware that his own body has been drenched is cited by Wei-yee Li as an example of the idealized dissolution of boundary between self and other (Enchantment, 207, also see 202-203, 229-24); and Yu-kung Kao, “The Lyric Vision in Chinese Narrative Tradition: A Reading of Heng-lieh meng and Ju-din wei-shih,” in Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays, ed., Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 227-65.
57 Ellen Widmer, “Xiaqing’s Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China,” Late Imperial China, 13.1 (1993): 111-55.
women from Cao Xueqin's creation of Lin Daiyu, who in turn inspired countless poems and paintings in which readers of Dream demonstrated their emotional sensitivity? The tragic lives of these beautiful and talented women, both fictional and historical, circulated as canvases upon which elite men and women could record their own passions and resentments even while they commemorated the lives of their subjects.

In addition to suggesting an alternative to Confucianism, certain images of women also evoked the possibility of less compromised Confucian identities. Born of the widespread literati frustration with the examination system and the increasingly unreliable rewards for public service was a nostalgic yearning for a simpler, less regulated and commodified basis for elite identity. During the late Ming and Qing, literati dependence on patronage networks for political and educational advancement intensified. This obviously contradicted the Confucian ideal that true virtue would be recognized and rewarded; to seek recognition too actively was to risk one's reputation. In this sense, the selfless modesty of a woman who lived her life in obscurity was the ultimate expression of uncompromised moral purity. As can be seen by the adoption of the voices of cloistered women in Confucian poetry, literati had long idealized the feminine as an authentic subject position untainted by the frustrations, sacrifices, and moral concessions demanded by participation in the bureaucratic system. The construction of beautiful young women as symbols of political purity had long been enshrined in the Confucian hermeneutic practice of reading women's romantic desires as allegorical of a worthy scholar's desire for political recognition. Yet the use of the trope exploded during the late Ming and Qing so that even courtesans and prostitutes were held up as emblems of integrity in heightened contrast to the perception of literati as weak and corrupt.61 Virtuous women became emblematic of orthodox, and as one scholar has argued, began to displace male scholars as local symbols of orthodox achievement.62 The idealization of women's subject position became so accepted by the Qing that the socially conservative scholar Zhang

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Xuecheng (1738-1801), the same moralist who criticized the belle-lettriste Yuan Mei (1716-98) for taking on female students, seems to have felt that the lives of cloistered women could provide the best site for nurturing the disinterested ideals of classical learning.63 Indeed, as Katherine Carlyle has written, one of the most perverse Ming innovations to the trope of woman as symbol of cultural purity was the intertwining of orthodox Neo-Confucian cult of female chastity with the counterhegemonic cult of qing to create a cultural fascination for ambiguous images of women whose virtue carried a new erotic charge.64

During the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in contrast to the earlier Ming adage that "the lack of talent is virtue in a woman," women were transformed into the fit guardians of the classical heritage, and their voices began to be privileged as producers of elite culture. Unlike highly trained scholars whose literary expressions would likely be mediated through an artificial style acquired through years of mimicking classical models, women and the unlettered were vaunted as having a more natural and powerful form of expression due to their supposedly direct access to emotions.65 Even for those who preferred the more refined aesthetics of the allusive and ornate classical language, which necessitated substantial education and training, women's voices were accorded a special affective power and purity denied their male counterparts. As Ellen Widmer has commented, the almost legendary literary status achieved by Xiao Qing, despite the slim corpus of writings which survived her, is indicative of the heightened interest in female writers and artists after the early seventeenth century.66 The immediate acceptance and success of Dream, in which Baoyu treats his girl cousins as more talented and refined than he, reveals that the formulation of the apolitical feminine as a privileged source of authentic cultural expression had become normative by the eighteenth century.

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65 Yuan Hangdiao 原洪道 (1568-1610) praised women and those who are ill as producing writings more powerful than others; for example, see his "Tao Xiaoruo Zhennongyi" 貂先詔仲永引, in Yuan Zh Anglican qiyi 元朝語彙集 (Taibei: Shijie shuju, 1964); "Wenchao" 文朝, 14. Charlotte Furth discusses a medical treatise which lists emotionalism as one of the reasons women are more vulnerable to serious diseases in "Blood, Body and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China, 1683-1850," Chinese Science 7 (1986): 50-51.

66 Widmer, "Xiaojing's Literary Legacy," 113.
Gender and gendered characteristics carry powerful ideological implications in the symbolic vocabulary of late imperial China. Rather than being a straightforward celebration of women's lives and talent, the cult of *qing* signalled a literati appropriation of the feminine and the female subject position. *Qing*, or a character’s capacity for *qing*, is expressed through physical, emotional, and intellectual attributes which include beauty, artistic talent, purity of intent, emotional empathy and passion, and physical frailty. Within this context, the feminine became an essential attribute of *qing*. The talented female beauty (or her feminized male counterpart) was made into a site upon which authors and readers could project their own *qing*, through sharing her passions and artistic talents and appreciating her unorthodox qualities. This narcissistic appropriation of the feminine as an attribute of *qing* is clearly discernable in the conventions of scholar-beauty romances, of which *Dream* is the preeminent example, in which the male and female lovers are intellectually, spiritually, and frequently physically interchangeable. Although the idealization of women and the femininity within the cult of *qing* may have empowered certain women, insofar as it made it more acceptable for women to display their talent and provided models of morally and intellectually independent women, its genesis was as a reaction against the hegemony of institutionalized Neo-Confucianism.

B. The Use of Masculine-Feminine Bipolarity as a Structural Device in *Dream*

As much attention as the gender inversions in *Dream* have received, Cao Xueqin’s novel is not unusual in this regard. Indeed, it could be argued that the complementary manipulation of gender and gendered characteristics is one of the signature aesthetic traits of Chinese literature written during and after the late sixteenth century. During the late Ming, as writers of fiction moved further away from the historiographical roots of *xiaoshuo* in favor of exploring and exploiting the craft of fictionality, they began to incorporate images of actors, masks, and plays-within-plays into increasingly intricate narrative patterns. The influence of drama on fiction has profound implications for the depiction of gender due to the complex codes used to represent gender in staged performances. Because actors specialized in certain role types, regardless of the sex, gender, or age of the character, stage identities were not rooted in the actor’s physical characteristics but were conveyed through performative conventions. As in Elizabethan drama, the obvious disparity between actor and character was exploited by playwrights. Hu Yinglin 胡应麟 (1551-1602) described *chaoci* drama as a “literature of play” based on paradox and inversion of the familiar and gender switching became a common form of inversion. Xu Wei 徐渭 (1522-94) well-known drama *Nu zhuangyuan* 女狀元 (The Female First Place Candidate), in which a woman disguises herself as a man and takes first place in the imperial examination, adds a simple twist to spice up a conventional plot. Wang Jide’s 王骥德 (d. 1623) drama *Nan wangi* 男王妃 (The Male Queen) exemplifies the manipulation of gender as an aesthetic device in Ming comedies of error. A young soldier, Chen Zigao 陈子高, is played by a dan旦 role. The actors who specialized in dan roles typically played young female leads and came to define the elite ideal of femininity. Captured by enemy soldiers, the beautiful Zigao is told to dress as a woman, and after the king is smitten with him, he is made queen of the enemy’s court. The king’s sister also falls in love with the new queen, but after discovering that Zigao is a man, she forces him, still disguised as a woman, to marry her in secret. The king eventually sanctions their marriage in order to preserve his own access to Zigao, and Zigao resumes his identity as a man. By the end of the drama, although Zigao’s gender is stabilized as male, his sexual identity, as lover to both brother and sister, continues to be fluid while the disjunction of a feminine dan role playing a male character remains. The self-reflexive layering of gender inversions and shifting pairs of characters completely destabilizes any link between the sex of the actor and the fluid gender of Zigao. In *The Male Queen*, Wang Jide treats gender as a performative aspect of Zigao’s character that, like a mask, can be donned or removed to enrich the aesthetic texture.

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69 Widmer draws similar conclusions about male writers’ interest in Xiao Qing as a “vehicle” for their own self-promotion (“Xiaoming’s Literary Legacy,” 128). The narcissism of the celebration of the feminine in *Dream* is discussed by Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, 81-97; Yee, “Self, Sexuality, and Writing in *Hanging Moustache*,” especially 388; and Haun Saussy, “Reading and Folly in *Dream of the Red Chamber*,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles and Reviews* 9.1, 2 (1987): 31.

70 For a discussion of the doubled identities and homonarratives in the play, see Sophie A. J. Volpp, “The Male Queen: Boy Actors and Literati Libertines” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), 63-65.

71 Although Wang Jide’s monograph on dramatic writing, *Quli* 剧录, deals more with questions of prosody than structure (and thus does not comment on structural or thematic inversions), in it he does draw associative links between various complementary paired terms which are alternated as part of the aesthetic design, such as
More so than any fiction writer, Li Yu (1610/11-80), an extremely inventive and witty storyteller and dramatist of the seventeenth century, delighted in using gender and even sexual inversions as a way to create multiple plot twists in his cleverly structured works. His female characters regularly outsmart their male counterparts, and some stories contain characters who undergo miraculous sex changes or engage in homosexual and lesbian liaisons, all while the narrator slyly argues for the moral and social propriety and even superiority of these inverted practices. The playfulness of Li Yu's treatment of gender in his narrative fiction may in part be due to the close connection between his narrative and drama; Li Yu is unique in simultaneously publishing his own work in short story and dramatic form, and his stories are filled with references to the structure and conventions of drama.

That Dream was originally conceptualized as a chuangju drama rather than xiaoju fiction may in part explain the fluidity and symmetry of its gender inversions. Baoyu, along with many of the other delicate young men in the novel, seems to have been modelled after the effeminate male xiaoju role of chuangju drama who was conventionally paired with the dan female lead. It is no coincidence that two of the young men to whom Baoyu is instinctively drawn, Jiang Yuhan (Biqiu in David Hawkes's translation who specializes in dan roles, and Liu and jing tones, or oral (īn ǐ) and nasal (ī nǐ) pronunciations which he metaphorically links to gender. For example, "A character (qī) which has open and nasal pronunciations is like jīng encompassing jīn, male encompassing female," (Qī di [Human: Remmin chubanshe, 1983], 98). Each section of the monograph illustrates how he conceptualized prosodic features in terms of maximizing aesthetic complementarity. By frequently inserting examples of "male" and "female" pairs as concrete expressions of abstract jīngning complementarity, Wang Jide renders the aesthetic more "natural" and compelling.


For example, see "Nü Chen Ping ji sheng qí chu" 女 Peng Ping ji sheng qí chu "A Female Chen Ping saves her life with seven schemes"; "Nan Mengduo jiao ren zhan; Bian nü wei er Pusa qiao" 变女为菩萨桥 "A daughter is transformed into a son through the Bodhisattva's ingenuity"; and in Wuxing xì [Silent opera]: "Cuixiu lou" 铜雀楼 [The House of Gathered Reminiscences] in Shi'er lou [The Twelve Towers]; and for lesbianism, the drama Lian xiangqin [Fragrant Companion].

Patrick Hanan suggests that Li Yu was the first to transpose his own works between genres and lists four stories Li Yu rewrote as plays (The Invention of Li Yu, 17-18, 138-42).


Xianglan, an amateur who performs arias from romantic plays with sheng and dan roles, are both actors. Moreover, the provenance of Shi Xiangyan's stylish tomboyishness (the text mentions how good she looks dressed as a Tartar) can be found in the troop of actresses kept by the Jia family; many of these girls excel at playing the more boisterous male roles. The aesthetic roots of Baoyu's fluid sexual identity, which allows him to idealize girls in some scenes while being drawn to beautiful men in others, can be found in characterizations such as the polymorphous Zigao.

Gender in Dream, as in The Male Queen, derives its meaning not from being rooted in the individual but from being situationally produced through a progression of complementary pairings. In this sense, gender complementarity as an aesthetic device is comparable to the use of heat and cold which, as the great commentator Zhang Zhupo 张竹坡 noted, is one of the central aesthetic features of Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅. The complementary interplay of heat and cold forms the basis of the bipolar categories used in Dream criticism of movement-stillness, elegance-basaness, joy-sorrow, union-separation, harmony-conflict, and prosperity-decline, etc. As is true of the depictions of gender, the most artistically compelling examples of the use of the heat and cold motif are found in those scenes which depict cold-within-heat or heat-within-cold. That traditional commentators did not identify gender complementarity as one of the specific manifestations of jingning conceptual categories which structure xiaoju fiction should not prevent modern readers from recognizing its structural and thematic importance. On a purely aesthetic level, gender complementarity expands the range of resonances which make up the novel's aesthetic surface. Baoyu, a sentimentalized rendering of feminine-within-male, is paired against a seemingly endless variety of post-

66 For an alternative view on Baoyu's bisexuality, see Edwards, "Gender Imperatives."

67 On the importance of heat and cold to Zhang Zhupo's poetics of Jin Ping Mei, see Rolston, How to Read, 120, 204-5, 216-17, 239, 240; for a discussion of scenes where Cao Xueqin mimicked the use of hot and cold in Jin Ping Mei, see Mary E. Scott, "Azote from Indigo: Hong lou meng's Debit to Jin Ping Mei" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 1989), 96-101. Also consider the use of heat and cold in the characterizations of Xue Baochai 薛宝钗, whose name (Xue pons on snow, xu 雪), physical features (she has exquisite white skin and emits a cool fragrance) and cool reserve set her off against Lin Daiyu's 尘缘白热, passionate quickness. For a full discussion of the complementarity of the two girls, see Plaks, Archetype and Allegory, 61-69. On the thematic and structural influence of Jin Ping Mei on Hong lou meng, see Xu Shunfang 徐顺芳, "Hong lou meng he Jin Ping Mei" 红楼梦和金瓶梅, Menglu meng jingnian zhi, 7th series (1988), 143-42; and Wang Rumei 王汝梅, "Zhang Zhupo de jiu Cao Xueqin chuangqiao de yingzhang" 张竹坡对曹雪芹创作的影响, in Wang Rumei, Jing Ping Mei tanue 金瓶梅谈案 (Changchun: Jinlin daxue, 1990), 83-85.
sible complements, from the coarse masculine-within-female of Wang Xifeng, to the gentler masculine-within-female of Shi Xiang-yun, to the utterly feminine Lin Daiyu, not to mention the split figure of Qin Keqing (her name in Baoyu's dream is Jianmei 筠美, "Two-in-One") and her equally charming brother Qin Zhong, who, similar to Baoyu, alternates between being paired with other feminized men and women (including the nominally sexless nun Zhineng 智能). Thus, rather than being an exclusive male-female dichotomy, gender in Dream occurs along a continuum with a seemingly infinite possibility of positions and variations; yet, for the ideological reasons suggested above, the entire continuum is shifted toward and favors the feminine.

C. Qing, the Lyric Impulse, and the Dissolution of Ritual Identity

In addition to appropriating the feminine as a gesture of resistance to the rigidity of institutionalized Neo-Confucianism and the use of gender polarity as an aesthetic feature, the gender fluidity in Dream functions on yet another level to help realize the traditional lyric impulse mentioned earlier of dissolving the boundaries between self and other. This aesthetic ideal enabled the individual to transcend the restrictions of the hierarchical relationships prescribed by ritual and replace them with the affective bonds of qing. The society outside Grand Prospect Garden is differentiated from the idealized garden community in that, nominally at least, it is organized according to the hierarchical principles of the five cardinal relationships. Those who live in the public world, such as Jia Zheng, his retainers, and Yuanchun the imperial concubine, subordinate their private desires and attachments to ritual in order to play their roles in the larger social order. Baoyu has nothing but contempt for his father and his collection of scholars, and great pity for Yuanchun who is imprisoned within the palace. In contrast, the designs, shapes and placement of the structures in Grand Prospect Garden architectonically represent Baoyu's affective bonds with his cousins rather than reflect the status of the inhabitants within the Jia family. The onerous aspect of a ritualized existence is showcased during the formal reception for the imperial concubine where ritual display displaces emotion. Only in the private, informal reception within the women's quarters is the imperial concubine able to express her true feelings of grief at being separated from her family. Jia Zheng's stiffness at family gatherings further demonstrates that his is a world unaccustomed to spontaneity.

Traditional and twentieth-century enthusiasts of the novel alike have decried the emotional falseness and repressiveness demanded by these public roles. The yearning for the values Grand Prospect Garden has represented to various readers, as a space where kindred nonconformist literati could express their true, "authentic" selves (no matter how cliched the expression), as a community which modelled resistance to demeaning feudal social roles and anticipated the ideals of modern individualism, or as a morally pure utopia, seems to have blinded many critics to the signs of excess which regularly surface in the text. In contrast to his father, when Baoyu withdraws into the enclosed world of the garden, he constructs an identity based on spontaneous and unrestrained emotive responses rather than prescribed protocol. Doing so, he exemplifies the late Ming conventions of "authenticity" in that he does not allow his unique eccentricities to be restrained by orthodox expectations. Except for the obligatory visits to his grandmother and parents, Baoyu manages to reduce all of his relationships to an equal bond of friendship and thus progressively deconstructs orthodox social structures. Additionally, with the exclusion of the decorous and restrained Xue Baochai, who is often castigated by commentators for her cold reserve, the cousins, and even the maids, set aside conventional manners and terms of address and speak their minds at will. While initially liberating, particularly in contrast to Jia Zheng's stilted expressions of affection for his mother and children, this relaxation of the hierarchical social order eventually results in the loss of social order.

The confusion of naming in Dream is a powerful example of how artifice and whimsy, dominant facets of the aesthetics of qing, lead to an implosion of identity. Naming immediately evokes the Confucian injunction to impose a moral order on society through the rectification of names (zhengming 正名). Within Confucian thought, language is prescriptive; the work of the sage is to make social reality comply with the ideals laid out in language. In Dream, the power to name is most closely associated with Baoyu and Daiyu, the two characters who most fully embody the ideal of qing. Baoyu names most of the sites in the garden, and Daiyu helps him write the descriptive poems. Baoyu, as the main conjurer of illusion, also renames certain titles.

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78 See Ying-shih Yu, Liangce shijie, 54-56.

79 Frustration with ritually defined Neo-Confucianism was voiced most stridently by the late Ming philosophers He Xinyin and Li Zhi who proposed that friendship is the most authentic of the five cardinal relationships, discussed in de Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism," 180-81, 185-87, 197-98.

80 For example, see Hong Qiaoyuan's 洪橋嫣 (1885) Du Honglou meng suibi 读红楼梦随笔 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 1984).

81 Wai-yee Li has identified a fascination with artifice and illusion as a central aesthetic of qing (Enchantment, especially 47-50).
of the girls as they enter his world. To his father's intense distaste, he renames his maid Hua Zhenzhu 花珍珠, "Precious-Pearl Flower," as Hua Xiren 花袭人 "Seductive Flower" (which David Hawkes translates as Aroma), foreshadowing the alluring nature of the garden. Baoyu's first impulse upon meeting Lin Daiyu is to give her the nickname Pinpin 针盼 "Frowner" (3.32). Baoyu's power to name and remake reality according to his aesthetic vision peaks in his transformation of the actress Fangguan's identity. From this point on, artifice displaces the Confucian imperative to establish a stable truth.

The garden community enters a new phase of refinement in Chapter 37, immediately following Baoyu's second dream of enchantment, with the founding of the poetry club. At the first meeting, Daiyu suggests that the cousins should take non de plume in order to avoid the awkwardness of referring to each other by kinship terms. Chinese kinship terms encode within them differentiations of status marked by age and gender; to do away with this formal nomenclature is to strip away the hierarchical markers that within a Chinese context are synonymous with social order. The literary names that the cousins take are innocuous enough as an imitation of the honored literati practice of assuming pen names, but the founding of the poetry club seems to initiate an entropic process whereby the crucial social boundaries that distinguish generations, sex, and social class are erased. This process of devolution culminates in Chapter 49 just as the population of the garden explodes. With the arrival of a hitherto unknown group of cousins, there is such a crowd that all the usual formalities have been dropped and with them all sense of order.

In terms of ages, except for Li Wan who was the eldest, the twelve were all fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen; if it was not these three were born in the same year, then it was these five having the same age, or these two having been born on the same day of the same month, or those two having been born at the same minute of the same part of the day, so that in terms of their horoscopes the only differences were the minute, time of day, or month. Even they themselves could not distinguish their ages, so that they indiscriminately called each other "older sister," "younger sister," "older brother," or "younger brother" (49.524-25).

That this disintegration of ritually defined identity occurs in Chapter 49 is particularly significant given the structural parallels between Dream and the hundred-chapter Jin Ping Mei, for it is precisely in Chapter 49 that Ximen Qing's fortunes begin to decline with the entrance of the foreign monk who provides him with the aphrodisiac that will be his undoing.

82 Zhiyan zhai comments, "A strange name, a novel name. It must have an origin," ZY2, 88.

The confusion becomes even more pronounced in Chapters 62 and 63 when the garden bursts into a riot of activity to celebrate all the spring birthdays. Individual identities begin to collapse when Tanchun reels off a long list of characters who share the same birthday (62.680). During Baoyu's birthday party in Chapter 63, social and architectural boundaries simultaneously dissolve. Early in the chapter, one of the older serving women chastises Baoyu for his disrespect toward his mother and grandmother in addressing their maids by their personal names (695). Baoyu likewise ignores other crucial barriers when he has the garden gates opened in order to invite his girl cousins to join the private party long after they are supposed to have retired for the night. That night, at Baoyu's insistence, he, his maids, and the actresses arrange themselves intimately on his kang in informal clothes, and with the cousins begin to play drinking games little different from those played by courtesans when entertaining their patrons. Individual identities continue to implode: further coincidences regarding the ages and names of maids and cousins are revealed during the party, and Baoyu decrees that the actress Fangguan, who is so physically similar to him that they could be twins, should permanently take on a male identity. This season of partying comes to an abrupt and ominous end when the death of the family patriarch Jia Jing is announced.

Despite the general laxness toward names and titles on the part of the garden inhabitants, they are nonetheless quite attuned to the significance of naming. For example, Baoyu treats Jia Yun 贾芸, a distant relative and opportunist, with derision when he refers to him as "father" (37.384). The charges of impropriety brought against the maid Qingwen 萧雯 when she fails to refer to Baoyu by his title come early enough to warn Baoyu of the dangers of ignoring ritual forms (52.569). Tanchun sticks to a rigid definition of propriety and provokes a terrible row with her birthmother, a concubine, when she indignantly refuses to recognize the woman's brother as her uncle (55.601). Baocai reacts with disgust when Xue Pan's shrewish wife Xian Jingui orders that Xiangling 香菱 change her name to Qiuling 秋菱 (80.913). And finally, one of the reasons the Jia family loses imperial favor is the revelation that the unscrupulous parvenue Jia Yucun 贾雨村, with whom the novel begins and who has been enjoying Jia Zheng's patronage in his rapid rise to power, has been smuggling arms under his real name Jia Hua 贾化 (104.245).

A parallel can be drawn between the collapse of the social order due to a failure to observe ritual distinctions and the collapse of meaning within Cao Xueqin's use of complementary bipolarity. Although complementarity was a standard aesthetic feature of late im-
perial fiction, *Dream* stands apart from other works of fiction in that the extent to which the paired terms are mutually interwoven so that each term is implicated in its opposite to a degree that each loses its distinct meaning. Rather than stress how the aesthetic of bipolarity sharpens the distinctions between the poles of meaning (as Plaks has done), it is useful to look at the ways that Cao Xueqin’s aesthetics destabilize epistemological categories by collapsing the stable boundaries which separate linked terms. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the deliberate confusion of Zhēn (true) and Jiǎ (false), summed up in the couplet “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction is true, Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real,” 使真若假 假作真 真假却无为 有处有还无 (1.7).

Echoes of this paradox can be heard in the pairing of the two characters Zhen Shiyin 真士隐 and Jia Yucun in Chapter 1, and the Nanjing Zhen Baoyu and the Beijing Jia Baoyu. By establishing Zhen Baoyu and Jia Baoyu, the true and the false, as identical mirror images of the other, Cao subverts the claim of either to a higher truth. Similar repetitions of signs and density of aesthetic patterning throughout the novel further contribute to the ambiguity of meaning in the novel. The repetition of the character Yu 玉, jade, which Wang Guowei has glossed as a pun on desire, in the names of Jia Baoyu, Zhen Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, Lin Hongyu 林紅玉, Miaoyu, the actress Yuyuan (as well as the close homophones in the names of Jia Yun and Shi Xiangyun), creates a sprawling web of suggestive but vague connections. These ambiguous repetitions erase the possibility of drawing absolute distinctions between characters or categories of meaning. In place of a clear moral frame, Cao has substituted an aesthetically productive but ethically meaningless chain of verbal relationships.

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83 The ambiguity between the two Baoyus is only maintained in the eighty-chapter Shiâu 甲 manuscript; Zhen Baoyu’s moralizing lecture on the virtues of studying in Chapter 93 contradicts the careful vacillation between the two characters maintained in the original manuscript.
85 This point is reminiscent of Andrew Plaks’s analysis of real and symbolic incest in *Dream* and *Jin Ping Mei* where he argues that the sexual inversion in both novels is linked to the collapse of generational and kinship relationships and that the resulting implosion of order ultimately threatens the boundaries which define the self. See “The Problem of Incest in *Jin Ping Mei* and the Honglou meng,” in *Paradoxes of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed., Eva Hung (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1994), 123-46.
textual history of *Dream* is the nature of the relationship between the Precious Mirror chapters and the final eighty-chapter version of Cao Xueqin’s *Shitou ji*. The style of characterization in these chapters is strikingly different from that Cao used in the garden world; one scholar has described these chapters as melodramatic in contrast to the lyric quality of much of the rest of the novel.\(^9\) That the Precious Mirror chapters stand out from the rest of the novel is unquestionable; however, unlike most scholars, who concur that these chapters represent the vestiges of an older version of the text and do not accord with Cao’s final artistic vision, I contend that their inclusion is integral to the full meaning of the novel. Parallel to Jia Rui’s double-sided mirror, which simultaneously reflects two contradictory images of desire, the novel itself contains multiple and opposing constructions of desire. And as I discuss below, these two discourses on desire use markedly distinct codes for the representation of gender.

The values and iconographic markers of *qing* at the core of Grand Prospect Garden, the feminine, the sensual, the emotional, the private, the natural, the mutable, the incomplete, the illusory, are associatively connected to traditional *jin* symbolism. Historically, for those who sought to escape the hegemony of the Confucian bureaucratic order, the private space of the literati garden offered the possibility for the creation of an autonomous and authentic (non-ritualized) self. However, within the dynamics of the *juanyang* symbolic vocabulary, these utopic spaces posed a fundamental threat to the Confucian metaorder, which historically was defined as a *yang* term.\(^8\) In metaphysical discourse, *jin* and *yang* are posited as equal, mutually complementary and interdependent forces, where *yang* is the sun, the male, brightness, fire, heat, activity, etc., and *jin* is the moon, the female, darkness, water, cold, receptivity, etc. Procreation, the processes of change, and the full range of cosmic phenomena and human perceptions depend on a free and endless mixing of these two equal properties. At various points of the calendrical and life cycles, one or the other gains in force until it is dominant, but soon thereafter peaks and begins to recede until the other is dominant. In Confucian socioethical rhetoric, however, *yang* is posited as morally superior to any *jin* correlate. Attributed to the *Qian* hexagram 坤, the representa-


\(^8\) Wu-yeh Li categorizes the Precious Mirror chapters as melodramatic and closer to ‘popular’ vernacular narrative in its inspiration, nati五 energy’ (Enchantments, 253n.)

\(^7\) The anthropologist Steven Sangree has argued that the unchanging metaorder, posited as *yang*, hierarchically encompasses the myriad manifestations of *juanyang* interactions. See his *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 134.


\(^5\) Li, *The Classic of Changes*, 143.

chapters range from the widely held view that they are remnants of an earlier draft of the novel written by Cao Xueqin himself, to a dual-authorship theory which proposes that they were drawn from a pre-existent text written by someone else. A comment ascribed to Zhiyan Zhai 職業者, Red Inkstone, an intimate of Cao Xueqin who was closely associated with the composition of the novel, suggests that these materials formed a separate book:

A Mirror for the Romantic was the name of a book that Cao Xueqin once had. It had a preface by his brother Tanguan 族村. Now that Tanguan is dead, I am reminded of the old when I look at the new. That is why I have continued to use it.

This identification of A Precious Mirror for the Romantic as a separate text is repeated in the comments by the bannerman Yuru 大人 who, although not born until after Cao Xueqin's death, was related to him by marriage and claims to have seen early manuscripts of the novel. Recently, Dai Bufan has argued that Baoyu's sometimes contradictory behaviors stem from the competing visions of two authors. Liking the Precious Mirror chapters to a separate text left over from an earlier version of the novel or a separate text has allowed scholars to diminish the importance of these materials in order to promote the view that Cao strove to write a seamlessly integrated idyll about life in Grand Prospect Garden. While this might enhance the impression that Dream conforms to the aesthetics of the classic European novel, which historically has been understood as reflecting the coherent vision of the author, it robs Dream of some of its polyvalent richness.

Conceptualizing the Precious Mirror narrative materials as part of a vision, or even text, which predates and stands apart from the composition of the eighty-chapter Shitou Ji, forces the question of why Cao Xueqin did not excise or rework these materials in later revisions of the novel. After all, he did rewrite the details of Qin Keqing's suicide. Red Inkstone underscores the thematic importance of the Precious Mirror episode in his comments, "This is where the author states his purpose; since he wants to write about the seeds of qing, he attempts to write profoundly here." This is a writer's intention, to write about the seeds of qing in the novel. However, as has been frequently charged, some of the most glaring lapses in the unity of the text appear in the stylistic and chronological inconsistencies found in the You sisters' episode. The compositional integrity of this same episode must also be questioned, for, as Yu Pingbo has pointed out, Chapters 64 and 67 of the You Erjie episode are missing from the 1759 Jiniao and 1764 Gengchen editions. While the Precious Mirror materials do stand apart and may even form a separate narrative sequence, to borrow Yu Pingbo's words, I argue below that they are much more coherently integrated into the novel than is generally recognized and that they play an important structural role. In fact, I propose that their structural placement may have taken priority over the subsequent craft of fine-stitching the seams.

Structuring the Precious Mirror chapters is a numerological framework based on the number six. Within Yi jing numerology, six is not the numerical representation of pure yin when it has reached its greatest volatility. As I have argued elsewhere of Yi jing pulsation (Yi jing pulsation (A Country Codger's Words of Exposure), a novel written contemporaneously with Dream, and Jinghua yuan 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the Mirror), an early nineteenth-century novel greatly influenced by Dream, numerical "pulsing" based on the number six are an important compositional feature of Qing xinshu aesthetics. The use of yi jing numerology is a significant expression of didactic orthodoxy; the most egregious examples of moral transgressions are placed in the key yin Chapters 36 and 66. Although the use of yin numerology is much less prominent in Dream than these two novels, chapters associated with the yin number six nevertheless form a figural chain in which the Precious Mirror chapters, especially the You sisters episode in Chapters 63 to 69, provide critical links.

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98 ZYJ, 297.
100 Yu Pingbo 倪平伯, Jinghua yuan 鏡花緣 (Hong Kong: Tangdi chubanshe, 1993), 194.
That minor characters whose surnames pun on the number six, liu, suddenly become the narrative focal point in Chapters 6, 60-62, and 66, make it tempting to read these chapters as an intentional sequence. Indeed, the details of the incestuous web of relationships depicted in Chapters 65 and 66 form a nightmarish variation of the theme of desire introduced in Chapters 5 and 6. Baoyu's dream of the alluring nature of ying in the Land of Illusion is followed immediately by his failure to heed the Fairy Disenchantment's warning when he initiates sexual relations with his maid Xiren in Chapter 6. In contrast, Chapter 65 provides a textbook illustration of sexual desires gone wrong: it narrates the unsavory details of the openly tangled and incestuous relationships between the You sisters and Jia Lian, his cousin Jia Zhen and Zhen's son Rong, only shortly into the mourning period for Jia Zhen's father. The lack of propriety and discretion on the part of the masters is so flagrant that even the normally tolerant servants are disgusted. Chapter 66, however, marks a turning point in the narrative with the redemption of the fallen You Sanjie and her betrothed, the actor Liu Xianglian. The agent of their enlightenment is the pair of matched "mandarin duck and drake" swords, an epithet which refers to marital bliss, which Liu Xianglian had presented as an engagement token. The swords are ironically described as cold and gleaming pools of autumn waters, adjectives typically ascribed to mirrors but which also recall the cold pools of semen which conclude Baoyu and Jia Rui's dream sequences (6.59, 12.124). In contrast to Baoyu, who enters into an even deeper level of sensual illusion in Chapter 6, You Sanjie, who up until this point had been a caricature of decadence, is awakened by these symbolic mirrors and uses one to cut her throat as a sign of her renunciation of her past life. Liu Xianglian follows suit and slashes off his hair to mark his decision to become a monk. The joint enlightenment of You Sanjie and Liu Xianglian in Chapter 66 underscores the depth of Baoyu's failure to comprehend Fairy Disenchantment's lesson in Chapter 6. The figurative connection between Baoyu and Liu Xianglian is more evident that the two scenes should be read as parallel. Baoyu and Xianglian, who enjoy a suggestively intimate friendship and are both strikingly beautiful young men, share the title Second Master. Disturbingly, the two form a triad with Jia Lian, a third "Second Master," who is active in these chapters as lover of You Erjie and sponsor of Xiangan's engagement to You Sanjie. Baoyu's admission of "having fooled around with You Sanjie" at [the Ning Household] for a month further incriminates him in the transgressive sexuality detailed in these chapters (66.741). The final image of You Sanjie's ghost, holding the swords in one hand and a register of names in the other, on her way to the Land of Enchantment to guard over other ying-dulled ghosts, provides a last after-ripple of Baoyu's original dream (66.743).

The figurative repetition and numerological patterning which link Chapters 5 and 6 and Chapters 65 and 66 might also explain the placement of the Precious Mirror narrative in Chapter 12, midway between Baoyu's dream visit to the Land of Illusion and his sexual initiation in Chapters 5 and 6 and the architectural realization of his dream in the construction of Grand Prospect Garden in Chapters 17 and 18. Exactly six chapters from both of these sequences, the Precious Mirror episode is perfectly positioned to caution readers, and Baoyu himself, against getting caught in the illusory beauty of the sumptuous garden world. That the mirror in Chapter 12 was made by the same Fairy Disenchantment who introduced Baoyu to the pleasures of love in Chapter 5 makes the parallelism between the experiences of Baoyu and Jia Rui, not to mention You Sanjie, more compelling. Furthermore, the mirror motif associated with Jia Rui is repeated in the large disorienting mirror which stands at the entrance to Baoyu's residence in the garden.

Chapters 33 and 36 complete the sequence of yin chapters. Although 33 is not a true compound of six, Zhang Zhupo had identified Chapter 33 of Jiu Feng Mei as a key yin site, perhaps because numerically 33 is half of 66, and numerologically three and three total six.

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105 Yingyi Yu discusses Grand Prospect Garden as a recreation of the Land of Illusion in Longge shijie, 43-45. That Jia Rui's encounter with the precious mirror of love occurs in Chapter 12 seems an eerie concretion of the motif of twelves, first introduced in "The Twelve Beauties of Jining" 金瓶梅, one of the alternate titles for the novel listed in the prelogue and repeated throughout the Fairy Disenchantment's registers.

106 A further parallel between Baoyu and Jia Rui already mentioned is the corporeal rendering of the cold mirror in the pools of spent semen which punctuate the end of their dreams.

107 In his prefatory and interlinear commentary to Chapter 33 of Jiu Feng Mei, Zhang Zhupo three times stresses the connection between the number six and the yin principle (Zhang Zhupo Jiu Feng Mei, 2 vols., [Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1991], 492-93, 503). The introduction of the sexually
Provocatively, the events of Chapter 33 anticipate Chapter 66 in providing Baoyu a lesson on the dangers of failing to control his desires. In this chapter, the household watches in horror as Jia Zheng beats Baoyu bloody to punish him for his involvement in his mother’s maid Jinchuan’s suicide and for publicly lying about his relationship with the duchess’ slave, Jiang Yuhan. Despite this grim warning, Chapter 36, identified as a key yin chapter by the traditional commentator Zhang Xinzhi, takes Baoyu several steps deeper into the Land of Illusion.

Early in Chapter 36, Baoyu’s mother, Lady Wang, announces her decision to raise the maid Xiren, with whom Baoyu had initiated sexual relations in Chapter 6, to the informal status of chambermaid. Later that day, Baoyu falls into a deep afternoon sleep and dreams again; although this time the readers are not permitted to follow Baoyu into his dream vision, we overhear him arguing with several monks that his destiny is a marriage of jade and wood, not jade and gold, which indicates that he has reentered the mythic world of either the prologue or the Land of Enchantment (36.378). While he sleeps, a succession of girls who are either symbolically or physically paired with him appear in his bedroom: first Xiren, then Baochai, who takes her place at the head of Baoyu’s bed, and finally Daiyu and Shi Xianyun, who peek in from the window. Although the commentator Zhang Xinzhi’s insistence gloss on the rhinoceros horn whish by the side of Baoyu’s bed as some kind of sexual object (yangguang 陽光) seems hysterically overstated (such whisks are conventionally associated with enlightenment), Baochai’s presence next to Baoyu’s sleeping, undressed body is highly disquieting, particularly given that this reenactment of his visit to the Land of Illusion follows so quickly upon Baoyu’s complicity in Jinchuan’s suicide (Chapter 32) and Xiren’s plea that Baoyu be removed from the garden before some scandal arise (Chapter 34).

Life in the garden world truly comes into its own immediately after this with the ironic departure of Jia Zheng to serve as Commissioner of Education and the subsequent organization of the poetry club in Chapter 37. As Yu Pingbo has observed, the narrative stitching between Chapters 35 and 36 is uncharacteristically weak, as is the transition after the You sisters’ biography. The much noted gaps after Chapters 36 and 69 strongly suggest that Cao worked from a structural template that gave priority to placing these thematically linked scenes in key yin chapters over streamlining the narrative flow.

One of the distinctive features of the Precious Mirror chapters is the extent to which shrews displace the more typical sentimental and nuanced portrayals of women for which Dream is renowned. Underpinning the characterization of the Chinese shrew is a pun between the homophones, yin 雲, as in yin principle, and yin 淫, meaning excess. From at least the time of Dong Zhongshu, writers of history and fiction have exploited an associative trope which links loss of social order (in yinyang terms, the destabilization of the dominant yang to yin excess. Favorited motifs used to symbolize an excess of yin principle include female subversion of imperial and domestic power, moral dissolution, most often sexual (yinjing 淫蠱), floating (yinshui 淫水), unusually cold weather or other natural disasters, and the sighting of ghosts or other malevolent spirits. In moral narratives which warn of the danger of sexual attachment (se 色), excessive yin principle is conventionally embodied in the person of a shrew, a female character who is variably identified as a sexually disolute yinzi 淫婦, the violent hanfu 漢婦, or a “scattering” pōu 淚婦, whom Keith McMahon has described as one who “spills” or splashes. This last term seems one of the stereotypical outrages carried out by shrews in Ming-Qing fiction, the dumping of the polluting contents of her chamberpot on the heads of her enemies. Despite the lexical richness of terms, in practice it seems impossible to distinguish the three types of shrews; each is typically a beautiful young woman who uses her sexual attractiveness to seduce and dominate men. Her beautiful exterior, however, hides a cruel, ambitious, jealous, and degenerate nature.

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111 For more on this theme, see my “Inscribing the Essentials: Culture and the Body in Ming-Qing Fiction,” forthcoming in Ming Studies.
Whereas elsewhere in the novel the characterization of Wang Xifeng is softened through her affinity with Baoyu and her occasional kindnesses to others, in the Precious Mirror chapters her depiction is flattened to conform to the stereotype of the vicious and jealous femme fatale. For example, her entrapment of Jia Rui is filled with conventional motifs associated with shrews: she and her victim switch positions so that Xifeng symbolically "cloisters" Jia Rui within the locked gates of the Rong household. During their second tryst, the genealogical connection between shrews and fox spirits is evoked when Jia Rui jumps "like a hungry tiger" (chu yatan 捕虎一般) on a hooded figure he assumes to be Xifeng (12.21). During this same cold, dark night, a bucket of nightsoil is mysteriously dropped on Jia Rui's head (122). Jia Rui is eventually driven to his death by his obsession for Xifeng; reminiscent of Ximen Qing's gruesome, sexualized death at the hands of the shrew Pan Jinlian in Jin Ping Mei, Jia Rui too dies from ejaculating too much semen. The connection between transgressive sexual desire, shrews, and death is brought out even more starkly in the You sisters episode. So magnified is the yin trope in these chapters that four shrews compete for dominance: You Erjie, once the lover of Jia Zhen and now the unfaithful wife of Jia Lian; her sister You Sanjie, whose desire to control Zhen sexually and financially is unbound by any sense of propriety; Lian's new concubine, Qiu-tong 秋桐 (Autumn in Hawkes's translation), who is overtly vicious toward her rival Erjie; and Wang Xifeng, who wants nothing more than to destroy both Erjie and Qiu-tong. Xifeng's cunning ruthlessness reaches new heights in these chapters when she uses Qiu-tong to kill Erjie while she pretends great solicitude toward the new wife. As mentioned earlier, sexual depravity peaks in these yin chapters, and the explicit depictions of it shock in comparison to the indirect allusions made elsewhere in the novel.

Conclusion

The thematic and numerical correspondences based on the number six which resonate throughout the sequence of Chapters 5-6, 12, 17-18, 33, 36, and 63-66 strongly suggest that the Precious Mirror materials are much more carefully integrated into the novel than has been generally recognized. When read from a numerological perspective, these chapters, which share an unusually dense clustering of yin topoi, form a coherent narrative structure that shapes and frames the presentation of Grand Prospect Garden. Rather than being an earlier and cruder narrative kernel beyond which Cao Xueqin needed to progress stylistically and intellectually in order to write his masterpiece, the Precious Mirror materials should be read as an integral part of the novel's broad aesthetic vision in which contrasting views of desire are brought face to face. That gender and relationships between the sexes are treated differently in these strands of the novel is a result of the divergent discursive genealogies of the concepts and values associated with desire and masculine and feminine. The unusually monochromatic portraits of Xifeng and the You sisters and depiction of relations between the sexes as a crude life-and-death battle in the Precious Mirror chapters are paradigmatic expressions of orthodox rhetoric about the danger of desire. They provide a stylistic and ideological counterpart to the narrative mise-en-scène of qing in Baoyu's garden world. Perhaps because readers have been much more sympathetic to the lyric depictions of the characters clustered around Baoyu, they have been less able to acknowledge how the iconography they draw upon, though more aesthetically nuanced and textured, is as conventional as that used in the caricatures of lust and cruelty in the Precious Mirror chapters. Comparable to the multiple reflections contained in Jia Rui's mirror, a full rendering of the shifting and contradictory meanings associated with the polysemous concept qing could only be achieved when the morally and aesthetically regenerative power of qing is recognized as simultaneous to and inseparable from its ability to threaten ritual order. The warning of the Fairy Disenchanted makes it clear that Baoyu's delicate "lust of the mind" (yiyin 意淫) is genealogically related to lustful desire (5.57).

Unifying the Precious Mirror chapters with the other narrative strands interwoven through Dream of the Red Chamber is a broad thematic exploration of the highly contested concept of qing. The multiple gender codes used in the novel are integrally related to the shifting ideological and aesthetic meanings ascribed to desire. The lyric presentation of qing predominant in the novel appropriates a variety of late imperial markers of idealized femininity, including physical beauty, emotional and aesthetic sensitivity, physical frailty, and modest purity, as attributes of qing which leads to the feminization of all who live within the garden walls. In keeping with the aesthetics of the
late Ming cult of *qing* in which illusion, doubling, and inversions were prized, distinctions between male and female are repeatedly reversed and blurred. Similar to the troop of actresses who assume new genders at will, the masters also don gendered masks which enable them to perform their affinity for *qing*. The fluid gender roles and quick succession of bonds of attractions, culminating in a dazzling array of parallels and correspondences in the garden world, contrast sharply with the harsh and deadly relations between the sexes in the Precious Mirror chapters, where the men are men and the women are dangerous ciphers of desire.

Within the context of Qing *xianshu* fiction, *Dream* is not unusual for the way that multiple constructions of gender, products of competing discourses on desire and self, circulate simultaneously within the same text. Most works of fiction from this period reveal a similarly ambivalent yearning to achieve the social stability inherent in Confucian orthopraxy while allowing for the possibility of expressive and moral authenticity promised by the counterhegemonic cult of *qing*. Although Cao Xueqin's use of gender complementarity may be more complex than other eighteenth-century authors, his masterpiece demonstrates that there is no one way to "read" gender in late imperial fiction. The subtle manipulation of gendered identities was one of the arsenal of techniques available to authors to shape both structure and thematic content of their fictional texts as brought out by associative connections between masculine and feminine identities, *yin*/*yang* numerology, and late imperial debates on human nature. That the texts woven from these various strands of meaning and form resist simple analysis reveals the limitations of our own cultural and academic understandings of gender.

**BUT I NEVER LEARNED TO WALTZ: THE "REAL" AND IMAGINED EDUCATION OF A COURTESAN IN THE LATE QING**

**BY**

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"[A] writing tablet signifies a woman, since it receives the imprints of all kinds of letters."

**Abstract**

This article illustrates the complex web of agency, voice, compliance, and resistance that men and women alike wove and unraveled (re)presenting fictional and nonfictional versions of the education and the life-cycle of courtesans at the turn of last century. On the one hand, it shows how Chinese male novelists appropriate the long-standing cliche of the courtesan to expand (albeit in a limited way) and exoticize the horizons of female subjectivity. On the other hand, it reveals how, thanks to the explosive development of print culture begun in the late nineteenth century, the courtesan herself could step in to redefine those horizons and to problematize her role as a "modern" heroine.

For some years now, a potent Chinese cultural icon has been haunting the works of many outstanding Western sinologists: the courtesan, better yet, the "Courtesan." She has played the part of the diva in papers, articles, and books, spanning from the Tang to

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