

Jia Baoyu and Essential Feminine Purity

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The main protagonist of Cao Xueqin's Qing dynasty novel *Honglou meng*, is the young, eccentric Jia Baoyu. The invocation of notions of eccentricity and mental derangement within the novel has led to a variety of scholarly analyses. This current article will focus on the contemporary critical perception of one of the most outstanding and consistent examples of Baoyu's aberrant behaviour — that being his preference for girls over boys and the feminine over the masculine. This particular eccentricity and its chronicling within the novel has led some critics to suggest that Cao, through Jia Baoyu, was expressing his objection to the treatment of women in his lifetime. For example Zhao Rong wrote in 1982 that the main thread of the novel is the question of the position of women in traditional Chinese society.¹ Hu Shijing reiterated this claim with his brief article entitled "A Cry of Inequality for the Women Who Suffer Oppression".² Han Huiqiang took a broader perspective of a similar conception by declaring that *Honglou meng* is a treatise that declares the rights of individuals to freedom of love and marriage partners.³ This current article will reveal how Jia Baoyu's eccentricity, that is his preference for girls over boys, is not an expression of concern at the place of women in his society but rather part of an elaborate traditional discourse which has strong and identifiable historical precedents.⁴

This article will first describe how Jia Baoyu expresses his preference for the feminine over the masculine with particular focus on his most famous statement on the pure essence of humanity being concentrated in the female of the species. It will then proceed to trace the literary origins and historical precedents of this statement by providing the translated text of its earliest known appearance. Through a discussion of both the earlier text and *Honglou meng* itself the article will then reveal how the novel has reinforced a traditional view of the place of women in Chinese society by invoking the feminine as either a moral mirror

¹ Zhao Rong, "Hunyin ziyou de nahan—nannü pingdeng de ouge", *Guiyang shiyuan xuebao*, I (1982), p. 59.

² Hu Shijing, "Wei shou yapo funü ming bu ping", *Wenxue bao* (23 June, 1983), p. 3.

³ Han Huiqiang, "*Honglou meng* zhong de xing guannian ji wenhua yiyi", *Beijing daxue yanjiusheng xuekan* 1 (1988), pp. 77-82.

⁴ This current discussion centres on the historical precedents for Baoyu's veneration of women and readers interested in a discussion of the portrayal of women within the novel itself are directed to my article "Women in *Honglou meng*: Prescriptions of Purity in the Femininity of Qing dynasty China", *Modern China* (forthcoming, October, 1990).

for a declining male society or as an aid to male religious enlightenment.

BAOYU'S VENERATION OF THE FEMININE

The novel has provided us with many examples of how Jia Baoyu has elevated women over men. On his first birthday his disposition was tested by his father, Jia Zheng. The infant Baoyu was presented with the choice of several objects and "he stretched out his little hand and started playing with some women's things — combs, bracelets, pots of rouge and the like".⁵ Later on we read of Baoyu's statement: "Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud. When I'm with girls I feel fresh and clean but when I'm with boys I feel stupid and nasty."⁶

Even Jia Baoyu's double Zhen Baoyu had a similar predilection for girls. Insisting on having girls to accompany him in his studies Zhen Baoyu would also shout the word "girls" to alleviate the pain of beatings. Leng Zixing tells the readers that Zhen would often instruct his pages on the correct handling of the word "girls".

The word "girl" is very precious and very pure. It is much more rare and precious than all the rarest beasts and birds and plants in the world. So it is most extremely important that you should never violate it with your coarse mouths and stinking breath. Whenever you need to say it, you should first rinse your mouths out with clean water and scented tea.⁷

Not only does the novel sanctify the feminine through the eccentric behaviour of both Zhen and Jia Baoyu but it casts doubt on Jia Baoyu's own sexuality.⁸ Jia Baoyu is often described as being effeminate by both critics and other characters in the novel. You Sanjie's description of him in Chapter 66 is instructive.

I suppose you could call him effeminate. Whether he is eating or talking or moving about, there is certainly something rather girlish about his manner.

⁵ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 76. All excerpts from the novel come from the translation in five volumes collectively titled *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes and John Minford. Volume 1: *The Golden Days* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1979). Volume 2: *The Crab-Flower Club* (1979). Volume 3: *The Warning Voice* (1981). Cao Xueqin and Gao E, Volume 4: *The Debt of Tears* (1982). Cao Xueqin and Gao E, Volume 5: *The Dreamer Wakes* (1986). I have followed their lead in the translation of the characters' names. For example Baoyu remains Baoyu while Jia Mu has been translated as Grandmother Jia. I have taken the liberty of removing the hyphen between syllables as its use is not customary in Hanyu pinyin—Bao-yu thus becomes Baoyu. For my own reference I have used the four volume edition of *Honglou meng* published in Beijing by Renmin Wenxue in 1973.

⁶ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 76.

⁷ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 80.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Baoyu's sexuality see my article "Gender Imperatives in *Honglou meng*: Baoyu's Bisexuality" forthcoming in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 12 (1990).

That comes from spending nearly all his time in the women's quarters with no men around.⁹

His knowledge of the composition of his maidservants' and cousins' makeup and his willingness to wash their clothing are quite eccentric and undesirable qualities for a young gentleman who is supposed to concentrate on his study of the Confucian classics. At one point Baoyu is spoken of as if he should have been born a girl. In Chapter 78 when pondering her grandson's aberrant behaviour Grandmother Jia comments,

Perhaps he was a maid himself in some past life. Perhaps he ought to have been a girl.¹⁰

Ping-leung Chan's critique of 1980 described the friendship that Baoyu forms with Qin Zhong and Liu Xianglian as being based on a "mutual femininity".¹¹ Other critics have found his effeminate behaviour repulsive and have described him derisively as a homosexual. Ma Qin wrote that his relationship with Qin Zhong shows that Baoyu was a homosexual and therefore had a "decadent personality".¹² A later view presented by the young woman critic Fan Yang has even questioned the extent to which we can call Jia Baoyu a man.¹³ Baoyu's embracing of the feminine and his veneration of young girls is so thorough that even his own sexuality comes into question.

The most often quoted evidence of the sanctification of girls and denigration of boys in the novel is Jia Baoyu's declaration in Chapter 20. It is upon this central comment that the current article will focus, as within its lines are the seeds of the deconstruction of the link between the seemingly unrelated symbols of purity and pollution, veneration and disdain.

As a result of this upbringing [among girls], he [Baoyu] had come to the conclusion that the pure essence of humanity was concentrated in the female of the species and that males were its mere dregs and off-scourings. To him, therefore, all members of his own sex without distinction were mere brutes who might just as well not have existed.¹⁴

This comment has led some critics, in both the West and China, to suggest that Cao Xueqin is directly challenging the Confucian social order which upheld the often cited homily "elevate boys and denigrate girls" (*nan zun nü bi*). Liao Zhang'an in his article in the nationally

⁹ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 3, Ch. 66, p. 294.

¹⁰ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 3, Ch. 78, p. 556.

¹¹ Ping-leung Chan, "Myth and Psyche in *Hung-lou meng*" in Winston L. Y. Yang and Curtis P. Adkins (eds.), *Critical Essays on Chinese Fiction* (The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 1980), p. 169.

¹² Ma Qin, "Tongxing lian—Jia Baoyu tuifei xingge de mingzheng", *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao* (she ke ban), 2 (1984), pp. 56-7.

¹³ Fan Yang, *Yang gang de huichen* (Guoji wenhua chubanshe, Beijing, 1988), pp. 72-3.

¹⁴ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 20, pp. 407-8.

circulated *Guangming ribao* said: "The majority of researchers on *Honglou meng* agree that this [Baoyu's statement on pure essence] is not simply a temporary, deranged notion that Baoyu had seized upon but rather a direct confrontation with the morality that would 'elevate boys and denigrate girls'."¹⁵ Angela Jung Palandri declared that Cao Xueqin's idealization "is against the traditional Chinese concept of women."¹⁶ To the contrary, as we will see, the idealization of women has a long traditional history.

The statement that females are the embodiment of pure essence and males the mere dross is not singularly credited to Jia Baoyu. Moreover when one examines the mechanisms of oppression alongside the history of this maxim it is evident that the "feminist" implications for Cao Xueqin's text are far from unqualified. Indeed exaltation is intricately linked to disdain, for, whatever the form of veneration, it still ensures that women are the Other for the masculine Self. Mary Douglas' work on notions of the socially polluted has revealed how the sacred is indifferntiated from the unclean in the same way as the pure is indifferntiated from the polluted.¹⁷ Veneration becomes abjection through the indifferntiation of the sacred and the unclean. Linguistic traces help draw this concept into a specifically sinological realm. The word for goddess (*shenniü*) was once the same word for prostitute. The virgin and the whore are two sides of the same symbolic order which maintained and justified the continued dominance of men in traditional China.

LITERARY ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS FOR THE VENERATION OF WOMEN

The earliest citing of the phrase "the purest essences of the universe are concentrated in the female of the species" (*Tian di jian lingshu zhi qi zhi zhong yu nüzi*) is located in the *Tan sou* written by Pang Yuanying during the Southern Song dynasty.¹⁸ To follow is a translation of the

¹⁵ Liao Zhong'an, "Honglou meng sixiang suyuan", *Guangming ribao*, 3 December, 1977. Moss Roberts has likewise described the novel as "deeply feminist". Moss Roberts, "Neo-Confucian Tyranny in the *Dream of the Red Chamber: A Critical Note*", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 10, 1 (January-March, 1978), p. 63.

¹⁶ Angela Jung Palandri, "Women in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*", *Literature East and West*, 12, 2-4 (1968), p. 229.

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966), pp. 7-10.

¹⁸ Pang Yuanying is recorded in the *Ci yuan* as having achieved the rank of prime minister (*zaixiang*) with the *Tan sou* being his most well known book. It is a single volume account of the miscellaneous affairs of the reigns of Ningzong (1195-1224) and Lizong (1225-1264) of the Southern Song. There appears to be considerable confusion about when Pang lived. Two sources place him in the Northern Song around the reign of Shenzong (1068-1085). Weng

text which records the interaction between a student Xie Ximeng and his philosopher-teacher Lu Xiangshan.¹⁹ Inclusion of the entire text prevents the concealment of the complexities of sexual symbolism elucidated in the tale for it is these that are of supreme importance to this present discussion.

Lu Xiangshan (1139-1193) was a Neo-Confucian philosopher of considerable influence. His Confucianism was idealist, based primarily on a Mencian foundation, and directly opposed to that of Cheng-Zhu rationalism. For several hundred years these two schools, the idealistic School of Mind and the rationalistic School of Principle, were the two major branches of Song Neo-Confucianism. Indeed the division between the two schools has resurfaced again in the twentieth century with Feng Youlan's *New Rational Philosophy* following the School of Principle and Xiong Shili's *New Doctrine of Consciousness-Only* expanding from the idealist branch.²⁰ Lu Xiangshan's philosophical teachings disdained lengthy, literary deliberation and concentrated instead on the propagation of a doctrine that would guide individual students in their everyday life. Wing-tsit Chan describes Lu as advocating "the simple, easy, and direct method of recovering one's original good nature, by having a firm purpose, by establishing the nobler part of one's nature, and by coming to grips with fundamentals"²¹ while Zhu Xi was an advocate of lengthy study and commentary on written texts.

Xie Ximeng, Lu's student, is a less famous personage. He is noted in the *Song shi ji shi* as coming from Huangyan in Taizhou. He passed the highest imperial examinations in 1184 and proceeded to successfully hold several official postings. The translated text from the *Tan sou* is as follows:

While at Lin'an Xie Ximeng was improperly familiar with some prostitutes. Xiangshan of the Lu clan berated him saying: "When a scholar and a gentleman passes time with base prostitutes how can he then not be shamed by the Confucian ethical code?" Ximeng apologized respectfully and pleaded that he would not offend again. Later on Xie went whoring at a brothel again

Tung-wen's *Répertoire des dates des hommes célèbres des Song* (Mouton and Co., Paris, 1962) notes that Pang Yuanying lived sometime after 1082 and Yang Jialuo's *Zhongguo wenxuejia da cidian* (Shijie shuju, Taipei, 1974) places him around 1078. These dates fail to account for the nature of the *Tan sou* which deals with events and personages that do not appear until a century later. It is possible that the *Tan sou* referred to by Liao Zhong'an was indeed from the Southern Song and was a revised and edited version of the earlier Northern Song text.

¹⁹ The excerpt from the *Tan sou* is quoted in Liao Zhong'an's article mentioned above. The translation is my own.

²⁰ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 751.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

and when Xiangshan heard of this he repeated his reservations. Xie replied: "Is this not a specially recommended building in the records?" Xiangshan asked with pleasure which text he was referring to as he himself was unaware of it: "How are brothels recorded?" Xie then pointed to the opening line: "From the deaths of Sun, Kang, Ji and Yun,²² the noble spirit of bravery is not concentrated in the males of the world, but is concentrated in the females." Xiangshan had no reply.

There are several points that need elaboration. The timing of the recorded conversation is of importance to the current article and will be discussed first. The Song dynasty (960-1279) is recognized as being the period during which the position of women underwent dramatic changes. The Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism propagated a highly puritanical form of an already moralistic Confucian order.²³ Many of the oppressive practices highlighted in later years, such as footbinding and widow chastity, were widely encouraged during this dynasty. That Cao Xueqin quotes from a Song dynasty text is enlightening when one considers that it was the revival of Confucianism (particularly in the form of the restrictive Cheng-Zhu school) which resulted in the Qing dynasty being described as follows: "The values and institutions which reinforced the subordination of women in China were never stronger than during the Qing dynasty."²⁴ Vociferous expressions of the purity and superiority of women occur most frequently in periods and cultures where their position is the most restricted.

Moreover, as was stated earlier, the debate about the frequenting of brothels between Lu Xiangshan and Xie Ximeng has a lengthy and important political and philosophical background. The *Tan sou* tale of a student invoking "the records" as justification of his frequenting a brothel, makes the reader aware that the followers of Zhu Xi, who prided themselves on their extensive literary knowledge through lengthy periods of textual study, clearly looked down upon the idealist school which rejected textual study. Lu Xiangshan then is herewith being ridiculed for his weakness in textual knowledge through a facetious joke. In the context of the historically divisive debate between Lu Xiangshan and Zhu Xi, Xie Ximeng's rejection of his teacher's practical advice for living and his invocation of textual evidence can imply that he had adopted the opposing school's doctrines. That our

²² Sun, Kang, Ji and Yun were all prominent members of the same Lu clan that Xiangshan was related to. Lu Sun and Lu Kang were famous generals of the Eastern Wu while Lu Ji and Lu Yun were literati during the Western Jin.

²³ For a discussion of how Song philosophy developed a more puritanical view of the position of women see Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* (Shangwu yinshuguan, Taipei, 1986), pp. 129-72.

²⁴ Paul S. Ropp, "The Seeds of Change: Reflections on the Condition of Women in Early and Mid Ch'ing", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Autumn, 1976), p. 5.

contemporary redactor Liao Zhang'an can simultaneously praise Xie Ximeng for opposing Lu Xiangshan the "teacher of *lixue*" and yet also condemn the Cheng-Zhu philosophy which ensured women's lowly place in the social scale is fundamentally contradictory given the existence of the rift between these two schools. While we have no way of predicting what the position of women would have been if Lu Xiangshan's School of the Mind had prevailed over the Cheng-Zhu school it is clear that the Qing dynasty exegesis of the latter school of Neo-Confucianism was fundamentally misogynist.

Another matter of importance to the current argument is that it is no matter of mere chance that Xie Ximeng and Lu Xiangshan's evocation of feminine virtue should take place within the vicinity of a brothel. The place of decadence and degradation juxtaposes neatly with the notion of female nobility in an invocation of the inextricable relationship within the symbolic order between the sacred and the profane. This juxtaposition of notions of purity within places of great pollution is echoed in *Honglou meng* through the construction of Grand View Garden. Yu Yingshi has noted that Grand View Garden is an island of purity in the sea of squalor and dirt that is the outside world. He has also noted that the Garden was built on land from both the Ning and Rong mansions. The Rong branch's donation was a section of Jia She's compound and the Ning contribution included the site of the Celestial Fragrance Pavilion. Both these sites had sexually promiscuous and licentious histories. Jia She is described by the circumspect maid Aroma as being a "sex maniac" and Celestial Fragrance Pavilion is the building where Qin Keqing's incestuous relations with Jia Zhen were conducted. It is in this same building that she later hung herself. Yu writes:

He [Cao] wanted us to bear in mind that in fact the greatest purity was born of the greatest impurity. If the novel were completed by Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in, or if a complete version were handed down to us intact, we would certainly be told that the ultimate fate of that great purity is to return to impurity.²⁵

This perceptive statement reveals quite clearly the connection between the sacred and the profane that Cao Xueqin was invoking in his novel. Thereby the implications for the previously eulogized young women are grim. If these young girls are hailed as the embodiments of the "purest essences in the universe" then they must complete the circle and return to the most impure essences. Indeed the character of Adamantina is symbolic of this very potentiality. Known for her "over pure" personal habits the young and arrogant nun is eventually abducted by a band of hoods and forced into a life of what is assumed to be prostitution. The distance between the extremely pure and the extremely

²⁵ Yu Yingshi, "The Two Worlds of *Hung-lou meng*", *Renditions*, 2 (Spring, 1974), p. 13.

impure is, within the traditional Chinese symbolic order, not a very great distance at all.

Cao provides the reader with an analysis of the process of exchange between pure and impure essences within corporeal and incorporeal matter at the very beginning of the novel. In the attempt at providing a possible reason for Jia Baoyu's eccentric behaviour to Leng Zixing, Jia Yucun describes at length how metaphysical science and moral philosophy combine to elucidate the balance or imbalance in the ethereal essences that all human beings are endowed with. Yucun explains that while most people are born with a balanced mixture of good and evil some exceptional beings who manifest "exceptional goodness or exceptional badness are produced by the operation of beneficent or noxious ethereal influences".²⁶

The good cosmic fluid with which the natures of the exceptionally good are compounded is a pure, quintessential humour; whilst the evil fluid which infuses the natures of the exceptionally bad is a cruel perverse humour.²⁷

Some of the cosmic fluid that is unable to lodge itself in human beings, we are assured, floats around in the air or dwells in the bottom of ravines. The good and bad essences lock in combat and the end result of the battle is the forcing of the evil humour to fall onto some random person. These people then are capable of great virtue or great crimes and will certainly never be ordinary imperial subjects. Leng Zixing summarizes with a couplet,

Zhang victorious is a hero,
Zhang beaten is a lousy knave.

This either/or dichotomy links directly into the pure/polluted binary as it related to the female characters of the novel. What many critics fail to notice however is that it is not simply the distinction of either men or women that Cao is proposing. He does not in fact eulogize all women but specifically young unmarried girls — the pure virgins. Indeed he loudly disclaims the value of married women as we see in his conversation with the gatekeepers of Grand View Garden.

Strange, the way they get like this when they marry! It must be something in the male that infects them. If anything they end up even worse than the men!

In reply the gatekeepers say with a laugh,

In that case all girls must be good and all women must be bad. You don't really believe that do you?

To which Baoyu answers, "That's precisely what I *do* believe."²⁸

Thus we see that the exceptionally pure young girls that Baoyu has so consistently eulogized throughout the novel do indeed become exceptionally bad once they absorb the infection of male essence in marriage. There is no alternative to this pattern for the female characters

²⁶ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 76.

²⁷ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 77.

²⁸ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 3, Ch. 77, p. 534.

other than by dying through illness or by committing a virtuous suicide.

The excerpt from the *Tan sou* thereby succinctly reveals the link between the venerated woman and the debased whore. The disparity between these two types of women is but a seeming contradiction as the discursive practice of the time neatly subsumes the qualities of one into the other. Liao Zhang'an's commentary of the piece unwittingly reveals the contradictory and necessarily flexible nature of the signifying system which conceals the gender hierarchy. On the one hand Liao states that the extract is "a mammoth attack on the guiding principles of feudal ethics which denigrate women and elevate men" and yet on the other he declares that Lu Xiangshan would never have expected to hear himself described as worth less than a prostitute by his own student.²⁹ So, is the excerpt from the *Tan sou* and the often alluded to phrase about the essential purity of women really a piece which attacks the oppression of women? One doubts the accuracy of Liao's assertions of Cao's "feminist" intent. Liao himself has elaborated on the alternative negative side of the binary — the debased woman as whore. Why would Xiangshan be insulted if the symbolic order did not regard women as prostitutes with contempt. Here the central ambiguity is uncovered and we see the dual force of women as a linguistic sign. She is the symbol of purity and sanctity as well as the symbol of pollution and degradation.

Is Cao Xueqin really addressing the question of the woman's place in traditional China by elevating his young female characters to the position of the most essentially pure? If the answer is negative then what are his reasons for invoking the powerful sign of "woman" in his novel? There are two possible solutions that would account for the veneration of women in the text *Honglou meng* — one with a Confucian tendency and the other with a Daoist moral. The first is that Cao was using women as moral mirrors for a declining male society and supporting this is the second solution that he was upholding the feminization of the male as a path to religious enlightenment.

MORAL MIRRORS AND PATHS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Throughout Chinese history women have been held up as moral mirrors for male society. When the menfolk fail, tales of virtuous women abound. T'ien Ju-kang explains that when "the ideal pattern of Han cultural life was deteriorating... the cults of fidelity and loyalty were elaborately prescribed and held up to glorify the steadfast purity of the fairer sex and at the same time to ridicule men for their pitiful lack

²⁹ Liao Zhong'an, "Honglou meng sixiang suyuan", *Guangming ribao*, 3 December, 1977.

of courage.”³⁰ Lu Xun described the phenomenon as it became manifested during the May Fourth era in his essay “My Views on Chastity and Self-martyrdom”. Here he states that the reason why purity is only proposed for women was because Chinese men were unable to withstand the onslaught from the West and thereby encouraged women to sacrifice themselves in their place.³¹

That Cao Xueqin’s young female characters are all morally and intellectually superior to their male cousins and brothers may merely indicate to the reading audience the depth of the mire that the Jia family had sunk into. Fan Yang has noted that a symbol of the decline in the Jia family’s fortunes is the depiction of the women being stronger than the men. She quotes the well-known homily “when Yin is superior Yang is decaying” to justify this assertion.³² In Chapter 2 of the novel we hear Leng Zixing’s description of the Jia family: “The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next”³³ while the girls of that family are “very fine girls”.³⁴ Cao could indeed be following the later historical precedent of presenting women as moral mirrors for degenerating men in his masterpiece *Honglou meng* by using the ascendance of the female as a symbol of impending chaos and decline rather than following the incipient “anti-patriarchal” trend found among other literati of his time. One of Cao’s contemporaries Yuan Mei (1716-1799) was famed for leading the feminist movement in traditional China and given a comparative study of their writings one would hesitate to credit Cao Xueqin with Yuan Mei’s radical sentiments.³⁵ Yuan Mei was a direct contemporary of Cao Xueqin although he outlived Cao by thirty odd years (Cao was born around 1715 and died in 1763).

In the previous section we saw how venerated females eventually become loathsome and polluted. For Jia Baoyu the young eccentric gentleman, and another individual imbued with what Jia Yucun has called exceptional cosmic essences, the solution is not as definitively either purity or pollution. Through his absorption of the feminine essences Jia Baoyu is indeed effeminate but he is also unwittingly growing closer to a Daoist enlightenment. *Yin yang* cosmology has

³⁰ T’ien Ju-kang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch’ing Times* (E. J. Brill Leiden, 1988), p. 17.

³¹ Lu Xun, (under the pseudonym Tang Si) “Wo zhi jielie guan”, *Xin qingnian*, 5, 2 (August, 1918).

³² Fan Yang, *Yang gang de huichen*, p. 62. The phrase is “Yin sheng er yang shuai”.

³³ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 74.

³⁴ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 81.

³⁵ For a discussion of the work and thoughts of Yuan Mei and other mid to late Qing feminist thinkers see Lin Yutang, “Feminist Thought in Ancient China”, *T’ien Hsia Monthly*, 1, 2 (September, 1935), pp. 127-50.

always maintained the flexibility of corporeal sexuality and Daoist religious practice encouraged the adoption of femininity as a sign of the rejection of passion which would lead to enlightenment. Charlotte Furth explains: "Chinese cosmology based on the interaction of the forces of *yin* and *yang* made sexual difference, a relative and flexible bipolarity in natural philosophy."³⁶ This path to enlightenment and freedom from the distinctions of the pure/polluted is a singularly male path as described by the text *Honglou meng*. Femininity as described in the novel is thereby sacred only before marriage and only when it leads to male religious enlightenment. Beyond these confines femininity is polluted.

CONCLUSION

Thus it is clear that the value of the text *Honglou meng* should not be judged solely on the grounds of whether or not it expresses an anti-patriarchal sentiment. Indeed, Cao's novel would fail to meet the criteria if this was the frame of the judgement. *Honglou meng* can indeed reveal to contemporary readers a great deal about the nature of femininity and the invocation of women as signifiers within the broad discourse of Qing dynasty Chinese culture — as we have seen with the development of the theme of the sacred and the profane, the venerated and the disdained in the foregoing discussion. We should not however expect the novel to satisfy our current ideological requirements when the text belongs to another period in history with its own ideological framework.

The desire by contemporary Chinese critics to find a hallowed literary text that is secure from political book burnings has had a dramatic impact on the textual analysis of *Honglou meng*. While the overt influence of politics on literature was a feature most commonly associated with the Cultural Revolution it is evident that the critiques of the 1980s are still hindered by the need to defend favourite authors and characters from damaging slurs based on the current political criteria. This study has shown us some of the problems that can arise from this simplistic search for contemporary political messages within a polyphonic text of a different political and social era. Misreadings of the text can perhaps in these cases only serve to reveal the nature of current intellectual thought in China today.

Finally, if these critics are genuinely concerned with the position of women in Chinese society then great caution is needed as to how the concern is expressed. If the contemporary culture of China imitates the concept of the female sex's purity and sanctity in a manner similar to that of Cao Xueqin then there will certainly be no improvement in the

³⁶ Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China", *Late Imperial China*, 9, 2 (December, 1988), p. 1.

lives of women. The indications are that the symbol of female purity (and thereby female pollution) does indeed remain a vibrant discursive sign within contemporary China's intellectual world.