# None *The Red Chamber* Message Hears: Art as Living Philosophy

*Zhou Ruchang*

ABSTRACT

In the first chapter of the 18th century Chinese novel, *Honglou meng* the narrator laments that no one hears the special message of this work (誰解其中味). I will argue that *Honglou meng's* core theme (embodied in the work's main character, Jia Bao-yu) is that of *gong qing* (公情, love and compassion to all). To Cao Xueqin, *qing* was not just a belief, but a living concept and philosophy inextricably connected to context and the manner of using and giving *qing* (called *ti tie* 貼). This paper also examines several longstanding misconceptions about *qing* and the novel itself.

KEY WORDS

*qing*, goodness, Confucianism, truth, beauty

## I.

When discussing the complicated connection between Chinese culture and *Honglou meng*,[1] one must keep three things in mind. First, the novel highlights many aspects of this culture in a thoroughly encyclopedic manner unique in world literature. Second, through fiction, Cao brings to the fore the Chinese way of thinking (which is both analytic and syncretic). Thirdly, the central theme of *Honglou meng* seems to be *qing* (love, empathy, kindness) since it is through this term that larger questions of the meaning and value of life—Who are we? How is it that we have come to be? What kind of life is the truest, kindest, and most beautiful?—emerge. In articulating a conception of *qing*, Cao draws upon many sources, among them Lao Zi.

The character *xi* (析, to analyze) literally means using an axe to split a block of wood. For Lao Zi the entire universe is like "a giant block of wood" (大樸) split into *qi* (器), all the utensils human beings have invented from the block. Lao Zi reminds us not to forget about the block though we use the tools created from the splinters. For Lao Zi, neglecting the origin of things destroys a fundamental unity and causes chaos. Cao uses this observation to comment on the Chinese penchant for both analysis and synthesis: to analyze in detail without losing sight of the origin of all manifestation, and to synthesize rather than focus on the distinction between things. The Chinese idiom "to remain essentially the same despite all apparent changes" (萬變不離其宗) represents well this characteristically Daoist way of thinking. The difference between Cao Xueqin and Lao Zi on this point is that Cao

didn't stress the negative affects of *qi* (器, tools), but rather inherited and developed the dichotomy and symmetry theory of Lao Zi. Cao Xueqin formulated a philosophy that saw humankind as naturally endowed with both good and evil simultaneously. For Cao, the principle of "yin and yang" (陰陽) meant that while one of these aspects might be ascendant, it remained fundamentally to a universal unity at the root of being.

Nothing is absolute, thought Cao Xueqin. Along with his close friend Red Inkstone (脂硯齋), Cao Xueqin found the road to happiness is strewn with setbacks—blemishes in an otherwise perfect thing (好事多磨, 美中不足), and they admitted that in reality opposites (such as beauty and ugliness and good and evil) always accompanied one another. Cao held the same attitude towards poverty and wealth, honor and disgrace, life and death, male and female, and all other apparent polarities. At the beginning of *Honglou meng*, Cao Xueqin noted that "truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal is real" (假做真是真亦假, 無為有時有還無) (SS 1: 55; HLM 1: 10). This dialectical thinking was employed throughout the entire novel.

This dialectic can also be seen at work in the analysis of Chinese herbal medicines in the *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Ben Cao Gang Mu*, 本草綱目). Each ingredient functions uniquely (generally speaking being either cool, hot, balanced, nourishing, evaporative, restraining, lubricating, and so on), and is also either supplementary or restraining in relation with other ingredients. In this relational model, each element has a individual function, yet to establish and maintain balance and thereby achieve *tai he* (太和), the utmost wholeness and harmony which is the essence of health and healing, ingredients must work in mutual conjunction. Similarly, the *I Ching* (易經, *Book of Changes*) classifies all the objects of the material world as *ba gua* (八卦) in yin-yang theory—though these material manifestations in the end constitute a supreme unity (太一) because they participate in the utmost wholeness or *yuan* (元).

Each of the one hundred and eight girls Cao Xueqin vividly depicts were, he stressed, "naturally endowed with both good and evil"

and had "little talent but sufficient kindness" that remained "essentially the same despite all apparent changes." The poem at the beginning of the Qi Xu version of *Honglou meng* states that without any pattern of interplay between yin and yang illusion appears real (陰陽交結變無倫, 幻境生時即是真). Here, Cao actually refers to the human ability to analyze and synthesize at the same time.

After observing the manifestations of the universe with his wise and keen poetic eye, Cao Xueqin found enlightenment, which gave rise to some of the questions noted above (Where are we from? What are the unique characteristics of humankind?) In chapter 5 of *Dream of the Red Chamber* this preoccupation takes the following form: when the world first from chaos rose, tell me, how did love begin? (開闢鴻濛, 誰為情種,?) (Cao 1.139). Cao searched from heaven to hell (上窮碧落下黃泉) and investigated the origin of chaos when the universe was born in order to discover that human beings solely had the capacity to embody *qing* (情, love). He learned that without *qing*, life, society, literature and the arts would all fade away.

Cao Xueqin imagined the goddess Nü-wa using dirt to create human beings and making tiles. People viewed these tiles as artificial stones, much like people viewed colored glaze as artificial jade. Since stones and humankind were both created by Nü-wa, they were therefore gifted with *ling xing* (靈性), the spiritual power of consciousness, of feeling, reaction, intellection, understanding, appreciation, in short, humanity. While *ling xing* is the exclusive gift of humankind, it must nevertheless be nurtured and cultivated to reach its full potential. In *Honglou meng*, this conception can be witnessed in the Stone, who was incarnated into "a poetical, cultivated, aristocratic place" (SS 1: 48; HLM 1: 3). Therefore *ling xing* and *qing* were present in developed human beings and not in uncivilized animals. Love and desire in animals is hard to distinguish because they are unrestrained, but human beings must learn to distinguish between love and desire, a point Cao reinforces in his open treatment of *qing*. Indeed, the lack of an easy translation for *qing* in English contributes to some of the difficulties Western readers of the novel encounter. For instance, when the famous scholar and professor Xia Zhiqing (C. T. Hsia) taught *Dream of the Red*

*Chamber*, he used two English words for *qing*, love and compassion, that seemed to him the best approximation of this slippery term. Yet in Chinese, *qing* is not simply a passive quality, as in one being affected by others, but it is more active in the sense of the term "ai" in modern Chinese, which has sexual connotations. The phrase *ai qing* (愛情, love between lovers) and *ai xin* (愛心, loving heart) represent absolutely different concepts.

In *Honglou meng*, *qing* refers to a noble relationship between persons and is manifested as caring, sympathy, pity, humanity, and compassion. As such, *qing* not only occurs between a man and a woman, but extends to all creatures, indeed to all those upon whom misfortune has visited (see Zhou 1993). This wide and noble conception of *qing* is of course embodied by Jia Bao-yu. In this sense, the concept of *qing* lies at the very heart of the novel. Cao termed the love between men and women *er nu si qing* (兒女私情), or as Hawkes puts it, "childish piques and envious passions" (SS 1: 141). So although Cao Xueqin explored *qing* throughout the novel, the main theme remains *gong qing* (公情, love and compassion to all). The phrase *gong qing* is my own fabrication used to better explain the central theme of the novel. Where is *gong qing* located? In empathy for the sorrow and misfortune for the girls of the world (千紅一哭, 萬艷同悲).

One may wonder about the historical roots of *qing* in Chinese culture. The research presented in a chapter of my book *Dream of the Red Chamber and Chinese Culture* (紅樓夢與中華文化) goes some way in answering this question, therefore there is no need for me to repeat its discussion here. Instead, let us consider the role of *qing* in Confucianism.

This discussion of *qing* in Confucianism, in itself a broad topic, will be limited to its applicability to human relationships. Confucius was generally unwilling to talk about *qing*, as he seemed to worry that it would spill over into other areas of discussion and experience. Therefore, to prevent *qing* from being used too frequently in terms of human relationships, Confucius stressed that one should feel compassion but not become sentimental (哀而不怒). Likewise, one might have complaints but should restrain anger (怨而不怒). In short,

Confucius thought that excessive emotion made one lose oneself. Therefore, he believed in the cultivation of discipline and restraint to achieve propriety (適可而止). The *qing* Cao Xueqin advocated was actually another form of compassion that differed from Confucius' idea of benevolence. So while many readers of *Honglou meng* come away from the novel believing that Cao Xueqin was anti-Confucian, as witnessed in his supposed use of *qing* as a weapon against Confucianism, this is to misunderstand the central premise of the novel. For example, Jia Bao-yu greatly admired the young woman Fu Qiufang whom he had never met, yet his affections arose not from sinful thoughts, but rather in pure respect and admiration. Consider also the elegy and invocation for Skybright, the Spirit of the Hibiscus (SS 3: 575-81; HLM 78: 1108-16). In passages such as these, Cao Xueqin reaches a concise, sincere, sophisticated, and convincing doctrine of Neo-Confucianism. How then could one say Cao Xueqin was anti-Confucian? The reason Cao Xueqin focused on *qing* was that he thought Confucianism underemphasized it, and therefore he felt compelled to highlighted its importance. For him, Confucianism, without *qing*, was just empty talk.

Indeed, Cao Xueqin valued moral standards but believed that moral advocates had forgotten that morality is born in *qing,* based on *qing*, emollient in *qing*, and embodied by *qing*. Without *qing* morality becomes mere doctrine—empty slogans and inflexible concepts—an inefficient ideology far removed from the realities of human life. We can trace such theories to those advocated by two great playwrights, Tang Xianzu from the Ming Dynasty and Hong Sheng from the Qing Dynasty. Cao Xueqin inherited and developed their ideas in his great novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Thus, *qing* in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is not merely a doctrine, but a living conception inextricably tied to context and the manner of using and giving *qing* (called *ti tie*體貼). "Ti tie" means literally "skin to skin." In other words, as the ancients said, "only by putting oneself into other people's shoes and understanding their real feelings will we be able to give sympathy and provide assistance" (換我心, 為你心, 方知相憶深). However, although the phrase *ti tie* cannot be found in the

writings attributed to Confucius, an equivalent expression was used in his lectures to his students: 其恕乎, 己所不欲, 勿施于人 (do not treat others as you would not like to be treated). This is "ti tie."

Consequently, Confucius was *wu shi* (勿施, not giving) and Cao Xueqin was *shi yu* (施與, giving), for Confucius started from oneself and then moved on to others; Cao Xueqin, by contrast, put others before himself, and even went so far as to forget about himself (為人忘己 or 有人無己).

## II.

Many people have conjectured about why was *Honglou meng* written and who it was written for. Some have pointed to the autobiographical nature of the narrative. However, the meaning of the term autobiography used by them is different from its usual sense of an author recording his own experiences in the first person. In *Honglou meng*, Cao Xueqin used his own personal experiences to explore philosophical issues (concerning the value of life, humanity, and what it is to be human) all couched in terms of a romantic story about a stone's transformation into a man. While his tone of objective commentary is clear, it has unfortunately resulted in many misinterpretations of the novel. For example, some read the novel as a satire on particular individuals, still others found it a bitter condemnation of traditional Chinese society, one that exposed past, and previously reported, events.

I suggest we put such conjectures aside and follow Cao Xueqin's narration closely instead. In chapter 25, for instance, a Buddhist monk chants a section of a *jue ju* (絕句) about "the precious jade of spiritual understanding" (referring, of course, to the protagonist Jia Bao-yu). This bit of poetry should be understood as a golden key to unlock the door of the mysterious 'red chamber dream' and unravel its main theme:

> Time was you lived in perfect liberty,
> Your heart alike from joy and sorrow free,

Till, by the smelter's alchemy transformed,
Into the world you came to purchase misery. (SS 1: 505)

天不拘兮地不羈
心頭無喜亦無悲。
自從鍛鍊通靈後
便向人間覓是非。 (HLM 25: 345-46)

After being tempered by the Goddess Nü-wa, the Stone waited to be used to repair the sky. In spite of his expectations, he was the only stone rejected and he "became filled with shame and resentment and passed its days in sorrow and lamentation" (SS 1:47; HLM 1: 3). One day, a monk and Taoist sat down beside the Stone and chatted away with excitement. While at first, they discussed "some wild topics about deities and things in the fairyland," later the conversation turned to the amusing life led by those in the Red Dust (紅塵) world where there was glory and prosperity. These two immortals' arrival "touched" the Stone's secular mind, and he persistently begged to be born into this earthy world as a man in order to enjoy its pleasures. In fact, Stone selfishly wishes to visit the Red Dust only for his own enjoyment, which indicates a form of desire emerges in his mind after he had acquired spiritual understanding. However, when the Stone enters the world and personally experiences human life, he realizes, as the monk and Taoist repeatedly warned, that the world of men was not as good as he had imagined it. He found more distress and bitterness than happiness in this world, especially for girls.

These two immortals placed the Stone in a home of pleasure and luxury where he could settle down in comfort and enjoy life. Yet soon the Stone found that mere material delights could not satisfy his spiritual needs, and consequently he was widely regarded by others as prosperous but unable to "play his part with grace" (SS 1: 102; HLM 3: 48). In this light some might interpret Bao-yu's pen name, Rich and Noble Idler (富貴閑人), as connoting the wonderful blessing of wealth, nobility, and leisure. Yet this reading misses Cao's skillful emphasis on the fact that in this "vanity fair," Bao-yu was an idler who had little to

do with earthly matters. Proponents of the first view of Bao-yu's *nom de plum* would without hesitation point to his inability to "bear hardship with a smiling face" (SS 1: 102; HLM 3: 48). Yet, the Jia family's rise and fall shows Bao-yu that when the family was in power they were greatly flattered, but when they lost their social position they were treated indifferently. This part of life made the Stone sigh with sorrow. Bao-chai also referred to Bao-yu as "busy about nothing" (無事忙), signifying again one who had little to do with wealth and honor. In other words, rather than busying himself with "meaningless and insignificant affairs," he (in actuality Cao Xueqin, for Bao-yu is a self-portrait of Cao Xueqin) empathized with the happiness and sadness of the girls.

Moreover, Bao-yu's longing to lead a highly spiritual life, like that of poets and hermits, conflicted with conventional social norms. Because of this, he was often thought to be foolish or deranged; on account of this ridicule, he suffered great misery deep in his heart. As soon as the Stone realized that the Goddess Nü-wa melted down rocks to repair the sky so that she could save the world and help humankind, he became determined to take *qing* as his task and devote himself to becoming one who "benefits society and aids people." In doing so, he realizes at last the importance of *qing* as a people orientated altruism connoting mental and psychological activity. Qing is fundamentally opposed to 'yu' (欲) or desire, which relates to behavior. (Sometimes readers have become confused over the surface meaning of these terms, and failed to properly distinguish between them). Consequently, Stone can be legitimately called the "head" of the "religion of *qing*" and the "saint of *qing*."

We can say without any exaggeration then that *Honglou meng* demonstrates *qing* and clarifies *yu*. This novel illustrates the loftiest, sincerest, and broadest meaning of *qing* that is possessed by all living things (not just humankind) in the universe (Zhou 1993).

It seems to me that the great scholar and literary historian Lu Xun understood the significance of *qing* in *Honglou meng* when he identified the work as "a novel on human relationships" in chapter 24 of his book 《中國小說史略》(*A Concise History of Chinese Literature*). In

*Honglou meng*, Cao Xueqin was not advocating the *ren* (仁) of Confucius, the *yi* (義) of Mencius, nor the *dao de* (道德) of Lao Zi, rather his core message was that of *qing*. Therefore there should be more research on the topic of *qing*, which has been of great importance in Chinese literature.

## III.

If we want to investigate the meaning of *qing* more thoroughly, we should consider in detail the way this word has been used in various kinds "doctrines and philosophies," for instance in the Daoist belief that the sage cannot be affected by *qing* (太上忘情), the Buddhist doctrine of avoiding *qing* (無情), and the concept of 'sheering off qing' (避情) in Confucian philosophy, and so on. It is my view that Gao E (the person who added a spurious ending to *Honglou meng* and who best represented of the hypocrisy of the "False Dao School" whose adherents claimed to be followers of the Sung dynasty Confucian school of philosophy), along with orthodox scholar officials as well as some scholars in the Qing dynasty, wanted to frighten readers of the novel concerning *qing*. Gao E did this by didactically ensuring that characters who indulged in *qing* always came to a bad end. The influence of the False Dao School was one of the great tragedies of Chinese history. *Honglou meng* "like a white, flawless jade dropped in the muck" (SS 1: 142; HLM 5: 84) was greatly harmed by the power of zealous followers of this philosophy. How sad this is!

Recently, I have been discussing this point with one of my colleagues, Liang Guizhi, who is a professor of classical Chinese literature. We both feel that the overall connotation of *Honglou meng* resembles that of the traditional Western trinity of 'truth, goodness, and beauty.' Jia Bao-yu is in actuality an advocate of, and in constant pursuit of, these three ideals, and he mourns over their destruction in the novel. To fully understand Bao-yu's perspective on truth, goodness, and beauty, we have to return to the book's general theme, that of *qing*.

According to Cao Xueqin (and Bao-yu), without *qing*, there would be no truth and so all things would be false. For example, in the absence

of *qing*, the observance of rites and filial piety would be an empty show—a series of false and self-deceiving acts. Cao, like Bao-yu, objected not to ritual in and of itself but to conventional rites that required people to dress formally and exchange insincere greetings and griefless condolences. Cao was not simply demanding the abolishment of all rites and social conventions, for without social order and ethical relationships, civil society would be reduced to barbarism. True goodness, in Cao Xueqin's judgment, is altruistic, selfless, and sincere. In the words of the 20th century poet and critic Hu Feng, true benevolence is 'people-orientated.' In the world of true goodness, no selfishness abides. Consequently, deeds performed solely for the purpose of one's present or future advantage in the name of goodness are false and deceitful, especially when ethical rhetoric is used for self-serving ends. Likewise beauty for Cao also comes from *qing*, for true beauty is the totality of the relationships between all beings and *tian* (the laws of nature) when they have reached a perfect 'Great Harmony' (太和).

## IV.

As Cao Xueqin contemplated the origin, meaning, and fate of humankind, he could not state his 'arguments and reasons' directly, as one would in a philosophical essay for instance. Rather, the fictional requirements of his undertaking meant creating a central character, as he notes in the beginning of the novel in the Jia Xu manuscript, to "tell a tale in rustic language" (as the famous argument of autobiography in Redology goes). This expressionistic style was revolutionary and innovative in its time, for it was never used in the Chinese novel before.

This type of writing accurately depicted characters' subjective experiences and feelings in conjunction with objective description and commentary. The skillful combination of these elements resulted in a vivid portrait of the personality and the literary talents of individuals like Bao-yu, so much so that it was as 'if the character would come to life when called.'

Cao Xueqin was at his best alternating between the ideal and the

actual, between falsehood and truth, and in using derogatory language when in fact he was praising. He also employed superficial mockery to highlight positive qualities that met with his approval. He frequently used the viewpoints of characters to objectively describe events and personalities without repetition. Bao-yu, for instance, is fleshed out in a conversation between Jia Yu-cun and Leng Zi-xing, in a discussion of Zhen Bao-yu, in two verses written to the melody of *The Moon over the West River* (西江月), through remarks made by Lady Wang, in comments by Lin Dai-yu, and curiously from statements made by two nurses from the family of Fu Qiufang.

Why did Cao Xueqin write in such a manner? Since this novel is a special type of autobiography, and because of the "author's reluctance to be noticed by outsiders," Xueqin wanted to share his true intentions only with close acquaintances by writing between the lines. However, even today, there are still scholars who have not understand this point and insist that *Dream of the Red Chamber* was either written by some one else or is just an invented tale. Such critical positions, in my view, miss the mark.

## V.

Cao Xueqin also used the word *qing* in unique and creative ways, such as when Patience (平兒) "*qings* authority (情權)," and Bao-yu "*qings* the thief (情賊)."[2] This usage of the word *qing* was quite rare. (Please note that I am talking about using a noun as a verb only for the word *qing*, not for other words, since in Chinese many words can be used as both a noun and a nominal verb). Thus, Cao's special use of *qing* is not a grammatical problem but further evidence that the word *qing* in *Dream of the Red Chamber* refers to all forms of goodwill and kindness and emphasizes the emotions but is not necessarily related to love. Unfortunately, this sense of *qing* in *Honglou meng* was completely distorted by the 40 chapter addition written by Gao E and published by Cheng Wei-yuan, who reduced a masterpiece to a vulgar "love tragedy" or "love triangle" grounded in a marriage dispute. The writer Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) aptly likened this addition to "bone

cancer." This false 120 chapter version of *Honglou meng* has deceived readers for over two hundred years. This is a cultural tragedy.

The great charm of *Honglou meng* lies not only in the sentiments expressed in the novel, but also in the fact that the author was a great poet. Cao Xueqin used his poetic sensibility to feel the inclusively of 'heaven, earth, man, and self' (天、地、人、我), and he merged the many vicissitudes of life into a splendid and wondrous "poetic realm."

As for the poetic color of the novel, we should note the highly unique characteristics of the Chinese language and the long poetical tradition in China. Those unfamiliar with it, and who cannot read the novel in Chinese and so rely on translated versions without notes, will probably become bewildered in the 'vast, dense fog' of the work from time to time. Therefore, some of these individuals may understandably find reading *Honglou meng* in translation "rather insipid" (SS 1: 139; HLM 5: 81).

## Conclusion

Because Cao Xueqin wanted to record his observations, feelings, thoughts, and understandings of the human realm and the meaning of human life, he adopted the form of a romantic novel to express his true sentiments in the story of the Stone who fell into the Red Dust world. He began his tale with the Stone traveling to the world for "enjoyment," which showed that human life was a form of desire. Yet, when the Stone experienced earthy life, he realized that to enjoy material comforts one had to suffer a great deal. After long and difficult searching, failing, and learning of the hard lessons drawn in the process, the Stone finally discovered *qing*. *Qing* is people-orientated, oblivious of oneself, and involves serving other people. Because of *qing*, a person can sacrifice the most precious things.

When Cao Xueqin encountered difficulties writing *Honglou meng* and felt his literary talent was too limited, he was ashamed and filled with regret. Red Inkstone writes of him in the Jia Xu manuscript (甲戌本):

Bitter words ramble through the hearts of saddened girls,
At this, one person obsessed with *qing* is filled with profound grief.
Words on the paper mix with tears and blood,
The extraordinary labor of ten years!

謾言紅袖啼痕重，
更有情痴抱恨長。
字字看來皆是向，
十年辛苦不尋常。

These two couplets reveal Cao's innermost feelings. Yet, some scholars of the novel continue to misinterpret the meaning of *qing* and *yu* by insisting that the Stone was incarnated as a boy, fell into the world of men, and after experiencing the earthly world, "understood" that "all is void." This interpretation overlooks the true meaning of *qing* and *yu* in *Honglou meng* and completely distorts this great work of Chinese literature.

Translated by Bao Liangmei and Li Li
(Assisted by Park Kyong sook).

## NOTES

[1] References to the novel are give in two parts, the first part referring to the English translation *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes, volumes 1 to 3 (New York: Penguin, 1973-1980), abbreviated as SS and followed by volume and page number. The second parts refers to the two volume *Honglou meng* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue 1991), abbreviated as HLM and followed by page number.

[2] *Qing quan* here refers to Patience (Ping-er), who uses *qing* when she exercises her authority as Wang Xi-feng's chief maid, while *qing zang* specifically refers to Bao-yu's behavior when he lied and took the blame for the missing bottle of rose flavored juice in chapter 61 in order to protect a maid.

## WORKS CITED

Zhou, Ruchang. "*Honglou meng* yu 'qingwenhua'" 《紅樓夢》與'情

文化' (*Honglou meng* and the Culture of Sentiment) in Honglou meng xuekan 樓夢學刊 5:1 (1993): 67-78.
---, *Honglou meng yu zhonghua wenhua* 紅樓夢與中華文化 (Honglou meng and Chinese Culture). Beijing: Huayichubanshe, 1998