Tai-yü or Pao-ch'ai: The Paradox of Existence as Manifested in Pao-yü's Existential Struggle

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Tai-yü or Pao-ch'ai? That is the question, the question which the readers of *Hung-lou-meng* (later to be referred to as *HLM*) must confront. This "eternal" question arises from the fact that the protagonist, Chia Pao-yü, is "torn" between the two heroines of contrasting natures, i.e., Lin Tai-yü and Hsüeh Pao-ch'ai. Although Pao-yü explicitly shows his predilection for Tai-yü, he nevertheless finds Pao-ch'ai's beauty unsurpassable, her charm irresistible and her personality admirable. Since Pao-yü's "vacillation" between these two heroines evidently constitutes the main pathos of the novel and has, indeed, attracted the greatest amount of readers' attention, the question of "Tai-yü or Pao-ch'ai" cannot be treated too seriously. However, traditionally, most commentators of *HLM* were content to take the triangle relationship of the three leading characters simply as a sentimental love story and busily took sides as to which girl was more worthy of Pao-yü's love and which would make a better wife. As a result, they either adapted their interpretations to suit this impoverished view of the relationship or simply attached little thematic significance to it. It is at least partly due to these unjust readings of this relationship that, despite the tremendous amount of scholarship devoted to it, the study of HLM has not been able to break much new ground until a few years ago. The purpose of this paper is to try to re-integrate the Tai-yü/Pao-yü/Pao-ch'ai relationship into the formulation of the thematic scheme of the novel so as to do fuller justice to it.

The key to the restitution of the significance due this relationship is to appreciate it metaphorically. That the relationship itself calls naturally for a symbolic reading can be seen if we consider Jonathan Culler's discussion of the rules of "symbolic reading" in his book *Structuralist Poetics*. Summarizing Roland Barthes' observation on the "symbolic code," Culler writes, "the formal device on which the symbolic code is based is antithesis. If the text

presents two items – characters, situations, objects, actions – in a way which suggests opposition, then 'a whole space of substitution and variation' is opened to the readers."[1] In other words, whenever elements in the text under consideration suggest opposition, they automatically lend themselves to symbolic reading. Very appropriately for our purpose here, the example Culler gives for this argument is the presentation of two heroines of contrasting qualities.[2]

A symbolic reading of this relationship should of course start with a proper understanding of the jade talisman Pao-yü was born with. Of the few "literary" interpretations of this jade talisman, Wang Kuo-wei's stands out as most illuminating. Very much in keeping with the Buddhist-Taoist tone of the novel, Wang observes that "the so-called jade (玉 *yü*) is but the representation of the desires (欲 *yü*) of life."[3] As "desire" is what underlies human existence in Buddhist terms, the transformation of the stone into jade can be construed as that from an insensate object into a sentient human being. Therefore, Pao-yü's struggle in this world, which is closely associated with the jade, automatically takes on the universal dimension of human existential struggle. But since his *yü* is distinguished from the *yü* of everyman in that it is a *T'ung-ling-pao-yü* 通靈寶玉 which is capable of a high degree of sensitivity and affection, the outcome of his struggle, however, would naturally be an unusual one.

In light of Pao-yü's universal significance and in accordance with the thematic thrust of the novel, Tai-yü and Pao-ch'ai, with their sharply contrasting personalities and characteristics and their pre-destined ties with Pao-yü (*mu-shih-ch'ien-meng* 木石前盟 and *chin-yü-liang-yüan* 金玉良緣), can easily be construed as the two opposite sides of existence that come with life. This is an opposition which seems to echo the other oppositions of "worlds" presented in *HLM*, that is, the opposition between the world of young ladies and the world of men and that between the world of *Ta-kuan-yüan* 大觀園 and the outside world. But in one respect, this Tai-yü/Pao-ch'ai opposition significantly differs from the others. In this opposition, the two sides do not respectively stand for what Pao-yü views as desirable or not, as they do in the other two oppositions, but rather exert rivalling appeals to Pao-yü. This difference in the oppositions present in the text may be attributed to the different attitudes held by Pao-yü, with his limited vision, and Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in, with his appreciation of the total vision.

The distinction between author and protagonist is particularly difficult for the emotionally involved Chinese reader of *HLM*, especially after the

study of the novel as the autobiography of Ts'ao. Even in Yü Ying-shih's brilliant and enlightening article, "The Two Worlds of *HLM*" 紅樓夢的兩個世界 where he repeatedly emphasizes the necessary distinction between author and protagonist, [4] he nevertheless somehow sees things through Pao-yü's eyes. Therefore, what he calls "the world of idealism" is clean and pure and its opposite, "the world of realism," squalid and degenerate.[5] But what I would like to argue here is that Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in himself, or the implied author, realized not only that the two worlds are mutually implicating, as Yü has argued, but also that "the world of realism" is not essentially squalid and degenerate; nor "the world of idealism" completely desirable. This is what is expressed by the Tai-yü/Pao-ch'ai opposition. The two worlds in this opposition together constitute the paradox of existence in which they, instead of being antithetical, contribute to an overall "totality of vision" by way of mutually implicating and complementing. What they actually form is a "complementary dualism" or in Andrew Plaks' terms, "complementary bipolarity."[6] However, I do not deny that, existentially, Ts'ao, just like most readers of *HLM*, is strongly sympathetic with Pao-yü's attitude and is not particularly keen on "the world of realism." Indeed, I would say, it is precisely from this discrepancy in the author himself, i.e., that between the transcendental Ts'ao and the existential Ts'ao that the tension and tragic sense of this novel are derived.

To do fuller justice to the two worlds as seen by Ts'ao and represented by Tai-yü and Pao-ch'ai, I would like to re-term them as "the world of youth" and "the world of non-youth." "The world of youth" subsumes the kind of attitudes and qualities which are often associated with younger people, such as innocence, boldness, intuition, sensitivity, emotion, non-conformity, idealism, self-salvation, whereas "the world of non-youth" subsumes the attitudes and qualities that are often associated with the world of adults, such as experience, prudence, calculation, sensibleness, reason, conformity, realism, compassion. It is through the interaction of these two worlds that the path of the development of our personality is marked out.

This distinction between "the world of youth" and "the world of non-youth" on the whole coincides with Jung's theory of *Puer* and *Senex*, or the Young and the Old, which finds very succinct explication in Daniel J. Levinson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life:*

> In their fullest meaning, the terms "young" and "old" are not tied to specific age levels. They are symbols that refer to

basic psychological, biological, and social qualities of human life at every age. We are both young and old at every age. We start becoming old at birth, just as we remain young in certain respects during old age.

Ultimately, "young" is an archetypal symbol with many meanings. It represents birth, growth, possibility, initiation, openness, energy, potential. It colors the meaning we give to many concrete images: the infant, sunrise, the New Year, the seed, the blossoms and rites of spring, the newcomer, the promise, the vision of things to come. We are young at any age to the extent that these associations color our psychological and social functioning.

Conversely, "old" is a symbol representing termination, fruition, stability, structure, completion, death. Its images include Father Time, the Grim Reaper, the Rock of ages, the Wise Old Man, the dotard, winter, midnight. . . .

Being Young, like being Old, has advantages and disadvantages, strength and limitations. Each state can be given positive as well as negative meanings. To be Young is to be lively, growing, heroic, full of possibilities; but it is also to be fragile, imperfectly developed, impulsive, lacking in experience and solidarity. Similarly, the Old person (whatever his age) may be seen as wise, powerful, accomplished, "able to hear the dictates of heaven" (Confucius) – but also senile, tyrannical, impotent, unconnected to the world around him.

The Young/Old polarity – the splitting of Young and Old, and the effort to reintegrate them – is the polarity of human development. . . .[7]

Therefore, as Tai-yü and Pao-ch'ai stand for the worlds of youth and non-youth in their entireties, they are not without defects. For instance, Tai-yü is sometimes neurotic and narrow-minded and Pao-ch'ai, dogmatic and over-restrained. Such shortcomings alert us to the fact that they should not be treated independently. That they both have strange, incurable sicknesses and have to rely on medicine all their lives further suggests their lack of self-sufficiency. It is, however, in the idea of *chien-mei* 兼美 that their mutual complementariness finds best expression.

Chien-mei is the sister of the Goddess of Disenchantment 警幻仙子 who is said to have the combined beauty of Tai-yü and Pao-ch'ai and with whom it is arranged for Pao-yü to have sex when he travels to the Great Void 太虛幻

境 for the first time. This journey which culminates in the rite of sexual initiation, has been traditionally understood as a means to disillusion Pao-yü about the illusory nature of life. But a closer examination reveals quite the opposite. Before the rite of initiation is performed, the goddess says to Pao-yü:

> You can be a kind and understanding friend to women in the boudoir. But in the roads of the world, it is unavoidable that people would consider you unpractical and eccentric. Hundreds of mouths would jeer and sneer at you; thousands of eyes would look at you angrily. Today I met your ancestors Duke Ning-kuo and Duke Rung-kuo. They have laid bare their hearts to me and have requested my help on your account. As I cannot bear the idea of your being rejected by the world for the greater glory of us women, I have brought you here. I have made you drunk with fairy wine. I have drenched you with fairy tea. I have admonished you with fairy songs. And now I'm going to give you my little sister – Combined Beauty (Chien-mei), also known as Ke-ching – to be your bride. Tonight is a propitious time. You may consummate your marriage right away. My motive in arranging this is to help you grasp the fact that the "happiness" of the fairy chamber and wonderland is but so, how much more so that of the mundane world. From now on, it is my earnest hope that you will shake yourself free of your current entanglements and change your previous ways of thinking, devoting your mind seriously to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius and your person wholeheartedly to the betterment of the society.
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> 在閨閣中固可爲良友，然於世道中未免迂濶怪詭，百口嘲謗，萬目睚眦。今旣遇令祖寧榮二公，剖腹深囑，吾不忍君獨爲我閨閣增光，而見棄於世道，故引君前來，醉以美酒，沁以仙茗，警以妙曲，再將吾妹一人——乳名兼美，表字可卿者——許配與汝。今夕良時，即可成姻。不過令汝略領此仙閨幻境之風光尙然如此，何況塵世之情景昵？而今後，萬萬解釋，改悟前情，留意於孔孟之間，委身於經濟之道。[8]

Obviously, by means of the rite of sex, as well as the other arrangements, the Goddess of Disenchantment is trying to make Pao-yü realize the insufficiency of the world of youth rather than to disillusion him about existence *per se*. But, to be more precise, in addition to disenchanting Pao-yü with his

indulgence in the world of women (the world of youth), the rite of sex also, implicitly, reveals to him the consummate beauty of the combination of the world of youth (Tai-yü) and the world of non-youth (Pao-ch'ai). In other words, the goddess' efforts are aimed not so much at persuading Pao-yü to conform to the world of non-youth, which the above-quoted passage literally seems to be suggesting, as at advising him to treat the two worlds as mutually implicating and complementing. In this connection, the lady Chien-mei can be taken as the symbol of the ideal state of being in which the best of the two worlds are combined.

The notion of the ideal state of being is reiterated in Chapter 42 where there is a scene in which Pao-ch'ai is shown helping Tai-yü re-fasten her hair. Watching from where he sits, Pao-yü "thought this was even better and wished he had not told Tai-yü earlier to tidy the hair above her brows, for then Pao-ch'ai could have done that for her too. . . ." 只覺更好，不覺後悔：「不該令他抿上蠶去，也該留着，此時叫他替他抿上去。……」[9] In other words, he has experienced once again the unusual desirableness of the close association of the two girls, or the two worlds. Chih-yen-chai's 脂硯齋 comment on this chapter is even more revealing:

> Ch'ai and Yü, though two in name, are actually one. This is a deceiving device. When his writing reached to Chapter 38, it was already more than one-third of the whole book, therefore, he wrote this chapter to merge the two into one.
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> 釵玉名雖二個，人却一身，此幻筆也。今書至三十八回時已過三分之一有餘，故寫是回，使二人合而爲一。[10]

Despite the various qualities the two worlds subsume, their respective hallmarks seem to be affection 情 and sex 色 . This is probably based on the fact that sex is the major socializing force while affection is the most salient youthful characteristic, and in addition the two are in actuality inseparable from each other. Consequently, on the one hand the world of men "reeks of" sex whereas the world of ladies is permeated with pure affection, and, on the other, the two ladies in the garden who represent the two sides of the ubiquitous paradox of existence also are respectively associated with one of the two elements. Tai-yü exhibits exceptional sensitivity and overbrimming affection but consistently shies away from even the slightest physical contact. On the contrary, Pao-ch'ai is physically attractive but cool and restrained to the point that she is time and again referred to as "feelingless" 無情 . As ideally

affection and sex should enjoy equal appreciation in one's life, preference for either of the two is improper. This is where the idea of *yin* 淫 comes in.

For a time-bound, existential being, however, the two worlds, more often than not, stand for the two poles of the paradox of existence between which they feel obliged to choose rather than for the two mutually implicating and complementing sides of existence. When this "either-or" view of life is unreservedly implemented, the result is what is expressed by the word *yin*. If one chooses the world of non-youth to the total exclusion of the world of youth, one is likely to eventually become *yin* or *p'i-fu-lan-yin* 皮膚濫淫 which means "sexually excessive or indulgent," since there is too much sex and too little affection. However, if one chooses the world of youth to the total exclusion of the world of non-youth, one is also said to be *yin* except that in this case he is *yi-yin* 意淫, spiritually or mentally indulgent or excessive.

This is why Pao-yü is labelled the "world's most indulgent person ever" 天下古今第一淫人 He is a "youth extremist," so to speak. His tendency to embrace the world of maidens, or the world of youth, exclusively can be seen as early as in his performance in a rite on his first birthday in which he picks out woman's cosmetics and jewelry from an array of objects, and later in his constant apotheosis of women and depreciation of men. Therefore, although after the effort of the Goddess of Disenchantment to re-orient his attitude toward existence, he does learn to appreciate the pleasures of sex, this aspect of existence never significantly enters his life. If anything, his sexual activities are deliberately played down so that we do not feel they are part of his life. By keeping sex out of his life, Pao-yü demonstrates his unshakable will to remain a sexually innocent adolescent and thereby to pledge loyalty to the world of youth. This will culminates in his escape into the Grand View Garden 大觀園, which is a literal world of maidens, and hence a world of youth.

However, since the paradox of existence is ubiquitous and certainly could not be warded off by walls, ironically enough, no sooner has Pao-yü moved into the "garden of youth" than he is involved in an even more fervent and intimate struggle between the two poles of existence right in the middle of the garden. That is the opposing attraction already referred to of Tai-yü and Pao-ch'ai. To view Pao-yü's struggle between the two girls as a metaphor for the human existential struggle between the two poles of the paradox of existence is particularly appropriate in that, on the one hand, it foregrounds the fact that both sides have their own merits, and on the other, it suggests

that a time-bound, existential being would feel obliged to choose between the two poles in the long run.

But, for Pao-yü, to make a choice between the two girls or, in other words, to marry one of the two, means not only to put an end to his indulgence in the world of maidens, or the world of youth (even if he chooses Tai-yü) but also, and more importantly, to accept the evil he constantly denounces. For in Pao-yü's mind, the evil of marriage is that of sex multiplied. Whereas sex without marriage only provides intermittent occasions for the world of non-youth (world of men) to muddle the world of youth (world of maidens), marriage facilitiates a long-term bulldozing of the latter by the former. Hence his constant lament for the loss of innocence of the married women. However, when circumstances require that he make the choice, as a youth extremist, he naturally chooses Tai-yü despite the fact that he is also deeply attracted to Pao-ch'ai. But those who have chosen the world of youth are always the losers because, if, as they believe, the two worlds are mutually exclusive, the world of youth is doomed to be nibbled away by the world of non-youth since one has still to "grow up." Hence we find the betrayal by the married women who arrange Pao-yü's marriage and the subsequent death of Tai-yü, which symbolizes the death of Pao-yü's world of youth.

After the death of Tai-yü, realizing through a tentative journey down to the Underworld that reunion with Tai-yü is impossible, Pao-yü seems to acquiesce with the status quo and to be even trying to embrace the world of non-youth as represented by Pao-ch'ai. But his long-awaited encounter with Chen Pao-yü ultimately eliminates this possibility for him as well.

Chen Pao-yü is the son of a distant relative of the Chia family who has been thus depicted so as to sound like a double of Chia Pao-yü. Besides bearing the same name, Chen Pao-yü and Chia Pao-yü also have strikingly similar physical appearances, temperaments and early youthful experiences. When Pao-yü first hears of this odd situation, he is deeply disturbed and subsequently dreams of an encounter with Chen Pao-yü. In Pao-yü's dream, the two Pao-yüs are so mutually implicating that we need not hesitate to construe them as the two possibilities of one person in terms of the youth / non-youth framework. The last few sentences of the description of the dream deliberately bring out this point:

> They barely finished talking when a messenger came and said, "The master's asking for Pao-yü." Both of them were panicked and became distraught; One of the Pao-yüs then started to run,

and in no time the other called after him, "Pao-yü, come back, Pao-yü, come back."

一語未了，只見人來說：『老爺叫寶玉。』嚇得二人皆慌了。一個寶玉就走，一個便忙叫：『寶玉快回來！寶玉快回來！』[11]

We should note here that, though initially the two have the same panicked response toward the world of non-youth (Chia Cheng – the patron of the world of men in the novel), they diverge in their ultimate resolutions. One chooses to escape; the other opts for staying.

But Pao-yü does not realize the significance of this episode in his dream until he meets Chen Pao-yü in person. When the two Pao-yüs meet, "while many members and servants of Chia Pao-yü's family are unable to tell apart the two Pao-yüs, Chia Pao-yü is overwhelmed to find that Chen Pao-yü is his *opposite* rather than his twin."[12] He is alarmed that Chen is actually the undesirable image he is afraid of becoming but would become if he continued his efforts to adapt himself to Pao-ch'ai's world. Now that re-unification with Tai-yü is impossible and identification with Pao-ch'ai is much less possible, Pao-yü, the extremist who can only see life in terms of its polarity, inevitably feels that existence has become meaningless. Therefore, the only thing left for him to do is to "return the jade" 還玉 ,[13] that is, to "return the desires of life" 還欲 in order to get rid of the suffering for utter meaninglessness.

Pao-yü's renunciation, however, is no transcendence. True transcendence means to reach the state of being where the question of Tai-yü or Pao-ch'ai, of youth or non-youth, disappears of itself, where one has achieved a balanced view of the two sides of existence and will henceforth live a rich yet untrammelled life. Nevertheless, although it is not too difficult to feel the beauty and necessity of totality or even to intellectually or transcendentally hold a totalized view of life, existentially, it is far from easy to implement. As often as not, it takes one a whole lifetime to come to terms with such an integrated outlook. The tragedy of Pao-yü's ultimate alienation from existence originates, in fact, from this inability to realize such an ideal existence. In this sense, it is not only Pao-yü's tragedy that we see in *HLM* but that of every human being: to be confronted with the question of Tai-yü or Pao-ch'ai, and be compelled to make a choice.

Notes

1. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 225.
2. *loc. cit.* A direct quotation from Culler will further illustrate my point. "The presentation of two heroines, one dark and the other fair, sets in motion an experiment in extrapolation in which the reader correlates this opposition with thematic oppositions that it might manifest: evil/good, forbidden/permitted, active / passive, Latin/Nordic, sensuality/purity. The reader can pass from one opposition to another, trying them out, even inverting them, and determining which are pertinent to larger thematic structures which encompass other antitheses presented in the text."
3. Wang Kuo-wei 王國維 , *Wang-kuan-t'ang-ch'uan-chi* 王觀堂全集 (Taipei, Wen-hua-ch'u-pan-kung-ssu 文華出版公司 , 1968), vol. 5, p. 1641.
4. Yu Ying-shih 余英時 , "Hung-lou-meng-te-liang-ke-shih-chieh" 紅樓夢的兩個世界,in *Li-shih-yu-ssu-hsiang* 歷史與思想 (Taipei: Lien-ching-ch'u-pan-she 聯經出版社 , 1976), p. 425.
5. Ibid. This is a point Yu reiterates throughout the article.
6. Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 3. Plaks' theory of "complementary bipolarity" is much more complex than mine presented here. But in terms of the basic concept of "complementary bipolarity," our ideas are quite similar.
7. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 209-10. I am grateful to Professor Lucien Miller for directing me to this book. For further information on the topic of *Puer* and *Senex*, see also Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbol* (Doubleday, 1964); Marie-Louise von Franz, *Puer Aeternus* (Sigo Press, 1980); James Hillman, "Puer and Senex," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 36 (Zurich, 1967), 301-59; and James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," *Spring: Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought,* 1970.
8. Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in 曹雪芹 , *Hung-lou-meng* 紅樓夢 (Taipei: San-min-shu-chu 三民書局 , 1979), ch. 5, p. 43. The translation here is based on David Hawkes's translation of *Hung-lou-meng: The Story of the stone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), vol. 1, p. 146, with significant alterations of my own.
9. Ts'ao, ch. 42, p. 353. This translation is also based on Hawkes, vol. 2, p. 343, again with slight modifications of my own.
10. Chih-yen-chai 脂硯齋 , *Hsin-pien-chih-yen-chai-shih-t'ou-chi-p'ing-yu-chi-chiao* 新編脂硯齋石頭記評語輯校 (Taipei: Lien-ching-ch'u-pan-she 聯經出版社 , 1979), ed. Ch'en Ch'ing-hao 陳慶浩 , p. 519.
11. Ts'ao, ch. 56, p. 483.
12. Lucien Miller, *Mask of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1975), p. 175.
13. Ts'ao, ch. 117, p. 1021.