Among premodern Chinese fiction writers, perhaps nobody had more traumatic memories of the erratic power of the imperial state than Cao Xueqin (ca. 1715–64), author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng). The splendid edifice of the Cao family, which once had enjoyed untouchable prestige and prosperity under the blessing of Emperor Kangxi, was leveled to debris under the wrath of Emperor Yongzheng. Cao Xueqing, who lived for most of his adult life under the Qianlong reign, was so poverty-stricken that he eventually had to rely on financial help from friends. However, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, especially in the depiction of the protagonist Jia Baoyu, there is a concern that goes far beyond any personal level. Indeed, further enriching the novel’s remarkable polysemy is a careful rethinking of the historical role of the literati that had long been dictated in the teachings of the *daotong*.

When Emperor Qianlong ascended the throne in 1735, he took over a prosperous empire, and the Han intellectual gentry had largely been tamed by his shrewd imperial grandfather and father. Elated with the prospect of achieving even greater heights during his reign, Qianlong did not conceal
his aspiration to have his name ranked with the ancient Three Generations (san dai) of sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu. Two months after his inauguration, he proclaimed complacently: “The order of the Three Generations will definitely be restored, and the dao of Yao and Shun will definitely be practiced.” Following that, top civil officials vied with each other acclaiming the advent of the new “sage king.” In 1745, for instance, Grand Councillor O-erh-tai sang the praise of the young emperor in a memorial to the throne: “Your Majesty concentrates on the constancy and adheres to the golden mean [jing yi zhi zhong], and venerated the orthodox learning. He has unified the minds of all people under heaven [yi tianxia zhi renxin]. . . . Both the heavenly virtue and the kingly way are fully embodied here.”

A few months later, Zhang Tingyu (1672–1755), another Grand Councilor, joined O-erh-tai in presenting this eulogy: “Your Majesty emulates Yao and Shun and has far surpassed Emperor Taizong of the Tang.”

Indeed, following an extended period of prosperity in the empire, Qianlong was apparently in a better position than his predecessors to speak of a successful return to the glory of the Three Generations, which was characterized by a seamless harmony between the dao and political power. However, what happened in 1768 ruthlessly proved Qianlong’s ambition completely unviable. As rumors about mysterious soulstealers sinisterly hovered across several provinces, the emperor found himself at constant odds with his civil bureaucracy on local levels. He first coerced doubtful local officials into taking hard-line actions on the sorcery cases, and then, after the cases turned out to be overblown, cast all the blame on his provincial officials. Qianlong took advantage of the crisis and quickly turned it into an opportunity to terrorize the potentially intractable intellectual elite. To borrow Philip Kuhn’s succinct words about the emperor’s vermillion rescripts on officials’ missives, “The context . . . was the prosecution of sorcerers, but the content was the control of bureaucrats.”

Although this sorcery crisis took place a few years after Cao Xueqin’s death, it was symptomatic of a long-term disease that had started much earlier, a disease in the relationship between what Kuhn calls the ruler’s “arbitrary power” and the bureaucracy’s “routine power.” Concluding his book on the sorcery scare, Kuhn wonders on the possibility for Qianlong’s civil officials to curb the ruler’s arbitrary power “by invoking a superior code under which all human governments might be judged”: “To do so required that they regard themselves as something more than servants of
a particular regime. Such self-confidence could persist only among men who believed themselves to be certified carriers of a cultural tradition. In late imperial politics, such gumption was scarce enough, even at the highest levels of ministerial power. In the context of imperial China, that “cultural tradition” whose “superior code” could possibly be invoked to restrain imperial power was precisely the daotong. However, the daotong had, by Qianlong’s time, lost its last carriers to intimidation from state power. Indeed, to indicate the intensity of the intimidation, there were more cases of literary inquisition during the Qianlong reign than those of the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods put together. Thus, when Qianlong spoke of a return to the Three Generations, he did not think of any harmonious coalescence of the zhengtong and daotong but simply muffling the voice of the latter. The damage to the daotong was severe: if the spirit to curb state power had been the soul of the daotong, it had now nearly lost its soul and started to wilt.

Against this sociopolitical backdrop, Jia Baoyu’s famous aversion to bureaucratic service in the novel is no surprise at all. Nor is his pungent sarcasm on “scholars dying demonstrating with the emperor and generals dying fighting for the empire” (wen si jian wu si zhan) difficult to understand. Indeed, to support this contextual reading of fiction, one finds this indifference toward government service not unique to Jia Baoyu but shared by main characters in other major novels of the Qianlong period. Tan Shaowen in Li Lüyuan’s (1707–90) Warning Light for the Wrong Path (Qi lu deng), for instance, is a profligate son from a literati family, who obstinately disregards his father’s admonitions to study for the examinations. After his father’s death, he indulges in sensual pleasures to the complete negligence of his obligation for the state and family, until he finally reforms. Likewise, Wen Ruyu, son of a governor-general in Li Baichuan’s (ca. 1720–71) Trace of the Immortals on a Green Land (Lüye xianzong), is a good-for-nothing dandy who dissipates the family’s wealth in the pleasure quarters, ignoring his father’s constant urges to prepare for officialdom. After a dream in which he is made a high-ranking official and the emperor’s son-in-law, he becomes totally disillusioned with official service and converts to Daoism.

In real life, however, most literati of the Qianlong period who had lost interest in government service did not just idle away their time as the fictional characters Tan Shaowen and Wen Ruyu. Indeed, a scholar’s decision
to enter a profession outside civil officialdom was often difficult and painful. As the ultimate distributor of social capital and material benefits, the imperial state was able to make the pursuit of an examination degree the normal mode of behavior for the literati. Valorized by the political power, the practices within the institution of official selection were regularized and routinized. When a scholar removed himself from that institution and took on a new profession, he became, in the contemporary Chinese scholar Wang Xuetai’s vocabulary, a tuoxuren, or a breakaway from the established social order. By doing so, he was stepping out of a familiar territory and onto an uncharted path strewn with perils and hardships. Yet, the unprecedented level of economic development and commercialization in the Qianlong period made it relatively easy for scholars to find other means of livelihood in different cultural fields. If in previous times most scholars had been forced to find other ways to make a living after their examination failures, now many of them voluntarily turned away from government service to embrace other professions. “There was an expanded definition of what a respectable career was,” as Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski observe on the situation for eighteenth-century literati. “High degrees and government office, becoming so difficult to obtain, were no longer seen as the only acceptable form of achievement.” As the daotong declined, it was no longer the cohesive agent it had been to bind the fate of the intellectual gentry to that of the state. Yet, if the literati’s replacement in society was in a way their reaction to the much weakened status of the daotong, it was also made possible by the changed economic conditions.

What happens at the closure of The Scholars reflects this phenomenon of the High Qing period: the four “extraordinary figures,” all well educated, make adequate living in their mundane professions far removed from government service. Xu Ke’s (1869–1928) Classified Anecdotes of the Qing Dynasty (Qing bai lei chao) contains numerous accounts of Qing scholars, including many of the Qianlong period, who migrated to different cultural realms and became physicians, bibliophiles, painters, calligraphers, musicians, merchants, and even fortune-tellers. Another important profession was legal counseling, as some of the scholars became law specialists or private advisers to officials. One special cultural role that some scholars would adopt outside officialdom was fiction writing. Just like elsewhere in literati culture, fiction writing was an area domi-
nated by “breakaways” from the mainstream political life regulated by the imperial power. Different from his counterparts in other cultural realms, however, a fiction writer could recapture, in fictional language, a scholar’s experience of cultural marginalization and adjustment of vocational choices. Since his own chosen profession is fiction writing, fiction can therefore become intensely reflexive in presenting the making of a fiction writer.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a mythic stone is deemed as “talentless” and dismissed from a goddess’s project of heaven reconstruction. After that it takes a human incarnation, and finally resumes its form as a supernatural stone with a narrative of its human experience inscribed on its surface. This narrative frame of the novel may be interpreted as an account of the transition from failed “official-making” to successful “fiction-making.” In this reading, Jia Baoyu is remarkably akin to the four “extraordinary figures” in *The Scholars*. Going one step further, however, *Dream of the Red Chamber* dramatizes all the emotions and commotions involved in the process of a young literatus’s repudiation of the examinations and officialdom. Through Baoyu’s vocational decision, the novel calls into question one of the time-honored precepts in the *daotong* tradition, namely, the political commitment to government service, which is symbolized in the novel with the master trope of “mending heaven” (*butian*)

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “FANLI” STATEMENT**

The *jiaxu* (1754) manuscript copy of *Honglou meng*, the earliest-known version of the novel, carries a prefatory piece titled “Fanli” (Statement of general principles), possibly written by one of the novel’s earliest commentators.¹⁴ The statement contains a long passage, allegedly by the novelist Cao Xueqin himself:

Having made an utter failure of my life, I found myself one day, in the midst of my poverty and wretchedness, thinking about the female companions of my youth. As I went over them one by one, examining and comparing them in my mind’s eye, it suddenly came over me that those slips of girls—which is all they were then—were in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the “grave and mustachioed signior”
I am now supposed to have become. The realization brought with it an overpowering sense of shame and remorse, and for a while I was plunged in the deepest despair. There and then I resolved to make a record of all the recollections of those days I could muster—those golden days when I dressed in silk and ate delicately, when we still nestled in the protecting shadow of the Ancestors and Heaven still smiled on us. I resolved to tell the world how, in defiance of all my family’s attempts to bring me up properly and all the warnings and advice of my friends, I had brought myself to this present wretched state, in which, having frittered away half a lifetime, I find myself without a single skill with which I could earn a decent living. I resolved that, however unsightly my own shortcomings might be, I must not, for the sake of keeping them hid, allow those wonderful girls to pass into oblivion without a memorial. . . . I might lack learning and literary aptitude, but what was to prevent me from turning it all into a story and writing it in the vernacular? In this way the memorial to my beloved girls could at one and the same time serve as a source of harmless entertainment and as a warning to those who were in the same predicament as myself but who were still in need of awakening. (HLM 1:1; SS 1:20)

In the subsequent versions of the novel, starting with the slightly later gengchen (1760) manuscript copy, part of the “Fanli,” including the passage here, is incorporated into the novel proper and becomes the beginning paragraph of the opening chapter.15 As the statement has since become such a crucial part of the work, one would think that Cao Xueqin himself “should have penned just one such preface,” as Wai-yee Li has suggested.16

Most significantly, this long passage, with its first-person self-reference, presents a penitent and apologetic novelist whose sense of shame over his dissipated past motivated him to write about his female companions. That image, in turn, is reinforced elsewhere. In the jiaxu text, the “Fanli” is followed by a heptasyllabic poem that ends with these lines:

Each word looks like blood,
Ten years’ toil was extraordinary.
(Zizi kanlai jieshi xue, shinian xinku bu xunchang)17

Consistent with it, there is another short poem in the opening chapter,
a pentasyllabic one, which was retained in all subsequent versions of the novel:

Pages full of idle words
Penned with hot and bitter tears:
All men call the author fool
None his secret message hears.
(HLM 1:4; SS 1:51)

This portrayal of a poignant novelist is also corroborated by the words of the novel’s earliest commentators, especially Red Inkstone (Zhiyanzhai). In a marginal note, Red Inkstone emotionally laments Cao Xueqin’s premature death: “Only the one who knew [the secret message] could shed his bitter tears with which to write this book [ku cheng ci shu]. On the New Year’s Eve of the year of renwu, Xueqin departed this world after having exhausted his tears, leaving his book unfinished. I wept so much for Xueqin that my tears became nearly exhausted as well.” Obviously, such textual reverberations in the opening chapter add to the significance of the long passage in the “Fanli.” Of course one should not be so credulous as to follow some of the 20th-century Chinese Redologists in equating the novelist constructed in the “Fanli” with Cao Xueqin, regardless of whether the long quote was indeed penned by Cao himself. Yet one has to agree that this fictionalized novelist at the beginning of the narrative imposes an additional layer of signification on the fictional text. If the “Fanli” offers a sketch of a novelist’s life and delineates the process of his conversion to fiction writing, in what ways does it bear on the meanings of the narrative action and the portrayal of the characters in the novel, especially Jia Baoyu?

“Unfit to Repair the Azure Sky”:
Baoyu, the Stone, and the Fictionalized Novelist

In chapter 34, after Jia Baoyu is severely thrashed by his father Jia Zheng, the girls in the Great Prospect Garden (Daguanyuan) come to show their deep concern and shed their tears. Their expressions of affection not only alleviate Baoyu’s pains but also set him to fantasizing about their even deeper grief at the time of his death. In an almost ecstatic inner monologue,
Baoyu calls that imagined moment a great accolade for which “the loss of a life’s ambitions would be a small price to pay” (HLM 2:402; SS 2:156). It is a moment similar to the one in chapter 36, when Baoyu again fantasizes the end of his life, with his dead body floating on a river formed by the tears of his beloved girls (HLM 2:436; SS 2:206). To him, to die as a martyr of love would be much more glorious than to die as a martyr of the imperial state, and he scornfully calls those who die remonstrating with the emperor or fighting on the battlefield “whiskered idiots” (xumei zhuowu).

Now, as Xue Baochai, Baoyu’s female cousin and future wife, inquires about the cause of the beating, the answer of Baoyu’s maid Aroma (Hua Xiren) may implicate Baochai’s uncouth brother Xue Pan. To dissolve the embarrassment for Baochai, Baoyu quickly interrupts Aroma’s words and dismisses that suggestion as groundless. Already badly shaken at the sight of Baoyu’s injuries, Baochai is now deeply touched by the boy’s gentle care and thoughtfulness: “What delicacy of feeling!” she thought, ‘—after so terrible a beating and in spite of all the pain, to be still able to worry about the possibility of someone else’s being offended! If only you could apply some of that thoughtfulness to the more important things of life, my friend, you would make my Uncle so happy; and then perhaps these awful things would never happen . . .’” (HLM 2:402; SS 2:156–57). Obviously, what Baoyu calls “a life’s ambitions” (yisheng shiye) is perfectly synonymous with what Baochai terms “the more important things of life.”

The celebrated dictum qi jia, zhi guo, ping tianxia underscores the Confucian family-society analogy, regarding the regulation of the family (qi jia) as the initial stage in a scholar’s progression toward his ultimate goal, ping tianxia. The latter phrase, which literally means “to smooth the world under heaven,” comes close to suggesting an act of cosmic refurbishment: the surface of the world was rough and therefore needed to be smoothed out. Little wonder that, for the Confucian ideal of government service, the myth of Nüwa’s cosmic re-creation lent itself as an apt metaphor. An official’s meritorious service to the imperial state was thus often likened to the goddess’s exploit of butian, patching the breakage of heaven. By the same token, the state’s recruitment of talented scholars into officialdom,
arguably the most crucial institutional measure to buttress the imperial rule, was also seen as analogous to the mythic act of cosmic reconstruction. That analogy is registered, for instance, in these lines by the eleventh-century poet Huang Tingjian (1045–1106):

The imperial court nowadays recruits only Confucian scholars
Who are made into hands mending the heaven with five[-colored] stones.  

In the outer frame in Dream of the Red Chamber, or the “over-narrative” as Henry Y. H. Zhao calls it, Nüwa uses thirty-six thousand and five hundred blocks of stone in her project of rebuilding the sky. She rejects an extra stone block as unworthy, abandoning it at the foot of the mountain called Qinggeng Feng. The Stone “became filled with shame and resentment and passed its days in sorrow and lamentation” (HLM 1:2; SS 1:47). One does not have to be a meticulous reader to notice the parallel between the abandoned Stone and the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli”: both feel shame and humiliation for having failed to achieve something important. What is more, both turn to something ostensibly less significant as an alternative, namely, fiction making: while the novelist in the “Fanli” takes to “turning [his experience] into a story and writing it in the vernacular,” the Stone travels to the mundane world and comes back with a narrative about its human experience inscribed on its surface. In light of this parallel, the tale of the mythic Stone can be considered a dramatization of the experience of the fictionalized novelist, his conversion to fiction writing after “a life’s ambitions” are stymied and thwarted. As stated in the “Fanli,” the fictionalized novelist “uses what the Stone remembers/recollects/records [shitou suo ji zhi shi] as an analogy [pi] for himself.” The word *pi*, which denotes the compatibility and comparability between humans and things, is found at the heart of traditional Chinese moral philosophy and philosophy of language. Used in the “Fanli,” it sums up the nature of the relationship between the Stone, Baoyu, and the fictionalized novelist, a set of relationships built on metaphorical affinity.

The main body of Dream of the Red Chamber is of course a story about Jia Baoyu, the Stone’s anthropomorphosis, and his female companions. Yet, as it is embedded in the narrative frame about the mythic Stone, it becomes not only the end product of the Stone’s trip to the human world but also an account of that trip itself. Indeed that meaningful ambig-
ity is well reflected in one of the alternative titles for the novel, *Story of the Stone* (Shitou ji), which can mean both “what is remembered/recollected/recorded about the Stone” and “what is remembered/recollected/recorded by the Stone,” suggesting the Stone’s dual status as the protagonist as well as the author. The rich polysemy of the word *ji* felicitously reveals the stone fiction as being a “record” of the past experience based on recollections—a historian style of fiction making—as well as a “record” of the process of recording/recollecting itself. In that light, the “Story of the Stone” can be considered both the “memoir” that the novelist in the “Fanli” declares he will write and an account of the process in which that “memoir” comes to be written.

That the “Story of the Stone” is based on the activities of *ji* is also manifested in the quatrain that the Daoist priest Vanitas (Kongkong Daoren) spots on the back of the stone block after he has finished reading the inscribed narrative:

> Found unfit to repair the azure sky  
> Long years a foolish mortal man was I.  
> My life in both worlds on this stone is writ:  
> Pray who will copy out and publish it?  
> (*HLM* 1:2; *SS* 1:49)

That the inscribed narrative is about the Stone’s “life in both worlds” (*shenqian shenhou shi*) reflects a Buddhist understanding of memory that serves as a crucial link in transmigration. Referring to the Stone’s life in the mythic realm as well as his human incarnation as Baoyu, the phrase strongly suggests an act of reminiscing as the basis of fiction writing. Yet, in light of the parallel between the Stone and the fictionalized novelist, it may also be a hint of the two “incarnations” of the novelist himself, his “half a lifetime” that was “frittered away” (*bansheng liaodao*) and his later “ten years of toil” (*shinian xinku*) as a novelist. Thus it can be said that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is about his prenovelistic experience—“the female companions of my youth,” “those golden days when I dressed in silk and ate delicately,” and so on—as well as his novelistic experience of recollecting the past and then turning the remembrances into a fictional text.

What is most interesting about the quatrain, however, is the way it summarizes the Stone’s trajectory of becoming a creator of fiction. Even after
the completion of its fiction, the Stone still remembers (ji) that its mission of fiction making started with its humiliating rejection from the project of cosmic creation. The narrative text inscribed on its surface now testifies to its potency in a different type of creation—and indeed it is the record of that creation itself. The first line of the poem—“Found unfit to repair the azure sky”—can be considered a succinct expression of—in Red Inkstone’s words—“the gist of the book” (shu zhi benzhi). Throughout the novel, one sees a constant conflict between two different demands for talent (cai), from the imperial state on one side and the individual and aesthetic pursuits on the other. Since the Stone’s fiction creation involves its “life in both worlds,” that disgruntlement about being excluded from the project of mending the azure sky is inherited by Jia Baoyu, the Stone’s human form. In Baoyu, it is turned into a persistent antipathy toward bureaucratic service, of which butian is often evoked as a morally and politically charged metaphor. With either the Stone or Baoyu, it is against the hegemonic discourse of mending heaven that an interest in fiction making engenders and develops. As dramatized by the experiences of both the Stone and Baoyu—“my life in both worlds”—fiction creation as a cultural activity can be in itself not only an alternative but also an audacious challenge to what is considered to be the ethical and political norm for the literati.

Toward the end of the opening chapter and right before the Stone takes its debut in the human world, an interesting character, Jia Yucun, steps into the narrative spotlight. A poor student who has to lodge at a temple with no money for traveling to the capital for the examinations, Jia Yucun eventually manages to acquire a jinshi degree and find his way into officialdom. It is important to note that he is from “a family of scholars and bureaucrats” that “has fallen on bad times.” Indeed, what he shares with Jia Baoyu is more than just their surname, as Baoyu is also born at “the time of twilight” (moshi) of his once influential and wealthy clan, even though he, unlike Yucun, does not have to live in poverty. What Yucun does—to “search for fame and success and restore the family’s fortune”—is precisely what Baoyu is expected to do (HLM 1:7; SS 1:56, translation modified). Since all the other male members of the Jia clan “get more degenerate from one generation to the next,” as the merchant Leng Zixing reports, Baoyu becomes the only hope to reinvigorate the family’s stock, if he can—just as Yucun has done before him—succeed in the examinations (HLM 1:18; SS 1:74). The early debut of Jia Yucun in the novel is therefore
meaningful: he is presented as a contrast to Baoyu even before the latter’s advent, suggesting a career model Baoyu is expected to follow but instead relentlessly rejects.

What Baoyu refuses to be is another block of stone to be used in a project of family rebuilding. In chapter 5, when the spirits of Baoyu’s ancestors, the Duke of Ningguo (Ningguo Gong) and the Duke of Rongguo (Rongguo Gong), meet Goddess Disenchantment (Jinghuan Xianzi), they reminisce about the past glory of their clan in serving the throne and express their wish that Baoyu become the one to prevent their family’s further decline and degeneration:

In the hundred years since the foundation of the present dynasty, several generations of our houses have distinguished themselves by their services to the Throne and have covered themselves with riches and honors; but now its stock of good fortunes has run out, and nothing can be done to replenish it. And though our descendants are many, not one of them is worthy to carry on the line. The only possible exception, our great-grandson Baoyu, has inherited a perverse, intractable nature and is eccentric and emotionally unstable. . . . Could you perhaps initiate him in the pleasures of the flesh and all that sort of thing in such a way as to shock the silliness out of him? In that way he might stand a chance of escaping some of the traps that people fall into and be able to devote himself single-mindedly to the serious things of life (ruyu zhenglu). (HLM 1:59; SS 137)

Thus Baoyu is expected to focus on the “serious things” (zhenglu), to enter service for the imperial state, which is seen as the only way to preserve the family’s prestige and prosperity. Yet, as suggested by his behavior at his one-year birthday party—where the baby plays with “some women’s things” (HLM 1:19; SS 1:76)—Baoyu seems to have an innate distaste for the “serious things,” which may indeed have been carried over from his previous incarnation as the Stone that is dismissed from a business most “serious” of all.

That imperviousness to the “serious things” now prognosticates Baoyu’s failure to carry on the family line “properly.” In chapter 110, almost as an echo to what happened at that early birthday party, the dying Grandmother Jia gives her last admonition to Baoyu, her coddled grandson: “My boy, you must promise to do your very best for the family” (ni yao zhengqi
Her last outcry summarizes her frustrated expectations as a grandmother as well as the unyielding obduracy of her grandson, now a married man, in resisting the call to familial duties. The Chinese term zhengqi, which means to win credit or earn respect for one’s parents and ancestors, was often used in a close association with filial piety (xiao). Thus a son who failed to bring dignity and esteem to his parents by having a successful career would be stigmatized as bu zhengqi, which was almost synonymous with bu xiao, or not filial. Furthermore, with the Confucian tradition of regarding the family as an epitome of the nation and filial piety in a close affinity to political loyalty (zhong), the failure to fulfill one’s duty to the family (jia) would be easily translated into negligence of service to the state (guo). As early as chapter 3, when Baoyu meets Daiyu for the first time, the novel offers a poem that contains these lines about the boy:

Regrettably so many precious hours he wastes,
For the family and the empire he will be of no use.

(HLM 1:36; SS 1:102, translation modified)

That verdict remains just as pertinent toward the end of the novel, as clearly indicated by the grandmother’s deathbed exhortation.

Thus one sees a triplex parallel between the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli,” the Stone in the mythic frame, and Jia Baoyu in the main body of the novel. While the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli” has made an “utter failure” of the first half of his life, the Stone is found unqualified for heaven rebuilding, and Baoyu is considered to be of no use “for the family and the empire.” There is therefore an intriguing resonance, not only between the mythic and human forms of the Stone but also between the Stone’s “life in both worlds” and the fictionalized novelist. In each case, the “failure”—which is clearly in a moral and political sense—turns out to be the prelude to a success in fiction making.

**Aesthetic Writings versus Examination Learning**

Even more than Grandmother Jia, Baoyu’s father Jia Zheng feels great anxiety over his son, who appears to be such a “doltish mule, to study disinclined” (yuwan pa du wenzhang) (HLM 1:36; SS 1:102). The austere
father makes persistent efforts to pressure Baoyu into earnest preparations for the examinations, which, however, only further strains the father-son relationship. “No reader of Hongloumeng will dispute the contention,” as Anthony Yu points out, “that one constant source of conflict between Bao-yu and his father lies in the boy’s ostensible lack of self-discipline in his studies.” Indeed there should be no question about Baoyu’s intelligence. While often depicted in the novel by such pejorative epithets as chun (stupid), dai (moronic), sha (silly), and chi (imbecile), Baoyu is, as the inscription on his talisman—“Precious Jade of Luminous Intelligence” (tongling baoyu)—suggests, a young man of remarkable acumen. He of course fully understands the moral, political, and financial remunerations that success in the examinations will bring for himself and his family. His obstinate reluctance to study for the examinations therefore merits close scrutiny.

In addition to his instinctive aversion for the bureaucratic recruitment and the “career worms” like Jia Yucun, Baoyu has a particular dislike for the format of the examination writing, the eight-legged essay (bagu wen), which he considers “nothing more than a shoddy way of worming into a job” (HLM 3:1059; SS 4:52). Despite his father’s dictatorial insistence that he should “thoroughly understand and learn by heart the whole Four Books” before anything else (HLM 1:107; SS 1:204), Baoyu demonstrates no impressive knowledge of the Confucian canon that formed the kernel of the examination curriculum. His vivacious and almost wayward disposition obviously is not conducive to the memorization-based learning essential for a success in the examinations. In chapter 73, hastily preparing for his father’s possible checkup of his examination studies, Baoyu realizes in consternation that he can remember little of the classics:

He found that there was little more than The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean and the two halves of the Analects that he could be absolutely sure of. The first half of Mencius he knew reasonably well, but certainly not well enough to be able to carry on from any sentence given him at random. The second half was virtually terra incognita. Of the Five Classics he was fairly familiar with the Poetry Classic because he was frequently having to read bits of it in connection with his own versifying. Though far from word-perfect, he probably knew it well enough to scrape through a test. He could not remember any of the other classics at all; but fortunately his
father had so far never asked him to study them, so probably it would not matter. When it came to Old Style Prose, the case was rather different. . . he had not done any serious work on them. There was certainly no question of his being able to remember them. There was even less likelihood of his being able to pass muster on the Examination Essay. He had always detested this style of writing in any case. (HLM 3:935–36; SS 3:436–37)

On another occasion, when Baoyu makes himself work on the Four Books, he immediately experiences a “familiar sinking feeling,” as all the textual details seem to “slip from his grasp.” Helplessly, he says to himself: “Poems are easy, but I can’t make head or tail of this stuff” (HLM 3:1060; SS 4:53–54). Despite his eventual acquisition of a juren degree following a spurt of intensive study urged by everyone around him, Baoyu is clearly aware that what he is endowed with is a different type of talent. The anthropomorphosis of the Stone, just like his former mythic incarnation, remains “unfit to repair the azure sky.”

Baoyu’s feeling about the relative easiness of poetry is bolstered by his experience of versification. “Although the boy showed no aptitude for serious study,” so is Jia Zheng informed by Baoyu’s tutor Jia Dairu, “he nevertheless possessed a certain meretricious talent for versification, not undeserving of commendation” (HLM 1:186; SS 1:326). Indeed, one of the routine activities for Baoyu and the girls in the Great Prospect Garden is composing poems. Although he usually defers the laurels of the poetry club to Lin Daiyu or Xue Baochai, he is able to handle different topics with admirable facility. The most impressive exhibitions of Baoyu’s poetic aptitude are, quite ironically, in Jia Zheng’s presence. In chapter 17, after the construction of the Great Prospect Garden is completed, Jia Zheng demands poetic lines from Baoyu to be inscribed at different sites in the garden. In chapter 78, in another of his attempts to test Baoyu’s talent, Jia Zheng orders his son to compose an elegy on Fourth Sister Lin (Lin Siniang), a legendary woman warrior. In both situations Baoyu demonstrates his facile imagination and remarkable dexterity in poetic composition. On the latter occasion, his “archaic-style” (guti) ballad honoring Fourth Sister Lin gives him the inspiration for a piece of rhapsody (fu) with the title “Hibiscus Dirge” (Furong lei), which he composes in mourning over his beautiful and innocent maid Skybright (Qingwen) who has lost her young life to calumny and slander.
Thus the young man who dreads the civil service examinations actually excels in a different type of examination, one on literary composition. Significantly, during both tests by his father, Baoyu’s performance wins admiration from Jia Zheng’s guests, mostly his fellow officials. What these former civil service examination graduates say—“Our young friend with his natural talent and youthful imagination succeeds immediately where we old pedants fail”—may be more than just a routine compliment (HLM 1:187; SS 1:328). Jia Zheng’s attitude, however, is quite ambivalent. While not totally unpleased by his son’s literary feats, he ultimately decides on both occasions to dampen Baoyu’s enthusiasm on poetic writing with his typical paternal severity. He is concerned that Baoyu’s enthusiasm with belletristic composition may be the very reason for his lack of interest in the examination essays, and that concern is once again expressed in his conversation with Baoyu’s tutor Jia Dairu, when he takes his son back to school:

Today I’ve myself brought him [Baoyu] here, because I felt the need to entrust him to you personally. He is no longer a child, and if he is to shoulder his responsibilities and earn a place in the world, it is high time he applied himself conscientiously to preparing for his exams. At home, unfortunately, he spends all his time idling about in the company of other children. He may be able to compose a few poems, but they are for the most part gibberish and nonsensical. Even the better ones are about nothing more than the wind and the cloud, the moon and the dew—frivolities that have nothing to do with the proper business of his life [yisheng de zhengshi]. (HLM 3:1056; SS 4:47, translation modified)

The tutor immediately chimes in: “Not that one should entirely neglect poetic composition. But there is surely time enough for that later on in one’s career” (HLM 3:1056; SS 4:47). This exchange between the father and the tutor reflects the prevalent view in late imperial China, which privileged government service over any other professions and the examination essay over any other forms of writing. Within the novel itself, the tutor’s words here echo his earlier report on Baoyu’s “meretricious talent for versification” (HLM 1:186; SS 1:326). The Chinese original for “meretricious talent” is waicai, a derogatory term that means, literally, a devious and crooked gift or an aptitude that goes awry. Meanwhile, studies for the examinations are constantly referred to, as in Jia Zheng’s words quoted
earlier, as \textit{zhengshi}, literally, a “straight” or “upright” matter. The antithesis between these two terms, \textit{waicai} and \textit{zhengshi}, clearly indicates the moral valorization for government service in the prevalent value system and vividly illustrates the perceived incompatibility between the talent for literary creation and the learning for the civil service examinations.

During the Ming and Qing periods, the examination curriculum was almost exclusively based on the Confucian canon and Song scholastic commentaries. With the exceptions of the special \textit{buoxue hongci} examinations, belletristic writings were almost completely eradicated from the examinations until 1757, when Emperor Qianlong decreed that the provincial examinations include the composition of a pentsyllabic poem. The tension between literary creation and canonic learning had a strong impact on many literati’s vocational decisions. According to the late-Ming poet and artist Dong Qichang (1555–1636), Wang Shizhen (1526–90), one of the famous “Latter Seven Scholars” (\textit{houqizi}), “exhorted his disciples not to work on poetry” because of his concern that poetic composition might become “a professional impediment for examination candidates” (\textit{juzi yebing}). This relegation of the belletristic tradition in favor of examination scholarship quickly found expressions in fiction. In the early Qing story “Pretense Became Reality in the Seven-Pine Garden” (Qisongyuan nongjia chengzhen) collected in \textit{The World-Illuminating Cup} (Zhaoshi bei), the young scholar Ruan Jianglan decides to give up poetry composition altogether and concentrate on preparations for the examinations in order to win back his beloved girl Wanniang. The narrator comments on his decision approvingly: “How much talent can one be endowed with? The more talent is spent on poetry, the less of it will be left for the examinations.” A still better-known example is in chapter 3 of \textit{The Scholars}, mentioned earlier in chapter 5 of this book: when an examination candidate brags about his skills in versification and knowledge in poetry, the chief examiner Zhou Jin reprimands him sternly: “Since the emperor attaches importance to essays, why should you bring up the poems of the Han and Tang Dynasties?”

This abrasive censure resonates with Jia Zheng’s scolding of Baoyu. Ironically, in chapter 37 Jia Zheng is appointed commissioner for education in one of the provinces, a position similar to the one Zhou Jin holds in \textit{The Scholars}. His departure for office leaves Baoyu free to “play in the Garden to his heart’s content without the least fear of restraint or reprisal”
Almost immediately, he joins his sister Tanchun and other girls forming a poetry society, the Crab Flower Club (Haitang She).\(^3\) So, while the father, just like Zhou Jin, is away “at the imperial command to examine essays,” the son at home indulges himself in “heterodox studies” and “miscellaneous literary forms” to the total negligence of “real work.”

Baoyu’s penchant for poetry is thus perfectly consistent with his antipathy for the examinations and government service. Yet, having “life in both worlds,” the Stone/jade/Baoyu has a mission that transcends the daily dabbling in poetry, a mission to turn his mundane experience into a narrative text. Indeed, that is precisely the mission that the fictionalized novelist proclaims for himself in the “Fanli” and then entrusts to his trifurcated novelistic agent, the Stone/jade/Baoyu. Baoyu’s poems, along with those by other characters, are materials for making the “Story of the Stone.” Macrocosmically, therefore, his primary literary engagement is not poetic composition but the creation of a fictional text. In comparison with poetry, fiction was further downgraded in the hierarchy of intellectual prioritization. As a Qing scholar put it, “Moral and ethical doctrines, classics and histories—these are the important ones among all writings \([\text{yan zhi da zhe ye}]\). Poems and songs, miscellaneous notes and fictions—these are the trifling ones \([\text{yan zhi xiao zhe ye}]\). Among all writings, fiction is the most trifling of the trifling ones \([\text{yan zhi you xiao zhe}]\).”\(^4\) In comparison with his practice of poetic composition, Baoyu’s fiction making amounts to an even more drastic and more resolute repudiation of a bureaucratic career, or the service of “mending heaven” for both the imperial state and the family.

**DREAMS AND ILLUSIONS (MENGHUAN): INSPIRATIONS FOR FICTION MAKING**

That the ultimate product of the Stone’s experience in the human world is to be a text of fiction is suggested early in the jiaxu manuscript copy of the novel. In the opening chapter, Zhen Shiyin sees in his dream the Buddhist monk and Daoist priest carry the jade to Goddess Disenchantment. Along the way, the two immortals converse about the Stone’s metamorphosis into Divine Luminescent Page (Shengying Shizhe), who is in turn destined to descend to the human world along with the celestial plant Crimson Pearl (Jiangzhu Xiancao). In a passage that somehow became obliterated in the later typographical editions, these clergymen make it
quite clear that the Stone’s imminent journey to the mundane world will become a story (gushi): “It seems this story is going to be more detailed [suosui] and more exquisite [xini] than all the wind-and-moon stories [fengyue gushi] that have ever existed.”

The Stone’s—also Baoyu’s or the baoyu’s—authorship of the inscribed “Story of the Stone” is further emphasized, still in the opening chapter, in the dialogue between the Stone and the itinerant Daoist, Vanitas. As the priest expresses his doubt about the moral value of the narrative, the Stone’s eloquent observations on its entertaining efficacy eventually convert the distrustful reader into a willing transmitter of the text. The authorship of the narrative is clearly claimed by the Stone and acknowledged by the priest: while Vanitas refers to it as “this story of yours,” the Stone calls it “my story of the stone” (HLM 1:2–3; SS 1:49). In light of this, the poem at the end of the inscribed narrative becomes intriguingly ambiguous. The line that David Hawkes has aptly translated as “My life in both worlds on this stone is writ” (ci xi shenqian shenhou shi) can also mean, in consistence with the emphasis on the Stone’s authorship, “My life in both worlds I’ve writ on this stone” (HLM 1:2; SS 1:49).

Two words, “dreams” (meng) and “illusions” (huan), frequently occur in the text in relation to fiction creation and therefore particularly merit our attention. In the “Fanli,” dreams and illusions are associated with the conception and inception of the fiction with the fictionalized novelist: “The author stated that he had experienced a series of dreams and illusions. He therefore concealed the real events and, by means of the Precious Jade of Luminous Intelligence, related this story of the stone. Hence the name Zhen Shiyin” (HLM 1:1). At the end of the long passage, the reader is reminded of the unusual significance of “dreams” and “illusions” in the main body of the novel, which are said to be “the very essence of this book” (ci shu benzhi) (HLM 1:1). The pairing of dreams and illusions, along with the Nüwa myth and the metamorphosis of the magic Stone itself, constitutes a chimerical textual ambience in a striking contrast to the realistic fabric of daily-life details in the main body of the novel. Dream of the Red Chamber is intensely interested in the dichotomy between what is real and what is false and its ramifications for fictional imagination. The tension between these two seemingly opposite orientations in signification—both toward and away from reality—is precisely what characterizes fictional literature. Chinese xiaoshuo, just like the Western novel, had to
circumscribe its territory between reality and truth on one side and illusion and falsehood on the other. In that sense, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is more directly concerned with the nature of fiction and more intensely reflexive on the art of fiction-making than any Chinese fictional work prior to it. While the words “dreams” and “illusions” certainly carry a Buddhist tinge, what is presented here is not so much religious wisdom as the wisdom for literary creation. By employing these terms, “the author has succeeded in turning the concept of world and life as dream into a subtle but powerful theory of fiction that he uses constantly to confound his reader’s sense of reality,” to borrow Anthony Yu’s astute words.42

According to the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli,” the writing of his fiction is both subsequent to and contingent upon “a series of dreams and illusions.”43 To be sure, the “dreams and illusions” mentioned here are quite ambiguous. They can signify on a literal level, but metaphorically they can also refer to the fictionalized novelist’s memory of his life experience that feels dreamlike when viewed retrospectively. The latter possibility seems more likely, as it is more consistent with the rest of the paragraph where the fictionalized novelist offers a brief account of his own life. In either case, however, dreams and illusions do not refer to his experience per se but a mental transformation of it, a process that must necessarily involve “concealment of real events” (*zhenshi yin*). Yet the dreams and illusions, as made quite clear here, are the source of the inspirations for the creation of fiction: the mental transformation leads to an aesthetic one.

Since the “Fanli” anticipates the dreams and illusions in the main body of the novel and calls them “the essence of this book,” one may wonder in what ways they are related to the “series of dreams and illusions” of the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli” itself, especially since it was those dreams and illusions that have initiated his transformation into a fiction writer. If the “Story of the Stone” is considered here not only as a textual outcome of that transformation but also a theatrical recuperation of that transformation itself, can some of Baoyu’s dreams and illusions be interpreted in a similar light, in terms of their function in the progress toward the completion of the stone narrative? In other words, if the fictionalized novelist’s fiction writing is initiated by a “series of dreams and illusions,” does Baoyu, the surrogate of the fictionalized novelist in the main body of the novel, have similar inspirational experiences?

Baoyu’s most important dream is, of course, the one in chapter 5, in
which he visits Taixu Huanjing, the Illusory Land of Great Void, or the Land of Illusion as David Hawkes renders it. The term taixu, or Great Void, was deeply entrenched in classical Chinese thinking. In the chapter “Knowledge Wonders North” (Zhi bei you) of Zhuangzi, taixu seems to refer to a metaphysical space of vacuity that provides an access to ultimate truth because of its transcendence over all the mutations of matters and affairs. With Confucian scholars in later periods, however, the concept of taixu came to be drastically reshaped. For the seventh-century Confucian exegete Kong Yingda (574–648), taixu was a grand realm where the transmutations and transformations of all substances took place: “How can the myriads of things be put in motion [by an outer force]? With no exceptions they all take their shapes from the Great Void on their own [mo bu du hua yu taixu] and create themselves instantly.”

Zhang Zai (1020–77), one of the Northern Song pioneers of neo-Confucianism, took over the idea of taixu and further developed it. For Zhang, taixu was not a space of nothingness as perceived by the Daoists, for nothingness, as Zhang argued, simply took no space. Rather, it was filled with what he termed qi, or the ether, which, although invisible to the human eye, was in a constant movement to form and then reform all types of existences: “The Great Void is formless and is filled with qi. Its condensation and dispersion are nothing but the changes of the transitory forms of existence” (qi ju qi san, bianhua zhi kexing er). “The Great Void cannot be without qi. The qi cannot but conglomerate into myriads of things, and myriads of things cannot but disperse to constitute the Great Void.”

Zhang Zai’s theory on taixu and qi influenced Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi, and, through them, had an impact on some of the major thinkers of the Ming and Qing periods, especially Wang Fuzhi (1619–92).

If taixu was traditionally conceived as the space where all forms of existence were to be created and then re-created, it is indeed quite befitting that it becomes transformed in Dream of the Red Chamber into a symbolic space of fiction making. Before its journey to the mundane world, the Stone travels to the Illusory Land of Great Void. The nature of this celestial realm is well summarized by the couplet inscribed on either side of the arch:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true;
Real becomes not real where the unreal’s real.

(HLM 1:6; SS 1:55)
That the couplet deliberately blurs the line between the real and the unreal and between facts and fabrications has been so well explicated that it does not bear another repetition here, but the background of taixu in Chinese philosophical thinking may provide a new perspective for us. What the couplet suggests, the metamorphosis between the real (zhen) and the unreal (jia) and between existence (you) and nonexistence (wu), is quite comparable to what happens in the realm of taixu as Zhang Zai characterized it. If the metaphysical taixu is where things are formed and reformed amid the continuous movement of the ether, it may be said that the Illusory Land of Great Void performs a similar function in the world of Dream of the Red Chamber. It is in Disenchantment’s Sunset Glow Palace that the Divine Luminescent Page, transformed from the magic Stone, irrigates the celestial plant of Crimson Pearl. When the plant sheds off her vegetable shape and becomes a fairy girl, she decides to repay the Page’s favor with her tears in the human world, where they are destined to be reborn respectively as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, the male and female protagonists of the novel. This series of successive rebirths here is quite similar to the constant reshaping of material forces in Zhang Zai’s taixu. It is significant that Dream of the Red Chamber starts with such successive metamorphoses of its main characters. The “Story of the Stone,” just to reiterate, can be read as a fictional elaboration of the life experience of the fictionalized novelist conjured up in the “Fanli.” Yet to fictionalize that experience, what is “real” has to be concealed, or rather, reprocessed, and the successive metamorphoses of the Stone and Crimson Pearl Plant signify that process of transforming the “real” into the fictional. Taixu Huanjing, seen in this light, becomes a symbolic realm of the creative power of fictional imagination.

The first five chapters of the novel have often been considered an elaborate prologue, unfolding the mythic frame of the fiction and then setting the stage for the drama in the Jia household. It is by no means accidental that in chapter 5, right before the story of the Stone’s human experience starts to evolve, Baoyu visits the realm of the Goddess of Disenchantment in his dream. His other dream trip there takes place in chapter 116, where the Illusory Land of Great Void is given a different name, the Paradise of Truth (Zhenru Fudi). These two visits are at two points perfectly symmetrical in the 120-chapter version of the novel, respectively near the beginning and the end. The meaning of this arrangement becomes apparent in
light of the symbolic-allegorical function of Disenchantment’s realm and Baoyu’s role as the destined fiction maker, as these two visits mark, respectively, the initiation and completion of Baoyu’s mission of fiction-making.

The first dream trip, which is certainly “one of the longest and most celebrated, complex, and well-wrought literary dreams in the history of Chinese literature,” particularly deserves a careful scrutiny. That day, while attending a party in the Ningguo mansion, Baoyu feels tired and sleepy. Grandmother Jia lets Qin Shi, her favorite great-granddaughter-in-law, put Baoyu to an afternoon nap. The young lady conducts Baoyu into a room, where he sees on the wall a painting featuring the Han scholar Liu Xiang assiduously reading a book that is dutifully illuminated for him by an immortal holding a flaming torch. On either side of the painting is this couplet in calligraphy:

True learning implies a clear insight into human activities,
Genuine culture involves the skillful manipulation
of human relationships.

(*HLM* 1:52; *SS* 1:126)

As Baoyu bluntly expresses his dislike for the place, Qin Shi takes him to her own chamber, where he is greeted by a delicious fragrance and a sumptuous but elegant décor:

The fragrance of wine overwhelmed one with its flower-like scents. On a table stood an antique mirror that had once graced the tiring-room of Empress Wu Zetian. Beside it stood the golden platter on which Flying Swallow once danced for her emperor’s delight. And on the platter was that very quince which An Lushan once threw at Lady Yang, bruising her breast. At the far end of the room stood the priceless bed on which Princess Shouchang was sleeping under the eaves of the Hanzhang Palace. Over it hung a canopy commissioned by Princess Tongchang entirely fashioned out of ropes of pearls. (*HLM* 1:52–53; *SS* 1:127, translation modified)

Baoyu is delighted with everything he sees and decides to take his nap here. Qin Shi, the proud owner of the room, then makes the bed for Baoyu: “She unfolded a quilted coverlet, whose silk has been laundered by the fabulous Xi Shi, and arranged the double head-rest that Hong-niang once carried for her amorous mistress” (*HLM* 1:53; *SS* 1:127).
Baoyu’s repugnance for the first room is not surprising, as the exaltation of pedantic learning and the glorification of a bureaucratic career presented in the painting and the couplet certainly will not win the renegade’s heart. Yet the reason behind his love for the second room is not immediately clear. One may say that the pubescent boy is attracted to the décor suggestive of sexual love. Yet, none of the objects in the room—the mirror, the platter, the quince, the bed, or the canopy—suggests anything at all until they become associated with the name of a woman celebrated in fictional literature. In that sense, they constitute an iconography of fictional sensuality and point to a prominent sector of Chinese fictional literature. Even the objects themselves may be just “fictional,” as their “authenticity” exclusively hinges on that of the stories they are associated with, stories that have evolved a long way into fictional literature from whatever factual or historical origins they might have once had. “If you take them for what they are called, you will be once again tricked by the author,” as Red Inkstone cautions the reader in his interlinear comment. So, if the décor in Qin Shi’s room is indeed arousing to Baoyu, it perhaps does not arouse the adolescent boy’s sexual desire as much as the budding fiction maker’s imagination for literary creation.

Amid this aura in Qin Shi’s room, Baoyu has his dream trip to Disenchantment’s celestial realm. To explain her reason for the invitation, Disenchantment observes that “a full exposure to the illusions of feasting, drinking, music and dancing may succeed in bringing about an awakening” in Baoyu (HLM 1:59; SS 1:137). She accordingly lets Baoyu have a glimpse of the files of women around him, become intoxicated with her celestial tea and fairy wine, watch a sumptuous song-and-dance suite, and, ultimately, sleep with her younger sister Jianmei. Baoyu’s dream experience, as Shuen-fu Lin has pointed out, presents “a program for the rest of the book.” The main and supplementary registers of the “Twelve Beauties from Jingling” (Jinling shi’er chai) foretell the destinies of dozens of women characters in enigmatic verses and pictures, and the prophecies about the twelve ladies in the “main register” (zhengce) are reiterated in the song-and-dance suite called “Dream of the Red Chamber” (Honglou meng). It is by no means a coincidence that the titles for the registers and the music suite are identical with two of the alternative titles for the “Story of the Stone” given in the opening chapter of the novel. Obviously, the novelist makes a conscious effort to suggest that Baoyu is here given a
preview of the outline of the stone narrative. Guiding Baoyu through the
dreamland by hand and offering the fiction maker a prognostic glimpse
into his own fiction, the goddess is to Baoyu what the Muses were to the
Greek bards. Indeed Red Inkstone demonstrates his remarkable percep-
tivity when he calls Baoyu and Disenchantment “the two persons that are
the key to the entire work” (*tongbu dagang*).54 On the level of signification
where *Dream of the Red Chamber* is read as a fiction about the making of
a fiction writer, the goddess should be considered the primary source of
inspiration.

That Baoyu’s experience in the dreamland does leave its imprint on his
mind is made clear in chapter 17. When he follows his father on a tour of
the newly completed Great Prospect Garden, all of a sudden he is over-
come by an unaccountable feeling that “he must have known a building
somewhat like this before—though where or when he could not for the life
of him remember” (*HLM* 1:195; *SS* 1:343).55 The boy lives his mundane life—
or, rather, advances his “Story of the Stone”—by following the “program”
revealed to him in the dream. Actually, the novel wastes no time in sug-
gesting the inspirational nature of Baoyu’s dream. Right after the account
of the dream in chapter 5, the narrative suddenly assumes a different tone
in this passage near the beginning of chapter 6:

> The inhabitants of the Rong mansion, if we include all of them from the
> highest to the humblest to our total, numbered more than three hundred
> souls, who produced between them a dozen or more incidents in a single
day. Faced with so exuberant an abundance of material, what principle
> should your chronicler adopt to guide him in his selection of incidents
to record? As we pondered the problem *where to begin*, it was suddenly
solved for us by the appearance as it were out of nowhere of someone
from a very humble, very insignificant household who, on the strength of
a very tenuous, very remote family connection with the Jias, turned up at
the Rong mansion on the very day of which we are about to write. (*HLM*
1:68; *SS* 1:150)

This Shandean-style apology, suggesting the diffidence and coyness of
a novice narrator, marks the inauguration of this stone-turned-fiction
writer. The novelist, as one scholar puts it, intends at this point “to hand
over the authorship to the Stone.”56 What appears to be an account of
Baoyu’s mundane experience, as the passage indicates, is coeval with his experience of fiction creation. Indeed, the “series of dreams and illusions” that initiated the fiction writing of the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli” becomes thus dramatically reenacted in Baoyu’s dream visit to Disenchantment and her realm.

In chapter 116, Baoyu has his second dream trip to the celestial realm, now called the Paradise of Truth (Zhenru Fudi). This time he sees on either side of the arch a couplet somewhat different from the one he saw during his first trip:

When Fiction departs and Truth appears, Truth prevails;
Though Not-real was once Real, the Real is never unreal.

(*HLM* 4:1457; *SS* 5:285)

Like the one he saw before, this couplet also heightens the dialectic between the real and the unreal. Yet, if the original one introduces Baoyu to the land of fictional imagination by accentuating the illusory nature of what appears to be real, this one, near the completion of the “Story of the Stone,” asserts the truthfulness in the product of the fictional imagination. Significantly, Baoyu does not see Disenchantment and her celestial cohorts this time. As he has fulfilled the mission of fiction making, creative inspirations are no longer needed. Instead, Baoyu finds himself in a place that dimly reminds him of the Great Prospect Garden and encounters the spirits of several women who have shared his mundane life. If Baoyu during his first dream trip is given a fleeting preview of the fiction he is to make, now he is having a retrospective summary of the fiction he has completed. As Baoyu feels dazed by what he sees, he asks the Buddhist monk, who has escorted him to the celestial land, whether he is in a dream or in the real world. The answer by the monk, once again, echoes the statement in the “Fanli” that the fictionalized novelist “uses what the Stone remembers/recollects/records as an analogy for himself.” Although deliberately obscure and evasive, the monk’s words carry a strong suggestion that what Baoyu sees is precisely his own recollection (*ji*): “As long as you have dutifully remembered/recollected/recorded all the details of what you experienced [*ba jingli guo de shiqing xixi ji zhe*], I shall explain it to you further when we meet again” (*HLM* 4:1462; *SS* 5:293, translation modified). Their next meeting, of course, takes place in the final chapter of the
novel, where Baoyu, following the Buddhist monk and the Daoist priest, leaves Red Dust for good. The author of the “Story of the Stone”—just like Vanitas, its first reader—experiences passion before finally advancing from the phenomenal world to the ultimate truth of void. Yet, by ending his adventures in the mundane world, he also ends the fiction he has been “remembering/recollecting/recording.”

PERSONAL AND PRIVATE FEELINGS
AS MATERIAL FOR FICTION MAKING

Baoyu’s dream in chapter 5 ends on a sensual note. After watching the performance of the song-and-dance suite, Disenchantment takes Baoyu to a sumptuously furnished room, where he sees a beautiful fairy girl. Then the goddess delivers an extended lecture on the connection between love and sex and the difference between lust of the flesh and lust of the mind (yiyin) before she offers her younger sister, the fairy girl in the room, to be his bride:

In principle, of course, all lust is the same. But the word has many different meanings. For example, the typically lustful man in the common sense of the word is a man who likes a pretty face, who is fond of singing and dancing, who is inordinately given to flirtation; one who makes love in season and out of season, and who, if he could, would like to have every pretty girl in the world at his disposal, to gratify his desires whenever he felt like it. Such a person is a mere brute. His is a shallow, promiscuous kind of lust. But your kind of lust is different. That blind, defenseless love with which nature has filled your being is what we call here “lust of the mind.” “Lust of the mind” cannot be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning. Either you know what it means or you don’t. Because of this “lust of the mind” women will find you a kind and understanding friend; but in the eyes of the world I am afraid it is going to make you seem unpractical and eccentric. It is going to earn you the jeers of many and the angry looks of many more. . . . And now I am going to give you my little sister Two-in-One—“Keqing” to her friends—to be your bride. The time is propitious. You may consummate the marriage this very night. My motive in arranging this is to help you grasp the fact that, since even in these immortal precincts love is an illusion, the love of your dust-
stained, mortal world must be doubly an illusion. It is my earnest hope that, knowing this, you will henceforth be able to shake yourself free of its entanglements and change your previous way of thinking, devoting your mind seriously to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius and your person wholeheartedly to the betterment of society. (HLM 1:64; SS 1:146)

This lengthy admonition is truly intriguing. If Baoyu’s dream visit to the Illusory Land of Great Void is a trip for fictional inspirations, why does the goddess want Baoyu’s initiation as a fiction maker to coincide with his sexual initiation? Her pronounced purpose of thrusting Baoyu into the illusion of sensual pleasures in order to disillusion him may well be ironic, as it is immediately vitiated by Baoyu’s sexual experiment with his maid Aroma when he is back in the “dust-stained, mortal world” after the dream. Equally ironic is her exhortation to Baoyu on the importance of Confucian learning. The goddess is, in her own words, “a person in the know” (gezhong ren), who is completely aware of the “origin” (laili) of the stone-turned-boy and his destined mission in Red Dust. As one recalls, Disenchantment is the one who has sent both Divine Luminescent Page and Crimson Pearl Plant, along with other “amorous souls” (qinggui), down to the mundane world. She of course knows that the Stone and the Plant, formerly two inhabitants of her own realm, are in Red Dust to redeem their “debts of passions” (qingzhai). And of course she also knows that Baoyu is, as goes the opening line in the prelude of the song-and-dance suite performed in her palace, the most devoted lover (qingzhong) ever since “first the world from chaos rose” (kaipi hongmeng). Quite obviously, the goddess’s “earnest” hope to see Baoyu turn away from love and devote his mind to “the teachings of Confucius and Mencius” does not sound genuinely earnest at all.

In a way Disenchantment’s younger sister Jianmei is a truly illusory figure in the goddess’s land of illusion. Unlike the voluble goddess herself and the other clamorous fairies—who complain loudly about their “pure, maidenly precincts” being contaminated by the intrusion of a “disgusting” male—Jianmei is completely voiceless and motionless even when Disenchantment brings Baoyu into her chamber and declares her his bride. All that is known about her is that she appears to Baoyu as resembling both his female cousins, Daiyu and Baochai. While that may indeed justify Hawkes’s translation of the name as Two-in-One, Jianmei literally
means simply “combined beauty.” Even though she reminds Baoyu of the
two girls he is most intimate with, the name itself suggests a sense of gen-
erality rather than specificity. Her other name, Keqing, happens to be the
same as that of Baoyu’s niece-in-law Qin Shi, who is to die very soon.59
The pairing of these two names thus forms a paradox about their owner
as being both omnipresent and nonexistent, pertaining both to women in
general and to a particular one who is soon to be no more. One therefore
has reason to believe that the shadowy fairy is meant to represent not any
specific woman or women but the abstract notion of womanhood. If that
is the case, Baoyu’s sexual intercourse with her becomes a highly symbolic
act, through which the boy’s naive and innocent preference for girls—
“Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud”—now evolves into
qing, the most intricate and complex feeling of a sexually awakened young
man (HLM 1:19; SS 1:76). What may appear to be a self-contradiction on
Disenchantment’s part—it seems that she distinguishes Baoyu’s “lust of
the mind” (yiyin) from others’ “lust of the flesh” and then ostensibly feels
the need to disillusion him of the corporeal pleasures—may not be a self-
contradiction after all, if Baoyu’s wedding with Jianmei is seen as a ritual
to mark both his puberty and his entry into the domain of the most com-
plex feelings in personal and private life.

It is clear from the beginning of Baoyu’s dream visit that Taixu Huan-
jing, as a land of inspirations for fictional imagination, is enveloped in an
aura of personal desire and passion. At the entrance of the land, after see-
ing the famous couplet celebrating the paradox of fiction, Baoyu is imme-
diately greeted by this line inscribed above the lintel: “Sea of emotions and
skies of passions” (niehai qingtian). That line is accompanied by another
couplet inscribed vertically on either side:

\begin{align*}
\text{Ancient earth and sky} & \\
\text{Marvel that love’s passion should outlast all time.} & \\
\text{Star-crossed men and maids} & \\
\text{Groan that love’s debts should be so hard to pay.} & (HLM 1:55; SS 1:130)
\end{align*}

Once within Disenchantment’s realm, Baoyu sees an array of build-
ings each with a board above it indicating the name of the department
housed in it. Those names virtually form a nomenclatural kaleidoscope of
The Stone in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

personal emotions: Department of Fond Infatuation (Chiqing Si), Department of Cruel Rejection (Jieyuan Si), Department of Early Morning Weeping (Zhaoti Si), Department of Late Night Sobbing (Muku Si), Department of Spring Fever (Chungan Si), Department of Autumn Grief (Qiubei Si), among many others (*HLM* 1:55; *SS* 1:131). Through all these names, along with the files auguring the fates of Baoyu’s female companions, Disenchantment reveals to Baoyu all possible scenarios in the drama of love and desire. At the same time, however, the goddess ostensibly assumes the role of an agent of Baoyu’s illustrious ancestors in urging him to shake himself free of the entanglement in passion and make himself ready for government service. By doing so the goddess prophesies a tension in Baoyu’s emotional and intellectual growth, the tension between *qing*, his personal and private feelings, and the public and bureaucratic role expected of him, of which *li* (principle), the central concept in the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy and potentially the passport to officialdom, may serve as an emblem.60 While *Dream of the Red Chamber* does not spurn *li* altogether, *qing* is clearly the main source for the fiction-making material. However, the novel is not about *qing* per se; rather, it contextualizes private desire and passion in a constant conflict with the discourse of the examinations and government service.

In the mythic frame of the novel, the Stone, after being rejected from Nüwa’s heaven rebuilding, lies at the foot of the mountain called Qinggeng Feng (Green Ridge Peak). Part of that name, *qinggeng*, as Red Inkstone pointed out, puns meaningfully on the word *qinggen*, or the root of passions.61 In light of the affinity between the Stone and the fictionalized novelist in the “Fanli,” the allegorical signification becomes fulfilled here: just as the ostensible futility of the fictionalized novelist’s days with his female companions turns out to be seminal for his fictional creation, the Stone, during what seems to be its idle abandonment, is nourished by the vitality of “the roots of passions” before it becomes a fiction maker. While the Stone was previously “melted” and “molded” (*duanlian*) by the goddess for her heavenly project, it now undergoes a different preparation for its impending mission to the earthly world. The effect of that preparation is soon evident. Transformed into Divine Luminescent Page in Disenchantment’s realm, the Stone conceives such a fancy for the beautiful Crimson Pearl Plant that it takes to “watering her everyday with sweet dew, therefore conferring on her the gift of life” (*HLM* 1:5; *SS* 1:53). Even before it
embarks on the journey to the human world, the Stone not only has its first experience of love but also witnesses for the first time the wonder of the creative power of personal passion: “Thanks to the vitalizing effect of the sweet dew, she was able to shed her vegetable shape and assume the form of a girl” (*HLM* 1:5; *SS* 1:53).

It may be said that the Stone, in order to become a fiction maker, is first made a *qingzhong*, a destined lover. Yet the Stone’s anthropomorphism, as son of an aristocratic and bureaucratic family, is not immune from the conflict between *qing* and *li*. Apart from the bitter father-son feud on the priority between aesthetic writing and examination learning, Baoyu’s development as a fiction writer is also punctuated by the clash between two different attitudes toward personal and private feelings. A figure in point is Qin Zhong. As handsome and affectionate as Baoyu, Qin Zhong may be considered Baoyu’s double, or another *qingzhong* as his name may suggest. Also like Baoyu, Qin Zhong finds scholastic learning totally insufferable, and when they are fellow students at Jia Dairu’s school the duo are a major reason for much of the tumult there. Yet, in the *jiaxu* manuscript copy of the novel, one hears Qin Zhong express his deep repentance to Baoyu in the last moment of his curtailed life: “Finally I’ve realized that we spoiled ourselves. I still hope you will become determined to pursue *gongming* and earn fame and prestige.”62 One can only imagine these words’ shocking effect on Baoyu, especially because they are from a dying friend who has during his lifetime totally immersed himself in love and passion.

To a greater extent, however, the opposition between *qing* and *li* is dramatized by the dynamic between Jia Baoyu and his namesake, Zhen Baoyu. While the Zhen family in Nanjing is for the most part kept in the background of the narrative, the first reference to the Zhens takes place as early as chapter 2. The Zhens and the Jias are almost mirror images of each other: both families are wealthy and prestigious, “though rich yet given to courtesy” (*fu er hao li*) (*HLM* 1:21; *SS* 1:80). As the narrative proceeds, both families turn out to share the same fate of falling out of imperial favor before regaining, perhaps only partially, lost glory. Red Inkstone notices in an interlinear comment in chapter 2 that the family of Zhen 甄, which puns on *zhen* 真 (real), is presented here as a double for the family of Jia 賈 / *jia* 假 (false) in a ploy to problematize the true-false opposition: “Another ‘real’ family [*zhenzheng zhi jia*] that confronts the ‘false’ family...
Thus, from what is written about the ‘false’ one can learn about the ‘real’” (xie jia ze zhi zhen). This mutual complementariness between the two families is corroborated in chapter 16, where the Zhens are said to be the only family to have “received the Emperor four times” (HLM 1:180; SS 1:314), clearly an allusion to the fact that Cao Xueqin’s grandfather Cao Yin (1658–1712), as the textile commissioner in Nanjing, acted as the host for Emperor Kangxi on his four imperial tours to the south. If the depiction of the Jia household is to some extent based on the history of the Cao family, the creation of the Zhens shares the same prototype. Certainly Red Inkstone has a point in this interlinear comment in chapter 16: “This Zhen family is the key to all important things, and should not be taken as idle chatter.”

Yet the most extraordinary about these two families is the similitude of the two boys, Jia Baoyu and Zhen Baoyu. Their physical likeness amazes everyone that has seen them both, and equally striking is the similarity of their personalities. Exactly like Jia Baoyu, Zhen Baoyu loathes going to school with boys and prefers to spend his time with girls. It seems that this Zhen boy, like his Jia counterpart, would be fully devoted to personal feelings and private sensibility and apathetic to the prescribed educational course for government service. In chapter 93, however, it is reported that Zhen Baoyu, after a dream visit to Disenchantment’s realm, becomes thoroughly transformed: “None of his old game appealed to him any more. Now it was all books and studying. And nobody could distract him” (HLM 4:1199; SS 4:270). While Jia Baoyu’s dream trip to Taixu Huanjing is inspirational for making fiction with personal and private sentiments, Zhen Baoyu’s trip becomes an effective reaffirmation of the political commitment to the imperial state.

The relationship between the two Baoyus, however, may not be so clear-cut. In chapter 56 Jia Baoyu has a dream in which he visits the garden of the other Baoyu, whose maidservants all mistake him for their master. He then drifts into a courtyard that looks just like his own. Once inside the building he sees the other Baoyu lying in bed, relating to the maids around him about his dream visit to the garden of his Jia counterpart. So Jia Baoyu dreams of Zhen Baoyu who is in turn dreaming of Jia Baoyu himself. The two Baoyus all of a sudden become like the ever-receding images in a hall of mirrors. Whether there is ontologically another boy named Zhen Baoyu is irrelevant, because for Jia Baoyu, at least for that
moment, the other Baoyu is just his own mental projection, as the account of the dream strongly suggests.

This encounter of the two dream-souls foreshadows the only meeting of the two young men in chapter 115, when Zhen Baoyu pays a visit to the Jia household. Jia Baoyu, who has expected to find in the other Baoyu a true friend, is soon disappointed, as Zhen Baoyu starts to prattle about glory of the family name and service to the state. Yet the parting of the two Baoyus is actually preordained. Despite all their physical likeness, Zhen Baoyu was not born with a piece of jade in his mouth. He is called Baoyu only because he is his grandmother’s “treasure” with “such a milky-white complexion” (HLM 2:713; SS 3:81). In other words, the Zhen boy, exactly as his family name Zhen (real, true) suggests, is not a destined maker of fiction (jia). Yet, because of his complementariness to Jia Baoyu that is sustained throughout much of the novel, he may be said to represent a tendency in Jia Baoyu himself. In his course of becoming a fiction writer, Jia Baoyu cannot fail to feel the coercing demand from his family and the imperial state as well as the temptations of all the remunerations of a bureaucratic career. By rejecting Zhen Baoyu as another “career worm,” Jia Baoyu ultimately repudiates one latent part of his own ego, or a potential possibility to succumb to the hegemonic discourse of government service. Zhen Baoyu may proceed to win an official appointment and prove to be a “real precious jade” (zhen baoyu) for both his family and the state; in contrast, Jia Baoyu, because of his decision to turn away from government service in order to “attend to [his] own affairs”—to borrow the words of Du Shaoqing in The Scholars—becomes a breakaway from what is valorized as the norm for a member of the educated gentry. Consequently, he will “seem unpractical and eccentric” in the eyes of the world just as Disenchantment has predicted (HLM 1:65; SS 1:146). With all his good looks and intelligence, he will be seen as a “spurious precious jade” (jia baoyu), which is to be cherished not in the “real” (zhen) world but only in the “false” realm of fiction (jia).

Yet Jia Baoyu proves that he is a different jade but by no means inferior. Toward the end of the novel, he takes the provincial examinations and wins a juren degree before he leaves the mundane world for good. As he wins the degree only after he has completed the “Story of the Stone,” he successfully reverses the intellectual and vocational prioritization rigorously prescribed by his father and tutor—and indeed by the imperial state
The Chinese word for joining the Buddhist order is *chujia*, which means to renounce one’s familial ties, but in Baoyu’s case the timing makes his *chujia* all the more meaningful: as he departs after the examinations without awaiting the official appointment, he does not only relinquish his familial duties but disclaims all political obligations to the imperial state as well.

Eventually the Stone resumes its original form in the supernatural world, with the narrative of its mundane experience inscribed on its surface. The fiction “of the Stone” and “by the Stone” is now “published by the Stone,” in the most enduring form of publication, stone carving. The Stone’s fiction-making mission is now completed, in the fullest manner possible. More interestingly, it “publishes” its fiction at precisely the same site where it was once declared by Nüwa as “unfit to repair the azure sky.” That ruling was correct: the Stone has indeed remained “unfit to repair the azure sky” in both its lives, as its anthropomorphosis Jia Baoyu would willingly agree. For over two millennia, Chinese intellectuals, by participating in government service, offered themselves as blocks of stone to mend the heaven for the imperial state. As the *zhengtong-daotong* partnership was approaching its date of expiration, more and more intellectuals found themselves “unfit to repair the azure sky.” However, they should be able to find uses for themselves other than mending heaven, as demonstrated by the Stone in *Dream of the Red Chamber.*