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SHADOWS OF A DREAM

Gender Roles in Qing Literature as Seen in Gu Taiqing's Sequel to *A Dream of Red Mansions*

Chee Meng Wong

In the typical fashion of Chinese mnemonics, the writer and critic Guo Moruo once honored the *tanci* ("plucking rhymes") novel *Zaisheng Yuan* alongside *Honglou Meng* as "Nan (South) *Yuan* Bei (North) *Meng*": each novel was a regional masterpiece of Northern and Southern China, respectively.¹ The *tanci* novel or *tanci xiaoshuo* was a literary genre derived from *tanci* as a popular form of storytelling that employed the singing of verses, a practice prevalent in the Jiangnan region along the Yangtze River. Far from being the first to mention a *tanci* novel in such high esteem, Guo was merely reworking an earlier coinage "Nan *Hua* Bei *Meng*," attributed

¹ Lijun Tong, "Tianyu Hua he Zaisheng Yuan Bijiao Yanjiu," *Journal of Hebei Polytechnic University* 8, no. 3 (August 2008): 212.

to Qing dynasty poet Yang Fangcan, which originally referred to *Tianyu Hua*, a seventeenth-century *tanci* novel that depicted a sword-wielding heroine against the background of political conflicts within the late Ming government.

Despite apparent differences in genre, both works centered the female subject and inspired a proliferation of sequels around the first half of the nineteenth century. This attests to their popularity among female readers in China even without extraneous factors like mechanization that, as Ian Watt suggested of English novels, provided more leisure and liberation for female readers.² The availability of such subgenres eventually lead to some women trying their hand at writing sequels (Widmer 220). It is my intention particularly to consider what trends may be observed in the sustainability and mutability of fictional narratives revolving around the representation of gender roles within a patriarchal society. What do these sequels suggest about the sustainable elements of narratives that challenged the rigid gender norms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China?

In his pioneering work on Chinese women's literature, *Zhongguo Nüxing Wenxue Shihua* or *History of Chinese Women's Literature* (1934), Tan Zhengbi acknowledged *tanci* and *tongsu xiaoshuo* (popular novels) as the two most influential genres in popular Chinese literature representing the verse and prose forms, respectively. He noted that the longest works of *tanci* in China, namely the trilogy of *Anbang Zhi*, *Dingguo Zhi*, and *Fenghuang Shan* date from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), yet female writers of popular literature appeared to become a phenomenon only in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Tan's explanation was that popular literature was not immediately circulated to the boudoirs, to which well-educated women were usually relegated; only when popular works were deemed acceptable within society at large did the women find a chance to read them and, ultimately, to imitate them.³ Women presumably composed works in the form of popular literature like *tanci* mainly as self-expression or as a kind of purely artistic pursuit, since there was no avenue for them to seek a career through recognition of their talents at the imperial examinations or otherwise.⁴

Tan expressed a peculiar perspective in seeming to associate literature with feminine qualities. He cited a common saying of his time that “without

² Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 219.

³ Zhengbi Tan, *Zhongguo Nüxing Wenxue Shihua* or *History of Chinese Women's Literature* (Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Chubanshi, 1984 [1934]), 372.

⁴ Tan, *Zhongguo Nüxing Wenxue Shihua*, 372; Ming Yan and Qi Fan, *Zhongguo Nüxin Wenxue de Chuantong* (Taipei: Hongye Wenhua, 1999), 182.

women, there would be no literature,” which he interpreted as basically suggesting that women are particularly sophisticated and rich in emotions.⁵ Regardless of the validity of this view, he mapped out three areas of focus in studying the relationship between women and literature that serve as a useful framework of reference: (1) the representation of women in literature; (2) the artistic emotions and environment that women provide to writers; (3) women as writers (10). The phenomenon of *tanci* affords an interesting study of the first and third aspects, in terms of the rise of women as agents of literary activities and how that enriched the representation of women in literature. Tan emphasized the close ties between *tanci* and women writers, suggesting that—before the mainstream entrance of western literature into Chinese cultural consciousness—every writer in the history of Chinese women’s literature had been a writer of verse. This gives a sense of the historical significance of a woman’s work in prose: *Honglou Meng Ying* (Shadows of The Dream of Red Mansions) by the poet Gu Taiqing, “the first extant Chinese novel demonstrably by a woman.”⁶ The work is also significant as one of many sequels to *Honglou Meng*, itself a work remarkable for a progressive portrayal of gender roles, and hence relevant to the first two perspectives that Tan mapped out.

The dazzling richness of cultural and historical details in *Honglou Meng* has often been attributed to Cao Xueqin’s illustrious family background—his grandfather was an officer of the imperial palace who was placed in charge of the Jiangning Weaving Bureau during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor. Similarly, Gu Taiqing’s background as a concubine of Yihui, a great-grandson of the Qianlong Emperor, may be cited for the superior quality of her work over previous attempts at *Honglou Meng* sequels. But from a more macro perspective beyond the biographical, the social context that helped sustain these genres of women-centered literature requires elaboration in terms of Chinese women’s changing position in society. There are records of 3,800 female writers in the Qing dynasty, compared to only 361 up through the end of the Ming dynasty.⁷ This suggests that a significant new trend was beginning to counter the old proverb that “to be without talent is a virtue for women” (*Nüzi wucai bianshi de*). The sign of a burgeoning community of women in literary activities may also be seen in the forming of literary societies among women like Beijing-born Gu Taiqing and her close associates, especially

⁵ Tan, *Zhongguo Nüxing Wenxue Shihua*, 10.

⁶ Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, 183.

⁷ Yongping Wu, Shuqin Zhang, Zeqin Yang, *Qingdai Sanda Nüciren Yanjiu* [Study on Three Qing-dynasty Women Poets] (Lanzhou: Gansu Wenhua Chubanshe, 2010), 212.

Hangzhou-based Shen Shanbao (1808–1862) who collected works of her contemporaries and accepted more than a hundred disciples. Widmer has also noted that Gu was not only personally acquainted with Liang Desheng, who wrote the conclusion to *Zaisheng Yuan* (from where Chen Duansheng left off), but that both were associated with a network of literary women along the axis of the Hangzhou-Beijing Grand Canal that was “well established by the 1830s,” a period that saw changes in women’s relationship to the printed word.⁸ But, as Widmer also points out, it is only relatively recently that Chinese scholarship (notably through contributions such as Siao-chen Hu’s *Cainü Cheye Weimian*) has managed to provide a coherent historical perspective on a much-neglected genre like *tanci* by situating it in a social environment of women as readers and writers.

Emphasizing an intertextual relationship among works of *tanci* novels, Hu has gone beyond a one-dimensional association of women with verses, by arguing that the writing of *Zaisheng Yuan* and its sequels demonstrates the evolution of a female literary tradition in narration, which also reflects the plural responses to prevailing moral standards for women in Chinese society.⁹ The series arguably started with *Yuchuan Yuan* (Romance of the Jade Bracelet), a *tanci* novel that includes love stories of the boudoir and heroic stories of the public sphere running in parallel, except for one point at which the protagonist Xie Yuhui cross-dresses, switching roles with his twin sister. *Zaisheng Yuan*, written by Chen Duansheng around the 1770s, however, subverts the structural contrast between male heroes and female damsels by imagining a reincarnation of Xie’s concubine Zheng Ruzhao, who ultimately leaves him. This paved the way for the iconic character Meng Lijun who cross-dresses as a man in order to take part in the Imperial Examination, thereby defying the patriarchal system represented by her father and even the Emperor. Chen stopped writing at the crisis point, when Meng’s identity is revealed. Liang Desheng (1771–1847) invents a happy ending to resolve the tension while still betraying a sense of dissatisfaction with the system. Hou Zhi (1764–1829) wrote the sequel *Zai Zao Tian* which seemingly criticized *Zaisheng Yuan* for having a protagonist that disrupts social order, but at the same time it, too, reflected on a woman’s dilemma in choosing whether to cultivate literary talent or conventional morality.

Bi Sheng Hua by Qiu Xinru (1805?–1873?) similarly upholds the protagonist’s moral standing. As Hu astutely points out, such sequels should not

⁸ Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, 285.

⁹ Siao-chen Hu, *Burning the Midnight Oil: The Rise of Female Narrative in Early Modern China* (Taipei: Rye Field Publishing Company, 2003), 73.

be judged at face value as falling short of articulating progressive ideas since the authors were writing within an environment of male dominance in which women would generally be too discreet to boast of circulating their literary output for public consumption.¹⁰ On the whole, this series of work reflects a struggle for gender equality especially with regard to a long-standing social debate on whether talent or morality should be the more desirable quality in women.

Adopting a similar outlook on literary traditions for women, this paper will now turn to discuss the significance of *Honglou Meng* in the imagination of gender roles, as seen in its representation of educated women and servant girls as possessing their own subjectivity beyond the patriarchal society, as well as Jia Baoyu as an androgynous character who styles himself as a protector of the girls around him in the utopian Grand View Garden. He treasures their purity, their freedom from the taint of the exterior, male-centered world that he considers to be corrupting. Before turning to Gu Taiqing's intervention in the sequel, I will situate *Honglou Meng* in its proper historical context, not merely in reference to gender issues, but in terms of its general significance as a pinnacle in Chinese fiction that parallels texts that contributed to the "rise" of the English novel.¹¹

According to Ian Watt, the novel as it emerged in eighteenth-century England was marked by two related aspects, namely, realism and individualism. Realism as such does not depend on the life that is presented, but on how it is presented. Developing from the philosophical positions of René Descartes and John Locke, the new standard was that truth had to be discovered through the individual's senses, free from assumptions and traditional beliefs.¹² Hence, following the idea of realistic particularity, novelists did not rely on general human types and conventional circumstances, but attended instead "to the individualisation of . . . characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment."¹³ *Honglou Meng*, with its highly individualised characterisation and richness of contemporary cultural detail, would easily qualify as an outstanding novel according to the same criteria. However, in the Chinese context this realism would be attributed to the humanist philosophy of thinkers like Li Zhi (1527–1602) and Dai Zheng (1724–1777).¹⁴

¹⁰ Hu, *Burning the Midnight Oil*, 74.

¹¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Pimlico, 2000 [1957]).

¹² Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 12.

¹³ Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 18.

¹⁴ Guangbo Li, *Hongxueshi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2010), 57.

But the “realism” of *Honglou Meng* may be understood by Chinese readers and scholars in a range of different senses. When it is classified as *renqing xiaoshuo* or “fiction of manners” by Lu Xun as opposed to *shenmo xiaoshuo* or “fiction of deities and demons,” it may be considered “realistic” in the sense of being preoccupied with sentimental stories of estrangement and reunion or changes of fortune in human society, and hence falling under the same genre as the erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei* (The Plum in the Golden Vase). But “realism” in *Honglou Meng* may also be taken as referring to its historical relevance. The study of *Honglou Meng*, known as Redology since the late Qing dynasty, has long tended to emphasise either the status of the work as autobiographical or biographical, or the historical documentation provided about economic, social, or cultural settings.¹⁵ This includes everything from customs, religion, handicraft, garden art, medicine, and cuisine to Chinese opera and poetry.¹⁶ Given the exceedingly rich cultural knowledge that the book provides, it is perhaps no surprise that much of Redology is preoccupied with researching on the identity and family background of the author, even speculating on any specific references to historical persons or events that the plot may be alluding to.

This paper, however, focuses on how *Honglou Meng* represents the fluidity of gender roles and the idealisation of the feminine in literati writing from the late Ming or early Qing period, and how such ideas were sustained or rechanneled through works representative of a wide range of positions on gender roles.¹⁷ The eighteenth-century Chinese literary scene was marked by a fascination with androgyny,¹⁸ a fascination already indicated by the popularity of works like Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, published in 1766), which included the story of a woman, Yan, who sits for the imperial examination dressed as a man.

Much of the popularity of the novel derives from the relationships between the characters Jia Baoyu, his poetic but melancholic soul mate Lin Daiyu, and his eventual wife Xue Baochai. This popularity may further be understood in terms of their different positions both *within* the patriarchal context of early modern China and *toward* the poetic impulse. With its representation of gentrywomen whose experiences and attitudes are expressed

¹⁵ Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18.

¹⁶ Li, *Hongxueshi*, 75.

¹⁷ Zuyuan Zhou, *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁸ Clara Wing-Chung Ho [Liu, Yongcong], *Virtue, Talent, Beauty and Power: Women in Ancient China* (Taipei: Rye Field Publishing Company, 1998), 277.

in individualized poems, *Honglou Meng*, alongside the *tanci* novels, not only reflects women's longing for participation in literary pursuits but also signifies the emergence of a more egalitarian relationship between men and women, as embodied in Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. Perhaps most significant for this argument is the individualism that the two represent, particularly the figure of Lin Daiyu who, in her poems, likens herself to a flower in all its evanescent beauty, soon to fade away and return to the earth.

Given her poetic expression, Lin Daiyu is the key to appreciating *Honglou Meng*, for she embodies the individualised spirit that is trapped in the structure of a patriarchal society and can only express her female subjectivity through literary means. If *tanci* novels around 1800 were significant for having female characters who rose through the ranks of a patriarchal society by adopting masculine roles and therefore challenging men's monopoly of public careers, Lin Daiyu's character is significant for refusing to pursue recognition in worldly society. Instead, she finds an ally in the androgynous Jia Baoyu who, after her death (and after being tricked into marrying the more conservative Xue Baochai), renounces society altogether. While Xue rejects literacy and poetry as illegitimate activities for women, arguing that women are better off occupying themselves with sewing and weaving; poetry is a medium of communication and self-expression that bonds Daiyu and Baoyu.¹⁹

One should not assume therefore that Daiyu simply represents the exemplary pioneer in Chinese women's liberation, for as Lu Xun has pointed out, what makes *Honglou Meng* precious in Chinese literary history is also the fact that its characters are never entirely good or bad.²⁰ Perhaps the "ideal" woman is to be imagined as a combination of Daiyu and Baochai.²¹ Baochai is not simply an embodiment of the traditional woman's views and attitudes; her character may be appreciated for her adaptability and consideration for others.²² She apparently also hides a burning desire beneath her cold appearances—her surname "Xue" is incidentally a homonym for "snow," yet she was afflicted with a "poisonous heat" that required her to take a kind of "Cold Fragrance Pills."²³ Being diplomatic, she is adept in gaining the approval of

¹⁹ Kam Ming Wong, *The Narrative Art of Red Chamber Dream*, trans. Teng-hsin Li (Taipei: Cheng Wen, 1977), 51.

²⁰ Ming Yan, *Honglou Meng yu Qingdai Nüxing Wenhua* (Taipei: Hongye Wenhua, 2003), 62.

²¹ Yan, *Honglou Meng*, 75.

²² Wong, *Narrative Art*, 157.

²³ Xueqin Cao and E. Gao, *Honglou Meng*, ed. Yishu Yanjiuyuan Chongguo [Honglou Meng Yanjiusuo] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1987). All quotations from *Honglou Meng* will be cited according to chapter number. Chapter 7.

people around her. Daiyu in contrast is arrogant, aloof, and does not mince her words, hence she is less popular. But her disposition can also be interpreted as a response to her experience as an orphan who has also been beset by illness for years.²⁴ Her identification with flowers in the Grand View Garden that wither and fall away is encapsulated in some of the most memorable poems in *Honglou Meng*.

Given how Daiyu and Baochai are sophisticated characters that are endearing to different camps of readers, and how both end tragically, it is not surprising that *Honglou Meng* inspired sequels that sought to revive either character in a way that would do them justice. But these responses would vary greatly depending on the writer's reaction toward the tension between the desire for a change in women's roles and patriarchal expectations of women, or between individualism and an educational system tied to the imperial bureaucracy. Generally, these sequels do not deviate much from the traditional roles carved out for women, though some seem to echo *tanci* novels in giving female characters a more masculine role. Yet the most outstanding sequel—one that subtly comments on patriarchal society and represents the fluidity of gender roles without indulging in fantasy—would be *Honglou Meng Ying*, which represents female characters in the composition of exquisite poetry while giving attention to the finer details of a realistic domestic life, all in keeping with the spirit of the original Grand View Garden.

The Grand View Garden, the center stage of the *Honglou Meng* story, is often interpreted by scholars like Yu Ying-shih as a utopian vision set in contrast to the filthy reality of the outside world.²⁵ It is equated with the Land of Illusion that Jia Baoyu has seen in a dream, clearly not of this world. Flowers in the garden represent the purity of the girls in contrast to the men that Baoyu despises. This is best shown in Lin Daiyu's act of burying flowers, to prevent them from being tainted. But the scenes of women who live out an idealistic, cultivated lives through the composition and recitation of poetry—particularly when they form the *Haitang Shishe* or Crab-flower Poetry Club—are more than just a figment of imagination. Literary women were a noticeable phenomenon in the Qing dynasty. Yuan Mei (1767–1797) was one scholar who notably helped promote the trend and, in fact, he thought *Honglou Meng*, with its description of the Grand View Garden, must have

²⁴ Wong, *Narrative Art*, 181.

²⁵ Ching-su Lin, *Bu Li Qingse Dao Zhenru: Honglou Meng Jia Baoyu de Qingyu yu Wudao* (Taipei: Daan Chubanshe, 2005), 166.

been inspired by himself and his coterie of women poets.²⁶ But the genius of writer Cao Xueqin lies in his vivid portrayal of the women in the Grand View Garden. The twelve beauties in *Honglou Meng* whose files Baoyu discovered on his dream journey to the Land of Illusion are “a literary device that allows both generalization and individualization” and are linked to the “fictional feminine space” of the Grand View Garden, itself an expanded version of the inner court Baoyu saw in his vision of the Land of Illusion.²⁷ His description of the Grand View Garden inspired imitation in the sequels.

After the first publication of *Honglou Meng* in the Cao-Gao manuscript (1791), which incorporated Gao E's 40 chapters, the first standalone male-authored sequel known as *Hou Honglou Meng* (Later *Honglou Meng*) appeared in 1796, the first year in the reign of Emperor Jiaqing. Another seven sequels would appear by 1820—the final year of Emperor Jiaqing's reign—most of them in the range of 30 to 48 chapters.²⁸ After another work in 1824 entitled *Zengbu Honglou Meng* (Another Supplement to *Honglou Meng*), the sequels became more sporadic, but among these was a lost work entitled *Honglou Juemeng* (Awakening from the Red Chamber Dream) by Tiefeng Furen, which was possibly the first *Honglou Meng* sequel written by a woman when it was printed in 1844.²⁹

The extant *Honglou Meng* sequels, despite the variety of narratives, may generally be divided into responses to the rivalry between the characters of Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai. According to Lin's classification there are four categories: the first two favor either Lin or Xue as the dominant character; the third seeks harmony between the two; the fourth extends the story to the next generation. The male-authored *Hou Honglou Meng* (1796) and *Honglou Yuan Meng* (1814) are two novels in which Lin Daiyu's character is literally resurrected.³⁰ In the former, for instance, the plot resumes from the 120th chapter in *Honglou Meng*, in which Jia Baoyu is seen leaving with a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest, signaling his renunciation of worldly society. The opening chapter of *Hou Honglou Meng*, however, begins with the narrator's

²⁶ Haun Saussy, “Women's Writing Before and Within the ‘Hong lou meng,’” in Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 285–305, 286.

²⁷ Hung Wu, “Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the ‘Dream of the Red Chamber,’” in Widmer and Chang, *Writing Women*, 306–65; 309, 361.

²⁸ Yi-Shiuan Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian: Honglou Meng Xushu Yanjiu* (Taipei: Wen Chin, 1999), 33.

²⁹ Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, 221.

³⁰ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 54.

criticism of Baoyu by describing him as a spoilt brat who had idled away his days in the company of the gentler sex. It also claims that what Cao Xueqin previously wrote was not the full story.

It then describes how Baoyu, apparently not in possession of his own senses and under the spell of an evil Buddhist monk and an evil Taoist priest, kneels before his father Jia Zheng for help. Jia Zheng somehow manages to counter their sorcery to rescue Baoyu. He also discovers that they have trapped the souls of Lin Daiyu and Qingwen (Baoyu's brash but beautiful maid) in voodoo dolls. Setting their souls free would allow them to come to life. In the case of Qingwen, she comes to life in the borrowed body of another maid, by the name of Wuer, who happens to have just died of illness. In the case of Lin Daiyu, despite being already buried in a coffin, her body is said to be kept pristine, thanks to a magical gold fish lodged in her mouth. Ludicrous as they may sound to the more modern reader, these descriptions have a basis in Chinese folklore.

While the premise of *Hou Honglou Meng* is to elevate Daiyu from her ill fate, readers who adore her in the original novel may find her resurrection in this sequel as shocking as that of Frankenstein's monster. In another sequel, a little-known writer under the pseudonym Xiaoyaozi apparently thought he was doing Daiyu's character a favor by suggesting that she is not as mean as some assume her to be, that she tends to make spiteful remarks only because of the frustrations and disappointments of life. The opening chapter in his sequel declares that were she to have better luck, she would become an open and sunny character as worthy as a *jinguo yingxiong*, a heroine among women.³¹ But the way Xiaoyaozi steers Daiyu's character into brand new directions effectively ignores her poetic, artistic but unsociable disposition and leaves her with little motivation to spend time with others or to make conversation.³²

While the description of Lin Daiyu in the original as fragrant—she radiates a lovely scent and frequently burns incense—was simply in keeping with her exceptional artistic nature, the sequel reinterprets that identification by recasting her as a self-styled “Taoist priestess” who uses incense as something more akin to religious or medicinal practice.³³ In a further twist, Lin Daiyu suddenly receives an inheritance from her brother and adds to her skill in composing poetry the talent of household management. Astonishingly, she becomes a “female house owner” and begins to parallel the scheming Wang

³¹ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 69.

³² Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 71.

³³ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 77.

Xifeng, Baoyu's elder cousin-in-law, in the way she disciplines the servants.³⁴ Eventually, however, she develops into a woman of commendable *fude*, or female virtue, by persuading her husband to pursue the Imperial Examination.

The revamped Daiyu was also cast in the role of the "female general." In *Honglou Yuan Meng*, Baoyu is on a pilgrimage when he is taken captive by a bandit king; it is a calm and brave Daiyu who comes to his rescue. Though Daiyu performs a 'masculine' role, in stark contrast to the familiar feminized disposition of Baoyu in *Honglou Meng*, this image of the heroic wife still situates her within mainstream society and does not imply the acceptance of an alternative mode of life in which a woman need not assume the responsibility of childbirth and caregiving.³⁵ Instead, it simply suggests greater expectations for Daiyi: she is not only admired as a beauty, but must also assist her husband, teach her children, and work independently.

In another variant of the early sequels, it is Baochai who becomes the centre of the story in *Honglou Fu Meng* (1799). At one hundred chapters, this sequel has the distinction of being the longest. Author Chen Shaohai depicts Baochai as a young widow who endures solitude and a sense of inferiority. She finds solace only in Mengyu, an incarnation of Baoyu born to the illustrious Zhu family.³⁶ Mengyu appears capable of telepathic emotional communication with Baochai, as if they are one and the same, for whenever she feels happy or sad, he feels likewise. Yet Caizhi, an incarnation of Daiyu, again stands in the way. Significantly, having recourse to tears—a characteristic of Daiyu in the original *Honglou Meng*—here becomes second nature to Baochai; despite being a woman determined to maintain her composure as part of *fude*, it seems she is ultimately as weak and helpless as Daiyu in the face of a failed marriage.³⁷ While Chen is obviously sympathetic to Baochai, the plot is effectively relentless emotional torture: she witnesses the union of Mengyu and Caizhi while other female characters find their partners one by one.³⁸ The work may be read as an expression of the sufferings and repressed desires of young women in old Chinese society who had to lead lives of involuntary chastity.

The third category of sequels attempted to resolve conflicts either by having the characters renounce love through spiritual practice, or by accommodating both Daiyu and Baochai as Baoyu's partners in some form

³⁴ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*.

³⁵ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 80.

³⁶ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 55.

³⁷ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 57.

³⁸ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 59.

of polygamy. The sequel *Qinxu Honglou Meng* (1799), by Qin Zichen, creates a fantasy world where the realms of human, immortals and ghosts may be traversed with ease. This allows for avoiding social conflicts, for life and time in such a universe become unlimited resources.³⁹ Lin Daiyu walks into the Land of Illusion in the first chapter without even realizing that she is dead, and she is very quickly given a welcome in the new realm. The fourth category involves stories where the characters go through rebirth into a new generation. In the case of *Qilou Chongmeng*, Baoyu is reborn through Baochai as Xiaoyu, who goes into the battlefield while enjoying his amorous share of female company.

The sequel *Honglou Meng Ying* (1877), written by the poet Gu Taiqing (1799–1877) between 1851 and 1861, is significant not only as the earliest existing sequel to Cao's novel by a woman writer, but because of the author's experience as a poet and lady of the Manchurian nobility.⁴⁰ This contributes to it being "realistic" in comparison to previous sequels that described how human and ghosts could intermingle, how a character could be resurrected or reincarnated, or how the characters of literary women could turn into heroines on the battlefield.

Gu Taiqing was married to Yihui in 1824, as his second wife. They wrote poems that underscored their romantic feelings for each other. As indicated in one particular poem by Yihui, they had known each other for ten years, since the age of sixteen, before getting married.⁴¹ But fourteen years of married life as a literary couple came to an end when Yihui died in 1838. Taiqing was not only widowed but also driven out of the residence three months later by his first wife's family.⁴² One may read in *Honglou Mengying* not only a lament about the insecurity of women's lives in a prestigious family, but also the longing for justice, as seen in the depiction of Jia Zheng as an upright official, for example.⁴³

*Honglou Meng Ying*⁴⁴ begins with an opening similar to that of *Hou Honglou Meng*. Baoyu is kidnapped by an evil Buddhist monk and evil Taoist

³⁹ Lin, *Wu Cai Ke Bu Tian*, 84.

⁴⁰ Yangjia Wei, "Dianjiao Shuoming (Explanatory Notes on Editing), in Taiqing Gu [Yuncuo Waishi], *Honglou Mengying* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1998), ii.; Song Zhan, "Nüxing de Quanshi yu Chonggou: Taiqing *Honglou Mengying* Lun," in *Honglou Meng Xuekan* 1 (Online: China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House, 2006).

⁴¹ Wu, Zhang, and Yang, *Qingdai Sanda Nüciren Yanjiu*, 206.

⁴² Wu, Zhang, and Yang, *Qingdai Sanda Nüciren Yanjiu*.

⁴³ Wu, Zhang, and Yang, *Qingdai Sanda Nüciren Yanjiu*, 225.

⁴⁴ Taiqing Gu [Yuncuo Waishi], *Honglou Mengying* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1988). All references to the text will be cited by chapter number.

priest, and has to be revived from his stupor by Jia Zheng. Unlike *Hou Honglou Meng* however, the element of witchcraft is downplayed—Baoyu's incapacitation can easily be cured, like a medical condition, and soon it is written off as a minor aspect of the ploy to extort money from the Jia family. Gu also intertwines this thread somewhat ingeniously with an account of a day in the life of the county magistrate Zhen Yingxi, said to be the brother of Zheng Yingjia who had been a character in the original *Honglou Meng*. Zheng Yingjia in *Honglou Meng* is said to have a son called Zhen Baoyu who looks like a doppelganger of Jia Baoyu—an apparent word play since “Zhen” has the same pronunciation as the word for “real” while “Jia” is pronounced exactly like the word for “fake” or “illusionary.” The name play hints that Jia Baoyu lives in a world removed from social reality.

Before learning of Baoyu's situation, Zhen Yingxi is described as being busy with three cases in court. The first involves an employee of a textile shop from the Shanxi region, whose employee has gone missing; the second involves a scuffle caused when a man is discovered selling a gold bracelet he had borrowed from a courtesan from Suzhou; the third involves a monk who must clear his name after a scholar renting a room for studies at the temple complains of shoddy accommodations and claims ownership of the temple. On first glance these accounts may come across as pedantic or out of place, being more akin to the genre of *gong'an xiaoshuo* or “crime case” fiction. But it is arguably part of Gu's creativity to juxtapose the public sphere of justice with what might otherwise fall into an escapist story of romance and fantasy as previous sequels had done. At the same time, it also differs from *Hou Honglou Meng*: the rough treatment of the evil Buddhist monk and evil Taoist priest gives way to an underlying adherence to family-oriented Confucian ethics. Daiyu's toying with Taoist meditation is replaced by her achievement in managing the household. The story about the exploited monk seems to emphasize that Buddhist practice is a valid institution that may be encroached upon or abused. This perspective balances secular and spiritual pursuits. Gu herself drew inspiration from Taoist philosophy in her poetry and was acquainted with monks and priests, even once letting a Taoist priest by the name of Huang Yungu paint a portrait of her clad in Taoist garb.⁴⁵

The man who cures Baoyu of his affliction is Zhen Yingxi, who diagnoses him personally, remarking that even doctors cannot be trusted as they tend to be money-grabbing crooks. Later Zhen also prompts the arrest of Ma Dao Po, Baoyu's Taoist godmother, the culprit behind the witchcraft-extortion

⁴⁵ Wu, Zhang, and Yang, *Qingdai Sanda Nüci ren Yanjiu*, 211.

racket. While a Taoist godmother only played a nominal role in religious practices, in *Honglou Meng* Baoyu had also felt oppressed by his nanny and wet nurse, Li Momo. In fact, she was the first example in the book of a woman who took advantage of her special position in patriarchal society to exploit others.⁴⁶ For Baoyu, who thinks of girls as pure as water while men are murky as mud, Ma Dao Po and Li Momo are examples of older woman who have been corrupted by male influence and commerce with the world.

If the first chapter offers a benign figure of patriarchal authority, the second chapter imagines an alternative masculinity. It picks up from another thread at the end of *Honglou Meng*, namely the forced marriage of Baoyu's principal maid Xiren to Jiang Yuhan, the actor. Xiren is so distraught after the wedding that Yuhan, for all his tenderness, is unable to enjoy intimacy with her. On the second day, he opens her chest to discover a familiar red handkerchief and realizes that she has been special to Baoyu. After some words of consolation and assurance, he leaves the house and makes a visit to Xiren's brother Hua Zifang, proposing to send Xiren home to await Baoyu's return, and offering to be considered a brother. Readers of *Honglou Meng* will remember Jiang Yuhan as a performer of female roles in Chinese opera with whom Baoyu is so enamoured that he exchanges a pine blossom handkerchief for a red handkerchief. So there may be some homoerotic overtones to his loyalty towards Baoyu. But putting aside the complexity in the sexual dynamics between the two men and Xiren, Jiang Yuhan may simply be considered as a noble character of conscience who refuses to marry a woman against her will.

In Chapter 3, Baoyu's wife Xue Baochai offers Xiren to Baoyu for the night, while Jia Zheng meets his brother Jia She, known in the original novel as a greedy, amorous and cruel character, but here appearing as a new man who stands on the side of justice. In Chapter 4, Baochai gives birth to Baoyu's son, a cause for much joy in the family. In the meantime, the widowed Shi Xiangyun gives birth to a girl. Most of her acquaintances, in contrast, respond with a sense of pity. The rest of the story in *Honglou Mengying* is largely an account of Jia Baoyu's rehabilitation into the life of a respectable man as husband, father and scholar, as part of the regular life of an extended family that enjoys prosperity after the fall from grace described in the original novel. This is punctuated by annual festivities such as Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and the Winter Solstice. While the story thus appears largely uneventful due to its lack of dramatic turns Gu nevertheless provides

⁴⁶ Lin, *Bu Li Qingse Dao Zhenru*, 161.

an impressive realism, especially in recapturing the atmosphere of literary women in gatherings for the composition and sharing of poems.

As a sequel, Gu's *Honglou Meng Ying* managed to connect the main threads of storyline in the original novel seamlessly and for the most part with little attempt to modify the setting, introduce additional characters, or introduce any drastic new plot. Its ultimate aim is arguably to provide a more positive and agreeable ending based on the principle of harmony in the family.⁴⁷ However, the sequel should not be taken at face value as a naive surrender to the patriarchal order. As Hu argued, some works of *tanci* novels were actually progressive in representing female characters who disrupted social order, while ostensibly being critical of such behavior.⁴⁸ Presenting benevolent father figures and generous wives is another strategy for criticising the status quo and functions alongside the dark portrayal of an illustrious family contained in the original novel.

Perhaps most significantly, *Honglou Meng Ying* represents gender roles extending beyond the heterosexual and polygamous institution of the Chinese family. In a comical scene in Chapter 10, Baoyu is mistakenly referred to as the potential *ganniang* (godmother) of Shi Xiangyu's baby daughter. In Chapter 17, he takes part in a cordial gathering of men including Xue Pan and Liu Xianglian, as if the latter two characters have resolved the misunderstanding from the original novel caused by Xue's unreciprocated same-sex desire for Liu. Conversely, if the wifely and tactful character of Xue Baochai epitomises the idea of harmony in the real world of family and society at large, she apparently does an excellent job by never making a fuss over anything. As in the *tanci* novels that take such interest in the ups and downs of daily domestic life beyond the union of the scholar and the beauty,⁴⁹ marriage as *telos* here does not mark a convenient end-point of the narrative; life goes on even if it does not conform to the most typical image.

Meanwhile, if Lin Daiyu, as Baoyu's rightful or alternative love, is the epitome of passion in the dream world of individual ideals, she is conspicuous in *Honglou Meng Ying* for her absence. Unlike in *Qinxu Honglou Meng*, where she appears as a character who makes a comeback even in the afterlife, she figure here only as a ghost of the past, in Baoyu's memory or as an illusion. In his mind, Baoyu still dwells on the remote possibility of summoning her spirit,

⁴⁷ Yun Zhang, "Honglou Mengying de Xushi Celui," in *Honglou Meng Xuekan* 2 (Online: China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House, 2012), 76.

⁴⁸ Hu, *Burning the Midnight Oil*, 73.

⁴⁹ Hu, *Burning the Midnight Oil*, 37.

reminded of Daiyu and the Land of Illusion when he sees a sandal wood carving of the Tang Ming Huang Emperor travelling to the moon. Baochai does not stop him when he says he wants to worship the “Flower Deity” at the Grand View Garden. He thus wanders off to the bamboo groves of Xiaoxiang Guan where Daiyu used to live and eventually spends a night there. Gu’s description of the night toward the end of Chapter Eight is ambiguous, suggesting an erotic visitation by Daiyu, whom he could rightly have married if his family had not insisted otherwise. It ends with Baoyu waking up from a dream unsure if the meeting was real.⁵⁰ The episode is lightly dismissed the very next day in Chapter Nine when Baochai asks if he has seen the “Flower Deity” and Baoyu laughingly responds that it was all in his mind.⁵¹ Life goes on and Baoyu tops the list in the imperial examination in the following chapter. The most eerie moment is saved for last, however. The concluding chapter describes Baoyu experiencing another vision in which he imagines himself spotting Daiyu in the Land of Illusion. The red mansions seem to be blown away in a gale, the sight replaced by a macabre dance of skeletons. Reality or illusion? It is not for Baoyu to tell.

With such scenarios, *Honglou Meng Ying* borders on being a kind of Gothic fiction. But if the English Gothic novels around the early nineteenth century tend to provide a hope of escape from domestic violence in a fortress-like home,⁵² the narrative here is more akin to the genre of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, in which women who fall out of the family institution are represented as phantoms. This is combined with the trope of life as one big dream, a trope that provided *Honglou Meng* itself with its metanarrative. Thus, in terms of its narrative design, too, *Honglou Meng Ying* is fitting as a sequel.

While relatively slight in volume at a length of twenty-four chapters, and less occupied with dramatic plot twists than with the details of domestic life revolving around inherited characters, Gu’s sequel might be judged as a shadow of the original novel in its ambition. But as the title hints, perhaps it is *intended* to feel like a shadow: a remembrance of past glories never meant to be permanent in the first place, especially for members of society marginalized even within the family, where gender equality, too, was a dream. Placed in a larger context, it should be appreciated as the joint culmination of an earlier literary tradition of women writers of poetry and *tanci* novels,

⁵⁰ Gu, *Honglou Mengying*, Chapter 8.

⁵¹ Gu, *Honglou Mengying*, Chapter 9.

⁵² Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xi.

mutually sustainaing and sustained by Cao Xueqin's great novel of the imagining of feminine space.

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