

# Metaphors of Aroma and Fragrance in *The Story of the Stone*

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“[E]ven the most evanescent perfume always retains ghostly hints of bodily shape, or perhaps better, the compensatory desire for imaging of it.”

—Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, 217

*The Story of the Stone* or *Hong Lou Meng* is generally regarded as the peak of classic Chinese novel. It no longer assumes the traditional Chinese historiography with legendary and archetype heroic characters, but focuses on contemporary life of ordinary people and livened up the narrative with vivid life-size characters. Luxun in *ZhongGuo XiaoShuo De RiShi De BianQian* acknowledges the unrivalled place of the novel in the history of Chinese literature and appraises in particular that the narrative represents its characters faithfully with no distortion or euphemism, so that the characters are all ‘real persons.’<sup>1)</sup>

One way Cao Xueqin, the principal author, achieved his ‘real person’ portrait is through depiction of life details. Instead of lengthy and hollow generalization and archetypes, he usually places the characters in various ‘tiny’ life details to reflect and set off special aspects and unique qualities of the characters, as the thinnest blade cuts the most exquisite lines. For the main characters, the portrait is even finer. Cao neatly embroidered his characters through carefully selected life details to allow their ‘real selves’ emerge.

This essay focuses on fragrance scenes in the narrative that shed light on personalities, inclinations and cultivation of the main characters and built a cryptic connection with the theme of desire. In particular, the contrasting scenes of the two heroines, Xue Bao-chai and Lin Dai-yu, have rhetorical and metaphorical meanings in the characterization and demonstration of the two kinds of feminine they embody.

In addition to the layered meanings and far reaching connotations, these scenes also give an aesthetic texture to the text to set against the devastating denouement in which the glamour and beauty in life—youth, love and hope for happiness—, end in the final emptiness.

## **The Two Feminine: Orthodox versus Pathocentrism**

*The Story of the Stone* is iconoclastic. One such element is its unflinching portrayal of human sorrow and suffering, of blighted dreams and blasted love, and of the finality of separation and death. This vision of the narrative, as Wang Guowei correctly perceives, is itself a radical reversal of some cherished value in Chinese literary culture.

In his judgment, the happy, united and prosperous endings in work after work of drama and fiction may indicate both the “worldliness” and “optimism” characteristic of the Chinese.<sup>2)</sup>

Xue Bao-chai and Lin Dai-yu are the two heroines that exemplify two versions of female tragedies. The two girls are portrayed as a pair of rivals with equal excellence; for Jia Bao-yu at least, his two beloved cousins represent in actuality two kinds of the feminine: one that openly subscribes to the norms of the Confucian discourse and the other an emergent one that reflects a more resistant and skeptical attitude. In the episode of Bao-yu touring the Land of Disillusion in chapter 5, he heard the oracular songs and prophecies purport to sketch out individually the destiny of each of the twelve female companions dear to his young life. Curiously, the two girls at one point seem to receive a combined treatment in a single verse.

One was a pattern of female virtue,  
One a wit who make other wits seem slow.  
The jade belt in the greenwood hangs,  
The gold pin is buried beneath the snow.<sup>3)</sup>

The “jade belt” is Dai-yu, whose name literally means black jade; Bao-chai’s name means “gold pin,” a representative female jewelry, which seemingly emphasizes her feminine quality and hints that she is for marriage. The names of Dai-yu and Bao-yu, the couple that have deep affection for each other in the narrative, pun on the homophones *yu* (jade) and *yu* (desire). Desire that include what in modern language is referred to as needs or appetites (sex, food wealth and life) in the narrative is represented in the form of *qing* or disposition, as Anthony Yu demonstrates with reference to Chinese classics and modern critics.<sup>4)</sup> Coincidentally the contemporary critic, Zhiyan-zhai (or Red-ink) also used the word to characterize that Dai-yu *qingqing* and Bao-yu *qingbuqing*,<sup>5)</sup> while Bao-chai obviously belongs to the type of beauty that lack passion, yet can others move.<sup>6)</sup>

The two girls in the board sense represent two sentiments: the orthodox Confucian feminine and the new trend for pathocentrism. Orthodox Confucianism considers desire an endangering element and renders ritual a channel for desire. It emphasizes *li* and sex separation to enforce the order into which women is place subordinate to men. Women must be careful, constant, retiring, and pure, and sex separation observes that men are not infatuated with her beauty to threaten the patriarchal norms, because it was believed that deep spousal affection itself exercises a decentering effect on despotic parental will.<sup>7)</sup> Nevertheless from the Wei-Jin period onward, Confucian tenets with respect to the social, political and moral orders were radically challenged. Assaulting the Confucian curriculum that seeks to curb desire with ritualism, Xi Kang (224–263) declares:

The basic aim of the Six Classic lies in restraint and guidance, but human nature delights in following one’s desire. Restraint and guidance go against one’s wishes, but following one’s desire is how we attain the natural. This being the case, the attainment of the natural does not stem from the restrictive Six Classics, and

the foundation of perfecting one's nature does not rely on rites and laws that offend our qing.<sup>8)</sup>

Following this trend upholding human nature against the Confucian norms, Ming iconoclasts like Li Zhi and Lu Kun would argue for re-positioning of marriage as the primary of the five Relations, which was unwittingly affirmed by many poets.<sup>9)</sup> It wouldn't be surprising then so many preserved texts of the Tang tale (*chuanqi*) have immensely escalated and exalted the literary representation of pathocentrism.

In the narrative, Bao-chai is from a prosperous aristocratic merchant family. At the time she came to live adjacent to the Jia family, Bao-chai is almost a grown woman with well-formed Confucian values and female virtues. Faced with a weak mother and a hopelessly spoiled and unruly elder brother, Bao-chai is forced to acquire the disciplined taciturnity and cultivated tactfulness so necessary to the management of household affairs.

Bao-chai is closely connected with the image of snow and coldness, indicative of her nobility and virtues as well as her depressed nature. Her surname xue is a pun for "snow," in the poem quoted earlier and in the following song, she is repeatedly likened to snow. The song is in the tone of Bao-yu revealing his sentiments to his two female cousins.

#### The Mistake Marriage

Let others all  
Commend the marriage rites of gold and jade;  
I still recall  
The bond of old by stone of flower made;  
And while my vacant eyes behold  
Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold,  
From my mind can not be banished  
That fairy wood forlorn that from the world has vanished.  
How true I find  
That every good some imperfection holds!  
Even a wife so courteous and so kind  
No comfort brings to my afflicted mind.<sup>10)</sup>

Bao-yu is fascinated by her "crystalline snow of beauty pure and cold," and acknowledges her 'courteous' and 'kind' manners, but these are not enough to anchor the heart that bond with the other with a stronger accord.

On the other hand, for the orthodox Bao-chai, Bao-yu with no ambition for 'career' or 'status' will not be a good match. Her name Bao-chai is imaged in a poem in the narrative to embody female ambition:

The jewel in the casket bides till one shall come to buy.  
The jade pin in the drawer hides, waiting its time to fly.<sup>11)</sup>

Her "time to fly" could be only accomplished through marriage, either by selection to

the Imperial seraglio as Bao-yu's older sister was, or more practically a successful marriage to a powerful and wealthy family.

In contrast, Dai-yu has come to live with her grandmother (Grandmother Jia, on mother side) at an earlier age after losing both parents, and spent the latter half of her childhood with Bao-yu. Within traditional culture of imperial China, where parents are invested with the absolute authority of all marital arrangements, premarital affection between the sexes seldom exists precisely because the parties have so little opportunity to meet, let alone to enjoy any form of acquaintance and courtship. Cao Xueqin is unique in so transplanting Dai-yu into the Jia Mansion that his hero and heroine are permitted prolonged and intimate association in a hospital setting. The unbreakable bond that unites the two can therefore assume a natural course of development, proceeding from intuitive childhood attraction, through shared periods of camaraderie, banter, communion, and growth, to poignant moments of heated dispute and passionate disclosure.

Endowed with intelligence, sensitivity and literary talents, Dai-yu has to grow up in a society where the aphorism, "a woman's virtue is her lack of talent" is its unchallenged watchword.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, wholly lacking the stabilizing influence of parental authority and affirmation and the steadying guidance of experienced wisdom, a great deal of her vexation is attributable to her inability to resolve the conflict between duty and desire, between the need to acquire the traditional social virtues of self-restraint and deference to others and the self-assertive impulsive to compete, to achieve and to excel.

The fragrance scenes to be examined depict significant moments in Bao-yu's relation with the two girls, revealing their mutual attraction and underlying differences. The motif of fragrance seems to carry a highly metaphorical meaning from its debut in the narrative with reference to the well cited poem.

*The flowers' aroma breathes of hotter days* (hua xiang xi ren zhi zhou nuan)<sup>13</sup>

Bao-yu named his first maid Aroma (Xiren in the original text, literally means to assault people) after ran across this poem and discovered the girl's surname was Hua, which means 'flowers.' The poem adroitly conveys the secret working of the fragrance on nose while invisible to eyes, which makes it almost irresistible. In a later episode in which Bao-yu has a nap in the exquisitely arranged bedroom of Qin Keqing's, his cousin-nephew's wife in chapter 5, the description highlights a decorative couplet:

The coldness of spring has imprisoned the soft buds in a wintry dream (nen han suo meng in chun leng)

The fragrance of wine has intoxicated the beholder with imagined flower-scents (fang qi xi ren shi jiu xiang)<sup>14</sup>

The couple attributed to the legendary Qin Guan uses the same phrase of 'xiren' to describe the working of fragrance on human organism. The extravagant description of the room emphasizes that virtually every one of Bao-yu's senses was stimulated in this seductive setting. His touch (the cover of the quilts), his sight (all the appointment

in the room, in particular the painting by Tang Yin entitled 'Spring Slumber' depicting a beautiful woman asleep under a crab-apple tree, and his smell ("a subtle whiff of the most delicious perfume assailed his nostrils, making a sweet stickiness inside his drooping eyelids and causing all the joints in his body to dissolve").<sup>15)</sup> Bao-yu soon fell asleep, and in his dream he visited the Land of Illusion and was taught 'the art of love.' Awake from the dream, Bao-yu shared his first sex with Aroma who waited on him. The significance of this episode is that it portrayed Bao-yu as one peculiarly responsive to the vision of feminine pulchritude and prepared for a later scene with Bao-chai. At the same time we should remember that Aroma in many ways resembles Bao-chai, the two pairs' relation sometimes follows the same course.

This association of fragrance/perfume with sensual enticement is hardly unique as the epigraph from Steven Connor reveals. This pattern is repeated and unfolds in an episode with real woman flesh.

In chapter 19 when meeting her at his grandma's, Bao-yu requested to see a string of mask beads on Bao-chai's arm. The beads are one of the gifts from Bao-yu's older sister, the imperial concubine. Meaningfully Bao-yu and Bao-chai received the same combination of gifts while Dai-yu and the other cousins had less, which was quickly speculated as the sister's approval of the gossiped 'goodly affinity of gold-and-jade' that Bao-yu and Bao-chai's respective birth talismans implied, a traditional metaphor for a happy and well-matched marriage. Bao-chai obediently tries to take off the beads.

But Bao-chai was inclined to plumpness and perspired easily, and for a moment or two it would not come off. While she was struggling with it, Bao-yu had ample opportunity to observe her snow-white arm, and a feeling rather warmer than admiration was kindled inside him.

'If that arm were growing on Cousin Lin's body,' he speculated, 'I might hope one day to touch it. What a pity it's hers! Now I shall never have that good fortune.'

Suddenly he thought of the curious coincidence of the gold and jade talismans and their matching inscriptions, which Dai-yu's remark had reminded him of. He looked again at Bao-chai—

that face like the full moon's argent bowl;  
those eyes like sloes;  
those lips whose carmine hue no Art contrived;  
and brows by none but Nature's pencil lined.

This was beauty of quite a different order from Dai-yu's. Fascinated by it, he continued to stare at her with a somewhat dazed expression, so that when she handed him the chaplet, which she had now succeeded in getting off her wrist, he failed to take it from her.<sup>16)</sup>

Like the Mencius of antiquity acknowledging that he wanted both fish and bear paw for food, Bao-yu suddenly finds himself struggling with the dilemma of competing appetites. The intensity of his present longing aroused by sight (Bao-chai's plumpness so

impresses him that he would teasingly compare her with Yang Guifei in chapter 30), makes him perilously close to being a vivid example of ‘the typically lustful man’ described by the goddess Disenchantment “who would expend his lust, as it were, merely in a skin-deep fashion.”<sup>17)</sup>

Almost deliberately left unmentioned is the smell of the mask that must have also worked on the boy the same way as the unnamed perfume did in the former scene. Steven Connor in his scientific study of the working of perfume on human organism, argues that

Smells that ‘stimulate’ or ‘refresh’ or ‘comfort’ are often doing so through the hints of substances like musk or civet, obtained from the secretions of the excretory or sexual organs of mammals. Even fragrances that seem entirely floral or vegetable may be doing their work through substances that resemble the chemical form or mimic the effect of the steroidal sex pheromones in mammals.<sup>18)</sup>

This seems to help explain the intensity of Bao-yu’s fascination. The scene is duly interrupted by Dai-yu, yet still as Anthony Yu argued “[t]hat a moment’s vision can trigger at once his urge to possession and conjure up for him the implied marital promise of their respective birth talismans measures the magnitude of his desire.”<sup>19)</sup>

Of course, Bao-chai does not wear the beads to seduce Bao-yu, probably only to show her appreciation of the gift as it is from the distinguished imperial concubine. But within the seraglio it is highly possible that scarlet mask beads were used to enhance womanly sexuality.

Though in the narrative Dai-yu is presumed as the one carrying desire, she is never involved in sensual or erotic scenes, even physical description of Dai-yu is rare, while Bao-chai’s physical beauty is elaborated as much as her virtues. Bao-yu appositely describes the two types of Bao-chai and Dai-yu as those of rose-fresh beauty and delicate charm.

### **Cold Fragrance Pills and Subtle Fragrance**

Apart from its seductive capacity, fragrance is also employed to underlie the contrasting characteristic of the two girls. Their difference is sharply caught in the eyes of the Jia household: “Bao-chai possessed a grow-up beauty and aplomb in which all agreed Dai-yu was her inferior. Moreover, in contrast to Dai-yu with her air of lofty self-sufficiency and total obliviousness to all who did not move on the same exalted level as herself, Bao-chai had a generous, accommodating disposition which greatly endeared her to subordinates.”<sup>20)</sup> Bao-chai’s gentility and generosity is part of her nature, but in a great portion is from her upbringing and education. The cold fragrance pill she takes exemplifies the family’s fastidious investment on the young girl, which is also metaphorical indication of the restriction placed on her. Here is the prescription of the pills she repeated to a flattering servant-in-charge:

You have to take twelve ounces of stamens of the spring-flowering white tree-peony, twelve ounces of stamens of the summer-flowering white water-lily, twelve ounces of stamens of the autumn-flowering white lotus, and twelve ounces of sta-

mens of the winter-flowering white plum and dry them all in the sun on the day of the spring equinox of the year immediately following the year you picked them in. Then you have to mix them with the powder I told you about and pound them all up together in a mortar. Then you must take twelve drams of rain water that fell on the Rain Days in the second month ...

... Then you have to collect twelve drams of dew on the day White Dew in the ninth month twelve drams of frost at Frost Fall in the tenth, and twelve drams of snow at Lesser Snow in the last month of the year, stir these four kinds of water into the mixture, make it up into pills about the size of a longan, and store the pill in an old porcelain jar. The jar is supposed to be buried in a flower bed and only dug up when you have an attack of the illness. Then one of the pills is taken out and swallowed in hot water into which one and a quarter drams of tincture of phellodendron has been stirred.<sup>21)</sup>

Unlike many practical prescriptions in the narrative that demonstrate the author's knowledge in medicine, this one is purely 'legendary.' This prescription is supposed to be handed down from the Immortal of the Islands by a monk, to heal the girl's "congenital tendency to overheatedness."<sup>22)</sup> In addition all the ingredients must be mixed by a brother.

The prescription's emphasis on the white color (white equals purity), the drying of the flower (to rid of natural energy), the demands on the divine water (unpolluted water from the sky) on the particular date, and the participation of a patriarch (the brother in Bao-chai's case is the family head after the death of the father), turns this medically almost useless medicine into a rhetorical metaphor of the girl's education: the process that eliminates desire from her nature (her congenital tendency to overheatedness) and forms her into an orthodox cold beauty that observes patriarchal norms. The emphasis of the brother's participation in the making of the pill mentioned in a later scene by Dai-yu seems to unintentionally underline the patriarchal depression. Ironically the brother is spoiled, while the sister grows into a young woman of accomplishment and sophistication. In Bao-yu's eyes, when visiting her in her private apartment with her servant, "[h]e saw no hint of luxury or show, only a chaste, refined sobriety; to some her studied taciturnity might seem to savour of duplicity; but she herself saw in conformity the means of guarding her simplicity."<sup>23)</sup> However against her elegant simplicity and defensive constraint, her cold fragrance pill becomes eloquent.

Bao-yu was now sitting almost shoulder to shoulder with her and as he did so he became aware of a penetrating fragrance that seemed to emanate from her person.

'What incense do you use to scent your clothes with, cousin?' he asked. 'I have never smelt such a delicious perfume.'

'I can't stand incense perfumes,' said Bao-chai. 'I could never see the point of smoking perfectly good, clean clothes over an incense-pot.'

'In that case, what is this perfume I can smell?'

Bao-chai thought for a moment.

'I know! It must be the Cold Fragrance Pill I took this morning.'  
'What's a Cold Fragrance Pill?' said Bao-yu with a laugh. 'Won't you give me one to try?'  
'Now you're being silly again. Medicine isn't something to be taken for amusement.'  
Just at that moment the servants outside announced 'Miss Lin' ...<sup>24)</sup>

Bao-yu naturally takes the fragrance as a perfume, who would have imagined it a medicine? Besides, the use of fragrance is not unusual among the aristocrats and wealthy. Bao-yu who is sensitive to feminine charm is impressed by the delicious perfume, and refuses to take it as a medicine even after his cousin's remonstrations. Bao-chai who observes the principal of "careful, constant, retiring, and pure" can hardly be the person to connect with perfume, but this perfume is justifiable because it is given (as well as her birth talisman) and taken as a medicine. Modern psychological analysis of perfume and its function in male-female relation help us to understand the secret working of the fragrance on one's psyche:

A delicate fragrance emphasized the tenderness and fragility of the self. It both discouraged the tactile invasion of the woman's atmospheric space and coyly encouraged the desire for it ... In making women seem frail and tremulous, perfume seemed to extend their skins outwards, as though their aroma were itself a subtle, exploratory organ.<sup>25)</sup>

Seen in this light, the fragrance is at least endearing if not seductive as in the other scenes. Bao-yu has obviously not heard about the fragrance, if he knows he would be even more fascinated. This scene seen together with the earlier one seems to demonstrate that the author is intentional and consistent in portraying the two protagonists in ambiguous and suggestive settings when meet in private. Indeed the two 'almost grown' women of Bao-chai and Aroma, who are well acknowledged for their virtues and morality in the Jia household, should be the subject of boy's sexual fascination. This seems to be the author's subversive irony on the artificial sex separation which in many ways could be considered the stimulation for the other Jia males' profligate and untiring seeking for sexual pleasure.

Meanwhile Bao-chai's theory of fragrance demonstrates her refined taste, her principle of sobriety and chasteness. She is a true believer and faithful practitioner of the Confucian norm that "a woman's virtue is her lack of talent" and also watches on other girls. She will later lecture Dai-yu who has obviously not systematically received such education and doesn't show any willing conformity to the Confucian norms. For example in chapter 42, Bao-chai argues with Dai-yu: "A girl's first concern is to be virtuous, her second is to be industrious in women's work. She may write poetry if she likes as a diversion, but it is an accomplishment she could just as well do without. The last thing girls of a good family such as ours need is a literary reputation."<sup>26)</sup>

Bao-chai's moral remonstrations to Dai-yu is earnest, and she will also persuade Bao-yu to establish himself and acquire a name, in other words, to seek success in a civil service career. Here lies her fundamental difference from the couple of Bao-yu and

Dai-yu. For girls like Bao-chai and Shi Xiang-yun, the other cousin who also remonstrated with Bao-yu, they have conceived of their relations to someone like Bao-yu as a part of their basic obligation to uphold the priority of the family, of its structures and values.

It is in regard to this issue that Dai-yu's attitude reveals her greatest distance from all the other girls. Dai-yu is the only girl who has never tried to persuade Bao-yu to establish himself and acquire a name. Dai-yu's love for Bao-yu is extraordinary precisely because she places his freedom for self-affirmation above his obligatory allegiance to the family. A love that has the potential to challenge some of the most cherished values of a culture must appear perverse and anarchic, for it threatens to repudiate or revise the long-accepted norms of that tradition. As many critics note a love of such quality is also what endears her to readers traditional and modern,<sup>27)</sup> because it registers the most eloquent intimation of tragic nobility. She has never demanded that her lover be anything other than what he is; all she has ever hoped from him is the unambiguous assurance of his love. And her love for him deepens when she accidentally overhears a conversation between Bao-yu, Xiang-yun and Aroma during which she comes to the realization that his regard for her is based squarely on her attitude toward his future career.

Different from the other girls conforming to the patriarchal norms, Dai-yu seeks in Bao-yu a *zhiyin*, meaning literally one who knows or understands the sound, the melody, or the notes, and it originates from the familiar story recorded in numerous ancient texts, including the *Lushi chunqiu* and the *Liezi*.<sup>28)</sup> The term *zhiyin*, in the evolved history of its usage, comes to mean not only an intimate friend but also one who recognizes and appreciates the friend's hidden ability and true worth. When Dai-yu employs it in the text, it is laced with amorous overtones. Meanwhile the characterization of Dai-yu follows the literary tradition of pathocentrism: the beautiful, talented woman who inhabits the sordid quarters of aristocratic or commercial entertainment in poetic self-representation appears to be the devoted lover. Nevertheless the author refuses to depict the unmarried lovers either as engaging in furtive intercourse that ends eventually in disaster (the stories and plays associated with *Western Wing*), or as establishing contact through the mysterious medium of premonitory dreams (*The Peony Pavilion*) that the novel's two literary antecedents (both prominently alluded to in the novel) resorted to. In stead we see innocent affection between Bao-yu and Dai-yu born from their childhood intimacy. On the other hand, Bao-yu's awakening sexual desire is aroused and satisfied by the more practical and orthodox women, who by observing the line between men and women ironically remind him of the gap and trigger his desire.

The following fragrance scene, which constitutes an echo and contrast to Bao-chai's cold fragrance, depicts Bao-yu and Dai-yu in their innocent sentiment. If the cold fragrance is a metaphor for Bao-chai's personality and upbringing, the adjective used here also points to the unusualness of Dai-yu.

Dai-yu's scene unfolds around a 'subtle fragrance,' an unusual and unexplained fragrance. In stead of the fastidious cold fragrance with the prescription elaborated by Bao-chai herself, Dai-yu didn't notice hers and is indifferent to it after Bao-yu noticed. When Bao-yu asks for the fragrance, Dai-yu simply says she was no wearing any fra-

grance at the unlikely season, which unwittingly claims the subtle fragrance natural.

He was preoccupied with a subtle fragrance which seemed to emanate from Dai-yu's sleeve—a fragrance that intoxicated the senses and caused one to feel rather limp. He seized hold of the sleeve and demanded to know what perfume she was wearing.

'Perfume? At this season?' said Dai-yu with a laugh. 'I'm not wearing any. "In the cold winter none smells sweet."'!

'Well, where does it come from, then?'

'I don't know myself where it comes from,' said Dai-yu. 'I suppose it might have come from the wardrobe.'

Bao-yu shook his head.

'I doubt it. It's a very unusual scent. Not the kind you would get from a scent-cake or a perfume—ball or sachet.'

'I hope you don't imagine it's some exotic perfume given me by the Immortals of the Isles. Even if I had the recipe, I have no kind elder brother to get together all those flowers and stamens and things and make it up for me. I have got only the ordinary, vulgar sorts of perfume!'

'Whatever I say, you are always dragging in things like that,' said Bao-yu. 'Very well. You will have to be taught a lesson. From now on, no mercy!'

Half rising, he pretended to spit on his hands, then stretching them out before him, began to waggle his fingers up and down in the region of her ribs and armpits. Dai-yu had always been the most ticklish of mortals, and the mere sight of his waggling fingers sent her off into shrieks of laughter which soon ended in breathlessness:

'Oh! Oh! Bao-yu! No! Stop! I'll be angry!'

'Will you say things like that any more?'

'No,' said Dai-yu, laughing weakly, 'I promise.'

She proceeded to pat her hair into place, smilingly complacently:

'So I've got an unusual fragrance, have I? Have you got a warm fragrance?'

For the moment Bao-yu was puzzled:

'Warm fragrance?'

Dai-yu shook her head pityingly.

'Don't be so dense! You have your jade. Somebody has a gold thing to match. Somebody has Cold Fragrance, you must have Warm Fragrance to go with it!'

'I've only just let you off,' said Bao-yu, 'and here you go again, worse than ever!'

Once more he stretched out the threatening fingers and Dai-yu again began to shriek.

'No! Bao-yu! Please! I promise!'

'All right, I forgive you. But you must let me smell your sleeve.'

He wrapped the free end of that garment over his face and abandoned himself to long and prodigious sniffs.

Dai-yu jerked away her arm.

'I really think you ought to go.'

'Couldn't go if I wanted to. Let's lie down very quietly and genteelly and have a

conversation.’ And he stretched himself out again.<sup>29)</sup>

This lengthy quotation reveals the two adolescents still wrapped in their innocent childhood intimacy. To the moralists of sex separation, it must be scandalous for the two youth to be so close. But their repeated body contact arouses no sensual feelings. Dai-yu at ease is the smart and mischievous young girl, quick-witted and sharp-mouthed. She continuously teases Bao-yu of his gossiped marital perspectives with Bao-chai. Admitting that he is not an equal in quick wit, the boy resorts to action, tickles the girl. Though one or two years younger than Bao-chai, the two’s relation conspicuously lacks the formality and gender consciousness Bao-chai demonstrates. Still more curious, their body contacts don’t arouse any erotic sense in either of them. It is not that Bao-yu finds Dai-yu unattractive, because he certainly expects marital happiness with Dai-yu as his thoughts revealed in his scene with Bao-chai by wishing Bao-chai’s snow white arm were growing on Dai-yu’s body. Bao-yu has also revealed in different occasions that he treats Dai-yu as a prospective spouse. It can only be explained that the boy is also seeking a *zhiyin*, a discerning friend and a spiritual mate in Dai-yu. He cherishes her so much that he won’t do anything to compromise her, meanwhile their secret communication in reading the forbidden *Western Wing* and other sentimental engagement such as collecting fallen blossoms to the Flowers’ Grave, undoubted deepen their mutual understanding and appreciation and guide the development of their affection to that of pathocentrism.

The title of the chapter from which the above scene is cited, “a very endearing one is found to be a source of fragrance by day,” hints that the fragrance the boy finds intoxicating could be imaginary. It is probably purely from his fondness of the girl and his enjoyment of her company that he imagines such a fragrance that both of them failed to locate. It could also be the author’s metaphor of their finding in each other the true worth of the love, which is unusual in their surrounding. Dai-yu, whose nature is not much disturbed by the moralist ‘medicines,’ is able to desire and response to Bao-yu’s affection. Their delirious desire (*chiqing*) is a great challenge to the patriarchal norms and morality of their time; placing their affection or *chiqing* above their life, they have to end in tragedy. In the 120-chapter version of the work published in 1971/72 that provides a denouement, Bao-yu is tricked into marrying Bao-chai by the schemes of his nearest kin, while his preferred Dai-yu dies a lonely, agonizing death on his wedding night.

This arrangement however compromises Bao-chai, and turns her to an invader as well as a victim. Based on her Confucian value and principle, if the marriage is desired and arranged by the parents of both sides, she has no ground to resist. But for Bao-yu the twofold tragedy of bereavement and marriage misfortune sent him to quick disillusion. In this sense the 120-chapter version renders Bao-chai an equal tragedy as Dai-yu, because Dai-yu though tragic has claimed her lover’s love and fidelity, but Bao-chai, maneuvered into marrying a man disapproves her Confucian female virtues is not only compromised but also humiliated when finally deserted. Moreover in hindsight, her early interaction with Bao-yu seems self-serving and seductive.

## Conclusion

The novel's Germany translator, Franz Kuhn, comments in his *Introduction* to the English version of the novel: "Though at first sight the *Hung Lou Meng* appears to be an inexplicable chaos of innumerable characters and events, on close scrutiny the novel reveals itself to be a harmonious structure, well ordered, logical, consistent."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the well wrought narrative in spite of its length and complicated structure is organized with carefully selected episodes and details that threw light from different directions to illuminate the central characters, rendering the effect that the reader is seeing the 'real persons' as he gradually knows them and observes them in details of everyday life.

In the age of censorship and undeveloped psychoanalysis, metaphor has an even more significant place in the narrative. As close reading of the fragrance scenes demonstrates, surface meanings yield to the underlayers under scrutiny. The two young women's respective fragrances and perfume uniquely reflect their individualities and upbringing, and function as a dramatic prop that throws light on the undercurrents in their relation to Bao-yu.

The two women had been considered by some scholiasts as a composite character, because the fictive goodness Disenchantment's sister who was given to Bao-yu in his dream is suggestively called "Two-in-one (Jian Mei) who has both Bao-chai's rose-fresh beauty and Dai-yu's delicate charm. The modern critic, Louise P. Edwards in his recent criticism that makes use of feminist theory argues that "the role given to women in the novel is ... subsidiary ... Dai-yu and Bao-chai are valorized primarily for their potential to reflect Bao-yu's problem with ... the signification of gender in Chinese society."<sup>31</sup> Such criticism neglects the significance in the author's characterization of the two complementary and contrasting heroines that eventually both end in tragedy. Their tragedies question the blind traditional norms that disregard human feelings; they destroy not only the skeptical but also ironically the orthodox. It also initiates a new understanding of gender relation conceptualized in Goddess Disenchantment's disguised commendation on 'the lust of the mind' that Bao-yu is different from 'the typically lustful man.' Intellectually and emotionally far more capacious than those worldly profligates who respond only to immediate physical stimuli and end in skin-deep relationship, Bao-yu is "a kind and understanding friend" that treats women as equal though he also feels the grip of desire through vicarious participation in memory or imagination. When meeting a *zhiyin*, an appreciative mate, he is able to form an unbreakable bond.

Leaving contemporaries novels far behind in artistic accomplishment and philosophical depth, *The Story of the Stone* demonstrates its iconoclasm in its unflinching refusal of the conventional happy and united ending. Dai-yu's suicidal death and Bao-yu's desertion of family and a perspective career in the 120-chapter version, which presents a reasonable interpretation of the prophecies in the beginning of the narrative, appeal for the restoration of natural human desires and re-positioning of marriage as the primary of the five Relations in stead of a subordinate to be sacrificed, of which the moralist Zhang Xuecheng prescribed in the *Qing* that the ardent sentiments of men and women can expect legitimation only in the guise of normative patriarchal desire.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

- 1) Lu Xun, “ZhongGuo XiaoShuo De RiShi DeBianQian,” *Luxun Quan Ji*, (Beijing: JinMin Shu Ban She, 2005), 309–50, esp. 348.
- 2) Guowei Wang, “HongLongMeng Pinglun,” *Haining Wang Jing’an Xiansheng Yishu*, 14 vols., (1940), repr., vol. 4, (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu, 1976), 1609–11.
- 3) Quotations of English translation unless otherwise noted, are from *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes, 5 vols., (London: Penguin, 1973). This quote is from vol. 1, 133.
- 4) Anthony Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56–75.
- 5) See *Xinbian Shitouji Zhiyanzhai Pingyu Jijiao*, ed. by Chen Qinghao, rev. ed., (Taipei: Lianjing, 1986).
- 6) Hawkes, vol. 3, 224.
- 7) Kang Zhengguo, *Fengsao yu Yangqing*, (Taipei: Yunlong, 1991), 132.
- 8) Xi Kang, “Nan Zhang Liaoshu Ziran HaoXue Lun,” *Quan Sanguo Wen*, juan 50, repr. of the 1936 ed., (Hongkong: Shangwu, 1974), 6b–7a.
- 9) For Li Zhi, see *Fen Shu*, (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1961), 90; for Lu Kun, see Joanna F. Handlin, “Lu K’un’s New Audience: The Influence of Women’s Literacy on Sixteenth Century Thought,” Wolf Margery and Roxane Witke eds., *Women in Chinese Society*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 13–38, esp. 34.
- 10) Hawkes, vol. 1, 140.
- 11) Hawkes, vol. 1, 59.
- 12) The quotation of this maxim is first made in the narrative in connection with the introduction of Li Wan, the widow of Bao-yu’s deceased elder brother, at the beginning of chapter 4.
- 13) Hawkes, vol. 1, 106. The underline is mine.
- 14) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 127. The underline is mine.
- 15) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 126.
- 16) *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 195.
- 17) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 146.
- 18) Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 209.
- 19) Yu, 200.
- 20) Hawkes, vol. 1, 124.
- 21) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 168–9.
- 22) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 168.
- 23) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 188.
- 24) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 190–91.
- 25) Connor, 220.
- 26) Hawkes, vol. 3, 64.
- 27) See Yu, 240–41; A-cheng, *Xian Hua Xian Shuo: ChongGuo ShiSu Yu ChongGuo XiaoShuo*, (Beijing: Zuo-Jia Shu Ban She, 1997), 112–13.
- 28) See Lu Buwei, *Lushi Chunqiu*, juan 14, 4a; *The Book of Lieh-tzu: A Classic of Tao*, tr. A. C. Graham, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 109–10.
- 29) Hawkes, vol. 2, 66–7.
- 30) *Introduction to The Dream of the Red Chamber*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), xv.
- 31) P. Louise Edward, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 44–45.
- 32) See Zheng Xuecheng, *Weishi Tongyi*, juan 5, (Beijing: Chonghua, 1957).