1991

Change and Stasis in Dream of the Red Chamber

Geoffrey Kain
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, kaing@erau.edu

CHANGE AND STASIS IN *DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER*

Geoffrey R. Kain
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Hung-lou Meng, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, stands as China's greatest contribution to the world's vast store of prose fiction. The eighteenth-century work, attributed to Cao Xue Qin is remarkable not only for its sheer volume[1] but for the insight it affords into the intricacies of the old Chinese family structure, as well as into the way of life of a wealthy family having connections with the imperial court. Cao Xue Qin provides a detailed, expansive description of events within the two linked, great households of the extended Jia family, introducing hundreds of characters and chronicling the eventual falling away of the family fortunes.

Most simply, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a love story, detailing the involvement of the young Jia Bao-yu with two young women, Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai. Jia Bao-yu is described as a rather effeminate, very sensitive child who is not interested in the disciplines his father feels he needs to cultivate but is drawn instead to idle away his time talking with Lin Dai-yu and/or Xue Bao-chai, cavorting with the maidservants, or reading romances. Bao-yu wishes to marry Dai-yu--and senses that they are fated to marry--but is tricked by his parents into marrying the wealthier and more influential Bao-chai. Lin Dai-yu, whose health has been failing, dies following this deceit; together with a Taoist priest and Buddhist monk, Bao-yu then leaves wife and family.

Dream of the Red Chamber seems all-inclusive, touching upon virtually every aspect of life, yet its general structure and ultimate import remain matters of debate. A text so vast, with its large cast of characters and the seemingly innumerable vignettes which, taken together, would have to be regarded as the "plot," has invited so many various interpretations over the two and a half centuries since its composition as to indicate both its richness and its elusiveness. It has been read as allegory, as satire, as semi-autobiographical realism, and (among post-Liberation Marxist critics within China) as a denunciation of the "bankruptcy" of Confucian morality. I would offer yet another reading of the text by suggesting that Cao Xue Qin invites us to perceive the overall framework of his narrative as informed by a pervasive tension, the fundamental antagonism and interplay between change and stasis. This conflict is most evident on three levels within the narrative. From most general to most specific (like three concentric circles) they may be identified as the larger pattern of the text as a whole; the garden of the Takuanyuan within the encompassing walls of the Jia family compound; and the father-son relationship of Jia Zheng and Bao-yu. In considering the relationship between

LANGUAGE QUARTERLY VOL. 29: 3-4 (SUMMER-FALL 1991): 50-56

the novel's "hero" and his father, it also becomes apparent that Cao intends, within his narrative concern for depicting static-dynamic opposition, to reveal what we are to understand as the failure of either character to accurately perceive and/or cultivate the Way.

Although almost the entire narrative centers on the interaction of characters who live within the walled enclosure of the adjoining Jia family compounds, this lengthy description of a microcosm of earthly existence ("the meetings and partings, the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs of fortune") is itself enclosed within, or between, brief depictions of the immortal world. The text begins and ends within the territory of the eternal, external world; we therefore cannot avoid the blatant contrast between the two worlds. Although there is some interaction between them, the two planes of existence are, contrary to traditional Chinese cosmology, exclusive. The "misfit" stone ("found unfit to repair the azure sky" by the goddess Nu Wa), during its melancholy wanderings in the non-earthly realm, comes into contact with two immortals, who reappear from time to time over the course of the narrative, reminding us of the ongoing presence of the immortal and its interaction with the mortal world of ceaseless change. The immortals attempt to discourage the solitary stone's insistent desire to experience the joys of life in the mortal world. They inform the stone that the pleasures of life are illusory and that while happiness is accessible, it is eventually spoiled, that sorrow predominates.

The immortals' observation that earthly life is characterized chiefly by mutability and loss sets the tone for the ensuing narrative, and it certainly serves to establish the basic distinction between the two realms, or forces, of the timeless and the time-consumed. Despite the immortals' warnings, of course, the stone insists further and achieves its incarnation as Bao-yu, the misfit son of a prominent and influential family.

Consistent with the image of earthly life painted by the two immortals, what we generally encounter in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in all its variety, is ceaseless, restless change:

> The judge whose hat is too small for his head
> Wears, in the end, a convict's cangue instead.
> Who shivering once in rags bemoaned his fate,
> Today finds fault with scarlet robes of state.
> In such commotion does the world's theatre rage:
> As each one leaves, another takes the stage.
> (Vol. 1: 65)

Andrew Plaks has interpreted this story line not as a clear pattern of rise and fall or gain and loss, but as a "welter of overlapping cycles without any sense of direction" (1977: 191). Characters pass in and out of the story, relationships develop and decline, some key characters sicken and die, the Jia family fortunes rapidly deteriorate in the latter chapters of the text. The fragility of

health and beauty and the unpredictable, dynamic nature of experience are witnessed in so many instances, but perhaps most overtly symbolically in one scene inside the Takuanyuan, the expansive gardern retreat built to welcome home for a visit one of Jia Zheng's daughters who has been chosen as an imperial concubine. Together with some of the female members of the extended family and their attendants, Bao-yu eventually removes from the central family compound to live within the Takuanyuan. As Dai-yu comes upon Bao-yu, he is shaking into a small stream of water a number of flower petals that have fallen on him from an overhanging tree branch. This impression calls to Dai-yu's mind lines of poetry from a number of poets. Among them are, "Relentlessly the waters flow, the flowers fade;" and

> The blossoms fall, the water flows,
> The glory of spring is gone
> In nature's world as in the human one. (Vol. 1: 466-67)

An implicit parallel allusion comes from *The Analects*: "The Master, standing by a stream, said, / 'It [existence] passes on like this, not ceasing day and night.'"

It is striking that this momentary, poignant recognition of mutability (with its ominous reflection of Dai-yu's fragile, failing health) should be shared by Bao-yu and Dai-yu within the boundaries of the Takuanyuan, the garden refuge which is arguably analogous (or so Bao-yu would instinctively prefer it to be) to the timeless, immutable realm of the immortals introduced as the text opens. As Plaks suggests, the Takuanyuan is "undoubtedly the central figure of the text" and stands as a "self-contained universe . . . of plenitude" (1977: 197).

Naturally, Bao-yu is unable to retain for long his hold on the edenic qualities afforded by the "golden days" inside the garden. At first Bao-yu rejoices that he is able to retire to the garden because it offers increased distance and apparently greater sanctuary from his father's harsh efforts to urge his son away from a life of leisure and toward preparation for a life of involvement as a civil authority. Escape, or at least distance, from his father allows Bao-yu to live as he is inclined--composing poetry, practicing calligraphy, playing the flute, reading romances, sporting with the young maidservants, conversing with his favorite females, and simply wandering about or sitting in the garden appreciating its beauty.

Bao-yu's association with the garden and his impulse to resist change continue to remind us of his instinctive attachment to his former residence among the immortals, and also betrays his continuing innocence of character. He has not yet aspired to or accepted the awareness of which the immortals had advised him before his incarnation. He persists as one of

> those whose knowledge is immature and frequently know only one side of affairs and things; they overlook the other side. "Knowledge of life and not of death; knowledge of gain and not of loss," as mentioned in the *Book of Changes*, is due to lack of adequate knowledge. (Chen: 1986: 17)

This knowledge comes to Bao-yu, inevitably, in a series of very painful lessons. The emblematic walls of the Takuanyuan are penetrated by decay, loss, and despair.

Bao-yu's idyll in the garden is disrupted first and most significantly by his menacing father. Bao-yu's fear of his father, as an agent of implacable, forcible change, is emphasized very early in the text, long before we actually encounter the two characters together in the same scene. Jia Zheng has "never cared much for his son," and his disappointment and hostility over Bao-yu's "dissolute and licentious" behavior and his lack of attainment mount until, following some misbehavior from Bao-yu, and having Bao-yu's protective grandmother conveniently preoccupied with matters in another part of the household, he had Bao-yu seized and brought before him. Consumed by wrath, "yellow with rage," Jia Zheng has Bao-yu bound and gagged in a locked room, then with all his might beats him with a heavy bamboo, intending--and nearly succeeding--to kill him.

This point in the text is significant not only because it graphically illustrates the father's violation of the moral principle that "force should come last and virtue first," but also because of the alarming level Jia Zheng's frustration has reached regarding Bao-yu's failure to change. His insistence that he will *create* change in his son's character proves ultimately to be futile, and we are left with the ironic fact that the father who perceives himself to be a protector of Confucian morality finally falls far short of the essential virtues of the very system he so sternly wishes to enforce or uphold.

> The object of the knowledge of nature is to be in accord with it and to fulfill it, to understand the way of existing with others. The object of the illustration of virtue is to . . . enlarge oneself and others; also, not to do unto others what one would not have others do unto oneself. The object of the illustration of instruction is to know how to teach others and how to be taught. (Chen: 1986: 128)

The nature of things, as the upright man knows, is dynamic; while there is surely order, the order is defined by movement, by change, and by adaptability--and to be in accord with nature would then imply flexibility (ju) and a recognition that change invariably occurs. Jia Zheng's efforts to create change by force rather than by counsel or example (evidenced repeatedly in the text) finally lead to his violent assault on a nature that will not yield to his unyielding dictates. In this, he exhibits an ignorance of nature (and Bao-yu's nature, more specifically) and thus a frightening lack of moral principle. Ironically, Jia Zheng's violent effort to force change--which exhibits his own inflexibility--is out of keeping with the essence of nature, which is change.

Despite Bao-yu's "unnatural" urge to avoid change, his garden fortress

succumbs to the essential dynamism that rolls over anything that might assume the shape of fixity. Some time before the garden is finally ransacked, it is invaded by malign spirits and is all but abandoned. The wind wails through the trees and the few who remain there seldom venture out.

The dissolution, invasion, and pillage of the family garden, Marsha Wagner argues (1985) is emblematic of the almost total breakdown of social order and Confucian role hierarchy by the end of the novel. She observes that, gradually, servants and maids become less subordinated to family members either socially or literarily as they rise to a prominence of their own. We are witnesses to "the pathos of social disorder" (Wagner: 1985: 281). It cannot be disputed that Cao Xue Qin gives much attention to some of the servile characters in the narrative and that Bao-yu, at least, is described as

> a child . . . whom nature endowed with the eccentric obtuseness of a simpleton. Brothers, sisters, cousins, were all one to him. In his relationships with people he made no distinction between one person and another. (Vol. 1: 124)

But Bao-yu's failure to recognize social hierarchy is offered as just another example of his eccentric nature, an unusual trait that isolates him from others in the family. This strange trait, coupled with his resistance to change while virtually everything around him experiences change, emphasizes or exaggerates his solitary, singular nature and, in so doing, reinforces his identity as the "misfit stone" who was not integrated into the architecture of the Dome of Heaven.

There seems to be little to argue for the larger breakdown of Confucian role hierarchy in the narrative, and the disintegration of the garden is better understood as a collision between encroaching mutability and the urge to escape it. This contrast is witnessed, as I have pointed out, on three levels within the novel: the mortal and immortal worlds; the family compound and the garden within it; and the relationship between Jia Zheng and Bao-yu. To assert, as Wagner does, that in *Dream of the Red Chamber* "apparent duality is essentially a unity" (1985: 281) is therefore to deny what I am identifying as the text's defining energy and basic organizing principle. In *Dream of the Red Chamber* the pervasive change/stasis dualities I have emphasized are in fact dualities, and any attempt to resolve their tensions falls probably not to Cao Xue Qin, but more likely to Gao E. There has been a long-standing debate over the question of the supposed authorship of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Originally, the text appeared unfinished, in eighty chapters. Later, Gao E with Cheng Weiyuan published a complete one hundred and twenty chapter version, edited from a fragmentary manuscript. How much Gao E added to the text of the first eighty chapters is unknown. Recent studies argue for the single author theory, based on internal stylistic evidence (see especially Chan: 1986). This theory, however, does not account for some very curious turns of behavior and events and the incongruously rapid deterioration of key characters and the Jia family in general. John Minford (1982) indicates that there is obviously "something missing" from the concluding forty chapters, and he assigns authorship to both Cao Xue Qin and Gao E.

That the garden should be consumed is not surprising and is fully in keeping with Cao's apparent designs. But Bao-yu posed a special problem for the editor and/or author of the final chapters. To be consistent with the pattern of change established during the narrative--that nothing that shares in life may avoid change--Cao or Gao not only bestows on Bao-yu an unseemly amount of loss and sorrow in the last chapters, but also creates in him an oddly abrupt impulse to apply himself to rigorous study in preparation for the Examinations, immediately prior to his return to the Great Void.

After Bao-yu finishes seventh overall in the Examinations, Jia Zheng is overjoyed--Boa-yu has finally yielded, and in high fashion. At the last moment before he leaves this world, "his earthly obligations fulfilled," Bao-yu encounters his father and kowtows four times before him. Such achievement and piety are inconsistent with the chartacter of Bao-yu (and stone) as developed over the first one hundred chapters. This final reconciliation of antagonisms Gao E evidently saw to be his principal task in polishing the work--or Cao Xue Qin decided finally to harmonize some clearly dissonant elements rather hastily. Bao-yu's retreat from this world, accompanied by the two immortals, also fulfills his urge for reclusiveness, witnessed throughout the text--and made possible (as I believe it likely would be if indeed Cao Xue Qin had finished the work) only by finally extricating himself completely from existence in this world. The change/stasis conflict between father and son is resolved, then, by realizing the fulfillment of both opposing forces: change, and freedom from change.

NOTES

[1] The unabridged *Hung-lou Meng* extends well beyond two thousand pages. The highly-acclaimed unabridged translation into English by David Hawkes and John Minford is available under the alternative title *The Story of the Stone*.

REFERENCES

Bonner, Joey. 1976. Yu Ping-po and the Literary Dimension of the Controversy over *Hung-lou Meng*. *China Quarterly* 67: 546-81.

Cao Xue Qin. 1973-82. *The Story of the Stone*. 5 vols. Trans. David Hawkes and John Minford. New York: Penguin.

Chan, Bing C. 1986. A Computerized Stylostatistical Approach to the Disputed Authorship of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Tamkang Review* 16: 247-78.

Chen, Li Fu. 1986. *The Confucian Way: A New and Systematic Study of the Four Books*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hsia, C.T. 1963. Love and Compassion in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Criticisms* 5: 261-71.

Hsu Min. 1963. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and Its Author. *Peking Review* 43: 25-28.

Liu, Chi Hui. 1984. The Themes of Renunciation in *The Dream of the Red Chamber, Le Rouge et le Noir* and *Jude the Obscure*: An East-West Comparative Study of Literary Themes and Techniques. *Fu Jen Studies* 17: 1-18.

Mote, Frederick W. 1971. *Intellectual Foundations of China.* New York: Knopf.

Plaks, Andrew H. 1977. Allegory in *Hsi-Yu Chi* and *Hung-lou Meng. Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays.* Princeton: Princeton UP.

- - - . 1976. *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber.* Princeton: Princeton UP.

Wagner, Marsha L. 1985. "Maids and Servants in *Dream of the Red Chamber*: Individuality and the Social Order. *Expressions of the Self in Chinese Literature.* Ed. Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney. New York: Columbia UP: 251-81.

Waley, Arthur, trans. 1938. *The Analects of Confucius.* London: Allen and Unwin.

Yu Ying-Shih. 1974. The Two Worlds of *Hung-lou Meng.* Trans. Diana Yu. *Renditions* 2: 5-21.

DECONSTRUCTING ORDER, CONSTRUCTING ORDERS OUT OF CHAOS: The work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Chaos Theory, and the Female Body

Raylene L. O'Callaghan
Simmons College

Susan Suleiman's seminal essay, "Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*" (1977), was the first to offer what she came to call a "feminist deconstructive" approach to the "obvious provocative aggression of the erotic content of Robbe-Grillet's novels" (1990: 51). Suleiman reads Robbe-Grillet as "the combination of the thematics of erotic violence"--rape, mutilation of female genitals, necrophilia, medical experimentation on young girls, ritual sacrifice--with a "poetics of anti-realist transgression" (1977: 13). Ricardou (1967) had argued that the pre-text of Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970) was the penetration of the door with complex and precise patterns on its imitation wood panels of the opening description, or again the word *rouge*/the color red. For Suleiman (1977), the generator of the text is rather the anatomical drawing/representation of the precise and complicated forms of the female genital organs that figures on a white page toward the end of the novel. The thematics of aggression like the ritualism and theatricality that also characterize the work are, for her, at once aspects of the subversive intent of the avant garde text and a textual violation of the mother's sexual parts in a masculine fantasy of self-generation and a will to power.

Suleiman's reflections on reading Robbe-Grillet support my own thesis that the powerful deconstructing impulse at work in Robbe-Grillet's text is rendered problematic by the subjective choices and limitations of the content or material that the text puts into play. Moreover, behind the masterful and carefully controlled *mise en scène* of the factitious conventions of the traditional novel and of the imprisoning commonplaces (*lieux communs*) that direct our readings of the world, there is a strong and intimate sense of imminent threat. Vesuvius, part of the play of the recursive "V" in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976), intertextual borrowing from Jensen's *Gradiva* as it served as generator for Freud's interpretation of dreams (1949), is conventionally a metaphor for the eruption of hidden violence and apocalypse. In Robbe-Grillet's text, this ready-made generator is part of a proliferating series of sexualized elements that evoke the violation of the immobilized female body (young and beautiful for eternity) and death. Yet the volcano and the