

THE PROBLEM OF BEING IN A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS

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Victor Hugo claimed: Men live, and things exist. That is to say, human existence *is* not, and should not be, akin to the existence of things which are merely here or there. Instead, human beings actively live, and should live actively. Yet, what does it mean that human beings live? Martin Heidegger insisted that human beings do not just occur in the world along other kinds of beings; instead, in their very existence, their existence become an issue and concern for them; human beings are self-conscious beings. Heidegger dubbed the human being as “*Dasein*”, which means being there. He saw the human being to be an agent whose agency structure includes self-consciousness. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that human beings must not exist in the mode of being-in-itself, but should be in the mode of being-for-itself; in life, we must not practice bad faith. For Sartre, the human being is a being of no-thingness. These thinkers all hold that human existence must not be a thing-like existence. Living, what a burden for humanity! Human living must not be thing-like existence, what a requirement!

Cao Xueqin’s *A Dream of Red Mansions* is, to rephrase the Chinese scholar Zhou Ruhang (周汝昌), a work of philosophy of humankind’s living.¹ That is to say, it is a philosophical work of the Being of human existence. The word “Being” with a capital letter here is distinguished from the word “being” in low case. The former refers to what makes an existence meaningful and real, while the latter means existence. Thus, to claim that *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a work of *the Being* of human living is to claim that it is of *that which* makes human living meaningful and intelligible. Wang Guowei (王国维) also claimed *A Dream of Red Mansions* to be a work of metaphysics.² By metaphysics, Wang meant the philosophical discipline that is of *the Being* of humanity and human existence. That is to say, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a work of metaphysics of *the Being* of humankind. Qu Qixiang (吕启祥) indicates that because *A Dream of Red Mansions* explores “the human soul, human experience, the meaning of human nature, and the meaning of human living”, it therefore can become the spiritual home of modern men and women.”³

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¹ Ruchang Zhou, *The Artistic Charm of A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing, China: Writers’ Publishing House, 2006), p.243.

² Guowei Wang, *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, in *Great Masters’ Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* (Changchun, China: The Time Art Publishing House, 2008):2–39, 30.

³ Qixiang Lv (吕启祥), *Searching for A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publisher, 2005), p.5.

It is often said that of the four Chinese literature classics, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is of human feeling (*qing*), *The History of the Three Kingdoms* is about human struggle for political power (*zheng*), *The Story of Water Marsh* is on human bond based on the idea of righteousness (*yi*), and *Journey to the West* is concerned with human awakening and enlightenment (*wu*). As I shall understand it, *A Dream of Red Mansions* examines all those phenomena of human existence and invites readers to reflect the essence, meaning and reality of them and therefore the meaning and purpose of human existence and the *Being* of humanity. For this reason, “Though centuries pass and history, and the waves of history have washed away countless heroes, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which Cao Xueqin had written with the blood and tear (of his heart) and with 10 years’ time, is not buried by ages, but has a more and more powerful life force in the hearts of millions of people today.”⁴

One novel, one classics, and one paradigm of human living! One novel, one classics, and one paradigm of human awakening and enlightenment!

I.

Shakespeare’s question, “To be or not to be”, remains an immortal human question. That being said, for human beings, there is not just the metaphysical question of what is to be, but also the ethical question of how ought to be in both Eastern and Western philosophies alike. All these questions return us basic to the question of the Being of humanity and human existence.

The philosophy of *the Being* of humanity in *A Dream of Red Mansions* epitomizes traditional Chinese philosophies of humanity—from the *Yin-Yang* metaphysics to the Five-agent metaphysics, from Confucianism, through Daoism, to Buddhism, and from ancient to modern. It synthesizes the metaphysical, ethical, moral, and political insights into humanity from all of these philosophies. This should not be a surprise. The novel itself can be counted as an encyclopedia of Chinese philosophies of humanity, not just a summit of Chinese literature.

The concept of *the Being* of humanity is not just a metaphysical, ethical, moral or political concept. It is a comprehensive one. The human being is a comprehensive being that is metaphysical, ethical, moral, and political and that is natural, cultural, social and political. *The Being* of the human being that makes the human being be human being is thus comprehensive. The term “humanity” connotes not just a quality, but also a species of being, and an agency or agent-entity. Thus, what is *the Being* of humanity that indicate that human ought to live, not just merely to exist akin to things? What does the concept “human living” connote?

Not surprisingly, the range of subject-matters are explored is wide. It covers themes of humanity including fate, human nature, human existential interests, human seven dispositions and six desires, mind, body, identity, love, happiness, duty, obligation, task, subject, object, situation, authenticity, substance, origin, home, belonging, causality, necessity, contingency, freedom, virtue, laws of existence, social

⁴ Jiang Heshen, *Essays on A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2006), p.1.

norms (e.g., justice, prudence), enlightenment, truth, falsity, absurdity, illusion, alienation, self-knowledge, self-deception, sentiment of being, good life, happy life, wise life, social role, essence and existence, human and the world, person and society, self and the other, culture and nature, the poetic and the worldly, the transcendent and the immanent, and so on.

Liu Zaifu (刘再复) points out the difference between questions in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and questions in the classical Chinese play “*The Peach Blossom Fan* (桃花扇)” as follows: The questions in the former are metaphysical, while questions in the latter are historical and sociological.⁵ For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, “it is asked: Do all those worldly things (including social ranks, wealth, physical pleasures, and likewise) which we consider to be “good” and which everyone is preoccupied with and lives for constitute the substance of the world or the substance of the world is ‘emptiness’?”⁶ By metaphysical, Liu means philosophical. Metaphysical questions in Liu’s sense include ontological, ethical, moral and political questions. Equally crucial, as Liu argues, the horizon of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the horizon of cosmos, not family or nation-state. That is to say, Cao in *A Dream of Red Mansions* asked questions from a world outlook that has a horizon of the cosmos.

Wang Meng (王蒙) also points out that the enquiry of humanity and human existence in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is philosophical. For example, he points out:

Rising and falling, thriving and declining, order and chaos, flourishing and drowning, these are themes that are central in Chinese classics ... *A Dream of Red Mansions* explores these themes philosophically, and investigates the laws of existence that governs rising and falling, thriving and declining, order and chaos, flourishing and drowning of a being. Thus, it indicates, as expressed in old Chinese sayings, “when thriving arrives at its limit, declining follows”, “when rising arrives at its limit, falling occurs”, “the moon waxes only to wane”, “water brims only to flow”. In the text when Qin Keqing appeared in Wang Xifeng’s dream before Qin died, Qin warned Wang of the fact that “Our house has enjoyed nearly a century of dazzling success. Suppose one day “joy at its height engenders sorrow” and suppose that “when the tree falls, monkeys scatter”.⁷

As Wang Meng sees it, through his protagonist Qin Keqing, Cao explored philosophically the law of rising and falling, thriving and declining, order and chaos, flourishing and drowning of a community or persons. For Wang, Cao’s other thoughts of love, fate, freedom, fame, social status and so on are all philosophical.

Liu’s and Wang’s observation have insight and textual basis in the novel. Thus, for example, the Daoist Master of Emptiness of Emptiness asked some questions of human existence as follows in Chapter 1:

⁵ Zaifu Liu, *Understanding A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing, China: Shanlian Publishing House, 2006), pp.125-126.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁷ Meng Wang, *Wang Meng’s Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing: Writers’ Publishing House, 2005), .182.

All men aspire to be an immortal.
 To become so they will stop at nothing to have fame and social rank.
 But where those famous persons in history now?
 They lay in grassy graves in the same way as everyone else.

All men aspire to be an immortal.
 Day and night they labor to cumulate wealth and become rich.
 Now what become of them when they have all the money and wealth?
 They die with eyes closed and two legs stretched like everyone else.

All men aspire to be an immortal.
 To become so they lavishly dote on their loving wives,
 Who in turn swear to love their husband forever.
 Alas, their wives remarry as soon as they die.

All men aspire to be an immortal.
 To become so they indulge their sons and grandsons all times.
 Although devoting and single-minded loving parents can be found
 everywhere,
 Whoever sees a single filial son or grandson?⁸

The questions above are *the being of an immortal*. Or they are questions of what is the human being akin to the being of an immortal. What is happy human living? What is the purpose and meaning of human living? Are all those worldly things such as fames, power, social rank, wealth, and family that we devote our life to pursue as real and substantial as they are thought to be? As I shall understand it, they are also question of human enlightenment. How ought one to live with wisdom and enlightenment in order to be truly happy? That is the question.

By the same token, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it is often asked where one is from, and where one is going. These questions are not empirical questions of whether one is from Beijing or from Shanghai and whether one is going to Beijing or Shanghai. But metaphysical question of where is one's home and where is one's destiny of existence. Notwithstanding, there are direct philosophical questions of human existence and humanity. For example, in Chapter 5, it is asked, "At the dawn of creation, who sowed the seed of love?"⁹ It is also asked whether Bao-Dai love is a matter of fate.¹⁰ Whether in general love between a man and a woman is fated? What is fate? What is *karma*? And so on. In short, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the questions of humanity and human existence are philosophical and part of the general question of *the Being* of humanity and human existence. So are their answers or approaches to them.

In turn, the questions in *A Dream of Red Mansions* that the objects of inquiry in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are not the same as in other Chinese classical literatures.

⁸ Cao Xueqin, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1982), 17/ch.1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84/ch.5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Instead, the objects of inquiry in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are philosophical. They are constitutive of the Being of humanity and human existence. For example, the novel tells a tragic story of Bao-Dai love, and there is no question that in it Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu are its two illustrating protagonists, and their love story is the object of narrative. Yet, we will not appreciate the profound meaning of the story if we think that the love story is the main object of enquiry in the novel. If one compares Cao's *A Dream of Red Mansions* to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* here, one can say that reading *Les Misérables*, one reads Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Marx, reading *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one reads Confucius, Mencius, Lao Zi, Zhuang Zi, Cicero, Wang Yangming, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus.

In the novel, protagonists, events, and states of affairs are all to illustrate particular philosophical ideas. The Buddhist master of Infinite Space and the Daoist Master of Immortal Time are to illustrate the doctrines of contingency, and the law of *wu ji bi fan* (extremity produces self-destruction). The story that Goddess Nu Wa melted stones to amend the sky is a combination of the traditional Chinese theory of creation and the Confucian concept of the purpose of a person's existence—that is, cultivating the self to serve the world and public good as epitomized in the Confucian motto: Cultivating the self (修身), regulating the family (齐家), assisting to put the country into order (治国) and assisting to bring peace to the world (平天下). Lin Daiyu taught about poetic existence, and true love that can break metal and tears apart stone (断金裂石). She also explored the subject-matters of contingency, inconstancy, creativity, self, the other, the world, being-for-itself, being-in-itself, home, Zen mind, and happiness.

Jia Baoyu taught about the conflict between Confucianism on the one side and Buddhism/Daoism on the other side, and the philosophical discourses of human desires, human dispositions, self, the other, world, being-for-itself, being-in-itself, freedom, home, enlightenment, Zen mind, and happiness. Xue Baochai and Shi Xiangyun led readers to meditate on humanity, love, marriage, friendship, family, self, the other, yin-yang, the five-agent metaphysics, society, social role, creativity, toleration, the world, and the broad, great, refined, and profound horizon of being. Jia Yuanchun illustrated the matters of inconstancy of being, the law of *wu ji bi fan*, contingency, and nobility of being, social role, and happiness. Qin Keqing taught about the law of *wu ji bi fan* (extremity produces self-destruction), true love, sexual desires, and yin-yang and five-agent metaphysics. Qing Wen, YuanYang, and SiQi speak of freedom, equality, true love, loyalty, and personal dignity. Jia Yucun taught about individual inauthenticity and alienation.

Meanwhile, in the novel, there are direct, rich, profound philosophical discussions. For example, in Chapter 1, the Buddhist and Daoist Master lecture to the Stone about the world and about humanity, as well as Zhen Shiyin's interpretation of the song, "All good things will end". In Chapter 2, Jia Yucun's length discussion of human nature. In Chapter 5, Goddess Disenchantment's lecture on human desires to Jia Baoyu. More examples include: Qin Keqing and Wang Xifeng's discussion of the law of *wu ji bi fan* in Chapter 13; Jia Yuanchun's reflection on happiness, family,

love, power, and social status in Chapter 18; Jia Baoyu and Xi Ren' discussion of the distinction between human beings and things in Chapter 19; Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, Xue Bao Chai, and Shi Xiangyun' discussion of Zen metaphysics, Zen mind, and Zen enlightenment in Chapter 22; Shi Xiangyun and her maid-servant Lou Chui' conversation of the yin-yang metaphysics in Chapter 31; Ping Er's lecture about philosophical lecture about in Chapter 61, Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu's philosophizing over contingency and Zen mind in Chapter 91; and Jia Baoyu and Xue Baochai' husband-wife dialogue of innocent heart-mind in Chapter 118. These philosophical discussions not only add color and bring style to the novel, but also enrich the substance of the novel.

The novel also is also full of rich, profound, and direct philosophical claims on, mottoes and wisdom of human existence. For example, it is claimed that "when the false is taken as the true, the true becomes false; when non-being is taken as being, being is taken as non-being". It is also claimed that "the moon waxes only to wane, water brims only to flow"; "the higher the climb, the harder the fall"; "when one reaches the limit of suffering, one will arrive at happiness; the extremity of suffering will lead to happiness"; "glory and disgrace turn into one another in endless circles ever since the immortal time"; "even the grandest banquet will end." These claims, mottoes and wisdoms are of the objective laws of human existence, not of some empirical or historical facts. They are of universal laws of human existence, not just of particular, cultural reality.

In the beginning of Chapter 1, the Buddhist master and the Daoist master lectured the Stone that requested them to bring it to the Mundane world to enjoy some worldly pleasures as follows:

The mundane world indeed has quite amusing things and pleasures> But, first, things in the world and worldly pleasures come and go, and cannot last. Second, what is beautiful is always imperfect, and what is good always travels an uneven path. Third, when happiness reaches its limit, calamity arises, people and things change constantly. Therefore, at the end, your worldly experience will amount to nothing but a dream.¹¹

In the lecture, the two masters point out three truths of human existence: (1) inconstancy in human existence; (2) human existence is an enduring struggle; and (3) the law of existence that extremity produces self-destruction.

In Chapter 2, Jia Yucun puts forth a radical theory of human nature that consists of two basic tenets: (1) human beings fall into three categories: (a) the exceptionally good; (b) the exceptionally bad; and (c) both equally good and bad; and (2) a person's human nature is crucially determined by the time when s/he is born. The exceptionally good are born according to the (year) number of "yun (运)", good number¹²; the exceptionally bad are born in the years and times of "jie (劫)", bad

¹¹ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), 2-3/ch.1.

¹² THE CONCEPT of "yun (运)": According to Shao Yong (邵雍), the mathematician of Chinese Sung dynasty, 30 years constitute one generation; 12 generations constitute one "yun"; 30

number.¹³ Exceptionally good persons embody the best “*chi*” (气 energy) of the universe, as well as the righteous *Chi* of the universe. The exceptionally bad embody the bad “*chi*” of the universe.¹⁴

In Chapter 13, Qin Keqing lectured on Wang Xifeng: “the moon waxes only to wane, water brims only to flow”; it is said, ‘The higher the climb, the harder the fall’; our family has now enjoyed nearly a century of dazzling prosperity. If on one day joy arrives at its limit and turns into sorrow, then, as said in a proverb, “When the tree falls, the monkey scatter”, will not this make a mockery of our family as one of cultured, Aristocratic families?... The limit of adversity is the beginning of prosperity, and vice versa.”¹⁵

Moreover, in the novel, various symbols are used philosophically too. For example, Chrysanthemum is used to symbolize the proud bone and pure heart of the authentic. Peach alludes to the vulgarity and vanity of the inauthentic. Peony symbolizes beauty, nobility, and persistency (of a self). Plum refers metaphorically to inconstancy and inconsistency (of a self). And fireworks suggest inconstancy of glory and impermanence. Various trinities conveys the metaphysical idea that everything has a necessary and a dimension. These symbols bring perceptions, images and material embodiments of philosophical ideas.

With regard to the philosophical vision of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Liu Zaifu insists that “The perspective of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is not a mundane one, but a transcendent one. A transcendent perspective is that which transcends worldly laws (e.g., mundane utilitarian rules, mundane rule of causality, etc.). The way of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is not a utilitarian one that is oriented to pursue worldly success and purposive, but aesthetic one.”¹⁶ He further insists that what demarcates *A Dream of Red Mansions* from *The Peach Blossom Fan* is that the vision of *The Peach Blossom Fan* is a family-nation-state centered one, while the vision of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is one of the cosmos.”¹⁷ Liu’s observation is suggestive and instructive. That being said, we do not need to mystify the philosophical vision of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. That is to say, in a final analysis, the vision of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is philosophical, not historical, sociological, or aesthetical. It is a philosophical vision that fuses the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist visions, while not reducible to either of the three. It is thus transcendent, critical, and liberating.

In summary, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a classic because its thoughts are profound. Its thoughts are profound in the sense that they are *philosophically*

“yun” constitute a “hui” (会 circle, combination); 12 hui” constitute a “Yuan (元)”. Ibid, footnote #2, 29/ch.2.

¹³ The concept “Jie” is a Buddhist concept. It is a name for a particular period wherein the universe destroys itself and re-starts again. According to Buddhism, every ten-thousand years, the universe will destroy itself and re-starts again. This period in which the universe will move from self-destruction to rebirth is called “jie.”

¹⁴ Ibid, 29-31/ch.2.

¹⁵ Ibid. 169/ch.13.

¹⁶ Liu, *Understanding A Dream of Red Mansions*, p.147.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.109.

profound. Its thoughts are philosophically profound not only because they imbibe the blood of its author's heart, but also because they have the insights of the author's mind.

II

Liu Zaifu suggests that the basic philosophical question of humanity in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the same as that in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: that is, once one is aware of the fact that death is inevitable, how one ought to live one's life?¹⁸ For Liu, the difference lies only in answers. For him, while the answer in *Being and Time* is from an existential perspective, it is from the aesthetic perspective in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Admittedly, the central question of human existence in *A Dream of Red Mansions* share common points with the question in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It is ontological question of how to demarcate human existence from thing-like existence. It is ontological question of the meaning of human living. It is ontological question of what is agency and in what sense humans ought to live as agents and are meant to live as agents. Still, there is a difference between Heidegger's question and Cao's question in focus, content, and scope.

In my view, the central question in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is as follows: How ought a person to take hold of one's existence amid fate? That is, how ought one to take hold of one's fate as a self? How a family ought to take hold of its fate? How a nation-state ought to take hold of its fate? This is the question that is pressed throughout the novel, and also the basic question from which other questions of humanity and human existence are raised. This is also the question that is asked for the sake of enquiry into the Being of humanity and human existence. While Heidegger's question is from the perspective of the human being as the being in time, Cao's question is from the perspective that the human being is the being with fate, purpose.

Core difference exists between Cao's question and Heidegger's. In content, Heidegger's question is how to recover one's lost self in the world once the imminence of death awakes one up. Cao's question is about how to take hold of one's existence. Cao's question itself consists of a set of conceptual and normative subdivision questions of fate, meaning, value, and purpose of one's existence, causality of thought, choice, and action, the relationships between necessity and contingency, between human freedom and laws of existence, and so on. Heidegger's question is how to rise above the seductive world. Cao's question is how to appreciate the weight of existence, to be competent in existence, and to bear one's responsibility for one's fate.

The difference here is not that Heidegger answered his question from an existential perspective, while Cao answered his from an aesthetic perspective. The difference lies in Heidegger's question is one from the ontological, as well as existential, perspective of *Dasein*, while Cao's is from the metaphysical, ethical-moral perspective a person as an Aristotelian self. The difference lies in that

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 208.

Heidegger answered his question from the point of view of existentialism while Cao allowed Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism compete to answer the question without an adjudication of which answer is better. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger paid only lip service to the concept of fate and defined fate as “authentic historicity”. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the concept of death does not play much role in ontological, ethical, and moral understanding. Instead, the concept of fate is central.

All the same, Heidegger’s question in *Being and Time* enthrones existentialism as the philosophy queen, while Cao’s question in *A Dream of Red Mansions* unfolds the drama of the struggle among Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Cao’s *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* share a core, common philosophical question of humanity and human existence: How to live one’s life so that one lives as a being-for-itself, instead of existing merely as a being-in-itself? As Sartre sees it, a being-for-itself is self-conscious and its self-consciousness exhibits the following salient features: (1) it is capable of asking, and indeed asking, questions about the meaning, value, and purpose of its existence, better yet about its essence and substance; (2) it lives for self-realization; and (3) it has an overarching plan for its own existence. In comparison, a being-in-itself is a thing-like being that is not self-conscious. A chair has no self-consciousness. It cannot, and does not, ask questions of its own meaning, value, and purpose of existence. It does not live to realize itself. It does not have an overarching plan for its own existence.

Noteworthy, the title of *Being and Nothingness* underscores Sartre’s concept that the human being ought to live as a consciousness, not a thing-like being. Cao’s *A Dream of Red Mansions* emphasizes the same idea. Its question of how ought one to take hold of one’s fate emphasizes that each protagonist is not a thing. And in the novel, the question for each of the illustrative protagonists is understood differently. Thus, for example, for Lin Daiyu, it is whether it is possible, and how to pursue poetic love. For Xue Baochai, it is how to have true and stable spousal love. For Shi Xiangyun, it is how to find a soul-mate. Even maid-servants such as Qing Wen, and Xi Ren not only dared to insist their human equality in front of their master Jia Baoyu, but also engaged in some spirited philosophical discussions with their master Jia Baoyu about the distinction between persons and things.

Moreover, in the novel, each of its protagonists came to the mundane world with a *karmic* destiny. For example, Jia Baoyu was to search for enlightenment through traveling through world pleasures and sufferings. Lin Daiyu was to come to the mundane world to live a love of tear, breaking metals and tearing apart stones. Shi Xiangyun’s journey to the world was one of searching for soul-mate. Jia Yuanchun came to the world to reveal the inconstancy, contingency, and metaphysical emptiness of power, wealth, social rank, and world prosperity and pleasures.

That being said, Sartre’s question is merely an ontological question. It is about in what sense one really lives as a being-for-itself. Sartre claimed that in *Being and Nothingness*, he is not concerned with ethical issues and do not do ethics. Cao’s question is comprehensive. It is about the essence and substance of a being-for-itself. It is also the question of what is happiness, and what is a worth life. It is further a question of responsibility, duty, and obligation. Both Sartre’s question and Cao’s

question lead to a sub-division question of individual authenticity. But Sartre's question of authenticity is merely ontological and existential, while Cao's question is comprehensive—metaphysical, ontological, existential, ethical, and moral.

Cao claimed in *A Dream of Red Mansions* that love (*qing*) between man and woman is the central theme and focus of its novel. He made no bone that the Bao-Dai-Chai love triangle is the central thread of the novel either. At the outset of the novel, "Various love-souls are incarnated and sent down into the world to take part in the great illusion of human life."¹⁹ As mentioned above, there are various philosophical questions of love in the novel too. For example, how did love come to existence and what is its origin? "At the dawn of creation, who sowed the seed of love?"²⁰ Is love between man and woman fated? What is love? Is love between man and woman identical to their physical intimacy? And so on. Various writers thus have a reason to believe that the basic philosophical question in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is what love is.

That being said, various questions of love between man and woman are part of the general question of how ought one to live one's life amid fate. The questions of love are the introductory questions in Cao's general inquiry into the *Being* of humanity and human existence the same as the inquiry of *Dasein* is Heidegger's gateway into the general inquiry into *Being* or the subject-matter of *Being*. This does not mean that the question of love has only instrumental value. Instead, it is that they are part of a broad, general question of humanity and human existence. For example, various questions of love are intended to explore and explain the source of human suffering and to search for the way of human enlightenment and happiness. That is to say, to explore the matter of love is to explore the source of suffering and the way of happiness. It is also to explore human nature and how does love between man and woman reveal to readers what is human nature.

A repeatedly asked question in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is human enlightenment. To a great extent, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a philosophical masterpiece of human awakening and enlightenment and it is part and parcel of the novel to teach about human enlightenment. While Bao-Dai love is doubtless a central thread of the novel, another central thread should be the stone-jade-stone journey: that is, the stone was transformed into a jade which in the end returned to be a stone again. This central thread is underscored by the fact that another title for the novel is *The Story of the Stone* (《石头记》) the journey is one of searching for human enlightenment. That being said, the key to human enlightenment is an enlightened answer the question of how best to take hold of one's own existence amid fate. S/he who searches for enlightenment is the one who searches to take hold of his/her own existence amid fate.

In summary, to live authentically, ethically, wisely, enlightenedly, and happily, or to live inauthentically, unethically, unwisely, ignorantly, and unhappily, that is the

¹⁹ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, (1982), 8/ch.1.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 84/4.

question of humanity in *A Dream of Red Mansions*! That is the content of the question of how one ought to live one's life amid fate in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

III

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the ethical question of how one ought to live one's life amid fate is mingled with the ontological question of the structure of agency. The ethical question of how to be happy is associated with the metaphysical questions of self, consciousness, home, fate, and the law of existence. Among those explored themes in the novel include, but are not limited to the themes of a consciousness, fate, contingency and inconstancy, authenticity and alienation, self and other, existential competence, and home.

Thus, *A Dream of Red Mansions* brings us to Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. It brings us to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard.

1. Consciousness and self-consciousness

The human question, in Shakespeare's immortal line "to be or not to be", is first of all the question "to be a consciousness or a thing" in human existence. Thus, a core philosophical theme in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is that human beings must exist as consciousness, as Sartre would argue, not exist akin to things. For human beings, their very existence is an issue for them. Their *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*), their existentiality and their forfeiture should constantly be reflected by them. While to exist is to struggle enduringly, such a struggle is first of all waged in the soul. Sartre insisted that subjectivity is the starting point of human living. We can also add here that the soul is the battle field of human living.

Hugo claimed, "There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior of the soul."²¹ We can add here the Confucian motto that the horizon of one's mind (soul) determines the level of one's living (existence); the greater the interior of one's mind, the greater one's being is, and can be. That is to say, human beings are consciousness and live as consciousness. This idea is emphasized in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the beginning to the end.

Liu observes, "We can read *A Dream of Red Mansions* as a work of 'dialogues between souls' and 'debates between souls'".²² Liu is right. First, in the novel, Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, Shi Xiangyun, Jia Yuanchun, Jia Tanchun and various other protagonists all live as self-conscious consciousness. To be sure, among 500 some characters which the novel creates, some protagonists are examples of inauthenticity and alienations. Still, the emphasis of the novel is that human beings are consciousness, not just things in the world. Second, in the novel, for different protagonists, in their existence, their beings become issues and concerns for them. Lin Daiyu's search for poetic love, existence and belonging, Jia Baoyu's search for

²¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (London: Wordsworth, 1994), Vol.1, p. 148.

²² Liu, *Understanding A Dream of Red Mansions*, p.182.

enlightenment, Xie Baochai's search for family and marriage, Shi Xiangyun's search for soul-mate and belong, Jia YunChun's quest for happiness and love and so on all indicate that for these protagonists, in existence, their existences become issues and concerns for them.

In Chapter 27, Lin Daiyu expressed her self-consciousness of her being in the beautiful "Song of Burying Flowers" as follows:

As blossoms fade and fly cross the sky,
Who pities the faded red and the handicapped fragrance?
Softly the gossamer floats over spring pavilions,
Gently the willow fluff wafts to embroidered screen.

A young lady in chamber mourns the passing of spring,
No relief from anxiety her poor heart knows.
Rake in hand she steps through her portal,
Loath to tread on the blossom as it comes and goes.

...

Each year for three hundred and six days,
The wind-knives and frost-swords threaten hard,
How long can the beauty of flowers stay fresh and fair?
Once drifted away, no traces can be found.

Bloom, flowers are easily seen, but fallen, difficult to find,
The one who wants to bury them cannot help having an aching heart.
Alone, her home in hand, her tears falls,
Her tears drop on bare bough with bloody sign.

...

What causes my two-fold anguish?
Love for spring and resentment of spring;
For suddenly it comes and suddenly goes
Its arrival unheralded, noiseless its departing.

...

I long to take wing and fly,
With the flowers to the Earth's utter most bound.
And yet at earth's uttermost bound
Where can a fragrant burial mound found?
(Similar question: where is one's final home? Note: the question itself indicates that everything is contingent)

Better shroud the fair petals in silk,
With clean earth for their out attire;
I come as a pure substance, and I will leave as a pure substance,
Not sink into some foul ditch or mire.²³

²³ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), 382-383/ch.27.

In the song, Lin Daiyu's self-consciousness—her anxiety, her anguish, her forlornness and her despair, to borrow some expressions of Sartre, was vividly expressed. She was aware of four aspects of her existential situation: (1) her being was a timely being; (2) her existence is an enduring struggle; (3) her aspiration to be authentic; that is to say, “to come as a pure substance and to leave as a pure substance; and (4) struggle and task to find her home. Needless to say, as a poetic consciousness, Lin Daiyu saw the world and her existence from a poetic perspective, just as a pragmatic consciousness, Xue Baochai saw the world and her existence from a pragmatist perspective and as a pragmatic consciousness, Shi Xiangyun saw the world and her existence from a romantic perspective.

Even those who were in humble social positions—for example, Xi Ren, Qing Wen, and Yuan Yang—had a strong sense of the distinction between themselves and things. Thus, in Chapter 19, Jia Baoyu and her maidservant Xi Ren philosophized on the distinction between humans and things and Xi Ren insisted that she is not a thing.²⁴ In Chapter 31, Jia Baoyu and her maidservant Qing Wen discussed that it was things for humans, not humans for things.²⁵ In the novel, while Qing Wen was totally loyal to her master Jia Baoyu, she did not give into Jia Baoyu in her struggle for equality of love and human dignity.

What is said above naturally returns us back to the question of what is a consciousness? What does it mean to live as a consciousness? Plato divided the human soul into three parts: the rational, the will (spirit), and desire. Does living as a consciousness mean living with a Platonic soul? Kant divided the mind into three faculties: understanding, practical reason (good will), and taste. Does living as a consciousness mean living with a Kantian mind? Husserl saw consciousness to consist of *noemata*, *noeses*, and *transcendent ego*. Does living as a consciousness mean living with a Husserlian consciousness? We know in Sartre, living as a consciousness is living as a being-for-itself. But what is required of living as a being-for-itself?

All the same, those souls had dialogues and debates because they were self-conscious souls. Their doubt, questions, and sentiments of being revealed that they were self-conscious, and are conscious of their *thrownness*, existentiality, and forfeiture, in Heidegger's terminology. Thus, Lin Daiyu was determined to “come as a pure substance, and leave as a pure substance”, Jia Baoyu and Xue Baochai would debate over self, humanity, social responsibility, and an authentic heart-mind akin to an infant baby, Shi Xiangyun would feel offended when she felt that Jia Baoyu valued Lin Daiyu's feeling more than hers. Even the servant-maid Qing Wen's mind was lofty far beyond her social status allowed and would debate her master Jia Baoyu when it came to the matters of human equality, love, and distinctions between things and persons.

Heidegger famously claimed the human being does not just occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being, this being is

²⁴ Ibid, 269/ch.19.

²⁵ Ibid, 434/ch.31.

concerned about its very being. This is illustrated by the protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

2. Fate and causality

The question, to be or not to be”, is further a question of how best to take hold of one’s fate in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Equally crucial, as discussed above, the basic philosophical question in the novel is how best to take hold of one’s existence amid the existence of fate. A core tenet of the novel is that fate is constitutive of human existence as gravity is constitutive of the cosmos. This tenet is also central in Chinese philosophies. Confucius famously asserted: “S/he who does not know her/his fate cannot be an authentic person.”²⁶ Mencius emphasized the distinction between right fate and wrong fate. Laozi and Zhuangzi associated right fate as returning to the *Dao*, and wrong fate as otherwise. Buddhism emphasizes *karma*. In contemporary existentialism, Heidegger spoke of fate as “authentic historicity”. Sartre identified fate with contingency.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, all protagonists faced their fates and in turn, from different aspects illustrate the concept of fate. The Bao-Dai love was fated and rooted in the Wood-Stone pledge. As I shall understand, Lin DaoYu was wood, and Jia Baoyu was earth (stone), and wood grew in earth and therefore their love was full of life. The Yu-Chai marriage was fated. Xue Baochai is gold, and Jia Baoyu was earth. Earth buried gold and thus their marriage was fated to be beautiful but imperfect. The Yu-Yun relationship was fated. Jia Baoyu was earth, and Shi Xiangyun was water. Water and earth together made a world.

In the novel, romantic passions and love-debts, girlish heartbreaks and male philandering, *karma* of amour—in short, all human feelings and desires are governed by fates. Indeed, as Cao claimed in the novel, “it is all a matter of fate!” No wonder, at the outset of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the question of fate is asked and pressed with a particular reference to the Bao-Dai love affair. The song “Vain Longing” has the following lines:

One is an immortal flower of the fairyland,
The other, a fairy, flawless jade.
If they are not predestined for one another,
Why have they met in the earthly life?
But if they are predestined for one another,
Why should their love end up with nothing?²⁷

In the song, through metaphors, it is asked whether there is *qi yuan* (a predestined lot) between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. It is asked: If there were no *qi yuan* between them, why would have they met in the earthly life? Conversely, if there were *qi yuan*

²⁶ Confucius, *The Essence and substance of Confucius*, in *Completed Works of Teachers*, vol.1, (Beijing, China.: Unity Publishing House, 1996), 20.3.

²⁷ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), 85/ch.5.

between them, why would have they ended up not getting married? In other words, the questions are: Is the love between Bao Yu and Dai Yu an accident or is it predestined to be? What is fate of love? Is the power of love so weak or is the fate of the Bao-Dai love so thin that the two lovers who love each other so deeply still can be nothing but “the moon in the water” or “the flower in the mirror” to one another?

In the novel, we read various literary metaphors of fate including: “the predestined lot for two persons to meet”, “the marvelous predestination that two persons meet and are together”, “*karma*; curse”, and “the work of cause and effect”. We also read such metaphors as “the allocation of amount of breath”, and “amount of good fortune; allocation of good fortune”. These metaphors bequeath us with both many conceptual and normative questions on the one hand and insight on the other hand. We read in the novel that in Confucianism, one’s character determines one’s fate; in Daoism, one’s disposition and desires determines one’s fate; in Buddhism, one’s thought determines one’s fate; but in all three philosophies, one’s horizon of mind determines one’s fate.

Fate, what a concept of humanity and human existence!

3. Contingency and inconstancy

The question, “to be or not to be”, is further a question of how best to face contingency and inconstancy of human existence. As *A Dream of Red Mansions* reads, “Like you, the flowerlike fair, the swift years akin to the water flow”; “The blossoms fall, the water flows, the glory of the spring is gone.”²⁸ In the novel, existence is not a totality of necessity, but has a contingent dimension. That is to say, existence contains also openness, uncertainty, and irregularity.

In Chapter 1 of the novel, the protagonists the Stone, the Plant, Zhen ShiYin, Jia Yucun, Jiao Xing, and Ying Lian all were introduced to contingency contingently. In contingency, the Stone was transformed from a useless thing into a romantic lover. In contingency, the Plant was transformed by the Stone-turned-Waiter’s care into an authentic, poetic lover who embodied the best essence of the universe. Neither the transformation of the Stone nor that of the Plant was part of the divine plan. Goddess Nu Wu who melted and abandoned the Stone as a useless stone did not anticipate the fate of the Stone changing from an abandoned object into a romantic lover. Even Goddess of Disenchantment who was in charge of the Palace where the Plant lived did not foresee the fate of the Plant changing from an emotionless plant into a poetic lover. Zhen ShiYin was led to see the color of contingency through a series of personal miseries—that is, a series of contingent but miserable events in his life, e.g., lost his daughter by accident, lost his home by accident, cheated and betrayed by his father-in-law accidentally, and met the Daoist master accidentally—in Chapter 1. Jia Yuanchun’s fate is characterized as “Sorrow of Contingency and Inconstancy” and its narrative is: “In the full flower of prosperity, once more come fatal contingency and

²⁸ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), 327/ch.23.

inconstancy. With both eyes widely opening, she bide all earthly things to cast aside.”²⁹

It is claimed at the outset of the novel that worldly things such as wealth, fame, power, glory, physical pleasures, love, family, and human relations all have a contingent and inconstant dimension. We have X, but we could have no X. What we will be tomorrow is nothing certain and fixed. Power, wealth, rank, and social status may be good. However, they come and go and one’s relation to them is determined contingently. Even good things such as love, friendship, trust, marriage, and true human relations are subject to change and contingency. Equally crucial, opposites can change into one another with contingencies. Thus, for example, “thriving and declining occur without regularity, happiness and calamity come from one another.”³⁰

Thus, in Chapter 1, the protagonist Zhen YiShing pointed out the contingency and inconstancy of human existence. He indicated the following:

Mean huts and empty halls,
where courtiers once paid daily calls;
Dead weeds and withered trees,
where were once with mirth and revelry alive.

Whilst cobwebs shroud the mansion’s gilded beams,
The cottage casement with choice muslin gleams.
While yet the rouge is fresh, the powder fragrant,
The raven locks turn white.

Yesterday, yellow clay received white bones,
today, red lanterns light the love-birds’ nest;
Men yesterday with gold and silver by the chest,
now turned beggars scorned and despised by all.

Yesterday one signed for a life cut short,
today it’s one’s turn to die.
No matter with what pains he schools his sons,
who knows if they will not turn to brigandary?

A pampered girl brought up in luxury
may slip into an ill-famed quarter.
Resentment at a low official rank
may lead to fetters and a felon’s shame.

In ragged coat one shivered yesterday,
today a purple robe one frowns upon.
All’s strife and tumult on the stage,
as one man ends his song the next man comes on.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 82-83.

³⁰ Yu Pingbo, *Explanation of the Heart of A Dream of Red Mansions* (China: Shanxi Normal University Press, 2005), p. 278.

To take strange parts as home,
Is folly past compared,
And all our labor in the end
Is nothing more than making clothes for someone else to wear.³¹

Zhen's narrative is that human existence is full of contingency and inconstancy and thus human living in his time is dreamy existence.

In Chapter 9, Lin Daiyu famously put forth six propositions to Jia Baoyu that brought the discussion of contingency and inconstancy in the novel to a new high. The context of the dialogue was Xue Baochai's unexpected distance from Jia Baoyu which made him anxious. After Lin Daiyu pointed out to Jia Baoyu that he was self-deluded, she put forth six propositions to Jia Baoyu. The propositions can be reconstructed as follows:

- 1) One desires X and one has X, how to live?
- 2) One desire X but one does not have X, how to live?
- 3) One desires X and one had X, but no longer does, how to live?
- 4) One desires X and one has X now, but not tomorrow, how to live?
- 5) One wants X, but one has X's opposite, Y, how to live?
- 6) One no longer wants X, but X comes to one unexpectedly, how to live?³²

Needless to say, Lin Daiyu's list of six contingent situations is not an exhausting or exclusive list, but a sample one. But the core claim is raised: How to live amid contingency? In short, *A Dream of Red Mansions* indicates that human existence may not be the totality of contingencies, it is full of contingency. How best to take hold of our existence and fate amid contingency and inconstancy? That is the question!

4. Authenticity and alienation

The question, "to be or not to be", is also a question of individual authenticity in existence. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Lin Daiyu was determined to "come as a pure substance and leave as a pure substance, not sink into some foul ditch or mire [of society] (质本洁来还洁去，强于污淖陷渠沟)"³³ Shi Xiangyun claimed, "Authentic wits enjoy life elegantly at will (是真名士自风流)." ³⁴ Xing Xiuyan would determine to remain aloof above her situation and hold to herself, having the spirit of red plum flower, "aloof, in ice and show its charm outspreads (浓淡由他冰雪中)." ³⁵ Needless to say, at the core of humans' question of their *Being* is their question of the authenticity of their beings. At the core of the issue of authenticity is

³¹ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, pp.18-19; cf Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes. (1973) London: Penguin, Vol.1, pp.64-65.

³² Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), p.1299.

³³ *Ibid*, 383/ch.27.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 684/ch.49.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 696/ch.50.

the distinction between the true and the false, or the real and the unreal. Alas, authenticity and alienation, self-knowledge and self-deception, self-aspiration and the gaze of society, sincerity and mask, what a merciless confrontation! How much human situations the line “When truth becomes falsity, falsity becomes truth; when the real appears to be unreal, the unreal appears as real (假作真时真亦假，无为有处有还无)” in *A Dream of Red Mansions* has summarized!

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, authenticity is not understood the sufficient condition for a good fate. It is nonetheless a necessary condition. An authentic person may not have a good fate; but the inauthentic always has a wrong, bad fate. In logic, it is not always the case that if the premise is false, then the conclusion is necessarily false even if valid reasoning exists. But is X is the necessary condition for Y, then when X is false, Y also false. A stronger claim can be made here: one must really exist first in order to have a fate, right or wrong alike. If one does not really exist, the issue of right fate or wrong fate does not exist. Nothing good or bad can come out of a self that does not exist. A person must really “be” first in order to be happy, free, and good. Reality is the first virtue of a person's existence.

Another core issue of authenticity is self-definition. Of this we can learn something from the art-centered notion of authenticity here. Lionel Trilling tells us:

The artist seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomousness— his goal is to be as self-defining as the art/object he creates. As for the audience, its expectation is that through its communication with the work of art, which may be resistant, unpleasant, even hostile, it acquires the authenticity of which object itself is the model and the artist the personal example.³⁶

Just as the goal of authenticity for an artist is to be as self-defining as the object of art that the artist creates, the goal of authenticity for an individual person is to be as self-defining as an artist.

Many protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are authentic in the sense that they are self-defining. Equally crucial, they exhibit a variety of authentic models of existence and self-definition, as in Lin Daiyu's poetic existence, Jia Baoyu's rebellious existence, Jia Yuanchun's royal existence, Xue Baochai's noble existence, Shi Xiangyun's romantic existence, Miaoyu's aloof existence, Jia Tanchun's thoughtful existence, Qin Keqing's liberal existence and so on, all provided us with vivid self-defined individual persons. The same can be said of other supporting protagonists such as Qing Wen, Xi Ren, Ping Er, Yuan Yang, Si Qi, Ying Er, Xiang Lian, and Xing Xiuyan.

Liu Zaifu points out, “Those illustrative protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are poets, Jia Yuanchun, Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, Miao Yu, Shi Xiangyun, Tan Chun ... These poets are poetic lives.”³⁷ “The philosophical meaning of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is, human poetic lives should live on the other world across the

³⁶ Lionel Trilling. (1972) *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. p. 100.

³⁷ Liu, *Understanding “A Dream of Red Mansions.”* p.141.

mundane world.”³⁸ Whether or not they are poets and all had poetic existence, protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions* such as Jia Yuanchun, Lin Daiyu, Jia Baoyu, Xue Baochai, Miao Yu, Shi Xiangyun, Jia Tan Chun, Qin Keqing, Wang Xifeng, Qing Wen, and so on are outstanding characters. This is exhibited in three aspects: (1) each defined himself or herself in a way that clearly distinguished himself/herself from others; for example, Lin Daiyu is not Xue Baochai or Shi Xiangyun, and vice versa; (2) each embodies his or her philosophical messages to the world; for example, Lin Daiyu’s is about the possibility of poetic existence, Qin Keqing’s is about the law of existence that extremity produces self-destruction; Jia Yuanchun’s is about contingency and inconstancy of human existence; and (3) each is irreplaceable by others.

Alienation is the opposite of authenticity. *A Dream of Red Mansions* emphasizes this. Taking Jia Yucun as a paradigmatic example, the novel puts forth the question of alienation: (1) a person’s alienation from his/her self as the original primary substance; (2) a person’s alienation from humanity as the secondary substance of all humans—that is to say, human alienation; and (3) a person’s alienation from one’s social relations that are constitutive of the self. Jia Yucun’s alienation consisted of alienations of all the described three.

Wearing mask is an act of running always from authenticity. *A Dream of Red Mansions* makes no bone of its criticism of peoples’ wearing masks in daily life. In our existence, most of us *are all acting in life, not live in our lives*. Wang Xifeng was a vivid example in Chapter 3. When Lin Daiyu first arrived at Jia Household, she was received by her grandmother (on mother’s side). No sooner than they started to converse,

Then they heard peals of laughter from the backyard and a voice cries: ‘I am late in greeting our guest from afar!’ Dai Yu thought with surprise, ‘The people here are so respectful and solemn to hold their breath. Who can this be, so boisterous and pert?’ While she is still wondering, through the back door trooped some matrons and maids surrounding a young woman. Unlike the girls, she is richly dressed and as resplendent as a fairy.

Then Xifeng took Daiyu by the hand and scrutinized from top to toe, exclaimed, ‘Alas, What a true beauty she is, grandma dear! If I had not seen her today by myself, I would not have believed that there could be such a beauty in the world!’³⁹ In the scene, it was not that Wang Xifeng did not have manner. Instead, she was acting. In so acting, she emphasized that *she was the one*; no one else could be what she was. She deliberately acted in a way that both showed her status in the family and pleased grandmother Jia.

All the same, to be authentic or alienated? That is the question in *A Dream of Red Mansions*!

³⁸ Ibid, p. 143.

³⁹ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1982), 40-42/ch.3

5. Self and others

I, you, s/he, we, they, society, family, country, the universe at large. These vocabularies fill the world we live, and also the world in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. . Therefore, it should not strike us as a surprise that *A Dream of Red Mansions* philosophizes deep over the subject-matter of self and other, in connection with the discussion of fate.

“None more than you the world disdains, No one but I your only soul-mate can be.”⁴⁰ Shi Xiangyun’s Chrysanthemum poem profusely praised the flower and celebrated Jia Baoyu and herself for having a self of independence. She celebrated that she and Jia Baoyu “out of the shared taste the world disdain.”⁴¹ “Who, world-disdainer, shares your hiding-place? Of all flowers why do you bloom so late?”⁴² Lin Daiyu’s poetic lines also vividly portray Chrysanthemum and celebrate a self-independent personality. The self who Lin Daiyu’s poetic lines portray mirrors the kind of Confucian destiny-oriented self. In comparison’ the self who Shi Xiangyun’s poetic lines portray reflects the Daoist natural self in Laozi, and Zhuangzi.

In the novel, different selves and different forms of self-consciousness also come into play. For example, we see Jia Baoyu’s critical self, Lin Daiyu’s poetic self, Baochai’s brave, great, refined and profound self, Shi Xiangyun’s natural self, Jia Yuanchun’s noble self, Miao Yu’s pure self, Jia Tanchun’s self of self-respect and dignity, Wang Xifeng’s “both made and broken by cunning” self, Qing Wen’s equality-seeking self, Jia Yucun’s alienated self, Si Qi’s heroic self, Yuan Yuan’s unbending self, Ying Er’s innocent self, Ping Er’s considerate self, Liu Xianglian’s divided self, Jia Zheng’s dogmatic self, Jia Lian’s hedonist self. The concept of self designates a person existing as an individual subject. A self is an entity of subjectivity.

Living as a self can cause anxiety, anguish, forlornness and despair, and thus backfire. For example, in Chapter 21, frustrated by his inability to iron out his relationship with others such as Lin Daiyu, Shi Xiangyun, his maidservant Xi Ren and so on and enlightened by his reading of Zhuangzi, Jia Baoyu wrote,

Away then with Musk and Aroma, and the female tongue will cease from nagging. Discard Bao Chai’s heavenly beauty, destroy Dai Yu’s divine intelligence, utterly abolish all tender feelings, and the female heart will cease from envy. If the female tongue ceases from nagging there will be no further fear of quarrels and estrangements; if Bao Chai’s heavenly beauty is discarded there will be no further grounds for tender admiration; and if Dai Yu’s divine intelligence is destroyed there will be no further cause for romantic imaginations.⁴³

In Chapter 22, frustrated by his inability to please both Daiyu and Xiangyun who are in a small quarrel, with both he is emotionally entangled and sentimentally attached,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 524/ch.38..

⁴¹ Ibid, 525/ch.38.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 293/ch.21.

Jia Baoyu remembered the verse of the song “*Ji Sheng Cao* (寄生草)” that he had listened to no longer ago, and what he read about Zhuangzi. He thus wrote:

Should you test me and I test you,
Should heart and mind be tested too?
Till there remained no more test,
That test would be of all the best.
When nothing can be called a test,
My feet will find a place to rest.⁴⁴

And continued,

If there's no “I”, then neither is there “you”.
If she misunderstands you then why rue?
Freely I come and freely I go,
Giving myself to neither joy nor woe,
Close kin or distant—it's the same to me.
What did it serve my assiduity?
Today I see its true futility.⁴⁵

When Daiyu, Baochai, and Xiangyun read Baoyu's verses, Baochai was alarmed that Baoyu was attracted to Buddhist doctrine of empty mind and forgetting the self. After some mutual consultation, Daiyu came up with a strategy. Then,

The three girls go to Bao Yu's room. Dai Yu opens the conversation by saying:

“Listen, Bao Yu. The word ‘*Bao*’ means that which is the most precious and the word ‘*Yu*,’ that which is the most solid. In what way you are precious? In what way are you solid?” When Bao Yu cannot answer, the girls clap their hands and laugh. “And this stupid fellow wants to dabble in metaphysics!” Dai Yu continues, “The last two lines of your verse are good –
When nothing can be called a test
My feet can find a place to rest.
But it seems to me they still lack something. Let me add two more:
When there's no place for feet to rest,
That is the purest state and the best.”⁴⁶

Needless to say, Dai Yu endeavored to pursue Bao Yu to stay away from Buddhist doctrine and to hold his self-consciousness and his being as a consciousness.

Self and others are interdependent. The other such as laws of existence, other persons, society or social power is the antithesis of a self. In human relationships, another person as the other is importantly related to a self on the one hand and cannot be reduced to the self on the other hand. It is also the other that defines and limits a

⁴⁴ Ibid, 307/ch.22

⁴⁵ Ibid, 308/ch.22.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 309-309/ch.22.

self. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Lin Daiyu indicated, “It is the concept of ‘me’(self) that creates the concept of ‘others’, and life lived under these twin concepts is bound to be beset with frustrations, fears, confusion, foolish dreams and a host of other obstacles and entanglements.”⁴⁷ That is to say, self and others co-exist. When a self exists, it others or antithesis also exists. A person is a social being, and therefore always co-exist with other persons.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the relationship between a man and a woman is typically a relationship between a self and the other, and a relationship of contraction. Even such love breaking metal and tearing apart stone as Bao-Dai love is a relationship between a self and the other. Even a soul-mate is not reducible to the self. Self- and the other, a twin existence.

6. The weight of existence and Existential competence

To exist is to struggle. “Facing excellent time and beautiful scene, my mind feels despair. Heartening joy and happy events in whose courtyard occur?”⁴⁸ The world is capricious. Human affairs are contingent and inconstant. The lightness of existence, and the weight of responsibility challenge all protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. They involve a question of existential competence. Existential competence is the totality of existential capacity, personality and virtues. In the novel, different protagonists also represent different understandings of existential competence, e.g., Lin Daiyu’s idealism, Xue Baochai’s pragmatism, Jia Baoyu’s liberalism, Shi Xiangyun’s naturalism, Jia Tanchun’s heroism, Jia Zheng’s Confucianism, Jia Yucun’s opportunism, and Qin Keqing’s hedonism.

In Chapter 70, Lin Daiyu’s concept and Xue Bao Chai’s concept of existential competence philosophy run into direct dialogues with one another. In the drama, every member of the poetry club of the *Grandview Garden* should compose one poem, taking willow-catkins as the subject-matter. In context, willow-catkins symbolized rootlessness and contingency. In her poem, Lin Daiyu criticized the indifference of the world to the fate of falling willow-catkins; “spring is indifferent to whether she is wedded to the East wind/ Leaves it to chance whether she stays or goes.”⁴⁹ Therefore, Lin Daiyu suggested that existential competence consist of the ability to face heroically the cruelty of contingency and the indifference of the world. It is the ability to “leave the broken lotus-leaves for the rain to play on (留得残荷听雨声)”, being persistent in one’s persuasion and ideal.⁵⁰ Xue Baochai, on the other hand, advocated in her poem that those willow-catkins should courageously make use of the force of the world to serve their purposes; “Do not jeer at me as rootless/ But lend me strength, good wind/ To soar up to the azure sky at last.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid, 1299/ch.91.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 317/ch.23.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 996/ch.70.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 555/ch.40.

⁵¹ Ibid, 997/ch.70.

Here, Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu advocated two different concepts of existential competence. In Lin Daiyu's concept, existential competence means heroism in dealing with the cruelty of contingency and the indifference of spring; in Xue Baochai's concept, existential competence means that one is able to make use of the force of the world to build one's existence. Xue Baochai, on the contrary, admired the graceful dance of willow-catkins in front of the east wind, sang for their ability to interact with others, and praises their flexibility (权变 *quan bian*) in front of contingency and change; "No matter what separates or unites, the filaments whence we are formed remains unchanging; Do not laugh at my rootlessness, good wind, but allow me to use your power to soar high."⁵² The attitude that Xue Baochai advocated—that is, to dance well in the new environment, to meet new challenges, and to make use of the new environment—is an attitude of creativity, flexibility, and spontaneity amid change, contingency, and chance. In Xue Baochai's concept of existential competence, not attempt to escape from contingency. Not self-pity for one's rootlessness. To a great extent, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai advocated the Confucian and the Daoist concept of existential competence respectively.

In comparison, Jia Baoyu's concept of existential competence is Buddhist, especially Zen Buddhist. Its core is the Zen concept of non-movable mind. "If All the Seas of Paradise were mine, with my simple guard I would be content."⁵³ At the core of this Zen concept of non-movable mind is detachment to things in the world. That said, the shortcoming of this concept is obvious and exhibited also in Jia Baoyu himself—that is, the lack of sense of duty and responsibility and of creativity to copy with the world. Scholars generally read Jia Baoyu's leaving home and family at the end of the novel exclusively as a victory, as a denouncement of "lusts and desires (欲 *yu*)" for worldly pleasures, and celebrate it as an act of liberation from the world and of arriving at Enlightenment. I bet to differ. In my opinion, Jia Baoyu's leaving home was not a victory to be celebrated, but a failure due to existential incompetence. It is an act of Sartrean bad faith. In short, to be happy, one must be existentially competent. What is required of existential competence? That is the question!

6. Home

"At the end of the world, where is my final home?"⁵⁴ Lin Daiyu's question of where in the end of the world is her final home in Chapter 72 of the novel returns us back to the subject-matter of home, which is preoccupied by Chinese philosophies and Western existentialism today. To be sure, the question of home has already be raised at the very outset of the novel. In Chapter 1, it is criticized that many people took wrongly strange quarters as their hometowns.

Liu Zaifu indicates, "The home of protagonists in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are by essence not ordinary families and countries, but the universe at large itself. Therefore, these protagonists do not take their present residences as their home. The

⁵² Ibid, 996/ch.70.

⁵³ Ibid, 1299/ch.91.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 383/ch.27.

novel re-defines what is home at the outset.”⁵⁵ Indeed, one criticism in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is that persons in ordinary life mistake foreign residences as their home. This leads us to a set of conceptual questions: What is home? What is the feature and criteria of home? What is the difference between home and foreign quarter? There are also some normative questions including: Where is home? How to go from home to the world? How to be back to home from the world?

A Dream of Red Mansions brings Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism into a dialogue on the subject-matter. In spite of their substantial difference, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all agree on one point: That being said, the novel indicates that a home is not only where one physically comes from and where one physically will go to, but also a source of one’s self-identity—the source of one’s family identity. Home is not any space to be occupied with or any properties to be owed. Instead, it is the space where one’s heart dwells, one’s sentiment of being belongs, and one’s identity is defined. It is a space with which one’s mind and body can both live and belong. For this reason, we cannot talk about fate without mentioning home.

Metaphysically, the concept of home is importantly associated with the concept of belonging. Indeed, belonging is a necessary condition of home. Where there is home, there is belonging. Home indicates a first of all spatial-belonging. Thus, one talks about a place such as one’s motherland or an organizational institution—say, family, school, army or corporation—as one’s home. But home also indicates emotional belonging. Thus, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu was Lin Daiyu’s home, and Lin Daiyu, Jia Baoyu’s. Notwithstanding, in the novel, according to Confucianism, humanity and full self-realization is one’s home; family, community, nation-state, and the world at large is one’s home. In this view, the world that we live our lives to realize full humanity within us is our physical home; humanity which we live on and live to realize within us is our spiritual home. Home is where we find full self-realization in terms of realization of full humanity within the self. According to Daoism, the world of the immortal is one’s true home, for example, the fairyland of disenchantment in the novel. Home is where one finds true freedom, happiness, and authenticity. According to Buddhism, one’s true home is one’s enlightenment. For example, Jia Baoyu’s true home is his ultimate enlightenment.

In the novel, a radical claim is that one’s true home is one’s Zen mind.⁵⁶ Notwithstanding, if home refers to where one’s soul belongs, for different person, true homes are different. Lin Daiyu’s poetic self cannot find a true home in a mundane world. Jia Baoyu’s critical spirit found its home in enlightenment. Xue Baochai’s graceful and creative self, found a true home in a harmonious family and nature. So did Shi Xiangyun’s romantic self, Jia Tanchun’s heroic self, Jia Yuanchun’s royal self, Miaoyu’s aloof self, Qing Wen’s beautiful and struggling self. All human endeavors are about finding a true home. All human sentiments including love and hate are about the home for a self. All human destinies are this question and choice: home or homeless, return or exile! “Existence is akin to light dust” and “where is my

⁵⁵ Liu, *Understanding A Dream of Red Mansions*, p.197.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.127.

home at last?"⁵⁷ That is Lin Daiyu's question in *A Dream of Red Mansions*! That is everyone's question in existence too!

In summary, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is philosophically profound. Its philosophical questions of humanity and human existence are metaphysical, cognitive, ethical, moral, and social-political. It teaches its readers to understand the weight of existence, take hold of one's responsibility for one's fate, preserve the authentic heart-mind, and to be an authentic, enlightened, and happy self. To live, or not to live, that is the question!

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⁵⁷ Cao, *A Dream of Red Mansion* (1982), 1252/ch.87.