Unpredictability and Meaning in Ming-Qing Literati Novels

Robert E. Hegel

To the extent that Ming and Qing novelists were at best marginal members of the official, hence nominally morally superior, stratum of society, their situation might be better understood as parallel to that of marginalized writers of other times and places. Concerning twentieth-century women writers in America and Western Europe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis explores the implications of their subverting the narrative conventions endorsed by writers from the socially dominant — male — group: “... breaking the sequence can mean delegitimizing the specific narrative and cultural orders of nineteenth-century fiction....” By “sequence” she means conventional plot patterns that exemplify dominant male values. 1 Similarly, when Chinese novelists of the late Ming and Qing periods self-consciously modified the narrative structures of popular fiction conventional at their time in the name of greater historicity or clearer presentation of moral truth, perhaps their innovations should be considered challenges not only to received literary practice but to the popular Confucian sense of moral order as well. I believe that a particularly interesting paradox is visible in Chinese fiction of the late Ming and Qing periods when one considers the implications of these challenges. Specifically, certain writers simultaneously reaffirmed popular morality as commonly expressed in vernacular fiction while by implication questioning the validity of the whole Confucian enterprise. Unconventional structural and thematic elements may very well have significance far beyond the development of the literary form in which they wrote.

It is well known that the rhetorical stance of the narrator conventional in Ming-Qing vernacular fiction — and that expressed in the prefaces as well — involved confirming dominant social values, those of Confucianism understood at an unsophisticated level. However, certain Ming
and Qing writers used their novels to explore the "paradoxes" of virtue unrewarded or of ostensibly moral action that provokes serious social disruption; at least one seems to exemplify the exhaustion of such rational explanations by regularly undercutting all predictability of the consequences of human behaviour when using conventional moral standards as the basis for anticipating social success or failure, much less of any sort of divine justice.

The present essay is an exploration of ways in which traditional Chinese novels conveyed meaning to their readers. It is based on several assumptions that should be made clear at the outset. First, I see at least the literati novels (wenshen xiaoshuo 文人小說) of late Ming and Qing as generally serious attempts at self-expression in narrative form. Many students of Chinese popular literature conclude that a spirit of playfulness pervades most of these novels, an observation that I do not dispute. However, the writing of a novel took months, years, even decades to complete. Many novelists were deeply engaged with the political concerns of their time and revealed their personal opinions in their writings; others addressed current moral and philosophical questions. One major characteristic of literati fiction is most certainly the intellectual and artistic seriousness demonstrated at least sporadically throughout their works.  

Secondly, while I am aware of the tremendous intellectual upheavals occasioned in part by the Manchu conquest and by the disaffection with Song period Neo-Confucianism growing among segments of society's educated elite during the late Ming, the world-view most commonly expressed and structurally embodied in Ming-Qing novels is that of "popular" Confucianism, an unsophisticated version of Confucian cosmology (overlain with a sense of "karmic justice" incorporated later from Buddhism) that began in the Han and that is still visible in morality books for the masses produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong even at the present time. This view assumes that the universe is structured and that structures have moral value, that virtue will be rewarded and wrong-doing will be punished, and that the universe is ultimately comprehensible in moral terms. In fact, this feature of Chinese narratives is visible even in the earliest examples. John Wang has identified it in the Zuo zhuan 左傳, one of the earliest collections of historical materials compiled perhaps in the fourth century before the Common Era:

Put very simply, the pattern is this; just as the evil, the stupid, and the haughty will usually bring disaster upon themselves, the good, the wise, and the humble tend to meet their just rewards. . . . . The pattern is not preconceived, but rather is something the author simply detected in the events he recounted. In other words, it represents his own interpretation of the significance of the events that had transpired. 

Finally, the question I focus on here, the expectation of reward or punishment appropriate to morally significant action, allows speculation concerning the deliberately subversive attitude taken in certain novels toward dominant morality. There are numerous other features one might examine in understanding the relationships between events narrated in fiction; I choose the question of reward and retribution as a way to demonstrate another level of paradox in Chinese literature: that between surface meaning and deeper significance in sophisticated fictional texts produced in late imperial China. I hope in this way to reveal facets previously overlooked in certain historical novels and to elucidate elements heretofore not readily explained in other works.

Self expression in moral terms to Ming-Qing literati generally involved furthering social harmony by act or by example, self being that central element in the famous dictum from the Confucian canonical text Daxue 大學 (The Great Learning):

The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation.

The essential message of Mencius, that human nature is fundamentally good, further informs the traditional image of self, especially as developed by Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472–1529) Neo-Confucian Xinlue 心學: spontaneous, genuine action is good, i.e., naturally in harmony with the moral structure of the universe. If society were orderly, as in the Daxue
situation, one could contribute thereto by spontaneous and morally proper behaviour. And yet the Master himself cautioned, “Show yourself when the Way prevails in the Empire, but hide yourself when it does not.” This assertion problematizes both “missionary” activity and political endeavours: one might choose not to demonstrate his own moral worth, hence not attempt to effect greater social harmony in the Empire in a time of rampant political and social immorality. There seems little reason to conclude, given the testimony of Ming-Qing vernacular fiction, that these writers perceived that the Confucian way — in its original sense of moral order and social harmony — “prevailed” at any time either in the past narrated in their historical fiction or in their own time. Confucius’s comment suggests that an intellectual might thereby be excused from moral action in the public arena.

It is worth considering in this regard the fictional career of Qin Shubao 越叔寶 in Sui shi yiwēn 隋史遺文 (Forgotten Tales of the Sui, 1633). A popular figure in legend, theatre history, and even folk religion — where he appears as the fairer of the two gods painted on double-leaved temple doors and gates — Qin starts out with what might be considered a “natural goodness” in the Mencian sense; he is unfettered by any formal teaching in the Confucian school. The motivations behind his actions are initially pure, uncoloured by selfish interests. His generosity is thus spontaneous and natural, but he becomes influenced by the kind of altruism to be found among Shu hu zhuān 水滸傳 heroes — the sort that encourages the breaking of heads and the squandering of personal wealth in order to right injustices and to play host to anyone who seems to acknowledge one’s worth (often measured in physical prowess). Such rowdy activity in the name of personal integrity leads to his mother’s insistent demands that he heed her words of guidance. In opposition to the paradigm of personal altruism that her son nominally exemplifies, she urges him to choose the conventional Confucian alternative of selfless service to family and State.

As a consequence, he begins to demonstrate his filial piety; Qin learns to curb his impulses and to come home when she calls him, thereby avoiding altercations with common bullies and ruffians. In this way his actions promote greater harmony within the family and, presumably, in local society as a whole. By inference we see this youthful hero following the Daxue path to moral perfection and self-expression. But this is accomplished through the external pressure of his mother’s urging; it is not as a result of any “investigation” of society’s needs on Qin Shubao’s part that he becomes “good”, i.e., obedient, filial, and law-abiding. Again following the advice of others he joins the local peace-keeping establishment as a constable, which is, of course, his initial undoing.

Sui shi yiwēn demonstrates through comic exaggeration that superficial “morality” (accommodating oneself to conventions of socially accepted behaviour — as defined by his mother — and to dominant political institutions in society — from which he is frequently excluded) does not necessarily equate with any kind of practical common sense on the one hand, much less with any wisdom into the way the universe works on the other. Similarly, neither participation in the supposedly moral political hierarchy nor action intended to promote social harmony automatically produces any knowledge of the real structure of power in a work-a-day society or of how to get along with one’s social equals. Competing moral paradigms simply compound this character’s confusion, as the dramatized narrator elicits the readers’ amusement.

Specifically, the erstwhile local hero Qin Shubao is easily manipulated by a calculating city inn-keeper; indecision over how to respond to poverty and alienation leaves him utterly disoriented. In the end Qin suffers such disgrace that he falls ill. When he throws himself on the mercy of a local “benefactor”, the latter demonstrates his personal altruism much as Qin himself had before learning more acceptably conventional “morality”. This selfless hero, Shan Xiongxin 单雄信, generously provides for the needs of passersby and victims of official abuse; Qin is just one of many so welcomed. While one should not blindly equate untrammeled knight-errant altruism with the spontaneous goodness explored by the philosopher Mencius, the moral authority attributed to such martial heroes by China’s storytellers and writers surely derives from this Confucian conception, even though knight-errantry came to be parodied by some Ming and Qing novelists. For my purposes here it is sufficient to see the altruism of the warrior developed in Sui shi yiwēn as a set of values consistent in general outline with Confucianism and only slightly in opposition to those espoused by the state — and ostensibly by society as well.

Conventionally “moral” service to family and State does not equip Qin Shubao to handle money efficiently, to cope with the normal “bad luck” that afflicts everyone at times, or to deal with isolation from his usual social support system. The implications of this section of Sui shi yiwēn, the Bildungsroman of Qin Shubao, are two-fold: as novelist Yuan Yuling 原于令 (1599–1674) says in his preface to the novel, he intends that his narrative will supplement orthodox (i.e., Confucian) historiography: in fact, Yuan parodies the seriousness of the formal histories through the
bathos of his historical fiction. Likewise, by extension one might see the novelist questioning the rightness of the State-supported dominant morality, of the political/social structures supposedly founded on proper moral relationships, or even of the Confucian system of values as a whole. Nor does he necessarily endorse knight-errantry as an alternative. Yuen Yuling begins his narrative with mock-serious introduction by his narrator in the guise of author:

People in situations of greatest wealth, of greatest honour, and of greatest luxury — it has always been so that to speak of them delights the heart, to hear of them delights the ear, and to read of them delights the eye. Yet sorrow and destruction are ever inherent in such situations; if these persons do not provoke everlasting vituperation, then, worse yet, they become the laughingstock of the ages. But the hero in the wilds who will not make a name for himself, will not take pleasure in wine or in women, instead must suffer ignominy and loneliness in fullest measure. Still it is he who can capitalize on the downfall of others from their lives of ease; regardless of whether he aids in the recovery of an imperial house or founds a dynasty on his own, his name will last throughout eternity. Though his reputation may shine in later ages, the man himself becomes no different in attributes through his success. Like the sun and the moon he has always shone of himself; skiffs of cloud or wisps of fog may obscure him, but he will always shine through whether or not his contemporaries recognize his greatness. And later when people begin to eulogize him, what they record with paper and pen will be nothing more than the circumstances immediately surrounding his successes; they will say nothing of his life in obscurity. Who can foresee in a tiny seed the pine or cypress reaching to the heavens, or that a cob tiger or leopard will someday be able to devour a whole cow? Still, to speak of such matters [as the early life of a hero] strikes people as being new and different. I will not introduce this person until I have outlined something of the events which he encountered at that time."

The tenor of this section is familiar, as if the narrator were sharing a joke with the reader: we all know that Qin Shubao was a great hero, but even heroes take their lumps, etc. Thus by claiming continuity in this hero when in fact he undergoes a radical transformation in character from youth to maturity, Sai shi yiven deliberately parodies the historiographical tradition it ostensibly "supplements", as did Sangyo yanyi and Shuifu zhuan. By introducing the protagonist as a realized hero, the novel is structured somewhat like the classical Western epic and as many Western novels; it starts in the middle, moves back to the beginning through flashback, and then finishes the story (an observation made by Gérard Genette). By referring in this introduction first to the extratextual historical record concerning Qin Shubao, the novelist draws the reader's attention to the story as it is generally known, of the adventures of a mature, self-assured and competent military hero. Yuen Yuling's narrative then refers backward in time to Qin's glorious ancestors, his auspicious birth, and his impoverished childhood before detailing his protagonist's painful maturation process. One might say that the novel in this way creates an obvious ironic distance between itself and the historiographical tradition by developing the concern for biographical details characteristic of the folk, oral tradition. The last half of the novel is more conventionally devoted to rapid-paced narration of historical or pseudo-historical battles and intrigues; there Qin Shubao becomes merely one of a welter of military protagonists.

One must not overlook the significance of the moral orthodoxy implicit in the standard histories and in the formal historiographical tradition. From the beginning of self-conscious historiography in China, not only was the invariable structure of chronological sequence imposed upon historical data; the social/political functions and the exemplary acts of outstanding individuals were used as the basis for grouping them in paradigmatic categories. Early historical fiction in the vernacular, the Yuen period proto-novels known as pinghua and even early versions of the Sangyo yanyi and other historical novels dating from the middle Ming period, follow rather closely the chronicle format (piannianti) of traditional historiography. In the more complex of these historical novels the action narrated generally confirms the basic Confucian sense of order in explicit terms: social disorder is condemned as are those who disrupt social harmony, peace ultimately reigns, and good acts are rewarded while evil is punished. In short, the outcomes due moral and immoral acts are predictable, as logically they should be in an orderly, moral universe — although the testimony of narrators and other characters may be introduced to affirm how events should have evolved, when the historical fact to which the fiction is hinged provides less than morally ideal consequences. Such novels thus seemingly confirmed their Confucian readers' notions about the nature and significance of reality.

The novelist Yuen Yuling's decision to invest most of his artistic energy in Sai shi yiven in the creation of a Bildungsroman of comic proportions demonstrates his innovative use of the narrative form conventional for historical fiction; this in itself establishes a double-sided problematic in his attitude toward traditional historiography. First, his hero must necessarily confront competing value systems if he is to mature
to the point that he can choose as his own the “correct” moral path. That initially Qin suffers by following both of these value systems by implication throws open to question the legitimacy of Confucianism’s monopoly on moral authority. Furthermore, his hero can be both morally good and socially correct in the mundane Confucian sense and yet still suffer mentally and physically; Qin Shubao is the same person, his narrator explains, in youth and in maturity despite wildly differing fortunes during those two periods of his life. That this assertion is subverted by the narrative itself — Qin’s youthful iniquity contrasts sharply with his success in maturity — provokes questions of no small magnitude in understanding the text and its original meaning: How can fool become hero? Can a person lauded by the historians ever be less than exemplary? Is it appropriate to find moral dilemmas humorous? Can there be any validity to the idea that spontaneous self-expression will be widely recognized as good? Alternatively, does socialization in the Confucian sense involve stifling all spontaneous self-expression or just certain types? More to the point, do the histories tell the truth? (Czech novelist Milan Kundera: “Historiography writes the history of society, not of man.”) All of these questions seem clearly implicit in the narrator’s introduction and events subsequently narrated in Sui shi yiwen. One should notice, too, the challenge to traditional assumptions about appropriate and morally charged structure implicit in Yuan’s radical revision of the orthodox narrative format: his starting in the “middle” of Qin Shubao’s tale before moving back to its beginning highlights the discontinuity between youth and age, between the “reality” behind the verisimilitude with which Qin’s youthful misadventures are narrated and the historian’s conventional paradigm visible in the mature protagonist’s predictable battlefield victories.

It is not surprising that novelists like Yuan Yuling should question — albeit playfully in Sui shi yiwen — the moral supremacy of Confucianism, given his marginal political, hence social, status in Confucian society. He and other novelists were educationally prepared for the civil service examination system and emotionally ready for the high status and wealth that an official position would bring. Being selected for the civil service in Ming and Qing China ostensibly confirmed the moral education and high moral stature of these Confucian scholars. Failure in the civil service examinations, as so graphically demonstrated in chapter 4 of Dong Yue’s 董誇 Xiyou bu 西遊補 (Tower of Myriad Mirrors, 1641), for example, could bring on serious doubts — in oneself or among others — about one’s moral viability as a human being in addition to the more obvious concerns over one’s diligence as a student and one’s appropriate social status as a consequence.

Ming-Qing novelists generally criticized society from a conservative Confucian moral perspective, demanding reform and attacking dereliction of moral duty on the part of men in positions of power — positions which, by inference, the novelists themselves might have filled more appropriately and more ethically. That is, the concerns of moral self-assertion (demonstration of one’s own moral discrimination through acts that encourage social harmony) may well have been served by strenuous affirmation of those ideals of Confucian education they were debarred from practising — as they were trained to do — in the political arena. One might pursue this line of thought farther to conclude that, as Marxist and Marxist-influenced critics have always said, certain novelists expressed their personal frustrations and anxieties by attacking the very structure of power in Chinese society at the time, e.g., the Confucian moral order nominally, but in their minds not actually, practised. Numerous novelics such as Shu hu zhuan demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of extant political structures by cataloging the immoral acts of those who hold power; Sui shi yiwen does exactly the same thing in a more imaginative manner by outlining a structure of local social control that can neither accommodate nor even tolerate the naïve Confucian moral sensibility of an immature Qin Shubao. At the grassroots of society money and influence determine all real power, this novel reveals; morality of the dominant Confucian sort is simply irrelevant: it is visible neither in the moral outcomes of spontaneous acts of the innocent individual nor exemplified by the distribution of power in society.

The correlation between the subversion of the conventional narrative sequence and the delegitimation of received moral teachings, hence the social structures they nominally define, can be seen most clearly in the eighteenth-century masterpiece Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (The Story of the Stone in the translation by David Hawkes and John Minford). The narrative is, in essence, the extensive biography of a single protagonist, the stone; in this regard it too can be considered a Bildungsroman, an exploration of the process by which Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 receives his painful education in the real world before he returns again to his stony state in the celestial realm. In contrast to the structure implicit in Sui shi yiwen — starting the “story” in the middle — and to the historiographical sequential narrative structure conventionalized for the novel by that time, Honglou meng both begins and ends in chapter 1; the rest of the novel in effect is
Unpredictability and Meaning in Ming-Qing Literati Novels

ji 西遊記 and Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 and seventeenth-century works such as Sui Tang yanyi 随唐演義. (Consider George Levine’s insightful comments on “realism”: that it is based on a notion of reality shared by writer and reader, that each new conception parodies the view it replaces, and that there is moral value in representing “reality” accurately; 23 in this regard consider again the importance of “the investigation of things” (格物) in the Daxue passage above. It is in Levine’s sense that I perceive intellectual seriousness and moral relevance in the verisimilitude with which the early life of Qin Shubao is narrated in Sui shi yiwen; the new visions of reality there and in Honglou meng do parody more conventional views.)

Certain among the crises predicted early in the Honglou meng narrative ultimately are fulfilled (as in the fates of Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai); others are mitigated (Wang Xifeng’s punishment), and some avoided (the total financial and social ruin of the Jia family on the model of the experience of the author) or reinterpreted/rewritten (the death of Qin Keqing 秦可卿). The causal linkages between fictional events in Honglou meng thus differ considerably from the moral predictability expected in literature and life during the Ming and Qing — and even now, by certain Chinese critics. In contrast to Confucian conceptions of ideal order — the cosmic harmony that should be reflected in social hierarchy and moral retribution in this mundane world — the causality at work in Honglou meng is rarely “neat”, to use Frank Kermode’s term. 24 The extreme contingency of all elements of narrative art in Honglou meng is visible from the very beginning of the novel; there characters are introduced as they are viewed through the eyes of other, fallible, fictional observers, none of whom is equatable with the “ideal reader” as is Kongkong Daoren — ironically a mere featureless fiction — in chapter 1.

Furthermore, no one moral evaluation can ever be sufficient for many characters and situations in Honglou meng; each must depend on the particular perspective dictated by specific circumstances. This fact in itself contradicts traditional historiographical categorizations. Take Qin Keqing, for example. Readers learn, for the most part indirectly, that this sensuous young woman has had an adulterous affair of the worst kind, incest with her father-in-law. She dies early, a seemingly appropriate end for a woman of such loose morals (comparisons with the adulteresses in Shuihuzhuan and Jin Ping Mei immediately spring to mind). One might anticipate that her partner in sin, Jia Zhen 贾珍, would try to hide his indiscretions in silence or at least try to balance his self-indulgent behaviour through a belated show of moral rectitude. But instead Jia Zhen makes a public

flashback from which we actual readers are to derive an enlightening lesson. To this end, we are shown how to read the novel in chapter 1 by the character Kongkong Daoren空空道人. This conclusion is suggested by the fact that the entire story is merely an inscription on that stone read by Kongkong Daoren. In format, Honglou meng is thus a more radical departure from traditional historical chronicle than is Sui shi yiwen. This fiction, deliberately and explicitly neither a history nor a pseudo-historical text, is meant to provoke a catharsis in the mind of the reader, greater in degree than any of the Buddhist or Taoist classics with which the implied reader characterized as Kongkong Daoren must already be familiar, to judge from his religious name. The dramatic effect of this reading suggests the vitality of the fiction and, alternatively, the moribundity of more formal — hence less profound — writings; by implication it also subverts the conventional moral views of society and history contained in other writings, if we consider Kongkong Daoren’s experience seriously.

The complaints of successive generations of Honglou meng critics that the last forty chapters are at least partially spurious reflect conventional limitations of both Qing fictional narrative and of the Confucian mindset: both expect predictable structures and clear linkages between cause and effect; both demand greater narrative attention to the morally/socially more prominent figures. (In the now venerable words of Edmund Wilson, “... all our intellectual activity, in whatever field it takes place [including fiction], is an attempt to give a meaning to our existence ... [to make it] something orderly, symmetrical and pleasing ...”). 21 Chinese readers have always expected that the events predicted in the dream of chapter 5 and elsewhere should be realized by the end of the novel, that Yinglian 英莲 should be killed by Xue Pan’s 邢瓌 wife, that Tanchan 探春 should end up far from home, that Wang Xifeng 王熙凤 should be dispossessed by the Jia family, that Daiyu 黛玉 and Baochai 非钗 should each have a song and an image to herself in the celestial registers, etc. (Hawkes calls this last unexpected element “special treatment for which there must have been a special reason”). 22 The dissonance between these expectations on the part of the actual reader and the resolution of conflicts and crises as narrated in the novel produces an unprecedented degree of realism for the Chinese literary tradition. This is not to say that action in the novel corresponded closely with events in historical reality, necessarily; I mean only that there exists far more contingency and less predictability between events narrated in the novel than was desirable for the Confucian mindset and than was conventional in the Ming-Qing novel, to judge from early examples such as Xiyou.
spectacle of himself through inappropriate levels and intensity of mourning — while heedlessly contributing to the family’s financial decline. More surprising still is the reappearance of the adulteress in Wang Xifeng’s dream early in chapter 13; there she urges sound economic measures to protect the Jia family to whose moral dissolution she so strongly contributed! (Appropriately, in Confucian terms, she suggests investment in schools, care of family graves, etc.) Her comments are not merely ironic; the implications of the seeming moral paradox Qin Keqing presents are noteworthy, even far-reaching: When miscreants are rewarded, when in fiction what society condemns as sin only masks virtue (or is it that Confucian platitudes are only the stuff of whores and house-wreckers?), the standards for moral judgment, even the moral structure of the family and society in general, are necessarily thrown into question. By generally destabilizing the predictive potential of certain major elements of his narrative, the novelist signals the implied reader about the appropriate way to read and how to regard reality at the same time: in this text the usual “rules” simply do not apply with any exactness; similar “rules” may mean no more in the reader’s own life.35

In earlier novels such as Sui Yangdi yanshi 唐豔帝豔史 (The Merry Adventures of Emperor Yang, 1631) the plot may also alternate between the mundane and the celestial realms of existence, but these earlier works confirm traditional morality: the “fates” of characters — that is, the retribution for their acts — vary predictably with their corporal motivations; their destinies are generally not already worked out in advance of their appearance in the world of men. In earlier novels characters typically have a kind of “free will” to the extent that they are morally responsible for their actions. Even the dissolute Emperor Yang of the Sui could have changed his fate by genuine moral reform and proper behaviour, both narrator and characters in Sui Yangdi yanshi suggest. By contrast, the stone Baoyu innocently and altruistically waters the celestial flower; this nurturing act parallels the generous distribution of food and money by the youthful Qin Shubao. But in Honglou meng this naïveté engenders a fateful, ultimately fatal, attachment between flower and stone that informs the tragedy of the entire work; in tone this later novel contrasts markedly with the comedy of incongruity between Qin Shubao as bumbling youth and the competent military hero supplied to the reader by the historiographical tradition and copied into Sui shi yiwen’s later chapters. Yet in neither work is cause — action bearing moral significance — related to effect — in terms of reward and punishment — logically and with moral appropriateness.

The alternation between realms of existence in Honglou meng simultaneously parodies earlier fictional references to the other world and heightens the sense of contingency concerning events of this world. Baoyu finds himself in a place of beauty and of mystery during his initial dream; presumably this realm is related to that of the Taoist and Buddhist from the novel’s frame-story who punctuate with their appearances the rest of the narrative. These curious figures may also be beautiful in the upper realm; the text does not detail their appearance there. Yet in the world of the Jia family they are deformed, dirty, perhaps even demented. Are their looks deceiving? Certainly their actions and their words are unpredictable, even enigmatic. Compare these figures with other-worldly actors in ideologically more conventional novels such as Sui Tang yanyi or even Xiyou ji: the gods and their hangers-on may be comic in the latter, but in both novels it is just such superior beings who represent order, rectitude, predictability. In novels such as Sui Yangdi yanshi they maintain the “account books” (zhangbu 賬簿) of right and wrong to ensure that moral justice is meted out in due course.36 One might argue that these denizens of the beyond maintain a kind of order in Honglou meng: they punish Baoyu for his attachment by “sentencing” him to a life in the Red Dust of mortal existence. Yet since his initial attachment is conceived in innocence and is essentially selfless, this result seems unjust, as inappropriate for its sorrowful consequences as the comic sufferings of the fledgling warrior Qin Shubao. That the Buddhist and the Taoist figures of Honglou meng’s celestial realm are only agents of inscrutable destiny and not acting in their own right further problematizes the moral uprightness of that higher order.

Thus the actual reader might well sympathize with Honglou meng’s more “realistic” characters, rejecting this frame story and the fate thereby imposed on Baoyu and Daiyu. One must conclude that the novel parodies earlier literary conventions of how to represent divine justice in narrative. Moreover, a reading of this sort is founded on the proposition that the novel rejects, through this parody, all earlier assertions that divine justice or cosmic moral order exists in any meaningful way. Conversely, reading the frame story as “true”, and considering the “enlightening” effect that reading the Stone’s inscription had on Kongkong Duoren as a representation of how we actual readers are to apprehend the text still involves nearly the same conclusions. That is, if we see, through the magnificent welter of detail in this work, an endorsement of the basic Buddhist truth that all human attachments lead ultimately to suffering, we must accept the
implications of the radical departure of the text from commonplace Confucianism to another philosophical paradigm: earlier novels are thus parodied (they were pedestrian and mechanical in their application of "fate" and the supernatural) and their conventions are subverted. This is despite the observation at the end of the novel by a character given the novelist’s name that the work has no value other than as mere diversion, an element to be considered the last in a lengthy series, each of which seems to mean the opposite of what it says.\footnote{27}

Furthermore, for a Qing period intellectual trained in the Confucian canon for government service (the goal toward which all education was directed) to reject all Confucian definitions of moral self-expression through moral action in society and thus to deny the ability to make one’s own fate through that action — the course followed by Jia Baoyu in Honglou meng — is a powerful subversion of the entire Confucian mindset. But one should also observe that even detachment from worldly ties, in the basic Mahayana Buddhist sense, is also of dubious value: it necessitates that all "enlightened" characters (Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱, Jia Yucun 賈雨村, Jia Baoyu) abandon their families and turn away from human society altogether. Zhen Shiyin achieves some degree of tranquility, but the celestial stone Baoyu feels remorse and loss while Jia Yucun ultimately lapses into a state of lethargy and incomprehensibility — rather like Baoyu when his jade, his tongling 誠靈 or "spiritual understanding" — is lost. In Honglou meng the emotional and spiritual release brought by Buddhist enlightenment is presented as a distinctly unattractive alternative to suffering in the "real" world. Only Zhen Shiyin achieves any lasting contentment. By the end of chapter 120 when the character named Cao Xueqin 譚雪芹 chides him, even Kongkong Daoren appears a gullible fool to have been so "enlightened" by this philosophically thin tale; he thereby becomes a parody of the wise Buddhists in chapter 19 of Xiyou ji and in other works, and problematic as an "ideal reader" of this text. Through him and other Buddhist figures in Honglou meng, the novel exposes the shortcomings of the conventional Buddhist values they seemingly represent. Earlier novelists regularly used prefices to argue for the moral efficacy of didactic fiction; here the "novelist" appears at the end of his novel to deny all moral seriousness therein, declaring the work mere light entertainment. Consequently, Honglou meng intertextually parodies other writers’ ostensible concern for the edifying effect of reading fiction while simultaneously subverting the reliability of the characters presented as reader and author of the text. Such an extremely self-conscious manipulation of the text "from within" can only alert the actual reader to read carefully, looking either for meaning expressed unconventionally or for unconventional realms of meaning.

While the events in the Jia family household that produce unexpected results are too numerous to mention, the abiding sense of tragic irony that pervades the work is of central importance to its interpretation. "Prophecy" often is misleading; other incongruities abound. The Daguan Yuan 大觀園 (the "Grand View Garden"), for all its supposed purity, is built on the site where the men of the family frequently had engaged in debauchery. The "nun" in residence there, Miaoyu 妙玉, has never formally taken the tonsure; furthermore, she is ultimately undone by lusty thoughts which may or may not produce a prophetic dream — the text is unclear about her physical fate. Excesses go unpunished and goodness is poorly rewarded — the youthful widowedness visited upon Shi Xiangyun and Li Wan 李鶴 (despite the limited success of the latter’s son in the civil service examinations) are examples. If Sanguo yanyi, Sui Tang yanyi, and other historical novels project order and balance in a moral universe, Honglou meng does just the opposite: there is no dependable order in society; moral balance is infrequently, if ever, effected by the higher powers. The novel is not structured to simulate moral balance; by implication, the fictional world of the novel has no final, overarching moral structure. The bulk of its chapters narrate the daily activities of its youthful protagonists; they are filled with details of social life of the author’s time. However, since the cosmic framework behind them is neither predictable nor moral, as a mirror of quotidian reality Honglou meng approaches subversion of the sense of moral order dominating the social context in which the novel appeared.

In this regard it is worth repeating the well-known fact that the novelist Cao Xueqin spent years rewriting his masterpiece. Biographical references scattered throughout the commentaries have been painstakingly pieced together; they reveal a process of textual production that was neither linear nor continuous. Cao wrote back and forth, writing and rewriting, removing some — but not all — vestiges of events from early versions that were modified in later recensions. His aim and style of work might become more comprehensible if viewed from this perspective: it is likely that Cao Xueqin did not intend that all details of his novel would fit "neatly" together. Without burying oneself in the morass of the intentional fallacy, a few speculations seem justified by the direction of the novel’s development in China.

In view of the increasing degree of individual self-expression in Qing
period novels, it is not unreasonable to expect unorthodox or unconventional sentiments in *Honglou meng*, the undisputed masterpiece of the period. Biographical details enforce the testimony of “reader” (Kongkong Daoren) and “author” (Cao Xueqin) in the first and final chapters; they suggest strongly that Cao strived throughout the last years of his life to destabilize his text — to create more logical inconsistencies, more moral paradoxes, as his way of revealing his fundamental skepticism about the moral validity of didactic elements in popular fiction and even in conventional world-views of his time. His work ultimately, then, reflects the dicta with which I began this exploration: when his family was cashiered in 1728, Cao Xueqin was deprived of any place in the political realm that bore the mantle of Confucian moral superiority; assertion of his own moral sense might necessarily involve subverting that system which had found his family wanting. His dilemma was profound: to perform as a good Confucian when the Way did not prevail necessitated either complete withdrawal from society (which to some Cao seems to have done, subsisting meagrely on income from his painting) or social engagement of an influential sort. Other writers previous to *Honglou meng* had condemned the shortcomings of the system as practised in their time (in fact, this became the conventional novelistic stance for literati writers and seemingly constituted, in their minds, engagement with political issues); instead, Cao questioned that system at its logical core, by destabilizing all predictability of rewards and punishments on the basis of moral action. By choosing the latter alternative, it might be said that Cao Xueqin realized most fully the tendency in the developing novel to subvert literary conventions on the surface while, by implication, expressing a radical lack of faith in the Confucian moral order as a whole.

In sum, by focusing on elements of ideology related to the core conception of a moral universe, a survey of selected Ming and Qing novels reveals an increasing degree of destabilization of moral order through the unpredictable consequences of the protagonists’ moral actions. In this way, paradoxical rewards for vice and punishment for virtue serve to break the mold of earlier narratives, both historical and fictional. Such paradoxes also threaten the very basis of the traditional Chinese worldview when, in the hands of a consummate novelist, the lives of fictional characters reach a level of contingency that is commensurate with later western European realism — and that is no longer compatible with traditional beliefs that goodness and order can or will triumph in human society.

---

**Notes**

7. Several of my earlier studies focus on this and other novels in which Qin Shubao figures as an important character; see especially my *Novel*. The
present essay should be considered as a supplement to them; my reading through the years has placed the seventeenth-century novels in ever broader contexts, hence the development of my understanding of their significance.


9. Andrew H. Plaks discusses *yi* 育 as personal honour in his *Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), see pp. 344ff, 413ff. Notice that *yi* has positive associations in *Shuihu zhuan* and negative ones in *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義.

10. This equation happens at the verbal level: *yi* denotes both the sense of personal honour or altruism of the knight-errant and a general moral sense to Mencius. See Munro, chapter 3, especially pp. 75–80; see pp. 72–73 for Munro’s discussion of Mencius’ conception of human nature.

11. Andrew H. Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, p. 489, notes the seriousness with which *Sanguo yanyi* commentators, especially Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗 (b. ca. 1630), have treated moral dilemmas created by conflicting standards or mutually exclusive claims, such as those of family and of the state. The significance of Qin Shubao’s plight lies not in his experience of conflicting moral paradigms but in the misfortunes he suffers when he makes the “right” moral choice, to serve the state ostensibly for the greater harmony within society.


15. Fei-yi Wu observes a similar fascination with events “too trivial or too improbable” for the historians in seventeenth-century autobiographical writing; see The *Confucian’s Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 164.


17. See prefaces to such works, of which those attached to the earliest extant edition of *Sanguo yanyi* are typical. There Jiang Daqi 江大器 using the pen-name Yangyuzi 廣愚子 writes:

The loyalty of Chu-ko Liang 諸葛亮 [Zhuge Liang] shone like the sun and the stars … then there is the righteousness of Kuan Yu 關羽 [Guan Yu] and Chang Fei 張飛 [Zhang Fei] which was also superlative. As for other examples of success and failure, they are all exhibited clearly in this text, both the fragrant and the foul, the worthy and the unworthy.


19. For the social status of novelist in general, see Hegel, *Novel*, chapter 1, and Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, chapter 1.


21. “The Historical Interpretation of Literature” (1938), quoted in Hoffman and Murphy, p. 83.


25. This point is central to the cosmological criticism that developed among late Ming and early Qing period intellectuals, according to Henderson, pp. 137–173. Henderson notes, p. 170, an exchange between Shi Xiangyun 史湘雲 and her maid in which the maid ridicules the whole notion of correlative cosmology, the *yin/yang* duality in particular. See Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 2 (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 121–124, from chapter 31.


27. No commentator has ever failed to be affected by the couplet on the entry to Taixu Huanjing (The Land of Illusion) in chapter 1: “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real” (摘作真時真亦假，無為虛有有還虛)，Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, p. 55.

segments of the works he discusses, structures particularly visible when he reads those texts in reverse chronological order. While admittedly *Honglou meng* parallels to some extent the structure of *Jin Ping Mei*, such structuring seems to have more meaning within the text, as a means to exemplify the self-consciousness with which the novelist has written. Such structuring, to my mind, reflects conventions of literary novel writing rather than projecting any predictability, even comprehensibility, about events in the novel’s human realm that can be abstracted as referring to the world outside the text, to its social context.

**7**

Tragedy or Travesty? Perspectives on Langxian’s “The Siege of Yangzhou”

Ellen Widmer

“Jiangdu shi xiaofu tushen”江都市孝婦屠身 (hereafter “The Siege of Yangzhou”), eleventh in the fourteen-story collection *Shi dian tou* 石點頭 (The Rocks Nod Their Heads) strikes the modern reader as a travesty of morality. The plot revolves around a couple engaged in business who have travelled from their home town of Hongzhou 洪州 (near Nanchang 南昌) to a Yangzhou under siege in the Bi Shiduo 畢師聶 uprising, just after the An Lushan 安祿山 (?–757) Rebellion. War has caused the husband, Zhou Di 周迪, to fail at business, which he normally carries out in Xiangyang 襄陽, some distance from his home town. He and his wife, Second Sister Zong 宗二娘, are both in their late thirties. They are still childless. Because of this, his mother suggests that the husband and wife travel together on business. The mother herself had been quite elderly when she gave birth to Zhou Di, and she feels the couple ought not to stay apart, although she has relied on her daughter-in-law to take care of her for years. The couple strenuously object to the mother-in-law’s suggestion, whereupon she threatens suicide. She then finds an unattached female relative to live with her, obviating the need for the daughter-in-law to stay home. She also brings up the daughter-in-law’s fine education, suggesting that it might be useful for Zhou Di to have a clerk and assistant on the road. Finally, she gives them her coffin money to support them on their journey back to Xiangyang.

In Xiangyang, their money is stolen by the son of Zhou Di’s former landlady, a man who has many gambling debts. They are forced to take jobs as assistants to a Huizhou 徽州 salt merchant, who happens to be in the Xiangyang area, but who has a shop in Yangzhou, to which they soon move with the merchant. The merchant eventually leaves town as the city