Aestheticization of Illness in A Dream of The Red Mansions*

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The basic tenet expounded in Civilization and Disease (1943) by the eminent American medical historian Henry E. Sigerist is that illness is not merely a biological process, but a singular experience for an individual, that a disorder cannot be ascribed solely to pathophysiological mechanisms but also entails complex social dimensions. Decades later, in Illness as Metaphor (1977), Susan Sontag demonstrates how diseases, for example, TB and cancer, come to be associated with personal psychological traits, especially how metaphors that are employed to represent a disease result in an association between the repressed passion and the physical disease itself. Illness affects the bearer's character and way of conduct, and proves to be a manifestation of his/her personality, therefore pragmatically a means for people to interact with each other. As a part and parcel of human life, illness tends to weigh on the life course of an individual or the destiny of the whole family.

For all Sontag's protest against the metaphoric conceptions of illness in general, and the literary romantic representations of disease (TB for example) in particular, there can be found multitudinal descriptions of illness in literature, whether Eastern

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or Western. "Ever since its debut in literature, illness has transcended itself and become a social and cultural issue." (Tan, 2007: 2) However, diseases in literature are never merely represented for their own sake. It is rather that authors covertly incorporate their own imagination, experience, and contemplation in their representation of illness (Gong, 2003: 14). Through vivid portrayal in literary works, illness performs aesthetic and narrative functions, as a prop for characterization, plot progression, and setting scene.

This is especially true with *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, a classic Chinese fiction in which there is a myriad of descriptions of diseases, therapies, and medicinal materials. As is shown in the following statistics, in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, "50 thousand words on 290 occasions are related to medical knowledge; 161 medical terms are used; and described are 114 cases, 13 TCM records, 45 remedies, 125 Traditional Chinese drugs, and 3 Western medicines. Statistically, of the 120 chapters in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, 66 are particularly or palpably relevant to illness or medicine, accounting for 55% of the total chapters" (Duan, 2004: 2). Many characters enter with diseases, and exit with deaths from the diseases; hence illness provides a storyline and a context for staging the interactions between characters and contemplating the existential implications of individuals, families or the whole society. In a word, the work presents an aesthetic perspective on illness and medicine.

This paper aims to, after a brief review of illness meaning and illness experience, examine the aestheticization of illness, focusing on the comparison between Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, two kernel female characters in the novel. Illness provides a distinctive approach to the two characters in terms of identity, society, and emplotment.

### I. Illness Meaning and Illness Experience

In *The Illness Narratives* (1989), Arthur Kleinman makes a distinction between three terms used to denote physical disorder: illness, disease, and sickness. While illness implies the patient's or his family's inner feelings about the symptom and pain and how they perceive, endure and react to the symptom and disability, disease is only a technical problem about biological structural or functional changes from a professional perspective. The third term, sickness, is defined as the understanding of a disorder across a population in terms of macrosocial forces. Kleinman further breaks the meanings of illness into four categories: the symptomatic, cultural, life-worldly,
and emotional. Although definite are the technical statistics and biological facts in the diagnosis of a disease, illness as a narrative is obscure in nature, without any definite meaning. Therefore, the interpretation of illness meaning tends to be individually or culturally specific, that is, for one person, an illness may be a mark of defect or evil, but for another, a symbol of perfection and love. In Roy F. Baumeister’s theorizing, meaning is defined as the “shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships” (1991: 15). It is meaning that connects things in life and endows life with cohesion. However, illness is one of the major and frequent factors that disrupt the fabric of life, disarray the coherence of identity, and finally, both temporally and spatially, dislocate the sufferer in the world. This state of loss of meaning caused by illness calls for an appropriate medium to express the illness experience, and narrative is just the most important medium to create meaning for illness experience. The disease process can be narrativized to create meaning by recontextualizing illness events and symptoms in the life world, and configuring the illness, presumed causes, life trajectory, and its social outcome, to make a causal and teleological sense.

Life in pursuit of meaning requires an understanding of illness and related events as a whole. As for literary characters in A Dream of the Red Mansions, while disregarding the inaccuracies of disease descriptions in scientific terms, we concentrate on how the characters’ illness experience is represented in an aesthetical way, and how illness contributes to characterization and conveys the author’s covert purposes.

II. Illness and Identity

Some diseases especially chronic illness and disability cause not only the loss of bodily functions but also the loss of identity or the upset of self image. The search of illness meaning is both a process and an outcome, to reach congruence between the reappraised conditions occasioned by an illness event and the person’s global beliefs and goals. However, this kind of meaning making may lead to negative life meaning, for example, a chronic illness may lead one to feel that he/she is more vulnerable and less in control, that the future is less certain, and that the world is unfair and unjust, hence a negative identity (Roussi and Avdi, 2008: 151). Identity derives from the unity of character and action and the performance of certain activities as the protagonist of a life story. When its coherence is disturbed by a disease, the patient
has to redefine the relationships between body, self, and society, readjust his/her values, priorities, and conception of self, and transcends the constraints imposed by the illness.

It sheds light both on the disparity in Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai's attitudes toward and copings with their illnesses and on the author's ambivalent purposes in characterizing the two figures in A Dream of the Red Mansions. Here is found a tension in aestheticization of illness between the morbidly beautiful as is symbolized by Lin Daiyu and the healthily beautiful as is symbolized by Xue Baochai that corresponds to that between the spiritual and the worldly idealization of female typical of the patriarchal Chinese society.

In the case of Miss Lin, her illness originates from her own physical and psychological states, and constitutes her existential condition. Lin embodies the kind of Morbid Beauty composed by her illness, grace, and talent, perfectly to the taste of the feudal Chinese scholars.

In literature, illness is usually exploited to indicate a character's sentimentality, melancholy, and loneliness. Illness, whether physical or psychological, tends to hold sway over the hero's emotion and temperament, and aesthetically contributes to the narrative point. In Chapter 2 of A Dream of The Red Mansions, Lin Daiyu makes her debut in the imagery of a patient: fragile at birth, nursing her ill mother, and so mournful at her mother's death that she frequently suffers relapses. Thus Lin's sickness and weakness can be traced back to her congenital deficiency and bereavement, which in turn accounts for her oversensitive, narcissistic, and aloof character. In Chapter 3, on her first entry into the Jia Mansion, Lin Daiyu appears disease-stricken:

All present had been struck by Daiyu's good breeding. For in spite of her tender years and evident delicate health, she had an air of natural distinction. Observing how frail she looked they asked what medicine or treatment she had been having. (Chapter 3) [1]

When introduced to Jia Baoyu, the apple of the eye in the Jia family, Lin Daiyu is pictured from his perspective:

Her dusky arched eyebrows were knitted and yet not frowning, her speaking eyes held both merriment and sorrow; her very frailty had charm. Her eyes sparkled with tears, her breath was soft and faint. In repose she was like a lovely flower mirrored in the water; in motion, a pliant willow swaying in the wind. She looked more sensitive
than Bi Gan, more delicate than Xi Shi. (Chapter 3)

As is said in Ban Zhao’s Lessons for Women: “As Yin and Yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the Yang is rigidity; the function of the Yin is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.” [2] In the time of patriarchal China, feminine frailty was an aesthetic quality because it scratched the male where they itched by signifying susceptibility to control and forming a contrast with masculine power. It is just in this line that Lin Daiyu is characterized: first as feeble, with Lin’s frailty, though attributed to her illness and adding to her delicacy and elegance, fashioned as the aesthetic object for love and pity on the part of the male; second as charming, due to her pretty look and melancholic nature, the integration of which presents her as refined, otherworldly yet spontaneous, so much so that Lin makes an icon of morbid beauty. Here, illness becomes an aesthetic object, something beautiful to enjoy by males.

Lin Daiyu’s refined manners and spontaneous nature stem from her birth and environment. Born to an aristocratic family, Lin reads extensively and becomes accomplished in such arts as music, chess, painting, and calligraphy. Her excellent memory and poetic flair contribute to her profound literacy. For all her infirmity, Lin is still a girl in her prime, ingenuous but intelligent, with extraordinary vibrancy and knowledge, which adds to her charm and charisma. Against the popular belief that “Ignorance is the virtue for women” in ancient China, the role model for beauties in Chinese literary tradition is represented as capable of poetic creation, music performance, and artistic painting. Women’s talent and taste, wisdom and knowledge, make them accessible to the mental and emotional world of men of letters and become their intimates. In the patriarchal eyes, a perfect lady should possess a pretty appearance as the object for appreciation, a feeble body susceptible to male manipulation, and enough scholarship to be intriguing and understanding. Lin Daiyu’s qualifications in these three respects make her morbid beauty a supreme model in the patriarchal discourse. In one word, Lin is created by the author as a symbol for ideal women, hence his favorite heroine in the novel.

From the novel, it is known that Lin Daiyu’s melancholy originates from her girlhood: parentless when very young and dependent on her grandma’s family. This kind of life under another’s roof shapes her susceptible and suspicious character. Her bodily ailment renders her oversensitive to the outside world; she becomes more pensive than the average healthy, by associating exterior vicissitudes with her
personal fate. Lin's mental and emotional states succumb to the course of nature, like the seasonal changes, the wax and wane. At the sight of fallen flowers, Lin would grieve over the passing of spring, and, hearing cold rain whipping window panes, feels sad with the advent of autumn. Lin's act of burying fallen flowers proves to be a lament of her own lot. Lin's poems on chrysanthemum that win her the laurel in the poetry club suggest her identification with a proud recluse. The quality of being proud and aloof was held in high esteem among ancient Confucian intellectuals whose ambition was thwarted by their wretched destiny, as represented by Du Fu who ended in poverty and Qu Yuan who plunged himself in a river. Therefore, Lin Daiyun embodies the noble nature the author admires. Lin is created after the image of traditional Chinese intellectuals and turns out to be a projection of their ideal of unwillingness to drift with the current. Consequently, more than an object for appreciation, Lin is a mirror image of the author and the like traditional Chinese men of letters.

From a psychoanalytica perspective, Laura Mulvey makes the comments in an oft-cited paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema":

Woman, then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as a bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey, 1975; 7)

In contrast with Lin Daiyu, as for Miss Xue Baochai, her illness has an exterior origin and her attitude toward illness is a pragmatic, sober and sophisticated one.

Miss Xue is portrayed as "a beautiful, dainty girl of great natural refinement" in Chapter 4. When visiting the Xues, Jia Baoyu is impressed by Xue Baochai's beauty: "There was nothing ostentatious about her costume, which was none too new. Her lips needed no rouge, her blue-black eyebrows no brush; her face seemed a silver disk, her eyes almonds swimming in water" (Chapter 8). In Chapter 5 there is a salient comparison of Xue with Lin. Xue Baochai is represented from the perspective of those in the Rong Mansion as "such a proper young lady and so charming that most people considered Daiyu inferior to her". And "Besides, Baochai's generous, tactful, and accommodating ways contrasted strongly with Daiyu's stand-offish reserve and won the hearts of her subordinates, so that nearly all the maids like to chat with her".

In representing Lin, emphasis is placed on her disposition and morbidity,
foregrounding her illness, frailty, and tears, while in the case of Xue, the narrator focuses on her lips, eyes, brows, her feature and complexion, a kind of beauty that appeals to senses and implies a male perspective. This is a sort of beauty of health, whether in physical and psychological terms: genial, mature and efficient.

Miss Xue’s amiable charm is also pictured through her illness (cough and dyspnea). In Chapter 7 when Mrs. Zhou “went into the inner room where Baochai in a house dress, her hair pinned into a loose knot, was copying an embroidery pattern with her maid Yinger at the low table on the kang. She put down her brush and turned with a smile to offer the visitor a seat”. Though a girl of a wealthy family, Baochai is plainly dressed and occupied, hence a sweet, sedulous girl. Baochai’s worldly wisdom enables her to greet Mrs. Zhou with a smile, knowing that the latter is a confidant of the powerful Wang Xifeng. This suggests that in the image of Miss Xue, maiden fair is blended with lady sophistication. Miss Xue’s sober disposition and resourcefulness are shown in her dealing with family troubles:

Aunt Xue’s anger over the scene with Jingui upset her liver, bringing on a pain in her left side. Baochai, knowing the cause, did not wait for the doctor to come but first sent out to buy a little Ourouparia rhynebophylla and brewed a strong bowlful of this for her to drink. Then she and Xiangling massaged the patient’s legs and rubbed her chest until presently she felt better. (Chapter 84)

Aunt Xue felt much better at Xue Baochai’s soothing. With presence of mind in the face of disasters, Baochai quells the turmoil created by swollen Jingui and Baochan, and bids prompt and effective treatment for her mother’s disease. Her self-possession and shrewdness are evidenced in her immediate solution to the family crisis.

Miss Xue, glamorous, intelligent, and efficient at conducting daily routines, represents another sort of female icon the author admires, and manifests the feminine qualities the society adores: beauty and vitality. With the duty to carry on the family line, only the healthy can produce viable offsprings. One of the major ethical concerns for ancient Chinese males was to proliferate to continue the family name, and that is why the author plots Xue Baochai’s conception before Baoyu converts to Buddhist monasticism.

We are tempted to say, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai symbolize the split in the identity of women (or indeed Confucian scholars): the aesthetic and the ethic, with the former representing the kind of beauty for men on the spiritual level, the latter on
the worldly level. In other words, ancient Chinese intellectual were always vacillating between two extremes of spiritual hermit with narcissistic autonomy and worldly governor with virtue and knowledge.

III. Illness and Society

In medical terms, an illness is a deviation from the normal, specific and universal, caused by unique biological factors, and can be repaired biologically. Similarly, illness is defined socially as a deviation from social norms or conventions, from accepted way of conduct, interaction, and social life. Illness bears complex social and cultural meanings in that its ramifications bring changes to social relationships. "Patients experience their illnesses and treatments in a particular context that both shapes and is shaped by their relationships. When illness is such that it alters the patient’s function, social role, or identity, there are inevitable changes in their relationships as well." (Hill, 2003) Usually, labeling a condition an illness reflects the commonly perceived undesirable affects of that condition. The social meaning of illness is individually specific, with regards to the individual reassessment of the viability of social relationships, the priorities in his/her life, and the potential of personal accomplishments. For psychological survival, to make sense of social meaning of an illness entails means to maintain agreeable social relationships and to secure a decent self image. The misfortune caused by illness alerts the sufferer to kinds of self-deception and failures of personality. Illness acquires social meaning in the way people react to the illness and to the patient. "Diseases bring people a distintive experience, and plunge them in a state of disharmony, disequilibrium, disability, and discomfort. In this condition the patient feels a loss of his familiar world, a change of existential status, a change in his being the world. Disease also causes the loss of individual identity, disturbs the patient’s mood and mentality, and fractures his social relationship with those around him." (Xiao, 2008: 68).

The novel renders a detailed account of a variety of diseases, prescriptions, therapies, and visitations. For example, Keqing’s falling ill puts the family in turmoil; people vie with one another to console Baoyu after he is beaten; Second Sister’s miserably dies from illness. From the Jia families’ and servants’ discriminative reactions to the ill, Lin Daiyu sees clearly their snobbery and experiences deeply a pain of finding shelter under their roof. When Xue Baochai recommends bird’s-nest to Daiyu for her indisposition, the latter replies with overdone worries:
If I started demanding bird's-nest now, the Lady Dowager, Lady Wang and Xifeng wouldn't say anything, but those below would be bound to think me too pernickety. Look how jealous these people are and how much gossip there is here because the old lady favours Baoyu and Xifeng. In my case, they'd resent it even more. After all, I'm not a daughter of the house; I'm here because I've nowhere else to go. They resent me enough as it is. If I should push myself forward, they'd all start cursing me. (Chapter 45)

For Daiyu, being ill provides an occasion to perceive and reflect on the fickle relationships and precarious realities. This experience gives her a keener sense, than her peers as adolescents, of the depressing society and human nature.

It can be concluded that, on the part of Lin Daiyu, illness turns out to be a sanctuary to escape from the real world. Though the dearest granddaughter of the Lady Dowager, true love of Baoyu, and the envy of many for her rosy looks and scholarly talents, Daiyu is inept, with her standoffish conceit, at ingratiating or handling her forlorn life situation. To avoid becoming an Aunt Sally and protect herself from potential risks, Daiyu turns to illness as a final resort to shelter from "The cutting wind and biting frost" in the Jia Mansion. Consequently, Daiyu unconsciously takes a negative attitude toward her illness and follows the natural course rather than hopefully fight and conquer her illness, as is illustrated by her reluctance when Zi Juan urged her to take medicine in Chapter 35. Sometimes this obsession with illness grows into a slight kind of self-abuse, for Daiyu, fully aware of her disadvantaged position, finds great comfort within her shell of illness. The ill Lin Dayu is in a love-and-hate mentality when indeed in need of society and companionship:

She therefore stayed in her own rooms to rest. Sometimes she grew bored and wished the girls would drop in for a chat to while away the time; yet when Baochai and the rest called to see how she was, a short conversation was enough to exhaust her. Knowing how delicate and hypersensitive she was, they all made allowances for her, overlooking any lack of hospitality and courtesy. (Chapter 45)

For Lin Daiyu, illness is also an outlet to manifest her love for Jia Baoyu. On the one hand, Daiyu's intense affection is the major pathogenic factor for her illness. Feeling hopeless about her union with Baoyu, Daiyu grows depressed and susceptible to tears; hence her illness is a symptom of her inner sorrows. As narrated in Chapter 32: "Grieved because her parents had died, and although his preference was so clear
there was no one to propose the match for her. Besides, she had recently been suffering from dizzy spells which the doctor had warned might end in consumption, as she was so weak and frail. " Her illness can arouse Baoyu's concern and bring them closer to each other, for Baoyu always shows the utmost solicitude when she falls ill.

On the other, illness is a means for Daiyu so assert her self and demonstrate her love for Baoyu. For all their mutual affection and expectation, they have to suppress their feelings and restrain their personality in a time when feudal Chinese ethics and codes disapproved overt confession of love and public intimacy. Though able to rely on her grandmother's partiality, Daiyu has no say in her own marriage. Daiyu cannot express her love and passion for Baoyu overtly, but hint covertly. Daiyu chooses illness as a means to convey her attachment to Baoyu. That's why whenever a dispute occurs between them, Daiyu will suffer a relapse of her persistent ailment. Here, her symptoms are nothing but disguised manifestation of the force of love. Daiyu's violent cough and the handkerchief stained by hemoptysis represent the final outburst of her long repressed feelings, the final demonstration of her high-mindedness as proclaimed in her poetic lines "For pure you came and pure shall go, / Not sinking into some foul ditch or mire" (Chapter 27).

As for Xue Baochai, illness and medicine constitute major resources to socialize and highlight her social status. The gregarious Baochai often chooses illness and medicine as the topic for chitchat, a topic that is trivial but indicative of her family wealth and reputation, as is represented in Chapter 7 in her gossip with Mrs. Zhou. Though a master in station, Baochai is indeed a guest residing in the Jia Mansion, while Mrs. Zhou is a powerful housekeeper favored both by Lady Wang and Xifeng, and, most important of all, a snob. When asked about her condition, Baochai smiled: "Goodness knows how much silver we've squandered on doctors and medicines to cure this illness of mine. The most famous physicians and the most fabulous drugs were of no use at all." (Chapter 7) The only cure is Cold Fragrance Pills, whose ingredients are rare and difficult to dispense. She then dwells on the queer formula and coincidence procedures, at which Mrs. Zhou marveled: "How terribly chancy! You might wait ten years without such a run of luck." (Chapter 7) Therefore, here the talk about illness and medicine renders an occasion for communicating with people, with Cold Fragrance Pills symbolizing one's social distinction.

With her medical knowledge and a drug store of her own, Baochai is able to obtain her position in the Jia Mansion by favor, and illness and medicine just function
as a good means to which she can resort. Baochai tends to offer medical materials to
the major figures in the Jia Mansion. When Baoyu is disciplined by her father Jia
Zheng, she delivers in person drugs that loosen congestion to win favor with Baoyu:

Just then Baochai was announced. As there was no time to clothe Baoyu again,
Xiren threw a lined gauze coverlet over him as Baochai walked in, a pill in one
hand.

“Dissolve this drug in wine this evening and apply it as a salve,” she told
Xiren. “That will draw the heat and poison from the bruise and help to cure him.”
(Chapter 34)

It is evident that Baochai is specialized in medication. When examining Baoyu’s
wounds, Baochai consoles Baoyu with caressing and affectionate words, which makes
Baoyu greatly touched. All her gestures produced the expected effects for Baoyu
“could see that while saying what was right and proper Baochai was also trying to put
him at his ease. He felt even more touched” (Chapter 34). And even Xiren
returned to Baoyu “With a warm sense of gratitude to her [Xue Baochai]” (Chapter
34). With the wealth of the Jia Mansion and Baoyu’s unique position in the family,
whatever rare and valuable drugs would be available, and Miss Xue does not have to
go out of her way to offer them. However, Baoyu’s wounds do provide an occasion
and drugs a means for her to achieve the otherwise difficult goal—tugging at Baoyu’s
heartstrings.

In Chapter 77 when Lady Wang is at a loss about the accessibility of ginseng,
the medicine urgently needed for Wang Xifeng’s disease, Baochai gives a detailed
account of how ginseng can be faked in the outside world, and volunteers to secure a
genuine one that night. Since Lady Wang is eager for the recovery of Xifeng, her
capable assistant, Baochai timely wins favor with Lady Wang in need. Illness and
medicine turns out an effective medium for her to elevate and fortify her position in
the Jia family.

It is even more amazing that Baochai wins Daiyu’s trust by way of the latter’s
ailment. In Chapter 45 when visiting the ill Daiyu, she makes exhaustive comments
on her disease and prescription, which moves Daiyu to these inmate words:

“How good you always are to others!” Daiyu exclaimed with a sigh. “I’m so touchy
that I used to suspect your motives. I really began to appreciate you that day when
you warned me against indiscriminate reading and gave me such good advice. I can
see now I’d misjudged you all along.” (Chapter 45)
Naturally, in a dependent situation, Daiyu would confide her helplessness to a person around who shows care and attention, especially when Baochai puts herself in Daiyu's shoes: father's early death and taking shelter in the Jia Mansion, which furthers their mutual commiseration and enhances their intimacy. As the saying goes, "Fellow-sufferers can sympathize with each other". That night Baochai delivers a big package of the best quality bird's-nest and a packet of fine plum-petal snow-white sugar from Alpinia Park. When ill, one is vulnerable and in need of care and help from others. It is at this juncture that Baochai endears herself to Daiyu.

IV. Illness and Emplotment

The actual domain of the narrative universe falls, by physical laws, into what Pavel (1980) calls the flat and salient ontologies, the latter marked by a distinction between the profane (or natural) and the sacred (or the supernatural) world. The actual world of A Dream of The Red Mansions is heterogeneous in that the narrative about supernatural or sacred world frames the main story, i.e., the experience of the stone in the human world. As a literary convention in classic Chinese fictions, the supernatural world presents a causal or even deterministic account about the origins, relations and endings of characters in the profane world, but never intervenes in the events in that world. It is a commonplace that Lin Daiyu's love for Jia Baoyu is paying her debts with tears. To fulfill this framing narrative arc, some kind of medium must be found in the framed story world, and this medium is tuberculosis.

For Daiyu, illness is her life course and predestination. In her interminable illness process, Daiyu ponders over her present and future, her romance with Baoyu, and, given her noble and ingenuous nature, does not yield to the worldly way of life, nor hesitates to embrace death when disillusioned about the prospect of her affection. "Love and death constitute the paradox for human existence; love desires perfection and plenty, but also bears a deadly telson. Love lives for eternity, but also breeds death." (Berdyaev, 1994: 198) As an established literary formula, the graceful death for a noble, pretty young girl is one from illness, which possesses a higher aesthetic quality if its etiology is languished love.

At the last moment of her life, learning that Baoyu's bride is Baochai instead of her, Daiyu grows masochistic, ready to knock on death's door. Daiyu's apathy about life and final relinquishment result from her disillusion with love, existence, and future. At this juncture, tuberculosis provides a justifiable means for her to put an end to her sea of troubles. In Western literature, "TB was represented as the
prototypical death. Often it was a kind of suicide [...] . TB sufferers may be represented as passionate but are, more characteristically, deficient in vitality, in life force” (Sontag, 1977: 24–25). In literary tradition, tuberculosis usually triggers romantic imaginations for its stereotypical association with artistic genius, fleeting beauty, and forsaken love. The aesthetic implications of this disease derive from its physical manifestations, for example, rosy cheeks, slender figures, brooding eyes, and sombre mood.

In contrast, Xue Baochai makes tactful use of diseases to win the hearts both of the superiors and subordinates in the Jia Mansion, and finally ranks with the hostesses in power. Diseases help her to keep disorders in bay. During Baoyu’s fits of insanity, Baochai tends to make amazing yet efficient decisions. For example, she overrides all objections to inform Baoyu of Daiyu’s death, in order to sober him up and facilitate his recovery. For all her efforts to cure Baoyu with her tenderness and soothing, Baochai does not evade the tragic fortune caused by illness—deserted by Baoyu who converted to monasticism.

Unnamed exactly, Xue Baochai’s illness is characterized by the medicative rarity. In some way, both Lin and Xue are beyond cure. The two icons of the aesthetic and the ethic idealism, represent meditations on the dysphoric condition of traditional Confucian intellectuals.

Notes:
[1] The quotations in this paper are all from the English version by Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-yi. In the paper, the specific sources of quoted passages are numbered by chapter instead of page.
[2] The quotation is Nancy Lee Swann’s translation.

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