Psychological Subversion of the Patriarchal Order in *The Tao Te Ching* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

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According to some feminist literary historians and critics, Anglo-American fiction did not become self-conscious of the male domination and oppression of women until the early nineteenth century.\(^6\) Jane Austen’s novels are often cited as evidence of burgeoning feminine consciousness in this period. About half a century earlier, however, Asian literature saw the advent of a monumental novel with an indigenous feminist motif. It is Cao Xueqing’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, widely acknowledged as the greatest novel in premodern Chinese literature.\(^5\) As a rule, the Chinese literary mind falls behind its English counterpart in portraying women’s emancipation due to the Confucian moral system, but this novel is an exception. Chronologically, it antedates Jane Austen’s novels. Thematically, it openly protests against the subjugation of women and explicitly engages in subverting the male order. In many ways, it anticipates the subversion of phallogocentrism undertaken by present-day feminist writers. As China’s (and probably the world’s) first great feminist novel,\(^5\) it is a fertile ground for women’s studies, capable of providing insights and
inspirations across cultural boundaries.

**Strategy of Subversion**

Cao Xue-qing lived and wrote his novel in an epoch when the Confucian repression of women had reached its zenith. Naturally, he could not openly condemn the subjugation of women in his writing. He opens his novel with an introduction which sets the strategy of his subversion:

> In this busy, dusty world, having accomplished nothing, I suddenly recalled all the girls I had known, considering each in turn, and it dawned on me that all of them surpassed me in behaviour and understanding; that I, shameful to say, for all my masculine dignity, fell short of the gentler sex... (Yang 1:1).

Although the author does not hesitate to reverse the Confucian evaluation of man and woman, he accomplishes his mission of subverting the patriarchal order mostly implicitly and often in psychological terms. Like most of the early women writers in the feminist tradition, Cao Xue-qing, in Emily Dickinson’s words, chose to “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” Determined as he was to set up a monument to the “gentler sex” with his novel, he nevertheless covers up his intention by continuing:

> I decided then to make known to all how I, though dressed in silks and delicately nurtured thanks to the Imperial favours and my ancestors’ virtue, had nevertheless
ignored the kindly guidance of my elders as well as the good advice of teachers and friends, with the result that I had wasted half my life and not acquired a single skill. But no matter how unforgivable my crimes, I must not let all the lovely girls I have known pass into oblivion through my wickedness or my desire to hide my shortcomings.

Though my home is now a thatched cottage with matting windows, earthen stove and rope-bed, this shall not stop me from laying bare my heart.... Though I have little learning or literary talent, what does it matter if I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely girls. This should divert readers too and help distract them from their cares. That is why I use the other name Chia Yu-tsun. What's more, I scatter the narrative with such words as “dreams” and “fantasies” which are really the original purport of this novel and serve as a reminder for the reader. (Yang 1:2) “Chia Yu-tsung” is not only the homophone for “fiction in rustic language” but also the name of a major character in the novel that is a homophone for “false words retained.” It is also related to the name of another character, “Chen Shih-yin,” a homophone for “true facts concealed.” It echoes the opening paragraph: “This is the opening chapter of the novel. In writing this story of the Stone the author wanted to record certain of his past dreams and illusions, but he tried to hide the true facts of his experience by using the allegory of the jade of ‘Spiritual Understanding’. Hence his recourse to names like Chen Shih-yin”. (Yang 1:1)

The author is engaged in an act of balance between revealing his intention and concealing it. On the one hand, he is afraid the reader
might not get his message; on the other, he fears that his message is too evident. His narrative strategy is similar to that of early female writers in the Anglo-American tradition who use surface designs to conceal or obscure deeper, and often socially and morally less acceptable, levels of meaning. In the opening section, if we take away the words like “illusion”, “dreams”, “Imperial favor”, and “ancestors’ virtue”, the substance is his intention to establish a monument to those “girls” who really represent the female sex. Through an adroit portrayal of these extraordinary female characters, Cao successfully accomplishes the difficult task of upholding the cause of the feminine sex in a Confucian setting by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal standards.

This strategy of subversion is used throughout the novel and can be illustrated with one extraordinary example. The narrator asserts: “As a result of being brought up among girls... he [the male protagonist] had come to the conclusion that while human beings were the highest form of creation, the finest essences of Nature were embodied in girls, men being nothing but the dregs and scum. To him, therefore, all men were filthy clods who might just as well not have existed”. (Yang 1:291) This reverses the Confucian tenet that “man is superior to woman” and turns upside down the phallocentrism that privileges males over females. As if conscious of the too obvious intention of subversion, the author hastily adds: “Only in the case of his father, uncle and brother, where rudeness and disobedience were expressly forbidden by the teachings of Confucius, did he make an exception—and even then the allowances he made in respect of the fraternal bond were extremely perfunctory” (Hawkes 1:408).
Subverting the Male/Female Hierarchy

One of the central themes of the novel, I suggest, is a psychological subversion of the male/female hierarchy. To a certain extent, the act of subversion anticipates the systematic efforts at subversion of the patriarchal order carried out by modern feminists. Jia Bao-yu, the male protagonist, acts as though he were the spokesman for the oppressed sex. In Chapter One, Bao-yu says: “Girls are made of water, men of mud. I feel clean and refreshed when I am with girls but find men dirty and stinking” (Yang 1:26). Because of these words, his father predicts that Bao-yu will grow up to be a lady-killer.

I want to suggest that Bao-yu’s remarks not only subvert the accepted truism in Confucian society that woman is inferior to man but also show his profound insight into the cultural construction of femininity. More significantly, he anticipates a subversive act undertaken by modern feminists and deconstructionists. Present-day feminist analysis of the male/female and culture/nature opposition arrives at a conclusion that has been summarized by Sherry Ortner, “everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men” (1974, 69). Ortner sees the “universal devaluation of women” as a result of an all-pervasive binary logic in which male/female is pictured as parallel to culture/nature, and where “nature” always is seen as representing a “lower order of existence” (1974, 72). Following Derrida, who labels the mainstream of Western thinking phallogocentric because of its consistent privileging of the Logos, the Word as a metaphysical presence, Helene Cixous has been engaged in a similar theoretical
project, the aim of which is “to undo the logocentric ideology: to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language that ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women” (Moi 1985, 105). By comparison, Bao-yu’s act of subversion may be more intuitive than those of modern feminists, but I believe that its intent is basically the same.

In *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991), Luce Irigaray argues that water is the element most alien to Nietzsche and that he feared water because of the patriarchal equation of fluids with woman: woman as water, as the life-giving sea, as the source of blood, milk, and amniotic fluid. She claims that Nietzsche’s fear of water is a fear of the feminine. Irigaray argues that water is something endowed with the highest destructive potential for his discourse. Bao-yu arrives at a similar insight, using the analogy of water to overturn the hierarchy of man and woman in Confucian society. Bao-yu’s privileging of water over mud is equivalent to privileging female over male. Through the mouth of Bao-yu, the author turns upside down the accepted truism of man’s superiority and woman’s inferiority and does something few writers had dared to do in Chinese literature before modern times.

Bao-yu’s equation of woman with water may have been inspired by Taoist thought. In the Taoist classic, *Tao Te Ching* (4th or 3rd c. B.C.), the female, water, and the valley are concrete examples to explain the inexplicable and nameless Tao (the Way) and Te (virtue): “Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and
settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way” (Lau
1963, 64). In a similar way, Bao-yu derives his conception of female
nature from the three characteristics of water: benefiting myriad
creatures, contending with nobody, and settling in lowly places. In
“Cao Xue-qin’s Anti-traditional Thinking,” the eminent Sinologist
Yu Ying-shih claims that among all his anti-traditional precursors,
Cao appreciated Yuan Ji the most, and the ancient text that he loved
most is Chuang Tzu (1983, 185). Yuan Ji was a Taoist eccentric,
and Chuang Tzu (3rd c. B.C.) is a Taoist classic. In The Dream of
the Red Chamber, Bao-yu is a lover of Taoist writings, who reads
and quotes from Chuang Tzu and refers as well to Lao Tzu and other
Taoist writers. To a great extent, the anti-Confucian theme in the
novel comes from the author’s upholding of Taoist ideas. As Yu
Ying-shih summarizes, “In short, Cao Xue-qin’s anti-traditional
thinking belongs to the anti-moralist school of the Wei and Jing
period. This school of thinkers uphold Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu’s
theory of nature in opposition of Confucian ethical school” (1983,
188). It is, therefore, not far wrong to speculate that Cao Xue-qing’s
quasi-feminist ideas are derived from the Taoist school of thought, in
opposition to the patriarchal hegemony of Confucianism. In
Thinking About Women, Mary Ellmann argues that Western culture at all
levels is pervaded by what she calls “thought by sexual analogy”, and
that there exists a general tendency to “comprehend all phenomena,
however shifting, in terms of our original and simple sexual
differences; and ... classify almost all experience by means of sexual
analogy” (1968, 6). This intellectual habit deeply influences Western
perceptions of the world and greatly affects Western women’s position
in society. Unlike Western philosophy, which privileges the male
principle at the expense of the female principle, Taoism holds that Yin (the female principle) and Yang (the male principle) are the primordial forces in the universe whose constant interactions give form to the myriads things of the phenomenal world. It does not privilege one at the expense of the other, although Taoism normally refers to the two principles in the order of yin first and yang second.

In Taoism, water is a female, and often a maternal symbol. It belongs to the female principle, yin.

In Chinese philosophy, the Tao is the most fundamental concept, which is often construed to be commensurate with the Western concept of the “Logos”. Few, however, seem to have noticed that the Tao and Logos have different and even opposite implications with regard to their ontological basis. The origin and foundation of most Western philosophers’ theories is, according to Derrida, a belief in metaphysical presence. Because of the assumption of presence, in any binary opposition, a priority is given to the term that represents presence, voice, and fullness while the term that represents absence, silence, and emptiness is relegated to the lower position in the hierarchy. The Logos, which represents the first and last thing, the self-presence of full self-consciousness, the Word, or the Divine Mind, is an epitome of the metaphysical presence (Derrida 1967, 10-26). Hence Derrida labels the Western philosophical tradition “logocentric”.

By contrast, the origin and foundation of the Tao is wu, a concept which covers a gamut of meanings like “absence”, “emptiness”, or “nothingness”. Taoism holds that the Tao is the emptiness or nothingness that gives birth to all things. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the unnameable and indescribable Tao is compared to an
"empty bowl". The Tao Te Ching opens with the statement:

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the constant Tao;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
Being nothing, it was the beginning of heaven and earth;
As something, it was the mother of the myriad creatures.®

In this quotation, "nothing" is the ontology of the Tao while "something" is its function. Though both "nothing" and "something" are the two aspects of the binary opposition in the Tao, "nothing" occupies the upper part of the hierarchy, for the Tao Te Ching says in a later chapter (ch. 41), "The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing" (Lau 1963, 101). In another chapter (ch. 42), the Tao Te Ching hints that the Tao is equivalent to nothingness: "The Way [Tao] begets one; one begets two; two begets three; the three begets myriad creatures" (103). Chuang Tzu, the second Taoist founder, said something similar, "In the beginning, there was wu or nothingness; the nameless wu is the origin of one."

Derrida, in addition to labeling the mainstream Western thinking logocentric due to its consistent privileging of the Logos as a metaphysical presence, challenges another major trend in Western thinking: phallocentrism or the tendency to privilege the phallus as the symbol of presence and source of power. He calls the conjunction of logocentrism with phallocentrism "phallogocentrism". By contrast, the Chinese concept of Tao in Taoism is entirely free from
any phallocentric connotations. In fact, the Tao in Taoism denotes just the opposite: the privileging of nothingness, the womb, vagina, lack, or absence.

In human anatomy, the vagina is often perceived as a lack; so is the womb. In Western tradition, since the etymological root of the word “hysteria” is the Greek hyster, or the womb, and the hysteric is one whose wandering womb shows the female bondage of mind and body, woman’s inferior destiny was believed to be determined by anatomy. This “anatomy-is-destiny” mentality, Cixous and Clement argue in The Newly Born Woman, is largely responsible for the association of woman in Western history, philosophy, psychology and literature with a group of anomalies—neurotics, psychopaths, sorceresses, witches, and deviants—and accounts to a great extent for the perpetuation of women’s inferior status in patriarchal societies (1975, 3-39).

In Taoism, however, the qualities associated with the womb or vagina—lack, or absence, or nothingness, or silence—are not demoted. Ellen Marie Chen, who compares the different conceptions of the female in the Tao Te Ching and Pythagoreans, points out, “Both the Tao Te Ching and the Pythagoreans identify the female with the indeterminate, empty, dark, unlimited, and formless. But in the Tao Te Ching the female is the origin of motion, life, and unity in all things, while for the Pythagoreans it was the source of evil, corruption, and multiplicity” (1969, 401). Indeed, the Tao Te Ching, which sees the concept of wu or emptiness as evincing a “mother principle”, argues that wu or emptiness, far from being void of substance, is a procreative force, from which all creation derives. “The Way [Tao] is empty, yet use will not drain it. / Deep, it is like
the ancestor of the myriad creatures” (Lau 1963, 60).

Scholars of Chinese Taoism have worked out various explanations for the origins of the Tao. In my opinion, however, the Taoist conception of wu or emptiness as the source of all creations may have, at least partially, derived from the female anatomy and the process of gestation and birth. The Tao Te Ching describes Tao in extremely feminine and maternal terms. It frequently refers to the connection between the Tao and the female anatomy. In attempting to explain the inexplicable and unnameable principle of Tao, Taoism conceptualizes such “female” qualities as lack, void, silence, emptiness, water, and the mother as equivalents of the Tao. One of the pervasive images that the Tao Te Ching employs to symbolize the principle of Tao is the valley: “The spirit of the valley never dies. / This is called the mysterious female. / The gateway of the mysterious female/ Is called the root of heaven and earth” (Lau 1963, 62).

The metaphor of the valley, I believe, is based on the physical attributes of woman, especially her vagina and womb. Here, the Taoist idea differs fundamentally from the phallogocentrism of mainstream Western thinking. As Irigaray and Derrida have shown, patriarchal thinking bases its criteria for “positive” values on the central assumption of the Phallus and the Logos as transcendental signifiers of Western culture. This patriarchal mode of thinking, according to psychoanalytic theories, is based on the difference in male and female anatomy. The phallus (penis) is often conceived of as a whole, unitary, and unified form, as opposed to the terrifying and fragmentary chaos of the female genitals. Anything conceived of as analogous to the “positive” values of the phallus is regarded as
good, true, and beautiful, while anything that is not shaped on the pattern of the phallus is defined as chaotic, fragmented, negative, or nonexistent. For this reason, woman is associated with loss, lack, absence, chaos, disorder, silence, and nature (I should mention in passing that one version of *the Tao Te Ching* translates Tao as “nature”), while men are associated with wholeness, fullness, presence, discipline, order, voice, and culture.

Because the womb and the vagina are the places where life begins, the valley, associated with the womb by its shape, is viewed in *the Tao Te Ching* as “the gateway of the mysterious female”. Hence, the Tao is viewed as the mysterious female and the root of all universe: “There is something confusedly formed, \( I \) Born before heaven and earth. \( I \) Silent and void \( I \) It stands alone and does not change, \( I \) Goes round and does not weary. \( I \) It is capable of being the mother of the world” (Lau 1963, 82). In Taoism, rather than being a lack, the female anatomy is seen as life-giving. It is perhaps for these reasons that Taoism posits that the Tao is *wu* or nothingness which, in turn, gives birth to one; one to two; and two to three; and to infinity (Lau 1963, 101). When “nothing” is viewed as the root of “something”, the “lack” becomes superior to the “presence”.

How refreshing it is to know that Taoism approaches female anatomy from a positive perspective and associates women’s physical attributes with the universal principle of the *Tao* and the highest virtue *Te*. Bao-yu, conversant with Taoism, may have conceptualized female superiority to the male under the influence of Taoist doctrines.

In the Taoist conception, water symbolizes the principle of the Tao because of its association with the valley. Water is contained in the valley; water is life-giving; and water is the mother of all living
things. In Chinese culture, water is often placed in binary opposition with mud. In other words, water and mud are two opposite terms, in the same way female and male are antinomies. Mud disgusts Bao-yu not only because of its connection to dirt but also because of the tyrannical oppression of women by men in Confucian society. There is a popular Chinese saying, "When water comes, earth blocks its way", suggesting that water and earth are constantly locked in a struggle. Either water is locked by earth or it breaks open the dike of earth. The conflict between water and earth symbolizes the struggle between the male, who wants to perpetuate the oppression of women and the female, who wants to rebel against male oppression. Bao-yu’s view of girls as being made of water anticipates Irigaray’s discovery of water as a subversive force in her dialogue with Nietzsche. His subversion of the male/female hierarchy symbolized by the opposition between water and mud is relevant to Western culture, for the Old Testament tells us that Adam, the first man, was made of earth, and the first woman was made out of one of Adam’s ribs. Bao-yu’s privileging of water over mud overturns the hierarchical opposition between male and female which prevails in both Confucian and Western traditions.

Female Superiority Through Mystic Discourse

The Dream of the Red Chamber is often criticized for its fatalist narrative structure predicated on the Buddhist theories of karma, the Taoist notion of escapism, and a superstitious belief in predestination. Viewed from a feminist angle, these limitations are a strategy of subversion employed by the author to escape the censure and censorship of the male-dominated Confucian society. The
supernatural and superstitious elements of karma, retribution, and escapism are adumbrations of a mystic discourse through which the author subverts the male order.

Luce Irigaray argues that, in a male-dominated society, the female is not allowed to condemn or rebel against male dominance or to talk frankly about female sexuality. Condemnation of men's oppression and frank discussion of female sexuality, love, and female superiority are made possible only in the mystic discourse, which is the "only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (1985, 191).

I might add that mysticism also gives such freedom to women in the East. The mystic discourse is central to the subversion of the male order in the Dream. The author reworked a Chinese myth, Nu Kua's creation of humanity and repair of the broken universe. One common interpretation has it that the Nu Kua myth provides the novel with a mythological framework which endows it with both strength and weakness. The strength lies in its giving the novel a mythical and mysterious atmosphere, a way in which the author could order diverse materials into an intelligible structure, and an archetypal pattern within the context of the Chinese tradition (Plaks 1976, 27-42). But some Chinese Marxist critics claim that the mythical framework has an ideological weakness which undercuts the progressive and democratic ideas of the novel. In one scholar's opinion, "Cao Xue-qin is a great writer, simply because his realistic creative method overcomes his backward world outlook" (Li Hsi-Fan 1954, 26). From a Marxist point of view, if all the events and actions in the novel are prearranged by karma and heaven, then the novel promotes the superstitious idea of predestination and reflects the
nihilistic idea of Buddhism and the escapist idea of Taoism.

A feminist reading may argue for the opposite. I suggest that the mythological framework has a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it is a subversive strategy that protects the author from possible suspicion and persecution from the male-dominated society. In her colossal efforts to repair the broken sky, the Goddess Nu Kua created 36,501 large building blocks. She used all except one, which was transformed into the male protagonist Bao-yu. The unused stone is described as feeling ashamed for being rejected as unworthy to repair the sky and as passing its days in sorrow and lamentation. Previous scholars have interpreted the stone’s lamentation as a sorrow for not being able to repair the Confucian social order. The novel shows Bao­yu as a talented scholar who deserts the world of Red Dust only after he successfully passes imperial examinations. Thus, it is not that he does not have the talent to repair the Confucian world order, but that he does not have the desire to perpetuate the patriarchal order that oppresses women. As the novel shows, the stone is the carrier of the remarkable life history of a number of females, as it claims: “Much better are the girls I have known myself during my young days. I wouldn’t presume to rank them as superior to all the characters of earlier works, yet their stories may serve to dispel boredom and care” (Yang 1:4). Moreover, the stone claims that the story inscribed on its body “offers readers something new, unlike those hackneyed and stale hodge-podges of sudden partings and encounters which teem with talented scholars and lovely girls—Tsao Tzu-chien, Cho Wen-chun, Hung-niang, Hsiao-yu and the like” (Yang 1:5). Evidently, the author wanted to present the female characters not as the polarized images of angel or demon, but as extraordinary human
beings of the female sex.

The reference to the Nu Kua myth is also a way to reaffirm women’s superiority in society, lost since the triumph of patriarchy in the remote past, and it fits the novel’s general scheme of upholding the cause of women. As such it has feminist potential across cultural boundaries. The Christian myth of creation perpetuates the superiority of man to woman in stating that the first man was made by God (a father figure) and the first woman out of a rib from the first man. The Arab tradition has it that women were created from the sins of devils and, according to another version, from the tail of a monkey. The Southern Slavs have a legend in which God absent-mindedly laid aside Adam’s rib when he was in the process of making the first woman. A dog came along, snatched up the rib, and ran away with it. God chased the dog but was only able to snatch off its tail. From it He made the first woman (Hays 1964, 2). In contrast to the Western tradition, the author of The Dream of The Red Chamber chooses the Nu Kua myth with its distinctly feminist overtones. In Chinese mythology, Nu Kua, a mythic female with a human head and a snake’s body, is a mighty goddess comparable to the Western God in the making of human beings. There is, of course, a major difference; while Christianity is monotheistic, the Chinese mythology is polytheistic, with many gods and goddesses. Nu Kua is one of the greatest deities in Chinese mythology, comparable to a major Greek goddess. Among her many exploits, she is reputed to have created human beings and repaired the broken heavens. According to one popular Chinese myth, when heaven and earth had opened forth, but before there were human beings, Nu Kua created human beings by patting yellow earth together. But the work was too strenuous for
her to have any free time, so she dragged a rope through mud and swung it. The mud drops from the rope miraculously turned into human beings (Ying 1968, 83).

Another of Nu Kua's exploits is briefly narrated by Liu An in *Huai-Nan Tzu* with a more pointed feminist implication; the repair of the broken heavens. According to one Chinese myth:

In very ancient times, the four pillars [at the compass points] were broken down, the nine provinces [of the habitable world] were split apart, Heaven did not wholly cover [Earth], and earth did not completely support [Heaven]. Fires flamed without being extinguished, waters inundated without being stopped, fierce beasts ate the people, and birds of prey seized the old and weak in their claws. Thereupon Nu-Kua fused together stones of the five colors with which she patched together azure Heaven. She cut off the feet of a turtle with which she set up the four pillars. She slaughtered the Black Dragon in order to save the province of Chi [the present Hopei and Shansi provinces in North China]. She collected the ashes of reeds with which to check the wild waters. (Bodde 1961, 386-87)

This account parallels the Western legend of the primeval Flood. There is, of course, again a fundamental difference: whereas the flood in the Chinese legend was a cataclysm wrought by another god out of wrath over his defeat by his rival, the Western flood occurred as a punishment for the wickedness of men by God, who decided to flood the earth and kill all except the chosen man Noah and his
immediate family. By comparison, Nu Kua is a more humane savior. She is not only the maker of human kind but also an extraordinary heroine, a true savior preferable to the Old Testament God.

Nu Kua’s repair of the broken heavens has another feminist implication. The cause of the Chinese flood was the rivalry between two male gods. In the Chinese legend, Gong Gong, a god of water with a human face, a snake’s body, and red hair, was engaged in rivalry with Zhuan-xu, another male god, for the throne. Gong Gong could not win, and in a fit of rage, he bumped his head against the Bu-Zhou Mountain which was the pillar of Heaven. After the pillar was broken, Heaven slanted toward the northwest, and the southeast of the earth sank to become the vast ocean (Shi Xuan-yuan et al. 1973). When the universal cataclysm upset the foundations of the Earth and subjected its inhabitants to the natural disasters of fire, floods, and wild beasts, Nu Kua came on the scene, repaired the broken heaven, and saved people from natural calamities. Thus, Nu Kua was a female who successfully relieved the male-created disaster.

Evidently, Nu Kua’s myth is woven into the novel’s structure to imply that the creator and savior of mankind is a woman, just as all people are born of women. Since the female is the origin and source of all creation, she should occupy a central position in society rather than being marginalized as the “other” of the male. From this point of view, the reworking of the Nu Kua myth represents the author’s attempt to create a mystic discourse as the background for the female characters in the novel to stage their human drama.

The mystic discourse is also exemplified in the novel by the Magic Mirror related to one of the most successfully portrayed female characters in the novel, Wang Xi-feng. She represents what Gilbert

122
and Gubar call the image of woman’s rage and the author’s anger against male oppression (1979, 78). Wang Xi-feng does not follow the Confucian code of feminine virtue. The author hints in the novel that she carries on a secret affair with one of her male relatives. But she is as a shrewd avenger who metes out punishment to any man who tries to take advantage of her. In the episode of the Magic Mirror, Jia Rui, a male cousin of her husband’s, attempts to seduce her. She ostensibly agrees to the seduction, but secretly sets a trap that subjects the seducer to a series of humiliations and tortures, until in the end the seducer falls sick and dies from his punishment. Her vicious trap can be viewed as a revenge. When the seducer lies in bed physically sick and lovesick, on the brink of death, a lame Taoist appears at his house claiming to be able to cure his illness. He then gives Jia Rui a mirror and asks him to look only at its back every day, promising that this will cure him. When Jia Rui looks at the negative side of the mirror, he sees a grinning skull, which scares him. Disobeying the Taoist’s admonition, he looks at the front of the mirror, discovering Xi-feng is beckoning him to join her in lovemaking. He ejaculates several times and dies eventually.

Critics have been intrigued by the meaning of the Magic Mirror. One interpretation holds that the mirror reveals the author’s Buddhist idea about the emptiness of sex and serves as a key to understanding the novel as a whole (Yu Ping-po 1954, 123). But this opinion falls into the conventional trap of splitting women into the polarized opposition of angel and demon, and it is rightly rejected by later critics. The mirror images are associated with the duplicitous female characters Gilbert and Gubar mention in their study: the traditional array of such “terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa,
Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy” (1979, 34). The mirror does serve as a warning, but not about the emptiness of sex. Rather it symbolizes female anger and revenge. We are told: “This mirror comes from the Hall of Emptiness in the Land of Illusion. It was fashioned by the fairy Disenchantment as an antidote to the ill effects of impure mental activity. It has life-giving and restorative properties and has been brought into the world for the contemplation of those intelligent and handsome young gentlemen whose hearts are too susceptible to the charms of beauty” (Hawkes 1: 251). In many ways, the Land of Illusion has been viewed by many critics as a female kingdom and the fairy Disenchantment as its queen. Since the mirror is made by the fairy and has life-giving power, it symbolizes facets of femininity. As it can also serve as an antidote to the lustful thoughts entertained by man who treats woman only as a sex-object, it has a punitive power which symbolizes female anger and revenge.

**Matriarchal Rule in the Jia Clan**

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar show how women writers take a roundabout route to rebel against the patriarchal order: “Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards” (1979, 73). This is what
the author of the Dream did throughout the novel. In a roundabout way, he exposed the male-dominated world as inhuman and cannibalistic behind the facade of Confucian benevolence and virtue and subjected the male oppressors to ridicule, humiliation, and vengeance at the hands of female characters. Through various subversive strategies, the author even managed, to a certain extent, to turn the male world upside-down. It is interesting to note that Lin Yu-tang, on the basis of the family situation in the Dream, claimed:

the so-called suppression of women [in China] is an Occidental criticism that somehow is not borne out by a closer knowledge of Chinese life... Anyone who doubts this should read the Red Chamber Dream, a monument of Chinese home life. Study the position of the grandmother Chiamu, the relationship between Fengchieh and her husband, or that of any other couple (that of the father Chia Cheng and his wife is perhaps most normal and typical) and see whether it is the man or the woman who rules the family. (1965, 14, 16)

Problematic as it is to view the real social situation in the light of a fictional work, Lin's reading of the novel itself is not entirely wrong. Indeed, in the Jia clan, the family affairs are managed by women. Lady Dowager, Bao-yu's grandmother, is a widow who is referred to by family members as "Old Ancestor". Contrary to the Confucian "three obediences" required of a Chinese woman to "her father at home, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after her husband's death", Lady Dowager lords it over her sons. It is
interesting to note that one translation renders her as “Matriarch”. Because she protects and dotes on him, Bao-yu repeatedly escapes his father’s Confucian indoctrination and punishment and grows up a rebel against the Confucian world.

In the subfamilies, the households are also managed by daughters-in-law. Most of the female characters are portrayed as capable managers or intellectually men’s superiors, while most of the male characters are depicted as incompetent officials or mediocre scholars. Even Bao-yu, the male protagonist, is inferior in literary talent compared to his two female cousins Bao-chai and Dai-yu. All this, I think, deliberately subverts the accepted Confucian tenet that man is superior to woman.

I want to cite Wang Xi-feng again. As one of the twelve girls on the Main Register, she not only rules her household but also puts man to shame with her often ruthless and unscrupulous efficiency. Most critics view her in a negative light, for she is a woman “with a sweet mouth and bitter heart” who has committed many wicked deeds, dealing in high-interest usury, embezzling servants’ pay, procuring money by abuse of power, ruining the marriage of a devoted couple, having a hand in persecuting several persons to death, and designing the marriage hoax which separates Bao-yu and Dai-yu and brings about the latter’s death. Nevertheless, the author does not depict her as a monster. On the contrary, she is so portrayed that the reader feels curiously drawn to this shrew. Moreover, the author is generous enough to place her on the Main Register of Twelve Girls he hoped to perpetuate with his novel. All of them, except Xi-feng, are positive characters favorably delineated. The characterization of Xi-feng is such that, in the final analysis, she
is, in Cixous's and Clement's words, a female character instigated by the male order "to do the male's dirty work" (1975, 68). In the end, she turns out to be a victim of the male society in spite of her victimizing others. There are many indications that the author blames Xi-feng's evil deeds on the male-dominated world. We are told that "she had been brought up from earliest childhood just like a boy", and hence becomes one of those wicked women who, in Bao-yu's opinion, "are contaminated by man's smell, become wicked and deserve death more than man". The narrator expresses his dissatisfaction with the crimes of Wang Xi-feng, but he makes it clear that it is the male-dominated society that corrupts her and aids and abets her in her crimes. However clever she is, she is unable to escape the miserable fate that befalls her sex. She suffers a great deal after the family's fall and is unable to protect her only daughter. She calls to mind the stepmother Queen in the Grimm Brothers fairytale, "Snow White". As Gilbert and Gubar claim, she is turned against Snow White at the will of the male looking glass (1979, 37-40). Indeed, Wang Xi-feng may be regarded as a Chinese version of that wicked queen. Her inclusion on the Main Register is an indication of the author's feminist awareness that, in a male-dominated society, women cannot control their own fate and hence are not responsible, in the final analysis, for their misdeeds.

Male Dread of Women and Female Anger at Men

In Chapter 75, the Jia clan has a family gathering at Mid-Autumn Festival. The center of the family is Grandmother Jia, who presides over the party. Everybody shows her excessive deference. At the party, they play the game of passing the flower. Anyone who
holds the flower at the end of the drumming must tell a joke. Jia Zheng, Bao-yu’s father, is caught holding the flower, so he is obliged to tell a joke. The narrative discourse implies that the arrangement is no accident. Jia Zheng is a staunch defender of Confucianism. In fact, he symbolizes the patriarchal order. But it so happens that the author makes him tell the story of a hen-pecked husband. The arrangement is not made merely for comic or ironic effect, although both kinds of effects are achieved. Warned that he would be punished if he fails to make the Old Lady laugh, Jia Zheng says that he “can only think of one joke”. We should pay special attention to the word “only” and ponder the hidden meaning of the joke in relation to the whole context. The joke goes as follows:

This hen-pecked husband was so afraid of his wife that he never dared stay long away from the house. But one Mid-Autumn Festival he chanced to be out shopping in the street when a friend caught sight of him and insisted on dragging him off to his house for a drink. Without meaning to, the husband became very drunk—so much so that he had to stay at his friend’s house for the night. When he woke up the next morning, he was full of remorse. However, there was nothing for it but to hurry back home and apologize. When he got back, his wife was washing her feet.

“Very well”, she said when he had finished apologizing, “if you will lick my feet clean, I will forgive you.”

The man began to lick, but a feeling of nausea overcame him and he showed signs of wanting to be sick.
When his wife saw this, she was furious.

“How dare you?” she screamed, and looked as if she was about to give him a beating.

The husband knelt down in terror and begged to be forgiven.

“Please, my dear! It isn’t that I find your feet in the least distasteful. It’s just that I drank rather a lot of yellow wine last night and ate lots of very rich mooncakes, so today I am feeling a little queasy.” (Hawkes 3:502-03)

In *Jokes and Their Relation To The Unconscious*, Freud maintains that jokes are closely related to the unconscious and may in a distorted form reveal the real motives behind their innocent or comic facade. Freud describes in detail one of the techniques of jokes—“representation by the opposite” (1905, 70-74). By using this technique, the joker not only gains pleasure but also silences the objections raised by any criticism (129). In Confucian Chinese society, it is customary for the wife to prepare water and wash the husband’s feet before going to bed. It is often the wife who kneels down and begs for mercy from the husband, and it is the wife who is always in fear of her husband. In the above joke, the usual roles of husband and wife are reversed. The victimized wife becomes the aggressor while the husband becomes the victim. For a rare moment, Jia Zheng drops his habitual mask of serious solemnity and reveals a facet of his secret heart: in the unconscious mind of this Confucian moralist, there lurks a fear of the female sex which is, in Freud’s opinion, a feeling of abhorrence due to the absence of the penis in women, but, in Karen Horney’s more accurate words, a “dread of the
vagina, thinly disguised under the abhorrence" (1967, 137). Both Horney and Simone de Beauvoir claim that the reason man wants to disparage and dominate woman is because of his fear of her (Horney 1967, 133-40; de Beauvoir 1952, 181-91).

Jia Zheng's fear, however, may be more directly related to women's feet as a fetish. In old China, there was the custom of binding women's feet. The bound feet, viewed by man as a manifestation of feminine beauty, actually symbolize woman's subjugated, inferior status. In a way similar to the Western man's reverence for woman's feet, the Chinese women's bound feet are fetishes. Freud holds that "the fetish is a penis-substitute... the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up" (1927, 152-53). In other words, to compensate for the lack of a penis, the boy imagines that the woman's feet become the replacement for the lost penis or for its lack. The fetish thus stands for man's "aversion from real female genitals" as representing a lack. Freud further asserts that "to point out that he [man] reveres his fetish is not the whole story; in many cases he treats it in a way which is obviously equivalent to a representation of castration. This happens particularly if he has a strong identification with his father and plays the part of the latter; for it is to him that as a child he ascribed the woman's castration" (157). Thus the bound feet as fetish are linked to the subjugation of women by the patriarchy. As Freud shows, one variety of fetishism is "the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated" (157).
Curiously, it is not made clear whether the wife’s feet in the joke are bound or not. In fact, this point is vague throughout the novel. Having made a systematic study of this curious fact in the novel, Tang De-gang, after an elaborate search in the novel, concludes: “It will always remain a mystery how the beauties’ ‘feet’ look in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. This mystery came into being not because of the author’s ‘neglect’ during his writing process, but because of his deliberate avoidance and mystifying intention” (1983, 156). In Tang’s opinion, Manchus did not adopt the Han Chinese custom of bound feet, and so, in their mind, bound feet had no sex appeal. Since Cao was born in a Han Chinese family converted to Manchu, and his intended readers were Han Chinese, he was put into a quandary as to how to depict the female’s feet, and had no other way but to be vague. Thus the ambiguous description of women’s feet in the novel results from the author’s “cultural conflict” (157-58). This may be true, but I tend to think Cao’s vagueness about the bound feet may be a sign of his awareness that the custom of bound feet represented the inhuman treatment Chinese women suffered and symbolized women’s subjugation in Chinese society. In Jia Zheng’s joke, the husband’s licking of his wife’s feet can be considered an extreme form of fetishism. The joke may also be interpreted as the author’s intention to subvert the foot-binding custom that stands for women’s subjugated position.

In a remark to a friend, James Joyce boasted that the secret designs he had woven into his *Ulysses* would take English professors a hundred years to unravel. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a novel of comparable complexity. The novel contains many secret messages the author hoped to convey to the reader, but he despaired of putting
across his key messages: “Pages full of idle words / Penned with hot and bitter tears; / All men call the author fool; / None his secret message hears” (Hawkes 1: 51). *The Dream of the Red Chamber* hides many secret messages, but one of them is the one I have labored to reveal: a psychological subversion of the patriarchal order that subjugates Chinese women to slavery.

Notes:
1. In discussing the awareness of male domination over women, feminist historians and critics usually begin with women writers of the early nineteenth century. Showalter (1977), Ellmann (1968), Millett (1969), Moers (1976), Gilbert and Gubar (1979), and Moi (1985) all concur with this chronology.
2. This novel, also known in English as *The Story of the Stone*, was written between 1744 and 1763. Its manuscript version began to circulate among friends and relatives as early as 1765. Its present version was published in 1792. See Lu (1964, 298) and Berry (1988, 215-16). There are two complete English versions: *The Story of The Stone*, translated by David Hawkes and John Minford; and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Hereafter, quotations from these two versions will be referred to as “Hawkes” and “Yang” respectively.
3. It antedates all major feminist novels in any literary tradition except Mme de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Cleves* (1678) and (if one regards it as feminist) Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748-49).
4. See Qian Zhong-shu’s *Guan zhui bian* (Pipe-Awl Chapters), 2: 403-10; and Zhang 1992, 22-33.
5. Longxi Zhang, who stresses the similarity of the Tao and the Logos in the duality of thinking and speaking, mentions in passing the potential of the Tao to subvert the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing. His thesis, however, is mainly predicated on the traditional
Chinese elevation of writing in contradistinction to the Western debasement of writing (1992, 33).

Because of the ambiguity of classic Chinese, the last two lines of this quotation are also translated as: “The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad creatures” (Lau, 57). This interpretation, however, does not fit the general structure of the book. Since the Song dynasty, scholars have tended to interpret the saying in the way I have rendered it.

See Lao Tzu, *Tao Te King, Interpreted as Nature and Intelligence*, 11.

Examples are too numerous to quote. Studies of the novel published before 1980s often end by lamenting its fatalistic weaknesses. For example, the publisher’s note to *A Dream of Red Mansions* states: “For after all Tsao Hueh-chin was born in a declining noble family more than two hundred years ago, and this novel was written in the feudal period. His pessimism and fatalistic, nihilistic ideas, his view of life as a tragedy and all on earth as vanity, as well as his feudal approach to certain matters show the clear brandmark of the author’s class origin and times on his world outlook and his novel” (Yang, 1:vii.)

When I say Nu Kua is comparable to the Western God, I only mean to say that she has the same legendary role as that of Christian God in the making of human beings.

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133
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