



EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SINOLOGY 10 (2019)

— M. WOESLER, ED. —

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▪ FIGURISM AND IDEOLOGICAL COLONIALISM

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▪ THINGS UNSPOKEN IN THE

RED CHAMBER DREAMS

European Journal of Sinology 10 (2019)

The European Journal of Sinology (EJSin) is published by the European Science & Scholarship Association, currently under the scholarly auspices of the German China Association.

The journal contains articles, occasional papers, review articles, book reviews, annotated translations, notes, and essays as well as abstracts of papers of other journals and monographs in German, English, French and Chinese dealing with the history, economy, culture and society of Greater China. Founded by Martin Woesler in 2010, it offers a forum especially for scholars from the EU and other European countries. We welcome contributions based on independent research by scholars (including PhD students) everywhere. Currently the journal is actively seeking to expand its contributor base (see instructions for contributors)!

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Contributions by any author, including those with any relation to the editorial board are double blind peer reviewed externally.

The journal is ABSTRACTED in: Bulletin of the German China Association.

The Journal of Sinology is a REFEREED academic journal published once a year both in print and electronic form (<http://china-studies.com>).

The journal's website is <http://universitypress.eu/en/journals.php>.

The journal has applied to be incorporated in the Emerging Sources Citation Index by Clarivate (ESCI, Web of Science, formerly Thomson Reuters).

Editor: Martin Woesler, Witten/Herdecke University, Witten/Germany

All inquiries, manuscripts, job applications and books for abstracting/review should be sent to:

Ruhr University Bochum, P. O. Box "The University Press Bochum", European Journal of Sinology, Editor, Universitaetsst. 150, 44801 Bochum, Germany

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ISSN 2190-085X. Online ISSN 2510-2761

Europe ISBN 978-3-86515-297-8

EAN 

EBOOK ISBN 978-3-86515-298-5

EAN 

USA ISBN 978-1-68202-537-6

ASIN 

Order: order@china-studies.com

Managing and Production Editor:

Martin Woessler

English Language Editor:

Margaret Chu, Licia D. Kim

Research Assistants:

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Publishing Houses:

European University Press

in association with

West German University Press.

In the USA: Academic Press of the U.S.A.

Instructions for contributors

Please format your paper in Microsoft Word or Open Office in the way it should appear in the journal and submit it to journal@china-studies.com.

Individual and institutional subscription rates incl. (inter)national shipping (single issues and special issues):

print version 49 € / year

online & print combined version 99 €

university site license (ip range) 398 €

special issues 49 €

《欧洲汉学》是中国湖南师范大学外语学院的英文学术期刊。

编辑部：湖南师大外院国际汉学中心
出版社、印刷、发行：欧洲大学出版社，德国波鸿市大学路 150 号邮编 44801。主编：吴漠汀

The rate of the book series *European Journal of Sinology. Special Issue*, ISSN 2190-0868, is 49 € / US\$ per volume.

USA

The journal is printed and published in the USA by Academic Press of the USA and can be purchased directly from the Press via ap@e-texts.org or through Amazon.com.

For the Catalogue Information, please refer to the Library of Congress (Preassigned Control Number Program).

Europe

The journal is printed and published in Europe by European University Press and can be purchased directly from the Press via info@universitypress.eu or through Amazon.de.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

<http://journal.china-studies.com>

<http://universitypress.eu/en/journals.php>

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Things Unspoken in the *Red Chamber Dreams*

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Abstract

Chinese literary works are often influenced by censorship, be it by others or by the author himself or herself. In China and the West there are different traditions of decency. With the *Red Chamber Dreams*, we have a novel of rich subtlety which fortuitously is also a novel that comes with a hermeneutical tradition comparable only to the Bible. There are various manuscript versions and the handwritten advice of relatives and confidants given before publication of the novel. Discourse on the explicit and implicit meaning and theme of the novel is primarily scholarly. There is, moreover, an army of scholars who strive to interpret every aspect of the novel, with some, for example, trying to situate it in real life. By

following manuscript comments in the novel, this paper aims to explore what autobiographical facts may be revealed in the novel and the reasons for their anonymity. Reasons are sought which include, but not exclusively, taboos such as suicide, the protection of real persons, and the avoidance of lese majeste. The author, Cao Xueqin, seems to be aware of this concealment and seems to play with it; for example, he chooses the protagonist name Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱, which is homophonous with *zhen shi yin* 真事隱 “true facts are hidden”. However, these precautions (and perhaps narrative strategies) could not prevent a temporary ban on the novel.

One of the main interpretation schools of the *Dream* is the *Deciphering School* (Suo yin pai 索隱派), literally, *School of the Search for the Hidden*, whose assignment of novel elements to contemporary reality is more rewarding to us than its conspiracy and puzzle theories. Special attention is also given to morally ethical reasons for the author’s silence: While the novel explains that it is not a romance novel with pornographic descriptions, John Minford renders two sexually charged scenes (which remain implicit in the Chinese

original) into vivid description in his English translation.

Key words

Red Chamber Dreams, tradition of decency, deciphering school, indirectness

1. Introduction¹

Instead of the commonly used title, The Chinese novel *Hounglou meng* 红楼梦 is commonly known in English as *Dream of the Red Chamber*. However, the title of the first known published excerpt translation (by John Francis Davis in 1819) is “*Red Chamber Dreams*” (Woesler 2010a). Therefore, while there are earlier, unpublished excerpt translations and earlier published terms from the novel, e.g. by Robert Morrison in 1815 (Woesler 2010a), in this paper, *Hounglou meng* 红楼梦 will be referred to as “*Red Chamber Dreams*”.

Chinese literary works are often constrained by censorship, both by the powers that be and by self-censorship. The *Dreams* is a case in point.

² traditions between China and the West but censorship is not solely a Chinese issue. It is also known in the West. A recent example is East German literature, where the reader has to read a lot “between the lines” or from coded language.

1.1 Of the Essence of Language

Unlike mathematics, language is inherently imprecise and fuzzy. It is, by character, always indirect, suggestive, and approximate. Orientation is given by dictionaries and language conventions as well as semantic expressions, which possess their counterparts in the ontological world, although these are also distorted in language by generic terms, generalizations and regional differences.

¹ This paper is based on a presentation given at the XXVI Annual Conference of the German Association for Chinese Studies Nov. 6-7, 2015 at Ruhr University Bochum, Faculty of East Asian Studies.

² Decency tradition is understood here as a tradition of restraint, but also of decorum and decency, just as the term “decency” is also used in the Anglo-American and Germanic language area.

Every person can understand something different from the same wording. One can approximate the actual meaning of language, but never reach it completely. Since misunderstanding makes communication more difficult, during the process of receiving language information, humans strive to grasp the sender's intention as best they can. In contemporaneous oral communication, there is the element of inquiry and clarification. This is more difficult with written communication and, as in the present case, especially with time-delayed written communication where the author is deceased and one is separated from him by at least an epoch, if not also by a culture, as well as by the filter of translation.

1.2 The Art of Interpreting

The art of interpreting, telling, and reading out loud, has, in turn, its own extremely long tradition in the nature-religious origins of cultures, which go back to shamans and fortune tellers and even before the invention of writing where observations of nature were interpreted orally. This interpretation made it possible for humans, who saw themselves as exposed to fate-determining forces of

nature, to grasp, act out, and process the unpredictable. They painted consequences of important decisions and reconciled with the unconscious and the imagined world of the dead. The first written evidence from China testifies to this tradition, for example, in their interpretation of cracks in turtle shells and cattle shoulder blades made by subjecting the shells and bones to fire. In early Celtic-Germanic Europe, druids predicted the future by reading thrown chicken bones and in Rome, augurs read from bird flight and entrails. The combination of runes, or characters, differentiated and potentiated the predictions. To this day, predicting the future by reading coffee grounds is common in Turkey and proverbial in Germany.

1.3 Interpreting and reading out deliberately hidden messages

So we have to We must therefore distinguish between interpreting God's will through random results, with a resulting lack of truth, and the quite possible truth of interpreting a second textual sense previously hidden e.g. by an author in a text. In fact, the hiding of

multiple textual senses has a long tradition in China, a practice which was particularly a matter of decency. For instance, a love message could be hidden in a landscape poem when the direct message of love would be socially inappropriate, or, as in the case of hidden criticism of rulers, when direct criticism might be sanctioned.

In fact, *The Red Chamber Dreams* were published in a sociopolitical environment in which there were drastic sanctions against criticism of rulers, and even aberrant, unintended secondary meanings – such as a homophone character or the use of a character from the names of the imperial family. To make matters worse, the emperor himself appears in the novel and despite his idealized portrayal any of the descriptions of the emperor could have been interpreted negatively, so that sanctions were not only likely, but actually realized when the novel was banned. Despite numerous precautionary measures – and perhaps also narrative strategies (described in detail below) – the author was not able to prevent the temporary banning of the novel. Had he lived to see the publication of his fragment, he might have been threatened with punishment, which explains why this

novel was published anonymously in the first place.

2. Pain

One is able to create the best literature when one is motivated by extreme feelings and can draw from one's own realm of experience. Qu Yuan warned his king, Huai of Chu, about the state of Qin. The king listened not to him but to scheming advisors and expelled Qu Yuan. The latter had to watch helplessly as the state of Qin took the capital of Chu, Ying. He expressed this immoderate pain over injustice suffered in characters on paper and created with *Lisao* one of the immortal works of Chinese literature. He then, according to the legend, drowned himself in the river Miluo. *Lisao* is not a reckoning or an indictment. It simply laments – in the form of hints, indirect language and images – about the injustice suffered, which went far beyond personal injustice. *Lisao* was so powerful that, despite its otherness, it has been accepted into the Olympus of the Chinese canons and created an entire 'tradition of the South' as a counter to the literature of the North. For this kind of literature, Qu Qiubai 瞿

秋白 has developed the term *bianzhe wenxue* 贬谪文学 “relegation literature”.

Cao Xueqin witnessed, as a child, how his wealthy family clan, which (like many other clans) was in the favor of Emperor Kangxi, unjustly, in his view, fell out of favor with the seemingly somewhat paranoid new Emperor Yongzheng, and how the family property was confiscated and its prestige destroyed. Cao Xueqin, too, carried with him the pain of injustice suffered, and, according to the novel's treatment of him, had clear feelings of guilt because, as the family's progenitor, he could not stop the family degeneration and was unable – whether through study of the classics or in the imperial examinations – achieve any success of his own (or at least none that would have significantly improved his clan's situation). Like *Lisao*, the novel refrains from directly accusing anyone (here: Yongzheng); rather, the emperor is characterized as all-knowing, wise, far-sighted, generous, and even sympathetic to the protagonist Jia Baoyu (Precious Jade Merchant) – who shared autobiographical traits with the author. Similar to the intrigant advisors who were responsible for Qu Yuan's ejection and the downfall of their kingdom (Hawkes

2011), the imperial advisors, eunuchs and officials do not come off nicely in the *Dreams*. They are often portrayed as corrupt. In addition to indirectly criticizing the court, the novel contains many other elements that are not directly addressed.

3. Discourse about what is to be said and what is better not to be said during the process of creation

Red Chamber Dreams, we have a novel which fortunately has preserved a hermeneutic tradition comparable only to that of the *Bible*. Therefore, as is true of very few other literary works, we have evidence of the discourse regarding what should be said and what was better left unsaid. For instance, we have various manuscript versions, handwritten advice from relatives and confidants given prior to publication (Shang 2010:245-342), and legions of researchers seeking to interpret or situate every aspect of the novel in real life. Some taboos are well known such as the general rule that characters appearing with rulers' names or even with names of members of the imperial family are not to be used. This was so strictly adhered to that planned new editions were checked to

see if other characters had become taboo in the meantime, so that they could be replaced before the new edition was printed. We are interested here in the question of which biographical facts, according to the handwritten comments, might have been illustrated in the novel but which must have remained unspoken and why. In chapter 35, Jia Baoyu (Precious Jade Merchant) wants Ying'er (Oriole) to make a jewelry knot that matches the color of his jade stone. Since this would be a red one, which was reserved for the emperor, he had to eschew it.

From the commentary in chapter 13 of the manuscript edition 脂本 *Zhiben* (of the best known manuscript commentator Zhiyanzhai 脂砚斋) we know that protecting real people was among the reasons for anonymity as well as the need to hide suicides. This is explained in more detail below.

4. Consciousness of Concealment

The author seems to be aware of and play with concealment when he chooses for the protagonist the name Zhen Shiyin

甄士隐, which is homophonous with 真事隐 "True events are concealed".

Personal names	Homophones Meanings
贾化 Jia Hua	jia hua 假话 lie
Jiao Xing 娇杏	jiaoxing 侥幸 lucky by luck
Shan Pinren 单聘仁	shan pianren 善骗人 to be good at deceiving people
Bu Guxiu 卜固修	bu gu xiu 不顾羞 to pay no attention to shame
Zhan Guang 詹光	zhanguang 沾光 benefit from association with sb./sth.
Jia Yucun 贾雨村	jia yu cun 假语存 false words are preserved
Place names	Homophones Meanings
Shili jie 十里街 10-Miles Street	shi li jie 势利街 Snobbish Street
Ren qing gang 仁清巷 Alley of Benevolence and Clarity	ren qing gang 人情巷 Favor Alley
Huzhou 湖州	huzhou 胡诌 talk nonsense

Table 1: Examples of people or place names with homophones with different meanings.

But eEven the family name Jia 贾, meaning "merchant", can be read as *jia* 家 "family" or as *jia* 假 "false or fictitious". That this may have been intended is

illustrated by Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉, meaning “Precious Jade Merchant”, suddenly meeting Zhen Baoyu 甄宝玉, meaning “Precious Jade Pottery maker”. If one reads the family name 甄 Zhen homophonously with zhen 真, meaning “right, true, actual”, and the *jia* as meaning “fake”, we then have *fake* Precious Jade, meeting the *real* Precious Jade.

5. Playing with “truth” and “fiction”

In the book, there are several apparent paradoxes constructed in couplets, e.g. on the two sides of the arch to the “Land of Illusion”: Jia zuo zhen shi, zhen zi jia 假作真时，真亦假 “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.” (Chapter 1, transl. by David Hawkes). This attests to the influence of the Buddhist and (partly) Daoist spiritual tradition, in varying degrees, in different versions of the text. The Cheng B edition has more references to Buddhism than Cheng A, which is an active intervention by Cheng/Gao and may be due to a fin-de-siècle change in the Zeitgeist in 1791/1792 or it could be a reflection of the interest of readers or a sponsor. It can also be understood

concretely as clues to hidden textual messages: truth can be fiction; fiction true. The simile of building a repayable debt in the mythical prelude (cf. Shi 2015) is not only a motivation in the main plot (from the Buddhist understanding that debt is to be repaid in the next life) but is also quite openly a disguise of reality in fairy-tale characters – like the tradition of Buddhism and Confucianism in the characters of the Confucian priest and the Buddhist monk. Also, the role of dreams, which foreshadow the novel’s plot and the fate of the protagonists, as well as the play on the fact that dreams draw reality all the more sharply, are alternative modes of communication by the author, who thus departs from direct narration, which for the most part describes reality chronologically. Additionally, the designation of the entire novel as a dream or dreams indicates that the text is not to be taken literally, that is, it contains alternative or fictitious messages. Without going into the authenticity discussion regarding the last 40 chapters, Cao Xueqin’s self-criticism in chapter 1,

“Pages full of idle words

Penned with hot and bitter tears:

*All men call the author fool;
None his secret message hears.”*

points to a “secret message” in the novel.

In the last chapter, which may not be from the original author, Cao Xueqin himself appears in the novel and tells Vanitas (in regard to the novel’s publication):

It would be a pleasure to share this with a few like-minded friends, to help the wine down after a meal or to while away the solitude of a rainy evening by a lamplit window. No need for some self-important being to commend it or publish it. [...]’ Vanitas lifted his head and guffawed at this, dropped the manuscript to the ground and went breezily on his way. As he went he said to himself: ‘So it was really all utter nonsense! Author, copyist and reader were alike in the dark! Just so much ink splashed for fun, a game, a diversion!’

This statement playfully questions the novel itself and leaves room for the readers’ interpretation and imagination.

5.1 Truth in Concealment

The second sentence of the quoted paradox parallel sentences appears in the guise of a familiar pair of Buddhist couplets: Wu wei you chu you huan wu 无为有处有还无 (when nothingness

becomes something, something becomes nothing). In fact, I understand this seemingly paradoxical philosophical insight as the author’s sharpest direct critique of the arbitrariness of property allocation and confiscation (as practiced by Kangxi and especially Yongzheng) (Yun 2017:59-89), which nearly destroyed Cao Xueqin’s family. This disguise of direct criticism as apparent non-criticism is reminiscent of the truths of the drunken Jiao Da 焦大 (Big Coal) in the novel:

“[...] my gracious master [...] also would not have dreamed that there would be such cattle in his family, such dogs in heat and horny hens! Some crawl in the ashes, the others keep it up with their younger brothers-in-law. I know everything! But when the arm is broken, it is hidden in the sleeve. (Chapter 7; cf. Hawkes/Minford I:139)

(Pa hui 爬灰 “crawl in ashes with his soles and knees” is a homophone with 扒灰 “dishonor his daughter-in-law”.) This concept, to let someone who is freed from conventions, e.g. through alcohol like Jiao Da, speak the truth finds its equivalent in the Bible quote “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings” (Matthew 21:16). In several languages there are similar idioms referring to other ‘innocent’ speakers like

the German “Fool’s mouth speaks the truth” (Narrenmund tut Wahrheit kund).

6. Interpretations

There is probably no novel that has been interpreted more than this one. Since the 1970s, many universities in the People’s Republic of China have set up their own research institutes, research centers on the novel, and regional Redology associations. This recent interest can only be compared with the hermeneutics of the Bible, which lasted for almost 2 millennia. Just as interpretations of the Bible have sometimes produced wondrous blossoms and even led to the founding of new religious - denominations, communities and sects, the interpretation of *Dreams* texts, or the preference of certain versions of the same text over other versions, has not infrequently been elevated to a question of faith – although not in the religious sense in China – and camps have fought each other bitterly.

Wang Guowei is representative for the *Literary School* 文學評論派, which reads the novel from the Western perspective and interprets its aesthetic and

philosophical content. Hu Shi and Yu Pingbo are representative for the *New Redology School* 新紅學派 (later called *Evidence Based School* 考證派). Zhou Ruchang 周汝昌 further developed the school into the *Cultural Thoughts School* 文化思想派, understanding the novel as key for Chinese culture in general. The *Exploration School* 探索派 of the 1980s, represented by Liang Guizhi, further concentrated on the two parts, the first 80 chapters and the last 40, as well as the interpretation of testimonials in regards to the intentions of the original author for the last 40 chapters.

One of the main schools of interpretation of the *Dreams* is the *Deciphering School* (索隱派, also called the *Decryptive/Figurism/Hidden School* or literally: *School of Searching Secrets*), represented by Cai Yuanpei. Its attribution of novel elements to contemporary reality is more fruitful for us than their conspiracy and number game theories.

7. Moral Reasons for not Speaking out

Reasons of decency, convention or morality as reasons for not speaking out

deserve special attention. While the author in the first chapter of the novel explains why it is not one of the ordinary romance novels (including explicit or even pornographic descriptions), John Minford, for his part, translates two sexually charged scenes, which remain unspoken in the Chinese original, in an almost debauchedly graphic way for the Western reader. (Woesler 2011)

An anecdotal justification of the *Deciphering School* is found in Zhao Liewen's 赵烈文 *Nengjingju diary* 《能静居日记》 (Yuelu shushe 岳麓书社 2013), where he describes how he had heard from Song Xiangfeng 宋翔凤 that the powerful official He Shen 和坤 (1750-Feb 22, 1799) had given the emperor Gaomiao “高庙” (i.e. Qianlong 乾隆, Sep 25, 1711 – Feb 7, 1799) *the Dreams* to read in the last year of his reign (1796). Zhao reports that Qianlong said (after finishing reading it) “This is the story of Ming Zhu's family. “此盖为明珠家事也。”

Nalan Xingde 纳兰性德 (January 19, 1655 – July 1, 1685), (born Nalan Chengde 纳兰成德, courtesy name Rongruo 容若, Manchu name Nara

Singde), was a Qing dynasty Chinese poet, famous for his ci poetry and his obsession with beautiful women.

Ming Zhu held the post of Zhaixiang 宰相 in the time of Emperor Kangxi 康熙. Qianlong may have been more familiar with the well-known family Ming Zhu then with the family Cao, and actually there are some striking parallels between Ming Zhu's son Nalan Xingde and Jia Baoyu, such as his famous poetry (although disliking Confucian Classics), his unfortunate love, his family's close relation to the court (including a courtesan (Hui / Yuanchun)) and the loss of imperial favor. The “12 beauties of Jinling” 十二金钗 may well have been female guests of Nalan Xinde. Nalan Xingde and Cao Yin were friends. Cao Yin even wrote a preface for a collection of Nalan Xingde's poems. There are also references in Nalan Xingde's poems to “red chambers” 红楼.

The theory (that the *Dreams* describe Ming Zhu's family affairs) seems to have existed before the alleged quote by Qianlong in 1796. In 1794, Zhejiang-based early Hongxue scholar Zhou Chun 周春 wrote the “Essay on my reading of the *Red Chamber Dreams*”. In it, he counters

the (at his time) prevailing theory that the *Dreams* described Ming Zhu's family affairs by proposing the *Dreams* described the affairs of the family of Marquis Zhang 张侯. Except for the parallel that Marquis Zhang's family also suffered the loss of imperial favor, little is known about the family of Marquis Zhang. However, today we know that Zhou Chun had a network of like-minded friends who helped his hypothesis to spread (Zhan Song 2019; Wen Qingxin 2003, Sun Yongjin 2003).

Another conspiracy theory popular within the *Deciphering School* is that Jia Baoyu was Emperor Shunzhi 顺治, and that Lin Daiyu was his concubine, Consort Dong E 董鄂妃. This was mainly advocated in the 1940s by Fang Hao 方豪 in his book 《红楼梦新考》 *New Investigations into the Red Chamber Dreams* 《红楼梦新考》. Shunzhi's mother was against the elevation of the concubine (妃), whom Shunzhi loved very much, to the status of imperial consort (huan hou 皇后), saying this was not befitting her status. After the death of Dong E, Shunzhi abdicated and became a monk. He later died of small pox at the age of 23. There are some parallels to the novel here.

However, even with all the suggested families and historical figures, there are many more autobiographical parallels between the author's Cao family and the protagonists' Jia family.

However, since up to 100 families suffered the loss of imperial favor at that time, the many similarities with the novel are unavoidable.

After Cao's authorship was widely recognized, the *Deciphering School* found more evidence for the theory that the Cao family was described, (more than for the other hypotheses).

Cao Xueqin would have been familiar with the fates of Shunzhi, Ming Zhu and Zhang Hou. They may well have been incorporated into the novel, especially since the novel is certainly not a faithful autobiographical work of Cao Xueqin's, (who was much younger than Jia Baoyu (Precious Jade Merchant) when the family estate was confiscated).

One theory of the *Deciphering School* is that Cao Xueqin in his novel probably did not recall his cousins in the garden where he grew up, but rather the educated pleasure girls along the Qinghuai River, the *Qinghuai Bayan* 秦淮八艳, who, as

supporters of the Ming Dynasty, openly opposed the Manchu at the beginning of the new Qing Dynasty. So the novel is also read as a political historical novel, and many scholars of the *Deciphering School* tried to read scandals of political figures or celebrities between the lines. The Cao family was connected with the emperor's family for generations – they were connected by marriages. The Cao family was immersed into the banner system and their loyalty to the Manchu is not to be questioned and not supported by sufficient evidence in the novel.

To me, the novel describes no political scandals of the time, but rather the diversity of life in autobiographical retrospective, which has been worked into a piece of art.

In A mainstream claim of the *Deciphering School* is that Cao Xueqin is only an editor of the book, not the author. In fact, the framework of the story in the novel itself suggests this in chapter 1, when it is reported that a certain “Cao Xueqin” worked on the novel for 10 years and revised it five times. To me, however, this passage reads as a recognition of Cao's authorship. Of course, other events and the fate of other families of his time may

have inspired Cao to create a more timeless piece of art than to limit everything to his own autobiographical experiences.

8. The end of the *Deciphering School*

After more than a hundred years of speculation (as to what were the things unspoken in the *Dreams*) Hu Shi, about 1916, shifted the *bongxue* mainstream from the 石头记索隐 *Deciphering School* of the *Story of the Stone* – most prominently represented by Cai Yuanpei –, to the autobiographical approach. Hu Shi is often credited as the first to attribute the authorship of *Dreams* to Cao Xueqin, but many scholars before him already believed that Cao Xueqin was the author. His book, *Evidence-based Research on the Red Chamber Dreams* 《红楼梦考证》, appeared in 1921 (reprint Peking Press 2015).

With Hu Shi's evidence-based research, the *Deciphering School* was history. It tends to flare up again and again, however, especially when there is political turmoil, e.g. at the beginning of the Republic period with Cai Yuanpei. In politically troubled times, the discussion about criticizing politicians through interpreting

fiction is fashionable. After 1950, the *Deciphering School* had largely disappeared in the People's Republic of China, although there were still famous exponents, such as Liu Xinwu, and followers of conspiracy theories who indulged in the hobby of unraveling the novel. Overseas, the *Deciphering School* has been revived (Xu 2003).

Zhou Ruchang further developed the *Evidence-based* research school into the *Cultural Thoughts School*, although his interpretations are often unsubstantiated and seemingly speculative. In his monograph *Between Humble and Noble*, (English transl. 2009), Zhou mixes imagination and facts into a fairy-tale like narrative, without supplying sources or evidence.

9. Suicides in the novel

Suicides form a very important part of the things unspoken in this novel. For this part of the paper, I refer to the research of Li Waiyee and Halvor Eifring, among others (Eifring 2004, 237-324, esp. 259-300).

In the 67th chapter, Liu Xianglian 刘香莲 gives two knives to his fiancée. Then

he hears that his fiancée is too permissive and wants the knives back. She decides, however, to prove her real love and innocence to him, gives only one knife back and commits suicide with the second one. Liu regrets that he gave her the knives.

You Erjie 尤二姐 was the 2nd wife of Jia Lian 贾琏. The 1st one was Wang Xifeng/Fengjie. She pretends to be okay with her husband taking a second wife. In fact, she was jealous and lured You Erjie to her house under false pretenses and had a doctor abort her child. You Erjie then swallowed gold and committed suicide. Jia Lian treated Wang Xifeng worse from then on.

Baoer's 鮑二 wife hanged herself after committing adultery with Fengjie's husband, Jia Lian, on Fengjie's birthday and after overhearing a conversation outside the window. Her husband, Baoer, was mocking Jia Lian about her, and wished that she would die as soon as possible. After the suicide, Jia Lian paid 200 taels of silver to Baoer.

Yuan Yang hanged herself, following her mistress, the Duchess Mother, to her death.

Qin Keqing's tryst with her father-in-law in the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion is discovered by the two maids, Ruizhu and Baozhu. Qin Keqing hanged herself in the pavilion out of shame. Ruizhu kills herself and Baozhu vows to become Qin Keqing's daughter, that is, to remain silent.

Zhi Yanzhai, at the margin of Chapter 13 of the Jiagengben, requested that Qin Keqing's suicide (which actually took place), and its reason not be published so as to not create a bad impression: "therefore, this must be erased."

10. Conclusion

Coming from the tradition of the subtle, cryptic-short, and often formulaic Tang poems (which provide only single characters or strings and thus leave much room for interpretation), one would expect the elaborated genre of the novel with its detailed descriptions, report of dialogues, and even thoughts to be direct and not leave much room for interpretation and speculation. Surprisingly however, the *Red Chamber Dreams* leaves much unsaid. Among other things, the things unspoken in the novel give it its complexity and allow numerous levels of

interpretation, even the emergence of a speculative school like the *Deciphering School*.

Accordingly, the reader is called upon to fill in what is implied with his or her imagination; to speak out what is unspoken in the mind. In fact, one often hears that the novel is read several times, offering new insights with each reading, partly because of the reader's changing age. Some dreams (especially in chapter 5), poems, and insinuations only become apparent as foreshadowing later in the novel. It is a common phenomenon that readers identify themselves with one of the protagonists. The novel offers protagonists of different ages, social status, educational background, and all walks of life for the reader to identify with. When I ask in literature classes in China which protagonist the students most identify with, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai are the favorites (with the majority of students being female). Among my Chinese colleagues, however, Wang Xifeng ranked first.

Generations of researchers have understood the many things unspoken in the novel as a mandate to devote their research to the enigmas of this story. In

fact the author seems to have used mysteriousness deliberately and even played with it:

“The true facts remain hidden.”

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