

“RUSTIC FICTION INDEED!”
READING JIA YU-CUN IN DREAM OF *THE RED CHAMBER*

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The celebrated eighteenth century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*, 紅樓夢) by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, c. 1715–1764) contains more than 400 characters, at least 50-60 of whom are “portrayed in such vivid detail that the personality of each stands out very clearly” (Fang 738). Because he appears in only 6 chapters (out of 120), Jia Yu-cun is not generally considered one of these fully developed characters, but rather a minor stock figure often emblematic of the “problematic relations between Manchus and Chinese” (Minford and Hegel 455). This move in Chinese Hongxue (紅學) to interpret Jia Yu-cun as a realistic depiction of a corrupt official and ungrateful sycophant, one who evinces the dark reality of banner life in the Qing period (Zhan and Liao 142-43), is in part the product of a critical tradition rooted in historicism that emphasizes mimetic fidelity to history (Yu 257). Such an approach to Jia Yu-cun does seem justified in light of the confiscation suffered by the author’s family in 1727 during which “all landed property, dwelling houses, and slaves” were ordered transferred to Cao Fu’s successor at the Nanjing Textile Commission (Spence 290). Chinese scholars also see in Jia Yu-cun an indictment of the inability of the literocrat, no matter how clever, to live up to central Confucian principles during a period of foreign Manchu rule. From this point of view, Cao Xueqin’s characterization of Jia Yu-cun reinforces *Honglou meng* as a “national narrative” dealing with the “imagined end” of an oppressive community (Liao 505).

These two critical approaches frame Jia Yu-cun as “an impoverished scholar” who begins the narrative “untainted by society,” but whose “latent ambition soon leads him to depart from the temple in pursuit of an official career” (Zhou, “Chaos” 278). In this context, it makes some sense to view Yu-cun as a one-dimensional stock character indicative of a larger disguised attack on Manchu rule by Han writers during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). After all, during the course of the novel, Yu-cun goes from being affectionate (多情) to cold-hearted (負情), virtuous to immoral (Zhan and Lian 142). In this transformation, he symbolizes the corrupting forces faced by banner officials during the Qing dynasty. Consider, for example, Jia Zheng’s attempts to avoid forfeiting his integrity while in a provincial administrative position (SS 99.26-29).

This interpretation of Jia Yu-cun as a stock figure of corruption persists, in part, because it enjoys ample textual evidence: well intentioned, yet overly ambitious, Yu-cun accepts silver and clothing from his benefactor Zhen Shi-yin “with only the most perfunctory word of thanks,” travels to Beijing to take the Triennial examination

and passes it (SS 1.61). Dismissed for cunning duplicity from his first appointment only to be reinstated after a general amnesty, Yu-cun's first case involves the tragic abduction of Zhen Shi-yin's beloved daughter Ying-lian (Caltrop). He resolves the case "by a judicious bending of the law" so as to pander to the more influential Jia Zheng and Wang Zi-teng (SS 4.117). For this reason, Jia Yu-cun is often considered a prime example of the type of person Bao-yu, the novel's protagonist, calls a "career worm." Convicted of extortion and avarice in the final chapter, Jia Yu-cun ends the narrative in the same impoverished condition that he was so eager to escape in chapter 1.

Other Chinese approaches to the characterization of Jia Yu-cun include interpreting his transformation from earnest student to corrupt official as emblematic of the times more than his character. Luo Zongyan argues that once in an official post, Jia Yu-cun is dismissed, not on account of "cunning and duplicity" (SS 2.69) as reported, but because he had not yet mastered the feudal bureaucratic system driven by *guanxi* that permeated every dimension of Qing life (179). Luo also calls Yu-cun the most successful characterization of a corrupt official in Chinese literature (180) because he breaks with previous stereotypical treatments in works such as *Water Margin* (水滸傳) and is integrated into the narrative of socio-economic decline in the novel (168).

Likewise, Qiu Limei's reading of Jia Yu-cun emphasizes that he knew the positive Confucian values of striving for academic excellence and the attainment of official position not for self, but for the betterment of society, yet he cannot live up to them (43). Qui argues that Yu-cun's ideals and behavior are in opposition because of changing values in the Ming-Qing period that emphasized worldly gain largely realized through the formalism of the eight-legged essay (44). Citing the poem of ambition that Zhen Shi-yin recites in chapter 1, which references a hairpin and piece of jade, Liu Heng believes that Dai-yu and Bao-chai ultimately paved the way for Jia Yu-cun's political advancement—since he escorted Dai-yu to Beijing and once there ingratiated himself with Jia Zheng (180).

By contrast, when Jia Yu-cun is cited in the English criticism on the novel, it is most often in connection to word play and riddles about truth and falsity in the narrative (Sychoy 291, Yau 122, Eber 231, Tschanz 65, Bech 17, and Wong 154), although he is also briefly alluded to as an "authorial persona" (Lee 90) and a "thematically pivotal" character when paired with Zhen Shi-yin (Zhou, *Chaos* 275). In the only sustained treatment of Jia Yu-cun (賈雨村) in the English criticism on *Honglou meng*, Lucien Miller notes that his surname is Jia (賈), his given name is Hua (化), his styled name is Shi-fei (時飛), and his appellation is Yu-cun (雨村) (Miller 112). These names become the basis for all kinds of homophonic punning. For example, the homophone for Jia Hua (賈化) means "fictive language" (假話), while Shi-fei (時飛) is a homonym for "actually untrue" (實非). Likewise, the name Yu-cun implies "folk language and coarse vocabulary" (村言粗語) or "using coarse vocabulary in expressing fictive language," and so Jia Yu-cun is a homophonic expression of Jia Yu-cun yan (假語村言) "fictive language and vulgar words" (Miller 112). We can add to these puns on the sound of Jia Yu-cun's name another based in the southern Yangzi river dialect, for "Cao Xueqin belonged to a prominent southern Chinese family with strong links to the imperial court" (Eber 2). Pronouncing "c" as "ch" in a Jiangsu dialect, for instance, creates

a homophonous pun in which Jia Yu-cun (賈雨村) becomes "fake fool" (假愚蠢), and his style name for Shi-fei (時飛) sounds like "quarrel and dispute" (是非) used to describe a troublesome person. Such sustained homophonic punning is typical of Cao Xueqin's style (Sychoy 291), and indeed *Honglou meng* contains, "a number of cryptic verses and outright riddles of prophetic significance" (Plaks 235). Furthermore, the punning by Cao Xueqin on Jia Yu-cun's name connects an apparently minor character to the allegory of truth and falseness in the narrative (Levy 14-15, Miller 146 and 255, and Eber 245) since the family name Jia is a homophone for "false" or "unreal" as Zhen is for "true" or "real." The pun on Jia Hua (賈化) as "fictive language" (假話), Yu-cun's given name, also calls attention to the motif of enlightenment and delusion in the narrative, as we shall see shortly.

To summarize, both Chinese and Western critical approaches to Jia Yu-cun place a corrupt minor official, whose treachery contributes to the fall of the Jia family, at the heart of the novel's essentially dialectical structure. As significant as such an observation may seem, there is still much more to Jia Yu-cun. He enjoys a prominent presence in the mythological frame of the novel, as witnessed in opening couplets to the first and last chapters (1 and 120) that reference him by name. As an important element in the machinery of fate (命), he is a soteriological agent, and while he only appears briefly compared with other central characters, he is masterfully paired with Bao-yu, Dai-yu, Bao-chai, and Wang Xi-feng (in addition to his benefactor Zhen Shi-yin). The unofficial historian of the Jia clan, Jia Yu-cun offers an important theory of character in chapter 2 that at least one mainland critic believes to be unique in Chinese philosophy (Zhou, *Between* 134-35, 141). Finally, the punning on his name noted earlier also calls attention to the metafictional nature of Cao Xueqin's project. Because of this multiplicity of roles in the narrative, indeed more than many of the main characters, I regard Jia Yu-cun as a highly developed character central to the articulation of the allegorical vision of the novel despite the fact that he is deliberately kept in the background. The remainder of this essay will unpack this series of claims and demonstrate how Cao Xueqin weaves Jia Yu-cun philosophically and typologically into the narrative.

Because Yu-cun appears in only 6 of 120 chapters, we can briefly chart his dialectical pairing to his benefactor Zhen Shi-yin throughout the narrative, since it persists through chapter 120 and underscores a central motif of cyclic gain and loss: the "extreme of adversity is the beginning of prosperity," and "joy at its height engenders sorrow" (SS 13.256). In chapter 1, as Shi-yin loses his beloved daughter Caltrop, Yu-cun gains a spouse. Yet, Zhen Shi-yin has reached enlightenment, while Jia Yu-cun still wallows in the delusion of greed and attainment belonging to the Red Dust human world. Because this dialectical relationship between Yu-cun and Zhen Shi-yin places both characters at the heart of the allegory of enlightenment in the narrative, Yu-cun and Shi-yin become symbols of the polarity that exists between reality and appearance (Miller 255), which is only heightened by the homophonic punning on their family names *Zhen* (真 true) and *Jia* (假 false).

In chapter 2, Yu-cun enters the dilapidated Temple of Perfect Knowledge and reads an inscription, only vaguely significant to him at the time, but which ironically describes the man: "As long as there is sufficiency behind you, you push greedily

forward; / It is only when there is no road in front of you that you think of turning back” 身後有餘忘縮手，眼前無路想回頭 (SS 2.71). This saying describes the nature of Yu-cun’s ignorance and marks out the course of his redemption. However, in chapter 2, the unenlightened Yu-cun is disgusted by the “ancient, wizened monk cooking some gruel who paid no attention whatsoever to his greetings” and whose “toothless replies were all but unintelligible” (SS 2.71). Yu-cun fails to recognize his benefactor, Zhen Shi-yin because Yu-cun is mired in the Red Dust human world. Zhen, now content with such straightened circumstances due to his spiritual attainments, refuses even to identify himself to Yu-cun.

When the two men meet again in chapter 103, Yu-cun has reached the height of worldly prosperity as mayor, while Shi-yin remains in a small broken-down temple in an extreme state of dilapidation (SS 103.93). At this moment of apex and nadir the enlightened Zhen Shi-yin exemplifies true perception while Jia Yu-cun (as his name suggests) represents ignorance. This time Zhen responds to Yu-cun’s questions by alluding not only to Yu-cun poem that betrays his ambition in chapter one, but also to the polarity that exists between reality and appearance. Zhen asks Jia quizzically, “What is truth and what is fiction?” He answers his own question: “You must understand that truth is fiction, and fiction truth” 要知道，真即是假，假即是真 (SS 103.94). Though stated unequivocally, Yu-cun remains blind to the true meaning of Zhen’s words. As he departs the temple, it spontaneously catches fire. Yu-cun does not attempt to save his benefactor, his “twinge of conscience notwithstanding,” for he “was at heart a man who put his career first, and he felt insufficient concern to involve (and inconvenience) himself any further” (SS 104.96). Even Yu-cun’s wife, a former maid to Zhen Shi-yin, reproaches Yu-cun for his callousness (SS 104.101).

In the novel’s final chapter, Yu-cun comes to understand the full implication of Zhen’s cryptic remark, “Beyond my prayer-mat...I know nothing” 我於蒲團之外...貧道一概不解 (SS 103.94). While all of Zhen’s desires have been extinguished, Jia Yu-cun still wallows in the dregs of endless ambition. Were he a corrupt Mandarin and nothing more, Yu-cun would not possess a natural curiosity about religion that can be witnessed in his repeated survey of local temple ruins (a hobby that serves as an important sign of his potential for enlightenment). Shrouded in ignorance and falsity, however, he never deciphers or understands the meaning of such encounters with Zhen Shi-yin until the end of the novel for his perceptions are faulty (Miller 130).

Only after Yu-cun has fallen from the heights of worldly prosperity to the depths of poverty and disgrace (a pattern equally applicable to the Jia clan and particularly to Bao-yu who returns to his primordial state as the Stone) can he find redemption. A convicted criminal, Yu-cun returns to his hometown in disgrace. As Zhen Shi-yin explains to him in their last encounter in the final chapter, it is “preordained that prosperity comes with virtue, and calamity with evil” 福善禍淫，古今定理 (SS 120.372). Therefore, only when Yu-cun abandons ambition and villainy is he ready for illumination. Like Bao-yu, Yu-cun must first be blinded by human passion before he can reach enlightenment. For both, enlightenment means coming to understand that the “Land of Illusion and Paradise of Truth are one and the same” 太虛幻境即是真如福地 (SS 120.371). At the very end of the novel, Jia becomes Zhen; the “false” has evolved

towards the "true" (Miller 146). In fact, Jia Yu-cun's evolution towards becoming "true" (*zhen*) is mirrored in Jia Bao-yu's own recognition that his double Zhen Bao-yu is actually "false" (*jia*).

While the punning on these two family names seems to suggest that Zhen Bao-yu is the "real" Bao-yu and Jia Bao-yu the "false" one, when they finally meet Jia Bao-yu discovers to his dismay that Zhen Bao-yu uses the "telltale rhetoric of the 'career worm'" (SS 115.274), which produces only "false meanings" (*xi-yi*) accompanied by affected gestures (Wang 141). The discovery of Zhen Bao-yu's falseness, combined with the fact that Jia Bao-yu is the reincarnated Stone whose purpose in the human world is to realize his true origin, connects this episode directly to the prominent paradoxical couplet in chapter one: "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; / Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real" 假作真時真亦假，無為有處有還無 (SS 1.55). These lines highlight a "Buddhist perception of the illusory nature of all things" (Wong 154), and they foreshadow both Yu-cun's and Bao-yu's eventual salvation. Just as Bao-yu must observe the monks make use of the jade to teach Bao-yu or to save his life on three occasions, so too Yu-cun must encounter Zhen Shiyin three times (in chapters 2, 103, and 120) before he experiences a changing perspective (Miller 147). Through this careful use of dialectical opposition, the power of the Stone for self-transformation from lust to enlightenment mirrors that of Yu-cun's from criminal to saint.

Furthermore, Yu-cun is essential to the patterns of fate in the narrative, and as such he is a soteriological instrument for he intercedes at pivotal moments in the text to bring to pass the prophecies found in chapter 5 and to facilitate Bao-yu's enlightenment. We have already considered him in the context of the mythical frame of the narrative in the first and last chapters, and although he only appears in four other chapters (2, 3, 4, 103), his role in these chapters closely ties Yu-cun to the fates of Dai-yu, Bao-chai, and Zhen Bao-yu (in addition to Jia Bao-yu). The couplet that Yu-cun recites in chapter 1 (referred to again in chapter 103), which is typically read as emblematic of his inexhaustible ambition, can be translated literally as follows: "The jade in its case seeks a good buyer; the hairpin in its box awaits the moment to take flight" (Wong 157). The character jade (*yu*) names Dai-yu as a young woman in search of the good Jia (Bao-yu), while the second line alludes to Bao-chai (literally Precious Hairpin) awaiting (*shifei*, Yu-cun's style name) the arrival of a bureaucrat (157), perhaps even Zhen Bao-yu.

When Dai-yu's mother falls ill and dies, Yu-cun escorts her daughter to Beijing and installs her in the Jia mansion. Brother-in-law to the Jia's, Lin Ru-hai recommends Yu-cun to Jia Zheng, who gets him reinstated (SS 3.86). All of these points are significant, for when Dai-yu arrives in Beijing, she confesses to Grandmother Jia almost immediately:

I have been taking medicine ever since I could eat and been looked at by ever so many well-known doctors, but it has never done me any good. Once, when I was only three, I can remember a scabby-headed old monk came and said he wanted to take me away and have me brought up as a nun; but of course, Mother and Father wouldn't hear of it. So he said, "Since you are not prepared to give her up, I am afraid her illness will never get better as long as she lives.

The only way it might get better would be if she were never to hear the sound of weeping from this day onwards and never to see any relations other than her own mother and father. Only in those conditions could she get through her life without trouble” (SS 3.90).

我自來是如此，從會吃飲食時便吃藥，到今未斷，請了多少名醫，修方配藥，皆不見效。那一年，我纔三歲時，聽得說，來了一個癩頭和尚，說要化我去出家，我父母固是不從。他又說‘既捨不得他，只怕他的病一生也不能好的了。若要好時，除非從此以後總不許見哭聲；除父母之外，凡有外姓親友之人，一概不見，方可平安了此一世’ (HLM 3.40).

From this passage we understand that when Jia Yu-cun escorts Dai-yu to Beijing, he becomes an agent in her ultimate demise, and he thereby facilitates the repayment of the debt of tears. The demand by the scabby-headed monk for Lin Ru-hai to give up his beloved daughter also parallels exactly that of Zhen Shi-yin and his daughter Caltrop (Ying-lian), but then this is one of the main lessons of the Won-Done Song: “Men all know that salvation should be won, / But with their children won’t have done, have done” 世人都曉神仙好，只有兒孫忘不了! (SS 1.64).

Moreover, Jia Yu-cun rules in the case of the murder of Feng Yuan by Xue Pan (SS 4.116-117), and thus he facilitates Caltrop’s fate to suffer the life of a maid (and later chamber wife) to Xue Pan, as well as her eventual death in childbirth. At the end of a tragic life, her soul is handed over to the fairy Disenchantment “to have her name entered on the register” (SS 120.373). Just afterward, the Daoist and Buddhist monk inform Zhen Shi-yin “that senseless Block has already returned,” but they note that the last installment of its story still needs recording. Jia Yu-cun attests to the fact that the story of the Stone “contains no errors.” Now too drowsy to attempt the publication of the work himself (a symbol of his final renunciation of ambition), Jia Yu-cun recommends that Vanitas seek out the persona of Cao Xueqin in his Nostalgia Studio to transmit Stone’s story (SS 120.375). Since the author uses Jia Yu-cun to explain the origin of the (fictionalized) publication of *Honglou meng*, Yucun’s slumber becomes a “gesture of spiritual transcendence” for “spiritual awakening through physical slumbering” has a long tradition in Chinese Taoism (Zhou, “Chaos” 283-84).

Jia Yu-cun’s somnolence in these crucial final pages of the novel also reinforces both the opposition between waking and sleeping found at the allegorical level of the narrative and that fiction is the “dream product of ‘false language’” (Yu 169). When Yu-cun provides instructions for the publication of the novel to the persona of Cao Xueqin, Cao smiles and replies: “Rustic Fiction Indeed (*Jia Yu-cun yan*)!” (SS 120.375). Ironically, Vanitas (and not Yu-cun) fails to distinguish truth from fiction, for he wrongly concludes: “So, it was really all utter nonsense! Author, copyist, and reader were all alike in the dark! Just so much ink splashed for fun, a game, a diversion!” 果然是敷衍荒唐！不但作者不知，抄者不知，並閱者也不知。不過遊戲筆墨，陶情適性而已！ (SS 120.375). In this final chapter of the novel, Jia Yu-cun and the persona of Cao Xueqin prove better readers of the text than does Vanitas. Finally, Lin Ru-hai’s endorsement of Yu-cun, and Jia Zheng’s subsequent misplaced fondness for the man,

leads directly to the confiscation of the Jia mansions as a result of the false accusations made to save his own skin (*SS* 107.154). The suffering that results from Jia Yu-cun's duplicity contributes to Bao-yu's decision to abandon his family in search of salvation (and the restitution of his original state as the Primordial Stone). For all of these reasons, in addition to being given a role as transmitter of the story, Jia Yu-cun unwittingly facilitates the fatalistic machinery of the narrative.

Cao Xueqin also employs Jia Yu-cun to draw attention to the narrative's metafictional dimensions, by which I mean "fictional writing [that] self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 6). A salient feature of such fiction is construction based on a principle of sustained opposition: the creation of fictional illusion and the laying bare of that illusion (Waugh 6). This is certainly the case with *Honglou meng*, and therefore, through the repeated punning on Jia Yu-cun's name noted earlier, the author calls attention to the self-reflexiveness of the text through a "complex and sophisticated system of rhetoric" to constantly "call attention to its own fictiveness" (Yu 265-66). Likewise, the pairing of Jia Yu-cun ("rustic fiction") with Zhen Shi-yin ("true matters concealed") returns us again to the fictional truth expressed in the aforementioned couplet: "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; / Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real" (*SS* 1.55). That is to say, illusion becomes truth in the figure of Jia Yu-cun. Here Cao Xueqin calls attention to the fictional nature of his enterprise to reinforce the religious allegory of awakening through the figure of Jia Yu-cun. *Honglou meng* "is thus in essence a self-referential paradox that problematizes 'concealment' in fiction" and pushes reality and fictionality to their extremes (Yau 122).

Taken together, the names Zhen Shi-yin and Jia Yu-cun are homophones for "True events are concealed by fictional accounts," a statement that outwardly stresses the allegorical meaning of the narrative, while inwardly concealing the more complicated concept of the interrelationship between the truth of real being and the dream life (Sychov 291). This opposition between truth and fiction infuses the narrative "with an existential urgency that makes the reader feel that the play with reality-illusion dialectics is crucial to the final configuration of meaning" (Li 153). Puns on Yu-cun's name push this dialectical opposition to the fore of the reader's consciousness, and Cao Xueqin uses Jia Yu-cun as a model to teach the perceptive reader to find truth in his fictional text. As Ka-Fai Yau notes, it is "through the representation of what-is-not" that we feel the allure of meaning, and so in essence the reader of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is forced to participate in a "self-referential reading game" of concealment and revealment (124).

In addition to these pivotal roles in the narrative, Cao Xueqin also has Jia Yu-cun articulate a sophisticated theory of character. In chapter 2, Leng Zi-xing and Yu-cun discuss the history of the Jia clan. Leng notes that Jia Zheng, Bao-yu's father, had three remarkable children: Jia Zhu who at fourteen was a Licensed Scholar (進學) but died before he was twenty, a girl named Yuan-chun born on New Year's day (who would later become an Imperial Concubine), and another born with a "piece of beautiful, clear, coloured jade in his mouth with a lot of writing on it" named Bao-yu (*SS* 2.74). When Bao-yu chooses "women's things" during the formal ceremony marking the first

twelve months of life, Jia Zheng incorrectly believes that his son will become a rake (a perception his father does not abandon until the final chapter of the novel). Yet, when Leng Zi-xing informs Yu-cun of this incident, Yu-cun's "face assumed an expression of unwonted severity," and he adamantly rejected such a view asserting that only one "well-versed in moral philosophy and in the subtle arcane of metaphysical science could possibly understand" Bao-yu (*SS* 2.76). This belief in the child's unusual heredity is one reason for Yu-cun's frequent, though unwelcome, visits to Bao-yu. While Yu-cun deems himself sufficiently erudite to understand Bao-yu's heredity, it is Zhen Shi-yin, and not Jia Yu-cun, who gets a peak at the "absurd creature," the Stone, in chapter 1.

Yu-cun's theory of character is one founded on the principles of energy (*qi*) in balanced opposition. According to the eminent critic Zhou Ruchang, Cao Xueqin uses Yu-cun to articulate a new theory in Chinese philosophy using the vehicle of fiction. Rather than portraying individuals who were wholly virtuous or villainous, as was the case in traditional Chinese vernacular novels, Cao Xueqin strove for a new method of characterization (Zhou, *Between* 131). Zhou traces the influences of the work of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) and Li Zhi (李贽, 1527-1602) in the formulation of Cao's philosophy. Zhu Xi argued that inborn vital force (*qi*) determined one's social station, but Cao Xueqin believed that "theory revealed little about human nature," which was not so easily measured in terms of broad concepts like good and evil. In Zhou Ruchang's view, Cao Xueqin found that some people were simply beyond such relative moral categories" (132).

Drawing on the work of Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) as well, Cao Xueqin "became determined to write about a group of people born with *jian qi* (impure energy) who were not immoral (as traditional commentaries suggested) but rather extremely talented figures" (Zhou, *Between* 133). For Zhou Ruchang, the idea that people born with a combination of both pure and impure *qi* incessantly in sustained opposition with each other articulated by Jia Yu-cun challenged traditional notions of the harmony of *yin* and *yang*. In chapter two of the novel, Jia Yu-cun observes: "Instances of exceptional goodness and exceptional badness are produced by the operation of beneficent or noxious ethereal influences." Thus, Yu-cun continues, "all instances of exceptional goodness" were "born under the influence of benign forces, and all sought to promote the well-being of the societies in which they lived," while "all instances of exceptional badness" were born under the influence of harmful forces and "sought to disrupt the societies in which they lived" (*SS* 2.76-77).

By contrast, there is a certain class of people, to which Bao-yu belongs, who are the recipients of mixed *qi*. In such individuals, these dialectical forces are "locked in irreconcilable conflict, the good refusing to yield to the evil, the evil persisting in its hatred of the good," and as such these people are "incapable of becoming either greatly good or greatly bad" (*SS* 2.78). Yu-cun notes that when you place "them in the company of ten thousand others," you will find that "they are superior to all the rest in sharpness and intelligence and inferior to the rest in perversity, wrongheadedness, and eccentricity" (*SS* 2.78). According to Yu-cun, such persons born into noble or wealthy families would become great lovers and fools for *qing* (love); born into poor but well-educated households, they became literary rebels and eccentric aesthetes; and born

into the lowest social strata, they would become great actors or famous courtesans (*SS* 2.78). Yu-cun is certainly right in terms of Bao-yu, Qin Zhong, Jiang Yu-han and Liu Xianglian. This theory that Jia Yu-cun espouses accounts for Bao-yu's eccentric nature far more accurately than the belief held by his father that he would become a rake.

Some scholars have a different interpretation of this episode. Lucien Miller, for example, argues that Jia Yu-cun's idea about Jia Bao-yu becoming a "foolish romantic" because of mixed *chi* is "preposterous." He cites as evidence the same conversation in which Yu-cun misinterprets the ability of Zhen Bao-yu (whom Yu-cun actually tutored unlike Jia Bao-yu) to "preserve the patrimony of the family." Miller acquiesces that in the aforementioned case that Yu-cun is right: Bao-yu "does manifest a recklessly romantic spirit" (Miller, *Masks* 134). However, the inability to perceive "certain things no matter how hard he looks" can be explained by Yu-cun's reliance on rationality, which prevents him from reaching enlightenment until the very end of the novel. Indeed, Yu-cun makes "profound statements of truth" periodically in the text, but "when he does so, he never realizes what he is saying" (Miller, *Masks* 155). Since he is himself false (*jia*), we have seen that Yu-cun is prone to confusing the false and the true until the final pages of the narrative. Other scholars simply view the speech as an example of a pretentious literatus trying to impress a friend (Minford 318).

Yet, in the case of Bao-yu, Jia Yu-cun proves a better reader of character than Jia Zheng and countless others in the narrative (consider for instance Xi-feng's belief that she can substitute Bao-chai for Dai-yu at Bao-yu's wedding). In my view, Cao Xueqin uses Jia Yu-cun to espouse his new theory of mixed *qi* because Jia Yu-cun himself possesses a nature "in which good and evil are comingled in more or less equal proportions" (*SS* 2.76). Like Bao-yu, Yu-cun is incapable of becoming "either greatly good or greatly bad," and he is clearly superior to many others "in sharpness and intelligence." In this sense, when Jia Yu-cun remarks to Leng Zi-xing that all of the people they have been discussing probably are "examples of that mixture of good and evil humours," he remains unaware that he should include himself among their rank. If Jia Bao-yu and Zhen Shi-yin represent the path of virtue in the search for enlightenment (people in whom the mixture of *qi* favored the good), Yu-cun represents the path to truth through the recognition of falsity (*jia*). Jia Yu-cun is after all the "fake fool" (假愚蠢). If it were not so, how could Jia Yu-cun reach enlightenment, along with Zhen Shi-yin and Bao-yu, while people like Jia Zheng remain in the dark? So while apparently a simple minor character commonly glossed as serving to warn the reader against the folly of greed, Jia Yu-cun is actually given a prominent position in articulating a complex theory of character in the novel.

Finally, although Yu-cun appears in only six chapters of this massive novel, he is evoked by other characters in another fourteen chapters: 16, 17, 32, 33, 48, 53, 73, 82, 92, 95, 99, 104, 107, and 117. Many of these references to Yu-cun occur at pivotal moments in the novel, and even the mere evocation of his name often portends loss and suffering (and implicates him in morally dubious undertakings). A brief review of several scenes where Yu-cun is evoked will affirm the multiple roles we have seen him play in the text when he is present.

For example, in chapter 32 Bao-yu is vexed after a visit from Yu-cun. Bao-yu protests, "I'm as common as dirt" and "have no wish to mix with people of his sort" (*SS*

32.130). His comment is significant in many ways. Like Yu-cun, Bao-yu is a member of the Jia clan, both of course find salvation despite their different priorities in the Red Dust, and both belong to individuals born with mixed *qi*. Here it is Bao-yu's inability to read Yu-cun's potential for enlightenment that is on display. This visit by Yu-cun also foreshadows Bao-yu's beating by his father for the alleged rape of Golden. Just as Bao-yu finishes his interview with Yu-cun, the news of Golden's suicide reaches him (*SS* 33.141). Already dejected, Bao-yu is subjected to a "string of accusations and reproaches" concerning his conduct with the unfortunate girl and his other female companions by his mother, "to which he was unable to reply." Leaving his mother, he encounters his father who berates him thusly:

'Now,' said Jia Zheng, 'will you kindly explain the meaning of these sighs and of this moping, hang-dog appearance? You took your time coming when Yu-cun called for you just now, and I gather that when you did eventually vouchsafe your presence, he found you dull and listless and without a lively word to say for yourself. And look at you now—sullenness and secret depravity written all over your face!' (*SS* 33.142).

好端端的，你垂頭喪氣噶些什麼？方纔雨村來了要見你，叫你那半天你纔出來。既出來了，全無一點慷慨揮灑談吐，仍是葳葳蕪蕪。我看你臉上一團思慾愁悶氣色 (*HLM* 33.520).

Here Yu-cun is evoked at what is arguably the first in a long series of disenchantments Bao-yu must suffer on the path to salvation. It also highlights the misguided view of both his father and mother that Bao-yu is overly licentious, and by contrast the accurateness of Yu-cun's theory of Bao-yu's character in chapter 2.

Again referenced at a pivotal moment in the text but not present, Bao-chai and Patience bemoan the beating Jia Lian takes from Jia She in chapter 48. "It was that toad Jia Yu-cun's doing," remarks Patience with bitterness. "It was a bad day for this family when they got to know him" (*SS* 48.454). She refers to Jia Yu-cun's treachery in assisting Jia She in the acquisition of twenty antique fans "by making out" that the reluctant seller (Stony) "owed the government some money" and then confiscating the fans in payment for the fabricated debt and presenting them to Jia She (*SS* 48.455). Patience's remarks also foreshadow Yu-cun's role in the confiscation of the Jia properties.

In chapter 82, Dai-yu dreams that Jia Yu-cun calls upon her unexpectedly. Dai-yu refuses to see him, and he does not appear in this scene, but her maid tells Dai-yu that Yu-cun has come to congratulate her. She is to be married to a widower relation of her "new stepmother's" and Jia Yu-cun is to act "as go-between" (*SS* 82.62-63). Though a former student of Yu-cun's, Dai-yu complains: "all the times he's come to see Uncle Zheng he's never once asked after me, so why should I have to see him now?" (*SS* 82.62). Here Dai-yu inadvertently highlights Yu-cun's repeated inability to read in so far as while he recognizes the unusual heredity of Bao-yu, he remains ignorant of her divine origins.

In this same dream sequence, Bao-yu comes to Dai-yu's house. A key scene in the novel, it foreshadows both Bao-yu's marriage to Bao-chai and Dai-yu's death. After

offering her his congratulations, Dai-yu clutches hold of Bao-yu and exclaims: "Now I know how heartless and cruel you really are, Bao-yu!" 寶玉, 我今日纔知道你是個無情無義的人了! (SS 82.64). Dai-yu will of course die believing that Bao-yu betrayed her, though in a moment of lucidity that does not carry over into waking life, she suggests prophetically: "It's all a trick of Xi-feng's" (SS 82.65). In light of her repeated pleading in her dream, Bao-yu relents, declaring: "I've told you, stay here with me. If you still don't trust me, look at my heart" 我說叫你住下。你不信我的話, 你就瞧瞧我的心 (SS 82.65). With this comment, Bao-yu takes out a knife and cuts across his chest. As blood spurts out, he searches the incision for his heart when he realizes: "It's not there anymore! My time has come!" and he falls to the floor with a thud (SS 82.65). When she awakens with a scream, Dai-yu coughs up blood for the first time in a fit of coughing that anticipates her own death by consumption (and Bao-yu's rediscovery of his true nature shortly thereafter). As Zhen Shi-yin later explains to Yu-cun in chapter 120:

Bao-yu [...] is the Stone, the Precious Jade. Before the two mansions of Rong and Ning were searched and worldly goods impounded, on the very day when Bao-chai and Dai-yu were separated, the Stone had already quit the world. This was in part to avoid the impending calamity, in part to permit the consummation of the union. For that moment the Stone's worldly karma was complete, its substance had returned to the Great Unity" (SS 120.371).

寶玉, 即寶玉也。那年榮、寧查抄之前, 釵、黛分離之日, 此玉早已離世。一為避禍, 二為撮合, 從此夙緣一了, 形質歸一 (HLM 122.2029).

Here again, the evocation of Jia Yu-cun in this dream sequence reaffirms his role in the fates of central characters in the novel, and by implication in Bao-yu's eventual attainment of salvation. As in this passage, Yu-cun also frequently asks questions that the reader seeks answers to, in this case enquiring about the final fate of Stone.

In chapter 92, Jia Zheng explains that Lin Ru-hai (whose daughter Dai-yu begins to repay her debt of tears when Yu-cun escorts her to the Capital City) originally introduced him to Jia Zheng. Jia Zheng, a perennially poor judge of character, quickly formed a good impression of Yu-cun in part because he "seemed to have familiarized himself with every detail of our family history" (SS 92.259). Jia Zheng notes, "there is a pattern in all things," and while Yu-cun "has had a comparatively easy time of it," the Zhen [Bao-yu] "family estate was confiscated" (SS 92.260). The principle of dialectical opposition in character pairing noted earlier means that when the Zhen's are later reinstated, Yu-cun's fortunes wane. (Jia Zheng's reference to the confiscation of the Zhen family property, and his ruminations on the Mother Pearl that Feng Zi-ting is selling, foreshadow the raid of his own family properties as well).

In chapter 95 Jia Yu-cun is evoked again as a harbinger of suffering and loss. Yu-cun is said to have delivered the news that Wang Zi-teng was promoted to Grand Secretariat (SS 95.308), though of course Zi-teng dies on the way home thereby crushing Lady Wang's spirits (SS 96.324). In the same chapter, the imperial concubine Jia Yuan-chun dies confirming the ill omen of the blighted crab tree and signaling that

the Jia clan is headed for a fall from the heights of prosperity. Yet, Jia Yu-cun does not simply deliver bad news and disappear. By evoking him so many times, Cao Xueqin purposely draws attention to Yu-cun as a structural device linked to the pattern of grave loss followed by enlightenment (exemplified by Zhen Shi-yin in chapter 2 and Yu-cun himself in the final chapter).

In chapter 99, Jia Zheng is chided by Li Ten for not being more “shrewd” like Yu-cun, so while Jia Zheng struggles to keep his integrity in his provincial administrative post, Jia Yu-cun prospers. This sustained dialectical opposition persists until the end of the narrative when Bao-yu’s performance on the provincial exams restores the family fortunes and Jia Yu-cun is impeached for avarice and extortion in chapter 104. The servant Bao Yong overhears a conversation that implicates Jia Yu-cun in the charges brought against the Jia clan in chapter 107, and in chapter 117 (the final chapter where Jia Yu-cun is mentioned but does not actually appear), Yu-cun is said to have been bound in chains and taken to the high court for questioning (SS 117.315). His career ruined, and smarting from a loss of face, Yu-cun is finally ready to distinguish *jia* from *zhen* in the final chapter.

As we have seen, there is much more to the characterization of Jia Yu-cun than clever homophonic puns on his name that reinforce his association with duplicity and falseness. Nor is Jia Yu-cun simply a stock corrupt official whose actions typify an implicit critique of Ming-Qing decadence, decay, and mismanagement. Rather he is a highly complex and developed character. Quite bright, he arguably begins the narrative as an earnest impoverished scholar who is corrupted by the force of social norms (consider, for example, the discussion of the Mandarin Life Preserver 護官符 in chapter 4). Yu-cun nevertheless visits temples, reads avidly, and demonstrates an interest in Buddhism that eventually leads to his enlightenment (together with Jia Bao-yu, Zhen Shi-yin, and perhaps even Vanitas).

The persistence of the tendency to read him as a stock figure of corruption may be due in part to the Zhi Yan-zhai (Red Inkstone) Commentary, which cites Yu-cun and Wang Xi-feng as two primary corrupting forces that lead to the confiscation and decline of a once great house. According to Zhi Yan-zhai, in “machination and audacity” both Xi-feng and Yu-cun were “treacherous leaders in a disorderly world” (Wu 167). In this respect, a passage from Xi-feng’s song, “Caught by Her Own Cunning,” in the *Dream of Golden Days* suite seems almost applicable to Jia Yu-cun:

And half a life-time’s anxious schemes
 Proved no more than the stuff of dreams.
 Like a great building’s tottering crash,
 Like flickering lampwick burned to ash,
 Your scene of happiness concludes in grief:
 For worldly bliss is always insecure and brief (SS 5.143).

竟懸懸半世心；好一似，蕩悠悠三更夢。忽喇喇似有大廈傾，昏慘慘似燈
 將盡。呀！一場歡喜忽悲辛。嘆人世，總難定！(HLM 5.85)

Moreover, Yu-cun is essential to the novel's *zhen-jia* mimetic core of dialectical opposition through his pairings with Zhen Shi-yin and Zhen Bao-yu. Also a significant cog in the machinery of fate in the narrative, he escorts Lin Dai-yu to Beijing thereby facilitating the repayment of the debt of tears between the Divine Luminescent Stone-in-waiting and the Crimson Pearl Flower. He also presides over a murder trial involving Xue Pan and Zhen Shi-yin's daughter, Caltrop. In addition, Yu-cun's poem expressing his ambition to succeed at the spring examinations, which is overheard by his benefactor Zhen Shi-yin in chapter 1, also connects him to the fates of both Dai-yu and Bao-chai.

Therefore, although Jia Yu-cun appears in just six chapters, he participates in the mythical narrative frame of the text (and his name is featured in the opening couplets to the first and last chapters). He espouses a complex theory of character that helps the reader to better understand Bao-yu (along with characters such as Jiang Yu-han and Liu Xiaglian) who inherited mixed *qi*. Moreover, the deliberate and sustained punning on his name calls attention to the metafictional dimensions of the novel, and his important place in the narrative is reinforced by repeated evocations in chapters in which he does not even appear. Taken together with the fact that Jia Yu-cun is the unofficial historian of the Jia clan and introduces the reader to main characters in the narrative through in his conversation with Leng Zi-xing, interpreting Jia Yu-cun as a stock depiction of the corrupt Mandarin in Chinese literature is to overlook his multivarious roles in the narrative. Like Wang Xi-feng who is too often regarded as a stereotypical shrew (Brightwell 69), Yu-cun is a complex and carefully developed character woven philosophically and typologically into the patterns of meaning in the novel.

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