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# Toward a Maoist *Dream of the Red Chamber*: Or, How Baoyu and Daiyu Became Rebels Against Feudalism

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## Abstract

Mao Zedong's views on literature were enigmatic: although he coerced writers into "learning the language of the masses," he made no secret of his own enthusiasm for *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a novel written during the Qing dynasty. In 1954 this paradox appeared to be resolved when Li Xifan and Lan Ling presented an interpretation that saw the tragic love story as a manifestation of class struggle. Ever since, the conception of Baoyu and Daiyu as class warriors has become a powerful and unquestioned cliché of Chinese literary criticism. Endowing aristocratic protagonists with revolutionary grandeur, however, violates a basic principle of Marxist orthodoxy. This article examines the reasons behind this position: on the one hand, Mao's support for Li and Lan's approach acts as a reminder of his early journalistic agitation against arranged marriage and the social ills it engenders. On the other hand, it offers evidence of Mao's increasingly ambiguous conception of class.

## Keywords

class struggle – *Dream of the Red Chamber* – *Hong Lou Meng* – Mao Zedong – *On Contradiction* literature

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Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) “attributed enormous power to a literary work, whether it were a short story, play, or literary criticism,” and his hands-on approach to rectifying the ideological thrust of research on *Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢] can serve as a fine example of his “obsession with the political role of literature.”<sup>1</sup> Whereas the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and living writers continues to attract much national and international attention, the Party’s attitude toward Chinese literary heritage attracts less critical attention. The defining discussions took place during the 1950s, and although research has provided valuable information about the genesis of these debates, their methodological premises remain unquestioned.

Mao’s puzzling attitude toward the past is exemplified by Ng Yong-sang’s analysis of his poetry: in 1957, when a number of the Chairman’s poems were published for the first time, he deemed it necessary for them to be accompanied by a self-aware note in which he apologizes for their composition in traditional meter and rhyme: “Of course our poetry should be written mainly in the modern form. We may write some verse in classical forms as well, but it would not be advisable to encourage young people to do this.”<sup>2</sup> Since his preferred style of poetry was *ci* 詞, a genre that flourished during the Song dynasty (960-1279), his own verse violates one of the basic principles outlined at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art: “learning the language of the masses.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, he happily inherits the coded language that was—by his own account—developed by and for the exploitative and oppressive feudal class.<sup>4</sup> There is a fine line between (positively) instrumentalizing literary traditions and indulging in outdated cultural heritage; in this light, even Mao harbors doubts about his own poetry.

The same dilemma emerges in his attitude toward classical literature, most notably *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This novel was penned during the heyday of the Qing dynasty, but unlike other novels, such as *The Water Margin* [*Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳] and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*San guo yanyi* 三國演義], the protagonists in the *Dream* are mainly of aristocratic origin and are portrayed against the backdrop of an indulgent and refined lifestyle. Like Mao’s

1 Merle Goldman, “The Political Role of Literature and the Intellectuals,” in *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 40.

2 Quoted in Ng Yong-sang, “The Poetry of Mao Tse-tung,” in *Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Gregor Benton (London: Routledge, 2007), 1: 360.

3 Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 3: 72.

4 Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

poetry, *Dream* does not speak the language of the masses, and yet it became one of the key texts of the Chinese literary canon of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is fair to say that it remains one of the few cultural products that was appreciated during and after the Mao era, and even today. Recently, a new television adaption was enough of a national event to justify a nine-digit budget.<sup>5</sup>

A lot of anecdotal evidence indicates that Mao underscored the importance of this novel time and again,<sup>6</sup> but he did not occupy himself with writing about the *Dream*, with the exception of one short document. This directive from October 16, 1954, titled "A Letter Concerning *Dream of the Red Chamber* Research" [*Guanyu "Hong lou meng" yanjiu wenti de xin* 關於“紅樓夢”研究問題的信], was addressed to key government personnel, among them Liu Shaoqi 劉少奇 (1898-1969) and Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898-1976),<sup>7</sup> and documents a congenial encounter between the realms of current affairs and literary criticism. This promotion of the work of Li Xifan 李希凡 (b. 1927) and Lan Ling 藍翎 (1931-2005), two high school teachers from Shandong Province, made a new interpretative paradigm compulsory within only a few months.

This article explores the surprising correspondence between Li and Lan's grassroots criticism and Mao Zedong Thought. In a hermeneutic reconstruction, Li and Lan's arguments are elucidated first by Mao's early journalistic work in the 1920s and, then, by his 1937 philosophical work *On Contradiction* [*Maodun lun* 矛盾論]. The latter principle is connected to narratological theory in order to develop a new understanding of the interplay between fiction and reality, the diegetic and the extradiegetic realm. Even today, Li and Lan's interpretation of *Dream* remain canonical and continue to inform

5 Li Shaohong's 李少紅 2010 production cost RMB 118 million. Cf. Zhang Lujing 張璐晶, "Xin Hong lou meng pei le? 新紅樓夢賠了? [Is the New *Dream of the Red Chamber* Suffering a Loss?]," *Zhongguo jingji zhoukan* 中國經濟周刊 [*China Business Weekly*], 35 (2010): 22-31.

6 Cf. Du Xianrong 杜賢榮, "Mao Zedong du 'Hong lou meng' fangfalun yanjiu 毛澤東讀《紅樓夢》方法論研究 [On Mao Zedong's Methodology When Reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*]," *Mao Zedong sixiang yanjiu* 毛澤東思想研究 [*Research on Mao Zedong Thought*], 1 (1997): 91.

7 The full list of recipients includes Chen Yun 陳雲, Zhu De 朱德, Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平, Hu Sheng 胡繩, Peng Zhen 彭真, Dong Lao 董老, Lin Lao 林老, Peng Dehuai 彭德懷, Lu Dingyi 陸定一, Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木, Chen Boda 陳伯達, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰, Deng Tuo 鄧拓, Yuan Shuipai 袁水拍, Lin Danqiu 林淡秋, Zhou Yang 周揚, Lin Feng 林楓, Kai Feng 凱豐, Tian Jiaying 田家英, Lin Mohan 林默涵, Zhang Jichun 張際春, Ding Ling 丁玲, Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰, Xi Zhongxun 習仲勛, and Ke Qifang 柯其芳.

some unquestioned arguments that are reiterated in the world of “red-ology” [*hongxue* 紅學].<sup>8</sup>

In Western research, Joey Bonner’s 1976 article remains one of the most important contributions to this debate. Irrespective of the negative trajectory of Li and Lan’s attack on bourgeois literary criticism, Bonner emphasizes its lasting impact on socialist literary criticism. Providing a welcome alternative to the downright rejection of feudal cultural products, it had a “unique value for the re-interpretation of other Chinese classical works.”<sup>9</sup> In her eyes, the debate was the original starting point for further campaigns directed at the intellectual sphere, that is, the Anti-Rightist movement [*Fan youpai yundong* 反右派運動] and the Socialist Education movement [*Shehui zhuyi jiaoyu yundong* 社會主義教育運動].

On the Chinese mainland, Sun Yuming 孫玉明 has portrayed the publication history of Mao’s letter and Li and Lan’s articles in great detail. In contrast to Bonner, he views the debate as a continuation of earlier campaigns triggered by *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* [*Qinggong mishi* 清宮秘史] and *The Life of Wu Xun* [*Wu Xun zhuan* 武訓傳], two feature films that, according to Mao, exhibited a revisionist world view. Because these campaigns quickly cooled off without public attention, the debate on *Dream* represented the first successful attempt to politicize cultural products on a national scale.<sup>10</sup> What is more, Sun’s work meticulously carves out the political antagonisms between the political and cultural elite, that is, between CCP leaders and the editors of *Literature and Art Journal* [*Wen yi bao* 文藝報], and between Jiang Qing 江青 (1915-1991) and Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908-1989), the assistant minister of the Central Propaganda Department [*Zhong xuan bu* 中宣部].<sup>11</sup>

8 The eminent red-ologist Zhan Dan emphatically reappraised Li Xifan’s main arguments in a recent paper. The only critical remarks concerned his lack of attention to philological detail. Cf. Zhan Dan 詹丹, “Makesi zhuyi hongxue de shenmei weidu: cong Li Xifan xian-sheng youguan ‘Hong lou meng’ de wanjin lunzhu tanqi 馬克思主義紅學的審美維度—從李希凡先生有關《紅樓夢》的晚近論著談起 [The Aesthetic Dimension of Marxist Red-ology: A Discussion of Li Xifan’s Recent Work on *Dream of the Red Chamber*],” *Hong lou meng xuekan* 紅樓夢學刊 [*Studies on Dream of the Red Chamber*], 5 (2014): 22-50.

9 Joey Bonner, “Yü P’ing-po and the Literary Dimension of the Controversy over *Hung lou meng*,” *China Quarterly*, no. 67 (1976): 572.

10 Cf. Sun Yuming 孫玉明, *Hongxue: 1954* 紅學: 1954 [*Red-ology: 1954*] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2001), 17-53.

11 Misled by the belief it did not reflect Mao’s own intentions, he was unconvinced of Li and Lan’s work and resisted Jiang Qing’s efforts to get it published. Cf. Sun Yuming, “<Hong lou meng> yanjiu pipan yundong fasheng de ouran yu biran (shang) 《紅樓夢》研究

What is still lacking, however, is a critical examination of the new methodological framework that emerged during the debate on *Dream*. After all, it established the paradigm that two aristocratic protagonists, Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and Lin Daiyu 林黛玉, can be regarded as class rebels. In Marxist thought, this is, to say the least, highly unusual; after all, its founding father stated:

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.<sup>12</sup>

Taking into account Mao's early feminist sensibilities, as evidenced by his journalistic work in Changsha, and his theoretical thinking, which also overthrew established Marxist paradigms, it is pertinent to explore the hidden layers behind Mao's support of Li and Lan's work.

### Rewriting the *Dream*

In his directive, Mao conveniently connects the interpretative trajectory of Li and Lan's article with one of the prime concerns that emerged after the foundation of the republic, the lingering heritage of Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962). Although this intellectual hero of the Republican era had sided with the Nationalist [Guomindang] administration, his clout in the cultural sphere on the Chinese mainland remained remarkably strong. Li and Lan, however, did not attack Hu Shi himself; rather, they dissected the work of his pupil Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 (1900-1990), who had never quite stepped out of the shadow of his tutor, even after his departure. In backing up Li and Lan's article, Mao hoped to relaunch his fight against the remnants of a regressive ideology that harbored a counter-revolutionary tendency. In his own words, the value of Li and Lan's work can hardly be overestimated: "It looks as if it is the right time to fight against the

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批判運動發生的偶然與必然(上) [The Haphazardness and Necessity of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* Research Criticism Campaign, Part 1], *Xin wenxue shiliao* 新文學史料 [Historical Materials of New Literature], 4 (2012): 67-70.

12 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Collected Works* (New York: International, 1976), 6: 494.

Hu Shi—style capitalist idealism in the field of classical literature, as it has poisoned the youth for some thirty years now.”<sup>13</sup>

Applied to red-ology, “capitalist idealism” maintains an undue focus on the individuality of the author: his or her work is not seen as depicting social tendencies but as representing a veiled autobiography of the individual writer. Hu Shi and Yu Pingbo’s new red-ology [*xin hongxue* 新紅學] is indeed informed by such biographical arguments. When he agreed to write a general introduction to the novel for foreign readers in 1953, Yu must have been largely unaware of the ideological struggles he was getting himself into. Not paying much attention to the advice of Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木 (1912-1992), both a close friend and a prominent CCP member, he refused to change its tone and trajectory—and eventually had it published under the title “A Brief Discourse on *Dream of the Red Chamber*” [*Hong lou meng jianlun* 紅樓夢簡論].<sup>14</sup> Li and Lan gladly picked up on it.

Their article, long-windedly titled “Regarding ‘A Brief Discourse on *Dream of the Red Chamber*’ and Other Issues” [*Guanyu “Hong lou meng jianlun” ji qita 關於“紅樓夢簡論”及其他*], first seemed to become a victim of the cultural establishment that Mao sought to fight. It was originally submitted to one of the key literary journals in Beijing, *Literature and Art Journal*. But as the journal had previously lauded Yu’s work, their article was rejected right away. In a second attempt, they succeeded in publishing it in the Shandong-based journal *Literature, History and Philosophy* [*Wen shi zhe* 文史哲]. (More recently, the first submission was put into doubt: Wang Xuedian 王學典 argues that the publication was intended for *Culture, Philosophy and History* in the first place.)<sup>15</sup> After Jiang Qing listed their article among her husband’s recommended reads, Mao approved of its content and decided to support the two young authors. First, he confronted the editors of the *Literature and Art Journal* about the rejected article and asked to have it reprinted in the journal. And as they declined his request, he approached the *People’s Daily* [*Renmin ribao*

13 這個反對在古典文學領域毒害青年三十餘年的胡適派資本家階級唯心論的鬥爭，也許可以展開起來了。Mao Zedong 毛澤東, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao 建國以來毛澤東文稿* [*Mao Zedong’s Works after the Foundation of the Republic*] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), 4: 574. [Translations by the author, unless stated otherwise—J.K.].

14 Cf. Sun, *Red-ology: 1954*, 24-26.

15 Cf. Wang Xuedian 王學典, “‘Hong lou meng yanjiu’ da pipan yuanqi jiemi—liang ge ‘xiao renwu’ zhihan ‘wen yi bao’ de shi shifou cunzai? ‘紅樓夢研究’大批判緣起揭秘——兩個‘小人物’致函《文藝報》的事是否存在?” [Unmasking the Genesis of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* Criticism Campaign—Can It Be True That Two ‘Unimportant People’ Wrote a Letter to the *Literature and Art Journal*?], *Hong lou meng xuekan*, 3 (2012): 2-22.



人民日報], a loyal Party organ. Eventually, this reprint brought Li and Lan's interpretation to the attention of the wider public.<sup>16</sup>

Yu largely approached *Dream* as a novel that is outside the realm of politics. To him, other classic novels, such as *The Scholars* [*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史], *The Water Margin*, or *The Golden Lotus* [*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅], are “angry” [*nu shu* 怒書] or “slandering works” [*bang shu* 謗書], which openly denounce social injustice. *Dream*, however, is balanced and merely exhibits a “bemoaning, but not angry” [*yuan er bu nu* 怨而不怒] attitude.<sup>17</sup> Li and Lan meet this depoliticizing view with the charge of “bourgeois subjective idealism” [*zichan jieji zhuguan weixin zhuyi* 資產階級主觀唯心主義] and “nihilist fatalism” [*xuwu mingding* 虛無命定].<sup>18</sup> In applying such labels, they criticize Yu's interpretation as an example of bourgeois ideology, as its multiple references to fate point to a lack of focus on human agency. Socialist criticism, they argue, should not tire of highlighting the emancipatory power of the downtrodden classes.

Whereas Li and Lan's first article largely exhausts itself in mere polemics against Yu, their follow-up work seeks to carve out an interpretation in its own right—one that establish the revolutionary credentials of the novel. Inevitably, their arguments are complicated by the fact that not only are the main characters aristocrats but so is the text's (alleged) author. Hu Shi had originally identified the historical person Cao Zhan 曹霑 (1715-1763) as the author, who appears under the pen name Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 in chapter 1. The attribution to Cao Zhan, the grandson of an imperial minister under the Kangxi 康熙 emperor (r. 1722-1735), could be seen as an obstacle to their reappraisal of an author whom they describe as a “rebel of the feudal aristocratic landowner class” [*fengjian guizu dizhu jieji de pannizhe* 封建貴族地主階級的叛逆者].<sup>19</sup> Li and Lan, however, never question this ascription but move on to providing answers to the pressing question this raises: under what circumstances could an aristocratic author have penned a novel with strong revolutionary credentials?

In their first attempt, the two acknowledge that Cao was firmly rooted in the prevailing thought of his time. But because the socioeconomic basis of society was already beginning to change, his life experience allowed him to broaden

16 Cf. Sun, *Red-ology*: 1954, 84.

17 Yu Pingbo 俞平伯, “Hong lou meng di fengge 紅樓夢底風格 [The Style of *Dream of the Red Chamber*],” in *Hong lou meng yanjiu* 紅樓夢研究 [Dream of the Red Chamber Research] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 2010), 80.

18 Li Xifan 李希凡 and Lan Ling 藍翎, *Hong lou meng pinglun ji* 紅樓夢評論集 [Collected Critical Essays on Dream of the Red Chamber] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1973), 6.

19 *Ibid.*, 193.

his horizons and eventually achieve a progressive attitude.<sup>20</sup> Through his merciless depiction of the Jia clan's corrupt household, Cao is seen as acknowledging the decay of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Chapter 4 attains a central role in this reinterpretation: in it, Jia Yucun 賈雨村 takes office as a provincial magistrate in Jinling, the capital. In his first legal case, all the evidence is against Xue Pan 薛蟠, the accused. He is charged with kidnapping and homicide, and yet the suitors complain that the case has been shelved. The infuriated greenhorn magistrate then proceeds to address the apparent dysfunction of the judicial system. But after he comes across the "Mandarin Life Preserver" [*Hu guan fu* 護官符],<sup>21</sup> a survival guide for newly appointed magistrates, he realizes that the culprit is above the law. Because Xue Pan's impunity is not presented as a singular phenomenon but, rather, as a symptom of the thoroughly corrupt and exploitative political system, Li and Lan find that this novel pillories the Jia family's "brutal exploitation, ruthless rule, the phony pretenses of Confucian ethics and the spirit of shameless debauchery."<sup>22</sup> Ex negativo, this is said to speak for the author's democratic ideals.<sup>23</sup>

While such a position still attributes the writer with a more or less revolutionary standpoint, their second approach portrays Cao Xueqin as a wholeheartedly aristocratic writer who fails in his original intention and pens a revolutionary novel more or less by accident. Originally intending to merely write the subjective account of a love story, he picks up on social trends in passing and weaves them into the text.<sup>24</sup> This revolutionary stance, then, can be established in hindsight, by a future readership able to detect the historical trends the text portrays.

This juxtaposition of a fundamental critique of the author's class with a sincere appreciation for certain qualities of the text is prefigured by Vladimir I. Lenin's essay on Leo Tolstoy; indeed, Li and Lan quote him. Lenin praises Tolstoy's psychologizing depiction of the peasant mindset and approves of his critique of capitalism but eventually accuses him of having failed to understand the real causes of social misery: only "immature dreaming" and "political inexperience"<sup>25</sup> allow him to seek deliverance in a godly life, instead of

20 Ibid., 197.

21 This translation follows Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes and John Minford (London: Penguin, 1973-82), 1: 111.

22 殘酷的剝削，無情的統治，偽裝的道學面孔，荒淫無恥的心靈。Li, *Collected Critical Essays*, 13.

23 Cf. *ibid.*, 16 and 121.

24 *Ibid.*, 268.

25 Vladimir I. Lenin, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1967), 32.



“uniting the masses into an army of socialist fighters.”<sup>26</sup> Li and Lan’s second approach places Cao Xueqin in a similar position, conceding that he has the skill of “truthful” observation but denying him “correct” class consciousness.

Li and Lan’s other and most important point is the reappraisal of Baoyu and Daiyu. In contrast to Yu, who had established the identity between author and characters through the autobiographical paradigm, they merely speak of an identity with regard to values:

Undoubtedly, the author positively identifies with Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. They are rebels of a feudal aristocratic family. They oppose Confucian ethics, despise rank and wealth. Given this shared spirit, they eventually fall in love. Although their love and their lives eventually end tragically, they thereby articulate their protest against the feudal system and Confucianism. Their thoughts already depart from their original ideological standpoint.<sup>27</sup>

The merciless hierarchy of seniority and ancestry eventually ruins Baoyu and Daiyu’s love. In this context, even Baoyu’s unwillingness to study the classics is endowed with revolutionary grandeur. Filled with rage at his son’s neglect of his studies, his father, Jia Zheng 賈政, orders two guards to beat him to death and, fearing they are being too soft on him, takes up the weapon himself (chapter 33). The “rebel of a feudal aristocratic family” almost becomes an anti-feudal martyr, but his life is spared through the intervention of Lady Jia 賈母.

Li and Lan’s position toward Baoyu and Daiyu is problematic. Although the couple undeniably suffer under the system, it is farfetched to regard them as rebels. According to Marxist orthodoxy, the economic base unilaterally determines the superstructure. Thus it is impossible for a bourgeois, not to mention an aristocrat to be a legitimate rebel against his own class; after all, “the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.” In Li and Lan’s approach, however, the couple’s alleged anti-feudalist attitude—that is: their ideological stance—completely overshadows the economic base of their social position. They emphasize the rumor that Baoyu would at one point free his slave servants (as mentioned in chapter 60), although it remains inconceivable that he could

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>27</sup> 無疑的，賈寶玉和林黛玉是作者所創造的肯定的人物形象。他們是封建貴族家庭的叛逆者。他們反對禮教傳統，蔑視功名利祿。他們在這樣共同的精神生活中相愛起來。儘管他們的戀愛和生命的結局是悲劇的，但他們卻以此向封建制度和封建禮教表示了抗爭。他們的思想已開始從原階級的思想體系中分離出來。Li, *Collected Critical Essays*, 8.

ever lead a life without the constant assistance of (female) servants. According to this interpretation, however, selected members of the aristocracy, despite being born with a silver spoon in their mouth, can engage in class struggle.

When discussing the Prospect Garden [Daguanyuan 大觀園], Li and Lan further elaborate on the revolutionary credentials of *Dream*. Arguably, Prospect Garden illustrates the isolation and seclusion of the world of nobility from the rest of society: originally conceived in honor of the imperial concubine Yuanchun 元春, who secures the Jia clan an ever-closer relationship with the emperor, the younger members of the family are eventually allowed to move in, so they can gather in poetry circles and cultivate the art of drinking games. Critics have approached Prospect Garden from two perspectives: first, it triggered inquiries into existing prototypes of the garden. Hu Shi, for example, argued that it is modeled after Sui Garden 隨園, the famed landscape garden of Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798), an early Qing-dynasty poet.<sup>28</sup> Second, it also attained the status of a semantic space that defies the prosaic realm of the realist narrative. This approach was first proposed by Li and Lan, and it offers relevant interpretations to this day.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, this special place contrasts the unpleasant realities of life.

In the end, Prospect Garden is the main stage of the tragedy. It is neither a happy paradise nor a shelter from the paradoxes of society, but a small piece of free land, where they can take refuge from a dark kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

The authors do not contrast the Jia family with the lower classes, who live outside its walls and may only enter upon becoming servants or workers; instead,

28 Cf. Hu Shi 胡適, *Hong lou meng kaozheng* 紅樓夢考證 [Textual Criticism on Dream of the Red Chamber] (Taipei: Yuandong tushu gongsi, 1961), 13.

29 In a study on Qing-era sentimentalism, Haiyan Lee portrays Prospect Garden “and its youthful residents as a radical alternative that resisted the ideological resolution demanded by the dominant order” (“Love or Lust? The Sentimental Self in *Honglou meng*,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* [CLEAR], 19 [1997]: 88). According to Yu Yingshi, it mirrors the aesthetic principle of polarity: just as the Precious Mirror of Romance [Fengyue baojian 風月寶鑒] has two sides, the Jia compound also consists of a realist and a utopian realm—and that is Prospect Garden. See Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Hong lou meng de liangge shijie* 紅樓夢的兩個世界 [The Two Worlds of the Dream of the Red Chamber] (Shanghai: Shanghai kexueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 36.

30 大觀園究竟是悲劇的舞台，而不是幸福的樂園，更不是與社會矛盾隔絕的世外桃園，而只是整個黑暗的王國裡稍有一點自由的一塊屬地。Li, *Collected Critical Essays*, 273.

they draw attention to the antagonism within the Jia compound: between the “dark kingdom” and Prospect Garden, where Baoyu and Daiyu find refuge.

Despite quoting Lenin’s nuanced critique of Tolstoy, Li and Lan do not reflect on this problem. Possibly, it escaped them. Mao’s tacit approval, however, endows their approach with a philosophical legitimacy, which in turn deserves our thorough attention. I argue that this surprising reappraisal of generational conflict as class conflict is made possible by two contexts. First, in Republican China and especially among the members of May Fourth movement [*Wusi yundong* 五四運動], generational conflict is intrinsically linked to class conflict; personal rebellion against a forced marriage was one of the defining features of this generation. Second, after the establishment of the PRC, Mao began to view class struggle as a phenomenon that transcends ordinary and, in particular, Marxist notions of class; Li and Lan’s unorthodox reappraisal of Baoyu and Daiyu is consistent with Mao Zedong Thought.

### Lin Daiyu’s Fate and Miss Zhao’s Suicide

Li and Lan view the tragic developments in chapter 96 as the culmination of the novel: in order to restore Baoyu’s mental sanity, Grandmother Jia resorts to following the advice of a fortuneteller, who suggests that he marry “a lady with a destiny of gold.”<sup>31</sup> This formula clearly points to Baochai. A plan—or, in Wang Xifeng’s own words, a “deceitful substitution” [*diaobao* 掉包]—is quickly devised and implemented: made to believe that he is about to marry Daiyu, he cheerfully attends his wedding. In a heartbreaking scene, we see the despairing Daiyu pass away, while Baoyu and Baochai’s wedding proceeds. After having, to his disappointment, removed Baochai’s veil in the bridal chamber and upon learning of his beloved’s death, Baoyu falls in a coma. Here, the utter cruelty of clan politics becomes obvious.

This emphasis on the social background of the tragedy sets Li and Lan’s work apart from two of the most prominent interpretations of the time. On the one hand, under the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) universalized the tragedy. He regarded Baoyu’s disenchantment as a necessary stage in his spiritual development. After having fulfilled his duties in the earthly realm—that is, after having fathered a child with Baochai—he reaches a state of “self-determined liberation” [*zi jietuo*

31 Cao, *Story of the Stone*, 4: 326.

自解脫]<sup>32</sup> and disappears into the spiritual dimension. According to Wang, one must not blame the tragedy on a given social superstructure; after all, experiencing the mundane world can only result in disappointment, as “life is a crime committed by free moral agents.”<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Hu Shi rejected the idea of Baoyu and Daiyu’s tragedy. Making light of the forty chapters added by Gao E 高鶚 (1758-1815), Hu finds it incompatible not only with the original author’s supposed intentions but also with existing literary models: “The great tragic end breaks with the belief in a happy end as featured in Chinese novels.”<sup>34</sup> In this sweeping claim, Hu glosses over the patriarchal brutality that not only is evinced in the last forty chapters but that permeates the novel.

Arguably, the greatest merit of Li and Lan’s work lies in the rehabilitation of the tragedy. In highlighting the novel’s unsparing portrayal of arranged marriages, their argument connects with a particular sensitivity that Mao had as a young man. As a runaway from a marriage set up by his father, he teamed up with different student alliances that promoted women’s equality and romantic freedom, for example, the New People’s Association [Xinmin xuehui 新民學會].<sup>35</sup> Because these unpleasant marriage practices affected most young people, they quickly became emblematic for much that was wrong with feudalism.

Among the articles Mao contributed to *Ta kung pao* [*Da gong bao* 大公報], a daily newspaper in Changsha, a series stands out that covers a gruesome incident on November 14, 1919. Miss Zhao Wuzhen 趙五貞 (1898-1919) was forced into a marriage with an elderly businessman. On the way to the wedding ceremony, the bride took her life—by slitting her throat. Although the general reaction to this incident was to condemn the bride’s lack of character, Mao made a case for her moral integrity and interpreted her suicide as a consequence of her desire to live. He argued that, in a perverted social order, sometimes, the only way to express one’s desire to live is suicide. Three main culprits are singled out as driving her to take such

32 Quoted in Deng Yushi 鄧豫適, *Hong lou yanjiu xiaoshi gao* 紅樓研究小史稿 [*A Short History of Dream of the Red Chamber Research*] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980), 1: 170.

33 Joey Bonner, *Wang Kuo-wei: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 82.

34 大悲劇的結束打破中國小說的團圓迷信。Hu Shi, *Wen cun* 文存 [*Works*] (Shanghai: Ya dong tushu guan, 1921), 1: 866.

35 Cf. Roxane Witke, “Mao Tse-tung, Women and Suicide in the May Fourth Era,” in *Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Gregor Benton (London: Routledge, 2008), 3: 5-9.

desperate means: Chinese society, her prospective in-laws, and her own parents. Together they created an inescapable situation for Miss Zhao:

These three factors erected an iron net. Miss Zhao, when facing blockades in all three directions, could not find a way out of her situation, no matter how hard she tried to carry on living. The opposite of life is death, and therefore Miss Zhao had to die.<sup>36</sup>

Mao then goes a step further and places her suicide in the larger context of Chinese culture, as he claims that every society that allows such a tragedy to happen must be considered murderous.<sup>37</sup> Although Mao also singles out the negative influence of capitalism, which had transformed the loving bond of marriage into an exploitative relationship,<sup>38</sup> the main culprit remains the misery of traditional Confucian matchmaking. Because its methods are based on astrology and other superstitious practices, it inevitably creates couples that are not well matched. Mao reminds his readers of common sayings, such as “An eighty-year-old grandfather fathers a son; in Changsha a hundred thousand families make fun.”<sup>39</sup> Mao did not stand alone in his advocacy of love marriages and his support for women’s rights; attacks against traditional customs were at the center of work by all writers associated with the May Fourth movement.<sup>40</sup> They all document the cultural struggle between tradition and modernity, in which arranged marriages were to be replaced with love marriages and filial piety with self-determination.

For the tragedy of Miss Zhao, the set of values that led to her suffering has long since lost its legitimacy, yet it has continued to exert influence over contemporary society. In this context, classical texts such as *Dream* become prominent because they describe the workings of the feudal class that helped put such practices in place. When Li and Lan approached the text from a modern

36 這三件是三面鐵網，... 趙女士在這三角形鐵網當中，無論如何求生，沒有生法。生的對面是死，於是乎趙女士死了。Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao* 毛澤東早期文稿 [Early Essays of Mao Zedong] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2008), 376.

37 Ibid., 391-92.

38 Ibid., 396.

39 八十公公生一娃，笑死長沙十萬家。Ibid., 403.

40 Many works of fiction revolve around this sensitive issue. Cf. Lu Xun 魯迅, *Shangshi* 傷逝 and *Lihun* 離婚; Yang Zhensheng 楊振聲, *Zhen nü* 貞女; Wang Tongzhao 王統照, *Hupan eryu* 湖畔兒語; Bing Xin 冰心, *Chouchang* 惆悵 and *Liangge jiating* 兩個家庭; Feng Yuanjun 馮沅君, *Lixing* 旅行; Lu Yin 廬隱, *Qianchen* 前塵 and *Hechu shi guicheng* 何處是歸程。

perspective, they promoted an archaeological approach in order to demonstrate that the sexual politics of the feudal period worked for no one, not even for the social class that devised them. As the talks at the Yan'an Forum demonstrate, Mao placed great ideological value on reading classical literature correctly. Despite his concerns about the continued influence of feudal literature in China, he knew that a blunt rejection of classical literature was not a satisfactory solution either. Instead, he recommended the following approach.

We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China..., but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people.<sup>41</sup>

Here, Mao formulated aesthetic principles that his subordinate writers were keen to put into practice. The first visible result of the new artistic guidelines was the rehabilitation of folksongs. *The White-Haired Girl* [*Baimao nü* 白毛女] He Jingzhi—a collaboration among He Jingzhi 賀敬之 (b. 1924), Ding Yi 丁毅 (1920-1998), Ma Ke 馬可 (1918-1976), and Zhang Lu 張魯 (1917-2003)—met Mao's expectations, as it “remolded” a contemporary folktale into a heroic musical drama: Xi'er 喜兒, a peasant girl, is abducted by an evil landlord and eventually manages to flee. Years later, as he mistakes her for a ghost, she takes revenge and joins her fiancé in the Eighth Route Army [*Balu jun* 八路軍]. Ma Ke's catchy tunes ensured that the lyrics would echo throughout the land.<sup>42</sup> Both a peasant and a female, Xi'er represents a two-fold victim of feudal society. Despite the happy ending in the musical, her life story reflects the outrage young Mao Zedong felt on the occasion of Miss Zhao's death in 1919. And although the Chairman did not mention any classical novel at the Yan'an Forum, his recommendation of “remolding old models” also laid the foundations for Li and Lan's interpretation.

By isolating Baoyu and Daiyu from their aristocratic environment, Li and Lan ticked all the right ideological boxes. Their interpretation turned Daiyu into a girl who has more in common with Xi'er than with Baochai. And it is not

41 Mao, *Selected Works*, 3: 76.

42 After 1950, the musical was also adapted to film, ballet and Beijing opera. Cf. Zhang Xiaofang 張小芳, “Geju <Bai mao nü> de muhou gushi 歌劇《白毛女》的幕後故事 [Behind the Scenes of the Opera *The White-Haired Girl*],” *Fujian dangshi yuekan* 福建黨史月刊 [*Fujian Journal of Party History*], 3 (2016): 44-47.



too far-fetched to suggest that this new Baoyu might as well join Xi'er's fiancé in the Eighth Route Army. This plot twist is evinced by a folksy treatment of *Dream*: in a televised Yue opera adaptation in 1962,<sup>43</sup> in which the final scene shows Baoyu grieving before Daiyu's name plaque, and he is startled by the solemn sound of a mighty bell. His facial expression changes and slowly attains a certain composure. Casting away a piece of jade that had been the object of so much metaphysical speculation, Baoyu is determined to turn his back on his own family, its exploitative lifestyle, and its superstitions. As the gates of the Jia estate open and he steps outside, the choir sings: "He's leaving that dirty patch of land, where flies over blood battle in turns. He's leaving that wealthy nest, this busy cave full of worms."<sup>44</sup> This ending implies that he is embarking on a bright future. This message implies that, in the just society of the PRC, the sad story of Baoyu and Daiyu would no longer be possible.<sup>45</sup>

The propaganda appeal of this final scene is evident. Informed by Li and Lan's approach, *Dream* can be retold as a story with educational value. And yet this example of utilitarian "remolding" threatens to unsettle a fundamental notion of Marxist orthodoxy. What is the point of fighting against Hu Shi-style capitalist idealism, if aristocrats such as Baoyu, who are even further removed from the economic base than the bourgeoisie, are attributed the class consciousness necessary to see through the social superstructure? Would it not follow that the working class loses its status as the prime mover of history and the Party its status as the political avant-garde? In short,

43 Taking into account the 1954 debate, Xu Jin 徐進 staged an operatic adaption of *Dream* at the Shanghai Yueju Theater (Shanghai yueju yuan 上海越劇院), where it became an instant success. In 1962, it was produced for a film audience. Its tunes, e.g., "Heaven Abandons Sister Lin [*Tianshang diaoxia ge Lin meimei* 天上掉下个林妹妹]," quickly entered the everyman's song repertoire. See Tong Jing 佟靜, "Hong lou meng yueju gaibian yanjiu shuping 紅樓夢越劇改編研究述評 [Research Commentary on the Yue Opera Adaption of *Dream of the Red Chamber*]," *Hong lou meng xuekan*, 1 (2014): 109-40.

44 離開了蒼蠅競血骯髒地, 撇開了黑蟻爭穴富貴窠。 *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 [*Dream of the Red Chamber*], dir. Zhong Min 鍾泯 (Shanghai: Haiyan dianying zhipian chang, 1962).

45 Arguably, women's rights and romantic freedom disappeared from Mao's agenda during the Sino-Japanese War, and the civil war. Nevertheless, 1949 has been hailed as the year that Chinese women were guaranteed equality with men. See Louise Edwards, "Women's Suffrage in China: Challenging Scholarly Conventions," *Pacific Historical Review*, 69, no. 4 (2000): 627. Furthermore, in 1950 the Marriage Law was implemented, which stated that "the marriage problem will largely be solved via the organs for the registration of marriages." See M. H. van der Valk, "The Registration of Marriage in Communist China," *Monumenta Serica*, 16, no. 1 (1957): 347.



Baoyu's "working-classification" threatens to unsettle the most fundamental assumptions of historical materialism.

### Interpreting Fiction under a Flat Historical Horizon

Despite the novel's obvious incompatibility with orthodox Marxism, an interconnection exists between the duo's crude politicization of it and Mao Zedong Thought. *On Contradiction*, originally written in 1937 and published in 1952,<sup>46</sup> constitutes one of his most distinctive writings during the period. The treatise presents a dynamic understanding of class and presents "contradiction" as a universal principle of life that transcends the threshold between nature and culture. As we argue, this is also relevant to the threshold between fiction and reality. In the realm of culture and society, contradiction creates the struggle between exploiters and exploited and the rivalry between materialist or idealist philosophy. All this contradiction does not aim at an ultimately stable telos but incessantly triggers further development and progress.<sup>47</sup>

As "the very kernel of [Mao's] entire philosophy,"<sup>48</sup> the application of the principle of contradiction facilitates the historical analysis of complex and multilayered conflicts and differentiates between different degrees of urgency. As a result, *principal* and *nonprincipal* contradiction must always be clearly distinguished, thus allowing the analyst to draw very pragmatic and concrete conclusions. As Mao applied this concept to current affairs, for example, this had very practical implications and allowed him to philosophically legitimize the CCP's decision to form the Second United Front with the Guomindang. Facing the Japanese threat, the peasants and workers, as represented by the CCP, he argued, must confront the primary contradiction and collaborate with the capitalist class, as represented by Chiang Kai-shek [Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石; 1887-1975]. Only after this primary contradiction is eliminated can the secondary contradiction, class war, come to the fore again.<sup>49</sup> In other words, during the Sino-Japanese War, the conflict between the CCP and Guomindang

46 Cf. Stuart R. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963), 43.

47 Scholars have pointed out Mao's indebtedness to ancient Chinese thought, including the *Book of Change* [*Yijing* 易經]. See Chenshan Tian, *Chinese Dialectics: From Yijing to Marxism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), 155.

48 Francis Y. K. Soo, *Mao Tse-tung's Theory of Dialectics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1981), 46.

49 Cf. Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong zhuzuo xuandu* 毛澤東著作選讀 [*Selected Readings of Mao Zedong's Works*] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), 1: 155-56.

continued, but given its *nonprincipal* nature at this point in time, military and propagandist resources should only be used against the Japanese. Yet *nonprincipal* contradictions, like a virus, are dormant and must be addressed at a later time.

When Mao issued his support for Li and Lan, this dynamic understanding of contradiction was already firmly rooted in his philosophy. Within this thought model, it makes sense to regard Baoyu and Daiyu as prototypical rebels. In their lives, different levels of contradiction overlap: on the one hand, they are engaged in a generational feud, and, on the other hand, they participate in the exploitation of the ruling class by benefitting from the family fortune. If we fit Li and Lan's categorization of the lovers into Mao's dynamic concept, the actual class conflict can indeed be considered the *nonprincipal* contradiction. After all, during the reign of the emperors Kangxi 康熙 and Yongzheng 雍正 (1735-1796), when *Dream* was written, class conflict remained dormant. Despite "brutal exploitation, ruthless rule, the phony pretenses of Confucianism and the spirit of shameless debauchery," the feudal system exhibited temporary stability. Due to the latency of the class conflict, Cao Xueqin could not perceive it; instead, he focused on the contradiction that, given the lack of working-class rebellion, attained a status as a *principality*, that is, a generational feud. Although of marginal importance for society at large, Baoyu and Daiyu are nonetheless caught in the crossfire of a conflict that transcends their personal circumstances. Because their loving relationship is destroyed by family intrigue, they become proxies of future class rebels, as the network of contradictions extends far beyond their individual biographies. The same is also true for the author. It is precisely this deictic dimension that Yu Pingbo's narrow focus on individual tragedy lacked and that Mao tried to emphasize by supporting Li and Lan.

On the one hand, Prospect Garden is an ultimate space of seclusion, where aristocrats celebrate their pastimes, such as poetry and elaborate drinking games. But, on the other hand, the landscape park also acts as the "main stage of the tragedy," because its seclusion allows the centrifugal forces of contradiction to come into play. It does not turn out to be the projected "small piece of free land," where the multiple repressions in traditional Chinese society can finally be leveled out; instead, it temporarily elides the realities of the feudal realm and, thereby, creates an illusory world. After the youths have experienced a carefree time in the Prospect Garden, they cannot bear to return to the cruel world from which it had temporarily provided shelter. The garden creates a vortex that further intensifies the tragedy.

Looking back on the 1954 debate, Yu Yingshi 余英時 thinks that, from a hermeneutic point of view, Yu Pingbo's narrow focus on individual tragedy was

entirely justified. The flat historic horizon allowing the application of modern terminology, such as socialist critique, to premodern artefacts fails to acknowledge the changing horizon of knowledge. The author of *Dream*, Yu Shiyong emphasizes, could not have possibly conceived of such an interpretation.

It is easy for twentieth-century readers to find multiple traces of class conflict in Prospect Garden. But if we argue that Cao Xueqin's main idea behind Prospect Garden was to portray the class conflict in the eighteenth-century, then I am afraid the author would turn over in his grave.<sup>50</sup>

Even if we do not share Yu Yingshi's intention to restore the primacy of auctorial intentionality, his reservation draws attention to a distinguishing feature of Marxist criticism in the wake of Lenin's Tolstoy essay: within its flat historical horizon, present and past blend into one. In this sort of analysis, the intellectual horizons of eighteenth-century feudal society and the twentieth century are not neatly distinguished—like the two water levels in a lock—but meet directly: water from upstream is not hindered from flowing downstream. The past becomes subject to the relentless judgment of the present.

Given the Marxist belief in the trajectory of history, however, it does not matter that Tolstoy failed to understand the real causes of social misery or that Cao Xueqin based his narrative on the downfall of his own family clan. After all, the *writer of the past* and the *reader of the present* are equally subject to the overarching historical process that Marxism teaches about. From this perspective, the innocent reader who “merely reads a story” does not exist, as one always positions oneself toward history, by either advancing or restraining it. Once past and present merge into one flat historical horizon, literature is no longer the semiotic cosmos that exists in separation from everyday reality. Cao Xueqin may turn over in his grave, as Yu Yingshi suggests, but it does not hinder readers from turning texts into reality: not by imitating the protagonists, but by revealing their true class standpoints. Bourgeois readers will read bourgeois ideas into the text and revolutionaries revolutionary ideas. In semiotic terms, this means that the sign is not identified but, rather, created by the signified.

In French poststructuralist thought, the disjunction between the sign and the signified has attracted much critical interest. In our context, Roland Barthes's insistence on the semantic openness of classical texts is most relevant. He presents Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* as a perfect example

50 20世紀下葉的讀者自不難在大觀園中發現種種社會鬥爭的痕跡。但若說曹雪芹創造大觀園的主旨便是在描繪18世紀中國的階級鬥爭，恐怕作者地下有知是難以首肯的。Yu, *The Two Worlds*, 16.

of the text's ready exposure to the reader's attribution of meaning. Given the absence of its author, a classical text consists of a semantic plural and offers multiple meanings.<sup>51</sup> Modern critics may find joy in the free-floating play of signification, but to a revolutionary leader, who is aware of the polyvalence and haphazardness of signification, this prospect is daunting. Limiting meaning is the obvious solution to the danger of uncontrolled interpretation on behalf of the reader. Criticizing the restricted understanding of the author, such as Tolstoy or Cao Xueqin, or the behavior of certain protagonists, such as Baochai and Wang Xifeng, is just one side of the coin; the other side is criticizing the reader's habits of perception.

Here, the notion of *primary* and *nonprimary* contradiction, again, comes into play. In a work of fiction, conflict not only exists in representation—in Gérard Genette's narratological terminology: in the *diegetic* world—but also is manifested as conflict in the reality of the reading subject—also called the *extradiegetic* world. In many works of fiction, these narrative levels overlap, for example, when the narrator addresses the reader and expounds what led him to write this fictional text—that is, in the opening chapter of *Dream* as shown in the Chengyi 程乙 edition. Genette calls such devices *metalepses*: “Once the narrator or the extradiegetic narrative intrudes the diegetic universe produces, a bizarre effect is produced, which may appear ludicrous or fantastic.”<sup>52</sup> Such narrative devices can also be found in the narrative itself “when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader.”<sup>53</sup> One of the most prominent examples of this device is in Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*: in it, the protagonist, Roderick, reads a medieval book, and, as the hero attacks a dragon, he hears monster's shrieks in his own house. The effect creates a “fantastic” rather than a “ludicrous” effect.

Applying Genette's narratological concept to this literary debate, Mao's attack on Yu Pingbo can be regarded as the consequence of such an intrusion. The *metalepsis* occurs when attention is deflected from the protagonists and directed at the reader. After revealing his true class standpoint in his

51 “To interpret a text, that does not mean giving it meaning ...; instead, it means the appreciation of the plural meaning that constitute it” [*Interpréter un texte, ce n'est pas lui donner un sens..., c'est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait*] (Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [Paris: Seuil, 1970], 11).

52 “toute intrusion du narrateur ou du narrataire extradiégétique dans l'univers diégétique ... produit un effet de bizarrerie soit bouffonne ... soit fantastique” (Gérard Genette, *Figures III* [Paris: Seuil, 1972], 244).

53 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 88.

interpretation, he suddenly found himself involved in the *principal* contradiction between individual reasoning and official ideology. After it is established that in the just society of the PRC, the sad story of Baoyu and Daiyu will no longer be possible, the *diegetic* contradiction appears to be solved. Now, the reader's conflict is brought to the fore: like Roderick, Yu Pingbo is surprised by the dragon's shriek in real life—or, rather, the critic is suddenly reminded of the obscure inscription mentioned in chapter 1 of *Dream*:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;  
Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real.<sup>54</sup>

It seems far-fetched to apply narratology (or the novel's Zhuangzian wisdom) to cultural politics, but Mao's sprawling notion of contradiction was universally applicable; after all, there was "no objective criterion to guide the concrete application."<sup>55</sup> After the establishment of the PRC, many intellectuals shared Yu Pingbo's astonishment, as he singled out revolutionary fatigue as one of the greatest threats to the Party's mission in 1957:

Recently political and ideological work has been weakened among the intellectuals and young students, and some [erroneous] deviations have surfaced. In the eyes of a number of people, there seems to be no necessity to be concerned about politics, the future of the homeland, or the ideals of humanity. It is as if although Marxism was all the rage for a while, it has now gone out of fashion.<sup>56</sup>

This statement was surprising even for Party members, who had previously proclaimed the final resolution of class contradiction and class struggle.<sup>57</sup> In accordance with the notions established in *On Contradiction*, Mao stresses the continuous fluctuation of *principal* and *nonprincipal* contradiction in a socialist society. Later, this stance would become the basis of Mao's theory of

54 假作真時真亦假，無為有處有還無。Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, 130; Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 [*Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Taipei: Da Zhongguo guoshu gongsi, 1984), 4.

55 Soo, *Mao Tse-tung's Theory*, 114.

56 Mao's speech is called "On Correctly Handling Contradictions among the People [Guanyu zhengque chuli renmin neibu maodun de wenti 關於正確處理人民內部矛盾的問題]," in *The Writings of Mao Zedong*, ed. John K. Leung and Michael Y. M. Kau (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 3: 328.

57 Cf. Schram, *The Political Thought*, 45.

permanent revolution [*jixu geming lilun* 繼續革命理論 or *buduan geming lilun* 不斷革命理論]: although contradiction “propels our society toward forward development,” it will never cease to inflict change on the present. The eighteenth, the twentieth, and future centuries are similarly subjected to the tireless work of contradiction. Changing its priorities depending on the situation, contradiction can put fictional aristocrats such as Jia Baoyu and real ones such as Cao Xueqin at the center of conflict. It can also draw in seemingly uninvolved observers such as Yu Pingbo.

One can say that Genette’s judgment about the “bizarre effect” of *metalepsis* is understated; in this particular case, it does not appear “ludicrous” or “fantastic” at all. “Haunting” is better suited to describe the thoroughness with which the principle of contradiction was applied to all realms of social life.

### In Conclusion: Li and Lan’s Afterlives

Mao supported Li and Lan for two reasons: first, they shared his opposition to traditional wedding practices, to which he was sensitive in his early years; second, they assert the victimhood of Baoyu and Daiyu and thereby implicitly characterize Mao’s dynamic conception of class, as expressed in *On Contradiction* and “On Correctly Handling Contradictions among the People.” Because this dimension of Mao Zedong Thought remained largely unnoticed during the early 1950s, the success of Li and Lan’s research owes much to sheer luck. Although Mao extols their valuable contribution to the fight against Hu Shi’s continuing influence, this reason is the mere tip of an ideological iceberg. The fictional realm can no longer escape the principle of contradiction: writers, their characters, and readers alike become subjects of history.

For Li and Lan, originally two high school teachers from Shandong Province, Mao’s powerful support was nothing less than a life-changing. His advocacy swiftly elevated them to the higher echelons of academe and publishing. Subsequently, they became part of the Chinese Writers’ Association [*Zhongguo zuojia xiehui* 中國作家協會], then editors of the literature and arts section of the *People’s Daily*. While Li Xifan’s career never suffered a dent, Lan Ling became a victim of the Anti-Rightist movement in 1957.<sup>58</sup> After Lan was rehabilitated

58 Activists picked up on his article “Contemplation on the Sight of Bloodstains [Mianduizhe xueji 面對著血跡的沉思],” in which he blamed the death of a factory girl on bureaucratism. Apparently, his critique was perceived as directed against the Party. See Ji Yin 季音, “Lan Ling de kanke rensheng 藍翎的坎坷人生 [Lan Ling’s Harsh Life],” *Yanhuang chunqiu* 炎黃春秋 [*Annals of Yan Huang*], 5 (2009): 65.

in 1980, their influence continued to grow in the post-Mao era. He became secretary of the Dream of the Red Chamber Society of China [Zhongguo Hong lou meng xuehui 中國紅樓夢學會], and Li was promoted to the position of vice director of the Chinese National Academy of Arts [Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan 中國藝術研究院] in 1986.<sup>59</sup> Rooted firmly in academic institutions, their interpretative paradigms became canonical.

But as the 1980s also allowed for more intellectual freedom, mainland red-ology also witnessed the return of the discredited autobiographical paradigm. In 1953, Zhou Ruchang 周汝昌 (1918-2012) published his key monograph, *A New Critique of Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Hong lou meng xin zheng* 紅樓夢新證]. Although his work was deeply influenced by Hu Shi and Yu Pingbo, he escaped denunciation by preemptively issuing a statement of self-criticism.<sup>60</sup> After being unavailable for two decades, *A New Critique of Dream of the Red Chamber* was reprinted in 1976 and quickly became an indispensable classic of red-ology. Although Zhou was a visible successor to Hu and Yu, his work endowed Li and Lan's basic premises with a lasting legacy, as it reconciled the autobiographical with the social realist paradigm. In the 1976 edition, Zhou inserts a foreword, in which he quotes from Lenin's essay on Tolstoy and subsequently praises the novel's social criticism.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Cao Xueqin solemnly and profoundly highlights many, many social problems: the patriarchal society, slavery, the autocracy, bureaucrats, the jurisdiction, landowning bureaucrats, the peasantry, religion, love, marriage, wives and concubines.<sup>61</sup>

Irrespective of this statement, the 2003 edition adds another foreword, in which Zhou underscores the continued relevance of Hu Shi's contributions—without caring much about the contradictions it raises.<sup>62</sup>

59 Interview with Zhang Qingshan 張慶善, the former director of the Hong Lou Meng Research Center [Hong lou meng yanjiusuo 紅樓夢研究所], Beijing, June 3, 2014.

60 When Lu Kanru 陸侃如 launched an attack on his work, Li and Lan intervened and wrote an article in his support. Ironically, Hu Shi got hold of a copy of Zhou's work and lauded his efforts as congenial to his own. See Sun, *Red-ology: 1954*, 318-29.

61 曹雪芹在“紅樓夢”裡那樣嚴肅而沉痛地提出許多許多社會問題—宗法問題, 奴隸問題, 專制問題, 官僚問題, 司法問題, 官僚地主問題, 農民問題, 宗教問題, 戀愛問題, 婚姻問題, 妻妾問題. Zhou Ruchang 周汝昌, *Hong lou meng xin zheng* 紅樓夢新證 [*New Critique of Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1976), 6.

62 Zhou Ruchang, *Hong lou meng xin zheng* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2003), 1: ii-iii.



Zhou's success, in turn, is related to the very principle of contradiction. According to Mao, it creates not only the struggle between the ruling class and the oppressed masses but also the rivalry between ideological stances, for example, between materialist and idealist philosophy. Applying this principle to the 1954 debate, we could argue that the rivalry between autobiographical and social realist paradigm features the same dynamic outline: because not all contradiction aims at an ultimately stable telos but, rather, incessantly triggers further development and progress, a new intellectual climate allowed the two paradigms to be reconciled. The 1980s indeed proved receptive to Zhou's conciliatory oeuvre, as the dogmatism of earlier years vanished.

Despite the temporary resolution of this conflict, debates on *Dream of the Red Chamber* will not come to an end any time soon. Recently, they have been increasingly informed by another discourse that caters to the growing nationalism in the Chinese intellectual environment. Its origins trace back to Zhou's work, as his juxtaposing approach also allowed the novel to be seen as the quintessence of Chinese culture in the most affirmative sense: "The '*Dream of the Red Chamber* phenomenon' is a great event in Chinese culture. As long as one does not fully understand it, one will be moving in circles, even when addressing the most basic ideas."<sup>63</sup>

This stance invariably produces new contradictions, as it gives new prominence to the condemned social practices of the feudal period and raises the question: does *Dream of the Red Chamber* portray social practices that are just as integral to Chinese culture as the text itself? After this contradiction is satisfactorily addressed, *Dream* could serve as a platform for a discussion of century-old problems, such as "the patriarchal society, slavery, the autocracy, bureaucrats, the jurisdiction, landowning bureaucrats, the peasantry, religion, love, marriage, wives, and concubines."

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63 "紅樓夢現象"是中國文化的一樁大事，沒有充分地認識就會在小圈子甚至俗套陳言中打蕩磨。Zhou, *New Critique* (2003): 6.

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