

Lin Yutang's appreciation of "The Red Chamber Dream"

紅樓夢

In 1939, Lin Yutang published his first novel, a tale of a traditional Chinese family set against a background of social turmoil. Moment in Peking immediately captured the imagination of the West and attracted wide acclaim in many languages. Chinese readers, making the book's acquaintance in its original English or in two or more authorised and unauthorised Chinese translations, recognised it as being modelled on the classic Hung-lou meng. Indeed, the author himself has readily proclaimed it his source of inspiration.

Not generally known is the fact that, in preparing for the writing of Moment in Peking, Dr. Lin had essayed translations from Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in's novel itself, much as an artist would make a number of "studies" before creating a painting of his own. Because Dr. Lin—along with thousands of Chinese, and now Western, devotees—considers The Red Chamber Dream one of the world's masterpieces, he has continued to be absorbed in it through the years. He has analyzed its structure and language, researched into its background, and written about it in scholarly journals. In the following we are privileged to present an appreciation of the Hung-lou meng by Lin Yutang, written expressly for the Western reader.

I A Great Novelist

YEARS AGO, writing of the art of fiction in China, I said, "I regard the *Red Chamber Dream* as one of the world's masterpieces. Its character drawing, its deep and rich humanity, its perfect finish of style and its story entitle it to that. Its characters live, more real and more familiar to us than our living friends, and each speaks an accent

we can recognize. Above all, it has what we call a great story."¹ Wang Kuo-wei, one of the last of the great old scholars and one of the most respected critics—he also knew German and Western esthetics—pronounced it as "worthy of being considered as the one great masterpiece in the realm of Chinese art." Exorbitant as this praise is, it never surprises a Chinese, but rather draws from him or her a hearty, warm assent, remembering well the hours of fascination he or she has spent over the novel.

It is a story spread out on a gigantic canvas,

通靈寶石
絳珠仙草



¹ *My Country and My People*, (1935) p. 272.

with some twenty important characters living in a fabulously rich family. The story is strictly what happened to the men and women in that family; very little outside political and social background will be found in it; even details of the city in which they lived are conspicuous by their absence. But the family is a little world in itself, with a large number of men and women servants and an untold number of maidservants—232 male servants and 189 female servants, according



JIA PAO-YU
Born with a jade in his mouth.

to one count. Of these masters, mistresses and chambermaids, some twenty occupy the center of the stage. Few Chinese who can read have not read the book a couple of times—perhaps six or seven times. In Chinese society we discuss our preference for this or that girl or maidservant, as if they were everybody's personal friends. Recently, in an evening party of Chinese friends, the company was chatting after dinner in a refurbished basement. Some were playing bridge. Someone remarked that a certain character said something in that novel. A young man at the bridge table looked up and immediately corrected him, "No, Jiwta (焦大) did not say that. It was Liu Shianglien (柳湘蓮)." The saying was that "the only morally decent persons in the Ning Residence were the pair of stone lions at the gate." The novel was written between 1750 and 1760—no exact date has been determined—and its popularity has not diminished. It is perennially young.

Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in, then, has compelled the same kind of admiration among the Chinese that Shakespeare commands among the English-speaking people, and probably for essentially the same reason, apart from the beauty of his language, namely, insight into the human heart and an eloquent interpretation of human character. Ts'ao had a story to tell, a deeply tragic story, his own. But his genius has made a swarm of characters come alive; he has achieved that objectivity which makes him look on, with compassion and pity, with focussed clarity and Godlike understanding, the characters that move across his pages. He does not spare himself; in fact, it is a novel of open and avowed self-castigation, of a rebel against social conventions, who disappointed his parents. One might say that all his charac-

ters are human, and none is perfect. They are just themselves, individuals with their admirable qualities and their foibles. Taiyu (黛玉), with her talent and charm, quick temper and her pert and petty jealousy; Paoch'ai (寶釵), with her reserve and sagacity and her habit of keeping her mouth shut to avoid offending people; Ch'ingwen (晴雯), saucy, pampered, pretty and spoiled; Shieren (襲人), with her true devotion and yet with a few things to her discredit; Phoenix (熙鳳), who did not stop at murder, who nevertheless became a sympathetic character toward the end. As Shich'un (惜春) says, "All men and women are just about average, nothing much to say one way or the other." And yet with all their faults, we are held spellbound and interested in following their individual destinies. In the end, we feel a sense of universal pity for all, for the severe, but unbusinesslike, doctrinaire father; for the wily, blithe, scheming Phoenix; for the dotting and very shrewd grandmother; pity for the charming Taiyu, and pity for the always correct, able, gracious Paoch'ai, and pity above all for the little rebel, the author himself, who came a complete cycle from licking rouge off girls' lips to disenchantment and self-redemption.

A UNIQUE FEATURE of the novel is the space given to the chambermaids. In no other novel that I know is such extended treatment given to adolescent maidservants. If a

Genesis of a Book

These prefatory remarks appear at the beginning of Chapter 1 of The Red Chamber Dream. They are attributed to the author's younger brother, T'ang-ts'un (棠村), one of several members of the Ts'ao clan who contributed commentaries to the novel.

The author once lived through a phantasmagoria of events which vanished like a dream. He has, however, disguised his true story in this "Record of a Rock", the story of a precious stone which was granted human life. Hence the name of one of the characters, Jen Shihyin (True Story Disguised).

As for the story itself, the author confesses that he has done nothing, accomplished nothing, in his life. He says, "My memory often goes back to those charming young ladies I knew in those days, who put me to shame by their intelligence and character and deportment. Vain regrets! Yet this remembrance of the past persists. While I confess to a sense of shame and of my own futility, I have decided to put all down here, for all the world to know, those events in my well-sheltered but misspent life, when I was nursed in the lap of luxury, living on the bounty of my ancestors, how I abused the love of my good parents and ignored the counsel of teachers and friends, together with those sins and follies which have resulted in a life of failures and frustrations, with nothing to show after all these years. I know that I ought to be ashamed, but on the other hand, it would be unfair to let the life of those charming, young ladies pass into oblivion simply because I want to conceal my own faults.

I ponder long over these things, unmindful of the shabby surroundings of my humble hut, where the morning breeze and the evening moon, the willows before my doorsteps and the flowers in my courtyard, urge me to the work of writing. I say to myself, however modest in my literary pretensions, why shouldn't I put it in the form of fiction, as a record of those remarkable women I had the good fortune to know? It should make beguiling reading, and perhaps also be a record of a most unique experience." Hence, again, the name of another of the characters, Jia Yuchun (Fictionalized Tale).

Here and there in this book the terms "dream" and "emptiness" are used, which may serve to indicate the underlying message, the meaning of the story, reminding the readers of the illusory nature of human life.

— Translated by LIN YUTANG



The portraits on this and the following two pages are by the Manchu artist Kai Ch'i (改琦), who is the best-known illustrator of Hung-lou meng scenes and characters. These reproductions are from Hung-lou meng t'u yung (紅樓夢圖詠), a wood-block edition printed in 1921 by the Wen-yuan T'ang of the Yang family in the province of Chekiang.

LIN TAI-YU
amidst tear-stained bamboos.

count is taken of the most interesting characters, it will be found that half of them are chambermaids. Shieren first of all, then Ch'ingwen, Yuanyang (鴛鴦), Tzuchuan (紫鵲) and P'ingerh (平兒) are all superb and superior characters in their own right. Probably P'ingerh stands out as the most lovely character. The quick-tempered, outspoken Ch'ingwen is like Taiyu, and the reserved, tolerant Shieren is like Pao-ch'ai; the latter type is always more successful, but which type does one like better? It is this rich humanity of all characters, high and low, that compels me to recognize Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in as a "great" novelist, and his work, in spite of the natural remoteness of its language and customs to the Western reader, a masterpiece to rank probably with the world's ten greatest novels.

Some other great qualities of the novel are the following: A great theme, the theme of transitoriness of earthly glories, so well stated in the Preface and Prologue. It is this Buddhist-religious, semi-mystical presentation, with the idea of fate and destiny, which lifts it to a plane above mere mundane realism. A great story of the downfall and collapse of an ancient family, brought about by decadence and human folly, and in the foreground the sad and frequently tearful love story, with its irony and its cruelty—the fate that enveloped first Taiyu, then Pao-ch'ai, and the young man himself. Concommitantly, the spiritual progress of the hero from infatuation with the eternal female to his disillusionment and final redemption. As the author presents it, the tragedy of the Jia house is the tragedy of all human life, of frustrated hopes and futile endeavors and passing glories. In this sense, it is deeply Buddhist. Its



HSUEH PAO-CH'AI
chasing after a butterfly.

drawback is, in contemporary eyes, what one may call its sentimentality, reminding one of *Clarissa Harlowe*, written in the same decade. It also displays a ubiquitous knowledge of all aspects of Chinese life—official corruption, court etiquette, religious and superstitious practices, divination, the planchette, exorcising of evil spirits, poetry, food, wine games, card and dice games, music, painting, medicine, astrology, state examinations, Ch'an Buddhism, Confucian philosophy and Taoism—all presented with expert knowledge. In particular, like other Chinese novels, it displays the author's talent for poetry in all its forms.

The method of Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in is unique, and to appreciate it fully, it must be read differently from a novel bristling with plots and action. The author's primary interest is in human character. In the first half of the novel, he contents himself with portraying a multiplicity of domestic episodes, now spotlighting one character, now another, or placing two characters in contrast, with the effect of tableaux. He is so fascinated by the immediate scene and the human traits that the story seems to move slowly, for a Western reader, as he leads leisurely toward the conflict. Secondly, and this is the subtle art for which he is greatly admired by the Chinese critics, he scatters here and there, like clues in a detective story, apparently inconsequential details and traits of character which determine their future destinies and bear down on the fortunes of the house with the weight of inevitability. Reading the novel always makes me feel like watching a slow-moving mass of fuming lava advancing

toward a village five miles away, not immediately threatening, but irresistible in its creeping march. One important thread, for instance, is how Paoch'ai wins the hearts of the elders while Taiyu wins only the heart of Paoyu (寶玉). How the pampered maid Ch'ingwen offends people right and left is another. These threads are then picked up one by one and their significance shown in later chapters in the novel.

II The Hero and the Symbol

A WORD MUST be said about the hero, Jia Paoyu, a complex character. He is pictured as a boy, extremely sensitive to beauty and appreciative of the feminine graces, a rebel with the artistic temperament who refuses to grow up and accept the social conventions and falsehoods of adult society. The story of Paoyu is the story of progress of that artistic soul in conflict with the sordid realities, and under the strain of that conflict, he mentally cracked up several times. Fate placed him, with supreme irony, in a life of undreamed-of comfort and luxury, in a pleasure garden, the Magnarama, where only women were permitted, completely surrounded by a bevy of charming cousin-sisters and four or five equally charming chambermaids of adolescent age. Often he was the only man in a hen-party. The dismissal of his favorite maid Ch'ingwen and the marriage of his cousin Yingch'un (迎春), representing only the first conflicts with reality, already made him ill for a month. What he absolutely could not understand was that grown-up girls should be married off. He remained warm, affectionate, trusting and, in spite of his lapses, an instinctively pure worshipper of the eternal female. He was a true lover, constantly suffering from the barbs and pinpricks of Taiyu, to whom he had given the one great passion of his life. Fate was cruel to him, and the supreme irony of it was that his parents and grandmother who loved him most were the very persons to thwart the one great love to which he had dedicated the purpose of his existence. He was to go through all the pangs and anguish of passion, so intense that he lost his sanity, and recovered only after he had waked up from a dream and discovered himself. Once he understood that all life is but a dream, he could not be hurt any more, was sure of himself, and went on to his destiny, to fulfil his duty to his family and to himself.

Thus Paoyu was unique. We have the impression that he was in this world and yet did not quite belong to it. The jade he was born with in his mouth, described as the very root of his life, is consciously employed as a symbol which explains his uniqueness, and vitally affects the course of his life. The jade is a symbol of the pure, unsullied soul of man, that higher pristine intelligence and purity and esthetic sensibility. Inevitably, it came into conflict with reality, a conflict which took two forms. One was rebellion against what the world called success—taking the state examinations and joining the crowd of corrupt and false and hypocritical officials. Gifted with his extraordinary intelligence, he could learn, without more than half trying, anything he set his mind to, anything except the Confucian classics, for which he had a fierce contempt, as associated with the corrupt gentry. Greatly he disappointed his doctrinaire father for not wanting to "get ahead" like the other boys. He reviled and he scoffed at the Sages. When Paoch'ai, the always correct girl, urged him to study for the state exams and he saw that this desire to "serve the country" had infected even the fair sex, he thought it the end of the universe. When Shiangyun

(湘雲) urged him to go out and learn the politics of the nation, he said, "Please be so good as to leave this room and go somewhere else." Only Taiyu, a female counterpart of himself, never urged him to study for the exams, which earned his deep respect and undying admiration.

THE SECOND MEANING of the symbol took the form of worship of feminine beauty. There was something recalling the spirituality of the Elysium which made him condemn the male sex as the riffraff, the scum of the earth, the cheaper vessels into which the Creator poured the dregs and left-overs, after he had fashioned the girls out of all that was pure and beautiful in the universe. His saying that "girls are made of water; boys, of mud" is justly famous. When Paoyu heard that Shieren's female cousins were about to be married to men, he involuntarily squealed. It was just like pouring water over mud. That water has to be mixed with mud is the very essence of tragedy of all human life, because the mortal world is so constituted. He could not stand vulgar women after they had been "contaminated" by men (that is, married). He was sorry for his cousin Jia Lien (賈璉) who saw in girls and women only objects of his gross, sensuous gratification. Elsewhere, the author repeatedly scores the current love stories of his day for their indecency, for mistaking adultery for love. This "psychological sexuality", which Paoyu was charged with, was no other than the adoration-of-the-Virgin complex from which the great cathedrals of Europe sprang up in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In twelve niches of his



CH'ING-WEN

mending the peacock-feathered coat.

literary cathedral, Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in sculptured with his heart blood his twelve female saints. Somehow, East or West, art and human imagination had not found it possible to express concretely the highest ideal of beauty, of goodness, and of purity, except by incorporating it in the feminine sex.

And so, following his destiny to the end, we get an impression that the jade was a symbol of supramundane intelligence that really did not belong to the world at all. Toward the very end, his father at last understood him. That was why, as the author finally explains in the Epilogue, the jade *had to disappear* before Paoyu got married. The jade must not be contaminated.

Some Western Evaluation

The Dream of the Red Chamber, the fascinating eighteenth-century Chinese novel . . . is to its native literature very much what *The Brothers Karamazov* is to Russian and *Remembrance of Things Past* is to French literature. . . . This Chinese author of the eighteenth century is saying, with the same technique and with the same voice, what the great nineteenth-century Russians were to say—that the entire basis of our lives is corrupt, that life must be transformed from the bottom upward by a vast awakening of the spirit. This, though it makes his novel interesting, and an unexpected product of its time and culture, does not affect its quality as literature; what demonstrates that is its richness of invention, both of incident and of character, and the authenticity of its psychological insights, insights that, though sometimes hard to recognize in their exotic trappings, are often thrilling in their penetration. By virtue of these aspects of its content, it is beyond question one of the great novels of all literature.

—ANTHONY WEST
The New Yorker,
November 22, 1958

All realistic novels are, of course, autobiographical, the writer's knowledge of realities being drawn chiefly from his own experience. But *The Red Chamber* is autobiographical in a more complete sense. Indeed, one even feels that, were it not for the rigid framework imposed by tradition, Ts'ao might easily have fallen into the error of transcribing with too careful a fidelity the monotonies of actual life. . . . It is in his accounts of dreams that as an imaginative writer Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in rises to his greatest heights; and it is in these passages that we feel most clearly the symbolic or universal value of his characters—Pao-yu, the hero, standing for Imagination and Poetry; his father, for all those sordid powers of pedantry and restriction that hamper the artist in his passage through life.

—ARTHUR WALEY
in Preface to translation
by Chi-Chen Wang, 1929