

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
