

## Introduction



*The Story of the Stone* (Shitou ji 石頭記), also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng 紅樓夢), was the first novel to open up the subject of adolescence for the Chinese reader. In 1804, twelve years after the first edition of *The Stone*, a novel called *Mirage* (Shenlou zhi 廬樓志) appeared and set about exploring that subject in a somewhat different direction.

*Mirage* is set not in the capital but in the southeastern province of Guangdong, and largely in the city of Guangzhou itself—in fact, it is a regional novel. Its hero is not the scion of a great official family with imperial connections; instead, he is the son of one of those men, known as Hong merchants, who were licensed to deal with foreign traders in the port of Guangzhou (Canton). (*Mirage* is the earliest novel by far to treat the subject of the China trade; it was written several decades before the Opium Wars and well before opium was even a factor in the trade.) The hero's father is the long-time head of the Hong merchants' association, and he is extremely wealthy, partly from his trading, but also from his landholding and money-lending interests. When the novel opens, the hero, Su Jishi 蘇吉士, is thirteen, attending class at a neighbor's house, and obsessed with amorous, and particularly sexual, desire. He is still only fourteen when his father dies and he has to take over the vast family properties. He follows the classic examples of philanthropy—forgiving the debts of hard-pressed tenants and distributing his grain reserves at a modest price in a time of drought—but he continues to philander, ending up at the age of seventeen with four concubines in addition to his wife.<sup>1</sup> He escapes, if only narrowly,

certain of the dangers that beset the rich but naïve young man, and he learns how to conduct himself prudently in the adult world. Largely by good fortune, he is instrumental in ending a local rebellion, and gains thereby a measure of fame. In the course of the novel he has a number of mentors, notably Li Jiangshan 李匠山, his tutor at the school he attends. At seventeen, having somewhat tamed his libido, Jishi settles down to a private life with his family in Guangzhou. He is actually only one out of a number of youths who appear in the novel, several of whom succeed in different ways, but he is by far the most important. *Mirage* is principally a *bildungsroman*, the story of a youth's growing up and making his way in the world.

For reasons of prudence, perhaps, the novel is set in the Ming dynasty, but it is actually closely tied to two crises that took place just before the time of writing, in the years from 1799 to 1802. One was the two-year tenure (1799–1801) as Customs superintendent in Guangzhou of a Manchu named Jishan 佶山; the other was a series of rebellions that broke out in 1802 in the neighboring prefecture of Huizhou, rebellions that at one point threatened even the security of Guangzhou itself. The novel juxtaposes two worlds, the realistic social and political world of Guangzhou and the highly romanticized world of the Huizhou rebellion.

The position of licensed trader was potentially lucrative but frequently ruinous. The trader had to contend with a Customs superintendent whose objective was to make as much money for his masters in Beijing—and himself—as he could. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there is ample evidence in the records of the East India Company of a more or less constant conflict between the superintendents and the traders.<sup>2</sup> It was not an equal conflict; the superintendents had the traders in their power, for traders needed their permission even to resign. In this novel's

brilliant opening Su Jishi's father suffers the ultimate indignity at the hands of the superintendent, but still manages by an ingenious ploy to withdraw from his appointment.

As scholars have long recognized, Superintendent Jishan appears in the novel as the corrupt and lascivious Heh Guangda 赫廣大. But although readers of the novel were clearly meant to make that connection, the portrait of Heh Guangda has been put together from various sources, including, presumably, the author's imagination. A similar partial connection exists between Pan Youdu 潘有度 (1755–1820), the actual head of the merchants' association at the time, and Jishi's father. I believe that a further connection can be drawn between the governor-general, a Manchu named Jiqing 吉慶, and Qing Xi 慶喜, the governor-general in the novel. Both men, the historical and the fictional, were opposed to the way the Customs superintendent dealt with the traders. Like his fictional counterpart, Jiqing was an experienced provincial administrator who advocated a dual approach to rebels, offering them a negotiated surrender while at the same time threatening them with liquidation.<sup>3</sup> Qing Xi is introduced with uncharacteristic praise in the novel as “a true bulwark of the nation, a living Buddha to the common man, one who combined wisdom with gallantry and possessed all the civil and military talents.” It is he who sets up the system of paying local braves (*xiangyong* 鄉勇) to serve as militiamen and defend their villages against the pirate raiders afflicting the south coast. But whereas the fictional governor-general triumphs, Jiqing, the historical figure, ended as a tragic failure, committing suicide when blamed for his handling of the rebellions in Huizhou prefecture.<sup>4</sup> A contemporary local reader of the novel would surely have seen its idealistic portrait of Qing Xi as an attempt to repair Jiqing's reputation, just as he would have drawn the other connections I have mentioned (and possibly more).

Parallel to the main thread of the novel runs the story of the rebellion in Huizhou prefecture. It is led by Yao Huowu 姚霍武, whose brother, an army officer, has been unjustly executed, and it is staffed by former militiamen who have been cheated out of their dues by corrupt officials.<sup>5</sup> The connection between the two plots, which alternate like the scenes of a southern play, is that Yao Huowu, when desperately poor, has been given generous help by both Jishi's father and his tutor, Li Jiangshan. If the story of Jishi in Guangzhou owes something to *The Story of the Stone*, that of Yao Huowu and his band in Huizhou prefecture owes more to the novel *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*The Outlaws of the Marsh*).<sup>6</sup> Yao's band are the traditional physical heroes of Chinese fiction, men distinguished by their prodigious strength, their gargantuan appetites for meat and spirits, their lack of interest in sex, and their fierce loyalty and unsparing vengefulness.

The historical rebellions in Huizhou prefecture, which were led by the Tiandihui 天地會, a secret society,<sup>7</sup> were quite different from the rebellion in the novel. But there are some telling correspondences between their locations; for example, one rebel lair, Army Gate Ridge 軍門嶺, appears in both the novel and historical accounts, while another, Goat's Foot Ridge 羊蹄嶺, recalls the Goat Dung Ridge 羊屎嶺 of the historical rebellion. In each case the governor-general negotiates the surrender of the rebels, but whereas Qing Xi received high praise for the achievement, Jiqing was harshly criticized for being either too severe or too lenient.

*Mirage* is a strikingly original work, but its connections to *The Stone* and *The Outlaws of the Marsh* are many and varied. As an example of the subtler kind in *The Stone*, let me note the drinking party in chapter 14, in which Wu Daiyun 烏岱雲 seems to play the part of the oafish Xue Pan 薛蟠 in chapter 28 of *The Stone*. We might dismiss this as a mere generic likeness—until we look at the songs

that Xue Pan and Wu Daiyun are forcing their young girl singers to sing: one song is actually a development of the other.

Although Su Jishi remains a landlord and moneylender, his heart is not in the world of business. Already by the age of thirteen he has begun to question his father's devotion to making money. Like his father, he seeks to ally the family through marriage with scholars, not scholars from powerful and wealthy families, but supremely gifted youths likely to succeed in the civil service. Toward the end of the book, Jishi reflects that if he had the talent for it he would have become a scholar (and official) himself. But he then decides that if he could live a contented family life and enjoy himself drinking wine and writing poetry with his womenfolk each day, he would not change places with the highest in the land.<sup>8</sup> The dominant values in the novel are those articulated by the scholar and teacher Li Jiangshan, whose broadly Confucian values exert a great influence on Su Jishi's father as well as on Yao Huowu, the leader of the rebellion. Perpetually unsuccessful in the civil service examinations, constantly "sewing garments for other people's weddings," Li Jiangshan composes two key poems, both of them elegiac, that are given in chapter 4; the first poem describes the view over the rooftops and walls of Guangzhou to the foreign ships lying at anchor, while the second retraces the early history of the region as an independent kingdom. Since the book contains a good deal of classroom material, it is not surprising that scholars have suggested that there is something of the author himself in the figure of Li Jiangshan the teacher.

The author is known only by his pseudonym, Yuling Laoren 庾嶺勞人, the Heavy-Hearted Man of Yuling (Yuling is on the Guangdong-Jiangxi border). The editing is credited to Yushan Laoren 禺山老人, the Old Man of Mount Yu (possibly Guangzhou).<sup>9</sup> The fact that we do not know the author's name is hardly surprising.

Unless Chinese authors were presenting their novels as history, they generally published under pseudonyms, and in many cases their real names have never been discovered.

Although *Mirage* is set entirely in Guangdong province, it was first published in Changshu, Jiangsu. Furthermore, the Mandarin in which it is written contains a number of Wu-dialect expressions, enough to support the assumption that the author was from Jiangsu or Zhejiang.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the preface by the Layman of Mount Luofu 羅浮居士 (in Guangdong) asserts that the author “was born and brought up in Guangdong” and hence had a detailed knowledge of the local scene, while the author’s own pseudonym refers to Yuling, which is on the Guangdong border. We can only assume that, if the author was a native of Guangdong, he must have spent a good deal of his life outside the province.

The word “mirage” in a novel’s title is usually a claim that the work is fiction or fantasy. Perhaps it is intended here as a superficial denial of the close connection between the novel and contemporary history.

My translation is based on the 1804 edition. I have used the Shanghai guji chubanshe edition of 1996, which is based on that edition, and also the 1804 edition itself in the possession of the Peking University Library. (Note that most of the available modern editions tend to amplify the erotic description here and there with lubricious clichés. The original work uses relatively plain language for sexual description, occasionally embellished with comic images drawn from the classics.) My translation omits the poems introducing chapters 2 to 23 because they do little more than expound the meaning of the chapter headings. The other two poems, those introducing chapters 1 and 24, are about the author and his work.

I have used the pinyin system of transliteration except in the case of certain surnames. There happen to be two different surnames (何, 赫) in the novel that would appear as “He” in pinyin, and three more (施, 時, 史) that would appear as “Shi.” To differentiate, I have turned to other romanization systems as well as to pinyin, resulting in the names Heh and Ho; Shy, Shr, and Shi.

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