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Lin Daiyu—An Unyielding Girl in a Stifling Society

Introduction

Lin Daiyu is perhaps the most studied Chinese literary woman figure in history. To know about her, one must first take a look at the literary work that gives life to her—the famous Chinese classic *Hong lou meng*, or *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, originally titled *Shitou ji* (*Record of the Stone*). The author Cao Xueqin, (1735 or 36 - 1763 or 64) finished only the first eighty chapters of the book due to poverty, poor health and family tragedy. In 1791, a government official named Gao E added the last forty chapters. Though literarily inferior to Cao Xueqin's original chapters, they have since been generally accepted because of their successful treatment of the tragic end of the protagonists' love affair. *A Dream of the Red Mansions* as we know it today consists of all the 120 chapters, totaling 1,075,000 Chinese characters.

A Dream of the Red Mansions has had a tremendous influence on the Chinese literary history. There have been nearly fifty attempts to add more stories to it. Those efforts persist even today among lovers of the book. The study of the work has become as serious and fruitful as those of Shakespeare or Goethe. Since its first English translation in 1842, the book has been rendered into twenty languages. It is safe to say that to understand China one must read *A Dream of the Red Mansions* among others.

The book, with over 400 named characters from all walks of life, has two main threads, namely, the tragic love affair of the young and rebellious Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu amidst the rise and fall of the aristocratic and decadent families of Jia, Shi, Wang and Xue.

Born an innocent beauty, Lin Daiyu loved and hated without a qualm. She yearned for spiritual rather than material gratification. Jia Baoyu, as a lineal decent of the Jia family, was its heir apparent. However, the handsome and smart young man was nowhere near what the family would like him to be. Instead, he rebelled against traditions, opposed inequality between masters and servants, and disdained the conventional ethics of treating women as inferior to men. When the two youngsters came together, they found a lot in common and plenty of love for each other.

Wedge between the innocent lovers of Lin Baoyu and Jia Daiyu was Xue Baochai, who was a rival as well as a contrast to Lin Daiyu. A daughter of an eminent family, Xue Baochai had a more realistic goal: to attain as many riches and honors as she could. On the one hand, the beautiful but extremely delicate Lin Daiyu was willful, aloof and oversensitive and therefore was shunned by other people around her. On the other hand, the equally pretty Xue Baochai was, in the eyes of the Jia Family, sensible, tolerant and gentle, and thus became everyone's favorite. Lin Daiyu was affectionate, naïve, frank and simple, but Xue Baochai was shrewd, dispassionate, and capable of ill intentions. Lin Daiyu embodies individual pursuit of freedom, whereas Xue Baochai symbolizes conformity and social order. It was no wonder that the Jia family secretly substituted Xue Baochai for Lin Daiyu at Jia Baoyu's wedding, bringing the love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu to a tragic end.

The relationship between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu is not based on sexual desires. Nor is their love platonic. It is, according to some scholars of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, a bond in the dreamland and of predestination. Everyday in the garden of the Red Mansions, they “read, write, paint, chant, riddle, embroider, enjoy plants and flowers, and play musical instruments, chess, and word puzzles.” By contrast, in the real world, other male members of their family such as Jia He, Jia Zhen, Jia Lian and Jia Rong were indulging themselves in unchecked prurient activities.

In fact, the author of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* used this contrast as an allegory, an extended metaphor of a well-known legend, namely, the story of *Nü Wa Mending the Sky*. The legend goes that Nü Wa was the creator of humans. When the sky was torn and the world inundated, she tempered colored stones to mend it.¹ The book of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* begins with a piece of stone left behind by Nü Wa. Eventually it was reborn into the Jia Family and became Jia Baoyu. Lin Daiyu, said to be the incarnation of a divine herb, was also dubbed by the author “the goddess of Xiao and Xiang,” who had been the wives of Fu Xi, allegedly the husband of Nü Wa. Therefore, scholars of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* argue that the author treated Jia Baoyu as the masculine side of the Goddess Nü Wa while Lin Daiyu, the feminine side. Their arrival in the Red Mansions as an alliance of stone and wood was to continue Nü Wa’s mission of ridding the world of flood. In the case of the Jia Family, it was the flood of licentiousness. Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu were two aspects of the same wholeness. When separated, they would certainly be doomed. Indeed, one can infer that by presenting the destruction of two innocent young lives along with their beautiful dreams, the author made a cruel condemnation against the stifling and debauched feudal society of his time.

The plot of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* is innovative and ingenious. Beginning with the myth of Nü Wa, it leads to the reality of the Red Mansions through intricate mists of dreams and illusions – a technique of telling the truth through pretended falsehood. This contributes to the difficulty in understanding the inner world of the characters, Lin Daiyu in particular. There may be as many interpretations of her life and her relations with the people in the Red Mansions as the people who read her.

The Story

Lin Daiyu was the only daughter of Lin Ruhai, a scholar official, and Jia Min, a member of the Jia Family in the Red Mansions. When Lin Daiyu was six, her mother Jia Min died. While she was sixteen, her father also succumbed. Before his death, he left her to the care of her maternal Grandmother Jia, the matriarch of the Red Mansions.

In the Red Mansions, there lived four related large and eminent families, namely the Jia, the Shi, the Wang, and the Xue. The Jia Family had a son named Baoyu, or Precious Stone. Indeed, he was said to be the incarnation of a piece of stone left by the Creator Goddess Nü Wa, who had saved the inundated world by mending the punctured sky with stones she had tempered. Indeed, to his mortal parents’ amazement, Jia Baoyu was born with a precious stone in his mouth. It was then carved into a talisman as part of his necklace, regarded as indispensable with his life.

¹ For the tale of Nü Wa Mending the Sky, see *The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese* (Libraries Unlimited, 2006, 165-67).

On the anniversary of his birth, Baoyu was made to go through a future-telling ritual, which consisted of picking a symbolic item from a pile randomly displayed before him. Ignoring an official seal, gold, and classic books (symbols of officialdom, fortune, and literary pursuit), he picked up a piece of cosmetics used by women, much to his parents' dismay. They had hoped that he chose the other items so that he could be an official, a man of wealth, or at least a scholar when he grew up. Now they feared that he would become a man of debauchery. He might not be dissipated, but as he grew up, he began to disdain the imperial examination system and oppose the tradition of treating women as inferior to men. In his eyes, women were made of pure water while men, contaminated dirt. He often said, "Whenever I saw girls, I feel refreshed, but the sight of men really stinks!"

Lin Daiyu was aloof, proud, naïve and straightforward. Despite her dependency on her grandmother for her living, having nothing to call her own but herself, she refused to conform blindly to the accepted customs and yield to the Confucian ethics. Whenever and wherever she could, she would defend her character and integrity. Her personality was such a match with that of Jia Baoyu that the latter welcomed her without the slightest reservation upon her arrival in the Red Mansions. Instead, he found her a congenial partner, claiming that he had seen her sometime, somewhere.

In the Xue Family there was a girl named Baochai. She was pretty and graceful, scrupulously abiding by the conventional rules that women were made to follow. Shrewd, diplomatic, and manipulative, she knew how to make friends and consequently became the favorite of all the families. She had a necklace of gold lock. Her mother had very early spread the word that she would match her daughter with one with a necklace of precious stone. Everyone knew whom she was referring to.

One of Jia Baoyu's cousins was the emperor's favorite concubine. During her home visit, she talked the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Red Mansions into allowing Baoyu and the girls to live in the Daguan Garden, away from their parents' close scrutiny. There they found freedom. Jia Zheng, Baoyu's father, wanted him to spend his time and energy studying the classics so that he could pass the imperial civil examination to bring honor and glory to his family. Jia Baoyu professedly agreed but covertly opposed the idea. Instead, he was beyond himself with joy when he managed to procure a banned book titled *Xixiang Ji* (Notes of the West-Wing Chamber), a story of a young man and young woman falling in love and kept a secret tryst with the help of a sympathetic and wise maid named Hong Niang.² Immediately he invited Lin Daiyu to a garden near the Qinfang Bridge, where he shared the book with her. They read and compared notes. At a point, Jia Baoyu was carried away and, referring to the protagonists of the book, bolted out, "I am the melancholy and sickly young man and you are the gorgeous and pretty young woman." At the remark, the blushed Daiyu pretended that the remark was offensive, saying that her integrity as an innocent girl was violated. She "threatened" to tell Baoyu's parents about his insolence. Of course she was only too ready to let him off the hook after Baoyu apologized profusely.

² For the tale in detail, read *The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese* (Libraries Unlimited, 2006, 112-15).

As sensitive as she was, Lin Daiyu had long perceived the Red Mansion's preference for Xue Baochai. What is worse, she also discerned Xue Baochai's interest in Jia Baoyu. She had been disturbed by the rumored theory of a gold necklace matching a jade one all along. Her jealousy of Xue Baochai grew so intense that she became capricious, often getting mad with Baoyu without apparent reasons. One instance, however, changed her attitude. She overheard Baoyu complaining with distaste about Baochai's insistence on his pursuing for officialdom, which he resented very deeply.

For Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu, their easy access to each other's abode soon came to an end. One day, Baoyu was suddenly summoned to his father Jia Zheng's presence in his study because of an incidence deemed to be disgraceful to the family. It turned out that Jia Baoyu's mother had caught sight of a maid flirting with Baoyu and drove her out of the Red Mansions. Jia Zheng was questioning Baoyu about the incident when Lord Zhongshun, an infrequent guest, rushed in. It turned out that His Highness had a gay partner named Qiguan, an opera actor acting as a woman. Since the actor had fallen in love with a woman, he suddenly disappeared from Lord Zhongshun's mansion. His Highness soon learned that it was Jia Baoyu who offered the actor a refuge in a house he had bought him. Lord Zhongshun was here to claim the actor. Already very angry with his son's shameful relations with the maid, Jia Zheng flew into a rage upon hearing this deviant act of helping a homosexual man, which was against every fiber of the Confucius doctrines that the patriarch firmly embraced. As if to add oil to the flame, Jia Huan, Baoyu's half-brother, dashed in at the heel of Lord Zhongshun's departure, telling him that the maid had committed suicide. Jia Huan had always had a grudge against Baoyu because his mother was a mere concubine of their common father. Instead of telling the true, he falsely accused Baoyu of having raped the maid. The father gave the son a good beating.

The injuries from the beating were so severe that Baoyu could neither lie down nor get up. He could only lie in bed on all fours to avoid hurting the gaping wounds on his buttocks. Xue Baochai came with medicine while Baoyu with tears. In his dream, Baoyu murmured, "Damn the gold and jade connection. I want jade to match wood," by which he meant Lin Daiyu, who was said to be the incarnation of a divine herb.

At the suggestion of Xiren, the personal maid of Baoyu's mother, Baoyu was separated from the girls and placed in the care of the maid herself. They were living in the Yihong Garden while Lin Daiyu was relocated to the Xiaoxiang Garden. They kept in touch only with the help of Daiyu's maid Qingwen, who volunteered to be their messenger. Gradually, Daiyu had a collection of love letters from Baoyu, some written on handkerchiefs and fans.

One evening, Lin Daiyu came to visit Jia Baoyu, but was mistaken for someone else by a new maid and turned away. She was about to turn and leave when she caught sight of Jia Baoyu seeing Xue Baochai out of his bedroom. Xue Baochai had also come to visit him. Lin Daiyu was stunned. She felt a sense of betrayal.

Without the love of Baoyu, she felt all the more lonely in the Red Mansions. The falling petals of the flowers out of her windows in the late spring touched the chord of her wounded heart. With a basket and a pick, she went into the garden. Comparing the fallen petals to herself, she began to bury them, and asked herself, "Flower petals falling all over, who pities a girl

whose life is dwindling?” “Peaches and pears can bloom again, but God knows who will reside in my chamber next spring?” The more she thought, the lonelier she became. She felt a shudder at the thought of the indifference she had suffered. It was as if she were injured by “the knife of wind and sword of frost,” every single day of the year. Weeping and sighing, she chanted:

“I wish I could fly to the end of the word
With the petals, but can I find my grave yonder?
In a pouch I collect thou delicate bones,
Beneath a cup of sanitary earth I bury thee.
Clean I was born as clean as I am gone,
It is better than if I were stuck in sewage.
I bury thee when thou dust become,
Who will bury me when I leave the world?
One may think I am crazy burying flowers,
Who will be the caretaker of the deceased me?
When flowers wither and spring comes to a close,
It is time for a girl to see the last of her days.
Once the spring ends and the girl dies,
Flowers and girl would be unknown to one another.”

In the meantime, Lin Daiyu’s grandmother, Xue Baochai, and other girls were in the garden enjoying themselves. Among them was Jia Baoyu. When he saw Lin Daiyu, he told her what had happened in his residence. Realizing the mistake, Daiyu reconciled with him. The two were engaged in a tender and lingering conversation.

The discovery of the love affair between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu appalled Lin Daiyu’s parents and the matriarch Grandma Jia. They wanted him to marry Xue Baochai as soon as possible. Fearful of Baoyu’s refusal, they disguised Xue Baochai as Lin Daiyu. In the traditional wedding ceremony, a bride’s face must be covered during the entire process until the bride and her groom retire to their own chamber, when the groom will lift the cover off her head and finish the matrimonial ritual.

A maid accidental leaked the preparation for Jia Baoyu’s marriage with Xue Baochai to Lin Daiyu. It struck a fatal blow to the already invalid girl. She was so grieved and ill that she was going to die. She asked her maid Qingwen to burn all the love letters that Baoyu had written to her, deeming them useless as their author had betrayed her.

Ironically, while Lin Daiyu was on her deathbed, Jia Baoyu was joyously thinking that he was taking her to his chamber. When he found out whom she really was, Baoyu darted to Xiaoxiang Garden to see what happened to Lin Daiyu. There the news of her death knocked him out of consciousness.

Xue Baochai carefully nursed him back to life, hoping that he would change his heart and mind. But how could he. Day and night he was thinking of Lin Daiyu. As soon as he received a reminder from his father that he ought to leave for the capital to take the imperial examination,

he said good-bye to Xue Baochai and the rest of the family and took off, never to return. In fact, he was nowhere to be found!

Years later, someone claimed that he had seen Jia Baoyu, dressed up like a monk, wandering aimlessly in the snow.