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How Humour Humanizes a Confucian Paragon: The Case of Xue Baochai in *Honglou meng*

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If one were to poll people on any Chinese street as to which is *the* greatest Chinese novel of all times, the chances are most would say *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, or *Shitou ji* 石頭記 (as it was originally titled, hereafter *HLM*), known in English as *The Dream of the red chamber* or *The Story of the stone*.[1] This work is an eighteenth-century 120-chapter novel by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715–63/64) and Gao E 高鶚 (1738?–1815?) that first circulated in hand-transcriptions among Cao's relatives and friends (see Figure 8.1 for a page from the earliest such extant edition, the 1754 *Jiaxu* edition).[2] Should anyone unfamiliar with the novel wonder about its claimed greatness, most Chinese would be happy to help by comparing it with Shakespeare's plays, on the assumption that these are among the *greatest* of world literature. The plays and *HLM* certainly share one critical similarity: both have inspired massive branches of scholarship, Shakespeare studies (known in Chinese as *Shaxue* 莎學) and *HLM* studies (*Hongxue* 紅學, sometimes humorously referred to in English as "Redology").

Serious scholarship implies the worthiness of its subject. The importance, richness and profundity of *HLM* is suggested by another analogy the Chinese love to make: the novel is an encyclopaedia of traditional Chinese society and culture, thanks to its insightful depiction of an aristocratic family in late imperial China (thirteenth to nineteenth centuries), its vivid portrayal of hundreds of distinctive characters and its minute accounts of their lives, sometimes traversing multiple worlds: the mythical, the realistic and the idyllic (such as the gorgeous Prospect Garden [*Daguan yuan* 大觀園], where the novel's hero dwells with his flower-like maiden cousins and their maids). In a nutshell, the plot of *HLM* delineates the gradual and irreversible disintegration of

the Jia clan — a magnificent and powerful family in the capital with intimate imperial connections (one of its members is a much-beloved imperial concubine). Concomitant with the clan's epic collapse is the tragic unravelling of a love triangle between three star-crossed cousins, the novel's hero Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and heroines Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 and Xue Baochai 薛寶釵.

The discussion below concerns only Xue Baochai, focusing in particular on her humour, a *blinder* spot, so to speak, since *HLM*'s humour at large is a blind spot in the ever-expanding Redology.[3] Such "humour blindness" is baffling, for what encyclopaedia is there without an entry on humour — a supposedly universal human trait and an integral aspect of human culture? As many people would say that absence of humour would make an encyclopaedia incomplete and life insufferable, I would say that "humourless criticism" has impeded full appreciation or enjoyment of *HLM*'s complexity and beauty by keeping us from many of its amusing nuances or subtleties. The critical reception of Baochai is a case in point.

Ever since the novel's first printed edition appeared in 1791, Baochai has had haters, admirers and sympathisers. Her haters prevailed for 200 years until the late 1960s, when more and more readers came to favour or sympathize with her. The difference between her detractors and supporters could not be starker, as the former demonize and the latter apotheosize her. Thus she becomes either a fiend incarnate, an extraordinary thief of virtue (*xiangyuan zhi you* 鄉願之尤) seen as even more abominable than evil (*geng shen yu xiete ye* 更甚於邪慝也),[4] or "a saint" embodying "ideal womanhood . . . generated and endorsed by Confucian teachings", which deserves to be called perfect (*kan cheng wanmei* 堪稱完美).[5] However, this "language of perfection" tends to exalt her beyond humanity into divinity, as an adoring apologist claims that the novelist meant to apotheosize her so that she represented the loftiest conduct that transcends both worldliness and vulgarity (*chaofan tuosu* 超凡脫俗).[6]

Between these two extremes lies a middle position, which anchors her squarely in the human realm: she is neither a monster nor a demigoddess, but a far superior and yet still flawed human being[7] — a complex character with both longcomings (*changchu* 長處) and shortcomings (*duanchu* 短處).[8] This re-visioning of Baochai reflects the rise of humanistic criticism, a growing trend since the late 1970s.[9]

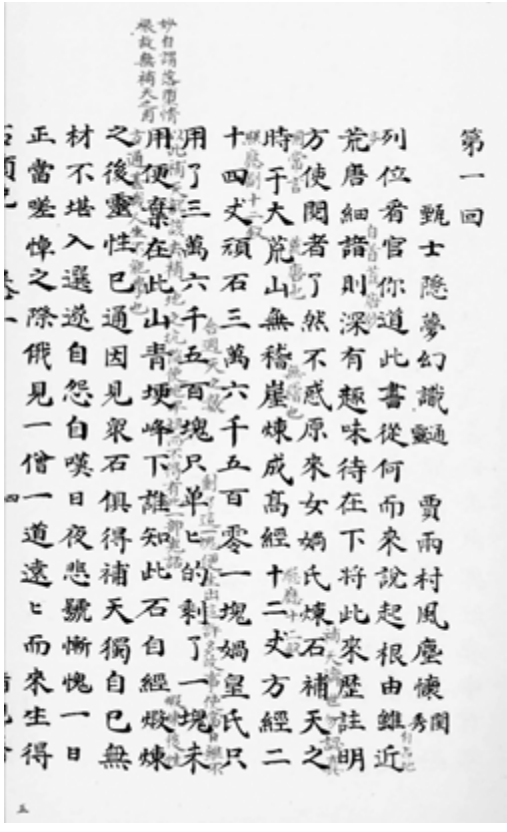

Figure 8.1 Annotated first page of the earliest extant edition (known as the Jiaxu [1754] edition) of *Honglou meng* by Cao Xueqin. Black and white copy of facsimile in *Qianlong Jiaxu Zhiyanzhai chongping* Shitou ji, 1961, *juan* 1, p. 4. Every effort has been made to locate any holder of copyright.

Despite their differences, however, the three views share some striking similarities. For instance, Baochai's demonizers and apotheosizers both believe that the novelist portrayed her as a *perfect* maiden, although the former hold that her perfection is meant to be deceptive, whereas the latter insist that it is genuine. Nevertheless, both reduce her to a flat character who is either utterly evil or utterly good — that is, either a devil or a saint. As we will see, such *dehumanizing* readings could not be further from the reality of the novel, to which only the humanistic criticism comes close. But all three are equally humour blind.

Such endemic oversight has led to either the claim that there are "only slight infusions" of humour in *HLM*,[10] or the complaint that "we are scarcely allowed to enter into [Baochai's] inner world to get a glimpse of her secret joys or sorrows".[11] However, I contend that her humour, so artfully deployed by the novelist, not only offers precisely such an entrance or insight into her private self but also subtly subverts her public image of perfection and (re)humanizes her.[12] I will show that the novelist could not have intended to portray her as either a perfect hypocrite or a perfect paragon, but intended to show her as a fledgling maiden who is striving to become a perfect Confucian gentlewoman (*shunü* 淑女). Although in the public eye she may appear to have succeeded in her goal, privately — as a flesh-and-blood young woman — she is caught in a perennial tug-of-war between her instincts, desires, emotional impulses and subconscious thoughts, and her keen sense of Confucian propriety resulting from her education — in other words, between her nature and her nurture or, in Freudian terminology, her id and her superego. The latter does not always succeed in guarding the former so that it slips out from time to time in a slip of the tongue, or bubbles to the surface in jokes. Such resurfacings of nature in humour often surprise us by disclosing sides of her personality that she, answering to her superego, takes pains to censor or conceal. These failures in her private struggle constitute the "curves" that prevent her character from being flattened by her ostensible image as a perfect maiden, rendering her rounder and more human.

Xue Baochai's Prenatal Imperfections and Postnatal Education

Being human means above all being imperfect, as in an old Chinese proverb: "no person is perfect" (*ren wu wanren* 人無完人). In other words, imperfection is a hallmark of humanity. Besides, in accordance with another old Chinese belief, human nature is irreducible, although modifiable, and is bound to manifest itself in one way or another.[13] These two assumptions are fundamental to the humanistic critique (and mine) of Baochai. Most importantly, they are consistent with the world-view or, more precisely, the human-view (*renguan* 人觀) that underpins *HLM*'s approach to characterization.

In Chapter 2, through the mouth of a character (Jia Yucun 賈雨村), the novelist gives an eloquent and elaborate account of human genesis from three kinds of *qi* 氣 (ether, energy or influence) — that is, *zhengqi* 正氣 (good ether), *xieqi* 邪氣 (evil ether) and a mixture of the two.[14] These moralized ethereal influences give birth to three kinds of people: (1) the exceptionally good (*daren* 大仁), such as those sage emperors and thinkers (for instance, Confucius) who bring order to the world; (2) the exceptionally evil (*da'e* 大惡), such as the most hateful villains (Hitler would be an anachronistic Western example) who plunge the world into chaos; and (3) the rest of the human masses (*dazhong* 大衆), the myriad combinations of the good and evil ethers. Among this last and morally ambiguous group of humans live many uncommon creatures who

> are incapable of becoming either the greatly good or greatly bad; but . . . [who are] superior to all the rest in sharpness and intelligence and inferior to all the rest in perversity, wrongheadedness and eccentricity. Born into a rich or noble household, they are likely to become great lovers or the occasion of great love in others . . . (*SS* 1:78–9; *HLMBS* 1:20)

The original Chinese terms for "great lovers or the occasion of great love in others" are *qingchi* 情癡 (literally, romantic idiots or anyone obsessed with their love) and *qingzhong* 情種 (literally, romantic seed or anyone prone to fall in love easily and/or repeatedly). Since both connote perversity, wrongheadedness and eccentricity,[15] it seems more concise to render them into English as "romantic eccentrics".

According to this human-view, Xue Baochai cannot be either a sage or a villain, and so must be a member of this romantic sub-group of the third "human kind". She was indeed born into an immensely wealthy family (we are told in fact it is one of the four wealthiest families in Nanjing, a former capital of imperial China). She was also born a romantic eccentric, belonging to the same batch of lovesick souls (*yi gan fengliu yuanjia* 一干風流冤家) as her cousins Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. Their romantic nature is revealed at the beginning of the novel by a supernatural Buddhist monk on his way to have these "amorous wretches" incarnated in human form (*SS* 1: 52; *HLMBS* 1: 7). As we will see, however, Baochai turns out to be a rather stunted romantic eccentric because her predisposition to the romantic mode is severely

chilled, although not cured, by her upbringing, which counteracts but does not eradicate her amatory nature. Thus the novel's human-view dictates that she is meant to be *flawed*, both pre- and post-natally.

It is therefore no coincidence that since birth she has suffered from *redu* 熱毒 (literally, noxious internal heat), "a congenital tendency to over-heatedness" or a tendency to physical, temperamental or emotive excess. Being a disease (*bing* 病) from the womb (*cong dai li dailai de* 從胎裏帶來的) (*SS* 7: 167–8; *HLMBS* 7: 70–1), this pathological over-heatedness is an *innate* blemish on her humanity. It also symbolizes her inveterate romantic predisposition and her potential romantic eccentricity. These underlying tendencies are confirmed by Baochai herself when she confides in Daiyu that she used to be a naughty girl, crazy about romantic literature and avidly reading it behind the adults' backs. Only after their "beatings and lectures and burning of books" did she finally stop (*SS* 42: 333; *HLMBS* 42: 448).

Just as her natural disposition is ineradicable but controllable through discipline, so her over-heatedness is incurable but manageable through medicine, which temporarily relieves its overt symptoms of coughing and wheezing (*chuansou* 喘嗽). Made from various white flowers of all seasons mixed with rain, dew and snow, this finicky remedy is aptly called "Cold fragrance pills" (*lengxiangwan* 冷香丸). (*SS* 7: 168–9; *HLMBS* 7: 71–2). As such, the remedy takes on a symbolic significance, corresponding to Baochai's Confucian — or, more precisely, Neo-Confucian — discipline of conforming to the Rites (*li* 禮).[16] Thus, just as the pills cool her prenatal over-heatedness, her education chills her inborn amatory impulses, turning her into a reformed former romantic or a born-again Neo-Confucian.

Baochai comes from a refined and highly cultivated family of Confucian scholars. Despite her gender, she has apparently received from her late father a fine Confucian education. The novel takes almost every opportunity to portray her as a maiden-scholar who is erudite in traditional Chinese arts and thought, be they Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian or Neo-Confucian. There are details in the novel to suggest, for example, that Baochai is highly conversant with the works of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1202), the arch-Neo-Confucian philosopher whose exegeses of the Confucian classics were a staple of late imperial Chinese curriculum, and she cites him easily and aptly in conversation.[17] Her

educational success is also reflected in her family's response to an imperial call that "daughters of hereditary officials and distinguished families . . . have their names sent in to the Ministry for selection to be study-companions" of princesses (*SS* 4: 118–19; *HLMBS* 4: 42). One of the reasons that Baochai's family moved from Nanjing to the capital and lodged with the Jia family was so that she could await this selection, evidencing her family's confidence in her qualifications. The titles of the job, *cairen* 才人 (literally, talented person) or *zanshan* 贊善 (literally, aid of virtue),[18] make clear its two basic prerequisites: education and decorum, commonly termed *zhi shu da li* 知書達禮 (knowing the Confucian classics and following the Rites).[19] Baochai's family believes that she meets both criteria, being steeped in the classics and, as I will show, always trying to conduct herself in accordance with the Rites.

The Rites, as explained elsewhere in this book,[20] were regarded as the supreme embodiment of human refinement and civility. They constituted the ultimate norms of propriety and were the best cultivator of virtue in pursuit of the highest of Confucian virtues, *ren* 仁 (humaneness). Thus, learning and practising them were the other staples of traditional Chinese education, which aimed not only to impart book knowledge but also to foster proper conduct. A goal of Confucian self-discipline was to keep one's desires and emotions within the bounds of the Rites, and thereby well away from any impropriety or immorality. This classical position was later radicalized by Neo-Confucians (under the influence of Daoism and Buddhism) into something even more ascetic, urging that desires — especially of the romantic kind — be annihilated (*mie* 滅). As a result, in late imperial China with Neo-Confucianism reigning supreme as state ideology, absence of amatory feelings or behaviour became a laudable womanly virtue.

Baochai's cultivation of this virtue and her internalization of its underlying stoic ethics and aesthetics are patent not only in her friendly lectures to other girls about women's proprieties and responsibilities,[21] but also in her poem on the white crab-flower, which professes: "For beauty in plain whiteness best appears" (*Dan ji shi zhi hua geng yan* 淡極始知花更艷: *SS* 37: 223; *HLMBS* 37: 388). Her conscientious strivings are borne out by what critics observe to be the two tactics of her strategy for propriety, *cang* 藏 (to conceal) and *lou* 露 (to reveal): she is eager to

reveal her virtuousness to others, and at the same time she tries hard to conceal anything in and about her that the Rites would censure.[22] The foremost of such improprieties is, of course, her romantic nature, and therefore not only has she long since given up reading romantic literature; she also jealously guards against any expression of her amatory feelings. For instance, during her visit to Jia Baoyu after he has been savagely beaten by his father in punishment:

> Baochai was relieved to see him with his eyes open and talking again. She shook her head sadly.
>
> "If you had listened to what one said, this would never have happened. Everyone is so upset now. It isn't Grandmother and Lady Wang, you know. Even —"
>
> She *checked herself* abruptly (*you mang yan zhu* 又忙嚥住), regretting that she had allowed her feelings to run away with her, and lowered her head, blushing. (*SS* 34: 156; *HLMBS* 34: 350, my italics)[23]

This constant inhibition of natural desire and passion creates an austere aura about Baochai which, if depicted in colour and sensation, would be white and cold, the two prominent characteristics of snow *xue* 雪 — an important symbol of Baochai since her last name, Xue 薛, puns on it.[24] She is not only likened to a cold, snow-white beauty (*SS* 65: 292; *HLMBS* 65: 735); her abode is also described as a *xuedong* 雪洞 (snow cave), since it is stark and bare of ornaments. Moreover, she is often associated with other cold and/or white things such as the famous "Cold fragrance pills", the plain white crab-flower and the charming but apparently passionless (*wuqing* 無情) peony (*SS* 63: 224–9; *HLMBS* 63: 698–701). In these ways, the novelist suggests the lengths to which Baochai has gone in practising Neo-Confucian stoicism. Yet she may have gone a bit too far, so Grandmother Jia 賈母, the widowed matriarch of the clan, admonishes her for having made her boudoir look too austere and self-effacing to be natural for a young girl (*SS* 40: 295, 296; *HLMBS* 40: 428, 429).

The earliest and most authoritative of traditional commentators, Zhiyanzhai 脂硯齋 (Red ink-stone studio), refers to Baochai as *zhishu shili nüfuzi* 知書識禮女夫子 (a female Confucius who knows the classics and the Rites).[25] This epithet denotes a paragon of decorum with a perfect ability to stay within the bounds of the Rites, anticipating her later reception as such an exemplar. But Zhiyanzhai's full comment

actually points out that she is *not always* so — in other words, she does not always behave like a straitlaced female Confucius since her self-control is not always that perfect.[26] Her innate humanity is represented visually in an early illustration of the heroine catching butterflies, shown in Figure 8.2. This well-known episode has been variously interpreted — for instance, as representing Baochai's ambition to catch (and replace) the heroine Daiyu in the affections of the novel's hero, Baoyu, but also as a manifestation of her playful nature as a young girl momentarily freed from her sense of lady-like propriety.

Figure 8.2 Baochai catching butterflies. Black and white copy of a print by Gai Qi 改琦 (1774–1827) in *Honglou meng tu yong*, 2004, *juan* 1 (unpaginated, originally published 1879). Reproduced with kind permission of the Beijing National Library.

Indeed, as is suggested by her mixed nature and associated symbols which contain both positive and negative aspects, she is not intended to be a paragon of propriety *all* the time. As we see below, the novel portrays her not just as a young *lady* but also as a young *girl*, who succumbs to her nature — if only sometimes and unwittingly — against the influence of her nurture. In other words, she is designed (predestined) to not always be so successful in repressing her raw self as she is in her visit to Baoyu above. If her image as an ascetic paragon dehumanizes her, then these passionate slippages naturalize and normalize her, making her more like the rest of us who are flawed and often unable to bridle our improper feelings, thoughts or actions. What is particularly significant is that such outbreaks of her nature against nurture often occur under cover of her humour.

Humorous (Re)Humanization of Baochai

In Chapter 42, Baochai gives a comparative analysis of a lampoon her cousin Daiyu makes of Granny Liu, a greedy family acquaintance visiting from the countryside, as "Old mother locust" (*SS* 42: 334–5; *HLMBS* 42: 449). This critique illustrates the keenness of Baochai's own sense of humour, which is confirmed by acclaim from her audience that she "excelled as a commentator no less than Daiyu and Xifeng, in their different ways, as wits".[27] The compliment seems doubly sincere, since they also witnessed earlier a spectacular display of her satirical wit at a crab-eating party. Towards the end of that party, Baoyu suggested they compose poems on eating crabs. For a laugh (*qu xiaor ba* 取笑兒罷), Baochai offered the following verse, which bowled over her audience:

> "桂靄桐陰坐舉觴，長安涎口盼重陽。
> 眼前道路無經緯，皮裏春秋空黑黃。"
> 看到這裏，衆人不禁叫絕。寶玉道："寫得痛快，我的詩也該燒了。"又看底下道：
> "酒未敵腥還用菊，性防積冷定須萎。
> 於今落釜成何益，月浦空餘禾黍香。"
> 衆人看畢，都說："這是食螃蟹絕唱。這些小題目原要寓大意，纔算是大才。只是諷刺世人太毒了些。"

(*HLMBS* 38: 408–9)

"With wine cups in hand, as the autumn day ends,
And with watering mouths, we await our small friends.
A straightforward breed you are certainly not,
And the goodness inside you has all gone to pot —"

There were cries of admiration at this point.

"That's a very neat bit of invective!" said Baoyu. "I can see I shall have to burn *my* poem now!"

They read on.

"For your cold humours, ginger; to cut out your smell
We've got wine and chrysanthemum petals as well.
As you hiss in your pot, crabs, d'ye look back with pain
On that calm moonlit cove and the fields of fat grain?"

When they had finished reading, all agreed that this was the definitive poem on the subject of eating crabs.

"It's the sign of a real talent," they said, "to be able to see a deeper, allegorical meaning in a frivolous subject — though the social satire *is* [a little too harsh]!" (*SS* 38: 257–8, my translation in brackets)

Calling it social satire (*fengci shiren* 諷刺世人), the party clearly read the poem as an allegory deriding lawless, callous and unscrupulous people who are as crooked, cold-blooded and (morally) smelly as sideways-scuttling crabs and whose treachery is as futile and self-destructive as the goodness inside the crabs cooked and eaten. Clever as it is, the poem might seem wittier still if also read (as some traditional commentators have done) as a *personal satire* vituperating Baoyu and Daiyu.[28] But before elucidating such a reading, I note that the poem not only testifies to the creative potency and artistic sophistication of Baochai's humour; it also betrays an aspect of her personality that she may wish to keep to herself when in a less playful and more sober frame of mind — that is, her dispositional over-heatedness, which her audience intuits when they comment that her satire is *tai du le xie* 太毒了些 (a little too venomous).

Even though poetic, such a joking outburst of moral fury mars her image as a *gentle* woman. It clashes not just with the general Confucian principle of moderation but also with the Rites that require a virtuous woman to be gentle and sedate, constant and quiet, chaste and orderly, not to utter vicious words, and to shun jest and laughter.[29] Baochai

herself repeatedly invokes these womanly precepts when admonishing the other girls, telling Daiyu, for example:

> As an old saying goes, "Lack of talent is a virtue for women". The most important of all is for us to be chaste and quiet. Our work (weaving, embroidery, and sewing) comes next. As for writing poetry, it is a mere boudoir diversion. One can have it, and one can do without it. Girls from families like ours do not need a reputation for literary talent.[30]

From this orthodox perspective, flaunting one's allegorical invectives, even as a poetic joke at a private gathering, is a far cry from being ladylike.

Baochai would be still more unladylike, harsh — even vicious — and the poem thus much funnier if we read it as her covert lampoon of Baoyu and Daiyu being as unruly or deviant as live crabs and as futile as cooked ones. For their thinly veiled love and dreams of a marital future together violate the decorum that disenfranchises men and women from expressing love and choosing their marriage partners, prescribing instead segregation of the sexes and conferring on their parents the prerogative of arranging marriages.[31] Otherwise, courtships and matrimonies would be scandalous and "despised by parents and countrymen" (*fumu guoren jie jian zhi* 父母國人皆賤之).[32] Such consequences are evoked in the novel by the horror of Baoyu's maid Aroma (Xiren 襲人) after overhearing her master deliriously pledging his heart to Daiyu. Aghast at the likelihood of an ugly scandal developing, Aroma wonders how she might arrange matters to prevent it (*SS* 32: 135; *HLMBS* 32: 339).[33] Quite conceivably, the good girl Baochai would scorn such wayward goings-on, knowing they will lead nowhere despite the lovers' burning passion and tearful pledges of fidelity, all just as vain as the lifelessness of the cooked crabs. This poetic conceit is quite prophetic, for Baoyu and Daiyu are never able to become husband and wife, thanks to their elders' fateful arrangements that tear them apart forever.

The likelihood that Baochai applies the conceit this way is increased by two phrases she uses to describe Baoyu, Daiyu and the crabs: *meile jingwei* 沒了經緯 (deviant) and *pili chunqiu* 皮裏春秋 (with concealed criticism). In Chapter 32, Baochai complains to Aroma about Baoyu: "*Ta rujin shuohua yuefa meile jingwei* 他如今說話越發沒了經緯" (lately he

lacks even more decorum in his speeches) (*HLMBS* 32: 339). Originally meaning vertical and horizontal lines in weaving, *jing* 經 and *wei* 緯 later came to denote north–south and east–west bound paths, respectively. As a set phrase, *jingwei* can be a metaphor for pattern, order, rule, propriety, and so on. Then, absence of *jingwei* (*wu jingwei* 無經緯) means being deviant, lawless, unscrupulous, improper, and so on. It is in both its literal and figurative senses that Baochai uses *jingwei* to poeticize the crabs: *Yanqian daolu wu jingwei* 眼前道路無經緯 (The paths before you that you follow are all patternless). Such parallelism insinuates that this is how Baoyu also behaves.

The second phrase appears in the following line — *Pili chunqiu kong heihuang* 皮裏春秋空黑黃 (In vain are all the springs and autumns, the black and yellow goodies, under your shells) — which forms a couplet with the preceding line. The term *pili chunqiu* is a metaphor for unvoiced appraisal,[34] derived from the style of *The spring and autumn annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), a history of the State of Lu (722–481 BCE) allegedly edited by Confucius. It is held that the book's terse descriptions contain the Master's praise or criticism of recorded events and personages, a method called *chunqiu bifa* 春秋筆法 (the rhetoric of hidden judgments). It is no coincidence that, four chapters later, Baochai says this is the method Daiyu uses when she lampoons Granny Liu as "Old mother locust".

However, the contexts of these *pili chunqiu* references imbue the term with unmistakable negativity. As one critic asserts, it connotes a crafty or scheming mind (*xinji guishen* 心機詭深) intending manipulation, deception or a wicked kind of wit.[35] Yet at the outset Daiyu is introduced as an extraordinarily intelligent girl with many chambers in her heart (*xinqiao* 心竅) (*SS* 3: 103; *HLMBS* 3: 32). According to ancient Chinese belief, these chambers, or eyes in the heart (*xinyan* 心眼), are the source of intelligence, enabling one to see with the mind's eye. So the more *xinqiao* or *xinyan* one has, the smarter one is. By contrast, an obtuse person is often said to lack such eyes (*queshao xinyan* 缺/少心眼), or not to have opened up the chambers in his heart (*xin bu kai qiao* 心不開竅). If *xinqiao* is a positive or at least a neutral word, *xinyan* often denotes a calculating or scheming mind (*xinji* 心計). In *HLM*, Daiyu is portrayed as making others think she has too many eyes in her heart (*xinyan tai duo* 心眼太多), (that is, is over-sensitive or even paranoid) or has small

heart-eyes (*xiao xinyan* 小心眼) (is petty-minded or intolerant), which make her prone to unfounded doubts, unnecessary misgivings and cutting sarcasm. As one character observes, "Miss Lin likes to say mean things to others, and she is also narrow-minded" (*Lin guniang zuili you ai kebo ren, xinli you xi* 林姑娘嘴裏又愛刻薄人, 心裏又細) (*SS* 27: 28; *HLMBS* 27: 277; my translation).

Hence the couplet in question indirectly calls Baoyu and Daiyu a pair of bad crabs — an unruly one coupled with a crafty one. Baochai thus appears to be engaging in the rhetoric of hidden judgements and abusive humour with relish and vengeance. For, seen in the larger context of the preceding chapters, her poem can also be read as retaliation for earlier impertinence by Baoyu and Daiyu. In Chapter 30, the three had engaged in a brawl of sarcasms, a scene I will analyse later. Suffice it for now to say that after a flash of outrage over a botched and offensive witticism by Baoyu about her plumpness, Baochai restrains herself from launching more stinging repartee, partly because of her sense of propriety and partly for fear of embarrassing Baoyu too much. It seems she has neither forgotten nor forgiven his impropriety; thus in Chapter 32 she complains to Aroma that Baoyu is getting ruder and ruder in his speech (*mei le jingwei*).

Nor does Baochai forget or forgive Daiyu's derision at the end of Chapter 34. Deeply hurt by her brother Xue Pan's remark that she has taken Baoyu's side because she harbours special feelings for him, Baochai weeps for a whole night. Next morning, unfortunately, the first person she meets is Daiyu. Seeing Baochai unusually dispirited and with clear signs on her face of having been crying, Daiyu thinks she has secretly been grieving for Baoyu because of the thrashing he received. The thought amuses Daiyu:

> 黛玉……便在後面笑道："姐姐也自保重些兒。就是哭出兩缸眼淚來，也醫不好棒瘡。" (*HLMBS* 34: 360)
>
> "Don't make yourself ill, coz," she called out, almost gleefully . . . "Even a cistern-full of tears won't heal the smart of a beating!" (*SS* 34: 172)

Baochai pretends not to have heard Daiyu and goes away. Although she is able to ignore Daiyu's unprovoked sarcasm for the moment,

it seems to be difficult for her to forget it, for Daiyu's innuendo has rubbed salt into the wound inflicted earlier by her brother's insult. Presumably the resulting pain makes both more memorable.

The poems by Baoyu and Daiyu in Chapter 38 on eating crabs may have recalled these offences by eulogizing the crabs' tasty fat and meatiness in spite of their cold nature.[36] Their mock praise may have been completely innocent, free from any malice towards Baochai.[37] Yet her memory of their insolence, as well as her nature, conceivably makes her so sensitive that she takes their words as making fun once again of *her* plumpness and coldness (apparent austerity). Thus she counter-attacks with her own poem, tooth for tooth. For example, in referring to the crabs as *wuchang gongzi* 無腸公子 (gutless princes), Baoyu may well be deprecating himself as witless. Extending his self-disparagement in her own poem, Baochai implies that he is worse than witless: he is rule-less. Similarly, where Daiyu praises the appetising goodies inside the crabs, Baochai insinuates that they are just as ineffectual as Daiyu's own over-crafty wit is in ridiculing and judging others.

Thus with one poem Baochai kills two kinds of crabs: she mocks not only immoral people in the outside world but also two impertinent persons inside the family. In so doing, she vents her spleen and takes her revenge. (The poetry contest between the three is hence a sequel to their earlier sarcastic brawl in Chapter 30, and it is small wonder that both scenes star only the three of them.) The poem thus also allows glimpses into some dark corners of Baochai's character — those latent and not completely tamed emotions. Disarmed by the convivial merriment, which is enhanced by playful versifying on the peculiar creatures they are eating, her superego lets down its guard, so that some otherwise censored tendencies seep out: over-harshness, intolerance and vindictiveness — all normally checked because they contravene the cardinal Confucian virtue of *ren* 仁.

Although not all Baochai's symptoms of dispositional over-heatedness are as dire as these, some are equally unbecoming to a "female Confucius". Her contribution to another poetry contest on willow catkins — a kind of playful thematic revolution — is an example. After critiquing the other entries as conventionally pessimistic, she prefaces her own with this claim:

寶釵笑道：“. . . 我想柳絮原是一件輕薄無根無絆的東西，然依我的主意，偏要把他說好了，纔不落套。所以我謅了一首，未必合你們的意思。. . .”

“白玉堂前春解舞，東風捲得均勻。”

湘雲先笑道：“好一個‘東風捲得均勻’。這一句就出衆人之上了。”

又看底下道：

“蜂團蝶陣亂紛紛，幾曾隨逝水，豈必委芳塵。

萬縷千絲終不改，任他隨聚隨分。

韶華休笑本無根，好風頻借力，送我上青雲。”

衆人拍案叫絕，都說：“果然翻得好氣力，自然是這首為尊 . . .” (*HLMBS* 70: 787)

Baochai said, smilingly: “Willow floss is a light and airy thing. It seems to me that the best way to avoid the clichés that this subject invites is to [make it desirable to be light and airy]. That is the principle on which I have tried to compose my poem; but you may not think I have succeeded . . .”

“In mazy dances over the marble forecourt,
Wind-whorled, into trim fluff-balls forming —”

“Bravo!” said Xiangyun. “‘Wind-whorled, into trim fluff-balls forming’: that line is better than anything the rest of us have written.”

They read on.

“Like fluttering moths or silent white bees swarming:
Not for us a tomb in the running waters,
Or the earth’s embalming.
The filaments whence we are formed remain unchanging,
No matter what separates or unifies.
Do not, earth-child, our rootlessness despise:
When the strong wind comes he will whirl us upwards
Into the skies.”

They thumped the table enthusiastically.

“Undoubtedly this poem is the best . . .” (*SS* 70: 387–8)

This happy, optimistic and uplifting poem certainly accomplishes what it sets out to do, rendering lightness and rootlessness as praiseworthy qualities that enable willow floss to defy gravity and fly high. The humour lies in Baochai’s deliberately topsy-turvy yet delightfully logical *re*-presentation of a conventional theme with delicate beauty. Her rebellious, inverting humour seems to open

a channel for some personal undercurrents to gush up, which are palpable not only in the poem's dynamic imagery of whirling winds and soaring, dancing catkins but also in its sonorous notes of complacent triumph, aloofness and defiance. As many have noted, the poem acts as her inner monologue or self-portrait.[38] Such externalization of her inner self may be completely unwitting, as it is usually repressed by her apparent modesty (*qian* 謙), a requisite virtue for women to ensure their (inherent) status as humble and weak (*bei ruo* 卑弱).[39]

The greatest of several immodesties betrayed here involves male political ambitions. The possibility that Baochai may harbour such thoughts is suggested by the poem's concluding image of willow floss borne on vernal gales and ascending into the azure sky. Most critics take the azure sky (*qingyun* 青雲) as alluding only to the position of Baoyu's wife, the future matriarch of the clan.[40] Such a reading is certainly valid, but inaccurate and utterly unflattering, as it renders Baochai a mere pretender to domestic power. Nor does it do justice to the image's rich implications. *Qingyun* (literally, black cloud) is often a figure of speech for great ambition for high position in government. In fact, the poem's last two lines: *haofeng pin jie li, song wo shang qingyun* 好風頻借力，送我上青雲 (frequent strong winds lend me power / and send me up to the black clouds) echo *ping bu qingyun* 平步青雲 (to walk with ease amidst black clouds) and *chunfeng deyi* 春風得意 (spring breeze, a sense of fulfilment), two common metaphors for feelings of joy and satisfaction resulting from rapid promotion in officialdom. Hence the lines may be taken as alluding to Baochai's wish to be selected as a study-companion of imperial princesses — the azure sky with herself (uprooted from her native place) as the rootless willow floss and the imperial summons as the vernal gales.

Since the post is decreed by the emperor, such an aspiration would not count as immodest unless Baochai desired something more, such as potential *political* impact from the appointment. That she is at least aware of this possibility can be deduced from her articulation of the purposes of reading books: these are, she tells Daiyu, to understand the principles of things (*ming li* 明理); to assist the state to govern the people (*fu guo zhi min* 輔國治民); and, as she urges Baoyu, to establish oneself and make a name for one's family (*li shen yang ming* 立身揚名). Here, as she is keenly aware, she is essentially echoing the

Confucian objectives of learning *for men*. Yet she regrets that few men have achieved these goals. So it seems not too far-fetched to say that, consciously or subconsciously, she may wish that she *were* a man so that she could go out and accomplish them. Since she *is* a woman, being a princessly study-companion will be her best chance to directly serve the state, through her influence on the princesses and, through them, on their men who are most likely part of the polity.

According to the Rites, of course, it is improper for women to meddle in state affairs, as governance is strictly men's responsibility, while women's lies squarely *within* the threshold of home. Evidently, Baochai fully understands this division of social responsibilities. Yet her behaviour suggests that having a strong sense of propriety does not mean that one never has improper desires or aspirations, nor does it guarantee that one can always suppress them. They may drift out, as here, when the excitement of poetic inspiration loosens the tie on the bag so that the cat of a latent political ambition slips out. Such over-ambition marks another symptom of Baochai's dispositional over-heatedness. And once again it is disclosed to readers through the mediation of humour.

Unquestionably, a major component of this over-heatedness is her inborn romantic ardour. Often suppressed, this natural energy can partly be released by her humour. In Chapter 25, for instance, Daiyu feels great relief on hearing that Baoyu has begun to recover from his illness (caused this time by a curse):

> "Bless His Holy Name!" Daiyu murmured fervently.
>
> Baochai laughed, but said nothing. The others were mystified.
>
> "Why do you laugh, Cousin Bao?" Xichun asked her.
>
> "I was thinking how busy He of the Holy Name must be," Baochai said. "Apart from working for the salvation of all sentient beings, He has to protect the sick and hasten their recovery. [Now that they are recovering, He will turn to take care of Miss Lin's marriage.] What a lot He has to keep Him busy! Don't you find the thought rather amusing (*kexiao* 可笑)?"
>
> Daiyu affected scorn (*cui le yi kou* 啐了一口), but was blushing hotly.
>
> "You are all horrid. Instead of following good examples, you all imitate [Xifeng] and make nasty, cheap jokes (*pin zui e she* 貧嘴惡舌) all the time."

> She raised the portière and went out. (*SS* 25: 506; *HLMBS* 25: 261–2; my translation in square brackets)

"Nasty, cheap jokes" refers to Xifeng's riposte to Daiyu several days previously about accepting some Siam tea Xifeng had given her: "You know the rule: drink the family's tea, the family's bride-to-be." By alluding to this age-old engagement rite, Xifeng evoked the idea of a union between Baoyu and Daiyu (*SS* 25: 499; *HLMBS* 25: 257). (This *joking* proposal of marriage may well have been intended to signify that they were not meant to be husband and wife after all.) At this moment, only Baochai remembers Xifeng's quip and brings it up teasingly to accuse Daiyu of thinking ahead about matrimony with Baoyu.

As usual, Baochai's humour reveals more about what is in *her* mind than in anybody else's. We cannot tell for sure whether Daiyu is thinking about marrying Baoyu, but Baochai's joke proves that *she* is thinking about it. It suggests that she may have been thinking about it ever since Xifeng made the joke, and perhaps even about her own union with Baoyu — who, as we will see later, has long attracted her attention. In fact, her joke reflects the preoccupation of every adolescent girl in *HLM*: marriage. The more marriageable the girls become, the more anxious they get. This is because marriage is *the* peg on which hangs their future happiness, yet they have little say in this event (commonly called *zhongshen dashi* 終身大事, the great event that will affect the rest of one's life), since everything has to be decided by their parents (and is thus often dictated by parental whim). This time-honoured protocol makes it embarrassing for a girl even to hear mention of a possible husband, let alone talk about such things herself, which would be insufferably uncouth. This is borne out by Daiyu's offended feelings described above, and by blushes or giggles among the girls whenever such taboo subjects come up in chit-chat.

But humour — especially about *another* person's marriage — helps alleviate their mounting marriage anxiety since the talk can readily be dismissed as a mere joke. Many boudoir jests in *HLM* therefore revolve around another person's marriage. Baochai's jests are no exception, as we have just seen; and on other occasions she also kids Daiyu and other girls about their marital prospects. She too suffers from marriage anxiety. This is natural and understandable, because marriage is logically her back-up plan should Plan A for becoming a princessly

study-companion fall through. For pre-modern Chinese women, the prospect of happy matrimony all-importantly depended on whether they could marry Mr. Right. For many girls in *HLM*, he is Baoyu; as Xifeng says to Daiyu, "Good looks, good family, good income. There are no snags that I can see. It's a perfect match." (*SS* 25: 499; *HLMBS* 25: 257) He also has a kind heart and a deep respect for women — in fact, he *worships* them, especially beautiful girls whom he regards as the most superior of human beings. At the novel's outset, he is declared to be a kind and understanding friend of women by virtue of his unique "lust of the mind" (*yiyin* 意淫), a kind of altruistic, egalitarian and polygamist-like love and considerateness.[41] Such an empathetic ladies' man naturally causes secret wishes to burgeon in the minds of many girls around him,[42] including Baochai. This is attested to by her very first joke with Baoyu, where once again humour reveals the underlying emotional truth.

This occurs during the homecoming of Baoyu's elder sister, Yuanchun 元春, an imperial concubine. To test their progress in learning, she asks her siblings and cousins to write verses on the magnificent Prospect Garden specially constructed for her visit. While Baoyu is still working on his, Baochai stealthily suggests that he change a particular image in one poem to avoid contradicting his sister. Under pressure, Baoyu cannot think of a suitable alternative poetic allusion. Before supplying him with one, Baochai shakes her head, clicks her tongue and says with a mocking smile:

> Tut, tut, tut! If this is what you are like tonight, Heaven knows what you'll be like in a few years' time when you come to take the Palace Examination. Probably you'll find you have forgotten even the *Child's first primer of rhyming names* . . . (*SS* 18: 368; *HLMBS* 17, 18: 182)

Significantly, *only* Baochai notices the inappropriateness in Baoyu's text. Such exceptionally close attention points to a hidden attraction (which is also borne out by her frequent visits to him).[43]

Equally significant is Baochai's reference to the palace examination, which betrays her wish to shape Baoyu into Mr. Right by prodding him to prepare himself diligently for adulthood. In imperial China, passing this examination (the last level of the civil service examinations) signified momentous success in one's career because it guaranteed a

job in the government and opportunities for fortune and/or fame. Since wealth and status were regarded as necessary conditions for a good life, such success was most desirable in a future husband. To Baochai's dismay, studying for the examinations is the last thing that Baoyu wants to do, and he uses every excuse to shun it; moreover, he despises those who do it, calling them "career worms" (*ludu* 祿蠹).[44] Because of this enormous snag (as Xifeng would call it), he is not quite as perfect a Mr. Right as he might have been, which is why everyone (except Daiyu) tries to persuade him to devote himself to study. Baochai does this through jest as above, and by giving him humorous pennames for their poetry club such as Wushimang 無事忙 (Mr Much ado about nothing) and Fuguixianren 富貴閒人 (Rich and honourable idler) (*HLMBS* 37: 385, 386; cf. *SS* 37: 218). Clearly, both dig at him for idling with girls, trying to serve and please them instead of doing something that matters for his future career.

Many readers hold that Baochai's interest in Baoyu is devoid of true feeling, and is purely motivated by selfish desires, vanity or lust for power. I believe this is inaccurate. Her near slip of the tongue, mentioned above, shows genuine care for him and her acceptance of the marriage eventually imposed on them strongly bespeaks her love for him, since by then he has lost nearly all his appeal as an ideal husband. The disappearance of his talisman jade (a symbol of his soul) ravished away his intelligence, reducing him to a mere good-looking, automaton-like idiot, and any quick recovery seems out of sight. Their wedding is hastily arranged as a kind of shock therapy, a last attempt to turn his luck, by pretending to him that he is marrying Daiyu. Baochai's cooperation in this deception is as selfish in relation to Daiyu as it is selfless in relation to Baoyu, since marrying him under these circumstances amounts to sacrificing any normal marital life, and thus evinces a profound love. People may say that her consent springs more from obedience to her elders than from love for Baoyu, but cannot it spring from both? Her wholehearted devotion to taking care of him after their marriage (by delaying their conjugal consummation, for example, until it might help his recovery as a kind of sex therapy) makes her love even more manifest. Furthermore, in retrospect it was already evident in her jealousy of Daiyu, her arch-rival.

Given that jealousy is an attendant passion of love, the more amatory people are, the more susceptible they are to jealousy and the more difficulty they have in suppressing it. Yet in traditional and polygamous China, it had to be surmounted in order to maintain familial harmony among wives, and its absence was celebrated as a virtue. To prevent and deter it, the Rites not only stipulated hierarchy, privileges, even sleeping arrangements between a husband and his wives, but also listed wifely jealousy as a main justification for a husband to divorce his wife.[45]

Noted for her generous and tolerant disposition, Baochai appears to be free from jealousy. However, a closer look reveals that her conscientious self-discipline has not entirely immunized her from this deleterious emotion; nor is she always successful in completely suppressing it, as is evidenced by her envious humour. While jealousy and envy share two essential passions, craving and resentment, they differ in that a jealous person guards what they have (or what they think they have), so will be resentfully suspicious of the influence of a rival, whereas an envious person resents others for having what they lack and desire.[46] In Chapter 27, for instance, Baoyu and Tanchun 探春, his half-sister by one of his father's concubines, briefly step away from Baochai and Daiyu to discuss some private matters. After Daiyu has also left, the narrator says:

> There was an amused interruption at this point from Baochai, who was still standing where they (Baoyu and Tanchun) had left her a few minutes before:
>
> "Do finish your talking and come back soon! It's easy to see that you two are brother and sister. As soon as you see each other, you get into a huddle and start talking about family secrets. Would it *really* be such a disaster if anything you are saying were to be overheard?" (*SS* 27: 37; *HLMBS* 27: 282)

In these teasing words we can detect a desire to be included in this secret-sharing closeness between Tanchun and Baoyu, something Baochai perhaps subconsciously wishes to possess between herself and him.

If in this case she is only wishful, she sounds truly discontented when she sees the magnificent rain cape made from mallard-head feathers that Grandmother Jia has given to a newcomer Xue Baoqin 薛寶琴, Baochai's paternal cousin. With a laugh, Baochai remarks:

> To each a different fortune meted — that's certainly a true saying. I never dreamt that she would be coming here — much less that when she did, Lady Jia would immediately fall for her like this! (*SS* 49: 475; *HLMBS* 49: 525)

As if to aggravate her displeasure at the fond and special treatment that Baoqin receives from the old lady (which Baochai has not, despite all her efforts to please her), a message comes from the matriarch telling Baochai not to be "too strict with Miss Qin; she's still only little and should be allowed to have her own way . . . if there's anything Miss Qin wants, she shouldn't be afraid to ask for it." Baochai's reaction is depicted thus:

> Afterwards she nudged Baoqin playfully.
>
> "*I* don't know! Some people have all the luck. You'd better leave us, hadn't you, before we start maltreating you? It beats me. What have *you* got that *I* haven't got?" (*SS* 49: 475; *HLMBS* 49: 526)

Her resentment is unmistakable.

Like two sides of a coin, Baochai's envy can become jealousy with a flip of circumstances, particularly when Baoyu and Daiyu are involved. One occasion makes this manifest with a momentary eruption of Baochai's emotive over-heatedness that blasts to smithereens its feeble, joking cover. In Chapter 30, after the stormiest and most scandalous of their fights, Baoyu and Daiyu make up and are dragged off by Xifeng to Grandmother Jia to demonstrate their reconciliation. Baochai happens to be present. Evidently not too thrilled about it all, she is further displeased when Baoyu apologizes to her for his inability to attend Xue Pan's birthday party, giving the excuse that he is unwell. This is a flagrant lie, for everyone knows he has been busy begging Daiyu's forgiveness. Baochai's displeasure is voiced in her response that apologies are unnecessary since they are cousins who see each other all the time, otherwise it would surely be rather unfriendly (*SS* 30: 97; *HLMBS* 30: 310). This first reflection of her discontent is only a distant rumble that quickly becomes a deafening thunderclap when she tells Baoyu why she herself is not at the birthday party watching the opera: "I can't stand the heat . . . I did watch a couple of acts of something, but it was so hot that I couldn't stay any longer. Unfortunately none of the guests showed any sign of going, *so I had to pretend I was ill in order to get*

away." (my italics) Exposed, an acutely embarrassed Baoyu scrambles to change the subject. With a stupid laugh, he blurts out:

> "No wonder they compare you to Yang Guifei, cousin. You are well covered like her, and they always say plump people fear the heat."
>
> The colour flew into Baochai's face. An angry retort was on her lips, but she could hardly make it in company. Yet reflection only made her angrier. Eventually, after a scornful sniff or two, she said:
>
> "I may be like Yang Guifei in some respects. [Unfortunately, I don't have a brother or a cousin who is capable] of becoming a prime minister." (*SS* 30: 97–8; *HLMBS* 30: 317; my translation in square brackets)

Ouch! Here the malice of Baochai's retaliatory sarcasm comes out in full force, cutting Baoyu to the quick.

What is so offensive about Baoyu's comparison that it ignites Baochai's wrath in spite of her efforts to restrain it? Historically, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–56) was the most beloved concubine of the Tang Xuanzong Emperor 玄宗 (685–762). In literature and popular culture, she is not only noted for her voluptuous beauty that makes her one of the four great Chinese beauties but she is also notorious for her liaison with An Lushan 安祿山 (d. 757), a border general (of Iranian and Turkish descent) who led the rebellion (755–63) that began the demise of the Tang empire. Thus her name connotes infidelity, lechery and treason, even in a joking comparison about her type of beauty.

Baochai may also well remember that Baoyu sometimes compares Daiyu to Xi Shi 西施 (b. 506 BCE), the foremost of the four great Chinese beauties and the embodiment of the delicate type of female beauty (as opposed to the plump type represented by Yang Guifei). As the legend goes, Xi Shi sacrificed both her beauty and her body in order to revenge her country, the State of Yue, by seducing its conqueror, the King of Wu. Her successful scheme of beauty enabled Yue eventually to topple Wu, so that her name often evokes not only beauty but patriotic heroism as well. Quite conceivably, Baochai would resent Baoyu comparing Daiyu to Xi Shi as illustrating his bias towards, and heartless treatment of, herself, and such thoughts further inflame her anger over being likened to Yang Guifei and urge an incisive response.

Her bitterly sarcastic repartee virtually calls Baoyu good for nothing. By prime minister, she refers to Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (d. 756), Yang

Guifei's infamous cousin who became a high-ranking court official and eventually prime minister, thanks to the emperor's surpassing love for his cousin. His venality and corrupt administration provided a major excuse for An Lushan's rebellion, contributing to the decline of the Tang. On the surface, Baochai negates Baoyu's comparison of her to Yang Guifei by claiming that she has no Yang Guozhong-like brother or cousin, but underneath she insinuates her lack of a brother or a cousin as *capable*, albeit wickedly, as Yang Guozhong, because both Xue Pan and Baoyu are useless — the former due to his wildness, the latter because of his repugnance for serious study and an official career. Consequently, Baoyu will not make the level of even a petty official, let alone prime minister, although his own elder sister is a beloved imperial concubine.

At this juncture, a maid provides Baochai's jealous anger with a further outlet, so she fires another salvo at Baoyu and Daiyu:

> It happened that just at that moment a very young maid called Prettikins jokingly accused Baochai of having hidden a fan she was looking for.
>
> "I *know* Miss Bao's hidden it," she said. "Come on, Miss! Please let me have it."
>
> "You be careful," said Baochai, pointing at the girl angrily and speaking with unwonted stridency. "When did you last see *me* playing games of this sort with anyone? If there are other young ladies who are in the habit of *romping about* with you, you had better ask *them*."
>
> Prettikins fled. (*SS* 30: 98; *HLMBS* 30: 731)

Baochai's stinging accusation of impropriety on the part of Daiyu (and thus between her and Baoyu) is oblique but palpable. And the narrator carefully suggests that the innuendo results from Baochai detecting Daiyu's gloat over Baoyu's offensive comparison:

> Baoyu's rudeness to Baochai had given Daiyu secret satisfaction. When Prettikins came in looking for her fan, she had been on the point of adding some facetiousness of her own at Baochai's expense; but Baochai's brief explosion caused her to drop the prepared witticism and ask instead what play the two acts were from that Baochai said she had just been watching.
>
> Baochai had observed the smirk on Daiyu's face and knew very well that Baoyu's rudeness must have pleased her. [Now on hearing Daiyu's question, she replied, smilingly:]

> "The play I saw was *Li Kui abuses Song Jiang and afterwards has to say he is sorry*."
>
> Baoyu laughed.
>
> "What a mouthful! Surely, with all your learning, cousin, you must know the proper name of that play? It's called *The abject apology*."
>
> "*The abject apology*?" said Baochai. "Well, no doubt you clever people know all there is to know about abject apology. I'm afraid it's something I wouldn't know about."
>
> Her words touched Baoyu and Daiyu on a sensitive spot, and by the time she had finished, they were both blushing hotly with embarrassment. (*SS* 30: 98–9; *HLMBS* 30: 317; my translation in brackets)

The effect of Baochai's verbal bombardment is noticed by Xifeng who, having guessed what is going on among the trio, jocosely compares their hot and bothered expressions to those resulting from eating raw ginger. At any rate, the whole episode highlights Baochai's imperfection in managing not only jealousy but anger (*qi* 氣), one of the four vices that popular morality admonishes a decent person to shun.[47]

Although she briefly loses her temper, Baochai quickly recovers her self-control. How she checks herself is equally character-revealing, demonstrating both her proper side and her care for Baoyu. The narrator tells us that, "Baochai was about to add something, but seeing the abject look on Baoyu's face, she laughed and held her tongue." Certainly propriety requires one to know when to stop and it is praiseworthy that Baochai can do so even amid her seething jealousy. But it seems that what truly enables her to do so are her feelings for Baoyu, which allow her to notice his misery and hold fire.

However, ceasefire neither makes her forget about their offences nor pacifies her rage, since shortly afterwards we see her enjoying a jealous dig at Baoyu by Daiyu over his praise of Xiangyun. As Wang Meng points out, the sight of her adversaries fighting one another naturally gives her satisfaction.[48] And she still recalls the insults after a considerable lapse of time, as her crab-eating poem attests; even after Baochai and Daiyu reach a mutual understanding,[49] Baochai's jealousy continues to surface in bantering with Daiyu about her prospective marriage. Interestingly, these jokes are never about Daiyu marrying Baoyu but always about *someone else*, including Xue Pan, the worthless

playboy.[50] It seems that, subconsciously, Baochai still wishes to remove Daiyu from Baoyu by imagining her sent elsewhere.

While Baochai preserves her sense of humour throughout the novel, its expression diminishes as the disintegration of the Jias gathers pace in the last 50 chapters. Also, the more she internalizes the norms of propriety, the fewer inner improprieties she reveals via humour. In fact, her later humour becomes increasingly Confucian in terms of its didactic and practical usage, a feature suggested by her reference to the Spring–Autumn method in analysing Daiyu's lampoon of Granny Liu. As I argue elsewhere,[51] the Confucian view of proper humour is that it should be instructive and useful in resolving issues in life, and this is indeed the direction the novel shows her taking. However, increased appropriateness of her humour does not mean that she becomes perfect; rather, it signifies that her flaws are less often manifested in humour.

Conclusion by Extrapolation

Baochai's early humour betrays the full gamut of her inner and repressed tendencies such as over-harshness, rebelliousness, masculine ambition, envy, jealousy, anger, malice, vengeance and gloating. Although all of these are natural human emotions, from the Confucian perspective they are improper — even harmful — and therefore to be inhibited. Their existence in Baochai thus belies her perceived image as flawless and effectively (re)humanizes her as a conscientious but flawed young woman who still has some inner "demons" to subdue. Given the novel's overall view of humanity, it is unlikely that the author/s intended Baochai to be either a downright villain or a perfect paragon; there is no discernable authorial attempt either to demonize or apotheosize her. Rather, considerable efforts are made to prevent her nurture from overwhelming her nature. It is as if, having conceived of her as a mixed-ether person who has made long strides in becoming a "female Confucius", the novelist then tried to keep her from becoming perfect because perfection would violate her predetermined make-up as a human being (of which one integral ingredient is imperfection). As we have seen, any dehumanizing effect from her scrupulous

observance of the Rites is mitigated by her humour, which allows repeated outbreaks from her not yet properly cultivated self.

Such characterization seems to embody a kind of humanism subscribing to both classical Confucian and late-Ming and early-Qing liberal human-views. Fundamental assumptions shared by these two outlooks include that humans are flawed; that human nature (typified by its most primeval parts, desire and emotion) is ineradicable but cultivable; and that human nurture, best represented by human culture, is a necessary part of humanity, which is itself a synthesis of nature and culture. The fullest humanity lies then in a perfect balance between those two; any deficiency or excess will result in less humanity. Seldom achieved, such a perfect balance remains an ideal, while imbalance is a common reality and a source of much human imperfection. Baochai's over-cultivation, as I have shown, would make her too cold to be natural for a young girl and thereby less like a normal or real human being.

Neo-Confucianism, as noted earlier, radicalized classical Confucianism by advocating elimination of human desire in order to recover the *tianli* 天理 (heavenly principle), which meant making human nature conform to the Rites as the earthly embodiment of *tianli*, the finest and highest form of human culture and the full measure of humanity. The ascetic nature of such cultural humanism incurred a backlash from liberal-minded literati in late Ming and early Qing (roughly sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries). The liberal conception of humanity (as an over-correction) tugged them towards the other extreme or natural humanism, emphasizing *zhen* 真 (the true), *ziran* 自然 (the natural) and *qing* 情 (the emotive) to counter the perceived falsehood, artificiality and inhumanity of cultural humanism. The liberal argument boils down to a tautology: what is true is natural, and vice versa. Then, what could be more natural than things spontaneously flowing from human nature such as sexual desire and romantic passion? And what could be more real than human imperfection that is predetermined by the mixed bag of human nature? In other words, a true human being is by nature flawed and amatory. The ethical and aesthetic implication of the natural–true tautology is that the natural and true is also good and beautiful. In part, this explains the flourishing of romanticism, eroticism and realism in late Ming and early Qing literature: passions

and flaws make characters more appealing as they look more human and life-like.

Our novelist is evidently a liberal humanist and realist to the extent that he refuses to allow cultural policing totally to triumph over human nature by rendering it completely submissive to external artificial control. He is also too fine an artist to portray Baochai as a robotic embodiment of propriety or a simplistic character. However, his aesthetics are not as extreme as outright liberal naturalism or Neo-Confucian culturalism. They lie closer to the classical Confucian human-view, but are infused with a measure of modernity as are his conception of mixed-ether humanity, his aesthetics of imperfection and his realism in characterization. All these in fact anticipate the modern theory of round fictional characters: those who cannot be defined by a single idea or quality, who are three-dimensional, mutable and often surprise readers with hidden facets or fresh extensions of their personalities. As such, they are more like real, living and changing human beings. By contrast, flat characters are defined by a single idea or quality and are thus two-dimensional and immutable, usually a type or a caricature.[52] Seen from this point of view, the continuing popularity of the novel and its lively characters such as Baochai is not surprising.

Moreover, the author's use of humour calls to mind the Freudian theory of jokes (even though this may not be the most highly regarded of theories on humour nowadays). For Freud, jokes often provide insights into the human unconscious, as do dreams or slips of the tongue, because they represent moments when the superego may be duped into slackening its normal censorship by the trickery of "dream-work" and "joke-work", so that natural and potentially antisocial impulses such as sexuality, hostility, blasphemy and enjoyment of absurdity can express themselves. In the case of jokes, this is done safely with the ready excuse that "it's only a joke".[53] As we have seen, Baochai repeatedly displays such instinctive behaviour to vent herself or to hurt others emotionally. The finesse with which our novelist employs humour in this Freudian fashion reflects not only his unflinching fictional realism and humanism but also a deep intuitive insight into the human psyche. Such perspicacity also partly explains what is so great about this eighteenth-century novel: it has the eternal appeal of any classic and its humour rings as true to us today as it has always done.