



EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SINOLOGY 5 (2014)

— M. WOESLER, ED. —

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OF THE RED CHAMBER · UNDERSTANDING HONGLOU
MENG AS A DREAM ABOUT THE RED PAVILLION,
AND NOT AS A DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER ·
MOULÜE IN THE HONGLOU MENG AND IN THE SONG
OF THE NIBELUNGS · COLOR SYMBOLISM OF
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The Role of the *Heart Sutra* in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Karl-Heinz Pohl

Abstract

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* can be read in a philosophical, that is, in a Daoist/ Buddhist way: understanding the vanity of life by going through its fullness (of desires, passions and lust).

Important for a Buddhist reading of the novel is some knowledge of the "Heart Sutra" (心经), one of the most popular and influential Buddhist scriptures in general. What are and where do we find the signals to the Buddhist meaning of the novel?

Central terms and ideas of the "Heart Sutra" frame the book (in its first and last chapter), in particular the idea of Non-Duality (不二), which arises from the central passage of the "Heart Sutra":

"Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form is nothing but emptiness; emptiness is nothing but form."

The message of non-duality is crucial to the understanding of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. There is no difference between "emptiness" 空 and "form/lust" 色, no difference between "true" (reality 真) and "false" (fiction 假), no difference between Buddhist awakening and passion/love, no difference between Samsara and Nirvana.

Hence, one has to go through the world of passion and love ("red dust") in order to awake to emptiness – which can also be the result of reading the book!

Keywords

Mahayana Buddhism, Vimalkirti Sutra, Non-Duality, Emptiness, Thusness

The Dream of the Red Chamber (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦) by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (c. 1715-1763), also known in English as *The Story of the Stone*, is celebrated as the

greatest of all classical Chinese novels, and this rightly so. None other matches it in its richness of content, its psychological characterization, its detailed description of social life of the 18th century and its sensitivity to standards of traditional Chinese aesthetics, such as the enjoyment of gardens, poetry, painting and calligraphy. For this reason, the studies about the novel have become so numerous that they can hardly be surveyed anymore by single researchers.

Traditionally though, there are several established ways of reading the novel: as a novel of manners (comparable to the *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 – *The Plum in the Golden Vase*¹); as a chronicle of the decline of a wealthy family (like Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*) including a political-historical frame of reference (and respective hidden criticism); as a sad love story; as a novel of formation/education or coming-of-age (what is called in German: *Entwicklungsroman* / *Bildungsroman*); or – in a Daoist / Buddhist sense – as a novel which probes into the philosophical meaning of life. Finally, the book also elicits the philoso-

phical question: What is true and what is false? Or, as a semi-biographical novel: what is reality (*zhen* 真) and what is fiction (*jia* 假)? – in the language of Goethe, the relationship between "*Dichtung und Wahrheit*" (Fiction and Truth).

The Daoist/Buddhist reading is certainly one of the more fascinating ways of approaching the novel. Here, the central idea is to understand the vanity of life by going through its fullness of desires, passions and lust.

If it is to be read in this way, one needs to understand the respective signals in the novel which is a demanding task, particularly for a Western audience not too familiar with the respective background. For non-native readers, the book is difficult enough for its many (untranslatable) puns based on the homophony of characters, particularly in the names of protagonists which are based on the double meanings of *zhen* ("true" but as another character also a common surname) and *jia* ("false", but also as another character a common surname, in fact the

¹ A famous (although somewhat pornographic) novel of uncertain authorship from around 1600.

surname of the main character Jia Bao-yu).²

Hence in translating the novel for a Western audience, there are some crucial questions: What are the limitations of translations into Western language? Can such translations be understood at all without too many footnotes? What are, and where do we find, the signals of Buddhist meaning?

This brief study cannot and will not attempt to compete with the vast amount of Chinese scholarship which has explored the Buddhist and Daoist meaning of the novel. It simply offers a Western audience certain clues which cannot be found in the standard translations.

In order to understand the Buddhist dimension of the novel, it is necessary to first highlight a few important notions of Mahayana Buddhist thought. The central idea of Buddhism (and one of its main distinctions from Indian Vedanta from which Buddhism originated) is the notion

of "No-Self" (*an-atman* – *wuwo* 无我), or, in other words, our "self" is an illusion which needs to be recognized as illusion in order to reach salvation or *Nirvana* (release from *Samsara*: the cycle of birth and rebirth). Instead of a permanent "self" or soul, Buddhism speaks of Five Aggregates (*Skandhas*, *wu yun* 五蕴) which can be understood as five functions that constitute sentient beings and thus lead to a feeling of "self". These Five Skandhas are: form (*se* 色), feelings/sensations (*shou* 受), volitions (*xiang* 想), perceptions (*xing* 行) and consciousness (*shi* 识). At death, these Five Aggregates dissipate and don't survive the dead body. Although there is no permanent entity or soul being reborn, Buddhists see that new life is still taking place in a kind of continuum. In other words, the old life (in terms of good or bad deeds, i.e. *kar-ma*) influences the new life. This is illustrated in the often found simile: "Like a billiard ball hitting another billiard ball. While nothing physical transfers, the speed and direction of the second ball relate directly to the first."³

² Such as Zhen Shiyin 甄士隐 / 真事隐, Jia Yucun 贾雨村 / 假语存/村言 (Jia Hua 贾化 / 假话), Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉 / 假宝玉, Zhen Baoyu 甄宝玉 / 真宝玉 etc.

³ http://buddha101.com/p_nirvana_frames.htm

One of the main ideas of Mahayana thought is that one needs to realize the "emptiness" of the "self" and thus also of these Five Aggregates. Therefore, the "Heart Sutra" (*Bore boluomiduo xinjing* 般若波罗蜜多心经) begins with the insight of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (Guanyin 观音) that these "Five *skandhas* are all empty" (五蕴皆空). But not only these Five Skandhas, and hence the human self, are "empty," all phenomena (*dharma*s, *fa* 法) are empty, i.e. they are not existent by virtue of a permanent substance, but originate in dependence on conditions (called: "dependent co-arising", *yuanyi* 缘起). Hence emptiness means: empty of independent existence.

Seen from this perspective, emptiness (*shunyata* – *kong* 空) seems to be the ultimate essence of reality and the message of the Buddha. But according to higher Buddhist wisdom, emptiness, too, must be left behind as a concept. If human beings cling to emptiness, there is still attachment – and thus illusion and suffering. This is what the Buddha teaches in the Diamond Sutra:

“The teaching of the Buddha of emptiness is like a raft that can bring one to the

other shore, but once the shore has been reached, it has to be left behind.”⁴

The teaching of emptiness is thus only a "skillful means" (*upaya*, *fangbian* 方便) of the Buddha in order to lead his disciples to the other shore. The further – and higher – idea is Non-Duality (*bu'er* 不二). And this is the main message of the Heart Sutra, the title of which stands for the "heart", i.e. the core, of the so-called "Perfection of Wisdom Sutras" (Prajnaparamita Sutras, *Bore jing* 般若经).

With respect to Non-Duality, the central passage of the Heart Sutra is as follows:

“Form (*se* 色) does not differ from emptiness (*kong* 空); emptiness does not differ from form. Form is nothing but emptiness; emptiness is nothing but form.”⁵

The consequence of this insight into Non-Duality is that there is no difference between "conventional" and "ultimate

⁴ 以是義故如來常說汝等比丘知我說法如筏喻者法尚應捨。 "Diamond Sutra", 金刚经, Ch. 6: <http://www.diamond-sutra.com/>.

⁵ 色不异空，空不异色。色即是空，空即是色。

truth" (*shisudi* 世俗谛, *shengyidi* 胜义谛), between "relative" world and "absolute" reality, between *Samsara* (*lunhui* 轮回) and *Nirvana* (*niepan* 涅槃) and between form/ exterior world (色) and emptiness (空).

But, according to Buddhist tradition, this higher wisdom of Non-Duality is something which is beyond expression; in fact it is unsayable. This is most vividly illustrated in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (*Weimojie jing* 维摩诘经). This sutra, highly popular in Tang China (7th -11th c.), describes a dispute between Buddhist saints and the layman Vimalakirti in which the layman proves to be better versed in the Buddhist "doctrine of emptiness" than their actual representatives. The highlight of the sutra is a talk between Vimalakirti and Manjusri (a major disciple of the Buddha) on entry into the "Dharma Gate of Non-Duality" (*bu'er famen* 不二法门). After the other Bodhisattvas have given their opinion on the subject, they turn to Manjusri as the most honorable among them (in fact he is the Bodhisattva of wisdom) and ask him for his opinion. Initially, he criticizes the contributions of the previous speakers as insufficient, then he

elaborates eloquently on the subject. After finishing, he turns to Vimalakirti and says:

"We have each made our own explanations. Sir, you should explain how the bodhisattva enters the Dharma gate of Non-Duality."

At this point Vimalakirti was silent, saying nothing. Manjusri exclaimed, "Excellent, excellent! Not to even have words or speech is the true entrance into the Dharma gate of Non-Duality."⁶

While Manjusri is still wordy trying to speak of the unsayable, Vimalakirti reacts in the only possible way: with silence. In the cultural history of China, it has become known as the "thundering silence of Vimalakirti".⁷

⁶ Ch. IX, 32-33, McRae. J. R. trans. (2004), *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, transl. from the Chinese (Taishō Volume 4, Number 475), Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, p. 148.

⁷ The episode can be found on numerous murals of Buddhist caves, and the legendary wisdom of the layman Vimalakirti – and the popularity of the Sutra with the same name – has certainly contributed to promoting a kind of Buddhism not only carried by monks (and nuns), who were supposed to leave their

Let us now turn to the Buddhist Reading of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. As is well known by Chinese "Redologists", central terms and ideas of the Heart Sutra frame the novel, i.e. they appear at the beginning and ending, in particular the terms emptiness (*kong* 空) and form (*se* 色). Although the notion of Non-Duality (*bu'er* 不二) is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly there as will be seen.

Also important is an understanding of the double meaning of *se* (色): In fact, and first of all, there is a Buddhist double meaning to this character: It not only stands for "form" (as the first of the five *skandhas*) but also for "exterior world" and "appearance" in general. But then one also has to take the conventional meaning into consideration; that even in Confucian scriptures, the character stands for "sex", "lust", and attractions of "female beauty." In this context, it is considered to be one of the so-called "four vices": drinking (*jin* 酒), sex (*se* 色), riches (*cai* 财) and anger (*qi* 气).

In chapter 1, the mythological story frame of the novel is laid out. Aeons ago, a magical and sentient stone was abandoned by the goddess Nüwa when she mended the heavens. The stone is found by a Daoist priest and a Buddhist monk and, upon its request, is taken into the world where it takes on human existence.

Aeons later, a Daoist called Kongkong Daoren 空空道人 (the Man of the *Dao* who Understands the Emptiness of Emptiness), while searching for the *Dao*, comes to the same place:

“His eye fell on the inscription on a large stone which was still discernible and he read it through. It was the account of the Stone’s rejection for repairing heaven, its transformation and conveyance to the world of men by the Buddhist of Infinite Space (茫茫大士) and the Daoist of Boundless Time (渺渺真人), and the joys and sorrows, partings and encounters, warm and cold treatment from others it had experienced.”⁸

families, but one which was compatible with Chinese (Confucian) family values.

⁸ *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang, transl. (4 vols.), Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1994, 1/3-4.

Hence it is the very same stone but in another appearance, for it had returned from its mortal course and gained Nirvana. Konkong Daoren talks to the stone and learns more about the fascinating history of its life as a mortal man. In the end, he copies the inscription from beginning to end and takes it away to find a publisher.

Following this, there is the crucial passage for the Buddhist reading of the novel:

“From this, Konkong Daoren
coming from emptiness (空) saw
| form/lust (色),
and that from form/lust (色) passion (情)
| was born,
the transmitted passion (情) entered into
| form/lust (色),
and from form/lust (色) occurred the
| awakening to emptiness (空).”

Hence he changed his name to Monk Passion (Qing Seng 情僧) and the name of the *Story of the Stone* to *Record of Monk Passion*.⁹

⁹ 从此空空道人因空见色，由色生情，传情入色，自色悟空。遂易名为情僧，改《石头记》为《情僧录》。

The passage ends by mentioning that, later on, Cao Xueqin came into possession of the manuscript, worked on it for ten years in his "Mourning-the-Red-Studio" (*Daobong xuan* 悼红轩) and rewrote it five times.

This crucial part of the passage above describes the experience of reading the story of the stone. It is a dense structure of four sentences with four characters each, wherein we find the three repeating characters for "emptiness", "form" and "passion" (空, 色, 情). The passage is notoriously cryptic and thus open for interpretation. But in structure, it is very similar to the four line passage from the Heart Sutra quoted above, as well as in its appearance and the interrelationship of the central characters for "form" and "emptiness." Interestingly, the passage begins with and ends with the notion of "emptiness." Apart from the two characters for "emptiness" and "form" there is a third one: "passion." It is the new, but central element. "Passion" is born from "form/lust" and, having been transmitted, it enters again into "form." On the basis of this there is, in the end, the awakening to emptiness (*wu kong* 悟空). Consequently, the Man of the *Dao*

who Understands the Emptiness of Emptiness (thus combining in his name Daoist and Buddhist notions) changes his name into "Monk Passion" (情僧) thus capturing the idea of Non-Duality in the words of the Heart Sutra: not only form but passion also is not different from emptiness; and emptiness does not differ from passion.

Lines 3 and 4 particularly ask for further interpretation. As the passage describes Kongkong Daoren's reading and editing experience of the story of the stone, it can be understood that he transmitted passion by having it enter into the "form" of a novel. From "form", i.e. reading the novel, one can awake to emptiness. Hence, the experience of reading – and understanding – the whole story about the love affairs and passions of Jia Baoyu brings enlightenment (awakening to emptiness).

Let us now turn to some major Western language translations and see if this Buddhist background is made clear or understood properly. A standard translation is that of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. There we read:

“Since all manifestations are born of nothingness and in turn give rise to passion, by describing passion for what is manifest we comprehend nothingness. So the Taoist changed his name to the Passionate Monk and changed the title of the book from *The Tale of the Stone* to *The Record of the Passionate Monk*.”¹⁰

Here the passage is completely taken out of the context of Kongkong Daoren's reading and editing the story of the stone. It reads like a philosophical musing about the relationship between passion to nothingness. The specific Buddhist background is not elucidated; and nothingness is not an appropriate translation for the Chinese term *kong* (空) which is "emptiness" in its specific Buddhist philosophical meaning.

The newer and today standard translation of David Hawkes and John Minford makes clear that the passage concerns the reading and editing of Kongkong Daoren:

“As a consequence of all this, Vanitas, starting off in the Void (which is Truth) came to the contemplation of Form

¹⁰ Yang, transl., 1/7.

(which is Illusion); and from Form engendered Passion; and by communicating Passion, entered again into Form; and from Form awoke to the Void (which is Truth).

He therefore changed his name from Vanitas to Brother Amor, or the Passionate Monk (because he had approached Truth by way of Passion), and changed the title of the book from *The Story of the Stone* to *The Tale of Brother Amor*.”¹¹

The terms *kong* and *se* are explained in brackets as Truth and Illusion which, however, is not their real Buddhist meaning. Apart from that, "void" is not the same as "emptiness" as a philosophical concept. The specific Buddhist background is not explained (such as in a footnote). Lastly, the Latinization of the names (Vanitas and Brother Amor) does not seem to be appropriate for characters that evolve from a Chinese Buddhist background.

The French translation has it like this:

« À dater de ce jour, le moine Vanité des Vanités, à travers la vanité discerna les apparences, des apparences déduisit l'amour, puis réintroduisit l'amour dans les apparences, et, par le discernement des apparences, prit pleinement conscience de la vanité.

Aussi adopta-t-il, au lieu de son ancien nom, celui de Moine d'Amour, et il substitua à l'ancien titre celui de *Relation du Moine d'Amour*. »¹²

The translation also clarifies the reading and editing process, but the specific Buddhist background is not elucidated. Also, *vanité* (vanity) is not the same as *vacuité* (emptiness) which is, in French, the proper philosophical translation for *kong*.

The German translation by Ernst Schwarz renders the passage in an impersonal way, similar to the Yang translation:

„Weil man aus der Leere den Anblick erschaut und durch den Anblick das Gefühl entsteht, weil man durch die Wiedergabe des Gefühls in den Anblick ein-

¹¹ *The Story of the Stone*, David Hawkes & John Minford, transl. (5 vols.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 1/51.

¹² *Le rêve dans le pavillon rouge*, Li Tche-Houa & Jacqueline Alézais, transl. (2 vols.) Paris: Gallimard, 1981, 1/13.

dringt und aus dem Anblick die Leere versteht, änderte der Dauist Kung-kung seinen Namen jetzt in T'jing-seng – 'Gefühlvoller Mönch' – und benannte die 'Geschichte vom Stein' in 'Aufzeichnungen des Gefühlvollen Mönches' um.¹³

Neither the Buddhist background, nor the Buddhist terminology is grasped appropriately or is explained. The term "Anblick" (sight, looks, aspect) for *se* 色 (form, outside appearance of things) is not successful, particularly not in the final sentence which would translate roughly into English: "... because from the looks/sight one understands emptiness."

Hence, from none of the existing translations does one get the signals or clues of a specific Buddhist understanding of the story.

In order to further understand how the concept of Non-Duality is at work in the novel, we have to look a few pages further at another passage in the first chapter. There we encounter Zhen Shyin 甄士隐 who dreams how the Buddhist of Infinite Space and the Daoist of Bound-

¹³ *Der Traum der Roten Kammer*, Rainer Schwarz & Martin Woesler, transl. (3 vols.), Bochum: Europäischer Universitätsverlag, 2006, 1/9.

less Time are bringing the magic stone into the world of human life. He wakes up from his dream just as the two reach a gateway with the large inscription above: "Illusory Land of Great Void" (Taixu huanjing 太虛幻境). Before waking up and getting into a conversation with Jia Yucun 賈雨村, he can still read the parallel couplet on the two pillars which says:

“When false (*jia* 假) is taken for true (*zhen* 真), true becomes false.

If non-being turns into being, being becomes non-being.”¹⁴

This couplet is one of the most often quoted passages in explicating the novel as it blurs the relationship between fiction and truth, between "*Dichtung und Wahrheit*" (Goethe), and is thus read with respect to the camouflaging strategy of the author.¹⁵

¹⁴ Yang, transl., 1/11. 假作真时真亦假, 无为有处有还无。

¹⁵ As is well-known, most studies in the field of Redology concern the question of how the author's biographic background features in the novel.

The passage can be read, however, also from the perspective of Non-Duality. It then concerns the questions: What is true and what is false? What is reality and what is fiction? What is being and what is non-being? What is enlightenment and what is passion (or attachment)? If we read the passage from the Buddhist point of view, then these questions can no longer be answered unambiguously. In other words, true *is* false, reality *is* fiction, passion *is* enlightenment.

This reading we also get when we finally turn to the book's last chapter (120), where the question of the nature of the Illusory Land of the Great Void is answered. Zhen Shiyin and Jia Yucun, the two characters that are at the beginning of the novel, come together again at the end and the former enlightens the latter about Jia Baoyu's fate, that the mysterious Buddhist monk Infinite Space and the Daoist of Boundless Time have taken Baoyu, the precious stone, back to his (or its) original place. Thereupon Jia Yucun asks the question:

"But why, with such a spiritual origin, was Baoyu so enamoured of girls before

he became so enlightened? Would you explain that?"

Zhen Shiyin's answer is:

"The Illusory Land of Great Void is the Blessed Land of Truth."¹⁶

Here, at the end, we find the most explicit clue to Non-Duality and thus to the Buddhist reading of the novel: the Illusory Land of Great Void (太虛幻境), which stands for our human world of passion and desires, and the (Buddhist) Paradise of *Thusness* (*zhenru fudi* 真如福地 – such is the literal translation of the Blessed Land of Truth¹⁷) are one and the same. It is telling that the Chinese original uses the same wording as we find in the second half of the crucial passage of the

¹⁶ Hawkes, transl., 5/371; Yang, transl., 4/2544.

¹⁷ In Mahayana Buddhism, the term *Thusness* (or *Suchness*), Sanskr.: *tathata*, Chin.: *zhenru* 真如, points to ultimate reality. The Chinese rendering means literally "just like". The meaning of the word is that the true nature of reality is ineffable, beyond description and conceptualization – it is just the way it is. Hence it is often used interchangeably with "emptiness". Consequently, the Buddha is referred to, for example in the Diamond Sutra, as *Tathagata* which means "The one who has thus come (or gone)".

Heart Sutra, cited above: "The Illusory Land of Illusion *is nothing but* (*jishi* 即是) the (Buddhist) Paradise of 'Thusness'"¹⁸.

Hence, the Heart Sutra's message of Non-Duality frames the novel: at the beginning and ending. It is thus crucial for the understanding of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The conclusion is that there is no difference between Buddhist awakening and passion/love (情). Therefore the "Man of the *Dao* who Understands the Emptiness of Emptiness" (空空道人) turns into "Monk Passion" (情僧). There is also no difference between "true" (reality, *zhen* 真) and "false" (fiction, *jiu* 假); no difference between "emptiness" (空) and "form/lust" (色) and, lastly, no difference between *Samsara* and *Nirvana*.

But one has to go through the world of passion and love (called in Buddhism the "red dust of the world": *hongchen* 红尘) in order to awake to this insight – and this awakening can also be the result of reading the novel.

¹⁸ Taixu huanjing, *ji shi Zhenru fudi* 太虛幻境, 即是真如福地。

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