

Cao Xueqin' Acceptance of Taoism's Nature Philosophy: On the Most Beautiful and the Most Tragic Aesthetic Features of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

WANG Shuangmei^{[a],*}

^[a]College of Literature, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 24 February 2016; accepted 11 April 2016

Published online 26 May 2016

Abstract

A Dream of Red Mansions is a masterpiece of Chinese ancient novels. It is not baseless. The main reason for this novel was that the author Cao Xueqin absorbed, melted and utilized ancient Chinese Taoism in order to express his own ideal world. *A Dream of Red Mansions* presented the Taoist perfect "natural world" in the conception of Grand View Garden, so was reflected a binary whole of "the most beautiful" and "the most sad" in the aesthetic style.

Key words: *A Dream of Red Mansions*; Cao Xueqin; Taoist; Nature

Wang, S. M. (2016). Cao Xueqin' Acceptance of Taoism's Nature Philosophy: On the Most Beautiful and the Most Tragic Aesthetic Features of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(5), 101-104. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8448>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8448>

INTRODUCTION

A Dream of Red Mansions is a famous subject. Much has been achieved about the relationship between "A Dream of Red Mansions" and Taoism for the academic discussion. However, it is still very rare from the perspective of the acceptance of the "natural world" in Taoism. The article discusses at this angle. Taoism natural world, that is, the value system that Taoism measures the real society and construct an ideal society. Cao Xueqin absorbed, melted and utilized ancient Chinese Taoism in

order to express his own ideal world. *A Dream of Red Mansions* presented Taoist perfect "natural world" in the conception of Grand View Garden, so was reflected a binary whole of "the most beautiful" and "the most sad" in the aesthetic style.

1. THE NATURAL WORLD OF TAOISM

The fundamental and core of Taoist philosophy is "Tao". "Tao" is the origin of all things, "Dao Sheng, a life of two, two, three, three things". (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 42) "Tao" is not an entity, it is the universe of the true, authentic, "Tao" is "all existing naturalness" (Xu, 1992). Naturally, "Tao" is nature. Because of the Lao Tzu proposed "laws, law day, days France Road, imitation of nature" (*Lao Tzu*, Chapter 25). "Tao" and life together, it can be said that the issue of life is always a core concern of Taoism, how to understand life, realize life, outlook life is the central topic of Taoist philosopher inquire.

Zhuangzi further develops the of natural philosophy, the natural way for the nature of human, pays more attention to person's individuality and authenticity, advocates "no people destroy days" (Qiu shui: Chuang-tzu), conforms to the human nature. In this way, it is possible to achieve spiritual freedom. To keep the truth is to keep the state of human nature, is to show the vitality of life. While maintaining the natural and true man, true with individuality, the actual is to obtain spiritual freedom, the mankind to achieve true liberation. So Chuang-tzu imagines the absolute freedom of spiritual reality, to people such as the ideal pure image. They have the nature, the beauty of nature, the true and natural vitality, like a newborn baby, pure and natural. The birth of Taoist philosophy of nature is from the criticism of the reality of society. It is through to the reality of human nature and the reality of the extreme negative society, making the Taoist natural philosophy has a profound realistic criticism and transcendence. Because it is based on strong criticism of

reality, it is a standard of value of measuring reality and criticizing reality. And Zhuangzi constructs their own value system and the ideal society and people (Wang, 2005).

When the ancient Chinese literati dissatisfaction with reality or frustrated in reality, often not only in action on the return to nature and literature and art to express their return to nature as well as the wonderful, or directly in the literary works in the outline of the hearts of the ideal society, looking for a true spiritual home. Li Chunqing in "the scholars and nature—the cultural heritage of the Chinese ancient Chinese landscape literature values", said:

Nature and society are the two most important fields that are placed in front of the ancient scholars. When they have no intention to construct the social value, their main body will turn to nature. Nature is the "other shore world" for Chinese ancient scholars. (Li, 1995)

Lao Tzu's "Tao", Zhuangzi's "Zhide world", although the ideal world is still in the imagination of the glorified human original state. However, these ideas enlighten later people unremitting pursuit, establishing his own Utopia. They basically gave up the primitive society of the imagination seeking for the ideal world in nature. The peach garden in Tao Yuanming, Wang Wei, Han Yu, Wang Anshi, Su Shi, Li Bai's *Mountain Quiz*, Ouyang Xiu's "Zuiweng Ting Ji", Pu Songling's *Demon Fox Magic World*, until Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions* and so on, without exception, in the review of the traditional Taoist ideal of "natural world".

2. A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS "THE NATURAL WORLD" AND "THE MOST BEAUTIFUL" AND "THE MOST SAD" IN THE AESTHETIC STYLE

Cao Xueqin constructed his ideal of "natural world"—Grand View Garden based on the Taoist natural spirit of the value system of perfect self-sufficiency with the distinctive expression in the former eighty chapters. When we feel a world of beauty in appreciating and reading *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we were deeply moved by the beauty of youth, pure simplicity and poetic life, and were lost in a reverie. However, when we are surrounded by the kind of pure beauty, we cannot make full resolution of the sorrow from first to last. The daughters' destiny "A cry, Wan Yan with sorrow", they died in misery, or married far away, or widowed, or reduced red-light district, Baoyu proceeded without hesitation and followed Buddhism, people in Grand View Garden went away, "And the land is so clean". This tragedy has multiplicity, the first is the tragedy of youth life, the second is love tragedy, the third is the tragedy of the family Jia's decline, and even the fourth is the

tragedy of the deterioration of the feudal society, and so on. There are many reasons leading to multiple tragedy, such as society, the character of the ideal persons, family unworthy and so on. But the biggest tragedy in the novel is the disillusionment of the ideal society constructed by Cao Xueqin based on the Taoist natural spirit, and the disillusionment basically lies in the vulnerability of Taoist natural spiritual value system. In the form of literature, Cao Xueqin broke Taoist natural spirit which Taoist philosophers and scholars of later generations understood perfectly transcended the vulnerability in "the most sad" in the aesthetic style.

Firstly, as previously mentioned, the value of the ideal of the natural spirit of Taoism is established on the basis of social reality in complete denial and criticism, so it must ignore and cover all sorts of objective facts of human existence, and it features the pure ideal beyond the reality, for mankind will never be able to match. Obviously, the peach blossom world is established in a closed self-sufficient in the natural world, showing everything beautiful and harmonious, with green mountains, limpid water, green grass and safflower. However, the true nature often linked to the objective facts, such as natural and man-made calamities. At the same time, this ideal also covered the "natural world" in the existence of a variety of objective facts. In man, not only have harmony, pureness, goodness and nature, also have contradictions, conflicts, perversion and abnormality due to the tragedy of a person's character and all kinds of desire.

A retrospective natural world such as "small territory and population", "the world of Perfect Ethics" and "peach blossom source", there were the beauty of nature and comfortable life, but Cao Xueqin did not always show like this. The construction of Grand View Garden was not pure, closed and self-sufficient, but it was connected outside the park—Jia House, outside Jia House and a wider real society. These places were not separated from each other, but intertwined together. On the one hand, outside the park's world guaranteed all expenses for the life in the park, rather than natural self-provide within the natural world; on the other hand, Grand View Garden often displayed an impact and penetration from outside the park of the realistic power, which made it seem tense. Especially the event "Search Grand View Garden", a direct result was Qingwen's death, Siqi was driven, Fanguan became a nun, etc.. The natural world was not birds' twitter and fragrance of flowers, or whispering waters, but the change of seasons brought a sense of depression and loneliness. Cao Xueqin did not conceal their various instinctive desire. When the desire couldn't be satisfied, people would be naturally anxious and bleak. Lin Daiyu was often unpleasant in order to realize the love; when Baoyu were enjoying "clean" of the daughters, he felt upset, incomprehensible, even felt

nihilism constantly because of conflicting; Xiren took great pains to persuade Baoyu, and so on. Therefore, on the construction of the value ideal of the natural world, Cao Xueqin broke the Peach Garden harmonious and peaceful, pure and closed in the previous works.

Secondly, understanding the natural personality, Taoism's natural spirit approves of human nature perfectly. As mentioned above, they believe that human nature is perfect arbitrarily. The natural man is an ideal state, in which the highest representative is newborn baby, or uncontaminated children. "A man of great virtue is as innocent as a child... Essence-qi vitality is at its height; ... the harmony is at its perfection." (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 55) They also believe that people only keep the baby's heart, they will naturally obtain the highest value of their lives and the ultimate significance. In order to keep the utter innocence unpolluted, we must reject the reality of human nature. When the heart is shocked by the real power, it will reject reality and deny reality with self-identification and self-mourning affectionately. Compared with the reality, the utter innocence is very vulnerable obviously and can be defeated easily.

For those who were in Grand View Garden, Cao Xueqin avoided their real age deliberately, such as Baoyu's age was uncertain, the age of those girls' was also be reduced knowingly. In this way, he wanted to do nothing except to strengthen the character of newborn's physiological age. However, he did not let "pure" girls "innocent" blindly (Chapter 23). With the increase of their age, they went towards the reality of the society through contacting the world outside Grand View Garden. Daiyu was a typical example of the newborn baby who took a closed and still state of life with self-appreciation, self-affirmation and self-mourning because of sorrow and aloofness, and was "quality of the born in purity" ultimately. What's more, the daughters in *A Dream of Red Mansions* almost were lack of the careness because of the family's deformity, such as Daiyu, Xiangyun, Miaoyu, Xichun, Tanchun, Yingchun and Baochai. It was also a breakthrough of the newborn baby in a good state with perfect and natural.

Thirdly, the natural spirit of Taoism thought the value of life would naturally create as long as adapt and keep the human nature, so people who can do be automorphic backoff and detachment. This is the principle of realizing the ideal of natural spirit of Taoism. Because there is no courage and faith to face the reality of society, the life attitude of doing nothing and detachment made the main character in a free mood which was self imagined, ethereal and impractical. People will not have any creative power, people will only self collapse under the reality of the blow due to the lack of creative power.

Children of the Red Chamber expressed their own life by poetry and other artistic way and their true feelings and poetized world. On the one hand, they could not really

transcend the individual desire and emotion, emotion, and could not be detached from physical illness and personality defects, and so on. Take Daiyu as an example, she couldn't break away free from the desolation of family bond, the unrequited love and the incurable disease, which gave her life of the contradiction and pain. The vulnerability of natural life and life detachment which were impossible to achieve happened to her. They looked at life and the world with aesthetic judgment, and resisted from the reality of the force with a super utilitarian attitude. On the other hand, at the time of bad luck, they did not have any response to the measures. When Bao Yu saw that Siqi was taken out of Grand Garden, he could do nothing but hate the old woman. At Qingwen's last gasp, Bao Yu knew her banishment because of grievances and visited her in secret. Despite Daiyu was living and crying for love, she didn't take the initiative to fight for a happy marriage, she experiencing the taste of love in recollections, joy, tenderness and lamentation. Her subject personality without initiative was unable to withstand the impact of the powerful forces of reality, and there was no way to create the strength of life.

So far, we also found the intrinsic relationship between Grand View Garden and "Fantasyland", namely "Grand View Garden is the fantasyland of human projection" (Yu, 1995). If Grand View Garden was an ideal home built by Cao Xueqin in the real world, beyond the real one, "Fantasyland" is an ideal one at a higher level. This fact of reincarnation that *Daughters of Red Mansions* came from "Fantasyland" and returned to "Fantasyland" eventually showed the illusion of the ideal world in the soil of reality. The ideal world was constructed by the natural spirit of Taoism.

"Literary creation and appreciation are a kind of life activity. Because the main requirements reflect the characteristics of life on the object, the literature and art are a symbol of life in a broad sense." (Qian, 1996) *A Dream of Red Mansions* was a typical text of Cao Xueqin's philosophical thinking about the life and the living condition of human being. He examined the social reality in Taoist natural and spiritual value system, at the same time, constructed a "natural world"—Grand View Garden. Grand View Garden was both the author's ideal world view and the ideal living environment the author explores and showed the life in the novel. There was "the most beautiful" in Grand View Garden.

However, the value system of the natural spirit of Taoism itself existed insurmountable vulnerability. The kind of vulnerability was ignored or concealed by predecessors, making their ideal world natural, simply beautiful and harmonious. Because Cao Xueqin profoundly understood and highlighted the vulnerability, he made Taoism "natural world" mix with the strong elegiac sentimentalism in the beauty of the pastoral. The

transcendence of the author was reflected a binary whole of “the most beautiful” and “the most sad” in the aesthetic style.

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