From "Li Sao" to Dream of the Red Chamber: Manifestation of Male Homosexuality in Chinese Literary Tradition

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Introduction

Originating during China's Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian orthodoxy left an ideological legacy in ancient Chinese dynasties that significantly shaped a hetero-patriarchal social and familial order.[1] A prominent stereotype of this social structure is the presumption that ancient China adhered to a family-based conception of sexuality, predominantly promoting reproduction-oriented sexual practice while marginalizing non-productive sexual behaviors. Nevertheless, historical records, legal documents, and literary works suggest that male homosexuality took root in China as early as the Zhou Dynasty, reached its peak in the Han Dynasty, and left behind a homosexual tradition that continued down to the end of the imperial era. Throughout these historical periods, male homosexuality played a crucial role in shaping politics, challenging prevailing sexual norms, and enriching the realm of literary creations.

[1] Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition,* 2nd ed., vol.1, *From Earliest Times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 748-751.

By comparing the manifestation of male homosexuality in *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦with "Li Sao" 离骚，an ancient poem composed during the Zhou Dynasty, the paper investigates how the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* championed egalitarian homosexuality by differentiating spiritual lewdness from fleshy lewdness and juxtaposing two patterns of homosexual relations — comrade friendships and patron-prostitute relationship. The uniqueness of homosexual manifestation in *Dream of the Red Chamber* lies in its contrast with the class-structured homosexuality that is typical of the Zhou Dynasty. Alongside the advocacy for egalitarian homosexuality, *Dream of the Red Chamber* ushered in new conceptions of homosexuality and femininity in two respects. On the one hand, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹foregrounded the naturalness of homosexuality by emphasizing the psychological and emotional origins of sexuality, thereby challenging sexual binarism and the limitations of sexual identification. On the other hand, Cao reconfigured femininity through what the paper defines as "positive feminization." The reconceptualization of femininity introduces a notion of "female superiority" portraying women as embodiments of an idealized figure that is symbolically superior to men.

Male Homosexuality as a Court Tradition

The existence of male homosexual tradition and relative tolerance of homosexuality by the upper class is conducive to the sexual openness of the Zhou court. *Book of Songs*, China's earliest poetic anthology, depicts male intimacy in the form of mutual friendship between hunters and warriors, exemplified by the poems "Xuan" 還and "Wu Yi" 無衣.[2] These poems suggest that the Zhou court favored an open expression of appreciation among men. Bret Hinsch's *Passions of the*

[2] Wang Shouqian 王守谦 and Jin Xiuzhen 金秀珍, *Shi Jin Ping Zhu诗经评注* (Changchun Shi: Dongbei shi fan da xue chu ban she, 1989), 230-231, 320-321.

Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China documents the tradition of open homosexuality in early Chinese dynasties: "surviving accounts come from every region of early China and convey an impression of open homosexuality in court life…homosexuality seems to have been considered simply part of the broader range of sexual expression."[3] Such "broader range of sexual expression" attests to the upper class's embracement of the spectrum of sexuality rather than heteronormativity.

Male homosexuality in the Zhou court is manifested in the form of institutional favoritism, with emperors or local lords lavishing offices and titles on their male favorites. This allowed men from the lowest strata of Chinese society to climb up the social ladder by becoming the sexual favorite of their lords. In some Zhou sources, the term *chong* 寵is used to describe the relationship between lords and their male partners.[4] Since c*hong* is homonymous with the Chinese word for "pet," it denotes a hierarchy in this male-male relationship, highlighted by the favor bestowed top-down by socially and politically superior men on their sexual partners. In consequence, male homosexuality in the Zhou Dynasty is structured around social ranks, with the hierarchical relationship between lords and their male favorites reinforcing a dichotomy of dominant and submissive sexual roles.

The institutional favoritism demonstrates how political organizations shaped sexual dynamics in the Zhou Dynasty. The genesis of homosexuality benefited from the political upheaval that marked the Zhou Dynasty. With the collapse of the decentralized, quasi-feudal system of the western Zhou, local lords began to establish their own power basis, relegating Zhou rulers to mere

[3] Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 33.
[4] Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, 21.

figureheads. The imbalanced position between Zhou rulers and local elites unraveled the pre-existing social and political order, causing massive social turbulence and frequent transitions of power. Such periods of unrest, however, provided autonomy for both elites and commoners, especially those who counted on sexual wiles to achieve upward social mobility.[5] Therefore, male homosexuality in the Zhou Dynasty must be understood within the context of power struggle and political mobility, rather than an individual preference or a privatized sexual experience. Institutional favoritism, in turn, transcends the notion of minoritized homosexuality by showing the practicality of homosexuality as a productive force in maintaining social and power relations during the Zhou era.

Public and Private Sex in "Li Sao"

"Li Sao," a famous poem of the state of Chu attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原, illustrates the intersection of public politics and private sex during this period. Qu Yuan served as a virtuous minister in the Zhou court. He was doomed to wander in exile because he lost the favor of King Huai of Chu 楚懷王, who was swayed by the malicious slander instigated by Qu Yuan's political rivals. In "Li Sao," Qu Yuan lamented his rejection and abandonment by the lord. It is worth noting that the poem's tone and diction bear a striking resemblance to those expressed by lovers or couples to channel their despair at another's betrayal or estrangement. [6] For example, Qu Yuan used the narrative to recount the shift in the king's attitude towards him:

I called on the ninefold heaven to be my witness,

[5] Hinsch, 19.

[6] Cai Aifang 蔡爱芳, "Yizhi tonggou nannv / junchen — Li Sao 'meiren' yixiang gouchen" 异质同构 男女/君臣 — 《离骚》'美人' 意象钩沉 [Heterogeneity and Homogeneity: Men and Women/Junior and Ministers — The Imagery of 'Beauty' in "Li Sao"], *Mingzuo xinshang* 名作欣赏08(2012):64-65, doi:CNKI:SUN:MZXS.0.2012-08-025, 65.

And all for the sake of the Fair One, and no other.

There once was a time when he spoke with me in frankness;

But then he repented and was of another mind.

I do not care, on my own count, about this divorcement,

But it grieves me to find the Fair One so inconstant. [7]

Qu Yuan's appeal to heaven, "all for the sake of the Fair One, and no other," reveals his unwavering loyalty and commitment to King Huai of Chu. In particular, the phrase "all for the sake of" is rather personal, conveying the intensity of Qu Yuan's emotional attachment to his lord. The juxtaposition in the third and fourth lines, contrasting the lord's initial candid interaction with Qu Yuan —"spoke with me in frankness" — against the subsequent withdrawal of favor — "he repented and was of another mind" — reveals an unfavorable shift in the lord-subject relationship.[8] Perhaps the English translation is insufficient in revealing the emotional bond between Qu Yuan and his lord. In the original Chinese poem, the first four lines depict a scene where the king agrees to meet Qu Yuan during dusk, but later changing his mind and going in another direction. Qu Yuan portrayed the king's capriciousness as a form of betrayal, equivalent to a symbolic "divorcement,"[9] which intensifies the poet's sense of personal and political abandonment.

In the next few stanzas, Qu Yuan used the term "mothlike" （蛾眉 *e'mei*) to describe himself, a metaphor associated with beautiful young women in Chinese poetic tradition. The word

[7] Cyril Birch and Donald Keene, *Anthology of Chinese Literature* (Anthology of Chinese Literature, 1965), 52.
[8] Birch and Keene, *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, 52.
[9] Birch and Keene, 52.

choice signifies an act of feminization, bringing into mind a woman lamenting her partner's betrayal and loss of affection. By comparing himself to a woman wedded to her lord and portraying his rivals as envious women resentful of the lord's favoritism towards her, Qu Yuan framed his political downfall within the context of inner-palace rivalry, where royal women competed for the lord's favor. The line "they envied me my mothlike Eyebrows fine / And so my Name his Damsels did malign"[10] metaphorically reflect this courtly intrigue, with Qu Yuan comparing his political degradation to the jealous schemes among royal concubines — though in reality, the "Damsels"[11] could either be female concubines or male favorites. Qu Yuan's yearning for the lord's trust and affection closely mirrors the emotional dynamics of a lovers' quarrel.

Certainly, there are political implications behind Qu Yuan's nuanced tone and deliberate word choice. The rhetoric of "Li Sao" points to a larger political context of the Zhou officialdom, where promotion and demotion of officials were sometimes based on good looks or sexual wiles. It was not uncommon for men in the Zhou Dynasty to take advantage of sex to acquire official appointments. By becoming the sexual favorite of a lord he serves, one could obtain a prestigious government position and generous emoluments.[12] Therefore, homoeroticism in the Zhou court is less about erotic arts or the depth of emotional connections between individuals and more a pragmatic means of social and political advancement. It is untenable to argue that Qu Yuan's exile is directly due to his envious rivals' gaining a sexual advantage in the court, and it is beyond the scope of this poem to conclude that Qu Yuan had a homosexual orientation or that he was the sexual partner of King Huai of Chu. This paper only intends to prove that the rhetorical device

[10] Qu Yuan 屈原, Yang Xianyi 杨宪益, and Yang Gladys, *Selected Elegies of the State of Chu* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2001), 9.
[11] Qu and Yang, *Selected Elegies of the State of Chu,* 9.
[12] Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, 29.

employed in "Li Sao" lends testimony to the construction of class-structured homosexuality in the Zhou court and the impossibility of examining male homosexuality independently of Zhou's political situations.

Spiritual Lewdness versus Physical Lewdness

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD) of China upheld the tradition of male homosexuality. This era witnessed the trickling of institutional favoritism down to the lower socioeconomic strata underneath the imperial court, represented by wealthy local men's patronage of boy actresses. [13] Although the Qing Dynasty is perceived by some scholars as a period of growing social conservatism, any stereotypes surrounding the acceptance of male homosexuality would be fallible because Qing society continued to show a high degree of tolerance towards some form of male homosexuality.[14] In this sense, the portrayal of male homosexuality in *Dream of the Red Chamber* could be generalized to represent its practice in reality.

Dream of the Red Chamber distinguished itself in the annals of historical records and literary representation of male homosexuality. The novel's perceptiveness lies in part in Cao's attempt to depict male homosexuality as a natural human experience instead of labeling it as a sexuality category or casting it into a set of binary frameworks — dominance / submission, heterosexuality / homosexuality, and heteronormativity / homonormativity. The reason that the paper emphasizes the dichotomy between heteronormativity and homonormativity is to differentiate naturalization from normalization. Because normalization implies the re-interpretation of a practice based on

[13] Liu Zhan 刘展. "*Hongloumeng* zhongde tongxinglian shuxie yanjiu" 《红楼梦》中的同性恋书写研究 [A study of the writing of homosexuality in *hongloumeng*]. *Mingzuo xinshang* 名作欣赏26(2009):50-52, doi:CNKI:SUN:MZXS.0.2009-26-018, 50.
[14] Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, 139-140.

comparison with pre-existing social norms, it entails the examination of homosexuality within a certain framework. Cao consciously abstains from confining male homosexuality within any framework, either ideological, social, or political. Instead, he naturalizes sexuality as a part of human nature, free from external impositions.[15] The portrayal of male homosexuality in *Dream of the Red Chamber* advocates a fluid, non-binary understanding of sexuality, challenging categorical distinctions and the restrictive binaries they perpetuate.

In opposition to sexual binarism and sexual identification, Cao established an antithesis between spiritual lewdness and physical lewdness:

> For example, the typical lust man in the common sense of the world is a man who likes a pretty face, who is fond of singing and dancing, who is inordinately given to flirtation; one who makes love in season and out of season, and who, if he could, would like to have every single girl in the world at his disposal, to gratify his desires whenever he felt like it. Such a person is a mere brute. He is a shallow, promiscuous kind of lust.
>
> But your kind of lust is different. That blind, defenseless love with which nature has filled your being is what we call here “lust of the mind.” “Lust of the mind” cannot be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning. Either you know what it means or you don’t. [16]

Cao delineated a distinction between two types of desires in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, contrasting physical lewdness—a "shallow, promiscuous kind of lust"—with spiritual lewdness,

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[15] Li Dabo李大博, “Cong *hongloumeng* de ‘tongxing ailian’ kan Cao Xueqin de ‘Chaoqian zhisi’ ” 从《红楼梦》的‘同性爱恋’看曹雪芹的‘超前之思’ [Cao Xueqin's 'Thinking Ahead' from 'Same-Sex Love' in *hongloumeng*], *Cao Xueqin yanjiu* 曹雪芹研究02(2015): 113-121, doi:CNKI:SUN:CXQY.0.2015-02-015, 118.
[16] Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 1, 5 vols. (London: Penguin, 2004), 146.

or what he terms "lust of the mind."[17] Physical lewdness is characterized by excessive indulgence in sexual pleasure, where partners are reduced to mere objects of gratification,[18] underlining sexual objectification and a hierarchical relationship between lovers. Conversely, spiritual lewdness prioritizes emotional and spiritual connections,[19] advocating for a relationship built on sincerity, loyalty, and an indelible passion described as "blind and defenseless."[20]

Cao's notion of spiritual lewdness does not negate the role of physical intimacy but rather reinterprets it, suggesting that genuine love transcends mere physical attraction or satisfaction.[21] It proposes that genuine love transcends carnal desires, transforming them into a deep, soulful connection. Sexual behavior is, in essence, a manifestation of love ignited by an appreciation of physical beauty, thereby elevating the physical act to an emotional and spiritual union - " 'Every act of love, every carnal congress of the sexes is brought about precisely because sensual delight in beauty has kindled the feeling of love'." [22]

Egalitarian Homosexuality and its Antithesis

The interaction between Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉and Qin Zhong 秦鐘abounds with sexual overtones. In the Jia clan school, they clandestinely share homosexual eroticism, yet their emotional attachment is restrained and remains unspoken. [23] The nuanced depiction of their relationship becomes particularly evident when Baoyu disrupts Qin Zhong's sexual encounter

[17] Cao, *The Story of the Stone,* vol. 1, 146.
[18] Shi Ye 施晔, "*Hongloumeng* yu *guwangyan* tongxinglian shuxie bijiao yanjiu" 《红楼梦》与《姑妄言》同性恋书写比较研究 [A Comparative Study of Homosexual Writing in *hongloumeng* and *guwangyan*], *Hongloumeng xuekan* 红楼梦学刊04(2008):183-201, doi:CNKI:SUN:HLMX.0.2008-04-013,184.
[19] Shi, "*Hongloumeng* yu *guwangyan* tongxinglian shuxie bijiao yanjiu," 184.
[20] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 1, 146.
[21] Li, "Cong *hongloumeng* de 'tongxing ailian' kan Cao Xueqin de 'Chaoqian zhisi'," 118-119.
[22] Cao, 145.
[23] Cao, 206-207.

with a novitiate nun. Baoyu's playful threat to Qin Zhong regarding his heterosexual activities—"'We won't say any more about it just now,' said Bao-yu genially, 'Wait until we are both in bed and I'll settle accounts with you then' " — is loaded with homoerotic implications.[24] The phrase "settle accounts" (算账 *suanzhang*) carries a double meaning: while superficially referencing resolving a dispute, it also connotates bedchamber intimacies where lovers resolve their sexual passion on beds. Baoyu's teasing tone and the specificity of the bed as a private space further communicates his latent sexual longing for Qin Zhong.

Besides Baoyu's physical attraction to Qin Zhong, their relationship embodies spiritual lewdness. Baoyu's initial encounter with Qin Zhong is impactful. It is described as a moment where "part of his soul had left him,"[25] a phrase that captures the intense emotional and spiritual connection he feels. The original Chinese term *daiyi* 呆意 signifies a state of oblivion in which the mind blanks out. This deep connection is not solely based on physical attraction, although Qin Zhong's physical attributes— "somewhat thinner than Baoyu, was more than his equal in freshness and liveliness of feature, in delicacy of complexion, handsomeness of figure, and grace of deportment, but whose painful bashfulness created a somewhat girlish impression" — certainly captivate Baoyu.[26] Their relationship transcends physical allure and is grounded in a shared intellectual and emotional intimacy, as evidenced by their discussion of the books they read, indicating a connection that is as intellectually enriching as it is emotionally profound. [27]

[24] Cao, 299-300.
[25] Cao, 178.
[26] Cao, 177.
[27] Cao, 179.

Moreover, the fact that Baoyu's presence momentarily restored Qin Zhong's soul after his corporeal death is reflective of their deep spiritual bond. [28]

The affectionate feeling between Jia Baoyu and Qin Zhong is reciprocal, and their relationship is grounded in equality rather than social hierarchy. This stands in great contrast with the institutional favoritism structured around class. Baoyu's willingness to sacrifice his aristocratic status to be closer to Qin Zhong shows that he values this emotional connection far above his social privileges: "Why couldn't I have been born in the family of some poor scholar or low-grade clerk? Then I could have been near him and got to know him, and my life would have been worth living."[29]Similarly, Qin Zhong harbors affectionate feelings for Baoyu, lamenting his humble origins and yearning for a closer relationship with him: "Why did I have to be born in a poor respectable family? How should I have liked to get to know him: to have shared moments of warmth and affection with him!"[30] The equality of their relationship is further shown by how they address each other, as Baoyu transgresses the rule of proper addressing prescribed by social norms and insists on addressing Qin Zhong as his equal: " 'You and I are schoolmates and pretty much the same age. Let us in future forget all this "uncle" "nephew" business and address each other exactly like friends or brothers'! "[31] *Friends or brothers* - Baoyu's and Qin Zhong's relationship is manifested as literati friendship with a prominent sense of equalness, bringing to mind the intimate camaraderie between the hunters and warriors depicted in *Book of Songs*.

The implications behind spiritual lewdness point to a larger message about the naturalness of male homosexuality that Cao intended to convey - male homosexuality as a psychological

[28] Cao, 322-323.
[29] Cao, 178.
[30] Cao, 178.
[31] Cao, 206.

reaction to the mutually developed sensual and emotional bonds rather than a socially constructed identity. Apparently, Cao understood homosexual orientation as a natural drive. This perspective contrasts with many contemporary queer theories that link homosexual desire to sexual identification, which diverts attention away from the origination of sexuality from physical and psychological impulses.

By constructing the notion of spiritual lewdness, Cao provided a refreshing insight into the normativity of classifying and labeling individuals based on self-identified sexual categories, an ideology that reinforces self-identification. He addressed the issues surrounding self-identification, such as the objectification of sexuality as a social label, by assigning a new definition to sexuality. In his definition, sexuality is a psycho-reaction to sensual delight and emotional impulse. In light of Cao's understanding of homosexuality as inherent in human nature, heterosexuality and homosexuality appear naturally to be two different manifestations of the same human instinct. [32] This perspective avoids binarism because it not only rejects imposing any socially constructed frameworks on homosexuality but also provides an explanation for why homosexuality should be treated equally as heterosexuality. Although the dissociation of sex from reproduction was considered transgressive in a reproduction-oriented society, Cao naturalized homoeroticism as a natural call that should never be condemned or marginalized.

Cao's preferential attitudes towards spiritual lewdness as opposed to fleshy lewdness are pronounced in the antithesis between Baoyu's relationship with his male favorites and other patterns of homosexual relations. The relationship of Xue Pan 薛潘and Uncle Dumbo with male servants is a form of prostitution patronage, mimetic of the institutional patronage dating back to

[32] Li, "Cong *hongloumeng* de 'tongxing ailian' kan Cao Xueqin de 'Chaoqian zhisi'," 118.

the Zhou court. Undoubtedly, such a patron-prostitute relationship is characterized by an indifferent exchange of sexual service for money, as well as the interplay between the need for physical materials and the more shallow, promiscuous desire for sexual indulgence. The vulgarity of Xue Pan and Uncle Dumbo serves as a cruel contrast to Baoyu's emotional sophistication.

The nature of prostitution patronage is illustrated by two instances. Xue Pan registers himself at the Jia clan school only to "[pick] up 'soul-mates' from among his fellow-students."[33] The "soul-mates" are referred to as those who used sexual attractiveness in exchange for Xue Pan's material offerings, as Cao noted, "It must with regret to record that a surprisingly large number of the latter were deluded into becoming his willing victims by the prospects of receiving those ample advances of money and goods which he was in a position to offer."[34] The hierarchy between patrons and their sexual objects, who are described as "willing victims" in the text, [35] once again embodies the class-structured homosexuality produced by institutional favoritism. In another instance, Uncle Dumbo reprimands the two male servants at a gambling party for "[withdrawing] their favors from him and [transferring] them to the winner."[36] The servants' response exposes the superficiality of their relationship - "'It doesn't matter what they are like or what your own feelings are, the person who at any moment has the most money is the one you must be nice to."[37] This patron-prostitution relationship is the very antithesis of Baoyu's and Qin Zhong's relationship, revealing Cao's prioritization of emotional and spiritual connection over physical lewdness.

[33] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 1, 207.
[34] Cao, 207.
[35] Cao, 207.
[36] Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, 5 vols. (London: Penguin, 2004), 494.
[37] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, 494.

Female Superiority

The subversiveness of Cao's perspectives also lies in his reconceptualization of femininity through Jia Baoyu's attitude towards females. This attitude rejects the reduction of femininity to a set of subordinate traits that are to be discarded whenever one secures a dominant position.[38] In "Li Sao," Qu Yuan's self-feminization - comparing himself to a beautiful young woman abandoned by the lord - ties femininity to women's disempowerment and inferiority in a male-dominated society. Qu Yuan's metaphor also shows the performativity of femininity. Throughout the poem, femininity is used to reinforce Qu Yuan's performance of gender crossing, thereby serving as a performative rhetoric rather than a fair representation of femininity in reality.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, however, Cao subverted the narrative convention of femininity in "Li Sao," wherein it is treated as a complement to females' subservient social roles. Femininity, once encompassing a set of attributes, is now imbued with symbolic meanings. It becomes the externalization of intrinsic qualities of impeccableness, sublimity, and extreme purity. In this respect, the female per se becomes the symbol of an idealized figure. [39] Yet it is not to argue that Cao's symbolization of females indicates his female fetishism, or that his conception plays any substantial role in enhancing females' social status. The real intention behind Cao's symbolization and its actual social influence is not of central concern. The aims of the paper are to demonstrate that Cao's idealization of females reflects his own set of values in "femaleness," as well as how this reconceptualization of femininity remains questionable - whether it is a

[38] Keith McMahon, "Sublime Love and the Ethics of Equality in a Homoerotic Novel of the Nineteenth Century: Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses," *NAN NÜ* 4, no. 1 (2002): 70–109, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852602100402332, 82.
[39] McMahon, "Sublime Love and the Ethics of Equality," 98.

subversion of the hierarchical dichotomy between men and women in Qing society or an implicit form of male gaze.

In Chapter 2 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Cao's predilection for young, unmarried female characters is emphasized through the metaphor that compares men to mud and women to water - " 'Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud" - as well as the change of Baoyu's feelings and mannerisms in his encounter with female family members - " 'When I am with girls I feel fresh and clean, but when I am with boys I feel stupid and nasty,' " "There was simply no end to his violence and unruliness. Yet as soon as his lessons were over and he went inside to visit the girls of the family, he became a completely different person - all gentleness and calm, and as intelligent and well-bred as you please."[40] Baoyu's appearance of "gentleness and calm," "as intelligent and well-bred" implies Cao's preference for symbolic female virtues - gentle, decorous, and emotionally sophisticated. Beyond giving preferential treatment to female family members, Baoyu sublimates females to a pure, idealized figure: " 'The word 'girl' is very precious and very pure [...]. So it is most extremely important that you should never, never violate it with your coarse mouths and stinking breath'."[41]

The quote implies the sacralization of "female" as symbols of perfection, sublimity, and extreme purity, and it reflects Cao's perception of idealness. In this respect, Cao subverted the normativity of treating females as a biosocial construct that contrasts with "male." For Cao, female is not a gender boundary, and femininity is not a set of characteristics laden with effeminacy.[42] Cao's reconceptualization of femininity highlights a kind of temperament,

[40] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 1, 76, 81.
[41] Cao, 80.
[42] Li, "Cong *hongloumeng* de 'tongxing ailian' kan Cao Xueqin de 'Chaoqian zhisi'," 116.

personality, and virtues that not only show "gentleness and calm," "intelligence and well-breeding," but also prioritizes sincerity and emotional sensitivity over decadence and coarseness, as represented by Xue Pan and Uncle Dumbo.

The realm of females is not exclusive to biologically female characters, as males with feminine characteristics are also incorporated into the world of females. [43] The rhetoric used to describe these males often involves feminization with positive connotations. Therefore, the paper defines this gender-crossing as "positive feminization" in contrast with the "negative feminization" in "Li Sao," where Qu Yun's self-feminization is constructed within the context of political disadvantage with a sense of helplessness and humiliation. In the scene where Qin Zhong first comes to presence, he is said to "[create] a somewhat girlish impression" because of the gentleness and delicacy of his manner - "grace of deportment," "painful bashfulness," "shy confusion."[44] Similarly, Jiang Yuhan, a talented male actor who is one of the male favorites of Baoyu, ishighlighted by his gentle femininity - "Much taken with the actor's winsome looks and gentleness of manner, Bao-yu impulsively took his hand and gave it a squeeze."[45]

Rethinking the Relationship Between Female Superiority and Heteropatriarchy: A Subversion or Reinforcement?

In a patriarchal society where women were regarded as categorically inferior to men, the protagonist's prioritization of females over males bespeaks Cao's ideological advancement through the inversion of the entrenched gender hierarchies. However, the reconceptualization of femininity in *Dream of the Red Chamber* offers a twist, paradoxically pushing back against the

[43] Li, 116.
[44] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 1, 117.
[45] Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 2, 5 vols. (London: Penguin, 2004), 61.

subversive aspects of Cao's ideology. It is notable that Baoyu prefers young, unmarried women over aged, married women: " 'A girl before she marries is like a priceless pearl, but once she marries the pearl loses its lustre and develops all sorts of disagreeable flaws, and by the time she's an old woman, she's no longer like a pearl at all, more like a boiled fish's eye."[46] Cao clearly classified women into different categories based on their marital status, which seems to indicate an appropriation of female subjectivity - women before marriage are deemed as "purer" than women after marriage.

This is where Cao's conception of female superiority contains one more twist if Baoyu's attitudes toward unmarried women are understood in the literary context. The aforementioned quote came from Swallow, a female actress employed by the Jia family who paraphrased Baoyu's words to denounce her mother's and her aunt's verbal abuse and greediness. [47] It seems that what Cao is actually condemning is one's moral deficiency, as expressed by inhumanity and violence, rather than the "unmarried women" themselves. This is further substantiated by Baoyu's speculation that these married women are polluted by men: "Strange, the way they get like this when they marry! It must be something in the male that pollutes them."[48] As previously discussed, "male" in *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents greediness, coarseness, and moral decadence, so it is readily comprehensible that Cao's attribution of women's moral decadence to men indicates a subversion of gender hierarchy.

Nonetheless, Cao's conception of female superiority has limitations. First, it is an abstract belief and ideological construct. It lacks weight to privilege women in social and economic terms.

[46] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, 139.
[47] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, 138.
[48] Cao, 534.

Secondly, Cao's notion of femininity entails a rejection of worldly success and a disregard for material concerns, as evidenced by Baoyu's discontent with women who were concerned about the family's financial situation or persuaded him to pursue exam degrees. [49] In comparison to the political implications behind Qu Yuan's feminization, Cao's conception of female superiority lacks social or political underpinnings, which might suggest his limited awareness of, or unwillingness to confront, societal reality.

Conclusion

Through the comparison of "Li Sao" and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the paper reveals Cao Xueqin's refreshing insight into sexuality as a natural desire inherent in human nature, rather than an act of self-identification or an objectified label for sexual identity. In "Li Sao," Qu Yuan conceptualized homosexuality based on class, anchoring homoerotic relationship to the power structure between imperial patrons and their male favorites. In contrast, Cao in *Dream of the Red Chamber* challenged the class-structured homosexuality in advocacy for egalitarian homosexuality based on equality and spiritual lewdness. Pioneering the conceptualization of spiritual lewdness and physical lewdness, Cao bears a fluid and comprehensive view of male homosexuality, which is critical for understanding the nature of sexual drive.

In the second half, the paper discusses Cao's reconceptualization of femininity through the positive feminization of biologically male characters, with Qin Zhong and Jiang Yuhan as examples. Based on the conception of female superiority, Cao exalted females as symbols of purity, sublimity, and flawlessness in terms of emotional and moral capacity. The paper draws attention to the dynamics and complexities of the realm of females in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

[49] Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 2, 195.

- while it includes men with feminine characteristics, it excludes vulgar men and married women who identify with these men. Cao's ideologies behind this classifying scheme, whether they were driven by the broader sociocultural background or some unexpected ideological trends that went popular in Cao's milieu, as well as their impact on the social and political horizons for people of his time or in the fiction, remained unexplored. These topics compose an intriguing area for future research.

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