

# Dream of the Red Chamber

By KENNETH REXROTH

THE CHINESE *Dream of the Red Chamber* may well be as great a book as the Japanese *Tale of Genji* (SR, Dec. 11), although its virtues are not as obvious, and in fact are not obvious at all. They are the virtues that distinguish Chinese civilization from Japanese, the virtues of a vaster humanity. Both novels have a lucidity and immediacy of narrative that are seldom encountered in Western fiction outside of cowboy and detective stories and the funny papers. Alex Comfort once compared Chinese fiction to Pepys's *Diary*, "a perfectly translucent medium through which we see the characters in all their moral nudity." The contemporary author most like a Chinese novelist is Georges Simenon. You are too busy with the story to notice psychological insight or dramatic command until a week after you have finished the book.

The plot is the familiar, recurrent one of so much great fiction, just as it is a specialty of both Chinese fiction and philosophy of history—"when women rule, the house decays." But it is also its contrary, a celebration of the matriarchy that underlies and sustains Chinese society. Like all great fiction, it is also the story of the immensely difficult achievement of personal integrity. The narrative works toward a transcendental meaning of life through that life itself, which so conspicuously hides all such meaning. The characters are all "fallen beings." The hero is an unprepossessing, idle, scholar-gentleman, timid, oversexed, and unstable. The two young heroines are both hysterics, and the villainess is a stock ruthless sister-in-law. The action is confined almost entirely to the women's quarters and consists mostly of vapors, tantrums, fugues, and quarrels. Time goes by. As in life, the characters run down, coarsen, sicken, and die. At the end everybody is worn out. Yet Pao Yu's meaningless life unconsciously evolves slowly toward illumination. He is a Taoist saint who doesn't know he is one and doesn't want to be one. Like Prince Genji, he is indifferent to and ignorant of his cosmic role. He struggles, unaware, against an embodied principle of hate. When salvation comes, it is scarcely distinguishable from its opposite. Behind commonplace life and death lurks another world that intrudes at all crucial

moments, a mirror image more real than this life, where destiny is achieved and manifest; like the dream time of the Australian aborigines where everybody is his own ancestor.

*Genji* is a mystical Buddhist work. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is Taoist; its principle of salvation is inaction (*wuwei*), the strength of the still key-stone in the arch, of water wandering among mountains, seeking its own level, eventually wearing away the highest peaks. The talisman of Pao Yu's integrity is the uncut stone of precious jade with which he is born and which he loses and finds again at the brink of death. Pao Yu's father, Chi Cheng, the embodiment of patriarchal legalism, presides over the waking world with iron rigor and unrelenting contempt for his son and all his ways; but the dramatic pivots of the novel are a series of dreams, apparitions of the true world where doubled images of the girls who love and hate Pao Yu function as moral determinants, presided over by the great matriarch, the grandmother of the family.

It is the metaphysical modesty of Taoism that gives *Dream of the Red Chamber* its style, that modesty which is the necessary ingredient of the very greatest style in any art. The most profound human relationships, the deepest psychological insights, the most intense drama, the revelation of the moral universe in trivial human action, in the simple narrative of ordinary happenings—greatness of heart, magnanimity ("human-heartedness" is the Chinese term), is the substance from which the narrative is carved.



Reading *The Tale of Genji*, you are always conscious of the ethereal refinement of the characters, the profundity of the issues, the skill of the author. In *Red Chamber* you are conscious only of what is happening. Lady Murasaki's Japanese courtiers seldom eat or drink, and never move their bowels. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is haunted by the faint odor of night soil from which a hundred flowers spring.

When you first read about all these people with strange names doing curious things in an exotic setting, you get lost. Then gradually the sheer human mass of Chinese fiction, a mass whose components are all highly individuated, envelopes and entrances you. You realize yourself as part of a universe of human beings endless as the dust of nebulae visible in the Mount Palomar telescope, and you are left with the significance of a human kinship powerful as flowing water and standing stone.

If completely translated, *Dream of the Red Chamber* would require about 1,000,000 words. The European versions are all drastic abridgments. Bancroft Joly's version (Kelly and Walsh, Hong Kong, 1892-93), two large volumes, was only the first third of the original. Chi Chen Wang's (Routledge, London, 1929) was drastically cut, simplified, and secularized until not much more than a Balzacian domestic epic remained. The English of Florence and Isabel McHugh, from the German of Franz Kuhn (Pantheon, New York, 1958), preserves the Taoist otherworldly emphasis that surely was all-important to the author. Chi Chen Wang's latest version (Twayne, New York, 1958; Anchor books paperback, 1958) is a fresh translation, greatly expanded and improved and, so to speak, desecularized.

From the date of writing, the mid-eighteenth century, until our time, *Dream of the Red Chamber* was anonymous. In 1921, after immense research, Hu Shih ascribed the first eighty chapters to Tsao Hsueh Chin and the remaining forty chapters to Kao Ngoh, one of the editors of the 1791 edition. Evidence later discovered would indicate that Kao himself had worked from first drafts by Tsao. Hu Shih believed the novel to be autobiographical, but it is significant that until the twentieth century no one bothered to disturb its anonymity. Like Gothic cathedrals, which sufficient research can usually demonstrate were built by somebody, the great Chinese fictions are more anonymous and communal than *The Iliad*. The *Ching Ping Mei* (*Golden Lotus*), *The Water Margin* (*All Men Are Brothers*), and *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* are end products of the accretion of hundreds of tales by street-corner storytellers, and their luxuriance of natural growth is characteristic of the Chinese novel even today.

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## The World Is a Campus

A UNIQUE blueprint for a better America and a better world was drafted in Washington last month when 1,500 Americans, inspired rather than dismayed by mounting tension and conflict around the globe, assembled in a mood of creative collaboration for peace at the White House Conference on International Cooperation.

One portion of the remarkable blueprint placed on President Johnson's desk involved the world travel industry, the largest single factor in international trade. Last year international travel alone amounted to \$11 billion, spent by 75,000,000 tourists in visiting nearly 100 countries.

The conference was part of International Cooperation Year (SR, Dec. 18), an inspiration of several world leaders, including Pope John XXIII and Prime Minister Nehru of India. ICY was initiated by the United Nations as a follow-up to International Geophysical Year. Its purpose was to chart and dramatize the possibilities of international cooperation as a realistic alternative to international conflict in solving the world's problems. Among the fields marked out for special study were peace-planning, human rights, world law, cultural exchange, communications, and travel.

In the travel area, a small core of industry leaders and government officials met and worked together in the months preceding the conference. They recognized the major role played by travel and cultural exchange in the vast, complex mechanism of international cooperation.

Out of this study and the White House Conference has come a series of recommendations flowing from the concept that "there can be little world cooperation in a world in which travel barriers—whether in the form of passport or visa restrictions or currency limitations or special taxes—have the effect of choking off the fullest and freest movement of peoples. . . . Regardless of the purpose—education, business, or pleasure—travel is the great convener of people. . . . We respectfully hope the President and the federal government will take an unequivocal stand before the world in reaffirming the right of free travel as a basic element of American policy."

In the days since the conference ended, cabinet-level assurances have been given privately and publicly that, despite an anticipated record U.S. travel payments deficit for 1965 of \$1.8 billion to \$2 billion, the Johnson Administration remains firmly committed to the principle of freedom of travel and contemplates no exit or other restrictive taxes on tourists.

"In every quarter, from Human Rights to Arms Control," a spokesman for travel said at the panel on Cultural and Intellectual Exchange, "communications and travel emerged as the only two methods by which the aims of this conference can be achieved. Travel and communications cannot be separated. Travel is a broad form of two-way communication. Conversely, communication cannot be completely effective without personal contact. Such personal contact . . . can only be accomplished by travel."

Dr. Frank Stanton, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, speaking at the panel, singled out freedom of international travel as a major key to cultural exchange among nations. He called for a Cultural Bill of Rights "as fundamental to a free cultural world as a constitutional Bill of Rights is to a political federation."

Here are some of the recommendations sent to the White House by the conference committees on aviation, transportation, and cultural exchange:

1. The U.S. Government was urged to affirm as basic policy the freedom of international travel as an inalienable human right.

2. The U.S. Government was urged to take the initiative for the progressive elimination of visa requirements by all nations.

3. It was urged that the pending pact for direct New York-Moscow air service be implemented without further delay as an act of mutual confidence in a period of grave international tension.

4. The U.S. was urged to foster diplomatic efforts to break down travel barriers.

5. The U.S. was urged to support the proposal in the United Nations that 1967 be declared International Travel Year in order to expand and accelerate the constructive role travel now plays in world affairs.

6. A White House Conference on international travel and communications was urged for next year.

7. It was urged that the U.S. Travel Service receive at least its authorized budget of \$4,700,000 to promote more foreign travel to the U.S. in order to ease the travel payments deficit and that, preferably, it receive \$10,000,000 for its work.

IN a rapidly developing sense the globe is a vast campus for the advanced study of man by man, from which national borders mired in red tape must be eliminated, from which narrow parochialism must vanish, and where a spirit of international cooperation and interdependence must reign, fulfilling, in thought and deed, the universal motto of the travel industry itself, "Peace through understanding." A Great Society cannot be built with closed minds, nor can an open society flourish with closed doors either to people or ideas.

The White House Conference opened some doors and minds. During 1966 the way must be cleared, in the words of the conference, for the positive exploration of "the means whereby the current revolution in international human mobility can be put to work for the best interests of the U.S. and for greater understanding and mutual cooperation among the whole of mankind."

—WILLIAM D. PATTERSON.