

The Symbolism of Naming in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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ABSTRACT

Here I show that the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is based on a quite sophisticated naming system: apart from their literal meaning, the names of characters and places have a number of connotations. The interplay of meanings of names sheds light on the novel's theme, plot and characters, and also reveals the author's own thoughts on a number of specific issues. For instance, the Taoist theme of yin/yang opposition-and-harmony and Buddhist vision of the world as illusion are subtly expressed through names whose "original" meanings are ironically subverted by the opposite connotations of their homonyms.

KEY WORDS

naming
literal
connotation
opposition
irony

homonym
theme
illusory
subversion
vision

Many critics have noted the all-comprehensive design of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in its representation of ancient Chinese civilization. The novel contains numerous characters, objects, and places, and has a most sophisticated naming system organizing the entire work. The various names, which are normally symbolic, shed light on the theme, the plot, and the characters, greatly reinforcing the meaning inherent in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In addition, the creative process and circulation of the work often becomes more clear through a study of the names. Despite the importance of naming, modern criticism gives little attention to the symbolic significance of the meanings of names in the novel. This paper is an attempt to explore the different uses of the names in this novel, demonstrating their significance in terms of theme, plot and characters. In the discussion of the meanings of names, David Hawkes' and Chi-chen Wang's English translations will also be cited in order to show how the richness can be lost in a translation and, eventually, to show the appropriate ways to translate the names in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The novel begins with a reference to the myth about the Goddess N. Gua's mending of the sky, an image of construction used to imply possibly the composition of the work itself. The analogy between the Goddess' mending the sky and the creation of the novel indicates the unusual importance which the writer attached to artistic creation. The places where the Goddess constructed the slabs of stone mending the sky were named "*Da Huang Shan*" (Mountain of Great Absurdity) and "*Wu Ji Ya*" (Cliff of No Record). These names of the mythic locus show that the creation of a work of art, like the mending of the sky, is based on imagination, which may not necessarily be verified by reality. At the beginning of the novel the hero appears as a slab of stone, which has obtained supernatural power yet is not used for mending the sky. The number of slabs used for mending the sky 36,500 is actually a multiple of the number of days in a year. By excluding the hero from the multitude of stones, the author may possibly suggest that what happens to the hero in the story is beyond secular time. The size of the stones, one hundred twenty feet wide and two hundred forty feet long, happens to be based on multiples of twelve (months) and twenty-four (hours). The mountain where the hero was deserted, "*Qing Geng Feng*" (Green Summit), connotes the meaning of its homonym "*Peak of the Root of Emotion*." A story is thus implied by the name of the summit of a mountain. The two characters who happened to pass through this area and later brought the stone to earth are

called "Mang Mang" (Far and Wide) and "Miao Miao" (Far and Invisible). Together, their names "Miao Mang" also mean inauthentic, a meaning which was expressed earlier in the names of the locus of the mythic story. Eons later, when another Taoist figure passed through the same area and read the story of the stone's earthly life inscribed on the slab, he was enlightened and decided to change his name from "Kong Kong" (Empty the Emptiness) to "Qing Seng" (The Monk of Emotion), a symbolic act linking the themes of emptiness and love. One of the alleged editors Cao Xueqin, who is now believed to be the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, undertook his literary task in his study entitled "Dao Hong Xuan" (Mourning over the World of the Red Dust), thereby indicating the sad nature of the novel. The subtitle that Cao gave to the novel, "Twelve Ladies of Jin Ling" – 12 being the number of months—further clarifies the content of his work. The short poem which concludes the prologue is thus a summary of what has already been expressed: "All are full of absurd words;/A handful of sad and bitter tears." Incidentally, the use of the stone as a hero—a device reminiscent of a previous classical Chinese novel, *Journey to the West (Xiyouji)*, in which the hero is a stone monkey — makes it clear that sensual love, which gives birth to life, is to be transformed into non-activity and non-life, essentially represented by a stone.

As the commentator on the "Study of Zhi Yan" indicated, the opening episode in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is full of symbolic names. Many of the names of places such as "Shili Street" (Ten-mile Street), which connotes the meaning of its homonym "Snobbish Street," "Ren Qing Alley" (Benevolence and Purity Alley) whose homonym is "Personal Connection Alley," and "Hu Lu Temple" (Gourd Temple) whose sound is similar to "Hu Tu" (Stupid), are actually the author's implicit comments on the negative aspects of the Chinese tradition. The characters' names in the first episode all have special meanings. The country squire, who appears at both the beginning and the end of the story, is called Zhen Shiyin, one homonym of which is commonly assumed to mean "true matter concealed." Through his name the narrator indicates once again that the story is not necessarily a record of real life but actually a work of imagination. In addition, another homonym of the name may mean "true person in seclusion," a descriptive phrase summarizing the righteousness of the character and the outcome of his story. By contrast, his crooked neighbor Jia Hua, whose name connotes "false words," has a totally opposite character. The crookedness of this initially impoversished scholar is emphasized in his title "shi fei",

meaning "really false." Even the name of his home-town, "Hu Zhou," which connotes "gibberish," bespeaks the worthlessness of the character.

What is unusual, however, is the close relationship between Zhen and Jia, "true" and "false," in the novel. Zhen and Jia are not only neighbors but also good friends. When Jia needs money to travel to Beijing to take his civil service examination, Zhen provides it. A similarly close relationship exists later between the stone's earthly family, Jia, and a family of comparable size and status in the south, Zhen. It so happens that the Zhen family also has a member called Precious Jade, the earthly name of the stone. Like Zhen Shiyin and Jia Yucun, the Jia and Zhen families, upon which the stone's story is essentially based, interact with each other very closely, often helping each other when either side has fallen into disgrace. The intricately close relationship between Zhen and Jia, true and false, is described in a couplet which is inscribed on the gate to the world of "Great Illusion and Emptiness: "When falseness is mistaken for truth, truth becomes falseness; when non-activity is mistaken for activity, activity becomes non-activity." The dichotomy between truth and falseness, non-activity and activity, which characterizes the overall structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is essentially based on the traditional yin and yang concept. The book, which consists of both facts and imagination, truth and falsity, is thus the embodiment of the Way (Dao). That the book is compared to the Way, which comprehends both good and evil, can be further verified by the subtitle of the novel, *The Precious Mirror of Romance (Feng Yue Bao Jian)*, given in the prologue. In Chapter Eleven the "precious mirror of romance" is described as a magic object containing two antithetical images: one, the image of the beautiful woman Phoenix; the other, a skeleton. These two radically different images represent charming deception on the one hand and harsh reality on the other. Deeply infatuated with yet repeatedly deceived by the beautiful Phoenix, Jia Rui refused to look at the harsh reality represented by the image of a skeleton as he was told to do by the Buddhist monk who gave him the mirror so that his life might be saved. Instead, Rui kept looking at the deceptive image of the Phoenix and eventually killed himself from excessive masturbation. The magic mirror, which presents the images of both illusion and reality, falseness and truth, is a metaphor for *Dream of the Red Chamber*, well illustrating its thematic structure.

Whereas the names of Zhen Shiyin and Jia Yucun signify both their personalities and the major theme of the novel, the names of Zhen's daughter, Yinglian, his guest, Mr. Yan, and his servant, Huo Qi, primarily suggest the

movement of the plot. The homonym of "ought to be pitied," "Yinglian," literally means a "heroic lotus," an expression which certainly applies to her virtuous character. Notwithstanding her personality, Yinglian was separated from her parents in her childhood and eventually forced to marry the worthless figure Xue Pan. While Yan means "harsh," the same word also connotes the meaning of "hot," which presages the fire to be experienced by the Zhen family. The servant Huo Qi, who took Yinglian to watch the lantern show but eventually ran away for fear of punishment because he lost her through carelessness, certainly spells "the beginning of disaster" for the Zhen family.

Apart from the theory of yin and yang, the idea of Five Elements is, as Andrew Plaks has demonstrated in his *Archetype and Allegory in Dream of the Red Chamber*, also found in the names of the characters. The name of the hero Jia Baoyu (Precious Jade) undoubtedly places him as the element of earth in the center of the traditional diagram illustrating the cyclical movement of the five elements. As indicated by her family name Lin, which means "woods," Daiyu, whom Precious Stone intends to marry (though he is prevented by his family from doing so), obviously belongs to the element of wood. The other heroine Xue Baochai, whom Precious Jade marries at the end of the novel, may clearly be classified under the element of metal in accordance with her name, "Precious Hair-pin." The tremendously powerful and domineering woman Wang Xifeng may represent the element of fire, since both her name, "Phoenix", and her hot temper are commonly associated with fire. Although Andrew Plaks tends to regard Lin Daiyu's father, Lin Ruhai, whose first name means "like a sea," as a character representing the element of water, it is more likely that another beautiful and talented heroine, Shi Xiangyun, whose name "Clouds over the River Xiang" is characterized by such an element, represents water. Because wood is considered the beginning of the cycle of five elements whereas water is the last, Lin Daiyu appeared first and Shi Xiangyun last in the novel. Based on the traditional theory, the five elements normally subsumed under yin and yang are opposite yet complementary attributes, together forming a harmonious cycle in the novel.

Examples can be found in the first chapter of the use of names for the illustration of the theme, plot, and characters. As mentioned earlier, the name of Zhen Shi-yin's daughter, Yinglian, signifies the terrible fate she is to experience almost throughout her life. The literal meaning of her name, "heroic lotus," also suggests her courage in enduring such hardships as

the loss of her parents and maltreatment by her husband, as well as her purity of virtue in faithfully serving her masters and honestly dealing with people. When contrasted with her maid Jiao Xing, who enjoyed a much better fate in the first chapter, Yinglian becomes a good illustration of the theme of transience through the cyclical movement based on the principle of yin and yang. By the same token, the name Jiao Xing indicates her charming character, which is fully expressed in her enchanting smile at Jia Yucun when she first met him. Since her name also means "lucky," it foreshadows her lucky fate at the beginning of the second chapter where she marries Jia Yucun when he comes back from the capital to serve as the top administrator of the local area. Together, Yinglian and Jiaoxing, like Zhen Shiyin and Jia Yucun form an interesting pair in the first chapter, reinforcing the Buddhist theme of transience as well as the concept of yin and yang.

Many of the major characters' names in the Jia family indicate primarily their personalities. For example, the father of the Duke of the Ning State practices the beliefs of the Taoist religion to the extent that he leads a seclusive life himself, letting his own son inherit the official title. Thus, his name is Jing, which literally means "respect" and connotes the meaning of "quietism," a characteristic of Taoism. His cousin "She," Duke of the Rong State, is a dirty old man very fond of women. One foot already in the grave, he still asked his mother for her favorite loyal maid, who, disgusted with the Duke's proposal, first fiercely rejected the idea but was eventually forced to commit suicide. In this regard his highly ironic name "She," meaning "to pardon," also assumes the sense of a similar sound "se," which means "sex." In addition, while he was willing to spend a fortune for a concubine, he refused to help his relative financially, a trait which may further be suggested by the sound "se" as in "lin se" (miserly). Righteous and studious, the younger brother of the duke has a corresponding name "Zheng," which literally means "politics" with the connotation of righteousness.

Without exception the names of the four heroines mentioned earlier Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, Wang Xifeng, and Shi Xiangyun indicate their personalities. Whereas Daiyu, meaning "black jade," has a sentimental, often temperamental character with a pessimistic vision, Baochai, meaning "precious hair-pin" (an emblem of restraint), with her sense of modesty and kindness, is a virtuous model for traditional Chinese women. Extremely talented yet calculating, domineering, and ruthless, Wang Xifeng handles the daily routines of the Houses of Ning and Rong, which accommodate thousands

of persons, thereby deserving the name of the mythic magic bird "Brilliant Phoenix." Finally, Shi Xiangyun, a straightforward, beautiful girl, is as carefree and charming as the image of her name "clouds over the River Xiang" implies. In the novel there is a rather distinguished widow Li Wan, the wife of the deceased eldest son of Jia Zheng, who is often ignored by critics. Her name, which literally means "refined silk," may suggest the author's comment upon the social convention of discouraging a widow from marrying again. On the one hand, the word "wan" may connote "perfection"; on the other, it may also mean "finished" or "doomed." The second connotation appears quite likely as the author described her in terms of death: "Although this Li Wan lost her husband in the prime of her life and lived among the rich people in an extravagant place, she acted as scorched wood or dead ashes, refusing to ask or to listen" (p. 31). Her name becomes all the more significant since her father Li Shouzhong, meaning "steering a middle course," is named after the fundamental tenet of Confucianism—the golden mean—and assumes the position of the Instructor of the Imperial School. According to the novel, what Li Shouzhong believed in was not Confucianism but rather the fossilized tradition based on Confucianism or Neo-confucianism, for he emphasized the traditional idea that "a woman is virtuous if she has no talents." Raised in such a fossilized tradition, Li Wan cannot but act like a dead person. By giving her such a name, the author may have implicitly commented on the unreasonable, stifling social practices based on Confucianism.

The use of a name to signify both the character's personality and the theme of the novel is to be found not only in the major but also in the peripheral characters. In Chapter Seventy-three a maid of the matriarch's is introduced by the narrator with a particular comment on the meaning of her name, "*sha dajie*" (*Big Sister Ignorance*): "*This maid, Ignorance, is only fourteen years old. She was recently employed to do hard work for the Matriarch. She has a fat body, broad face, and two big feet, yet is quick and nimble with heavy work. Moreover, when speaking, she, being silly, stubborn, and knowing nothing, often makes people laugh. The Matriarch was fond of her, so she named her Big Sister Ignorance*" (p. 709). In keeping with the Taoist view of ignorance, the Matriarch takes a liking to the maid. According to Buddhism, however, ignorance is the origin of the dark force which gives birth to the ceaseless movement of phenomena in the universe, the essence of which is characterized by sorrow and illusion: "On ignorance depends karma;/On karma depends consciousness;/On consciousness depend

name and form;/On name and form depend the six organs of sense;/On the six organs of sense depends contact;/On contact depends sensation;/On sensation depends desire;/On desire depends attachment;/On attachment depends existence;/On existence depends birth;/On birth depend old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.”¹

It is thus most fitting metaphorically that the obscure character Big Sister Ignorance is the cause of the harsh search conducted by the family itself, an internal search which foreshadows the ruthless official search and confiscation later undertaken by the Imperial Guards. Whereas the internal search only resulted in the eventual deaths of Bao Yu's favorite maid, Qingwen (bright cloud) and Siqi (in charge of chess), whose homonym means “the time of death,” the official search brought the downfall of the family. Viewed in this light, the pornographic design on the purse accidentally found in the garden by Ignorance may thus indicate sensuality, which is often associated with ignorance in Buddhism, the cause of suffering in the secular world. That this internal search is significant in the novel can be substantiated by the link established between it and the official search undertaken almost concurrently in the House of the Zhens, the counterpart of the Jia family. The news of the official search in the House of the Zhens reached the Jia family on the same day the internal search began in the latter family. Commenting on the significance of this event, Tan-chun compared it to the official search of the Zhen family: “Early this morning didn't you all talk about the Zhen family, which itself expected a thorough search? Now the search truly occurred. We are also undertaking this gradually” (p. 723). Tanchun is not the only one who mentioned the official search of the Zhen family at this point in the novel. The wife of Duke of the Ning State again spoke of the event as the Jia family gradually folded its own internal search: “Yesterday I heard your lord (the Duke) say: ‘I saw from the official gazette that the Zhen family committed a crime and that they were searched. Some of their property was confiscated and the members were taken to the capital for further investigation of and punishment for their crime’” (p. 729). Although Big Sister Ignorance, who appears only once and briefly in the entire novel, is unimportant as a character, her possible representation of a fundamental Buddhist idea makes her enormously important in the understanding of the themes of the novel. Through the device of naming, the author thus makes an otherwise peripheral character thematically significant.

One more type of name — those names that imply the opposite of what

they indicate—deserves attention. Jia Zhen the Duke of Ning, for example, is anything but what his name suggests. In fact, the meaning of his name, “precious,” ironically indicates the opposite attribute, “worthlessness,” in the Duke, who, as the narrator describes him, “turned the entire house upside down” (p. 14). Another famous example is “Mandarin Duck” (Yuan Yang), the faithful maid of the Matriarch. In the Chinese cultural tradition, the Mandarin duck is usually presented in a pair, employed as the emblem for a couple. Contrary to the reader’s expectation, Mandarin Duck, though beautiful and virtuous, eventually committed suicide after the Matriarch’s death, most likely to avoid becoming the concubine of the Duke of Rong. The third example concerns a place, “*Ping An Zhou*” (the Prefecture of Refuge). Again ironically, Xue Pan and his servants safely roamed various places in China until they reached the Prefecture of Refuge where they were robbed. Although they were eventually rescued, the place betokens the opposite of safety to Xue Pan and his followers: “My employees and I sold the merchandise and returned in the spring. We were safe all the way. Who could have known that when we reached the Prefecture of Refuge we would encounter a group of bandits and be robbed” (p. 639). The use of a name to indicate its opposite meaning in *Dream of the Red Chamber* often creates a shocking effect, making one realize how illusory or deceptive things can be. The theme of illusion or deception as opposed to reality and truth, is one of the author’s dominant concerns. The device of ironic naming is used not only to substantiate the theory that yin and yang comprehend and give birth to each other but also to emphasize the Buddhist vision of the world as an illusion.

To sum up, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is based on a most sophisticated naming system. Apart from its literal meaning, a name normally has a number of connotations. The various names of figures, objects, and places not only shed light on the theme, plot, and characters but also reveal the author’s own thoughts on a number of specific issues. In studying the greatest master-piece of classical Chinese fiction, a critic thus must reckon with the significance of naming.

Notes

1. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, ed., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1973), 278.

