

**Document 3.5: Excerpts from “Yuanchun Visits Her Parents on the Feast of Lanterns,” *The Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin, 1792**

*The Dream of Red Mansions (also known as The Dream of the Red Chamber or The Story of the Stone) is a love story written during the reign of Qianlong. It is considered by many to be the most remarkable piece of Chinese literature. Cao took twenty years to write it. The novel holds layer upon layer of meaning, especially to someone literate in Chinese, who can recognize the multiple meanings of words.*

*Cao’s family had once been powerful and wealthy under the emperor Kangxi. They later lost favor under the emperor Yongzheng and Cao lived in poverty when he wrote the novel. The book focuses on the wealthy Jia family, offering a view of life among the elite during the Qing dynasty. This excerpt describes the Jia family preparing for a visit from one of their daughters, who was a courtesan to the emperor.*

For Lady Wang and her helpers the days passed in a flurry of preparations until, towards the end of the tenth month, all was ready. The stewards had handed in their accounts; antiques and precious objects had been set out; the pleasure grounds were well-stocked with cranes, peacocks, deer, rabbits, chicken and geese to be reared in appropriate places; Jia Qiang had twenty operas ready; and the little Buddhist and Taoist nuns had memorized various sutras and incantations.

Then Jia Zheng, able at last to breathe more freely, invited the Lady Dowager to make a final inspection of the Garden and see that all was in order with nothing overlooked. This done, he chose an auspicious date and wrote a memorial, and the very same day that it was presented the Son of Heaven acceded to his request. The Imperial Consort<sup>1</sup> Yuanchun would be permitted to visit her parents for the Feast of Lanterns on the fifteenth of the first month the following year. This threw the whole household into such a commotion that, hard at work day and night, they scarcely had time to celebrate the New Year.

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<sup>1</sup> Concubine

In a twinkling the Feast of Lanterns would arrive. On the eight of the first month eunuchs came from the Palace to inspect the general layout of the Garden and the apartments where the Imperial Consort would change her clothes, sit with her family, receive their homage, feast them and retire to rest. The eunuch in charge of security also posted many younger eunuchs as guards by the screened and curtained entrances to the retiring rooms. Detailed instructions were given to all members of the household as to where they should withdraw, where they should kneel, serve food or make announcements—all the exact etiquette to be observed. Outside, officers from the Board of Works and the Chief of the Metropolitan Police had the streets swept and cleared of loiterers. Jia She superintended the craftsmen making ornamental lanterns and fireworks, and by the fourteenth everything was ready. But no one, high or low, slept a wink that night.

Before dawn the next day all those with official ranks from the Lady Dowager downwards put on full ceremonial dress. Everywhere in the Garden were hangings and screens brilliantly embroidered with dancing dragons and flying phoenixes; gold and silver glittered, pearls and precious stones shimmered; richly blended incense burnt in the bronze tripods, and fresh flowers filled the vases. Not a cough broke the solemn silence.

Jia She and the other men waited outside in the west street entrance, the Lady Dowager and the women outside the main gate, the ends of the street and the alleys leading to it all having been screened off. They were growing tired of waiting when a eunuch rode up on a big horse. The Lady Dowager welcomed him in and asked for news.

“It will be a long time yet,” the eunuch told her. “Her Highness is to dine at one, pray to Buddha in the Palace of the Precious Spirit at half past two, and at five go to feast in the Palace of Great Splendour and look at the display of lanterns before asking leave from the Emperor. She can hardly set out until seven.”

This being the case, Xifeng suggested that the Lady Dowager and Lady Wang should go inside to rest and come back later.

So the Lady Dowager and others retired, leaving Xifeng in charge. She ordered the stewards to conduct the eunuchs to where refreshments were waiting. Then she had loads of candles carried in for all the lanterns.

It was not until the candles had been lit that a clatter of hooves was heard in the street. The next moment up panted ten or more eunuchs, clapping their hands as they ran. At this signal the other eunuchs said, "Her Highness is coming!" They all rushed to their posts.

For a long time they waited in silence, Jia She and the young men of the family by the entrance of the west street, the Lady Dowager and the women in front of the main gate. Then two eunuchs wearing scarlet uniforms rode slowly up to the entrance of the west street. Dismounting, they led their horses behind the screens, then stood to attention, their faces turned towards the west. After some time another pair appeared, then another, until there were ten pairs lined up and soft music could be heard in the distance.

And now a long procession approached: several pairs of eunuchs carrying dragon banners, others with phoenix fans, pheasant plumes and ceremonial insignia, as well as gold censers burning Imperial incense. Next came a curved-handled yellow umbrella on which were embroidered seven phoenixes, and under this a head-dress robe, girdle and slippers. After this came attendant eunuchs bearing a [Buddhist] rosary, embroidered handkerchiefs, a rinse-bowl, fly-whisks and the like.

Last of all, borne slowly forward by eight eunuchs, came a gold-topped palanquin<sup>2</sup> embroidered with phoenixes.

All present, including the Lady Dowager, hastily fell to their knees by the side of the road. Eunuchs rushed over to help up the old lady as well as Lady Xing and Lady Wang.

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<sup>2</sup> A covered litter, or elaborate arm chair, carried by poles on the shoulders of two or more men.

The palanquin was carried through the main gate to the entrance of the courtyard on the east, where a eunuch holding a whisk knelt down and invited the Imperial Consort to dismount and change her clothes. Then the palanquin was borne inside and the eunuchs withdrew, leaving Yuanchun's ladies-in-waiting to help her alight.

She observed that the courtyard was brilliantly lit with ornamental lanterns of every kind, all exquisitely made of finest gauze. The highest, a rectangular lantern, bore the inscription: Fraught with Favour, Basking in Kindness. Yuanchun entered the robing room and changed, then remounted her palanquin which was carried into the Garden. She found it wreathed with the perfumed smoke of incense, splendid with flowers, brilliant with countless lanterns, melodious with strains of soft music. Words fail to describe that scene of peaceful magnificence and noble refinement.

Now, as she gazed from her palanquin at the dazzling display both within and without the Garden, the Imperial Consort sighed softly:

“This is too extravagant!”

Then a eunuch with a whisk knelt down by the palanquin and invited her to proceed by boat. As she alighted she saw before her a clear waterway winding like a dragon. From the marble balustrades on either bank lanterns of crystal and glass of every description shed a silvery light, clear as snow. The wintry boughs of the willows and apricot trees above them were festooned with artificial flowers and leaves made of rice-paper and silk, and from every tree hung lanterns. Lovely too on the water were the lotus flowers, duckweed and water-fowl made out of shells and feathers. Lanterns high and low seemed trying to outshine each other. It was truly a world of crystal and precious stones! The boats were magnificent too, with lanterns, rare miniature gardens, pearl portières, embroidered curtains, rudders of cassia and oars of aromatic wood, which we need not describe in detail...

Meanwhile the boat had reached the further shore and again Yuanchun mounted her palanquin. Before her now there towered the beautiful hall of an imposing palace....

As she entered this temporary palace, she saw torches in the courtyard flaring to the sky, powered incense strewing the ground, flaming trees, jasper flowers, gilded windows and jade balustrades, to say nothing of screens as fine as the shrimp's antennae, carpets of otter-skin, musk burning in tripods, and fans made from pheasant plumage....

Another eunuch, the Master of Ceremonies, knelt and begged her to sit in a chair of state to receive the obeisances of her family. On both sides of the steps music was played as two eunuchs ushered in Jia She and the men of the family to range themselves below the dais; but when a lady-in-waiting relayed the Imperial Consort's command to dispense with this ceremony they withdrew. Then the Lady Dowager of the Rong mansion and the female relatives were led up the east flight of steps on the dais, but they too were exempted from the ceremony and shown out.

After tea had been served three times, Yuanchun descended from the throne and the music ceased while she went into a side chamber to change her clothes. Meanwhile a carriage had been prepared to drive her out of the Garden to visit her parents.

First she went to the Lady Dowager's reception room to pay her respects as a granddaughter of the house; but before she could do so her grandmother and the others knelt to prevent her. The Imperial Consort's eyes were full of tears as her family drew near to greet her. As she clasped the hands of her grandmother and mother, the hearts of all three were too full to speak—they could do nothing but sob. Lady Xing, Li Wan, Xifeng, Yuanchun's half sister Tanchun and her cousins Yingchun and Xichun also stood beside them weeping silently. But at last the Imperial Consort mastered her grief and forced a smile as she tried to comfort them.

“Since you sent me away to that forbidden place, it hasn't been easy getting this chance today to come home and see you all again,” she said. “But instead of chatting and

laughing, here we are crying! Soon I shall have to leave you, and there is no knowing when I can come back again.” At this she broke down afresh.

Lady Xing and the others did their best to console her and the Lady Dowager asked her to take a seat, after which she exchanged courtesies with each in turn and more tears were shed. Next the stewards and attendants of both mansions paid their respects outside the door, and so did their wives and the maids.

This ceremony at an end, Yuanchun asked why Aunt Xue, Baochai and Daiyu were missing.

Lady Wang explained that they were afraid to presume, not being members of the Jia family and having no official status.

The Imperial Consort asked them to be invited in at once, and they were about to pay homage according to Palace etiquette when she exempted them too and chatted with them.

Next Baojin and the other maids whom Yuanchun had taken with her to the Palace kowtowed to the Lady Dowager, who hastily stopped them and sent them off to have some refreshments in another room. The senior eunuchs and ladies-in-waiting were also entertained by members of the staff of both mansions, leaving only three or four young eunuchs in attendance.

When the ladies of the family had spoken with feeling about their separation and all that had happened since, Jia Zheng from outside the door-curtain asked after the health of his daughter, and she in turn paid her respects.

With tears she told him, “Simple farmers who live on pickles and dress in homespun at least know the joys of family life together. What pleasure can I take in high rank and luxury when we are separated like this?”

With tears too he replied, “Your subject, poor and obscure, little dreamed that our flock of common pigeons and crows would ever be blessed with a phoenix. Thanks to the Imperial favor and the virtue of our ancestors, your Noble Highness embodies the finest essences of nature and the accumulated merit of our forbears—such fortune has attended my wife and myself....

“Your Noble Highness must not grieve your precious heart in concern for your ageing parents. We beg you to take better care of your own health. Be cautious, circumspect, diligent and respectful. Honor the Emperor and serve him well, so as to prove yourself not ungrateful for His Majesty’s bountiful goodness and great kindness.”

Then it was Yuanchun’s turn to urge her father to devote himself to affairs of state, look after his health and dismiss all anxiety regarding her....

Madam Yu and Xifeng stepped forward then to announce, “The banquet is ready. We beg Your Highness to favour us with your presence.”...

Accompanied by all the rest she walked into the Garden, where the magnificent sights were lit up by lanterns....They strolled, mounting pavilions, crossing streams, climbing miniature hills and enjoying the view from various points. All the buildings were distinctively furnished, and each corner had such fresh, unusual features that Yuanchun was lavish with her praise and approval. But she cautioned them:

“You mustn’t be so extravagant in the future. This is far too much!”

When they reached the main reception palace she desired them to dispense with ceremony and take their seats. It was a sumptuous banquet...They then left the banqueting hall to visit the places Yuanchun had not yet seen, among them a Buddhist convent set among hills, where she washed her hands before going in to burn incense and

worship Buddha... And here she gave additional gifts to the Buddhist nuns and Daoist priestesses.

Soon a eunuch knelt to report that the list of gifts was ready for her approval. She read it through, found it satisfactory, and gave orders that the presents should be distributed. This was done by the eunuchs.

The Lady Dowager received two *ruyi*<sup>3</sup> sceptres, one of gold, the other of jade; a staff made of aloeswood; a chaplet of sandalwood beads; four lengths of Imperial satin with designs signifying wealth, nobility and eternal youth; four lengths of silk with designs signifying good fortune and long life; ten bars of gold with designs signifying “May Your Wishes Come True”, and ten silver bars with fish and other designs to symbolize felicity and abundance.

Lady Xing and Lady Wang received the same gifts with the exception of the scepters, staff and chaplet.

Xia Jing, Jia She and Jia Zheng each received two new books of His Majesty’s own composition, two cases of rare ink-sticks, four goblets, two of gold and two of silver, and lengths of satin identical with those described above.

Baochai, Daiyu and the other girls each received one new book, a rare mirror and two pairs of gold and silver trinkets of a new design.

Baoyu received the same.

Jia Lan received one gold and one silver necklet, a pair of gold and a pair of silver medallions.

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<sup>3</sup> Considered to have magical properties.



To Madam Yu, Li Wan and Xifeng were given two gold and two silver medallions and four lengths of silk.

In addition, twenty-four lengths of satin and a hundred strings of newly minted cash were allotted to the women-servants and maids in attendance on the Lady Dowager, Lady Wang and the girls.

Jia Zhen, Jia Lian, Jia Huan and Jia Rong each received one length of satin and a pair of gold medallions.

A hundred rolls of variegated satin, a thousand taels of gold and silver, with various delicacies and wine from the Palace were given to those in both mansions responsible for the construction and maintenance of the Garden, the furnishing and upkeep of the various houses in the Garden, the theatre management and the preparation of lanterns. Five hundred strings of newly minted cash were also given as largesse to the cooks, actresses and jugglers.

It was nearly three in the morning by the time all had expressed their thanks, and the eunuch in charge announced that it was time to leave. At once Yuanchun's eyes filled with tears again, but forcing a smile she clasped the hands of her grandmother and mother and could not bring herself to let them go.

“Don't worry about me,” she begged them. “Just take good care of yourselves. Thanks to the Emperor's kindness you can now come to the palace once a month to see me, so we shall have many chances to meet again. There is no need to be upset. If next year by Imperial grace I'm allowed another visit home, you must promise not to be so extravagant.”

The Lady Dowager and other women were sobbing too bitterly to make any reply. But although Yuanchun could hardly bear to leave, she could not disobey the Imperial regulations and had no alternative but to re-enter her palanquin which carried her away.

The whole household did their best to console the Lady Dowager and Lady Wang as they helped them out of the Garden.

Source: Hsueh-chin Tsao and Ngo Kao. *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Trans. Hsien-yi Yang and Gladys Yang. Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 1996 edition. 114–126.