

Document 3.6: Excerpts from “A Worthless Son Receives a Fearful Flogging,” *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 of 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.

An old maid-servant came panting up to [Baochai and Xiren].

“Just imagine!” she gasped. “That girl Jinchuan, for no reason at all, has drowned herself in the well.”

Xiren gave a start.

“Which Jinchuan?”

“How many Jinchuans are there? The girl who worked for the mistress, of course. The other day, we don’t know why, she was dismissed. She wept and sobbed at home but no one took any notice, till they found she’d disappeared. Just now one of the water-carriers was drawing water from that well in the southeast corner when he discovered a corpse. He fetched people to get it out, and it was Jinchuan. Her family’s trying frantically to bring her round, but of course it’s too late.”

“This is rather odd!” exclaimed Baochai.

Xiren nodded and sighed, and the thought of her friendship with Jinchuan made tears run down her cheeks....

All was strangely quiet in Lady Wang's apartments, where she sat in the inner chamber shedding tears all by herself. Not wanting to mention the maid's suicide, Baochai sat by her aunt in silence until asked where she had come from. "From the garden," was her reply.

"Did you see your Cousin Bao?"

"Yes I saw him just now going out in formal clothes, but I don't know where he's gone."

Lady Wang nodded tearfully. "Did you hear this extraordinary business about Jinchuan suddenly drowning herself in the well?"

"Why should she do a thing like that for no reason? It's very strange."

"The other day she broke something of mine, and in a fit of anger I struck her and sent her away. I was meaning to punish her for a couple of days and then to have her fetched back. I'd no idea she'd fly into such a passion she'd jump into the well. This is all my fault."

"You feel that way, auntie, because you're so kind-hearted. But I can't believe she drowned herself in a tantrum. She was playing by the well, more likely, and fell in. After being rather confined in your rooms she'd want to play around once she left, stands to reason. How could she work herself into such a passion? If she did, that was very foolish. She doesn't deserve any pity."

Lady Wang nodded.

"But even if you're right," she sighed, "I still feel bad about it."

“Don’t take it so much to heart, auntie. If you feel bad about it, just give them a few extra taels of silver for her burial and you’ll be doing all a kind mistress could.”...

Baoyu had been cut to the heart by the news that her disgrace had driven Jinchuan to suicide. He had nothing to say in reply to his mother’s scolding, but Baochai’s arrival gave him a chance to slip out. He wandered aimlessly along, his hands behind his back, hanging his head and sighing, until he found himself by the front hall. He was skirting the door-screen when as ill luck would have it he bumped full tilt into someone who shouted to him to stop.

Baoyu started and, looking up, saw to his dismay that it was no other than his father. He had to stand aside respectfully gasping with fright.

“Why are you moping like this?” demanded Jia Zheng. “It took you a long time to come out when Yucun asked for you; and when you did come, you had nothing spirited or cheerful to say but looked quite down in the mouth, the picture of gloom. And now you’re sighing again. What have *you* to moan about? Is anything wrong? Why are you carrying on in this way?”

Baoyu normally had a ready tongue, but now he was so distressed by Jinchuan’s death that he wished he could follow her straight to the other world. He heard not a word his father said but just stood there in a daze. His stupefied silence—so unlike Baoyu—exasperated Jia Zheng, who had not to begin with been angry....

[The prince’s chief steward explains that the prince is very upset because his favorite palace actor left. They have reports that Baoyu is hiding him in the family compound.]

[The chief steward] concluded his speech with a bow. Alarmed and scandalized, Jia Zheng summoned Baoyu, who hurried in without knowing why he was wanted.

“You scoundrel!” thundered his father. “Not content with shirking your studies at home, you commit such wicked crimes outside! Jiguan is in service of Prince Zhongshun; how dare a wretch like you lure him away and bring calamity on me?”

Baoyu on hearing this was consternated.

“I know nothing about it,” he cried. “I’ve never even heard the name Jiguan, let alone lured him away.”

He burst into tears.

Before Jia Zheng could speak again the chief steward said with a sardonic smile: “It is useless to keep it a secret, sir. Tell us whether he is hiding here or where else he has gone. A prompt avowal will save us trouble and win you our gratitude.”

Still Baoyu denied any knowledge of the matter. “You may have been misinformed, I’m afraid,” he muttered.

The steward gave a scornful laugh.

“Why deny it when we have proof? What good can it do you to force me to speak out before your noble father? If you never heard of this actor, how is it that you wear his red sash round your waist?”

Baoyu was thunderstruck and stood aghast. “How did they find out?” he wondered. “If they’ve even found out such secrets, it’s not much use trying to keep the rest from them. Better send him off before he does any more blabbing.”

So he said, “If you know so much, sir, how is it you are ignorant of something as important as his purchase of property? I am told that twenty *li* to the east of the city, in a

place called Sandalwood Castle, he bought a house and a few *mu* of land. I should think he might possibly be there.”

The chief steward’s face brightened. “He must be there if you say so. I shall go and investigate. If we find him, well and good. If not, we shall come back for further enlightenment.”

He took a hasty leave.

Jia Zheng’s eyes were nearly bursting from his head with rage. As he followed the chief steward out, he turned to order Baoyu:

“Stay where you are. I shall deal with you presently.” He escorted the steward all the way to the gate, and was just starting back when he saw Jia Huan racing past....

The sight of his father paralysed Huan with fright. He pulled up short, hanging his head.

“What are you rushing about for?” demanded Jia Zheng.... As he shouted for the servants who accompanied Huan to school, the boy saw a chance to divert his father’s anger.

“I wasn’t running to begin with,” he said. “Not until I passed the well where that maid drowned herself. Her head’s swollen up like this, and her body’s all bloated from soaking in the water. It was such a horrible sight that I ran away as fast as ever I could.”

Jia Zheng was astounded. “What maid here had any reason to throw herself into a well?” he wondered. “Such a thing has never happened before in this house. Since the time of our ancestors we have always treated our subordinates well. Of late, though, I’ve neglected household affairs and those in charge must have abused their power, resulting in this calamitous suicide. If word of this gets out, it will disgrace our ancestors’ good name.”

He called for Jia Lian, Lai Da and Lai Xing. Some pages were going to fetch them when Huan stepped forward and caught hold of his father's gown, then fell on his knees.

"Don't be angry, sir!" he begged. "No one knows about this except those in my lady's apartment. I heard my mother say...."

He stopped and looked around, and Jia Zheng understood. At a glance from him the servants on both sides withdrew.

"My mother told me," Huan went on in a whisper, "that the other day Brother Baoyu grabbed hold of Jinchuan in my lady's room and tried to rape her. When she wouldn't let him, he beat her. That's why she drowned herself in a fit of passion."

Before he had finished Jia Zheng was livid with fury.

"Fetch Baoyu! Quick!" he roared.

He strode to his study fuming, "If anybody tries to stop me *this* time, I'll make over to him my official insignia and property and let him serve Baoyu! How can I escape blame? I'll shave off these few remaining of hairs and retire to a monastery, there to atone for disgracing my ancestors by begetting such a monster."

His secretaries and attendants bit their lips or fingers in dismay and hastily withdrew as they heard him raging at Baoyu again. Then Jia Zheng, panting hard, his cheeks wet with tears, sat stiffly erect in his chair.

"Bring Baoyu in!" he bellowed. "Fetch the heavy rod! Tie him up! Close all the doors. Anyone who sends word to the inner apartments will be killed on the spot."

The servants had to obey. Some pages went to fetch Baoyu.

Baoyu knew he was in for trouble when ordered by his father to wait, but he had no idea of the tale Huan had since told. He paced helplessly up and down the hall, wishing someone would carry the news to the inner apartments; but it so happened that nobody was about—even Beiming had disappeared. As he was looking round anxiously, an old nanny finally appeared. He seized on her as if she were a treasure.

“Go in quick!” he cried. “Tell them the master’s going to beat me. Do hurry! This is urgent!” He was too terrified to speak distinctly and the old woman being hard of hearing, mistook the word “urgent” for “drowning.”

“She chose drowning herself,” she told him soothingly. “What does it matter to you?”

Her deafness made Baoyu frantic.

“Go and get my page to come,” he begged.

“It’s over now. Over and done with. And the mistress has given them clothes and silver too. Don’t fret.”

Baoyu was stamping his foot in desperation when his father’s servants arrived and he had perforce to go with them.

Jia Zheng’s eyes blazed at the sight of him. He did not even ask his son what he meant by playing about outside and exchanging gifts with actors, or by neglecting his studies at home and attempting to rape his mother’s maid.

“Gag him!” he roared. “Beat him to death!”

The attendants dared not disobey. They thrust Baoyu down on a bench and gave him a dozen strokes with the heavy rod. His father, thinking these strokes too light, kicked aside the man with the rod and snatched it up himself. With clenched teeth he rained down

dozens of vicious blows until his secretaries, foreseeing serious consequences, stepped forward to intervene. But Jia Zheng refused to listen.

“Ask *him* if such conduct as his can be pardoned,” he cried. “You’re the ones who’ve been spoiling him. When it comes to this do you still intercede for him? Will you still persist when he commits regicide or parricide?”

Realizing from this tirade that their master was quite beside himself with rage, they hurried away, feeling constrained to send word to the inner apartments. Lady Wang dared not tell her mother-in-law at once. Having dressed in haste she ran towards the study, regardless of who was about, while men-servants and secretaries fled out of her way in confusion.

His wife’s arrival roused Jia Zheng to still greater fury and he belaboured his son yet more mercilessly. The two servants holding Baoyu instantly withdrew, but the boy was already incapable of moving. Before his father could beat him any further, Lady Wang seized the rod with both hands.

“This is the end!” roared Jia Zheng. “You’re determined to be the death of me today.”

“I know Baoyu deserves a beating,” sobbed Lady Wang. “But you mustn’t wear yourself out, sir. It’s a sweltering day and the old lady isn’t well. Killing Baoyu is a small matter, but should anything happen to the old lady that would be serious.”

“Spare me this talk,” Jia Zheng gave a scornful laugh. “I’ve already proved an unfilial son by begetting this degenerate. When I discipline him all of you protect him. I’d better strangle him now to avoid further trouble.”

With that he called for a rope. Lady Wang hastily threw her arms around him.

“You’re right to chastise your son, sire, but have pity on your wife!” she cried. “I’m getting on for fifty and this wretch is my only son. If you insist on making an example of him, how dare I dissuade you? But if you kill him today, it means you want *me* to die too. If strangle him you must, take this rope and strangle me first, then strangle him. Mother and son, we won’t dare hold it against you, and at least I shall have some support in the nether world.”

She threw herself down on Baoyu and gave way to a storm of weeping.

Jia Zheng heaved a long sigh and sat down, his tears falling like rain. Lady Wang, clasping Baoyu in her arms, saw that his face was white, his breathing weak, and his green linen underclothes were soaked with blood. When she undid them she cried out in distress at the sight of his buttocks and legs beaten black and blue, with every inch bruised or bleeding.

“Ah, my poor child!” she wailed....

In the middle of this commotion a maid suddenly announced, “The old lady is coming!”

And they heard her quavering voice outside the window, “Kill me first and then kill him. That will be a clean sweep.”

Jia Zheng rose in dismay and distress to greet his mother, who entered on a maid’s arm, gasping for breath. At once he stepped forward to bow respectfully.

“Why should you vex yourself, mother, and come over on such a hot day? If you have any instructions, just send for your son.”

The Lady Dowager halted to catch her breath. “Were you addressing me?” she demanded sternly. “Yes, I have some instructions. The pity is I’ve borne no filial son to whom I can speak.”

Appalled by this rebuke, Jia Zheng fell on his knees, tears in his eyes.

“If your son disciplines his son, it is for the honour of our ancestors,” he pleaded. “How can I bear your reproaches?”

The Lady Dowager spat in disgust.

“So you can’t bear one word from me, eh? Then how does Baoyu bear your lethal rod? You talk of disciplining your son for the honour of your ancestors, but how did your father discipline you in the past?”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t grieve, mother,” he begged. “I was wrong to lose my temper. I shall never beat him again.”

The old lady snorted. “You needn’t try to work off your rage on me. It’s not for me to stop you beating your son. I suppose you’re tired of us all, and we’d better leave now to save trouble all round.” She ordered the servants to prepare sedan-chairs and horses, telling them, “Your mistress and Baoyu are going back to Nanjing with me this instant.”

The attendants had to make a show of complying with her orders. Then the Lady Dowager turned to her daughter-in-law.

“Don’t cry,” she urged Lady Wang. “Baoyu’s still a child now and you love him; but when he grows up and becomes a high official he may not have any consideration for his mother either. Better not be too fond of him now if you want to avoid heartache later.”

When Jia Zheng heard this he knocked his head on the floor. “What place is there for me on earth, mother,” he wailed, “if you reproach me like this?”

The Lady Dowager smiled sarcastically.

“You’re making it clear that there’s no place for *me*, and yet *you* start complaining. We are simply going away to save you trouble and leave you free to beat anyone you please.”

She ordered attendants to pack up at once and make ready for the journey, while Jia Zheng kowtowed and earnestly begged her forgiveness.

But while storming at her son the old lady was worried about her grandson, and now she hurried over to look at the boy. She was further pained and enraged by the severity of his flogging today. Claspng him to her she wept bitterly. Lady Wang and Xifeng were hard put to it to soothe her. Then some of the maids who had assembled there took Baoyu’s arms, meaning to help him out.

“Stupid creatures!” scolded Xifeng. “Have you no eyes? He’s in no state to walk. Go and fetch that wicker couch.”

They hastily did as they were told. Baoyu was laid on the couch and carried to the old lady’s room accompanied by his grandmother and mother. As the Lady Dowager was still incensed Jia Zheng dared not withdraw but followed them, aware from a glance at Baoyu that this time he had flogged him too severely. He turned to his wife, who was now lamenting even more bitterly. “My child, my darling!” she wailed....

These lamentations interspersed with reproaches against her “worthless son” dismayed Jia Zheng and made him repent that he had beaten Baoyu so mercilessly. But when he tried to mollify his mother she rounded on him with tears in her eyes.

“Why don’t you leave us? What are you hanging around for? Won’t you be satisfied until you’ve made sure that he dies?”

Then Jia Zheng was forced to withdraw.

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. 195–207.