The Confucian Concept of Self in the Classic Chinese Novels

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There are many good reasons for rejecting the use of the term "novel" (or, novella, roman, etc.) when one describes the great works of full-length Chinese fiction in Western languages. The most obvious of these is the simple fact that the word 'novel' refers to a very specific literary genre that emerged in Europe during the eighteenth century and rose to its position as the predominant Western literary mode by the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Attempts by scholars of comparative literature to formulate a general critical 'theory' of the European and American novel have yielded only a very vague set of defining characteristics shared by this broad range of diverse works over three centuries of development and through a variety of distinctive national literatures; but, still, there remains a fairly consistent core of common aesthetic features that define the novel as a unique medium of Western cultural expression. In this light, it would appear to be simply inaccurate to apply this same term to examples of prose fiction belonging to any other historical periods or separate literary traditions.

Despite the persuasive logic of the above argument for restricting the use of the term 'novel' exclusively to Western literary history, I have attempted in several earlier essays to defend the common practice in Sinological writings of referring to various examples of Ming and Qing fiction as the traditional Chinese 'novel' (The same point applies, of

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course, when one uses the Chinese xiaoshuo—or the Japanese shōsetsu and the Korean soseol—as equivalents of the Western term.) I have tried to show that, from a variety of perspectives, the form of full-length xiaoshuo that appeared as early as the mid-Ming period in China conforms to some of the basic presuppositions of Western novel theory. These may be summarized in the following points:

1. The connection drawn by a number of scholars between the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century Europe and its broader background in social and cultural history—especially as an outgrowth of the great historical movements of urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization that were changing the shape of the continent in precisely the same period—are strikingly matched by the flourishing of certain economic and cultural factors in late-Ming China, centering on the Yangtze Delta region, that served as the backdrop for a comparable rise of colloquial fiction and drama as expressions of the aesthetic sensibilities and intellectual directions of a new age.

2. Where the Western novel is often viewed as the culmination of a long continuous narrative tradition stretching back to the epics of the ancient Mediterranean world and then passing through the great romances of medieval and renaissance Europe, the Ming-Qing novel reflects a separate but parallel set of roots in its own tradition of classical narrative—in the Chinese case primarily taking the form of the great monuments of historical prose (from the Zuozhuan and Shiji to the Zizhitongjian).

3. Despite enormous differences in linguistic medium and literary style, the Chinese ‘novels’ share with their European counterparts a large number of formal and aesthetic features. These include patterns of structural design based upon sequences of chapter-units within an overall symmetrical shape, rhetorical devices emphasizing an ironic disjunction between the conflicting perspectives of narrator, characters, and readers, and many other areas of common form.

All of these points taken together, in my view, provide strong justification for speaking of the great works of traditional Chinese fiction with the same critical terminology—and applying many of the same modes of literary analysis—that we are accustomed to using in the study of the
early-modern and modern Western novel.

There remains, however, one aspect of Western novel theory that presents a difficult challenge to the idea of a single genre of prose fiction shared cross-culturally by the great masterpieces of the novel both in Europe and in the high civilizations of Asia. This is the tendency of recent literary scholarship to shift its primary focus from the function of the novel as a medium for the narration of external experiences and actions, to its significance as a semiotic vessel for the exploration of inner ‘selfhood.’ This ‘inward turn of narrative,’ as the literary historian Erich Kahler once termed it, helps to explain the prominence of two particular sub-genres in the formation of the aesthetic canons of the European novel, both revolving around the central theme of the development of consciousness: the bildungsroman model depicting the process of youthful coming-of-age, and the picaresque, presenting observations of the world through the eyes of a wandering social outcast. The essential ambiguity of meaning generated in such works through the juxtaposition of contradictory perspectives of subjectivity and objectivity—as well as the bifocal vision of innocence and experience—also gives special importance to the characteristic use of irony as the basic rhetorical mode of expression in classic Western fiction.

It is not difficult to refute the common view of traditional Chinese fiction as lacking in psychological depth—as being restricted to the superficial recounting of personal entanglements and episodic adventures. Certainly, anyone who thinks that Sanguozhi yanyi and Shuihu zhuan are nothing more than the retelling of cycles of martial exploits, that Xiyou ji is simply a collection of the comic adventures of delightful supernatural characters, or that Hong lou meng and Jin Ping Mei present just a series of romantic or lustful encounters between amorous young men and beautiful women, must have read these profound texts in the most shallow manner, or else, at best, must be viewing them through the filter of common versions of these narratives known from storytelling and the popular stage. As I will argue below, each of these works—plus certain other outstanding examples of serious Ming and Qing fiction—represents as deep an exploration of the inner layers of human motivation and fulfillment as the great novels of Goethe, Sterne, Flaubert, Dostoievski, Proust and Joyce in the West. Like these monuments of the European novel, the master-
works of classic Chinese fiction also define the mentality of their own
time and place: here, the same preoccupation with individual authentic-
ity and ironic self-expression that give such a special character to late-
Ming and early-Qing painting, poetry, and literary criticism.

If the principal difficulty in establishing the generic equivalence of
classic fiction in China and the West is not due to any simple dichotomy
between exteriority and interiority of narrative focus, it may perhaps lie
in the corresponding links between literary expression and its intellectu-
al foundations in the two cultural spheres. In Europe, the rise of the
novel through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflects a chain of
intellectual developments beginning as early as Descartes, running from
the ‘Empiricist’ philosophy of Locke and Hume to the ‘phenomenology’
of Husserl and Heideger and the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and
Lacan. Given the consistent emphasis through all of these diverse intel-
lectual movements on the common denominator of the autonomous
Self as the essential ground of human existence, it has seemed natural to
associate the manner in which the novel as a genre tends to delve
depthly into the problematic relation of Self and Other with these partic-
tular strains of European intellectual history.

To draw an analogous correspondence between the exploration of
inner experience in the classic Ming/Qing novels and the broader
background of traditional Chinese thought presents a much greater
challenge. True, a great many of these works appear to present a rather
explicit philosophical ‘message’ in their use of Buddhist frameworks of
karmic retribution and spiritual enlightenment, or Daoist images of
wordly vanity and transcendence. But, in the final analysis, these
schemes of potential meaning usually remain inconsequential, function-
ing more as aesthetic than as doctrinal elements in the overall literary
design of each text. If we wish to look for the intellectual foundations of
traditional Chinese fiction, therefore, we must turn our attention back to
the more fundamental ground of late-Imperial thought: that is, the
syncretic blend of post-Song moral philosophy (lixue) centered upon
the core Confucian teachings in the Four Books, and enriched by a
generous admixture of the metaphysical speculation and aesthetic
orientation of the two ‘heterodox’ schools—in a word, what is known in
Western Sinological writings as Neo-Confucianism. Because this essen-
tial intellectual groundwork of traditional Chinese literary culture is so
diffuse and pervasive, it is generally hard to map out specific points of correspondence between any given philosophical positions and the particular configurations of fictional works. Moreover, attempts to read Ming/Qing fiction as a reflection of their contemporary intellectual milieu face an even greater obstacle in the common misconception of Confucian thought as a body of learning concerned exclusively with external, interpersonal definitions of man’s place in the universe, sets of moral precepts for virtuous behavior, patterns of harmonious social and political organization and the observance of archaic ritual norms. All this seems to provide very thin intellectual support for the sort of exploration of inner consciousness that characterizes the greatest examples of the novel in both Europe and China.

This view, however, derives from a fundamental misreading of the basic Confucian texts, and a simplistic misinterpretation of the prevailing world-view of post-Song Chinese thought. A closer look at the Confucian foundations of the Ming-Qing literary mentality reveals a far richer and more nuanced ground for probing the depths of selfhood in the fictional masterworks of the period. It has been observed by many scholars of late-imperial literati culture in China that the painters, dramatists, novelists and essayists of the period frequently reflect a direct influence of those strains of contemporary thought associated with what is commonly known as the ‘school of mind’ (xinxue). A number of leading literary figures of the time reveal in both their creative works and their collected essays a direct and conscious affinity with notable proponents of this potent force of contemporary philosophy. Among the most visible examples of this type of explicit connection we may mention Tang Xianzu’s special relation to the ideas of Lo Rufang, and Li Zhi’s outspoken defense of certain ‘left-wing’ followers of the thought of Wang Yangming, such as Wang Gen and He Xinyin. Attempts have also been made to draw a direct link between the exploration of human motivation in works such as Honglou meng and Rulin waishi and the ideas of Dai Zhen and other early Qing thinkers, but these connections remain for the most part marginal and inconsequential.

A much firmer foundation for reconstructing the intellectual underpinnings of the classic Chinese novels comes into view when we step back to the broader perspective of Confucian learning—in the vision of
the ‘Four Books’ that comprised the unchallenged core of elite education, the basic texts of the imperial examination system, and the primary focus for philosophical discourse over the last thousand years of Chinese history. Beneath the surface of what may appear to be a narrow focus in these texts on the practice of personal virtue and the instilling of social order, we can easily perceive a central preoccupation with the key Confucian concept of ‘self-cultivation.’ The expression ‘self-cultivation’ may be a bit misleading here. In this English formulation, as well as in its common retranslation into Chinese as ziwo xiuyang, it seems to describe only the process of polishing one’s personal qualities and putting them into practice in the performance of Confucian duties. But the true significance of this concept—and thus its crucial importance for the representation of individual fulfillment in prose fiction—may be captured more accurately in the equivalent terms in the language of Confucian learning: the expressions xiu shen and xiu xin.

Taken alone, the first of these terms (xiushen) may still sound restricted to the perfection of the external marks of one’s personal character. But it is only in the dynamic interface between these two paradigmatic dimensions of Confucian cultivation—shen and xin—that the full meaning of this crucial concept emerges. We can see this most clearly in the best-known formulation of the model of self-cultivation outlined in the canonic Daxue text. In the famous opening paradigm of the first section of the Daxue, and in its elaboration in the subsequent ‘chapters’ of the treatise, the phase of cultivation labelled as xiushen is posed as the essential core of the entire enterprise of individual self-perfection (...). But what is called xiushen does not stand alone as a separate area of Confucian fulfillment; it is positioned midway along a continuous sequence of phases of self-realization, from the internal ordering of the mind to the actualization of one’s inner capacity in the external ordering of one’s relations at each level of human interaction: the immediate circle of the family and the broader spheres of the state and the entire world. At the other end of this continuum, the ordering of one’s internal self is divided analytically into the ‘heart’ or ‘mind’ (xin), and the consciousness (yi). I understand the distinction here between xin and yi to refer to what we might call the ‘outer consciousness’—comprising one’s emotive and cognitive interaction with the outside world, on one hand, and the ‘inner consciousness,’ the seat of one’s fundamen-
tal seeds of motivation, on the other. Significantly, at the furthest end of this spectrum, in the deepest layers of selfhood, we find a complete reversal of orientation. Here the innermost core of the self is redirected outwards: and it is redefined as a receptacle for knowledge of the outside world (zhizhi), and as a capacity to ‘reach out’ to all the ‘things’ of objective existence through the conceptual grid of correlative thinking (as I understand the difficult concept of gewu).

From this concentrated paradigm in the first chapter of the Daxue and parallel discussions in the Zhongyong—and from innumerable debates on their essential message in later Confucian philosophical writings, we gain an understanding of the concept of self-cultivation as a dual process of internal self-perfection and external actualization in the grand enterprise of ordering the world of human relations. This definition of Confucian cultivation rests upon a profoundly bifocal view of the individual self: as a single integral whole comprising both the inner dimension of one’s innate moral capacities and personal attributes, and the outer dimension of one’s interaction with other men and the surrounding world. In the canonic formulations of the Daxue, Zhongyong and other texts this may sound like an abstract idealization of seamless harmony, but in ‘real life’—in the concrete circumstances of actual human existence explored so exhaustively in the medium of narrative fiction—this gives rise to the endless struggles and internal contradictions I have called the ‘paradox of self.’ Such conflicts are inevitable, because the fixation in Confucian thought on the all-important aim of perfecting one’s personal character, by placing its crucial focus on individual fulfillment, constantly threatens to be distorted into self-centered and self-indulgent individualistic tendencies. It easily leads to replacing the universal moral ground of ideal selfhood (gongli) with the pursuit of selfish desire (siyu), precisely what is condemned most vehemently in Confucian teachings from Mencius to Zhu Xi.

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Now what does all this have to do with the representation of human character in the classic Chinese fictional works of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries? My argument is that what distinguishes the great Chinese novels from popular tales of love and adventure is
precisely their capacity to probe this problematic core of the experience of self, much like the primary examples of serious European fiction. Within the context of traditional Chinese civilization, this issue is fundamentally conditioned by the intellectual and emotional tension between the Confucian commitment to social order and the Buddhist and Daoist yearning for spiritual transcendence—resulting in a profoundly ambiguous view of human fulfillment. This tension often finds its fullest expression in the explicit and implicit irony that constitutes the rhetorical ground of the best of Ming and Qing prose narrative. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to take a closer look at a few leading examples of classic Chinese fiction from this perspective of the ‘paradox of selfhood,’ in order to support my contention that, on this point as well, these works can be meaningfully classified alongside of the greatest exemplars of the Western novel genre.

Turning to the earliest ‘masterworks’ of the Ming novel: *Sanguozhi yanyi*, *Shuihuzhuan*, and *Xiyouji*, we must begin by stressing the fact that each of these three texts, in their fullest and most sophisticated editions appearing over the course of the sixteenth century, represents a very radical transformation and elaboration of the traditional story-cycles and popular stage pieces to which they are genetically related. Among the wide range of structural and rhetorical refinements observed in these full-length versions, it is precisely in their tendency to plumb the depths of human motivation that they diverge most visibly from the beloved hero-cycles of the popular tradition.

This sharp disparity between the ‘literati novel’ and its popular sources is very evident in the case of *Sanguozhi yanyi*. Here, a ‘revisionist’ reformulation of the well-known exploits of the Three Kingdoms heroes injects a strong note of ironic undercutting into its retelling of popular episodes from oral storytelling and the popular stage, and returns to the sharply critical perspective of the official history of the *Sanguozhi* chronicle and other historical sources. In its overall design, *Sanguo* traces the inexorable course of disunion and reunification in an age of political chaos according to standard models of ‘dynastic cycle’ thinking—as summed up in the proverbial opening line: ‘… what has long been divided must eventually be united; what has been long united must in the end be divided’ … ¼×·µ½, ·µ½. Within the vast sweep of this framework of inevitability, the most memorable
moments of individual greatness—the martial prowess and fortitude of Guan Yu—μεâ, the sheer physical force of Zhang Fei—íåÞ«, the strategic brilliance of Zhuge Liang—ð³ÊçÕÕ—are reduced to points of light in a sea of darkness. As the long narrative rolls toward the collapse of all the vain dreams of empire in the hearts of the principal heroes, this sense of historical determinism is raised to an even higher power of futility amidst suggestions of a grand design of Heaven beyond the control of the small human players briefly crossing the stage—a sentiment expressed in another proverbial statement: ‘To plan great deeds is in the hands of man, but to bring them to fruition is only in the hands of Heaven’—and reinforced by a number of symbolic passages expressing in Buddhist terms the emptiness of all human striving.

But the real substance of this fictional masterwork takes shape neither on the level of heroic action in the popular mold, nor at the level of universal determinism or metaphysical speculation. Rather, the body of the narrative is occupied with the slow unfolding of the limitations of human capacity in the actions of both major and minor participants in the drama of the final collapse of the Han Dynasty. This is where the issue of ‘internal selfhood’ begins to emerge in a text that often seems exclusively concerned with external deeds and their consequences. Although the reader of the novel witnesses a series of examples of heroic capacity drawn from the popular tradition, it is ultimately the failure to realize this heroic promise—the gap between ambition and fulfillment—that constitutes the principal theme of the book. Thus Zhang Fei’s towering strength and impetuous spirit are shown again and again to be fatally destructive to the Shu-Han cause and ultimately to himself. And by the same token, Guan Yu’s nearly Homeric qualities of godlike force of arms and will are gradually outweighed by a number of scenes in which he is trapped in circumstances of personal obligation that effectively neutralize his epic achievements. This essential theme becomes particularly visible in the later phases of the narrative, where we see both Zhang Fei and Guan Yu grow progressively older and weaker, until each of these invincible heroes is rendered practically helpless and each is finally snared in the net of his own flaws of character: for Zhang Fei, his violent temper, for Guan Yu, his unbending pride. Even Zhuge Liang is finally laid low by the exhaustion of his powers and by his arrogant underestimation of his foes.
The same holds true for the central figures of the narrative, Liu Bei and Cao Cao. In a number of early scenes in the novel, Liu Bei’s exercise of charismatic leadership marks him with the stamp of the ideal compassionate ruler associated with this figure in the popular imagination; while Cao Cao’s uncanny capacity to exploit circumstances and survive, and his uncommon ability to judge and ‘use’ the talents of other men, earn him begrudging respect as a ‘hero in the service of evil’ (jianxiong). Significantly, both of the two principal ‘heroes’ of the book are distinguished by qualities of inner spirit rather than impressive external attributes of physical strength or martial prowess. But in each case, they are trapped by their own self-image—what I would describe as an exaggerated sense of personal worth. Liu Bei’s sense of predestined greatness propels him to the brink of triumph, but it also leads him into a series of morally compromised moves—for example, his ruthless elimination of his kinsmen Liu Biao and Liu Qi in his rise to power as King of Shu and contender for the imperial throne. Cao Cao’s singleminded pursuit of personal grandeur also causes him to sully his reasonable claim to hegemony with a chain of acts of cruelty committed in the name of hollow slogans of dynastic legitimacy. I would like to suggest that in each of these central examples, the primary issue for the novelist—once again, in sharp contrast to the popular story cycles—comes to focus upon the self-destructive consequences of delusions of unbounded self-importance. To give the most striking instance, Liu Bei’s insistence on remaining faithful to his own self-image as a man of personal honor (yì), immortalized in the ‘Peach-Garden Oath’ and other popular episodes, ultimately becomes the primary cause for the failure of his grand enterprise when he launches the ill-conceived campaign of revenge for the death of Guan Yu that spells the end of the Shu imperial dream. In traditional terms, this may be expressed as a clash between a sense of honor defined in narrowly personal terms (xiaoyì) and a self-sacrificing commitment to the greater good (dayì). In light of the novel’s preoccupation with self-destructive impulses and inner weakness, I believe it is very significant that the author expends so much creative effort on episodes illustrating the vulnerability of the greatest heroes of the Three Kingdoms story to age, infirmity, and sexual temptation—the weak inner core of external pride and hubris. I believe that such unforgettable moments as the deflation of
Cao Cao’s triumphal spirit at the banquet before the Battle of the Red Cliffs, and the prophetic extinguishing of Zhuge Liang’s lamps shortly before his death, do not simply express the ethical truism that the proud must fall, but probe much deeper into the intrinsic limitations of individual heroic capacity.

I see much the same issue underlying the even more popular story-cycles of the 108 bandit-heroes in *Shuihuzhuan*. While most casual readers of *Shuihu* may tend to take it as simply a prose version of the heroic sagas of Robin Hood-type outlaws known to every child in China from oral storytelling and the popular stage—and certain late-Ming critics such as Li Zhi even proposed that these irrepressible figures may embody the spiritual ideal of the ‘childlike heart’ (*tongxin*)—a number of recent critics such as C.T. Hsia in the U.S. and Sun Shuyu in Hong Kong have pointed out the darker side of the ‘heroic’ mentality that emerges in the novel: its glorification of gratuitous violence, delight in mindless chaos, and troubling elements of misogyny and gang psychology. Viewed from the perspective of the general tendency of the novel as a genre to probe the issues of inner selfhood, however, I would like to emphasize the manner in which the fullest recensions of the narrative—the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century 100 and 120-chapter editions of *Zhongyi shuihuzhuan*—weave various strands of heroic material borrowed from popular and historical sources into a sharply ironic

In an earlier study on this subject, I have attempted to demonstrate the manner in which the compiler (or compilers) of the Ming novel version of the *Shuihu* stories juxtapose sequences of episodes in order to bring out a pattern of ironic cross-reflection between parallel examples of heroic capacity. For example, I see a clear sense of progression in the treatment in the novel of a series of heroes characterized as unruly, violent strongmen. This chain of figures begins with the amusing escapades of the ‘naked monk’ Lu Da, before turning to the more problematic and disturbing cases of Wu Song and Li Kui. In the Wu Song sequence that stretches over a ten-chapter span of the text (Chapter 23-32 in the original full editions), it is striking how the novel takes us from a light-hearted recounting of the famous tiger-killing episode directly into a series of scenes in which Wu Song’s violent rage (especially at the Yuanyanglou and Wugongling in Chapter
31) seem to express more his emotional vulnerability than his legendary strength and courage. By the time we come to the elaboration of the Li Kui figure after Chapter 38—in such unsettling scenes as the brutal killing of an innocent child in Chapter 51, in the name of cynically ‘recruiting’ an unwilling comrade, and other examples—it is clear that the focus has shifted to a more serious indictment of unchecked violent impulses. Significantly, the author of the novel version of Shuihuzhuan takes pains to put these negative portraits into relief by also developing a set of positive examples of human capacity, notably in the figures of Lu Junyi and especially Yan Qing, that set off by contrast the flawed image of mindless fury that characterizes some of these best-known examples of the violent type of huahenzhe heroes.

Once one has been sensitized to this method of reading the full-length Shuihuzhuan as an ironic deflation of popular myths and stereotypes, the portrait of the central figure in the Liangshan band takes on its fullest significance. The Song Jiang of the popular storytelling tradition, as well as in certain Yuan and Ming dramatic works, may be a paragon of personal charisma and leadership skills. But as in the case of Liu Bei in Sanguo, this charismatic figure is sharply undercut by his presentation in the novel version of the story, where incident after incident seems framed to bring out the essential flaws of his character. In view of the generally negative treatment of female figures in the novel, it is important to note the consistent theme of sexual vulnerability running through the depiction of Song Jiang’s character—from the tension and frustration underlying his unheroic killing of Yan Posi in Chapter 21, to his utter lack of grace and self-mastery in his two encounters with the lovely courtesan Li Shishi in the capital, nearly undermining the longstanding aim of the band to join forces with the dynasty against its internal and external enemies. In these and other examples, Song Jiang, like Liu Bei, is driven by an overblown sense of personal importance that seems to have more to do with the weakness of the inner self than with the pressure of external challenges. Here, the fine-sounding ideals of ‘loyalty’ and ‘valor’ (zhongyi) are distorted from the lofty motives of Chinese heroic spirit into the debased slogans of gang morality. In the end, the novel’s unflinching portrayal of the self-destructive aspect of this lower form of heroism is played out amidst a growing sense of futility and pointless loss, as the band is steadily decimated in
its last campaigns, leading (in all major versions of the text) only to its final betrayal and dissolution. Despite the presence of a few final scenes suggesting an appeal to the notion of cosmic emptiness as the ultimate ground of meaning, the body of the text is better understood as an exploration of the same issues of failed capacity and illusory self-image we have seen to underly the Ming novel version of *Sanguozhi yanyi*.

There is a vast difference between the various popular episodes associated with the story of the Tang monk Xuanzang’s journey to India—accompanied by his three marvelous disciples—in pursuit of Buddhist scriptures, and the complex allegorical narrative presented in the versions of the full-length novel *Xiyouji* first published in the second half of the sixteenth century. In these late-Ming versions, almost every character and every episode borrowed from the popular narrative tradition is subordinated to a strikingly original allegorical framework that gives new meanings to the specific details of the story. These meanings are clearly signposted in a variety of allegorical hints inserted in chapter titles, poems, and symbolic names of figures, places, and weapons, and they are presented fairly explicitly in certain scenes expressing strong philosophical implications—such as the preaching of Daoist formulas of salvation by the master Xuputi (Subodhi) in Chapter 2, or the full citation of the central teachings of the ‘Heart Sutra’ (*Xinjing*) in Chapter 19. For the reader who follows these signposts with proper attention, it becomes clear that the author of the novel has refashioned his borrowed narrative materials recounting the pilgrimage journey through exotic landscapes and thrilling, or humorous, adventures in order to bring out his message of a quest that is essentially one of the inner self, or ‘mind’ (*xin*). Practically every major episode includes abundant explicit and implicit indications from the ‘stilling of the mind-monkey’ (*dingxinyuan*) in Chapter 7, to the two ‘exiles of the mind’ (*fangxin*) in Chapters 27 and 56, among many other examples—to the effect that what is presented here as an allegorical pilgrimage really refers to an inner process of the cultivation of the Self. On top of this frame of meaning is overlaid a number of other sets of allegorical indicators—most noticeably Daoist terms of internal cultivation (literally, the ‘internal cinnabar’ *neidan*) of particular currency in late-Ming syncretic thinking that further define the essential core of the novel, beneath its entertaining surface narrative, as a serious exploration of the process of
ordering the inner consciousness.

To say that *Xiyouji* presents an allegorical journey of the mind does not automatically mean that its central focus is the same sort of ‘paradox of selfhood’ we have proposed as a central defining feature of the novel as a serious literary mode in both China and the West, because the basic structural outlines of the narrative seem to follow a predictable and unproblematic pattern of quest and attainment. But the pursuit of cultivated selfhood in this novel also remains deeply paradoxical in a number of senses, as it leaves unresolved some of the most fundamental questions about the nature of the internal quest: Is this a cumulative process or an instantaneous flash of revelation (analogous to the Buddhist concepts of gradual and sudden enlightenment)? Is the fulfillment of the goal a function of individual attainment, or does it reflect a final subordination to external powers of salvation?

One key to unlock answers to such questions may lie in the author’s use of overlapping sets of allegorical language drawn from all three ‘schools’ of late-Ming syncretic philosophical discourse to frame the central issue of ‘integration’ of the self. These terms, including ‘five elements’ (*wuxing* 勝) symbolism, *Yijing* hexagram lore, and other loaded expressions, project the idea of the collective ‘self’ of the pilgrimage band as a set of separate components within a single composite whole. The jealous rivalry between Sun Wukong 快 and Zhu Bajie 白 and the detached aloofness of Sha Heshang 砂, may account for much of the humorous surface of the narrative, but on the allegorical level these elements are gradually integrated into the deeper structure of a collective selfhood engaged in the process of self-perfection. Along this allegorical pathway, special meaning is given to those crucial episodes in which the primary obstacles to spiritual progress are conceived not as the inimical external forces of false prophets and demons, but rather as the destabilization of inner self-containment represented, for example, in such forms as scenes of sexual temptation and in the frequent instances of the Tang monk’s ‘excessive consciousness’ (*doxin* 豫) in moments of personal danger and discomfort.

The *Jin Ping Mei* marks a unique accomplishment among the ‘four masterworks of the Ming novel’ (the so-called *sida qishu* 史) in that this work—though it, too, is in a sense derived from the prior narrative of an episode in *Shuihuzhuan*—cannot be associated with any story-
cycle tradition or specific popular dramas. Rather, it is very clearly the unique and independent creation of a single author’s literary imagination. At the same time, however, we must draw a sharp distinction, here as well, between the ‘popular’ reading of the text as little more than a sensational revelation of the sordid details of life in a corrupt late-Ming household—especially, of course, in those sexual passages bordering on the pornographic, and the serious levels of deeper meaning that can be uncovered through a close reading and analysis of the work following the critical methodology of recent studies of the novel genre. Although Jin Ping Mei has been criticized for certain instances of ‘loose’ structure, a careful textual analysis reveals its highly complex interweaving of images and symbols and its subtle use of rhetorical effects to bring out these deeper layers of meaning. One of these significant patterns lies in the author’s coordination of the rise and fall of Ximen Qing as an autocratic ‘ruler’ in the microcosm of his own petty private world and the corresponding vision of the collapse of the Northern Song state gradually foreshadowed through the narrative and dramatically enacted in the closing scenes of the work. All of this is bracketed—as in the cases of Sanguozhi yanyi and Shuihuzhuan—with a Buddhist framework of karmic retribution and final emptiness that seems to provide a simple formula for the essential message of the book.

But Jin Ping Mei is only tangentially concerned with universal schemes of historical and religious meaning. It is far more profoundly entrenched in its own exploration of the chaos within the private world surrounding one individual. By savagely stripping away the outer shell of wealth and power cloaking figures nearly devoid of human values, it reveals a hollow core of selfhood (shared by Ximen Qing and his circle of wives, lovers, and friends) brought out with great force in the images of emptiness that come to dominate the second half of the text, especially from Chapter 70 to 80, and in Chapter 100. There are many reasons to describe Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian, and some of the other major characters in the book as ultimately ‘empty’ figures. Despite the external fullness of money, power and sex that seems to characterize their lives, we ultimately see them ripped out from the fabric of meaningful human relations—they almost all die parentless and childless—and reduced to fleeting moments of vain self-gratification, the antithesis of Confucian self-cultivation.
This overwhelming sense of emptiness at the core of Ximen Qing’s collective self is, paradoxically, a kind of mirror image of the theme of excessive plenitude that fills the pages of the book. That is why the author of the earliest and fullest edition of the novel: the Jin Ping Mei cihuaprefaces his text with a long introductory discourse and poem sequence on the theme of the ‘four vices of excess’ (sitān). What is at stake here is not simply the moral flaw of overindulgence in ‘wine, women, wealth, and wrath’ (ñÐßäî¯Ñ¨), but rather the deeper issue of the paradox of self-absorption. Perhaps the most disturbing form this issue takes in the narrative of Jin Ping Mei is seen in the consistent theme of incest that runs through an unbroken chain of illicit relations—from Pan Jinlian’s initial attempt to seduce her brother-in-law Wu Song, to the flagrant cohabitation of Wang Liuer and her husband’s brother, and culminating in the fatal dalliance between Pan Jinlian and Chen Jingji. Within the context of the broader theme of failed self-realization underlying the major Chinese novels, this represents not simply the violation of a conventional social taboo, but—as encapsulated in the Chinese term luanlunsignifying the utter disordering of all human relations—the problem of the excessive gratification of individual desire through the illusory pursuit of one’s own self-image. This gives the most cutting force to some of the precise details used to depict Ximen Qing’s process of self-destruction, as his insatiable attempts to consummate his own desire spin out of control in the second half of the book, and he ends by literally depleting his own essence.

After the demise of the Ming state and the Manchu conquest, the prevailing intellectual mode of xinxue was blamed by many early Qing intellectuals for the cynical, effete, and self-indulgent tendencies of late-Ming culture that they believed to have hastened its downfall. In general, these tendencies were thoroughly rejected in favor of philosophical movements of greater moral and scholarly substance (e.g. shixue and kaozheng), but the leading thinkers of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—such figures as Wang Fuzhi, Dai Zhen, and Yan Yuan—in no way abandoned their intense interest in the Confucian cultivation of the inner self. It is therefore not surprising that the great monuments of early and mid-Qing fiction continue unabated their exploration of the most subtle and paradoxical aspects of the experience of selfhood.
The most profound example of such fictional exploration is, of course, *Honglou meng*. With its incomparable richness and complexity of narrative design, this text can be read as a lighthearted lyrical romance, as a profound tragedy, as a saga of the rise and fall of a great family, even as a realistic portrayal of daily life in the elite society of the Kangxi and Qianlong eras (although, technically, the narrative is set back to an earlier time period). Taking *Honglou meng* as our prime example of the conformance of classic Chinese fiction to the aesthetic configurations and intellectual depth of the European ‘novel’ genre, I wish to emphasize the degree to which its literary vision revolves around the central issue of selfhood, as projected through the story of Jia Baoyu’s coming of age in his enclosed garden. At its most basic level, the narrative core of *Honglou meng* can thus be seen as a *bildungsroman* about the gradual formation of the consciousness of a sensitive young hero (and heroines), one that has perhaps more in common with Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*Sorrows of Young Werther*) and Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) than with *Sananguozhi yanyi* and *Shuihuzhuan*.

At the same time, *Honglou meng* is all about the concept of self-cultivation as conceived in late-Imperial Chinese literary culture, embracing the polishing of lyrical and artistic, as well as moral and spiritual qualities. The author signals his central concern with the object of these different forms of cultivation: that is, the individual self, through a series of allegorical devices—for example, the overlapping use of five-elements symbolism and dense literary allusions in personal names, and the ‘doubling’ of individual characters to form composite constructions—suggesting a very ambivalent view of the problem of self-definition. From these and other hints, we sense that the slow unfolding of day-to-day experience in the enclosed garden of the Daguanyuan is not primarily about the trivial cares and delights of its young inhabitants in their narrow bubble of self-absorption, but has much more to do with the enclosed world of the individual self, and its relation to the all-inclusive frame of existence beyond its walls—what we may call in more philosophical terminology the *xiaowo* and the *dawo*).

Although the elegant young hero and heroines of *Honglou meng* seem to many readers an embodiment of innocence and purity, the author takes pains to focus his narrative on the central issue of self-
indulgence—here not so much the literal, corporeal fulfillment of desire as the more abstract problem of excessive feeling. This is stated unambiguously in the message conveyed to Baoyu on the verge of his initiation into carnal experience in the dream-vision in Chapter 5: that all emotional attachment (qing), when taken to excess, becomes the equivalent of lust (yin). In the flow of the narrative, the words of this little moral vignette are very significantly linked to a series of textual hints and allegorical signs raising the troubling issue of incest. At this point in the story, the early hints of sexual transgression apparently refer only to secondary characters: Qin Keqing and her brother Qin Zhong and by vague suggestion, Wang Xifeng. But these minor tragedies at the start of the book cast a troubling shadow over the gradual deepening, and eventual consummation, of Baoyu’s attachment to his own consanguine soulmates in the garden—a conjugal union of cousins that may be poetically ideal, but remains symbolically problematic. As in Jin Ping Mei, the theme of incest signifies not simply a technical transgression, but rather a manifestation of the deeper problem of self-definition: the paradox of pursuing individual fulfillment not in union with the Other but in the near replication of one’s own Self. What little drama there is in the ‘plot’ of Honglou meng revolves around two central themes: the impending marriage of the sheltered maidens and the eventual departure of the young masters to a life of Confucian obligations—both understood in traditional Chinese terms as a forced ‘exit’ (chujia, chushi, chumen, etc.) from the enclosed shell of innocence and self-indulgence. At the end of this long slow-paced narrative, this issue comes to be focused on Baoyu’s final Buddhist withdrawal from the world itself (chujia)—an ‘exit’ that, paradoxically, amounts to his pulling even deeper into the shell of his own individual selfhood.

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In this brief outline of a very complex topic, I have tried to show that these major texts of classic Chinese fiction may be accurately labelled as ‘novels’ to the extent that they share with the greatest examples of the European genre an essential commitment to the pursuit of the meaning of selfhood—as embodied in the texture of experience
traced in the medium of fictional narrative. Despite the striking absence in Chinese philosophy of formal discussions of the ‘mind-body’ problem, broader issues of subjectivity and objectivity (wu/wo) remain central to Confucian discourse. At least as early as Mencius and Xunzi, and certainly by the Neo-Confucian period, Chinese thinkers were preoccupied with the epistemological and metaphysical, as well as the moral issues underlying the central theme of self-cultivation—conceived canonically, in the Daxue, the Zhongyong, and other texts, as the simultaneous fulfillment of Self and Other (chengji, chengren, chengwu; or, jin jixing, jin ren zhi xing...). I believe it is precisely in this area of interface between the inner and outer aspects of the self (shen and xin) that the best works of the classic novel in late-Imperial China pursue the meaning of individual fulfillment and the integration of the self into the larger human and cosmic order. As in the European tradition, it is as a rule not shining examples of perfect character, but the poignant failure to achieve this ideal vision of self-perfection that provides the most gripping material for narrative development. From this perspective, the frequent sounding in these works of Buddhist and Daoist refrains of existential emptiness and their promise of a final escape from the self through renunciation of the world must be weighed against the positive exploration of the paradox of selfhood presented on the more comprehensive ground of Neo-Confucian thought.