

Research Notes

The Metaphorical Dimensions of Symbolic Prices and Real-World Values in *Hong Lou Meng*^{*}

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical and metaphorical implications of *Hong Lou Meng*'s economic dimensions. First, for historical context, we provide a background of the 18th century Qing economy. Then, we examine the prices which appear in the book in light of Hongxue scholarship, especially comparing those in the first eighty chapters with those in the last forty chapters. Finally, we consider the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of literary price inflation in the novel.

Key words : *Hong Lou Meng* 紅樓夢, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, Taels, Qing Economy

* This article uses David Hawkes's 1973-1980 translation of *Hong Lou Meng* as well as the original text, published with *Zhiyanzhai* 脂硯齋 commentary in 2003 under the title *Zhiyanzhai Chongping Shitouji Huijiao* 脂硯齋重評石頭記匯校. See Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*. Trans. David Hawkes (London : Penguin Books, 1973) and Cao Xueqin *et al.* *Zhiyanzhai Chongping Shitouji (The Story of the Stone with Zhiyanzhai Commentary)* (Beijing: Author's Publishing House, 2003). For all relevant quotations in the article, Hawkes's translation will be cited first followed by the original Chinese text and the relevant page number. Quotations from chapters eighty through the end of the novel will be cited with the unabridged 1982 Renmin Chubanshe Chinese-language edition of *Hong Lou Meng*.

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At a pivotal turn in Chapter Fifty-six when the impending collapse of the Jia family's fortune is beginning to be cast largely in financial terms, Baochai (寶釵) and Tanchun (探春) have a conversation on the subject of money. In it, Baochai makes two observations: "Everything in the world has some use or other, and if it has a use, it must have a monetary value" (vol.3, p. 69) 天下沒有不可用的東西，既可用，便值錢 (pp. 368-369). Immediately after saying this, she avers: "But talk about books is important business, without it we should be no better than vulgar tradesmen!" (vol.3, p. 69) 學問中便是正事。此刻於小事上用學問一提，那小事越發作高一層了。不拿學問提著，便都流入市俗去了 (p. 369). Baochai acknowledges that everything has a price because everything has a use – a very practical sentiment, while simultaneously pointing out that as members of the social gentry, they should be careful to involve themselves with "vulgar," mercantile pursuits. The latter statement corresponds to the general ethos of late imperial gentry, who saw merchants as inferior to those who pursued scholarly lives,¹ yet the first statement reveals an entire philosophical worldview with direct application to this paper. In the world of 18th century China, did everything have a price? In the world of *Hong Lou Meng*, does everything have a price? Finally, to what extent are these different questions?

Out of the many precious objects mentioned in *Hong Lou Meng*, from fans to jades to sashes, none are mentioned as often as silver taels. Money in a general sense, "qian" is mentioned 429 times in the first eighty chapters of the book and 115 times in the last forty.² Since much scholarship has been devoted to the meaning of objects in the novel with the notable exception of money, this paper will present an analysis on the meaning, symbolism, and role that money plays in the novel. Up until this point scholarship regarding late Imperial commerce has generally focused on national economic issues, such as Man-houng Lin's (林滿紅) *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808-1856* and Madeleine Zelin's *The Magistrate's Tale: Rationalizing*

1. See Richard John Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 59.

2. Although this is not the subject of this paper per se, these numbers might be convincing proof for the idea that Cao Xueqin and Gao E (高鄂) had very different agendas as expressed in their writing. By invoking "money" 429 times in the first eighty chapters, Cao Xueqin effectively mentions money twice as often as Gao E does. However, as we will see, the values he provides are generally much lower than the values Gao E gives in the final forty chapters. Different historical circumstances around the lives of the two men aside, Cao Xueqin mentions prices and values more often, but also probably more accurately. Gao E mentions them less, but for an intended poetic effect.

Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth-Century Ch'ing China. Some scholarship, such as Quan Hansheng's 1972 article "Qianlong Shisan Nian de Migui Wenti 乾隆十三年米貴問題" has touched upon local governmental responses to specific local food and price-crises. Marc Shell's *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* has provided a lucid analysis of the role of economy in literature as both "ideology" and "metaphor," but his analysis is largely limited to texts of the Western Canon. Even Craig Clunas's *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China*, while providing insight into the social and economic realities of garden building and maintenance, is unfortunately limited in scope to the Ming dynasty, which had vastly differing social and economic reality from 18th century China. In fact, the only piece of scholarship which may directly relate to the topic at hand is an article in Zhao Gang's (趙岡) 1979 work, *Huaxiang Tongchou Du Honglou 花香銅臭讀紅樓*, titled "*Hong Lou Meng li de Jiazheng Guanli 紅樓夢裡的家政管理*". This previous scholarship will aid in beginning a conversation on the subject of money in *Hong Lou Meng* on how it defies a singular role and a singular meaning in the context of the narrative.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will briefly examine the economics behind the 18th century world in which *Hong Lou Meng* was written, with an attention to prices of mundane objects in the book as well as the characters' perceptions of these prices. In the second section, I will examine the line between historically accurate and intentionally exaggerated, fictional prices in the novel. This argument can be viewed as an extension of Zhao Gang's work in his essay "紅樓夢裡的家政管理." Unlike Zhao Gang however, who sees hyperbolic tendencies in most of the given prices of the novel, I will claim that some are within historical plausibility and that those that are exaggerated are specifically done so for poetic effect. In short, I will demonstrate the agency of incorporating such inflated prices into the novel. The third section will build on this line of reasoning and expand the argument to examine the poetic dimensions of fictional prices, incorporating the theories of symbolic, poetic, and literary economies from Marc Shell. In this section of the paper I will examine price variation between the first eighty and the last forty chapters, with a conclusion that money in *Hong Lou Meng* can be read as a precious object, for as Baoyu's (寶玉) jade is intimately tied to his fate, money determines steers the fate of the entire Jia family who gradually are made aware of its immanent significance and value.

1. Prices and Values in the world of *Hong Lou Meng*

Timothy Brook began his lecture “For What It’s Worth: Prices and Values in Ming China” by discussing the bimetallic “economies of Ming China: a silver-based currency for large purchases and a copper-based currency for lesser purchases.”³ While the value of silver fluctuated into the Qing dynasty and the values of silver and copper cannot be accurately compared across dynastic periods, this bimetallic system continued throughout the Qing dynasty and is reflected in *Hong Lou Meng*. By 1733, approximately twenty years before Cao Xueqin wrote the novel, all land taxes were collected in silver, largely because the long strings of cash copper were too burdensome to transport long distances (Lin, Man-houng, p. 41). Yet this is not to say copper was not used in Cao Xueqin’s day, to the contrary, a Qianlong imperial edict of 1744 reveals that the Qing state was quickly casting copper coins to make up for the scarcity of silver (清史稿·卷10 高宗本紀一 and Lin, p. 43).⁴ At the time of the writing of *Hong Lou Meng*, copper actually appears to have been seeing a resurgence in usage after having been largely scarce throughout the reigns of Kangxi and Yongzheng (Robert B. Marks and Chen Chunsheng, “Price Inflation and Its Social, Economic, and Climatic Context in Guangdong Province, 1707-1800”, p. 119). As we will see however in the third section of this paper, the value of silver became inflated during the late Qing dynasty with “the influx” of more convenient silver dollars around 1775 (Lin, p. 43).

Yet while reflecting the 18th century Qing state’s bimetallic currency in his novel, Cao Xueqin roots much of the plot for the wealthy members of the Jia family in the realm of silver-tael currency.⁵ References to copper often are intended to underscore the

3. Timothy Brook, *Annual Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures*: “For What It’s Worth: Prices and Values in Ming China,” April 14th, 2010.

4. Qianlong appears to have been fairly perspicacious in this instance: Quan Hansheng 全漢昇 in his article, “Qianlong Shisan Nian de Mi Gui Wenti 乾隆十三年米貴問題” notes that local officials appeared to have overlooked “big” picture of the national monetary system when debating in 1748 why the price of rice had increased so precipitously. See Quan, Hansheng. “Qianlong Shisan Nian de Mi Gui Wenti (The Problem of Expensive Rice in the Thirteenth Year of the Emperor Qianlong),” in *Zhongguo Jingjishi Luncong (Chinese Economic History Essays)* (Hong Kong: The New Asia Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies, 1972), pp. 547-566.

5. Historically speaking, this is not very surprising. In 1744, Qianlong mandated that, “except for the wages of public workers or retail exchanges involving grain and cloth, copper coins could not be used for either

poverty of certain residents of the households. In Chapter Sixty-one, Liu Jia (柳家) tells Yingchun's (迎春) maid Lianhuar (蓮花兒) "This year chicken eggs are very scarce, ten cash copper for each if you can find them 今年這雞蛋短得很，十個錢一個還找不出來" (vol. 3, p. 169). Liu Jia's budget, which is already stretched thin by cooking for approximately forty to fifty mistresses and maids, simply cannot afford the purchase such expensive eggs (vol. 3, ch. 61, p. 170. Chinese version: p. 399). Yet even these eggs can be contrasted to the hen eggs mentioned in Chapter Forty when they are presented to Liu Laolao (劉姥姥), which cost a total of one tael each (vol. 2, ch. 40, p. 249. Chinese version: p. 270-271). This dichotomy may reveal one thing about family finances: Liu Jia buys and cooks eggs, even expensive ones, in the copper realm while Jia Mu (賈母) and her cohort can eat eggs purchased with silver.

Among the reasons why these examples are striking is because *Hong Lou Meng* is a novel that from start to finish, largely revolves around the world and psychological dimensions of the silver tael. The copper, silver divide, while it exemplifies the late imperial Chinese economy, within the novel actually categorizes members of the household – the "more than 300 souls" who occupy the Rongguo Mansion – into monetary strata visible in the payment of monthly allowances. (vol. 1, ch. 6, p. 150. Chinese version: p. 45). Lady Wang (王夫人) receives twenty taels of silver a month from the family treasury, Xiren (襲人) begins receiving two taels as of Chapter Thirty-six, and Qingwen (晴雯) and Sheyue (麝月) each receive a "string of copper cash" (vol. 2, ch. 36, pp. 198-199).⁶ This is one of the first and more prominent examples of money transcending the concrete exchange value of its own worth for an inherently symbolic value – in this case, the symbolism of social hierarchy expressed through monetary stratification. But in addition to being a marker of status, silver is used for the vast majority of purchases, deals, and debts in the novel. This fact actually presents some difficulties to modern readers of the novel that Cao Xueqin's contemporaries would not have faced; for instance, what exactly constitutes an "expensive" purchase or transaction in the novel? Because expense is perceived relatively on the basis of one's income and because the Jia family spends so much, it is easy for contemporary readers to lose a sense of what things cost in the world of *Hong Lou Meng*. In truth, the characters inhabiting the

official business or ordinary commercial exchanges." Lin, Man-Houng, *China Upside down* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 43.

6. Zhao Gang calculates that the annual cost of simply paying for the allowances of all the members of the house is no less than 2,000 silver taels. Zhao Gang, *Huaxiang Tongchou Du Hong Lou (The Fragrance of Flowers and the Stink of Money in Reading The Dream of Red Mansions)* (Taipei: China Times Publishing Co., 1978).

“world of silver” themselves do not know how to correctly measure money. In Chapter Fifty-one, Sheyue and Baoyu are unable to correctly identify a tael’s worth of silver. (vol. 2, ch. 51, p. 527. Chinese version: p. 339). Here Cao Xueqin is working with the reality that silver had to be weighed out to determine its value, while copper coins could simply be strung together and counted. Baoyu and Sheyue’s inability to recognize a tael of silver, coupled with Daiyu’s (黛玉) inability to recognize a pawn ticket in Chapter Fifty-seven, and even Xifeng’s (熙鳳) inability to read, illustrates that money is not something noble families understand the true value of because of their status and the crassness of explicitly mentioning money in public. (vol. 3, ch. 57, p. 133. Chinese version: p. 368). As seen in Baochai’s quote at the beginning of this paper, money is treated as a sort of taboo object and there is even an implied value in not knowing its true value.⁷ This tragic delineation of the characters’ various relationships to currency makes money, usually conceived of as holding a singular, objective value, largely experienced subjectively in the course of the novel.

What did things cost in the 18th century world of *Hong Lou Meng*? To begin with, a farmer’s yearly salary circa 1700 was approximately five taels a year.⁸ Liu Laolao notes at the crab dinner in Chapter Thirty-nine that twenty taels, “is enough to keep a farmer and his family for a year” (vol.2, ch. 39, p. 265) 一共倒有二十多兩銀子。阿彌陀佛！這一頓的錢夠我們莊家人過一年了(p. 264). The prices of other mundane objects and novelties fill the pages of *Hong Lou Meng*. At the beginning of Chapter Eighty-one, curing a sickness requires over ten taels to cure through the burning of paper money (神馬紙錢) (vol. 4, ch. 81, p. 41. Chinese version: p. 1103). This is a noticeable contrast to the first eighty chapters of the novel, where Baoyu repeatedly scoffs at the efficacy of paper money and when doctors can cure illness for far less than ten or more taels. Birthday parties range from three to four taels for Baoyu’s party in Chapter Sixty-three

7. Though not the subject of this paper, gambling is a rampant presence throughout most of the novel. Even the two old nannies who bring Daiyu, Baochai’s gifts at the end of Chapter Forty-Five gamble while they stay up to “keep watch” of the garden. These secret activities involving “dirty money” become the subject of great controversy in the last forty chapters of the novel. Most interestingly however is that one of the old women departs saying to Daiyu: “橫豎每夜各處有幾個上夜的人，誤了更也不好，不如會個夜局，又坐了更，又解悶兒。今兒又是我的頭家” (p. 302). The last phrase of her sentence, translated as, “Tonight is my turn to be the banker (of the gambling game)” (vol. 2, ch. 45, p. 404) reveals something crucial about these gambling activities. The illicit gambling activities are actually well-ordered and formally executed, with rotating leaders on a nightly basis. In short, dirty money is spent more systematically and more orderly than the family expenses themselves.

8. Timothy Brook, *Annual Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures*: “For What It’s Worth: Prices and Values in Ming China.”

(vol. 3, ch. 63, p. 217. Chinese version: p. 413) to over a hundred taels for Xifeng's birthday in Chapter Forty-three (vol. 2, ch. 43, p. 344. Chinese version: pp. 286-287). Funeral expenses, including the price of coffins, as well as the cost of dowries, and the cost of scandals also fluctuate greatly in accordance to personal rank and circumstance in the novel.

In concluding this general overview of copper and silver price ranges of the novel, I would simply point out that most of the monetary “values” of things in the novel are often provided by the characters themselves, not by the narrator. Thus the prices of certain objects and services naturally vacillate greatly over the course of the novel. For this reason, money is rarely appreciated for its objective value in the novel, nor is it ever given an objective value by the author; as previously mentioned, it is only subjectively experienced by the individual characters on the basis of their social status. Considering that ignorance regarding the prices and values of things is such a strong theme in the novel, we may have some reason to doubt the accuracy of many of the given prices, particularly the exorbitant ones. This ambiguity, possibly intended by the author, leads us into the next part of this discussion – the difference between historically accurate and symbolically fictional prices and values in *Hong Lou Meng*.

2. Historically Accurate and Symbolically Fictional Prices

As a novel largely dealing with the silver realm of the Qing economy, *Hong Lou Meng* describes some very expensive objects that come with naturally exorbitant prices. This actually led Zhao Gang to conclude in his essay on the internal management of the Jia household, “in the book when the value of money is given, there are always places that elaborate with exaggeration 書中提及金錢數字時，往往都有誇張渲染的地方” (Zhao Gang, p. 77). Other scholars of the work have also noted the usage of hyperbole in *Hong Lou Meng* for poetic effect, such as Xiang Li (向莉), whose essay “Lun *Hong Lou Meng* Kuazang de Zuoyong ji Tese 論《紅樓夢》誇張的作用及特色” focuses on the literary exaggeration present in the inter-personal relationships of the novel. In this section, I will use Zhao Gang's argument as a starting point to examine the possible historical accuracy or fictional symbolism of certain monetary values in the novel. I will also examine monetary prices differences in the first eighty chapters in comparison with the last forty chapters and conclude with some theories as to why there are such pronounced differences in the amounts of money cited in these two parts of the book.

Zhao Gang begins his analysis of money in the novel by examining Xifeng's birthday party in Chapter Forty-three. He points out that Grandma Jia collects over 150 taels for what is intended to be a birthday party for Wang Xifeng. Zhao claims that in spite of the lavish drink and entertainment prepared, the figure of 150 taels is far too much for a simply birthday party (Zhao Gang, p. 77). He even claims that the previously mentioned ten-cash copper eggs are also fantastically priced. Zhao Gang also points out the exaggeration in Chapter Seventy-one's conversation between Jia Lian (賈璉) and Yuanyuan (鴛鴦):

從賈璉口中得知為了賈母的八旬大慶，從七月二十八日起到八月初五日止，連日開出筵宴，花了幾千兩，竟逼得賈璉向賈母的丫頭鴛鴦情商，要把老太太查不著的金錢傢伙偷連一箱出去，暫押幾千兩銀子供用。（趙岡，頁 77-78）

“From Jia Lian's mouth we learn of the eight-day celebration for Grandma Jia. From the 28th of July until the beginning of the 5th day of August, there was continuous celebrating, with the spending of several thousand taels. This led Jia Lian to pressure Yuanyuan to take an inconspicuous box of treasure out of Grandma Jia's room in order to pawn it for several thousand taels of silver.” (Zhao Gang, pp. 77-78)

In this episode, Grandma Jia's birthday expenses had totaled “several thousand taels,” which galvanized Jia Lian to ask Yuanyuan to steal objects from Grandma Jia to pawn for “several thousand taels” (vol. 3, ch. 72, p. 423. Chinese version: p. 474). Since Grandma Jia's birthday celebrations had lasted eight days, if the Jia family had spend 2,000 taels on the festivities, they would have been spending at a rate of around 250 taels a day for drink and entertainment – a highly improbable figure. In his last point of argument, Zhao points out that in Chapter Seventy-eight, after Qingwen dies of consumption, the value of her clothing is estimated to be between 300 to 400 silver taels, another exorbitant figure (Zhao Gang, p. 78). Yet in spite of all these keen observations, Zhao Gang never postulates as to why these figures specifically were exaggerated by the author, as if he assumed they were simply errors in calculation.

Zhao Gang is correct that certain individual prices in the novel are probably inflated, yet he fails to account for why they would be. Furthermore, it appears that only some of the values and prices are inflated for a specific poetic effect – one that will be discussed in greater detail in coming section. This type of exaggeration appears to arise at certain

moments in the novel, particularly the last forty chapters, and we do have reason to believe that Cao Xueqin ascribed some historically accurate values to things. One major example is the cost of building the garden in Chapter Sixteen. The building of the garden is indubitably the largest expensive in the first eighty chapters of the novel, totaling at least 50,000 taels. Jia Qiang (賈薺) notes how the cost garden will be managed:

江南甄家還收著我們五萬銀子。明日寫一封書信，會票我們帶去，先支三萬，下剩二萬存著，等置辦花燭彩燈並各色簾櫳帳幔的使費。(頁 106)
 “The Zhens of Jiangnan hold fifty thousand taels of ours on deposit and he can give us a letter of credit to take to them when we go. We’ll draw out thirty thousand first and leave the rest to buy lanterns, lamps, and curtains with later on.” (vol. 1, ch. 16, p. 317)

The price of 50,000 taels for a large garden is actually consistent with extant Qing dynasty records on the subject. Craig Clunas, in *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* notes that by the Qing dynasty, large gardens were constructed for several tens of thousands of taels. He notes that the “Duke’s Flower Garden” at Jiangnan “was deemed in the 1650s to be worth 100,000 ounces of silver, having been bought by a group of local officials, each contributing the still considerable sum of 300 ounces” (Clunas, p. 130).⁹ It is possible that Cao Xueqin intended the building of the garden, as having the most expensive price listed in the first eighty chapters of the novel, to be seen as instrumental in the decline of the Jia family’s fortunes as an expensive and unsustainable undertaking. However, as we will see, the remarkably high values given in the last forty chapters of the book make such a reading more difficult because the monumental cost of the garden becomes overshadowed by other exorbitant prices. Nevertheless, the given cost of constructing the garden in the novel can be viewed as an accurate rendering of historical reality.

Upon completing an overview of the variety of prices in *Hong Lou Meng* and an analysis of the historicity or inventiveness of certain prices in the text, it is now time to inquire as to why the author chose to exaggerate certain values. The hyperbole of certain prices or values on one level may act as a literary tool to add to a mood of extravagance and waste within the Jia family. In the following section, I will investigate the poetic

9. See also Frederic Jr. Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Order in Seventeenth-century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 978.

dimensions of these fictional prices, as well as the existence and implications of certain “invaluable” objects in the novel. The symbolic and literary purposes of assigning values, particularly high values, will be analyzed in the context of theory regarding the economies of literature.

3. The Poetic Dimensions of Fictional Prices

In this section, I will examine the role of money in *Hong Lou Meng* as a literary device. In the context of the novel, it is simultaneously an artifact of narration, a real value, a symbolic value, and an illumination of the value of things. Money’s umbrage extends to both the sacred and immoral: burnt money can honor a lost friend and money can be used to copy the sutra, yet money can also be used as a tool of scandal and deception. In this section in particular I will investigate the symbolic inferences of spending large quantities of money towards the conclusion of the book as well as the literary implications for spending vast quantities of money on certain things.

Marc Shell, in his book *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* specifically considers the implications of poetically-induced economic inflation on plot narration.¹⁰ He specifically looks at *Faust*, to a scene where Mephistopheles meets an emperor whose kingdom is on the verge of economic collapse. Mephistopheles realizes that the country is rich in unminted gold and recommends that the king produce large sums of paper money, backed up by the unmined gold. This action initially has a positive effect, and the “flying moneys” act as “monetary kites” to lower prices throughout the empire. The emperor is momentarily saved by this newfound extravagance. However, Shell continues with an analysis of the final result:

“If the amount of gold is immeasurable in the same way that Boy Charioteer’s gifts are supposed to be, then the inflationary discount must increase infinitely. All moneys, including crowns, will become worthless, as will the crown itself.” (Shell, p. 101)

10. Another invaluable source for this topic is Hans Binswonger’s *Money and Magic: A Critique of the Modern Economy in the Light of Goethe’s Faust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 133. There, the topic of monetary inflation in literary forms is discussed in a socio-economic context.

The telling of this story by Goethe recapitulates at the political level the fate of the bond that *Faust* made with Mephistopheles on the metaphysical level.¹¹ Money acts not merely as a possessor of historical value but as a literary trope that can both symbolize and galvanize social and moral destruction. Although Goethe's paper money does not have a "fictional price," there is a theme of money becoming valueless when "they (money) scatter everywhere, like a wildfire blazing" (*Faust*, p. 6086). The poetic dynamism of money originates from its competing subjective and objective values: in the opening of Part One of *Faust*, a bankrupt individual lacks all money and thus ascribes all value to it. Conversely, at the opening of Part Two, the surfeit of money in a kingdom makes money worthless. Shell's analysis reveals that the large relativity of the value of money thus literarily parallels the rise and fall of human fortune in certain works of literature as he points out that the fluidity of money's inherent value often lends it for usage as sources of poetic irony.

Shell's argument is applicable to *Hong Lou Meng* in two ways. First, there appears to be a noticeable shift in the values and prices of things upward towards the end of the novel, particularly the final forty chapters written by Gao E. Second, understanding how the Jia family spends their money over the course of the novel recapitulates the origins behind their demise. In the first instance, the increasing values and prices of things underscores the increasing worthlessness of their fortunes and in the second instance, the spending of money underscores the toxic consequences of failing to understand money for both its real value and its symbolic implications.

The most expensive price of the first eighty chapters of *Hong Lou Meng*, the 50,000 taels for building the Prospect Garden, has been juxtaposed with some other values in these chapters that Zhao Gang has found to be implausible. Some of these values in these chapters written by Cao Xueqin are probably historically accurate while others are probably exaggerated. Now that it has been established that such exaggerated prices or the inflation of money in general can have a poetic effect on the narrative, it is imperative to examine the last forty chapters of the novel, when given prices and values become astronomical. For example, in Chapter Eighty-eight, Zhou Rui (周瑞) makes the

11. Marc Shell notes the importance of the poetic symbolization of money to the narrative of *Faust*, pointing out that "Part One begins with the bankruptcy of an individual who lacked money," and thus parallels the opening of Part Two with the king on the verge of collapse. Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 91. Even more interestingly, Shell points out that for the scene with the Emperor in Part Two, Goethe actually imitates Marco Polo's description of paper money and financial institutions in China. Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 99.

following comment to Cousin Zhen (賈珍):

奴才在這裡經管地租莊子，銀錢出入每年也有三五十萬來往，老爺太太奶奶們從沒有說過話的，何況這些零星東西。(頁 1200)

“I have been in charge of farm rents and income here for years, and on average I should say around 400,000 taels passes through my hands each year, and I have never had a word of complaint from the Master or the Ladyships or the young mistresses about anything, let alone such a small matter as this.” (vol. 4, ch. 88, p. 184)

In order to fully show the ludicrousness of such a figure, I would point out that in 1710, the entire province of Sichuan paid a total of 202,300 taels in taxes to Beijing (Zelin, p. 23). The province of Jiangsu’s fixed public expenses budget was approximately 120,000 taels in the 1730s (Zelin, p. 155). The idea that Zhou Rui, a member of the staff of the Rongguo House, could personally handle “400,000” taels a year is preposterous and incongruous with expenditures and sums mentioned in the first eighty chapters of novel.

The example of Zhou Rui’s income is not the lone instance of this phenomenon in the last forty chapters of the novel. Feng Ziyang asks Jia Zheng (賈政) for 20,000 taels as the price of his four pieces of merchandise (vol. 4, ch. 92, p. 256. Chinese version: p. 1252). Once again, Feng Ziyang could simply be exaggerating the value of the objects in order to make some money, although this possibility is undermined by the fact that Jia Zheng appears to take the price as legitimate and proceeds to ask his family whether they should purchase them. Chapter 106 sees Wang Xifeng lose a total of 60,000 taels – a value higher than the cost of building the entire Prospect Garden (vol. 5, ch. 106, p. 197. Chinese version: pp. 1423-1424). Even the price of an elaborate funeral appears to go up: in Jia Jing’s funeral expenses total 1110 taels while Grandma Jia’s funeral in Chapter 113 puts the Jia family four to five thousand taels in debt, in spite of the 1000 taels of silver the Emperor gives to the family upon her passing (vol. 5, ch. 113, p. 248. Chinese version: p. 1522). Lastly, Baoyu’s jade is valued with a 10,000 tael-ransom in Chapter Ninety-five – a value set by the family members themselves and a price that is one of the highest in the novel.

There are two main possibilities to account for such a prominent increase in prices and values at the end of the novel.¹² The first directly relates to Marc Shell's reading of Goethe's *Faust*: an increase in the visibility of large amounts of money facilitates its own decline in value, which in turn acts as a literary parallel to the fortunes of the characters. In short, the increase in the mentioned values of things in the final chapters of *Hong Lou Meng* serves to accentuate the mood of despair and collapse. Previously invaluable objects, like Baoyu's jade, suddenly receive a set price. Previously affordable objects which would have before been purchased by the family, like Feng Ziyong's merchandise, become unaffordable through their exaggerated prices. Previously we met characters who simply made small monthly allowances, but now we are reintroduced to Wang Xifeng through her greedy fortune of 60,000 taels and Zhou Rui through his impressive assets. These astronomical prices and values figuratively serve to underscore just how far the Jia family could fall.

The second possibility to account for this conspicuous increase in prices and values in the last forty chapters is historically-rooted. Cao Xueqin completed the first eighty chapters of the novel around 1760, possibly earlier, whereas the last forty chapters did not appear until 1791 – at least thirty years later. Not only did Cao Xueqin and Gao E hail from very different family backgrounds,¹³ which would logically produce different psychological perceptions of prices, but the value of silver also changed dramatically in these thirty years. Late 18th century China saw massive inflation in the prices of everything, from rice to furniture, as the value of silver decreased (Zelin, pp. 294-295). Large amounts of newly imported silver coupled with large population growth had driven up the values of most objects. Thus in addition to certain aesthetic and literary preferences, Gao E was completing *Hong Lou Meng* in a very different economic environment than the one in which Cao Xueqin began it.

With this discussion of price increases in the last forty chapters in mind, I will conclude this section on the poetic dimensions of fictional prices by discussing in brief how the Jia family spends their money over the course of the novel. This analysis will once again reveal poetic dimensions to the economic and material structures of the novel. Major transactions in the novel can be loosely bracketed into several categories, including the cost of building the garden, the cost of preparing and executing the visits of the Imperial Concubine, family scandals, and funerals. The first two occur in solely in the

12. Zhao Gang notices this phenomenon too. Zhao Gang, *Huaxiang Tongchou Du Hong Lou*, p. 89.

13. Zhou Ruchang, *Between Noble and Humble: Cao Xueqin and the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Berlin: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), pp. 23-26.

first eighty chapters of the novel, while the latter two are stretched throughout the novel, although with a higher concentration in the final forty chapters. Discounting Wang Xifeng's loss of 60,000 taels, the overall cost of paying for scandals – from Jia Lian's trouble to You Erjie (尤二姐) to Xue Pan's (薛蟠) numerous scandals to the final exiles of Jia She and Cousin Zhen – is approximately 20,520 taels. Yet even this is an underestimate, because of numerous “hidden costs” including the Xue family's loss of “several tens of thousands of taels” in their Nanjing joint-stock business, among others. (vol. 5, ch. 100, p. 37)¹⁴ Funerals are equally difficult to tabulate, with the total approximately coming to 9,380 taels, though this does not include numerous “hidden” expenses such as the cost of coffins, which as we have mentioned appears to vary wildly in the novel. These expenses constitute the largest percentage of spending in the book so much so that one could say, in the world of *Hong Lou Meng*, dying is more expensive than living – an example of the “poetic irony” that Shell's economy of literature describes.

Marc Shell's work *The Economy of Literature* illuminates metaphorical exchanges in literary works in regards to how money is spent. He writes:

“...literary works are composed of tropic exchanges, some of which can be analyzed in terms of economic form. The economy of literature seeks to understand the relationship between literary exchanges and the exchanges that constitute a political economy.” (Shell, p. 152)

Shell's analysis of metaphorical values of money is here expanded to include metaphorical and tropic implications for the exchange of money, or in short, how money is spent. Money is an extension and numerical representative manifestation of what it can be used to purchase, the realization of which is termed by Shell to be “the money of the mind.” The accumulation of what the Jia family spends their money on – scandals, funerals, and the Garden – parallels the decline of value of money with the simultaneous exaggeration of prices in the last forty chapters. Both of these phenomena in turn parallel the “money of the mind” of the characters – their increasing knowledge of the decreasing symbolic value of their ever-decreasing, real money.

14. I hesitate to include this in the final tabulation simply because it is only mentioned at the end of the novel, when so many prices appear to be exaggerated.

4. Conclusion

This paper has traced the economy of *Hong Lou Meng* by establishing a context for the values and prices of the novel, followed by an analysis of which of these values was historically accurate and which were literarily exaggerated, and finally by an appraisal of the poetic dimensions of fictional prices. *Hong Lou Meng* is fundamentally a novel of economy: a narrative in which prices, values, and transactions parallel and reflect the state of the characters and the family as a whole. Each character has a unique relationship to money on the basis of their social status, which is literarily portrayed in their monthly allowances. While some of the values in *Hong Lou Meng* are accurate and reflect the realism of the author's intentions and the knowledge he garnered from his own background, many are in fact inflated – a fact not unnoticed by some scholars of the novel. Yet, through questioning why these values and prices were exaggerated, this paper has explored the applicability of Marc Shell's literary analysis of economy for *Hong Lou Meng*. Money's both subjective and objective values – subjective on an individual level depending on personal circumstance and objective on the societal level for having one set selling price – parallels the ethos of the novel as it traces the fall of the Jia family. This decline, like the changing role and value of money in the novel, is likewise experienced subjectively by the individual characters until the end, when the demise of family fortunes is objectively evident for all to see. Money in *Hong Lou Meng* is thus more than a single holder of value but a precious object, both with real and unreal qualities that steer the fate of the family as much as Baoyu's jade steers the fate of its owner. Unlike Baoyu's jade however, the value of money has to be realized over time.

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研究紀要

紅樓夢中象徵性物價與實際物價的隱喻層面

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摘 要

本文擬探究《紅樓夢》中的物價，分析書中價格的歷史依據，評論象徵性虛擬物價的歷史意義，反映這本描寫人物與家庭的敘事小說涉及經濟層面的物價與交易活動，並比較前八十回與後四十回的物價意義。總結而言，《紅樓夢》中的物價具有文學、象徵與實際意義。

關鍵詞：紅樓夢，物價，經濟學，象徵

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