Introduction

This brief essay addresses the theme of entrepreneurship through examples from a selection of fictional texts from China’s early modern period, a span of time that I take to run from ca. 1550 to the mid nineteenth century. It explores – through a focus on words and stories – some areas of common concern between economics, on the one hand, and literary and cultural history, on the other. I begin with the supposition that language – as an essential tool for the expression of individual preferences and desires – is a sine qua non of economic activity. As the preface to an 1864 Cantonese-English phrasebook aimed at Chinese traders says, “If you cannot understand [each other’s] language, how can your desires/sentiments (qíng 情) be known? If you cannot read [each other’s] writing, how can you communicate?” (夫不通語言，情何由達？不識文字，言何由通？)1

Indeed, according to economist David Levy, for no less an authority than Adam Smith “trade and language are two aspects of the same process; humans trade because we have language, nonhumans do not trade because they do not.”2 To quote The Wealth of Nations: “Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog.”3 In Smith’s view, moreover, trade is a fundamentally rhetorical practice. In Lectures on Jurisprudence, he writes: “The offering of a shilling . . . is in reality offering an argument to persuade

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one to do so and so as it is for his interest. Men always endeavor to persuade others… and in this manner every one is practicing oratory on others thro [sic] the whole life.” Not coincidently, results of a study published in a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review stress: “The quality serial entrepreneurs display above others . . . [is] persuasion, or the ability to convince others to change the way they think, believe[,] or behave.”

For some, the connection between entrepreneurship – or, more broadly, economics – and persuasive rhetoric will come as little surprise. I suspect many will be familiar with the work of Deirdre McCloskey. Building on the insights of Smith, she has, in a series of well-known articles and books, written compellingly about what we might call the “literary structure” of economic thinking. Others, such as cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (followed later by literary critic-cum-cognitive scientist Mark Turner), go even further, contending that certain basic features of storytelling underlie all human understanding. For McCloskey, however, it is enough to suggest that economists are actually “not so very different from . . . novelists.” The former simply tend to study things like “the market for rice,” while the latter tend to obsess over “the scarcity of love.” To hold our attention, however, both must tell persuasive stories about their chosen subjects.

These stories are, of course, rooted in specific historical contexts. Recall, for a moment, the phrasebooks cited above. Its author, Táng Tíngshū 唐廷樞 (1832-1892), played an important role in the business history of nineteenth-century China. Educated in Hong Kong missionary schools in the 1840s, Táng pursued an eventful career, working first as an interpreter for the colonial government of Hong Kong, next as a secretary for the Shanghai Maritime Customs Service, and then as a compradore for Jardine, Matheson and Co. Later, recruited by Vice-Roy Li Hóngzhāng 李鴻章 (1823-1901), he managed the China Merchant Steam Navigation Company (輪船招商局) and helped establish the Kāipíng Mines (開平礦務局) and Tángshān-Xūgèzhuāng Railway (唐胥鐵路). Over Táng’s lifetime, business practices in China underwent significant changes as “Chinese merchants in the treaty ports . . . learned about the operation of [Western-style] companies . . . several decades before China enacted a Company Law [in 1904].” Táng himself was an active participant in these changes, seeking ways of transforming earlier forms of business organization and entrepreneurial activity – those that developed and flourished in the commercial economy of the Míng and Qīng – into new ones for a new era. Institutionally, for example, he mobilized merchant
networks to invest in new ventures, such as the *Huìbào* 《匯報》 newspaper, which he and Yè Tíngjuàn 葉廷眷 (1829-1886), District Magistrate of Shanghai, established as a joint-stock company in 1874. Ideologically, Táng *translated* – quite literally as his work on the phrasebook attests, but also more figuratively as a mediator between the business practices of his Chinese peers and those of the Western powers. From this perspective, there is much to be gained by viewing entrepreneurship – whether in Míng and Qīng dynasty China or the contemporary global economy – as, among other things, a narrative activity that is everywhere and always embedded in the value- and desire-making function of language. It is to the elaboration of economic themes in Míng and Qīng period fiction that we now turn.

**Míng and Qīng Fiction and the Market**

Much has been written about the *bürgerlich* qualities of Míng and Qīng dynasty fiction. In current Chinese scholarship, in fact, such fiction is often referred to as *shìmín wénxué* 市民文學 – that is to say, literature by, for, and about “city folk” (*shìmín*), expressive of their tastes and values, and anchored in those market-oriented modes of production and exchange that were a prominent feature of urban life in early modern China. Significantly, the first character of the compound *shìmín* is *shì* 市 – i.e. “market.” Of course, during the period under consideration, China was an overwhelmingly agricultural society. At the same time, as the economic historian Madeleine Zelin notes: “[It] was a place where, by the late Ming dynasty and into the Qing dynasty, there was a proliferation of markets. Approximately eighty percent of the population lived within a day’s journey of a market town and could take some of their produce to the market and become involved in marketing activities.” Historian Timothy Brook suggests the following relationship between the farming economy and the growth of commerce over the three hundred years of Míng rule: “The Ming became a commercial world . . . not . . . despite the . . . agrarian order . . . but . . . because of it . . . . Enhanced production resulted in surplus that went into trade, and the regular circulation of surplus encouraged a move from surplus-production to commodity-production.”

Notably, in contemporary usage, the Chinese word *shìmín* has varied connotations and plays a key role in debates concerning the nature of Chinese modernity (both economic and cultural). Specifically, *shìmín* serves as the translation of a range of terms from “citizen,” to “bourgeois,” to “urban resident.” It is also closely
tied to the Hegelian – and, by extension, Marxist – idea of “civil society” (bürgerliche Gesellschaft, Ch. shimin shehui 市民社会), as the realm of liberal individualism – i.e. an “abstract … association [that] is brought about by [individuals’] needs, by the legal system – the means to security of person and property – and by an external organization for attaining their particular and common interests.”16

Remarks from a 1948 essay by the Japanese Sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好 (1910-1977) make clear the various thought-provoking associations of these terms. Takeuchi writes:

Civil society existed in the Orient [sic, = 東洋] from long ago, prior to the invasion of Europe. The genealogy of bourgeois literature can be traced back to the Song period (and perhaps even to the Tang period). Particularly at the time of the Ming Dynasty, civil rights had in certain respects extended to the point where bourgeois literature was able to forge a type of free man that was virtually akin to the Renaissance man.17

Observe that in Takeuchi’s original Japanese the words for “civil society” shimin shakai, “bourgeois literature” shimin bungaku, and “civil rights” shimin-ken are written with the same sinographs – and thus carry similar connotations – in Chinese.

Noteworthy, too, is the broader context in which Takeuchi’s comments occur: an essay entitled “What Is Modernity? (The Case of Japan and China).” In this essay Takeuchi argues for a fundamental distinction between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century East Asian modernity – the result of Western imperialism – and earlier, indigenous forms of social organization and institutions (evident, for example, in Ming dynasty China and Edo period Japan).18 Limiting our focus to China, much scholarly energy has been expended on reconstructing the histories of such institutions: from merchant guilds, to native banks, to the evolution of the concept of property rights within the imperial legal system, to forms of knowledge production within the context of Ming-Qing print culture.19 Although maybe not truly “modern,” this society nevertheless allowed its members certain degrees of “freedom” (Ch. ziyou, Jp. jiyu 自由), to use Takeuchi’s word. In turn, the argument goes, such freedom – of movement, of association, of thought, etc. – engendered a spirit of industry and enterprise – something akin, perhaps, to an entrepreneurial ethos – among its population. In accord with this view,
the intellectual historian Yú Yīngshí 余英時 has marshaled significant evidence to suggest a shift, beginning in late sixteenth-century China, in elite attitudes towards commerce and trade as well as a rise in the social status of merchants. 20

One thinks here, inevitably, of the novel Jīn Píng Méi 《金瓶梅》(The Plum in the Golden Vase) and the great late Míng short story collections of Féng Mènglóng 馮夢龍 (1574–1645) and Líng Méngchū 凌濛初 (1580–1644): the Sān yán 《三言》(Three Words) and the Èr pāi 《二拍》(Two Slaps). 21 Not only are these masterpieces signal products of the great cultural centers of the Jiāngnán 江南 region – the most urban and sophisticated part of the Míng empire; they are also themselves peopled with characteristic shìmín types. In his study of representations of shìmín in Míng fiction, the literary scholar Fāng Zhìyuàn 方志遠 distinguishes the following groups. First, there are the “urban intellectuals,” or “scholars” (shìrén 士人), men who use their education and literary talents to earn a living either within or outside of the imperial bureaucracy; consisting of a large number of failed examination candidates, members of this group are just as likely to engage in trade as they are to work as clerks and secretaries to officials. Next, there are the “merchants” (shāngrén 商人) and “laborers” (gōngrén 工人), individuals with little or no formal education who, engaged in commerce and handicraft industries, form the backbone of the early modern commercial economy. Finally, there are the “courtesans/prostitutes” (jìnüˇ 妓女) and “vagabonds” (yóumín 遊民), people of low social status who inhabit the urban demimonde of tea houses, theaters, and brothels. 22 Tying all of these groups together – and reflecting the expansion of the silver-fueled money economy of the Míng-Qīng period – are complex networks of trade and exchange, in which everything is for sale and everything (and everyone) has a price – or so it often seems.

Of such money economies, the philosopher Georg Simmel (1858-1918) has written: “[They] enforce[] the necessity of continuous mathematical operations in our daily transactions. The lives of many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones.” 23 The genius of a novel such as The Plum in the Golden Vase is to represent the social anxieties that arise from this state of absorption. While the novel is best known for the promiscuous sexual relations of its protagonist Xīmén Qìng 西門慶, it is just as obsessed with the promiscuous circulation of silver in Xīmén Qìng’s world. Attuned to its anonymous author’s penchant for clever puns and wordplay, readers of The Plum in the Golden Vase have often remarked on a parallel in the symbolic economy of the novel between lust (yín 淫) and silver (also pro-
nounced *yin* but written with a different character: 銀). As the eminent literary critic Patrick Hanan once noted: “[M]oney is the fabric of the story.” Recently, one scholar has added specificity to this claim: According to his calculations, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* describes no fewer than 456 cash transactions – valued at some 180,000 *taels* of silver – over the course of its 100 chapters. (For some perspective on these figures, a sixteenth-century agricultural manual pegs the per annum wages for a farm laborer at 13 taels.) For our present purposes, we should note that, of these 180,000 *taels*, roughly 120,000 – or 67% of the total – relate to business dealings, many of which involve entrepreneurial risk taking of one kind or another.

**Example One: Something from Nothing**

Ultimately, notwithstanding its scandalous reputation, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is a morally (and economically) conservative work. From its author’s perspective, both sexual desire and money, in unregulated flow, corrode hierarchy and social stability. To quote Simmel again, it is money that, as “the common denominator of all values[,] . . . hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability.” Much the same could be said for Xīmén Qìng’s voracious carnal appetites. In any event, Simmel’s remarks have a deep resonance with the unyielding sense of “desolation” and “emptiness” (kōng) that pervades *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, despite its relentless cataloguing of activity and things. I will return to the moral problem of the individuality and value of “things” (wù) in my remarks on *Hónglóu mèng* 《紅樓夢》 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) below.

Right now, however, I would like to look beyond *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and its critique of the money economy to consider an alternate – and substantially more positive – fictional representation of the value-creating possibilities of the Míng-Qīng economic system. Of the numerous tales of entrepreneurial risk-taking and resourcefulness in the corpus of the vernacular literature of this period, a most remarkable example appears in a rather obscure early Qīng collection of short stories called *Zhào shì bèi* 《照世杯》 (*The World-Reflecting Cup*, ca. 1660s). The author of this collection is known to us only by the pseudonym Master of the Zhuóyuán Pavilion酌元亭主人. The fourth and final story in this collection is entitled “By excavating new cesspits, a skinflint becomes a moneybags” 〈掘新坑悭鬼成財主〉. In it the author prefaces a narrative of intergenerational domes-
tic discord (the details of which need not concern us here) with a brief account of a villager’s rise in fortune. To summarize: By converting several rooms of his house into a public cesspit and then selling the collected filth to his neighbors as night soil, Elder Mù 穆太公 (for such is the villager’s name) devises a scheme, or “system” (zhìdù 制度) (to use his word for it), for extracting profit from shit. To entice people to use his facilities, he has decorated them with pretty pictures and calligraphic scrolls. He also offers the luxury of free toilet paper. In the following excerpt, the episode reaches its droll climax:

Lo and behold! They came, young and old, to admire the new cesspits. . . . Those bumpkins, moreover, liked nothing better than to think they might be getting something for nothing. Thus, when they saw there was [free] toilet paper to be had, they could barely contain themselves, especially since they had only ever before wiped down there with straw and bits of tile. . . . Then, they saw the pretty wall decorations. What wasn’t to love! A visit to the new cesspit was like taking in a vision of natural beauty! . . . Next, came the women with their disheveled hair and big feet. “Do you have a women’s cesspit?” They asked. So Elder Mù built a new room and dug a new pit exclusively for their convenience and pleasure. Who knew women visitors would outnumber the men? . . . After this, it wasn’t long before farmers were at his door to buy [night soil]. For every picul he charged a single copper coin. There were, moreover, those who brought firewood, rice, and oil to exchange with him. Thus, by opening these cesspits, Elder Mù and his family became quite well off.
For its original seventeenth-century readers, I believe, this comic scene was calibrated to provoke a very particular aesthetic response—namely, a feeling of *qí* 奇 in the full panoply of its meaning from “marvelous!” and “original!” to “how strange!” and even “that’s not right!” (i.e. the opposite of *zhèng* 正, or that which is “proper” and “in its appropriate place”). How so? First, the story of Elder Mù’s cesspits is *qí* as a literary artifact. From nothing, the author has accomplished the marvelous—the creation of something: something not only to be read and enjoyed, but also something to be printed, bought, and sold. The author is, in other words, an entrepreneur, trading in originality and filling the demand of his audience for unusual tales. Although, as mentioned above, the identity of the Master of the Zhuóyuán Pavilion is unknown, it nevertheless seems to me not improbable that he may himself have been one of those “urban intellectuals” who, turning away from the examination system and official employment, sought to forge new identities as cultural entrepreneurs in the burgeoning Míng-Qīng commercial economy.

Second, the cesspits and even Elder Mù himself are *qí*, in the sense that they are (it must be admitted) decidedly strange. Through association with the abject—what anthropologist Mary Douglas famously termed “matter out of place”—they present us with an unnerving spectacle (accentuated by the appearance of unruly women), from which readers are only somewhat protected through the workings of parody. Thus, this story reminds us that entrepreneurial energies—such as those embodied, in the fiction, by Elder Mù’s cesspit business and, in reality, by the writing and publishing of vernacular literature—were potentially disruptive of accepted ideas and hierarchies. The social inappropriateness of the upstart merchant Xímén Qìng—his “out-of-place-ness”—is, after all, a major source of the anxiety that permeates *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Here it is worth considering just how much the Míng-Qīng aesthetic fascination with *qí* (qua the strange) draws its potency from the socially transformative dynamics of the commercial economy, in which the notion developed.

In this regard, it is Elder Mù’s “system” itself—his *zhídù*—that is *qí*. Analogous to the text as artifact, this system—the commercial economy in micro-cosm—also creates something from nothing; and it does so—again, like the text itself—through language. What others call “shit” (*fèn* 糞) Elder Mù calls “precious sludge” (*băobei zhī* 寶貝汁, *băobei* on its own being a word for a treasured
object or possession). In a manner that resembles Táng Tíngshū’s phrasebook and his various business ventures, Elder Mù translates and he persuades. His story thus lays bare a basic structure of entrepreneurial narrative: “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure,” as the saying goes. But, that is not enough. To get rich, Elder Mù cannot just collect other people’s waste for his own enjoyment. He must represent it to them anew. He must tell them a different story about it. Yes, shit is shit, but, as fertilizer, it is also new life, a commodity of real value, and a source of wealth, not only for Elder Mù, but his customers too.

**Example Two: Creative Destruction**

Of course, there is something a bit too utopian about this scenario. What happens when the new narrative, at the same time that it creates new value, destroys something of existing value? In other words, how do Míng-Qīng authors construe the ethics of “creative destruction” (schöpferische Zerstörung)\(^{34}\) – an entrepreneurial notion, if there ever was one? To address this question, let us jump from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century and explore some of the details of a well-known episode from *The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cáo Xue˘qīn 曹雪芹 (1715?-1763?). In Chapter 31 of this beloved novel, Jiă Băoyù 賈寶玉, the young male protagonist, is embroiled in a conflict between two of his maids – Xírén 襲人 and Qíngwén 晴雯. The proximate cause of the drama is a fan, which Qíngwén accidentally damaged by treading on. As the fighting escalates, Băoyù, in a fit of pique, threatens to dismiss Qíngwén from his service, a decision that he soon regrets. To mollify Qíngwén’s wounded feelings, he then invites her, in a typically flamboyant gesture, to rip as many fans as she likes. She agrees gleefully, claiming that she loves the sound fans make as they are torn. Another maid intrudes and chides them for their wastefulness, and the episode concludes.

Cáo Xuêqín’s focus in these events is, as ever, on the nature of desire. Simply put, although they would be incapable of expressing themselves in these terms, both Xírén and Qíngwén desire to be understood, to be appreciated, and – ultimately – to be *loved* by Băoyù. Moreover, it is precisely this perceived “scarcity of love” (to borrow McCloskey’s phrase) that instigates their conflict with each other and with their master. “Desire,” as the great scholar Wáng Guówéi 王國維 (1877-1927) once wrote in response to *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, “is by its nature boundless, and yet it [always] derives from scarcity.” (欲之為性無厭，而其原生於不足。)\(^{35}\) Undoubtedly, Wáng intended this observation to be a comment
on the philosophical – or, one might say, religious – and psychological nature of Cáo’s masterpiece. It is just as easy, however, to read it as an economic axiom.

In fact, Cáo Xuêqín seems keenly interested in how the philosophical, psychological, and economic aspects of desire intertwine. Consider the fans that play such a pivotal role in the quarrel between Băoyù, Xírén, and Qíngwén. As the first half of the title of Chapter 31 – “A torn fan is the price of silver laughter” 撕扇子作千金一笑 – suggests, fan-tearing has meaning as a romantic gesture only insofar as fans have monetary value. To emphasize this point, Cáo goes to great lengths throughout his novel to insert fans – and other such articles that make up the realistic texture of his fictional characters’ material world – into a convincing described system of trade and exchange. In Chapter 67, for example, when Băoyù’s older cousin Xuê Pán薛蟠 returns to Bêijíng from a business trip to Sûzhōu, he brings with him trunks filled with all manner of objects, including, of course, fans. Cáo writes: “In the first trunk were mostly materials – silks, satins, brocades and so forth – and various foreign articles of domestic use; . . . [in the other trunk were] writing brushes, ink-sticks, paper, inkstones, different sorts of fancy stationery, purses, rosaries, fans, fan pendants, face-powder, rouge, etc.” (這一箱都是綢緞錦綾洋貨等家常應用之物， . . . [那一箱裏] 卻是些筆、墨、紙、硯, 各色箋紙, 香袋、香珠、扇子、扇墜、花粉、胭脂等物。)36

To gain a sense of what we might term Cáo Xuêqín’s economic realism, compare this list of commercial goods to those items represented as available in the shops of Sûzhōu in one of the scroll paintings commissioned by the Qiánlóng 乾隆 era emperor (1711-1799, r. 1736-1796) to commemorate his southern tour of the empire in 1751 – i.e. exactly when Cáo was writing his novel: Remarkably, there is an almost one-to-one correspondence, as Figures 1 to 3 demonstrate. Viewing the painting, one can easily imagine that among the merchants and their customers there depicted are Xuê Pán and his agents.
An Economy of Words: Observations on Fictional Narrative and Entrepreneurship in Early Modern China

Figure 1: Detail of a stationery store; the sign reads 各色名箋 (Famous stationery in all colors)

Source of Figures 1 through 3: Xú Yáng 徐揚 (active ca. 1750 – after 1776) and assistants, The Qianlong Emperor’s Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Six: Entering Suzhou along the Grand Canal, 乾隆南巡圖 （第六卷:大運河至蘇州）1770, handscroll; ink and color on silk, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. An excellent resource for exploring this work is the website Recording the Grandeur of the Qing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Columbia University, Asia for Educators Program of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute & Visual Media Center of the Department of Art History & Archaeology, 2005.
Social stability and economic flourishing – pillars of the so-called “prosperous age” (shèngshì 盛世) of the mid Qing dynasty – are central themes in this genre of painting, which was intended by emperors such as Qiánlóng and his grandfather Kāngxī 康熙 (1654-1722, r. 1661-1722) before him to immortalize for posterity the achievements of their reigns. 37 Lively scenes of urban life and healthy trade contribute to the creation of the desired effect. A similar impression of stability and prosperity emerges from the repeated descriptions of routine financial transactions in The Dream of the Red Chamber. Cáo Xuĕqīn’s characters inhabit a fictional world structured by an efficient and sophisticated commercial economy – one that not only embraces the entire empire but also extends well beyond its borders (note the presence of imported goods among the items Xuĕ Pán purchases in Sūzhōu). In this context fans have a recognized use and an established value. In Chapter 31, however, Băoyù’s encouragements to Qíngwén to tear the fans upend this system, revealing, paradoxically perhaps, the unpredictable dynamics of scarcity and desire upon which wealth creation depend.

Devotees of the novel will, of course, recognize unconventional – and, yes, disruptive – behavior as a core component of Băoyù’s personality. Elevating this aspect of his character to the mythic plane, Băoyù’s own mother famously refers to her son as a “world-confusing demon king” (hùnshì mówáng 混世魔王). 38 Here I would like to propose that Băoyù’s demonic powers resemble, at least in the episode we are now considering, something akin to what economists term “Schumpeter’s gale.” For readers unfamiliar with this expression, it derives from the work of the Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950). Schumpeter theorized that the “entrepreneur-spirit” (Unternehmergeist) consists in the unleashing of a “gale of creative destruction,” the effect of which is to “revolutionize[] the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.” 39 He, moreover, cites the identification of “a new quality of [an already existing] good” as an example of this kind of revolutionary innovation.

Already we have seen this kind of innovation at work in the story of Elder Mù’s cesspits, although Elder Mù does not need to destroy anything to create value. In The Dream of the Red Chamber, however, Băoyù and Qíngwén do destroy in order to create. It is for this reason that Shèyuè 麝月, the other maid in the scene, rebukes the pair, admonishing them that their actions will lead to the accumulation of “karmic debt” (niè 孽). Premised on the rising popularity of moral account keeping in late Míng and early Qīng China, 40 this warning itself invokes
the “evaluating, weighing, [and] calculating” (following Simmel) of the money economy.

For his part, Bāoyù offers two rather distinct justifications for his conduct, both of which engage him in the entrepreneurial process of – in the words of the *Harvard Business Review* study – “convince[ing] others to change the way they think, believe[,] or behave.” On the one hand, to Shèyuè, Bāoyù appeals to the very same procedures of “evaluating, weighing, [and] calculating” that she deploys against him: “How much can a few fans be worth after all?” (幾把扇子，能值幾何？), he asks rhetorically. His point is this: Of minimal value in themselves, the fans function as a form of ersatz currency. Once again, the work of Georg Simmel provides useful context. Simmel writes: “Money expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of ‘how much?’” From this perspective, Bāoyù’s jǐhé – his “how much” – “hollows out the . . . individuality” of the fans with the result that they are no longer fans per se but rather tokens of exchange. Thus, when Qíngwén rips the fans, no value is lost, as their destruction purchases something of equal – indeed, greater – value: her laughter.

On the other hand, in conversation with Qíngwén herself, Bāoyù offers a considerably different rationalization of their behavior – one that focuses on the use-value, as opposed to exchange-value, of individual objects. He says:

> These things are there for our use. What we use them for is a matter of individual whim and desire. For example, fans are made for fanning with; but if you prefer to tear them up because it gives you pleasure, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. What you mustn’t do is to use them as objects to vent your anger on. It’s the same with plates and cups. Plates and cups are made to put food and drink in. But if you want to smash them on purpose because you like the noise, it’s perfectly all right to do so. As long as you don’t get into a passion and start taking it out on things — that is the golden rule.

這些東西原不過是借人所用，你愛這樣，我愛那樣，各自性情。比如那扇子，原是搧的，你要撕著頑兒也可以使得，只是別生氣時拿他出氣；就如杯盤，原是盛東西的，你歡喜聽那一聲響，就故意砸了，也是使得的，只別在氣頭兒上拿他出氣。這就是愛物了。\(^{42}\)
One may, of course, read this little speech as a bit of juvenile sophistry typical of a pampered and self-indulgent scion of privilege, as is the protagonist of The Dream of the Red Chamber. Even when we take into account Cáo Xuĕqīn’s tendency to treat with a touch of irony Băoyù’s attempts at intellectual sophistication, however, these remarks do establish an intriguing ethical framework for considering acts of wealth destruction and creation in the context of early modern China.

The first thing to note here is what we might call Băoyù’s Schumpeterian attention to the innovative discovery of “new qualities” in already existing goods – e.g. fans, plates, and cups. At the same time, this “entrepreneurial spirit” is firmly grounded in aspects of the Chinese philosophical tradition. In this passage, for example, the influence of Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 (369?–286? BCE) – in whose thought Băoyù expresses explicit interest elsewhere in the novel – is especially strong. Briefly, according to Zhuāngzǐ, the perceived quiddity of a “thing” or “object” (wù 物) originates, in large measure, from habit and the concretization of habit in language. In Zhuāngzǐ’s own words: “A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so.” (道行之而成, 物謂之而然。) 43 Similarly, for Băoyù, the apparent properties of a fan depend rather more on how it is “used” (yòng 用) than on any inherent “nature” it may possess (wù zhī suō rán 物之所然). 44 The frisson of fan-tearing thus derives from a creative shift in perspective: from the habitual, to the novel; from the use of a fan to fan, to the use of a fan to make a delightful sound. The catch lies in the fact that to enjoy the latter one must destroy the former.

A key question therefore is: How much does Cáo Xuĕqīn sympathize with this point of view? In other words, is he satisfied with Băoyù’s assertion that the world of things exists solely for “our use” (這些東西原不過是借人所用)? Or, do these “things” (both dōngxi 東西 and wù 物) have a claim to existence that is somehow independent of human “whim and desire” (你愛這樣, 我愛那樣, 各自性情)? In this context, it seems crucial that Băoyù himself makes two attempts to limit the scope of his argument. First, he insists – however arbitrarily – that one must never tear a fan or break a cup or plate “when in a passion” (在氣頭兒上). Next, and more significantly, he appends to this insistence a suggestive gloss: ài wù 愛物 – a phrase that David Hawkes translates in his English version of the text as “the golden rule,” but for present purposes I shall render less elegantly, although perhaps more accurately, as “the appropriate care of things/objects.”

A well educated Qīng dynasty reader of The Dream of the Red Chamber would
have immediately recognized this phrase as a reference to Mencius 《孟子》 (7.A.45), in which the philosopher says: “The noble person cares for things [ài wù] without being humane [rén 仁] toward them and is humane towards the people without being affectionate.” (君子之於物也，愛之而弗仁；於民也，仁之而弗親。) 45 The same reader might have been somewhat surprised by Bāoyù’s choice of classical reference, given the otherwise more obvious affinity of his argument with the philosophy of Zhuāngzǐ (as discussed above). For this reason, then, its appearance invites further consideration.

On the one hand, of course, Bāoyù’s allusion to Mencius is little more than a sort of rhetorical legerdemain, whereby the famous “world-confusing demon king” enlists orthodox authority to support unorthodox opinion. Beyond that, it may actually mean very little to our hero. On the other hand, for the perceptive reader, the text’s turn to Mencian philosophy seems to signal a subtle correction to the Zhuāngzǐ-like perspective that use alone determines both the nature and value of an object.

Specifically, in the original passage, Mencius aims to draw a distinction between two kinds of moral regard: 1) the care (ài) of things; and 2) the humane treatment (rén) of other people. On the surface, this distinction merely reinforces the instrumental status of things: whereas human beings, as ends in themselves, must be treated as such (i.e. “humanely”), things are subject to a different – and lesser – ethic of “care.” Upon closer examination, however, this notion of “care,” particularly as it is defined in the exegetical tradition, entails its own safeguards against the complete instrumentalization of things. As the great Southern Sòng dynasty (1127-1279) philosopher Zhū Xī 朱熹 (1130-1200) writes, “To care [for something] is to gather it up in its season and to use it in moderation.” (愛，謂取之有時，用之有節。) 46 From this perspective, then, things still are primarily “there for our use” (借人所用), as Bāoyù says; but Bāoyù is wrong to believe that what we use them for is a matter of indifference. Rather, “the appropriate care of things/objects” establishes definite limits – e.g. of “season” (shí 時) and of “moderation” (jié 節) – on their consumption. Crucially, moreover, these limits are tied to specific properties of the objects themselves. That is to say, these objects exists independent of human “whim and desire.”

If this interpretation is correct, then the fan-tearing episode in The Dream of the Red Chamber appears to be more than simply an endearing scene of overwrought teenage emotional conflict that resolves in peels of laughter. Instead, in this deceptively trivial incident, Cáo Xuěqīn demonstrates how his characters are
caught up in an economy of both things and words, the manipulation of which may have far-reaching moral consequences. What is lost through the damaging of a fan? What is gained? Does what is gained outweigh what is lost? Cáo prefers to raise questions rather than to provide answers. All the same, it is intriguing to consider that, through a subtle play on words, he may have hidden an explanation for his reluctance unequivocally to affirm Qíngwēn and Băoyù’s unconventional energies, as the very object they destroy – a fan (shàn 扇) – is, in the original Chinese, homophonous with the “moral good” (shàn 善). At the very least, Cáo’s fiction provides a sophisticated arena in which to consider the moral complexities of creative destruction.

Conclusion

In conclusion: a caveat. The texts that I have discussed in this essay come from different historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts than the one we inhabit at this moment. None, however (or, maybe, therefore), is representative of “the Chinese way” of thinking – an ignis fatuus of lazy cross-cultural analysis, the gleam of which blinds rather than illuminates. Let us not forget that these texts have varied voices and complex intellectual lineages. My purpose here has been to show how these voices contribute meaningfully to the humanistic understanding of our lives as economic beings, which unfold – not un-problematically – across local, regional, and global networks, and whereby all of us are united, as John Dewey has said, in a concern for “the occupations and values connected with getting a living.”

Endnotes

1 Anonymous, untitled preface, in Táng Tíngshū 唐廷樞, Yingyǔ jíquán 《英語集全》 (Ying Ü Tsap Tsʿün, or The Chinese-English Instructor), (Canton, 1862), n.p.


13 For an example of this scholarship, see: Fang Zhiyuan 方志遠, *Míng dài chéngshì yù shìmín wénxué 明代城市與市民文學* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004).


18 For a version of this argument with regard to the development of business practices in China, see David Faure, “A Historical View of Chinese Entrepreneurship,” pp. 15-35.


20 Yú Yīngshí 余英時, *Zhōngguó jìnshì zōngjiào lúnli yǔ shāngrén jīngshén* 中國近世宗教倫理與商人精神 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiyé gongsi, 1987),
The earliest printed edition of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* dates to 1610, although there are references, as early as 1596, to a manuscript version of the novel. The *Three Words* and *Two Slaps* are collective terms. *Three Words* refers to Féng Mènglóng’s three short story collection –《喻世明言》 (*Stories to Enlighten the World*, 1620; originally titled《古今小說》 [*Stories Old and New*]), 《警世通言》 (*Stories to Caution the World*, 1624), and 《醒世恒言》 (*Stories to Awaken the World*, 1627); *Two Slaps* refers to Líng Méng-chû’s two short story collections –《初刻拍案惊奇》 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection*, 1628) and 《二刻拍案惊奇》 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection*, 1632).

Fang Zhiyuan 方志遠, *Míng dài chéngshì yù shìmín wénxué* 明代城市與市民文學, pp. ??


On the *qí* as an aesthetic category, see Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), especially pp. 5–6. See also the extensive treatment of this


40 On the relation of this phenomenon to social and economic factors, see Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014 [1991]).


The phrase 物之所然 comes from Guō Xiàng’s 郭象 (252-312) commentary to Zhuàngzǐ.


This pun is suggested by Zhāng Xīnzhī 张新之 (1828-1850) in his commentary on The Dream of the Red Chamber.

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1941.
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