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Between Passion and Compassion: *The Story of the Stone* and Its Modern Reincarnations

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Abstract: This study reconsiders *The Story of the Stone* as a literary exemplum of the “Buddhist conquest of China.” The kind of Buddhism that *Stone* embodies in its fictional form and makes indelible on the Chinese cultural imagination simultaneously indulges in and wavers from the Mahāyāna teachings of the nonduality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. The dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion, which *Stone* dramatizes and problematizes, continues to stir the creative impulses of artists in revolutionary and post-revolutionary China. This study features three of *Stone*’s modern reincarnations. *Tale of the Crimson Silk*, a story by the amorous poet-monk Su Manshu (1884–1918), recasts at once the idea of Buddhist monkhood and that of “free love” in early Republican China. In *Lust, Caution*, a spy story by the celebrated writer Eileen Chang (1920–1995), a revolutionary heroine is compelled to weigh the emptiness/truth of carnal desire against the truth/emptiness of patriotic commitment. Decades later, love and illusion dwell again at the epicenter of a fallen empire in the director Chen Kaige’s (b. 1952) 2017 film, *The Legend of the Demon Cat*, in which an illustrious poet sings testimony to the (un)witting (com)passion of a femme fatale.

Keywords: Buddhist literature; *The Story of the Stone*; Su Manshu; Eileen Chang; Chen Kaige



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1. Introduction: Rethinking “Buddhist Literature”

Let me present the gist of what I have to say in the form of three paradoxes. First, that our view of Chinese Buddhism as a historical phenomenon is greatly *obscured* by the abundance of our source materials. Second, that if we want to define what was the normal state of medieval Chinese Buddhism, we should concentrate on what seems to be *abnormal*. Third, if we want to complete our picture of what this Buddhism really was, we have to look outside Chinese Buddhism itself. (Zürcher 1982, pp. 161–62)

Erik Zürcher, the doyen of the history of Chinese Buddhism, made these observations in a lecture at the Royal Asiatic Society in 1982.

Decades later, Zürcher’s observations remain instructive for the field of Buddhist Studies, a field that has been blessed, as well as burdened, with a stupendous scriptural tradition. Since its inception, the making of Buddhism as a “textual object” (Almond 1988, p. 24) in the Western academy has been underpinned by deeply entrenched “Protestant presuppositions,” in the view of Gregory Schopen (Schopen 1997). There is much methodological acuity to recommend in Schopen’s call for a turn away from canonical works and doctrinal exegesis—the preoccupation of “a small, atypical part of the Buddhist community” historically in Schopen’s eyes (Schopen 1997, p. 1)—and a turn toward archaeological and epigraphical materials. It is a call many in Buddhist Studies have heartily heeded since the initial publication of Schopen’s paper in the early 1990s. However, one wonders if an “overriding textual orientation” in Schopen’s diagnosis is too sweeping a charge against an obsession narrowly centered on sacred texts (Schopen 1997, p. 2). As a student of literature, I am inclined to think that we have scarcely paid enough attention to the heterogeneous

texts that can help us understand, as Donald S. Lopez puts it, “the elusive category we call Buddhism” (Lopez 1997). Our view has been *obscured*, as Zürcher long ago reminded us, not only by the wealth of sources but also by certain idées reçues that tend to demarcate what dwells within the category of “Buddhism” and what does not.

In view of Schopen’s question concerning “where religion as an object of investigation is to be located” (Schopen 1997, p. 14), or what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the matter of “choice” (Smith 1982, p. xi), this study puts forward another attempt at understanding the “local production of meaning,” in Charles Hallisey’s terms (Hallisey 1995, p. 49), in a distinctive Buddhist tradition. In particular, it highlights a literary approach in “coming to terms with Chinese Buddhism” (Sharf 2002). I would like to begin by proposing that we reconsider the eighteenth-century masterpiece by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (ca. 1717–1763), *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢, or *The Story of the Stone* 石頭記 (alternatively, *Dream of the Red Chamber*; hereafter *Stone*), as an example par excellence of the “Buddhist conquest of China” (or the “Chinese transformation of Buddhism”) (Zürcher [1959] 2007; Ch’en 1973).¹ As the pinnacle of premodern Chinese prose fiction—“an encyclopedic compendium of an entire tradition in a form that itself serves as a model,” in the words of Andrew Plaks (Plaks 1976, p. 11)—*Stone* stands as many things at once. It is a family saga and an arresting portraiture of Qing-dynasty social and domestic life; a tragic love story and a bildungsroman imbued with an autobiographical compulsion (which has also spawned incessant speculations of *Stone* as a roman à clef of secret Manchu history); and a Buddhist cautionary tale, as the protagonist Baoyu’s this-worldly sojourn ends with his “leaving home” and conversion to a Buddhist monk. To explain what I mean by *Stone* as an exemplum of the “Buddhist conquest of China,” a brief recapitulation of scholars’ responses to the last aspect of the novel hitherto is in order.

Designating *Stone* as a piece of “Buddhist literature” would raise no eyebrows. There is, however, lively disparity of opinion—*prima facie*, I would add, with explanations in a moment—with respect to what the “Buddhist” aspect of the work means. Let us first address the disparity. In *The Classic Chinese Novel*, a pioneering study of the subject in English, C. T. Hsia remarks that the Buddhist-Daoist message enjoys the “last word” in *Stone* (and many other Ming-Qing vernacular novels) “but only ostensibly.” For a critic who so keenly relishes the psychological intricacies of the human condition, it is well understandable that the Buddhist goal of deliverance from saṃsāra appears in Hsia’s eyes little more than a “path of holy indifference” (Hsia [1968] 2015, pp. 30, 271, 262). Hsia is certainly not alone in feeling unconvinced. Xiao Chi sees Baoyu as a “reluctant quester,” in response to David Hawkes’ characterization of the teenage hero as a Buddhist “spiritual pilgrim” (Xiao 2001, p. 212). It should be added that Hawkes, the acclaimed English translator of *Stone*, observes in an earlier article that the most striking instance of contrast between Western literature and Chinese literature is the “absence of religious inspiration” in the latter.² Anthony C. Yu refutes this sweeping generalization. Yu does agree with Hawkes, however, in his masterful rereading of *Stone*, that in addition to the plot line, an assortment of literary devices lends weight to an affirmation of *Stone* as “a grand parable of Buddhist quest and enlightenment” (Yu 1997, p. 136). The most ardently Buddhist reading of *Stone* comes from Qiancheng Li. Predicating his argument upon the subgenre of *wushu* 武書, “fictions of enlightenment,” Li underscores the fundamental soteriological patterns and attendant narrative structures that are shared between some best known Buddhist scriptures and vernacular Chinese novels such as *The Journey to the West* and *Stone* (Li 2004).

Convinced or not, all these seasoned readers agree on the insistent conspicuity of the Buddhist message—the “last word”—in *Stone*, which demands interpretive attention. This is one way to recognize their common ground. There is, however, another and more critical common ground masked by their divergence. Their variant stances notwithstanding,

¹ Erik Zürcher’s *Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* and Kenneth K. S. Ch’en’s *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* are two of the pioneering works on the problem of the sinification of Buddhism.

² David Hawkes, “Literature,” cited in (Yu 2009, p. 158).

these scholars' responses can be read as a spectrum of rejoinders patterned after the same question—namely, the question concerning how Buddhism serves *Stone* and hence aids our understanding and appreciation of the novel. Critics on one end of the spectrum tend to downplay such service and aid and treat *Stone* primarily as a secular work; whereas critics on the other end stress the overpowering gravity of the religious dimension of *Stone*, to the extent that Li proposes, provocatively, albeit sketchily, that we regard *Stone* as a work of “secular scripture” (Li 2004, p. 5).

As much as—or precisely because—I appreciate these earlier readings, I would like to suggest a rethinking of the guiding logic concerning how we approach *Stone*. Instead of asking how Buddhism serves *Stone*, we can well turn the question the other way around and ask how *Stone* serves Buddhism. Instead of affixing the likewise “elusive” label of “Buddhist literature” to *Stone*, I suggest that we approach such vernacular articulations as “local manifestations of Buddhist life as it existed among the people,” following Zürcher's advice (Zürcher 1982, p. 165). In conceiving *Stone* as an epitome of the “Buddhist conquest of China” and highlighting a literary approach in the “local production of meaning,” my goal is not to decode the Buddhist “influence” on certain Chinese literary works; but rather to illuminate “morphologies” of the Buddhist faith realized nowhere else but in these very literary works (Gerhart and Yu 1990).

This essay is an attempt in this direction. We begin by revisiting *Stone* to discuss the kind of Buddhism that *Stone* embodies in its fictional form and makes indelible on the Chinese cultural imagination. Accompanying our explorations and serving as our guides are two seemingly marginal figures in the novel, the “Buddhist mahasattva Impervioso” and the “Daoist illuminate Mysterioso,” the scabby-headed Buddhist monk and the lame Daoist priest who make an intermittent appearance throughout the story. The dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion, which *Stone* adroitly dramatizes and problematizes, continues to stir the creative impulses of subsequent generations of artists in revolutionary and post-revolutionary China. We sample three such instances in the second half of the essay: *Jiangshaji* 絳紗記, or *Tale of the Crimson Silk*, a story published by the amorous poet-monk Su Manshu 蘇曼殊 (1884–1918) in Shanghai in 1915; *Se, Jie* 色, 戒, or *Lust, Caution*, a most cherished story to its celebrated author, Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–1995), an aficionado of *Stone* in her own right; and, finally, *Yaomao zhuan* 妖貓傳, or *The Legend of the Demon Cat* (hereafter *Demon Cat*), a 2017 film by the mainland Chinese director Chen Kaige 陳凱歌 (b. 1952), based on an epic Buddhist novel by the Japanese writer Yumemakura Baku 夢枕貳 (b. 1951).

A few words of explanation are needed concerning the selection of these three works and why they are deemed “reincarnations” of *Stone* in modern China rather than “sequels” (such as, for a most obvious example, Wu Jianren's 吳趸人 [1866–1910] *Xin shitouji* 新石頭記, or *The New Story of the Stone*). These three works do not display a connection to *Stone* at the diegetic level. Their authors may or may not be acquainted with *Stone*: Su Manshu alludes to *Stone* in his poems; Eileen Chang has written a series of essays on *Stone*; we have little idea how well Chen Kaige knows *Stone*. Such contextual information about the artist, when relevant or interesting, is given; but it hardly bears on the question of the work being a “reincarnation” in the present discussion. What these works reincarnate—recall, reconfigure, and reinvigorate—is the kind of Buddhist metaphysical quandary and soteriological quest *Stone* so compellingly embodies, in particular, the interlacing dialects of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion. The ultramodern “passionate monk” Su Manchu has fashioned, in literary imagination as well as in real life, is so emblematic that its resonance with the figure of Brother Amor in *Stone* appears most readily discernible. The subsequent two works, *Lust, Caution* and *Demon Cat*, however, might challenge the reader's immediate perception. The former does not seem to have anything to do with Buddhism, while the latter does not seem to have anything to do with *Stone*. Would it be possible to discover the kind of Buddhist quest *Stone* embodies in works that, upon first glance, have nothing to do either with Buddhism or with *Stone* itself? In making these two provocative selections, this essay persuades the reader to venture

beyond the obvious so as to capture the reverberations of *Stone* and, along with it, the classic Buddhist quest *Stone* embodies, in some unexpected places.

2. *Stone* and Reading (As) a Buddhist Quest

It is clear to even the most insouciant reader that *Stone* is studded with religious elements from cover to cover. Exactly because *Stone* stands as a great achievement of “social realism,” hailed by no less a reader than Chairman Mao,³ it affords us, inter alia, a window into the variegated religious milieu of late imperial China. As Yiqun Zhou shows in her meticulous study, the representation of the religious professionals and institutions in *Stone* is characterized by a bifurcation of images and themes. The majority of the clerics, who practice the faith as a trade and live off liturgical services, are objects of often overt derision and hostility that would support the reading of *Stone* as an anticlerical novel. We recall the old nun at Wheatcake Priory (Chapter 15) and the sorceress Mother Ma (Chapter 25), who display loathsome rapacity and slyness in manipulating their patrons for illicit profit. In another instance, the last snapshot of Jia Jing—a fervid alchemist who dies in pursuit of his cause—with “purple face and cracked and shriveled lips” and “iron-hard abdomen” conjures a grim caricature of the Daoist obsession with immortality (Chapter 63). Zhou further shows that this anticlerical stance remains remarkably consistent from the first eighty chapters to the last forty chapters, the origin and authorship of which have long been a subject of dispute. On the other hand, however, the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism enjoy unrivaled eminence in the novel that would support the reading of *Stone* as a fiction of enlightenment. This is illustrated by a few exceptional clerics, and above all, by the scabby-headed Buddhist monk and the lame Daoist priest who appear intermittently throughout the novel (Zhou 2011).

It is to this quaint pair we now turn. *Stone* begins with a triple framework of the mythic-fantastical, the earthly, and the metafictional. The interweaving of the narrative across the three realms is simultaneously accompanied by radical shifts in temporality. Apart from the stone, the two celestial masters are the only characters in the novel who are capable of transcending the triple framework. The duo, showing up mad and filthy on most occasions except that of their debut, are far from marginal characters. Quite the contrary, they are crucial figures that bring to light what the author has tactfully concealed from the surface of a predominantly realist story. A close look at the duo unveils what kind of Buddhism is at work in *Stone*. The functions they serve in the narrative accentuate a “problematic of contradiction and constraint,” to borrow the terms of Jing Wang (Wang 1992, p. 173), between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, This and the Other Shore. We shall examine some scenes to understand how the “contradiction and constraint” are cast and sustained throughout the novel.

The manner in which the celestial duo descends to inaugurate the story coins the first Buddhist challenge in *Stone*. This is a seminal moment. There are two extant versions for the opening scene. In the most popular Cheng-Gao edition, a full 120-chapter printed edition released in 1792, by the time the celestial duo arrives at the foot of Greensickness Peak, the stone has by his own means shrunk and metamorphized into a piece of lustrous jade. Catching sight of the “attractive” stone with “magical properties,” the monk picks him up and offers to take him on for a trip, the destination of which is withheld from the inquiring stone. The monk promises, however, that he would escort the stone to a “certain

brilliant
successful
poetical
cultivated

³ In 1954, Mao declared himself an avid reader of *Stone* and urged his party comrades to follow his example and read *Stone* at least five times to grasp its message of class struggle. Mao’s words were targeted at Yu Pingbo, an eminent scholar of classical literature whose research on *Stone* was published two years earlier. The subsequent persecution of Yu Pingbo became a prelude to the nationwide Antirightist Campaign in 1957. For a summary of the 1954 *Stone* controversy, see (Wang 2012, pp. 419–22).

aristocratic
 elegant
 delectable
 luxurious
 opulent
 locality". (Cao 1973, p. 48)

In his English translation, Hawkes largely follows the 1792 Cheng-Gao edition insofar as the first chapter is concerned, despite the fact that this opening appears to him to be "less interesting" than the other ones (Hawkes 1973, p. 46). Hawkes has full reason to think so. In the Red Inkstone reannotated manuscript edition dated to the Year of Jiaxu during the Qianlong reign, or 1754, which has only 16 chapters and stands as the earliest surviving version of *Stone*, we see a different rendition of the opening scene. It all begins with a seemingly accidental chat between the duo, whose topic presently changes from "cloud-wrapt mountains and mist-covered seas and the mysteries of immortal life" to "the wealth and luxury and the good things of life in the Red Dust" as they advance toward the stone (Cao 1958b, p. 1). It is upon "overhearing" their conversation that an irresistible desire to experience the earthly realm is kindled in the stone. However, when the stone expresses his wish, the two prophets, in a unified voice, make haste to object:

That Red Dust does have some delights, but you cannot count on them forever. Besides, as the couplet goes, "every perfection is tarnished by some inadequacy" and "all fine endeavors meet more than one setback." In the passing of a moment, the best pleasures give way to sorrow; people are no more, while things change. It is, after all, a dream. All phenomena return to emptiness. Therefore, it would be better never to make the venture. (Cao 1958a, vol. 1, p. 2)

Their advice falls on deaf ears. Obviously, the prophets have anticipated so. Upon repeated entreaties of the stone, the monk exercises his magic power to transform the stone into a piece of translucent jade and brings him on for a sojourn into the Red Dust.

The 1754 opening, with an addition of over 400 characters and a tantalizing conversation between the stone and the celestial duo, is pregnant with metaphysical implications. When the desire for Experience necessarily exacts the pain of evanescence and life as an unstoppable passage of time never lingers over any of its treasured moments, should one choose to embrace both beginning and end, entrance and departure, life and death, or to stay clear by withdrawing altogether? This is the question the intelligent yet innocent rock encounters. *Stone* makes a critical distinction at the outset. The "experience" of the stone, which is soon to unfold in extravagant detail, is not to be approached in conventional terms; instead, it refers to Experience in an all-encompassing and non-differentiated sense. In this sense, Experience is the other name of *samsāra*. When C. T. Hsia remarks ruefully on the lack of "mature vision" in *Stone's* adolescent lovers, who appear in Hsia's eyes "fearful to step into the realm of experience," he fails to detect this critical distinction (Hsia [1968] 2015, pp. 243, 256).

In both versions of the opening scene, the biggest irony of *Stone*—regarding its *raison d'être*—is given away at the outset. It is a story that ought not to have taken place. From the beginning and throughout the story, the Buddhist monk and the Daoist priest stand as ethereal emissaries to warn the mortals of the folly of earthly attachment and deliver the ultimate wisdom of emptiness. At the same time, nonetheless, they are the first ones to betray what they preach, and kick start the entire drama—thankfully, or we would never have the story. In the 1754 opening, the duo's calculated conversation about the allures of the Red Dust and apparent futility of persuasion seems so dubious that one hesitates to hold the stone responsible for his own fate despite his "assertive behavior" (Yu 1997, p. 117). The point is made even bolder in the 1792 opening, which does away with the vain exhortation and proceeds swiftly with the monk's *volunteering* to take the stone on for a trip. As much as they advocate Enlightenment, the celestial duo also lend a

guiding hand to initiate—and later, to close—the stone’s earthly Experience. The glaring oddity between their claims and their moves hints at another understanding of Experience: Experience not as an absolute antithesis of Enlightenment but as an enabling condition and an indispensable means for Enlightenment.

In a study of *The Journey to the West*, Anthony Yu poses the question concerning “what kind of religion is in view” as we delve into the religious dimension of a creative work (Yu 2009, p. 180). We may well apply the same question to *Stone*. The kind of Buddhism that *Stone* embodies in its fictional form and makes indelible on the Chinese cultural imagination simultaneously indulges in and wavers from the Mahāyāna teachings of the nonduality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Philosophically, the novel opens with a problematization of existence; more precisely, with a problematization of the relationship between Experience and Enlightenment, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Depicting with intense feeling and artistic finesse the stone’s earthly sojourn especially his “golden days” in the garden utopia, *Stone* seems to exalt the Mahāyāna approach that the ultimate wisdom of detachment is to be grasped in deepest attachment. The final redemption that awaits the stone is, in Wai-ye Li’s incisive reading, “transcendence of passion through passion” and “apprehension of reality through illusion” (Li 1993, p. 3). Nonetheless, unlike the Mahāyāna tendency to collapse the distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa for a radical realization of nonduality, *Stone* firmly maintains the line between desire and emptiness and between This and the Other Shore from beginning to end. Baoyu, after all, is no Vimalakīrti. As a literary exemplum of the “Buddhist conquest of China,” *Stone* encapsulates through a narrative mode the profound awe as well as angst in the Chinese reception of the essential teachings of the Buddha, teachings that call into question not only the indigenous Confucian system of values and rites but moreover the fundamental meaning of human experience.

This Buddhist conceptual experiment, in which Experience and Enlightenment, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa stand in a relationship of “contradiction and constraint,” is enacted by *Stone*, with as much sophistication as ambivalence, throughout the narrative. The experiment remains largely out of sight; but at certain moments, it comes to the fore. Dore J. Levy has shown that in *Stone*, poetry which portends the future conjures an opening between the mundane and the transcendent realms: “the clues are in plain sight” (Levy 1999, p. 155). The clues are in plainer sight, I would like to add, when the celestial duo spring up in the mundane world—now a pair of “crazy saints” in mortal eyes, as Meir Shahar characterizes them (Shahar 2012, pp. 135–39). On some occasions and when the time is right, the scabby-headed Buddhist monk and/or the lame Daoist priest descend into the Red Dust to reap a lost soul on the cusp of “letting go,” such as Zhen Shiyin (Chapter 1), Liu Xianglian (Chapter 66), and ultimately after a series of “prefiguring fables” (Xiao 2001, p. 205), Baoyu (Chapter 120). However, the celestial duo’s earthly interventions do not always bear a clear purpose. For instance, in Chapter 1, both clerics exhort Zhen Shiyin to give his beloved little daughter Yinglian away, to no avail. In Chapter 3, we learn that the scabby-headed monk has likewise called on Daiyu’s parents and made the same plea, again, to no avail. One cannot help but wonder why the two prophets bother to make such pointless trips when, as we are told at the beginning, all characters’ fates have been predetermined. A little later, we learn that the prescription of a rare medicine Baochai takes, “Cold Fragrance Pill” (Chapter 7), and the inscription on her golden locket (Chapter 8) come from the scabby-headed monk as well. Travelling tirelessly back and forth between the mystical realm and the earthly realm, the celestial prophets administer a persistent reminder of how the story begins in the first place and the questionable nature of the stone’s Experience in the Red Dust. Their every move, consequential or not, sends the “chiming of the void” throughout the story (Levy 1999, p. 139).

Despite its unfinished form, *Stone* is a “finalized” novel in the Bakhtinian sense. Cao Xueqin seems scarcely concerned with “surprisingness,” “openness,” or “potentiality” in the emplotment of his story (Morson and Emerson 1990, pp. 36–38). On the contrary, *Stone* seems to exhibit an extreme determinism when the denouement has been foretold in the opening chapter(s) and echoes of the prolepsis extend throughout the subsequent narrative.

What does the (re)reading of such a work of fiction entail? Readers who move beyond the opening scene must undergo a suspension of disbelief, however tangentially, and accept the cosmological setting of the story so as to experience, for oneself, what it would feel like to travel along with the stone to the earthly realm and savor all its riches and sorrows until the characters meet their karmic destinies. In following the stone's spiritual pilgrimage, readers vicariously undertake a spiritual pilgrimage as well.

Here lies the true “openness” of *Stone* as a fiction of enlightenment. In conjuring a Buddhist quest, *Stone* turns the endeavor of reading into a Buddhist quest, its fictive medium furnishing a testing ground for its religious message without imposing belief. It enables readers to experience a dream in sheer wakefulness and prompts them to judge for themselves the persuasion of the Buddhist soteriological vision, while making no pretense to smooth over the paradoxes and ambiguities that render this vision frustrating, implausible, or elusive. Vanitas, the “Passionate Monk” to whom the stone entrusts his story—who, “starting off in the Void (which is Truth) came to the contemplation of Form (which is Illusion); and from Form engendered Passion; and by communicating Passion, entered again into Form; and from Form awoke to the Void (which is Truth)” (Cao 1973, p. 51)—stands as the first as well as the ideal reader of *Stone*. The scholarly opinions we sampled earlier add furthermore a vivid spectrum of readerly records. Given all these records, the question is not to emphasize or deemphasize the “Buddhist” import of *Stone*. Rather, I hope the brief discussion above serves to highlight how subtly yet compellingly *Stone* dramatizes and problematizes a “Buddhist” cosmos and its prescribed path to salvation, just as *Stone* dramatizes and problematizes its own fictionality. Subsequently, we turn to three modern reincarnations of *Stone*, which continue to wrestle with the dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion and bear testimony to *Stone*'s reverberations that penetrate changing sociopolitical circumstances.

3. Tale of the Crimson Silk

Repaying you, darling, an alms-bowl of heartless tears,

I regret that we had not met before my tonsure. (Su [1927] 1985, vol. 1, p. 46)

When Su Manshu penned the above verses in 1909 in commemoration of an aborted romantic relationship between himself and a Japanese courtesan (Liu and Wuji 1927, p. 158), he made explicit the inspirations he drew from *Stone*. In Cao Xueqin's magnum opus, the stone in his previous life, Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting, watered daily a delicate Crimson Pearl Flower on the bank of the Magic River with sweet dew, thereby conferring on her the gift of life. Out of gratitude, Crimson Pearl vowed that she would repay Stone-in-Waiting with “tears shed during the whole of a mortal lifetime” if both of them were to be reborn as humans in the realm below (Cao 1973, p. 53). This is the beginning of the karmic bond between Baoyu and Daiyu in their previous lives. Readers anticipate a lachrymose love story, of which the tragic burden and ineluctable emptiness have been foreshadowed even before the story opens. In his life, real as well as imagined, Manshu, however, conjured a paradoxical twist. With his monastic commitment taking precedence, he felt obliged to eventually withdraw from all romantic engagements, however harrowing it would be. Nonetheless, cloaked in a Buddhist monk's robe, the passionate soul reinvented the possibility of a constant heart in an age which witnessed the rise of “free love” as a zeitgeist.

Manshu stood as the quintessential “passionate monk” in twentieth-century China, although—or as a result—he is rarely mentioned in histories of the Chinese Buddhist establishment. In this essay, I address him by his Dharma name, “Manshu,” rather than “Su,” his family name before tonsure, to honor his identity as a formally ordained Chinese Buddhist, an identity Manshu himself had painstakingly honored. A Sino-Japanese descendent born in Yokohama, Manshu led a peripatetic life since childhood. In the eyes of both his contemporaries and later historians, Manshu's family background and circumstances surrounding his conversion were shrouded in mysteries—contributed to a considerable extent by the man himself, who confided in his friends an “unspeakable agony” concerning his personal past (Feixi [1927] 1985). Against all the obscurities, what matters, however, is

that Manshu has consistently identified himself as a Buddhist monk, even when he sent out invitation cards for sing-song girls at dinner banquets in Shanghai. Another point to note is that Manshu was far from “a monk who had never gathered up the courage to transgress the monastic code” (Ip 2008, p. 245). To be exact, he regularly and publicly transgressed *some* monastic codes. For instance, in fashioning himself, Manshu alternated between a monk’s robe and a western suit. He was also known for his voracious appetite for an assortment of delicacies including beef, ham, fish, mooncakes, cigars, and candies, whereas strict vegetarianism has remained a hallmark of Chinese Buddhist monastic culture since the sixth century. Manshu practically binged himself to death—on steamed pork buns.

There was one rule by which Manshu steadfastly abode, in real life as well as in literary imagination: the rule of celibacy. The theme that is characteristically Manshu’s is the bitter impossibility of romantic consummation between a monk and a lady; oftentimes, two ladies in fact, each attractive in her own right and both fervently devoted to the male protagonist. Manshu created a number of such monk characters, each shaped by his own life experience in some ways. A striking example is found in *Tale of the Crimson Silk*, a story Manshu published in Shanghai in July 1915. In the story, Mengzhu—a name that resembles “Manshu” phonetically and graphically—conceals his feelings when a girl from a Confucian gentry family, Qiuyun, offers him a token of affection, a jade pendant wrapped in a piece of crimson silk. Mengzhu rushes to the marketplace to sell the pendant but keeps the silk. He then enters the monastery, only to be sent away for eating pigeons and for adamant nonobedience. When Mengzhu reappears in a latter part of the story, he seems a cold and indifferent monk, thoroughly oblivious to Qiuyun’s unwavering love and long-suffering search for him. The story reaches its climax when, with the narrator’s help, Qiuyun eventually finds Mengzhu, who has passed away in sitting meditation in a small temple outside the city of Suzhou:

I hurried out to tell Ch’iu-yün [Qiuyun]. She entered and stood silently in front of him, without uttering one word. All of a sudden, she saw a corner of a crimson silk kerchief protruding from the lapel of his cassock. She pulled it out with her hand, looked around, and turned it over. Then she nestled herself in Meng-chu’s [Mengzhu] lap as she embraced and kissed him with streaming tears. All this time I stood still. Suddenly, I heard the rustling of the wind as Meng-chu’s corpse dissolved into ashes, only the piece of crimson silk remaining in Ch’iu-yün’s hand. (Lee 1973, pp. 71–72; Su [1927] 1985, vol. 3, p. 220)

The last portrait of the enigmatic monk has fascinated readers then and now. It is a stunning configuration of “nirvāṇa in love,” which Manshu declared to be the goal of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (Su [1927] 1985, vol. 1, p. 131). To Manshu, nirvāṇa is nothing but “emotion condensed and sublimated in tranquility” (Lee 1973, p. 72). It is a state attained paradoxically by a “renunciative approach to love,” in Hung-yok Ip’s observation (Ip 2008, p. 243). Ip further argues that love in Manshu’s literary idealization defies the domination of desire and transcends self-gratification, which has been coveted by many a modern individual. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that the morbid genius has envisioned another kind of self-gratification, in which case a self-imposed deprivation turns out to be the most solemn promise for fulfillment. Unfaltering yearnings for what has been lost or is never within reach warrant devotion in its noblest form. When love is measured not only by the intensity of feeling but moreover by the constancy of feeling, as it turns out, celibacy triumphs as the ultimate seal of fidelity.

Tale of the Crimson Silk weaves together a number of romantic encounters, all of which come to a pitiful ending. A shipwreck—which allows the author to incorporate snippets of information about the recent disaster of the sinking of Titanic—forever separates the narrator and his lover during their elopement. The girl survives the calamity but languishes to death afterwards. To requite her constant longing for him, the mournful narrator becomes a Buddhist monk. Besides, after her farewell to Mengzhu, Qiuyun lives the rest of her life as a Buddhist nun as well. In another episode, a man takes his life upon the realization that he has been deceived by his girlfriend, who marries a wealthy man in the

end. After all, C. T. Hsia's remark concerning a lack of "mature vision" well fits Manshu's fictive characters, who demonstrate few choices at the end of a heartbreaking romance. But "mature vision" was never Manshu's preoccupation. "High-spirited and defiant" according to an untraceable (if not made-up) friend (Feixi [1927] 1985; Liu and Wuji 1927), Manshu sought indulgence in youthful ardor and excess.

At a time when the idea of "free love" was only beginning to stir the hearts of a new generation of Chinese youth, Manshu stood as an ingenious forerunner of the romantic spirit. To Manshu, *qing* (feeling, love, passion) constituted the core of his faith. In his own words, "Although I have become a monk, I seek the Way through *qing*. This explains my anguish" (Su [1927] 1985, vol. 2, p. 51). It is clear that these pages "penned with hot and bitter tears" betray a wounded soul's inability to handle intimacy (Cao 1973, p. 51). Manshu's monk protagonists, mirroring the author in reality, hanker after yet withdraw from intimacy, opting to let one's love go in order to cherish it for eternity. Nonetheless, by conjuring a passionate "body of Dharma," in reality as well as in imagination, Manshu recast at once the idea of a Buddhist *bhikṣu* and that of love in his times (Ying 2017). He seemed to insist that love holds such liberating power and universal enchantment that it must be compatible with the Buddhist spiritual pursuit as well, and true love not only transcends desires of the flesh but also outlasts the fragility and transience of worldly union. One cannot help but notice that the dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion no longer carries much weight in Manshu's works, when love becomes the ultimate truth and nirvāṇa is accomplished in everlasting passion. Manshu's climactic last words say it all: "Love embraces all; as for impediments, there are none" (Lee 1973, p. 76).

4. Lust, Caution

Since C. T. Hsia elevated Eileen Chang to modern China's master storyteller on a par with Lu Xun in his groundbreaking *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* in 1961 (Hsia [1961] 1999, pp. 389–431), admiring attention has been heaped on Chang from critics and readers alike in the Sinophone world and, since the 1990s, in mainland China as well. A descendent of a crumbling aristocratic family, Chang was educated in Shanghai and Hong Kong before hitting literary stardom virtually overnight in mid-1940s Shanghai. Chang's stories are subtly poised between passion and compassion, as she gleams the glimmers of humanity in the affairs of mundane men and women ensnared in their own desires and calculations in a society in turmoil. We shall soon see an example. Notably, her artistic precocity drew nourishment from both worlds, modern Western fiction (and cinema) and premodern Chinese vernacular novel, *Stone* in particular, which remained Chang's all-time favorite.

In the decade between 1968 and 1977, Chang wrote a series of studies of *Stone* while living a secluded life in the United States. This collection of studies was published in 1977 as *Honglou mengyan* 紅樓夢魘, or *Nightmare in the Red Chamber*. In the preface, Chang speaks of two books—the late Ming vernacular novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, or *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, and Cao Xueqin's magnum opus, the latter especially—as the "fountainhead of my all." "Whenever I met an occasional setback, big or small, I would be all right after 'perusing' *Stone* for a while," she says (Chang 2001, vol. 10, p. 7). There is much to savor in *Nightmare in the Red Chamber* watching one literary genius explicating the craft of another literary genius (Wang 2012, pp. 422–26). Here, however, I would like to highlight another endeavor of Chang's during the same period. Toward the close of 1977, Chang published in Taiwan *Lust, Caution*, a story she first conceived in 1953 and subsequently spent more than two decades writing and rewriting. If Chang's entire oeuvre can be deemed a modern reincarnation of *Stone*, *Lust, Caution* conjures a particularly fraught moment that lays bare the politics of desire and emptiness in a bizarre drama of "revolution plus love."

Readers cannot fail to notice the dreamy atmosphere that pervades *Lust, Caution*, as the story makes constant reference to the theatrical thrill that invigorates the heroine's life from past to present. In Chang's laconic characterization, "She had, in a past life, been an actress; and here she was, still playing a part, but in a drama too secret to make her famous"

(Chang 2007, p. 17). For a female lead of a student drama troupe whose repertoire consisted solely of patriotic historical plays, it is no mean feat for Wang Chia-chih to switch to the role of an underground spy, in the guise of a Hong Kong businessman's wife. Her new mission is to seduce and assassinate Mr. Yee, head of the secret service of the Nanjing-based puppet regime of Wang Jingwei. Her trepidation and intoxication feed each other as she watches her own charm bloom in subduing her prey, body and soul, in a series of dazzling performances in and out of his sight. "Her stage fright always evaporated once the curtain was up," Chia-chih cheers herself while waiting in a café for the last climactic act (Chang 2007, p. 25).

Chang is a virtuoso storyteller in blurring the boundary between the real and the unreal. In "The Golden Cangue," one of her most praised works, for instance, the protagonist Ch'i-ch'iao is torn between claiming the love, however feigned, she has been craving for from her brother-in-law and giving in to his chicanery and exploitation. Ch'i-ch'iao cannot help but ask herself: "Even if she knows he is deceiving her, can't she accept his love for real, since he is such a good actor?" (Chang 2001, vol. 5, p. 28) For another instance, in "Sealed Off," a story set likewise in occupied Shanghai, a romantic tête-à-tête between a man and a woman—two strangers stranded in a tram—swiftly evaporates as soon as the blockade is lifted. To the woman's wistful realization, it is, after all, "a preposterous dream" (Chang 2001, vol. 5, p. 299).

Lust, Caution, nonetheless, stands out for its relentless enactment of double consciousness from beginning to near the end, a characteristic narrative tact that bespeaks the story's affinity with *Stone*. In *Stone*, as we saw earlier, the earthly interventions of the celestial prophets, the futile ones in particular, serve to shatter the fictive illusion of a self-evident world and remind readers how the stone's sojourn ever began and is destined to end. In addition, in several banquet scenes in *Stone*, characters delight in songs and riddles without the slightest idea that written on the slips are their own karmic fates soon to be met. In *Lust, Caution*, which is not a metafiction and all events are confined to a single temporal frame, double consciousness works in another way. As an underground spy, the *modus operandi* of Chia-chih allows her to become simultaneously the star performer of the play and the most intimate observer of her own performance. Moreover, she keenly observes her fellow players. The stinging betrayal she felt from other members of the drama troupe after she had sacrificed her virginity in order to live up to her role of "Mrs. Mai" paves the way for a cathartic sense of gratification she subsequently derives from her coital relationship with Mr. Yee. Chia-chih lives a thorny question with which masters of the theatre such as Zeami and Stanislavski have wrestled: How does the performer take care of herself, ensnared in a calculated paradox of reality and make-believe, attachment and detachment, and peculiarly in this case, bodily rapture and ideological discipline? Such double consciousness enables another parallel plot to quietly unfold and gather momentum, when nobody is able to stay forever faithfully in one's "role." The tension between the two plots reaches its peak in the last climactic act until double consciousness breaks down.

The jewelry shop in the last climactic act is a locale of exception. For the first time, Mr. Yee follows Chia-chih to go to a place of her choosing and beyond his radar. He offers to buy her a six-carat pink diamond ring, a treasure so fabulous that it is "worthy, surely, of a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights*." In the "warm, sweet air" inside the boutique, a tense moment of calm seems eternity. "Though she was vaguely aware that something was about to happen, her heavy head was telling her that it must all be a dream." Seeing the pensive face of her man, a silhouette that appears to her sadly affectionate, the dreamer awakens to an epiphany:

He really loves me, she thought. Inside, she felt a raw tremor of shock—then a vague sense of loss.

It was too late.

...

"Run," she said softly. (Chang 2007, p. 39)

In Haiyan Lee's perceptive reading, from a Levinasian perspective, Chia-chih's encounter with the "face of the other" calls forth from the self the "vocation of saintliness." An occurrence of "contingent" or "secular transcendence" is thereby accomplished, in its ultimate form of "dying for the other" (Lee 2010, p. 648). "Contingent" or "secular," the term "transcendence" Lee invokes merits close consideration. To be exact, when she gives away her real identity, Chia-chih still clings onto a faint hope of escape. It would be more precise to say that she decides to save Mr Yee's life—and along with it, the love she believes to exist between him and her, a belief she consolidates only too late—*regardless of the price*. For, to our heroine, this love is *truth*. It is, in fact, truth of the most sublime order and substance of her "ultimate concern," if we may borrow Paul Tillich's term, which demands total surrender and promises in return total fulfillment. The self-denying act of freeing Mr. Yee is one of self-affirmation at the same time: Chia-chih undertakes a "centered act" of "the total personality" in safeguarding, beyond all cost, her faithfulness to the existence of true love and the possibility of a meaningful life (Tillich 1957, pp. 1–5). The alternative outcome, the story also implies, in which case our heroine must not only betray her man but also deny the authenticity of her own feelings, would be unbearable to Chia-chih despite—or all the more so as a result of—her bodily survival. What appears an irrational impulse is in fact an irresistible act of conviction that transcends rational calculation. As Chang sums it up later, "love goes beyond the question of whether it is worth it or not" (Chang 2001, vol. 9, p. 208).

The Buddhist connotations of the story's title—*se*, literally "form" in Buddhist terminology, encompasses all material phenomena, while *jie* denotes "precepts" and "renunciation"—are at once provocative and elusive. For readers who cannot help but view the story through the prism of Chang's relationship with Hu Lancheng (1906–1981), a writer and minor official in the collaborationist government of Wang Jingwei and her first husband, *Lust, Caution* is a story that conceals far more than it reveals. Like Cao Xueqin, who spent ten years editing his *Stone*, Chang instilled decades of deliberation in a poignant tale of double subversion. An ironic twist of the theme of "revolution plus love," *Lust, Caution* stands at the same time as a radical reconfiguration of the Buddhist quest enacted by *Stone*. Love as the ultimate truth is sought in the deepest engagement with falsehood and authenticated in the histrionics of carnal desire. To begin with, the precariousness and illusoriness of this-worldly existence is part of the given in Chang's fictive realm. At her best, Chang is a eulogist of the mere mortal, in whose eyes the Other Shore seems too faint and too distant. Nonetheless, it is private faith that redeems the emptiness of Red Dust and outshines the glory of the grand récit of national salvation, bestowing wholeness, however ephemeral, on a feeble individual stranded in a forlorn world. Like *Stone*, *Lust, Caution* ends with an act of renunciation, one that is far more radical and resolute; but this renunciative act is a testimony of passion and a gift of compassion—a "beautiful and desolate gesture" of daring to believe at any cost (Chang 2001, vol. 5, p. 34).

5. The Legend of the Demon Cat

"Being arises from nonbeing."

In the opening chapter of *Stone*, the Buddhist monk thus acknowledges the fated inevitability of the stone's earthly sojourn and the story that ensues (Cao 1958a, vol. 1, p. 2). The Japanese writer Yumemakura Baku knows this dictum well. That being arises from nonbeing is a resounding theme of his novel, *Shamon Kūkai Tō no Kuni nite Oni to Utagesu* 沙門空海唐の国にて鬼と宴す, or *The Ghostly Feast of Monk Kūkai in the Tang*, a mammoth historical fantasy that is 2600 pages long and took the author 17 years to write.

The focal event of the novel is the death of Yang Yuhuan, an extraordinary beauty and the favorite consort of the Tang emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756). Historically, when the rebel army of An Lushan (703–757) seized Chang'an in 756, Xuanzong was forced to flee the capital. At Mawei Station, under searing pressures from his troops, who blamed the calamity on the Yang clan, the emperor yielded and ordered the execution of Yuhuan. The tragic end of the femme fatale has inspired numerous works of art, among which the

poet Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772–846) *Changhen ge* 長恨歌, or *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, ranks a most beloved classic in East Asia. As legend has it, Yuhuan did not die at Mawei Station. She was surreptitiously escorted to Japan and spent the rest of her years there. She enjoys an afterlife in the Japanese cultural imagination, starring in a succession of works such as Mizoguchi Kenji's 溝口健二 (1898–1956) 1955 film, *Yōkihi* 楊貴妃, or *Princess Yang Kwei-fei*, and Inoue Yasushi's 井上靖 (1907–1991) 1963 novel of a similar title. Yumemakura's novel is a latest addition. It is a Buddhist tale that reinvents Kūkai (774–835) as the unrivaled Sherlock Holmes in resolving the mystery surrounding Yuhuan's death decades later, in the wake of a string of uncanny events involving a black cat. The future founder of the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism earns a name for himself as an esteemed guest of the Tang emperor and the predestined heir of the esoteric Buddhist school barely a year after setting foot on Chinese soil, thanks, most of all, to his mastery of magic (Yumemakura 2005).

Magic abounds in both Yumemakura's original novel and Chen Kaige's film adaptation. In the former, from the moment their ship reaches Chinese shore, Kūkai exercises his clairvoyance and ability to wield magic at every turn in a cosmopolis cast under a malicious spell. The Chang'an Kūkai set foot in is filled with skilled magicians of all stripes: Daoists, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and perturbed spirits. Only a fraction of the plot line is retained in the film, which tantalizes, stuns, and horrifies with a gorgeous visual feast from start to finish. Upon a closer look, however, a salient divergence between how the novel approaches "magic" and how the film does so emerges. For a historical fantasy and a Buddhist tale that is so enthusiastic about incantations and miracles, Yumemakura's novel turns out to be, surprisingly or disappointingly, pragmatic. Despite the massive plot, it is an unambiguous and unsophisticated story in which a clear line between reality and magic is always maintained and every riddle gets straightened out as the narrative unfolds. It is, in short, a conventional Buddhist story—"Buddhist" in subject matter. Chen's film adaptation, on the other hand, is Buddhist not only in subject matter but moreover in spirit. The putative boundary between reality and magic, truth and falsehood, is readily transgressed. It does not take long for the lavish display of magical conjurations to usher in a familiar problem: What is real, and what is not?

We now proceed to examine two moves by which Chen's film adaptation departs drastically from the original novel in terms of characterization and plot development. Both moves instill a critical reflexivity into what appears at first glance a thriller for mass entertainment. In the original novel, by virtue of an incredible method of life preservation, Yuhuan feigns and thereby escapes death. Forty-nine years later, she returns to the now dilapidated palace ground to relish, once more, a resplendent feast Kūkai has magically conjured for her. This climactic episode, spotlighted in the title of Yumemakura's novel, is done away with in the film. Instead, *Demon Cat* presents a macabre twist in the storyline. The life preservation method fails. After she wakes up from the hypnosis, Yuhuan dies a tortuous death, in a sealed sarcophagus following a futile struggle, leaving the inside of the lid covered with stains of blood from her fingertips. Love—even when one commands the admiration of the Tang empire—is, after all, an illusion. In the passing of a moment, all phenomena return to emptiness—if not worse than emptiness.

However, what kind of illusion could love accomplish? What kind of femme fatale was Yang Yuhuan? Was she a passionate lover of naïve hopes as she consented to the arrangement to dedicate her "dead" body as an expedient scapegoat, or a compassionate redeemer who had long intuited her part in an ill-fated dynasty? Bai Juyi, a minor character in the original novel who becomes in the film Kūkai's close aid, wrestles with these questions. We have finally come to the most intriguing intervention of the film that is not found in the original novel: the problematization and dramatization of the coming into being of Bai Juyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Infatuated with the legendary beauty, Bai seeks to immortalize in verse the tragic romance between Yang Yuhuan and the erstwhile emperor. As Kūkai quickly intuit, Bai is elected, by the vengeful demon cat as well as by fate, to enter and unravel the secret of Yuhuan's death, for few remain who cling to the

bygone affair with such zest. Coming to terms with the secret, however, proves difficult. How is he to explain, or explain away, the grisly truth hitherto concealed? At the end of the film, Bai reveals to Kūkai his newly attained liberation. He is no longer exasperated by the “falsehood” of his *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. He would keep it as is and not alter a word, for therein he has discovered his own “unsurpassed esoteric Dharma.” The rest is—not history—but poetry.

Notably, *Demon Cat* features two Tang poets, Li Bai 李白 (701–762) and Bai Juyi. In the film, both poets have to confront the question of the “truthfulness” of the work they have each crafted to celebrate Yang Yuhuan, either in her presence or in her memory. The scene in which Li Bai complies with an imperial order to produce a lyrical portraiture of the legendary beauty before setting his own eyes on her becomes a “prefiguring fable” for the ultimate dilemma of Bai Juyi. In reconciling himself with the *raison d’être* of his lifeblood, the author of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is not unlike the author of *Stone* in “writing from loss, writing as expiration, and writing from the present perspective of an unjustified existence” (Li 1993, p. 169). Against a backdrop of the inevitable dissipation of grandeur and power and the precariousness of human attachment, a shared theme between *Demon Cat* and *Stone*, both chroniclers have come to affirm that “truth exists in conjuration as well” (Chen 2017).

Demon Cat’s persistent allusion to the splendor of the High Tang as a “magical conjuration” and a “dream” strikes a provocative pose in today’s Chinese mainland, where Big Brother’s gaze infiltrates every corner with ever tightening grip on the “China dream.” A work as remotely connected to *Stone* as *Demon Cat* proves telling of the dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion that *Stone* makes indelible on the Chinese cultural imagination. The “best pleasures” of life—power, wealth, pomp and circumstance, and so forth—are best for comprehending the transience and emptiness of all worldly phenomena. Despite—or, from a Mahāyāna perspective, because of—such emptiness, love, while being part of worldly phenomena, is nonetheless capable of transcending this world, blurring the boundary between passion and compassion and that between self-sacrifice and self-redemption. Above all, in reinventing the poet Bai Juyi and what it takes for his *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* to come into being, *Demon Cat* dramatizes the predicament of writing/righting the past when writing as an attempt at coming to terms with the past pivots ironically on the impossibility of doing so. The Bai Juyi in *Demon Cat* who has finally grasped the “unsurpassed esoteric Dharma” in his work answers back to the impassioned call of the author of *Stone*: “All men call the author fool; None his secret message hears” (Cao 1973, p. 51). The secret message has been heard.

6. Conclusions

We begin by rethinking *Stone* as a masterpiece of “Buddhist literature” and as a demonstrative case of the “local production of meaning” in the lived realities of the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Unlike the authoritative and prophetic dreams that have come to define the origin of Buddhism in ancient India (Young 1999), in the case of *Stone*, we find an ambivalent dreamer and raconteur caught between the most alluring vision of the Mahāyāna and its most shattering lesson. “The metaphysical framework of *The Story of the Stone* is Buddhist, but Buddhism itself is neither the answer nor the goal,” observes Levy (Levy 1999, p. 155). As readers, we are invited to travel along with the stone through his earthly sojourn and experience for ourselves the persuasion of the Buddhist soteriological path. In the final analysis, what *Stone* drives home is the profound solace *as well as difficulty* of embarking upon this path. The solace proves awe-inspiring, while the difficulty turns out to be riveting, to some readers at least.

The essay subsequently showcases three examples of modern reincarnations of *Stone*, all of which pivot upon a certain form of renunciation. Whether one relinquishes a corporeal union or a mortal existence, the stunning human choices these works exhibit enact radically disparate responses to the dialectics of truth and falsehood, love and emptiness, passion and compassion, which *Stone* dramatizes and problematizes in its literary form. The line

between passion and compassion is nearly erased in Su Manshu's *Tale of the Crimson Silk*, where love becomes the other name of nirvāṇa. Whereas *Stone* abides by the canonical Buddhist view that the negation of love is a prerequisite for attaining enlightenment, both Eileen Chang's *Lust, Caution* and Chen Kaige's *Demon Cat* venture forth an opposite claim that it is the sorest passion that gives birth to the noblest compassion, when the self is sublimated and redeemed in her very negation. The modern reincarnations of *Stone* will not end here. As "pages full of idle words" beget more pages of idle words, we have full reason to believe that an adumbrating line from *Stone* will continue to reverberate and stir readers' imagination: "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true" (Cao 1973, p. 55).

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