

FROM THE LAND OF ILLUSION TO THE PARADISE OF TRUTH

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THE 2019 CHINESE Lunar New Year celebration began with the usual display of fireworks. But what really caught the public eye was an article with the over-long title — ‘I Showed My Syrian Friend a Video of Fireworks from Lunar New Year’s Eve, He Burst into Tears’. First published on *College Daily* 北美留學生日報, a WeChat-based publication operating from New York and Beijing, the article tells a moving story of how the fireworks reminded the author’s Syrian friend of the bombings in Damascus and the death of his brother, causing him to weep. In this article, the author Deng He (pen name He-He), expressed a mixture of hope for peace in Syria and the world, indignation at Western imperialism and colonialism, and a sense of pride in being born in the People’s Republic

of China (PRC) — a rising yet peace-loving global power. The article quickly gained more than 100,000 views, and was reposted by all major Chinese government media outlets including the *People’s Daily*, *Global Times*, Xinhua News Agency, and the *Chinese Communist Youth League*.¹

Six months later, *The New Yorker* published an investigative piece detailing *College Daily*’s transition from ‘a bare-bones survival guide’ for Chinese students studying in North America to an influential media outlet delivering news with nationalistic overtones to Chinese students around the world.² During an interview with the journalist Han Zhang, Deng He admitted that his piece on the Syrian friend was entirely made up. It turned out that his boss Lin Guoyu



The article from *College Daily* begins with a photo of Damascus during an air raid

Source: *College Daily*

林果宇, who founded *College Daily* in his Beijing apartment in 2014, had come up with the idea while browsing viral videos online.

Lin himself denied the article was fabricated, but when pressed to describe the nature of his publication, he chose the term ‘post-truth’, a position with which *College Daily* readers seem comfortable. When asked to comment on the veracity of *College Daily* posts, a sophomore at New York University responded, ‘In my heart they are simply not real and not fake.’ This

answer reminded the journalist Han Zhang of Schrödinger’s cat. But for me, it evokes a famous couplet from the eighteenth-century Chinese classic *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 also known as *The Story of the Stone* in the English translation):

*Truth becomes fiction when the
fiction’s true;
Real becomes not-real when the
unreal’s real.*³

In chapter five of this novel, the protagonist Jia Bao-yu 賈寶玉, a young aristocratic fop, sees the above couplet inscribed on the lintel of an arch in a dream visit to the Land of Illusion. The dream warns Bao-yu about the illusory nature of his love for his girl cousins (and also for beautiful boys), and of the decline in his family’s fortunes. Being young and ignorant, Bao-yu pays no attention to his dream. He continues to live a life of leisure inside a beautiful garden that is the main setting of the novel.

The novel — considered China’s finest literary achievement — is preoccupied with details of daily life inside the garden: how tea is prepared with the last year’s snow or how themes are set for poetry competitions. Tedious as it may sound,

this is precisely the novel's appeal. What the author Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715–1763), an impoverished Manchu banner-man, spent ten painful years creating is in fact an entire universe so rich in detail that it seems more real than life itself. At the same time, Cao incessantly reminds his readers of the fictional nature of this universe. The novel begins with the meeting of two characters Zhen Shiyin 甄士隱 and Jia Yucun 賈雨村, whose names sound like the phrases 'true events concealed' and 'false words remained', respectively. Bao-yu's surname is also Jia 賈, a play on the word for 'false or fiction' (假). In another dream, in chapter fifty-six (you can tell by now, dreams are a recurring feature of the novel), he encounters another Bao-yu, but with the surname Zhen 甄 — a homophone for 'real or true' (真).

In the twentieth century, the study of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* became a serious academic discipline, known as 'Hong Xue' or 'Redology' 紅學, granting the novel a unique status in Chinese literature. The first 'Redologists' included eminent scholars such as Hu Shi 胡適, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (a founding father of the Chinese Communist Party). They all belonged to the generation of Chinese students who studied abroad, in America, Europe, or Japan, at the turn of the century. They were also leaders of the May Fourth Movement (see Chapter 1 'A Dream of Perpetual Rule, pp.19–31) advocating for the adoption of 'science' and 'democracy'.⁴ Ironically, in their quest for scientific truth, they and their disciples have tended to read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* as a historical



***The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Sun Wen**
孫溫 (1818–1904)
Source: Sevilleadade, Wikipedia



‘Pointing to a stag and calling it a horse’ 指鹿為馬
Source: Rawpixel Ltd, Flickr

document on Qing dynasty society or as an almost literal guide to the author’s life and family, thereby confusing fiction and reality.

The obsession with this novel continues into the present century. In late 2018, an article claiming to have discovered the ‘true authorship’ of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* went viral on WeChat. It has no basis in fact, yet since then, as a scholar working on this novel, I have found myself being lectured on the novel’s ‘true’ authorship everywhere I go in China. From a retired Beijing couple on a train to my aunt who is a county-level official in Jiangsu, everyone feels the need to tell me the ‘truth’ about the novel I have spent years studying.

The first time this happened, I was rather amused. A line from the novel *Fortress Besieged* 圍城 by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1988) came to mind: ‘Uneducated people are fooled by the words of others because they are illiterate; educated people are fooled by the written word because they are literate.’⁴ Later, I recalled another incident, from the *Record of the Grand Historian* 史記, written more than 2,000 years ago. You might call this China’s first ‘post-truth’ paradigm: Zhao Gao 趙高, a prime minister in the emperor’s court, wanted to test the limits of his power. He took a stag to court, pointed to it, and called it a horse. Cowed, some of his fellows remained silent, while others agreed that this was indeed a horse. As for those who dared to speak the truth, Zhao Gao had them all executed.

Unlike their forebears from a hundred years ago, many overseas Chinese students today choose to ignore the more objective sources of news and information available to them, preferring platforms such as Weibo and WeChat and, of course, ‘self-media’ 自媒體 outlets such as *College Daily*, which willingly engages in persuasively detailed ‘post-truth’ soft propaganda. As a result, they

continue to live in the Land of Illusion, where a stag is called a horse. The clashes between Chinese nationalists and pro-Hong Kong protesters on university campuses worldwide are indicative of this phenomenon.

But if we can blame the continued delusions of overseas Chinese students on language differences and the authoritarian regime that currently governs China, what excuse do we in the West have for our own 'post-truth' world? Perhaps we can all learn something from reading *Red Chamber Dream* — a novel that constantly challenges our perceptions of truth and fiction. At the end of the novel, a sorrowful Bao-yu finally comes to

the realisation that what he thought was real was, in fact, only a dream, an illusion, nothing but 'moonlight mirrored on water'. Having woken from this 'dream', Bao-yu finally leaves the fictional garden and disappears into the snow. But first, in chapter 116, he revisits the Land of Illusion in one final dream. This time, the Land of Illusion is replaced with the Paradise of Truth, and the couplet on the lintel reads:

*When Fiction departs and Truth
appears,
Truth prevails;
Though Not-real was once Real,
the Real is never unreal.*⁶

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