

*The Path of the Jade*, based on Cao Xueh-Qin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 - synopsis for an imaginary opera

Cast:

Jia Bao-yu ('Bao'), the boy with the jade (**treble**)

Dai-yu, his cousin, destined to be his bride (**treble, or sop**)

Bao-chai ('Bao-chai'), female cousin to the Jias and Wang Xi-feng (**treble, or sop**)

Jia Zheng, Bao's father (**tenor**)

Madam Jia, Bao's mother (**soprano**)

Grandmother Jia, matriarch of them all (**alto**)

Wang Xi-feng, the family's female enforcer, a close cousin of the Jias (**soprano**)

Aunt Hsueh, aunt to the younger Jias and Wang Xi-feng (**alto**)

Hsueh-pan, male cousin to the Jias and Wang Xi-feng (**baritone**)

Yu-tcun, a poor young civil servant, distantly related to the Jias (**bass**)

The Drunk Priest (**tenor**)

Snowflake, a servant girl (**mezzo**)

Aroma, a servant girl, Bao's personal servant (**soprano**)

The Goddess of Disenchantment (**soprano**)

Cousin Qin-shi (**soprano**)

Period: 18th Century

Prologue: In a tavern some distance from the capital Beijing, a poor young civil servant named Yu-tcun meets a failed priest who tells him of Jia Bao-yu (Bao), Yu-tcun's distant relative who was born with a piece of jade from the Goddess of Heaven's roof in his mouth. Though the Jia family's fortune is not what it was (and it is hoped that the heavenly boy Bao will arrest its steady decline), Yu-tcun sees opportunity to exploit his tenuous connections with a still-distinguished family. He and the priest reflect on the skill required to cushion life's downward plunges.

Act I:

No expense has been spared at the Jia mansion for Cousin Qin-shi's funeral. Maybe a big funeral, showing proper respect for a relative, will persuade the gods to restore the Jia crops, refill their rivers, and replenish their treasure chests. Daughter-in-law Wang Xi-feng orders Snowflake, a servant-girl, whipped for coming late on this 39<sup>th</sup> day of the 49-day ceremonies. Into this scene of punishment arrive other relatives, and Wang Xi-feng is overjoyed to greet her Aunt Hsueh and cousins Bao-chai and the oafish Hsueh-pan. The Hsuehs have fallen on hard times and need help. The Jias will entertain them royally, though it means stretching resources.

In their favourite part of the mansion garden, teenage lovers Bao and Dai-yu, escape the ceremonies and renew their childhood vows of love (Not much longer, surely, until we're married). Finding them, Bao-chai wants to see Bao's famous jade. Its poetic inscription matches that on Bao-chai's amulet. Devastated, Dai-yu knows that the rules of feudalism destine Bao-chai for Bao (Not much longer surely until *they're* married) and she runs away, tearful.

Attending Wang Xi-feng, servant-girl Aroma says she approves of Snowflake's whipping. Dependent on the family for her livelihood, Aroma fears lax discipline and decadence. Wang Xi-feng is also relieved to have this servant's approval of the lavish funeral for Cousin Qin-shi at a time of savage cutbacks to the servants' rations.

Dai-yu reminds Master Bao that she had come down from Heaven a Honey Dew Flower grateful to Master Bao for watering her. Unable to pacify her now she sees her dreams of marriage turn to dust, Bao turns to Bao-chai for comfort, but Miss Bao is unsympathetic. A paragon of the old values that guarantee family health, Bao-chai asserts the stability of feudal tradition.

## Act II

In a dream, the Goddess of Disenchantment teaches her human relative Bao, the pleasures of sex which will strengthen him through even a prescribed marriage. Bao wants to try these out on Aroma. Believing that she was given to the Jia family for Bao's use, Aroma is compelled to agree but she extracts from him promises to apply himself and work on becoming a fit heir for the mansion. All livelihoods depend on it!

Too late! Bao's father, Jia Zheng, thrashes him for neglecting his duties at a time of declining wealth. Nursing his wounds, Bao discards the text he has been set by his masters and finds unexpected comfort, instead, in *The Great Text on the Inherent Nature of Things*.

As more of the family property is pawned, Grandmother Jia and Bao's parents (Jia Zheng and Madam Jia) worry about the need to restore the family's former glory, and of the suitability of Dai-yu who has long been considered Bao's destined bride. Wang Xi-feng tells them of Bao and Bao-chai's matching amulets (reported by Aroma) and says she knows how to arrange a more auspicious marriage.

Told of his forthcoming marriage, Bao is overjoyed, but Dai-yu is in seclusion, sick behind a closed door, when he comes to visit.

Choosing a date for the wedding, the family learn that their oafish guest Hsueh-pan has been arrested for killing a waiter, but Grandmother Jia assures Hsueh-pan's cousin, their enforcer Wang Xi-feng, that the new magistrate Yu-tcun can be leaned on. He owes his position to Bao's father, Jia Zheng.

The wedding day can therefore go ahead as scheduled. Bao is persuaded not to visit Dai-yu who needs all her strength. The family toasts the prospering of their dynasty. At the close of the sumptuous festivities, Bao raises the bride's veil to discover it's Bao-chai. News is brought that Dai-yu has died, as Bao collapses.

## Act III

Walking through the Grand View Garden as the wedding festivities come to a close, Wang Xi-feng sees the ghost of Cousin Qin-shi, the spitting image of the Goddess of Disenchantment, who tells Wang Xi-feng that her 'treasured daughter's funeral' concealed the fact that she and her father had an incestuous relationship. Snowflake's sneers aside, Aroma, the loyal servant, assures Wang Xi-feng that the apparition is a tribute to the vigilance with which Wang Xi-feng protects

the family. But Wang Xi-feng is terrified.

Some time later, Bao's father is accused by the emperor of corruption for having pressured Yu-tcun and is ordered to appear at court. Bao's mother and grandmother fearfully despair that the family's fortunes will never be restored. Wang Xi-feng is in no mood for 'waterworks'. She brings news that is both good and bad. Bao-chai is pregnant but Bao has disappeared. He has left behind his jade. No sooner does she reveal this news than she collapses dead at their feet, as Cousin Qin-shi's ghost intimidated. It is small comfort when the oafish Hsueh-pan returns, having been acquitted by the magistrate Yu-tcun who was paid off.

Travelling through the provinces to a remote governorship (the emperor's punishment), Bao's Father sees a priest of the Goddess of Heaven who looks like Bao, but before he can tell Bao about his newborn son, Bao disappears. Bao's Father reflects on the turn of events that has seen him, a former favourite of the emperor, bereft and exiled.

The nation resounds with bells announcing Grandmother Jia's death. Returning to his village, stripped of rank, an older Yu-tcun meets again the priest he met at the outset of the story. The priest tells Yu-tcun that his latest instalment of the Jia family story is one of guilt punished, virtue rewarded. It would have required a mere nudge to produce a more favourable outcome. Yu-tcun agrees, but corrects the priest's naivety. He sees the potential for rise and fall concurrently in all things. As they drink, Bao-chai, back in Beijing, nurses her healthy baby. Grandmother Jia lies in her coffin, awaiting sufficient funds for burial. Madam Jia neglects household repairs while Aunt Hsueh dotes on being a grandmother. The Hsuehs have taken to wearing the robes of the mansion's owners.

Gordon Kalton Williams, © 2015

*based on an earlier 2012 draft*