THE MIRROR AND CHINESE AESTHETICS.

A STUDY OF THE HONGLOUMENG

1. Traditional Forms of the Mirror Image

One of the five alternate titles of the Hongloumeng is Fengyue baojian 風月寶鑑, "The Erotic Mirror". This image, which has a long tradition in Chinese literature, provides not only a key to the interpretation of the novel but also to an important concept of Chinese aesthetics.

Chinese bronze mirrors are mentioned for the first time in 672 B.C. in Zuozhuan. Presumably they came into existence much earlier than that. In literature the mirror can take on the most diverse meanings. It serves as a means for the investigation of the self and of others, for the representation of Love and Death. It can symbolize self-knowledge and self-deception, the world that appears to us or the world beyond.

The mirror is a myth of creation: As the World Creatress Nüwa saw herself reflected in a lake one day and felt lonely, she grasped a handful of mud and formed human beings after her own image.

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1 The paper is based on an unpublished speech during the Symposium "Zweihundert Jahre Traum der Roten Kammer", Bonn, Germany, April 21-13, 1992. A slightly different version has appeared in Chinese (Motsch 1993, pp. 125-30). Some ideas have been discussed in my book on Qian Zhongshu's Guanzhuibian (Motsch 1992, pp. 130-180).

2 Needham 1962, p. 87.

3 Taiping yulan, ch.78 (Fengsu tongyi). Yuan Ke 1986, p.103.
Magic mirrors have been a popular motif in folk literature since the Jin and Tang Dynasties. They can cure diseases, exorcise ghosts and even, like X-rays, make innards visible.

Confucians, on the other hand, applied the motif with a moral turn for the differentiation between good and evil. Already in the Shujing there appeared the moral injunction that a ruler should approach his subjects as he would a mirror. When the tyranny of a king was “mirrored” in the poverty and suffering of his people, then he would lose his heavenly mandate and his dynasty would fall. The fall of a dynasty in turn served as a warning mirror for posterity.

Confucian officials considered themselves to be critical mirrors whose duty it was to point out the defects of the government. In doing so, they often resorted to a mirror-simile that originated in Han Fei Zi, a simile that became something of a proverb and is frequently used even nowadays by critics of the government:

It is not the fault of the mirror when it shows defects.

Also in a personal sphere the mirror was an instrument for self-examination and self-criticism. The most well-known and much imitated example is Du Fu’s line:

I often look into the mirror to spur me on to heroic efforts.

In contrast, Daoists and Buddhists applied the image in a mythic sense. In Zhuang Zi the mirror symbolizes the spirit of the holy which reflects the whole universe as a calm water surface without bringing itself into turbulence - i.e., a mythic stillness and vacuum. But in Chinese literature, the most important stimulus for the mirror-myth came from Indian Buddhist literature.

In Buddhist temples it is customary to hang up a multitude of mutually reflecting mirrors for meditation sessions, which reflect the image of a

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5. Legge, p. 409.