

HAPPINESS, FATE, AND THE LAW OF NO SELF-SUBVERSION

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Abstract: Using the story of the protagonist Lin Daiyu in the Chinese classical novel A Dream of Red Mansions as the literary paradigm, this paper explores the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of wu ji bi fan (extremity produces self-destruction; extremity turns X into its opposite) as the law of existence and happiness. The paper first discusses the two precepts of the law. It then demonstrates why Lin Daiyu arrived at a destination that was totally opposite to what she so determinately and intensively wanted; why Lin Daiyu had not achieved that she desired; why she could not maintain that she had had; what was the “invisible hand” that had subverted her enterprise; and what had denied her the dream that she dreamed and the aspiration that she aspired. Therefore, the paper also indicates the distinction between moral desirability of existence and ethical-existential desirability of existence.

HOW WE ought to live our life? In Western philosophy since Socrates/Plato, this ethical question is generally casted in terms of two concerns: (1) What kind of life do we want to live? Or what is X? (2) How to arrive at the kind of life that we want to live? Or how can we arrive at X? This understanding of the question is inadequate. In comparison, in Chinese philosophy, the question is understood somehow differently. In addition to the parts of what is X and how to arrive at X, the question includes also another part: How to stabilize and maintain the kind of good and happy life that we want to live? That is, how to stabilize and maintain X which we want and arrive at? In other words, in Chinese philosophy, the ethical question of how to live our life is not only a question of what a good, happy life is and how to arrive at happiness. It is also a question of how to stabilize, maintain, and continue the kind of good, happy life which we have arrived at. Needless to say, the subject-matter of how to stabilize, maintain, and continue the kind of good, happy life which we have arrived at is, and ought to be, an important subject-matter of ethics.

Therefore, this essay explores the ethical and ontological bearing of the law of *wu ji bi fan* (物極必反 extremity produces self-destruction; when X arrives at its limit, it turns into its opposite) on human existence, and happiness. It contends that the law is of non-self-subversion of happiness and fate; following the law is a necessary condition for us to have true, enduring happiness. It demonstrates that in the twilight of the ethical life, the creativity of free will liberates, and the alluring abyss of the law of *wu ji bi fan* constrains; free will brings about energy and points us

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to the shining city, and the law of *wu ji bi fan* dictates how energy can be fruitfully spent and points us to the real earth. The existence of the law of *wu ji bi fan* presses the free will to make enlightened, wise choices in the ethical life, reminding us of the norms of prudence, wisdom, and creativity in the ethical life.

At the end of the day, the essay introduces a dialectical perspective of happiness, emphasizing respect for the fathomless law of happiness or “the invisible hand of happiness” on the one hand and insisting a distinction between a wise choice and an unwise choice of free will, as well as between moral desirability and existential-ethical desirability in the ethical life on the other hand. It demonstrates that the diameter of one’s freedom in the ethical life corresponds always to the caliber of one’s cognition of necessity, to rephrase Hegel, Marx and Engels here.

I

The concept of the mutual transformation of two opposite conditions or states of being is not alien to Western philosophy. At the dawn of Western philosophy, Socrates talked about it. In *Phaedo*, Socrates asked: Did everything necessarily come from its opposite? In the dialogue, while Socrates was not conclusive on the point that everything necessarily had its opposite, he insisted that those things having their opposites necessarily come from their opposites, e.g., the beautiful come from the ugly, and life come from death (Plato 1997, 70E1–72B4). That said, Socrates did not raise the question of how to stabilize, maintain X—that is, to prevent X from turning itself into its opposite—if one desired X to endure. Say, how to stabilize, maintain happiness and to prevent a life of happiness from turning itself into one of suffering? With regard to happiness, Socrates’ question was exclusively of what happiness was and how to arrive at it. In *the Republic* and elsewhere, Socrates insisted that the just person be necessarily happier than the unjust one; that true happiness be akin to a mix of honey and water, not either honey (intellectual pleasure) alone or water alone (physical pleasure). Meanwhile, the question of how to stabilize, maintain true happiness and to prevent a state of happiness from turning itself into a state of suffering was no part of Socrates’ question.

Hegel, a master of the dialectics of existence, recognized the possibility of the mutual transformation of opposites too. Yet, he never raised the question of how to stabilize and maintain X if one wanted X to endure either. For example, in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel talked about the Consciousness’s transformation from one state of existence, say, X, into its opposite state of existence, say Y, following the dialectical pattern of position–negation–negation of negation. He indicated the condition in which the Consciousness as X would turn itself into its opposite, Y: when the quantitative changes of the Consciousness as X accumulated to a certain point, the qualitative change of X would occur. Still, when all was said and done, Hegel did not ask the question of how to maintain X if X is desirable. His concept of negation contains a richer insight that X will turn itself into its other once it accumulates a sufficient amount of quantitative changes. But it falls short of a view of the law of non-self-subversion in existence.

Hegel's critics including Marx, Engels, and Nietzsche did not see the lacuna in Hegel's philosophy. Nietzsche's radical call for bringing some style and character to one's existence had a point. But his audacious assertion that one should owe society nothing but contempt showed an unfortunate insensitivity to the stability-endurance problem of existence in the world. Nietzsche might be a good rebel and revolutionary. He was definitely not a builder or maintainer. Thus, while it remains a question of whether one can arrive at true happiness by following Nietzsche, it leaves no doubt that one cannot keep happiness by following him. No Nietzscheans can stay in happiness! To some extent, the story of the protagonist Lin Daiyu, which will be discussed below, illustrates the truth that no Nietzschean can be truly happy or can stay in happiness; a Nietzschean's Achilles's heel is that he or she always indulges in living in extremity, never asking the question of how to keep happiness. Marx and Engels indicated that when the production force of a society developed into a certain level, the production relation in that society would be forced to change correspondingly and when the economic foundation in a society changed, the superstructure of the society would also change correspondingly. Their view still does not break any new intellectual ground for an appreciation of the law of non-subversion in existence.

The phenomenological account of *Dasein* given by Heidegger in *Being and Time* does not concern about how to stabilize and maintain *Dasein*'s authenticity. It sets aside the question of happiness. The question of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is: What makes a *Dasein* authentic? How can *Dasein* arrive at its authenticity? The question is never of how can *Dasein* stabilize and maintain its authenticity. Thus, for example, in *Being and Time*, anxiety is the call for *Dasein* to be awakened to its task of liberating itself from inauthenticity and arriving at authenticity, but not a call for *Dasein* to be awakened to the danger that it may turn itself from authenticity into inauthenticity. Heidegger did not recognize the truth that arriving at authenticity was merely the first step of the long march of ten thousand miles, to borrow a metaphor from Mao ZeDong; that even if *Dasein* arrived at individual authenticity, it still had the task to stabilize, maintain the achieved authenticity; its authenticity could turn into inauthenticity under given conditions.

Albert Camus followed the same footsteps of Nietzsche. He never raised the question of how to arrive at and keep X. He could have done so in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. *The Myth of Sisyphus* revealed what a self-subverting enterprise Sisyphus' endeavor was. The image of Camus' Sisyphus revealed heroism of perpetual struggle, but not any wisdom of success in achieving and maintaining happiness. That Sisyphus was once the wisest man on the earth until he was punished by Zeus and that Sisyphus' enterprise was synonymous to self-subversion together created a titillating irony. Camus rightly called our attention to the tyrannical force in our existence. Yet, he never bothered himself to raise the question of why his Sisyphus was inevitably led to the opposite of his intended destination. Following Camus, one may become a hero, but cannot be happy, let alone that one can keep happiness. The environment in which Camusian heroes lived might be absurd. That said, Camusian heroes were not wise either. From a different angle, the story of the protagonist Lin Daiyu suggests that it is unwise to be a Camusian. Noteworthy, mainstream existentialist

philosophers today are misgiving about the possibility of happiness. This reveals a clue: the ways of existence which they advocate cannot lead us to true happiness.

All the same, since the dawn of Western philosophy, a lacuna exists in Western philosophers' interpretation of the question of how to live one's life: the absence of the concern of how to stabilize and maintain what is desirable. But we cannot talk about a good, happy life without addressing this concern. In addition, the concern of how to avoid arriving at the opposite of the intended destination of one's endeavor is also absent. But the problem of arriving at the opposite destination of one's intention is one of the most common, urgent existential and ethical problems. For example, we pursue love, but arrive at hate. We pursue happiness, but arrive at suffering. Whose is at fault, we or Providence? We or Fate? All the same, we are not happy and cannot keep happiness. That is the problem!

II

In Chinese philosophy, the question of how to live one's life includes both the concern of what is a good and happy life and how to arrive at that good and happy life and the concern of how to stabilize and maintain a good and happy life. The teaching about the law of *wu ji bi fan* in Chinese philosophy epitomizes Chinese approach. For Chinese philosophers, *wu ji bi fan* is a natural law of existence, having particular bearing in the ethical life and happiness of humankind. The law indicates how to avoid arriving at the opposite of X, that is, one's intended destination in one's endeavor, and how to stabilize and maintain X which one has arrived at. By this token, the law contains the most crucial code of human happiness.

Now, what is the law of *wu ji bi fan*? *Yi Jing* reads, "The dragon that reaches the highest point feels regret because being at the highest point and being full, it [dragon] cannot endure (亢龍有悔, 盈不可久也 *Kang long you hui, ying bu ke jiu ye*)" (Fang 1999, 10). It also reads: "When the sun arrives at the middle point of the sky, it will slope to the West. The moon waxes only to wane (日中則昃, 月盈則食 *Ri zhong ze ze, yue ying ze shi*)" (*Ibid.*, 363). The moral of the above statements in *Yi Jing* is that whatever arrives at its limit turns into its opposite. Its ethical bearing in happiness and the ethical life is the concept that living in extremity is self-sabotaging and self-subverting. *Dao De Jing* makes the same point. It reads: "From calamity, happiness arises; from happiness, calamity is conceived" (Laozi 1996, 108/ch.55). It further reads: "What is harmonious is stable and constant ... When things arrive at their limits, they turn into their opposites. Going to the limit of something violates the *dao*. What violates the *dao* will perish" (*Ibid.*). It thus warns us: "He who stands on tiptoes is not steady. He who strides forward does not go" (*Ibid.*, 95/ch.24). It then advises us: "Blunt the sharpness. Untie the angles. Soften the light. Becoming one with the world, this is called profound identification" (*Ibid.*, 109/ch.56). Another Chinese classic, *He Guan Zi: Huan Liu* (鶡冠子: 環流) makes the same point too. It reads, "When things reach their limits, they will turn into their opposites. This is called the law of the universe (物極則反, 明曰環流 *Wu ji ze fan, min ye huan liu*)" (*Si Ku Chaun Shu*, 2:554).

In terms of content, the law of *wu ji bi fan* has two precepts that correspond to the two meanings of the word “*ji* (極)”. When the word “*ji*” is read as a verb, it means doing things in an extreme manner. Accordingly, the concept of *wu ji bi fan* says that when we pursue things by extreme manners, we will arrive at the opposite of our intended destinations. For example, when asked about governing, Confucius said, “rushing things only slows them down (事欲速, 則不達 *shi yu shu, ze bu da*)” (Confucius 1996, 13:17). To rush things is to pursue things in an extreme manner. To pursue things in an extreme manner will not lead one to the intended destination, but to its opposite. Admittedly, what should be counted as an extreme manner can only be determined in particular contexts. All the same, employing extreme manners in our endeavor is self-sabotaging, more than counter-productive. Thus, the first precept of *wu ji bi fan* is: *never employ extreme manners to pursue what one wants or otherwise one will arrive at the opposite of one’s intended destination* (P1).

The word “*ji* (極)” can also be read as a noun, meaning the limit. By this token, the concept of *wu ji bi fan* is that when things arrive at their limits, they turn into their opposites. By this token, Laozi said: “To hold and fill to overflowing is not as good as to stop at the right time and point. When we sharpen a sword-edge to its sharpest, the edge will not last long” (Laozi 1996, 89/ch.9). *Huai Nan Zi* also reads: “When things reach their limits, they turn from growth to decline. When happiness reaches its limit, suffering follows. When the sun reaches the middle of the sky, it will slope to the West. The moon waxes only to wane (物盛而衰, 樂極生悲, 日中而移, 月盈而虧 *Wu sheng er shuai, le ji sheng bei, ri zhong er yi, yue ying er kui.*)” (Liu 195/ch.12). It advises us: “If something is too strong, it is easy to be broken. If something is too soft, it is easy to be crooked (太剛則折, 太柔而卷 *Tai gang ze zhe, tai rou er juan*)” (*Ibid.*, 201/ch.13). Commenting on *Yi Jing*, Cheng I said: “When a thing arrives at its limit, it turns into its opposite. Therefore, when a good fortune reaches its limit, a bad fortune follows. . . . Going to the limit of something always turns it into its opposite. This is the principle of the universe” (Ruo 1994, 146). He also offered this argument for the law of *wu ji bi fan*: “We can find examples around us in daily life. When we go east and reach the limit of the East, our further advancing movement will lead us to the West. When we climb high and reach the highest point, our continuous climbing will lead us downward (*Ibid.*)”

Admittedly, what is X’s limit may vary in contexts. All the same, as a formal condition, going to the limit of X is self-sabotaging and self-subverting, more than counter-productive, if one desires X to endure. Therefore, the second precept of the law of *wu ji bi fan* is: *never go to the limit of X, let alone to go beyond the limit of X, if one desires to stabilize and maintain X; or otherwise, one turns X into its opposite or something else* (P2).

At the end of the day, what Chinese philosophers have said above has directing bearing in the ethical life and the happiness of humankind. In the ethical life, the habit of going to extremity—either doing things in extreme manners or going beyond the limits of things—is a common human propensity. This exhibits most strikingly in daily life when we pursue what we consider to be valuable, for example, fame, rank, wealth, sexual pleasures, power, and likewise. *Dao De Jing* thus reads: “The Way of

the universe reduces whatever is excessive and supplements whatever is insufficient. Humankind practices the wrong and unnatural way. The way of mankind is to reduce the insufficient to offer to the excessive” (Laozi 1996, 115/ch.77).

In sum, in Chinese philosophy, the question of how to stabilize and maintain what one wants is always a part of the question of how one ought to live one’s life and has important bearing in the ethical life. Those who fail to ask the question cannot be happy or stay at happiness.

III

A Dream of Red Mansions provides a paradigmatic literary illustration of the Chinese understanding of the law of *wu ji bi fan*. The novel explores the errors of various protagonists indulging themselves in extremity; as a result, those protagonists who sought with extreme manners what they desired always arrive at the opposites of their intended destinations; those protagonists who pushed things beyond their limits always turned things into their opposites and therefore, suffered ill-fates. Because they indulged in extremity, various protagonists in the novel self-sabotage and self-subvert their own enterprises.

The story of the protagonist Lin Daiyu (林黛玉) gives us a glimpse into the relation between fate and the law of *wu ji bi fan*. It also illustrates the nature, content, and scope of the law. Two things are noteworthy. First, Lin Daiyu’s way of life is morally praiseworthy and noble. In light of this, from the moral point of view, her way of life is inspiring. Yet, from the ethical and existential point of view, her way of life is not wise but self-sabotaging and self-subverting. Therefore, her paradigm helps us with drawing a distinction between moral desirability and ethical-existential desirability, reminding us of the tragedies of Nietzschean heroes. Second, Lin Daiyu’s way of being is characterized by employing extreme manners and going beyond the limit of thing, reminding us of Camusian Sisyphus. Therefore, the problem of her way is an archetype problem that the law of *wu ji bi fan* addresses.

As a moral consciousness, Lin Daiyu was the embodiment of nobility, poetry, beauty, good, and authenticity. As an existential consciousness, Lin Daiyu suffered a fatal shortcoming as other existential consciousnesses do: she had the propensity to indulge in extremity; like other Nietzschean heroes, she was unwilling to meet the world in the half-way. Her constant push beyond the limit of things and the extreme manner by which she pursued her ideals, beliefs, and desires brought her not only to the opposite of her intended destination, but also turned what she desired and had into their opposites: love into bitter resentment, happiness into suffering, and the like. They ultimately subverted her enterprise. Lin Daiyu’s story expounds an old Chinese saying, “When the water is too clear, no fishes can live [in it]; when a person is too critical of things, no one can be his/her company (水至清則無魚, 人至察則無徒 *Shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze wu tu*).” It brings stock value to a piece of wisdom that the Chinese poet of Qing dynasty Zheng Banqiao (鄭板橋 1693–1765) bequeathed to us: Not to be critical of everything is the best policy of existence (難得糊塗 *Nan de hu tu*).

Like the Niezzschean Superman, Lin Daiyu failed to walk a balance between opposites of different kinds, which turned her as a poetic consciousness into an unwise existential consciousness. For example, she took no balanced approach toward the world in which she lived. To a great extent, she was a Nietzschean rebel, having nothing but contempt for the mundane world. She was thus taken captive in pursuing the height and alienated from the world. She was a Sartrean being-for-itself that would like to roll back the stone of commonplace. Doing so, she failed to recognize one truth: to be critical of the world was one thing; to reject or disregard it was quite another; to live a Socratic examined life was one thing; to demand that either the world was totally up to one's ideal or the hell with the world was quite another; to aspire for the self's authenticity, the self's being poetic, true, and classic, as well as self's being outstanding was one thing; to reject the world and everyone because of its, his, or her commonplace was quite another.

Reading Lin Daiyu's story, one cannot help asking: Why did she arrive at a destination totally opposite to what she so determinately and intensively wanted? Why had not she achieved that she desired? Why could she not maintain that she desired and had? What was the "invisible hand" that had subverted her enterprise? What had denied her the dream that she dreamed and the aspiration that she aspired? The invisible hand asserting its grip was the law of *wu ji bi fan*. The existence of this law makes the Niezzschean way self-destructive, the Camusian way self-subverting, and the Sartrean way self-sabotaging. It brings into prominence the distinction between a wise free will and an unwise one in the ethical life. What we can, and should, learn from her story warrants a detailed review here.

To start with, Lin Daiyu's extreme "un-worldliness"—her poetic presence, her classic authenticity, and her radiant nobility and her refusal to be tainted by the world—led her only to part further from, and ultimately leave, the world, not to be with the world. Her existence constituted a staunch contrast to the inauthenticity, hypocrisy, and vulgarity of a lot of people of her time and our time, no question of that. That said, living in extremity, she created one problem for herself: no one was good enough to be her comrade. Even Jia Baoyu, her predestined lover, could not stay as her company, as symbolized by the fact that he could not understand her music and art throughout the novel. Xue Baochai, her true rival in beauty, intelligence, personality, and love could not continue to be her comrade. Shi Xiangyun, her good comrade and friend, complained constantly, openly, and strongly that she was too aloof and critical of everything and of everyone. Grandmother Jia, her powerful and indulging supporter, could not be liberal enough to understand and entertain her way. The fact that the tune of her music was even too high for Miao Yu, her spiritual twin, whose way was already very extreme in the eyes of common folks, suggested that her way was too extreme for the world.

In the novel, being too outstanding, Lin Daiyu thus found herself to be extremely lonely. The following lines of her poem could be applied perfectly to her: "Proud recluse, with what hermit are taking refuge? / ... / So lonely in dewy garden and frosty courts / When swans fly off, crickets chirp, does your heart ache? / There is none in the world worth talking to" (Cao 1982, 526/ch.38). Proud reclusiveness is the very characteristic of Lin Daiyu. "None in the world worth talking to" was the very

problem that Lin Daiyu had! Anthony C. Yu rightly indicates, the above poem and two of other her poems about Chrysanthemum in the same occasion express Dai Yu's desire for "companionship, communication, and communion" (Yu 1997, 232–233). Indeed, Lin Daiyu's poem above was true not only of chrysanthemum, but also of herself. Her existence was not only outstanding and distinctive, but too outstanding. Morally, nothing is wrong to be outstanding as Lin Daiyu was. That said, ethically and existentially, those who are too outstanding are truly lonely! Lin Daiyu was truly outstanding and lonely!

Problematically, Lin Daiyu pursued her outstanding existence in an extreme manner and by pushing things beyond their limits. As a result, she pursued love, but was led to bitter complaint and resentment. She asked for proof of love, was left with obsessive self-torturing. Her earthly life was devoted to searching for and living in the absolute—the absolute love, the absolute beauty, the absolute truth, and the absolutely poetic world to live in. She wanted the absolute perfection of everything. Indeed, one cannot help wondering: Had she had her way, would she not have suspended the filthy world, dismantled the ugly society, and canceled the dusty universe? As a moral consciousness, Lin Daiyu was an outstanding moral paradigm and standard. She was a poetic embodiment of free will, truth, good, and beauty. Meanwhile, she was a paradigm of indulging in extremity and being self-subverting too. She pursued what she desired in a manner of self-subverting. What she pursued was also not stable.

Her feeling as a guest in the Jia family conveyed symbolically a sense of distance—the emotional, spiritual, and social distance—between her and the mundane world and a sense of her alienation from the world. The metaphorical image was that she had no place, not even an embarrassing place, in the Jia family. She did not lack familial love and care at the outset. Yet, in spite of her struggle, she could not fit herself in the family. Her stubborn determination to pursue what she aspired for, instead of being willing to negotiate, only made her situation worse. She did not want to adopt herself to the world, but wanted the world to live up to her! She refused to negotiate with the world and thus did not have a deal from the world. She remained as a metaphysical outsider, an ethical alterity, a cognitive stranger, and a political non-ally to the world. That is the beauty of her existence, but also the Achilles' heel of her endeavor!

While her existence prophesied a poetic future, such a poetic future was not connected with the present properly. Xu Shanhe observes: "Dai Yu indulges herself in the ideal. . . . Disregarding whether society would tolerate her" (Xu 2006, 37). Cao Xueqin's Lin Daiyu was a true, noble young woman caught in a world which she could not fit in and in which she determinedly pursued her dream in a manner of "tearing part metal and cracking stone (斷金裂石 *duan jin lie shi*).” The line “the substance comes as a pure one and will leave as a pure one, not sinking into some foul ditches or mires (質本潔來還潔去，強於污淖陷渠溝 *zhi ben jie lai huan jie qu, qiang yu wu nao xian qu gou*)” epitomized her sentiment of being and her earthly journey (Cao 1882, 383/ch.27). The line was a celebration of her spirit, courage, nobility, authenticity, and glory, but also a condolence of her failed adventure. It celebrated that her heavenly substance remained true, authentic, and beautiful to the

end of her earthly journey. It glorified that she had preserved herself in the end of her journey. Meanwhile, the line was a condolence of an adventure wherein the truest, purest and most glorious love could not endure in a prejudiced, biased, and inauthentic world. It was a sad acknowledgement that a noble, poetic, and glorious substance did not fit in the world and had no place in a prejudiced, biased, and inauthentic universe. It was a moan for an adventure of love wherein at the end of the day, her best choice could only be “better shrouding the fair petals in a silk bag, and with one cup of pure earth, burying the extraordinary beauty (未若錦囊收艷骨，一杯淨土掩風流 *mo ruo jin nang shou yan gu, yi bei jing tu yan feng liu*).” (*Ibid.*) It raised a profound question of how to live one’s life in the mundane world in order to be true, good, and happy.

By this token, from the ethical-existential point of view, Lin Daiyu was unable to walk a proper balance between ideal and reality, the aspiration for the absolute and a willingness to bear with the relative, the utopia and the flesh/blood. First, her uncompromised manner of questing for authenticity led her go to extremes in intolerance, alienating her from the world and others. She conceived the world simply as something hypocritical, filthy and unworthy, rejecting the way of the world. On this point, “(Xue) Baochai’s generous, tactful and tolerant manners are sharply contrasted to (Lin) Daiyu’s way of ‘allowing no dust in the eyes (目下無塵 *mu xia wu chen*)’” (*Ibid.*, 69/ch.5). Second, she could not walk a balance between aspiration for the glory and living with the commonplace, aspiration for the perfect and living with the imperfect, living with her Apollonian aspiration for the other world and facing the necessity for her to live in this world, her free will and existential causality, as well as aspiration for spiritual fulfillment and preserving physical health. As a result, her Apollonian sentiment and way was so extreme that instead of bringing the world to her, it turned the world away and against her.

It is helpful to recall that Lin Daiyu’s problem with the law of *wu ji bi fan* was allegorically referred to in Chapter 87. There, Jia Baoyu and Miao Yu passed by Lin Daiyu’s quarter and heard Lin Daiyu playing the lute. Then,

They heard the strings being re-tuned.

“The tune of the main string is too high!” Miao Yu exclaimed. “The others may not follow the scale of it [the main string].”

...

The color draining from Miao Yu’s face and she exclaimed, “Why does she change to play such a high note? The tune is enough to tear apart gold (metal) or crack stone! It is too extreme!”

“So, what is wrong with being extreme?” Baoyu asked.

“It cannot last!” Miao Yu answered apprehensively.

Even as she said this, they heard the main string snap. Miao Yu turned pale, stood up and hastily started off.

“What is the matter?” Baoyu asked?

“You will know later on. Don’t ask.” Miao Yu answered in a strange tune and hurried off (*Ibid.*, 1252-1253/ch.87).

Miao Yu's observation above summarized Lin Daiyu's problems: (1) her tune was too high, and others could not follow her; and (2) her tune was too high to the extent that it could tear apart metal and crack stone, but also could not last! Lin Daiyu was not conceiving an ideal world as the reference to criticize the real world. Instead, for her, it was: gave me the ideal or gave me death! She died in chapter 97, exactly 10 chapters after the above scene.

Indeed, Lin Daiyu was too unearthly that others could not be her company. She was too unearthly that she could not last in the earthly world! That was the problem! Miao Yu "understands that the great technical risks Dai-yu takes with her *qin* are a direct reflection of her emotional extremity" (Levy 1999, 147). Lin Daiyu could have been a paradigm for the world. She could have been the standard for the world. However, she was too unearthly to the world. Therefore, she remained more as an absolute other to the world. The extreme manner by which she pursued her ideal and sentiment of being in the world and her propensity to go beyond the limit of thing only separated her from the world even farther.

Lin Daiyu's problem of living in extremity exhibited most strikingly in the saga of the Bao-Dai love. The love was an eternal and non-duplicable masterpiece (千古絕唱 *a qian gu jue chang*): poetic, glorious, and inspiring. It was a paradigmatic illustration of true love of its time and all times. However, the love ended in the opposite of its intended destination. Its Achilles' heel was its extremity. On this point, Lin Daiyu should remind readers of Camusian Sisyphus to some extent. Her single-mindedness (癡 *chi*) in pursuing the Bao-Dai love, her manner by which she pursued the love, her standards which she set for the Bao-Dai love, and the value of the love that she attempted to realize all were extreme. They backfired as the rule of *wu ji bi fan* affirms its grip.

First, *Chi* was an exclamation point and beauty of Lin Daiyu's way in pursuing the Bao-Dai love. However, with *chi*, Lin Daiyu turned her love into excessive demands on Jia Baoyu, which, in turn, produced grief, anguish, and conflict in her. For example, because of her *chi*, Lin Daiyu would be angry at Jia Baoyu if she felt that Jia Baoyu had not treated her with equal *chi*. Grandmother Jia complained about the constant quarrels between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu by lamenting: 'Not a day goes by without something to worry about [these two]. How true the proverb is that "enemies and lovers are destined to meet!"' (*Ibid.*, 417/ch. 29). "Love and enemies were destined to meet!" Grandmother Jia's observation contained both a dialectical perspective of the relationship between love and its counterpart and keen view into the bearing of the law of *wu ji bi fan* on the ethical life.

Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu were "enemies" because they were lovers! They were lover-turned "enemies" because of their inability to strike a proper balance between the self and the other, proximity and distance, inside and outside, close and far, certainty and uncertainty, having and having not, many (much) and few (less), flexibility and dogmatism, and likewise. Lin Daiyu was worse of the two. Lin Daiyu demanded excessively to cancel the space between her and Jia Baoyu, but actually created more distance and developed more barriers between him and her. She

demanded excessively Jia Baoyu to understand her, but incurred more and more misunderstanding between them.

As Wang Meng notes, Lin Daiyu's *chi* turned the Bao-Dai love into a kind of "spiritual torture (精神酷刑 *jing shen ku xing*)" to her: full of "suspicion, criticism, reproach, anxiety, jealousy, grievance, and fear" (Wang 2005, 58). Nothing morally wrong with Lin Daiyu's *chi*. But ethically and existentially, her unbridled *chi* self-sabotaged and self-subverted her own enterprise. Her *chi* led to her constant, excessive, and unreasonable demand for proof of love from Jia Baoyu (*Ibid.*, 62). As a result, it brought her anguish, forlornness, jealousy, despair, and endless suffering. As the law of *wu ji bi fan* dictates, "Jealousy comes from true love, ugliness comes from beauty. This is the dialectics of love." (*Ibid.*) Equally crucial, Lin Daiyu's constant and excessive demand for proof of love from Jia Baoyu only sentenced their love to death, symbolized in her nightmare in Chapter 82 wherein as she "demands more for his pledge of love, Bao Yu cuts his chest open to show her his heart, only to find the heart missing" (Yi 2004, 42). The unbridled flame that her *chi* brought about consumed the Bao-Dai love.

C.T.Hsia asked suggestively, "Could he [Bao Yu] meet her demand for proof only at the cost of his life? Paoyu dies when he discovers the loss of his heart, but would he have lived if he had ripped out his heart and handed it to Daiyu?" (Hsia 1969, 275–276; Yi 2004, 42–43). Hsia's question could be asked reversely of Lin Daiyu: Could her love live if her demand were met? This is not a question that scratches where there is no itch. It is one reminding us of the law of *wu ji bi fan*.

Secondly, because of her *chi*, her Apollonian aspiration of love was excessively high. There was a sad tune in the fact that even Jia Baoyu could not understand her love because of its extreme nature. Levy rightly observes, "The power of Dai-yu's art is such that it might even break the power of karmic destiny, if only her real perfect listener, Bao Yu, could 'hear' it" (Levy 1999, 147). If only he had understood it! Yes, her art and her love would tear apart the moon, dismantle the sun, split the earth, cancel the time, and eliminate space, if only he could understand them! Had he understood her, had the world understood her, things would have been different, and there would have not been *A Dream of Red Mansions*! But she was too good and too transcendent to the world, including her destined lover, Jia Baoyu, to understand. Wang Meng observes: the tragedy of the Bao-Dai love lied also in the fact that they often "did not understand each other (對不上號 *dui bu shang hao*)" (Wang 2005, 58).

Thirdly, the otherness of the Bao-Dai love was so radical that it was a threat in the eyes of the Jia family. Jia Yuanchun resisted it at the first sign. Lady Wang was deeply worried about it when it was known to her. Anthony C.Yu criticizes Grandmother Jia: "She will destroy their love and thereby their lives in the name of her love for them. That is the tragic irony worthy of perpetual tear" (Yu 1997, 218). But to be fair, Lin Daiyu's love was far outside Grandmother Jia's horizon. It was a metaphysical, cognitive, and ethical other too alien for Grandmother Jia.

In light of the above, few of us would disagree with Song Jing on this point, "Unless we have the death of Dai-yu, the subject matter of *Hongloumeng* is not fully established" (Song 1966, 271; Yu, 1997, 246). Ethically and existentially, Lin

Daiyu's death realized her earthly existence which was too outstanding to the extent that it appeared to be too extreme to the eyes of the earthly world to accept. Her death was an affirmation of her uncompromised distinction and otherness and of her "tune" of life and love, which could tear gold (metal) apart and crack stone and was simply too high for the world. This existential non-fitness into the world was not an indication that Lin Daiyu's way was in any way morally blameworthy. Indeed, morally, one could even say that it was beautiful and poetic. However, to be a morally beautiful song or poem is one thing. To be a sustainable being in the world is quite another. Each requires different conditions to live.

It is worth mentioning that Lin Daiyu died with resentment to and complaint of Jia Baoyu (Cao 1982, 1368-1384/ch.97-ch.98). Wang Meng points out, at the end of the Bao-Dai love affair, "[because the love is too deep], love produces complaint, and complaint produces hatred" (Wang 2005, 66). Also, with symbolical values, in Chapter 116, Lin Daiyu was completely indifferent to Jia Baoyu in the Fairyland of Disillusion: there, her excessive *qings* had turned into indifference. The transformation of Lin Daiyu's love into complaint or indifference, like the transformation of Jia Zheng's strict fatherly love into fatherly hatred of Jia Baoyu, followed the same rule: when things go beyond their limits, they turn into their opposites or something else.

In short, a lesson that the story of Lin Daiyu has taught us is about the law of *wu ji bi fan*. Xunzi said: "Nature has its laws. These laws do not exist for the sake of (the sage-emperor) Yao, nor do they cease to exist because of (wicked king) Jie" (Xunzi, 1996, 246/ch.17). The rule of *wu ji bi fan* did not suspend itself even for the sake of a dazzling wonder such as Lin Daiyu.

IV

In conclusion, the question of how to stabilize and maintain happiness is an indispensable part of the question of how to live our life in order to be happy. It is difficult to arrive at a good, happy, and authentic life. It is even more difficult to stabilize and maintain one. The question of how to avoid arriving at the opposite of happiness is also a crucial part of the question of how to arrive at happiness.

The rule of *wu ji bi fan* indicates both how to avoid arriving at the opposite of happiness and how to stabilize and maintain happiness, not self-subverting our own enterprise. In pursuing those good things such as love, authenticity, truth, beauty, and excellence or desiring things such as sexual lusts, wealth, prosperity, power, social rank, or other social accomplishments, we must avoid employing extreme manners to pursue what we want, and going to the extremes—that is, going beyond the limit of thing. We must overcome the habit to indulge in pursuing extremity. The burden of judgment on what is the limit of something is heavy, and the responsibility to choose the right action is heavy too.

The limit of something is the most difficult thing to know. It depends on (1) the thing itself, (2) what it is related to, and (3) the environment and conditions in which the thing exists. Thus, for example, six miles per day may be the limit for a normally healthy man in his late 30's, but not the limit for a soccer player in his early 20's. All

the same, the ethical and existential consideration of stabilizing and maintaining X and of not-being led to X's opposite is independent of the moral consideration of the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of X. What makes X good does not necessarily make X stable. X's worthiness and value has no bearing in why we should not pursue X in extreme manners.

A few clarifications are in order here. First, existence in extremity and existence in perfection are two different states of affairs. Existence in extremity is not a necessary or sufficient condition for existence in perfection. X does not achieve perfection by going to extremes in its existence, but by properly balancing its components and its different external relations. Going to extremes is not going to perfection. Conversely, a rejection of extremity is not a rejection of perfection.

Another clarification is this. Nothing is wrong with X's turning into its opposite if X itself is undesirable. For example, it is a good thing when suffering turns itself into happiness. Positive, desirable self-negation exists. The law of *wu ji bi fan* does not imply that the transformation of something into its opposite is bad. Thus, we do often expect "when suffering [calamity] arrives at its limit, happiness follows (否極泰來 *pi ji tai lai*)" in life. The law of *wu ji bi fan* says only that something cannot maintain itself if it goes to its "ji" or we cannot maintain something if we pursue it beyond its limit or in an extreme manner.

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