

November 15, 1990 (Vol. 6, no. 6)

Dear Colleague:

One of China's greatest novels is The Story of the Stone, written by Cao Xueqin in the middle of the eighteenth century. There is an excellent translation of it by David Hawkes, who, in his Introduction, notes that the author in middle age concluded that the girls he had known in his youth were all "morally and intellectually [his] superior." This view has much in common with that of the novel's boy hero, Bao Yu, who thought that "the pure essence of humanity was all concentrated in the female of the species and that males were its mere dregs and off-scourings." The boy once observed of his female cousins that "if they, whose understanding was so superior, were manifestly still so far from Enlightenment, it was obviously a waste of time for him to go on pursuing it." When Bao Yu was a very little boy he used to maintain that "girls are made of water and boys are made of mud," and that only when he was with girls did he feel "fresh and clean."

This unabashed feminism is hard to match in the West. Unlike the West, Chinese civilization never worshiped the typical masculine hang-ups of "physical force," "hyperactivity," and "aggression." In Taoism, water (the female principle) is regarded as superior to rock (the male principle). Confucians argued that "no action" is an ideal of government. The power of the Emperor himself is best exhibited by sitting still in a posture of inactivity. The expression "pale faced scholar" is a compliment, whereas the mighty warrior, unless he also composes poetry, is *déclassé*.

Note that, to Cao Xueqin, women are not only morally but intellectually superior. To the traditional Chinese, intellect is manifest most luminously in the deep understanding of people and society rather than in analytical prowess applied to the manipulation of physical reality or to fun-and-games. Western feminists are in a bind because they either adopt the male values of aggression (the "f...k you" style of speech) and hyperactivity, which still enjoy enormous prestige, or they push half-heartedly for certain recognized feminine values, such as gentleness, inwardness, and contemplative understanding--half-heartedly because these values are also seen as the timid flowers of repression. (Women call other women "guys," but men never call other men "girls." And "Oh boy!"--an expression of joy--has no parallel in "Oh girl!").

Best wishes,

*Yi-tzu*