



Lin Daiyu's Physical and Mental Dilemma Tragic Metaphors from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Based on an Interdisciplinary Analysis of Dream of the Red Chamber

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Abstract. In Dream of the Red Chamber, the scenes depicting Lin Daiyu's use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) serve as multidimensional metaphors, integrating TCM's mind-body theory, character psychology, temporal constraints, and the author's artistic vision. Supported by TCM theories of the holistic nature of the body and spirit, as well as the idea that internal injury is caused by the seven emotions, this paper analyzes the physical manifestations and psychological projections of Lin Daiyu's congenital insufficiency. It does so by examining core medicines and prescriptions, such as Renshen Yangrong Wan (Ginseng Nutritive Decoction in Pill Form) and Tianwang Buxin Dan (Heavenly King Tonifying Heart Pellet), as well as bird's nest. The paper explores the catalytic effects of emotional disorders, a dependent living environment, and feudal ethical constraints on her physical and mental health. It also reveals the inevitability of fate and temporal tragedy embodied in TCM symbols. The research indicates that Lin Daiyu's history of TCM usage reveals a trajectory of coordinated physical and mental collapse, characterized by physical depletion, psychological depression, and social oppression. The failure of medicine to cure her predicament stems from the conflict between her emotional pursuits and temporal constraints, offering a new perspective for interdisciplinary interpretations of classical literary characters.

Keywords: Dream of the Red Chamber, Lin Daiyu, TCM Metaphor, Holism of Body and Spirit, Internal Injury Caused by Seven Emotions, Tragic Fate.

1 Introduction

Lin Daiyu's illness is a key entry point for research on The Dream of the Red Chamber. However, existing studies mostly focus on a single dimension, leaving room for interdisciplinary, integrated research. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)'s unity of form

and spirit theory emphasizes the dialectical relationship between physical illnesses, emotions, and the environment. This theory can accurately decipher the multilayered connotations of Lin Daiyu's illness ^[1, 2]. Her symptoms, such as coughing and hemoptysis, are not only physical manifestations of pulmonary consumption and consumptive disease, but also direct projections of her psychological traits and living predicament ^[3, 4, 5]. Using TCM as a core clue, this paper connects TCM theory with literary analysis to deeply explore Cao Xueqin's artistic use of medicine as a metaphor for fate.

2 Dual Analysis of Lin Daiyu's Core Illness: Body and Spirit

Lin Daiyu's illness stems from congenital insufficiency, which aligns with TCM's primary pathogenesis of yin deficiency, fire hyperactivity, and wood-fire assaulting metal. This creates a vicious cycle of mutual impairment between the body and spirit, which embodies TCM's holistic view of health.

2.1 Physical Manifestations: Symptoms of Yin Deficiency with Fire Hyperactivity and Wood-Fire Insulting Metal

Lin Daiyu suffered from a chronic cough, blood-tinged sputum, an afternoon fever, insomnia, and emaciation. These symptoms fall into the TCM categories of pulmonary consumption and consumptive disease. The core pathogenesis is yin deficiency with fire hyperactivity. Congenital insufficiency leads to lung yin depletion. Deficient fire burns the lung collaterals, causing hemoptysis. When it disturbs the spirit, the result is insomnia and night sweats. Additionally, long-term stagnation of liver qi transforms into fire according to the five-element restriction theory. This fire invades the lung metal, forming a pathological cycle of wood-fire insulting metal. This cycle causes her symptoms to worsen repeatedly with emotional fluctuations.

2.2 Psychological Projection: Damage to Zang-Fu Organs by Emotional Disorders

According to TCM's theory of internal injury caused by the seven emotions, emotional disorders such as worry, anxiety, sorrow, and anger directly damage zang-fu organ functions. Troubled by the entanglement of the wood-stone marriage promise and anxiety about living under others' roofs, Lin Daiyu remained in a state of worry, anxiety, and irritability for a long time. Worry impairs the lungs, anger impairs the liver, and anxiety impairs the spleen. This further aggravates the depletion of the liver and lungs as well as spleen-stomach dysfunction. It also forms a cycle of emotional impairment to the zang-fu organs, zang-fu damage to the body, and physical illness disturbing the spirit. These are mutually causal and form a vicious circle.

3 Metaphorical Interpretation of Core Traditional Chinese Medicines/ Prescriptions

Renshen Yangrong Wan, Tianwang Buxin Dan, bird's nest, and other medicines are more than just medical tools. Their pharmacological properties and supply logic conform to Lin Daiyu's pathogenesis and metaphorize her psychological predicament and fate, realizing the artistic expression of a prescription as a formula of fate (Table 1).

3.1 Renshen Yangrong Wan: The Limitation of Aristocratic Material Supply

Lin Daiyu stated that she had been taking Renshen Yangrong Wan since childhood. Derived from Taiping Huimin Heji Ju Fang (Formulas of the Peaceful Benevolent Dispensary), this prescription tonifies both qi and blood. It accurately corresponds to her congenital qi and blood insufficiency constitution. As a precious medicinal material exclusive to the aristocracy, its long-term supply reflects Grandmother Jia's favor for Lin Daiyu. However, it can only compensate for physical depletion, not psychological trauma from living under others' roofs. This symbolizes the limitation of aristocratic material protection, which can only treat symptoms, not the root cause.

3.2 Tianwang Buxin Dan: Pointing Directly to the Essence of Mental Illness

Mentioned by Jia Baoyu in Chapter 28, Tianwang Buxin Dan specializes in treating restlessness, insomnia, and dreaminess caused by heart yin deficiency. This is consistent with Lin Daiyu's symptoms, which are induced by emotional anxiety and excessive worry. The phrase tonifying the heart points directly to the core. Lin Daiyu's mental illnesses, such as uncertainty about love and loneliness from her wandering life experience, are far more severe than her physical illnesses. These are precisely what no TCM can cure, symbolizing the complete hopelessness of her emotional redemption.

3.3 Bird's Nest: A Symbol of Human Feelings and Dependence

Xue Baochai advised Lin Daiyu to eat rock sugar bird's nest porridge every day. Bird's nest is mild in nature and nourishes yin. It is suitable for her lung yin deficiency constitution, which cannot tolerate strong tonification. This marks a shift in her physical conditioning from warm tonification to mild yin nourishment. Metaphorically, the bird's nest not only carries Xue Baochai's kindness and the complex interpersonal relationships within the Jia Mansion, but it also highlights Lin Daiyu's dependence on Grandmother Jia's approval for survival. This dependence lays the groundwork for the collapse of her subsequent fate.

3.4 Supplementary Metaphors of Other Medicines

Yiqi Yangrong Bupi Hegan Tang (Qi-Tonifying, Nutritive, Spleen-Invigorating, and Liver-Harmonizing Decoction), which was prescribed for Qin Keqing, is not intended for Lin Daiyu. However, it is exactly suitable for her illness, reflecting her tragedy of having a suitable prescription but no chance of a cure. The silktree flower-soaked wine that Lin Daiyu drank in small amounts can temporarily relieve emotional stagnation, but it is ineffective in resolving her deep psychological and living predicament.

4 The Root Cause of Incurable Illness: The Synergistic Effect of Body, Spirit, and Era

Lin Daiyu's tragedy resulted from the combined effects of physical depletion, psychological depression, and social oppression. The futility of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) conditioning highlights the inevitability of her fate.

4.1 Physical Limitation: Irreversible Congenital Foundation

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the kidneys are considered the congenital foundation. Lin Daiyu's constitutional insufficiency is a root deficiency illness. Medications such as ginseng and bird's nest soup can only temporarily alleviate symptoms and slow disease progression. They cannot reverse congenital insufficiency. This reflects the tragic tone set from the beginning by her parents' early deaths and her having to live under others' roofs.

4.2 Psychological Core: Fatal Depletion from Internal Injury Caused by the Seven Emotions

Internal injury caused by the seven emotions is the main reason for Lin Daiyu's deteriorating illness. Her obsession with love and continuous psychological friction constantly deplete the zang-fu functions, rendering the effects of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) futile. TCM holds that the heart is the monarch organ. When the spirit is disturbed, zang-fu functions become disordered. Ultimately, her mental illness becomes the fatal cause.

4.3 Social Catalysis: Constraints of the Era and Class

The harsh feudal ethics of the Qing dynasty suppressed women's emotions. This made it impossible for Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu to publicly express their love, forcing them to repress it inwardly. The anxiety she experienced due to her dependent identity, coupled with the collapse of her final reliance due to the decline of the Jia Mansion, ultimately crushed her physical and mental defenses.

4.4 Artistic Sublimation: Ingenuity of Using Medicine as a Metaphor for Fate

Cao Xueqin used traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as an implicit footnote to the characters' fate: Renshen Yangrong Wan highlights the limitations of the aristocracy's material resources. Tianwang Buxin Dan clarifies the essence of mental illness. The bird's nest metaphorizes dependence on others for survival. The blood that Lin Daiyu coughs up is the ultimate symbol of the passing of life essence and passionate emotions. It vividly metaphorizes the state of aristocratic women in the Qing Dynasty.

5 A Portrait of Qing Dynasty Medical Practice

Qing Dynasty medicine exhibited three defining characteristics. First, there was coexisting peaks and stagnation. Meticulous pattern differentiation and extensive knowledge reached the pinnacle of traditional Chinese medicine. However, fundamental breakthroughs in theoretical foundations and diagnostic techniques remained elusive. Second, there was coexisting openness and conservatism. Pragmatism embraced foreign medicinal substances, yet the core system remained constrained by Confucian rituals and ethics. Finally, science and humanities were intertwined. A comprehensive pattern identification and treatment system was deeply entrenched in feudal ethics and superstitious culture. The two were inseparable.

The adept application of indigenous herbs demonstrated the maturity of the classical pharmacology system. Ginseng, mentioned earlier, appears with remarkable frequency throughout the text. From Qin Keqing and Lin Daiyu to Grandma Jia, ginseng served as the primary herb for replenishing qi, consolidating collapse, and fortifying the body's vital essence. Its use was meticulously refined to encompass diverse forms, including pure ginseng decoction, inclusion in decoctions, and formulation into pills and powders. The precise distinctions made regarding origin (superior grade vs. wild mountain ginseng), processing methods (ginseng roots with hair vs. sliced ginseng), and suitable patient groups catered to the medicinal needs of the aristocratic class and demonstrated the Qing dynasty's profound understanding of precious herbs' properties and class-based usage characteristics.

Common herbs such as Poria (which calms the spirit and strengthens the spleen), Angelica (which tonifies blood), Tangerine Peel (which regulates qi), and Cinnamon Bark (which directs fire back to its source) were precisely combined in formulas that strictly adhered to classical pharmacology theories dating back to the Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica. This demonstrates the profound mastery of physicians over the Four Natures, Five Flavors, meridian tropism, and the therapeutic effects of commonly used herbs.

The incorporation of foreign medicines and Shanghai School approaches reflects the exchange and innovation within Qing medicine. In addition to the ginseng and bird's nest that Daiyu regularly consumed, she also used American ginseng. Introduced to China via Guangzhou in the early Qing dynasty, American ginseng is explicitly documented by Zhao Xuemin in his Supplement to the Compendium of Materia Medica as cool in nature yet tonifying, making it suitable for individuals with yin

deficiency and internal heat. Lin Daiyu's use of American ginseng precisely addressed her condition of consumptive cough and wheezing, yin deficiency with excessive fire. This corroborates the earlier diagnosis of her yin deficiency with lung dryness and demonstrates how Qing dynasty medicine swiftly assimilated foreign novelties, integrating them into traditional Chinese medical theory for localized interpretation and precise application.

In summary, Qing dynasty pharmacology was not a closed system. It remained firmly rooted in traditional herbal medicine while actively It incorporated foreign medicinal substances, primarily through the port of Guangzhou.

Table 1. Detailed Table of Drugs Used by Lin Daiyu

Drug Name	Core Efficacy
Renshen Yangrong Wan	Warming and tonifying qi and blood, supporting healthy qi and consolidating the primordial essence.
Ginseng	Tonifying qi to relieve collapse, supporting healthy qi and consolidating the primordial essence.
Bird's Nest	Nourishing yin and moistening the lung, mild nourishing and moistening.
American Ginseng	Cool in nature and tonic, nourishing yin and reducing fire.

6 Conclusion

From the perspective of TCM usage, Lin Daiyu is a typical embodiment of TCM’s holistic approach to the body and spirit. Her history of TCM treatment clearly illustrates the progression from congenital insufficiency to emotional aggravation, social catalysis, and physical and mental collapse. TCM’s approach of treating symptoms rather than root causes reflects individuals’ helplessness against the era and fate. Lin Daiyu’s tragedy is the inevitable result of the interplay of era, system, and personal fate. This interpretation enriches character research in Dream of the Red Chamber.

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