Prologue

This book studies the bearing of the Buddhist quest for salvation, or enlightenment, on the vision, structure, and narrative form of three works of classic Chinese fiction, namely the Ming (1368–1644) masterpiece *Xiyou ji* (Journey to the West), *Xiyou bu* (The tower of myriad mirrors), and *Honglou meng* (The dream of the red chamber).¹ I argue that in these works the plot, structure, mode of expression, and resolution of inner conflicts as they relate to the final denouement are determined, in various degrees, by Buddhist soteriology, in particular by the quest for enlightenment as defined by the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition. The plots of these novels are generally patterned after the narratives in certain well-known Mahāyāna sūtras, and as such can be read as a series of “grand parable[s] of Buddhist quest and enlightenment,” to quote Anthony C. Yu’s self-conscious words in his criticism of *Honglou meng*²—self-conscious because the critic is acutely aware of other stances that seem to have ignored such an interpretive strategy altogether. Moreover, it is clear that the authors, by their manipulation of the texts, especially the metafictional discourse, intended their works to be read in this way: they persistently claimed that these works were equivalents to the scriptures. This technique culminates in the Qing (1644–1911) masterpiece *Honglou meng*.

The methodology of this study is largely informed by theories of intertextuality.³ By this I mean the study of different texts from different periods and genres as they relate to one another, with the goal of understanding those configurations that have “generic” significance. Texts studied in this way yield a greater understanding than when read separately. The reference here is not to tenuous relationships, but rather to substantive structural ones that constitute an intertextual web in terms of both theme and rhetoric. “Intertextuality” in this study applies to
two fronts: first, a later text may shed light on its precursors, or the process may work in reverse, yielding ways of reading that move both forward and backward in time, as texts read together add new dimensions to one another and complement one another. In following how later authors rework earlier pieces and carry on what their precursors have produced, we find a more complex relationship among these authors than has generally been assumed. This is especially so in the case of what might be called “composite authorship”—authors, editors, and commentators who worked “in aggregate” on a single novel. A writer from one group may influence one from another on many different levels, including the personal, which justifies our studying them together. On a textual and thematic plane, this influence may operate at the level of vision and purport, not only at the level of episodes or motifs, making such influences difficult to detect.

Second, texts from one genre may illuminate those from another (in our case novels and Buddhist scriptures). Comparing the works of different genres will set in high relief their common thematic and structural concerns. The novels under discussion can be more fruitfully studied in the often neglected context of the Buddhist pattern of salvation, which accentuates the dynamic of the plot and to a great extent determines their particular mode of expression.

In the light of such Western theories on influence and intertextuality as that of Harold Bloom, the first concern can be dubbed “Freudian” because the textual traffic is between individual texts with their authors as agents. The second concern I would call “Jungian” because something else is at work, a common cultural milieu that shapes the poetics and aesthetics of these authors, a cultural given, regardless of authorial intentionality.

My readings are conducted within these parameters. I am looking to see how these texts constellate and contribute, intertextually, to the fiction of enlightenment as a “genre” or subgenre and a narrative mode in traditional vernacular Chinese fiction, a tradition that depends on the Buddhist understanding of the relationship between reality and illusion, the religion’s soteriological pattern, and intertextual practice.

The result, I argue, is a marked degree of self-reflexivity in these works that points in two directions. First, it is directed to the experiences of the protagonists in search of salvation, voluntary or otherwise, which in turn lead them back to their selves, sometimes without their knowing it initially, partly because the soteriological pattern in Buddhism is essentially an epistemological one. And second, this self-reflexivity points to a self-consciousness on the part of these authors concerning the creation of “fictional truths.” In other words, the authors are aware of the
intricate relationship between truth and illusion and of the nature of knowledge, both of which are logical outgrowths of some basic Mahāyāna tenets they work with. This self-reflexivity is further enhanced by the authors’ awareness of the achievements of their precursors. I concentrate in particular on Honglou meng: how it refers back to its predecessors and, conversely, how it illuminates them.

There are, it seems, two tendencies among Chinese critics of Honglou meng. They have until recently been uneasy about acknowledging Cao Xueqin’s literary debts and have regarded everything in the novel as unique, hence its towering stature in the Chinese narrative tradition.⁵ On the other hand, many critics emphasize the novel’s relationship with Jin Ping Mei (Plum in a gold vase) and Shuihu zhuan (Water margin). Among traditional critics, Zhang Xinzhi’s (fl. 1828–1850) comment (finished in 1850) seems balanced and relevant: “The Dream of the Red Chamber evolved from Journey to the West, trod the path of Jin Ping Mei, and drew its spirits from Shuihu zhuan”⁶ (HLMJ 1:154). The Chinese alchemical term the critic resorts to, “tuotai,” seems to signify a somewhat closer, more intrinsic relationship between Honglou meng and Xiyou ji: the Ming work constitutes the embryo of the Qing masterpiece. Another commentator, styled Mengchi xueren, was more direct (this commentary was finished in 1888): “In terms of meaning Honglou meng is a wholesale imitation of Xiyou ji, and its language is hence Zen-like: full of twists and turns, inversions and surprises, most fantastic, most difficult to understand fully” (HLMJ 1:219). It seems that the hints concerning the relationship between these works have generally gone unheeded, especially by critics of the last century. Although there have been some recent important studies in the light of intertextuality, including works by Mary Elizabeth Scott and Jing Wang,⁸ there is still little on the relationship between Honglou meng and Xiyou ji. An exception is a seminal study by Zhou Cezong (Chow Tse-tsung) titled “Honglou meng yu Xiyou bu,” which concentrates on the relationship between the two works in question. Anthony C. Yu also states, concerning one of Honglou meng’s defining features—the exhaustive treatment of qing (passion, desire, attachment)—that “[i]n the history of Chinese prose fiction, the most important antecedent might well have been Xiyoubu.”⁹ Although this book draws on the insights of these scholars, it also differs from the earlier studies in that it is primarily an intertextual study of the three works as viewed through the lens of the Buddhist epistemic-soteriological models. This book is concerned with how the novelists translated such patterns into narrative structures and how such patterns determine the outcome of the plot in each work.

This is an appropriate point at which to provide a working map for my study.
To recapitulate, this book aims to reconsider the relationship of the vernacular fiction to Mahāyāna Buddhism in a “generic” way by means of an intertextual study of the works in question, both the interactions among themselves and those within the larger context of the religious milieu, in particular the scriptures. Chapter 1 considers the often neglected Buddhist milieu and some generic issues regarding these works. The first part of the chapter discusses the contradictions in the culture of late imperial China and the relationship between Buddhism and the literary landscape, in which our novelists lived and wrote. My argument is that what the novelists have inherited are not religious norms—they may not even be practicing Buddhists—but rather the philosophical background and a set of soteriological patterns that they use to literary purpose. The second part of the chapter discusses the generic implications of these works from a comparative perspective. Finally, I draw on these discussions to define the term “fiction of enlightenment.”

Chapter 2 discusses the Buddhist soteriological patterns and structures as exemplified in the life of the founder of the religion and the reenactments of such in the sūtras, their variations or further evolutions and applications, their bearings on the deliverance play (a dramatic model), and the narrative structures that develop out of these patterns. The chapter begins with a review of speculation about the Buddhist impact on the Chinese novel and elaborates on how such discussions will become more meaningful when related to the narrative structure of representative works of the genre. Proceeding from this, I discuss one of Buddha’s biographies popular in China and some sūtras that reenact Buddha’s life: the pilgrimages of Sādāprarudita (Satuobolun) and Sudhana (Shancai). This pattern is subjected to ironic revisions in Xiyou ji. The development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, meanwhile, is characterized by a paradox, the embrace of this world manifested, so to speak, in the valorization of the provisional, an affirmation of life in this world, the saṃsāra. This becomes the philosophical basis of Xiyou bu and Honglou meng. In Chapter 2 I also consider how Chinese drama draws on such patterns and, returning to works of fiction, the common settings for these dramas of enlightenment, a movement from the journey or pilgrimage to the family.

The first two chapters set the cultural and literary contexts for these works, as well as present the prevalent Buddhist assumptions about reality and salvation. They thus prepare us for in-depth discussions of specific novels.

Chapter 3, on Xiyou ji, discusses the quest of Sun Wukong and Tripitaka, their pilgrimage to the West, which is simultaneously a journey inward. After a consideration of the relationship between the sūtra Ru fajie pin (Gandavyūha) and the novel, I discuss the abortive journey of Sun Wukong, which is followed by
that of Tripitaka. To be emphasized is the dramatization of what the author sees as the Great Way, that is, its expression and manifestation in *samsāra*. This is followed by a consideration of some key issues in the interpretation of this novel: the tensions between two views of enlightenment (as represented by Sun Wukong and Tripitaka) and the nature of this journey. Is the journey necessary? Is it circular or linear? Is it real or illusory? Finally, I discuss the persistent and pervasive doubling devices, a logical outcome of the Buddhist preoccupation with the human mind.

Chapter 4 serves as an interlude, a consideration of *Xiyou bu* that forms a link, an intermediary, between the two longer works. This chapter concentrates on the novelist’s probing of human desires, a reorientation in face of the flight from such desires in the earlier novel; it discusses the author’s evocation of the dream world in order to dramatize this point; and finally, it returns to the doubling devices, which in this book take on self-reflexive proportions.

This leads in to Chapter 5, on *Honglou meng*, which focuses exclusively on the protagonist Jia Baoyu, who to a degree embodies both Sun Wukong and Tripitaka. With *Xiyou bu* as an intermediary, the Qing masterpiece *Honglou meng* can be regarded as a deliberate contrast or an antithetical parallel to *Xiyou ji*. Emphasis will be given to the similar thematic concerns and structures that characterize these three works: how the patterns emerging from the past are adapted and revitalized, and how the protagonist reenacts the quest within a new context, that of an aristocratic family. In the process, however, such themes and structures are subverted; in the end, what appears—and promises—to be a work on detachment turns out instead to be a paean on attachment. The discussions culminate in a study of self-reflexivity on different planes, of the metafictional dimension of the novel, and of the manipulation of various discourses—all a logical outcome, albeit sometimes ironic and parodic, of their engagement with Buddhism. I will probe the authors’ self-conscious creation of illusions, which are at the same time scriptures or “secular scriptures,” a characteristic paradox of Buddhism as it developed in China.