

Professor Dr. Sophie Volpp (University of
California, Berkeley)

“Phantom Reference and the Fictional Text: The
Inventory of Possessions in

The Story of the Stone”

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Hauptgebäude, Raum M001, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz



I consider the inventory of the possessions of the Jia family near the close of Cao Xueqin’s magisterial mid-eighteenth-century novel *The Story of the Stone* (Honglou meng) in order to ask how it resembles and differs from historical inventories of confiscations of the possessions of officials. The episode indirectly references the confiscation of the author’s own family after it fell from imperial favor in 1727. I ask how the residue of historicity present in the inventory of items confiscated affects the experience of reading the text. Rather than trying to create a picture of the relationship between the fictional confiscation of the Jia family’s possessions and the historical confiscation of the Cao family, I develop a notion of phantom reference in which a fictional text points to a potential relationship to historical sources. I ask how commentaries and textual variants both reinforce and undermine the notion of phantom reference. What does the presence of such moments of phantom reference, and the implied imbrication of the fictional and the historical, ultimately suggest with regard to this novel’s notion of fictionality?