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CHINESE CLASSICS

A Dream of Red Mansions

BY CAO XUEQIN AND GAO E

VOLUME I



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS BEIJING

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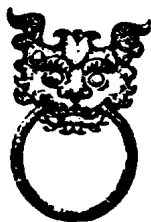


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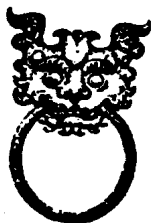


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**A DREAM
OF RED MANSIONS**

INTRODUCTION

In a book called *Folk Ballads of the Capital*, published in the early 19th century during the Jiaqing reign period of the Qing Dynasty, we find the following two lines: "One can not call himself erudite / Without touching upon *Red Mansions* in his talk." In fact, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a controversial work, so much so that when discussing it even the best of friends almost come to blows. Two hundred years have passed since its first appearance, and yet this novel is still a hot topic of conversation among the Chinese people, and criticism and research concerning it have crystallized into a specialized branch of study, whimsically referred to as "Redology."

A Dream of Red Mansions is rich in ideas and concepts. It is a multi-faceted world of art into which the more one delves the more one finds. The charm of the novel lies, in short, in its revealing youth fully and truthfully, in its uncovering the naivete, zeal, grace and tenderness of the younger generation. Although the era in which the protagonists of the novel Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu lived, together with its social conditions and cultural environment, has long since vanished, their dreams and longings, together with those of the young ladies of the Grand View Garden, still strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of the people of today.

The author of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is Cao Xueqin (1715? - 1763?). His personal name was Zhan, and

his style (name adopted by a man at his coming of age), Mengruan. He was also known as Xueqin, Qinqu or Qinxī. His ancestral home was in what is now Liaoyang City, in Northeast China, and his forebears, although Han Chinese themselves, had been accepted into the Manchu Right White Banner. For three successive generations, a period of some 60 years, his ancestors had held the post of Textile Commissioner in Jiangning (present-day Nanjing). His paternal great grandmother, surnamed Sun, had been nursemaid to the infant who was later to become the Kangxi emperor, and his grandfather, Cao Yin, had been the future emperor's study companion and close attendant, accompanying him when he came to the throne on four of his six inspection tours of the south, a singular honor. After the death of Cao Yin, the family, under the headship of Cao Xueqin's father Cao Fu, continued to enjoy the emperor's favor, but when the Yongzheng emperor ascended the throne, Cao Fu was removed from his office and punished on charges of financial mismanagement and incompetence in the management of courier stations. The family property was confiscated, and the Caos' halcyon days came to an end. They moved to Beijing. Cao Xueqin, who had spent his childhood in pampered luxury, now shared the family's fate of a wretched existence. Dogged by poverty, he eventually moved to a rustic hovel on the western outskirts of the capital. The death of his young son in 1762 was a crushing blow to Cao, from which he never recovered, and on February 12, 1763 he himself passed away.

There is no reliable documentary evidence for the exact dates of Cao Xueqin's birth and death, and scholars are

divided on the subject. There are three theories regarding the date of his death, namely, the “Renwu” theory (the 27th year of the Qianlong reign period, 1762), the “Kuiwei” theory (the 28th year of Qianlong, 1763) and the “Jiashen” theory (the 29th year of Qianlong, 1764). Regarding the year of his birth, it can be calculated from the fact that he had not reached the age of fifty when he died.

Cao Xueqin was haughty by nature, but an extremely talented literary man. His friend Dun Cheng compared his poems to those of the Tang Dynasty poet Li He, describing them as bold, solid and having the cold glitter of a knife blade. Unfortunately, all that survives of Cao’s poetry is two lines of a poem dedicated to a play adapted by Dun Cheng from the famous Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi’s long narrative poem *Song of a Lute Player*. Cao was also a painter who liked painting stones, in a style described by another friend, Dun Min, as sturdy. But Cao Xueqin’s fame rests on his magnificent achievement in writing the full-length novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

We know little about the process of the novel’s creation. In the “Author’s Preface,” Cao says, “In this busy, dusty world, having accomplished nothing, I suddenly recalled all the girls I had known, considering each in turn, and it dawned on me that all of them surpassed me in behavior and understanding; that I, shameful to say, for all my masculine dignity, fell short of the gentler sex. But since this could never be remedied, it was no use regretting it. There was really nothing to be done.

“I decided then to make known to all how I, though dressed in silks and delicately nurtured thanks to the Imperial favor and my ancestors’ virtue, had nevertheless ig-

nored the kindly guidance of my elders as well as the good advice of teachers and friends, with the result that I had wasted half my life and not acquired a single skill. But no matter how unforgivable my crimes, I must not let all the lovely girls I have known pass into oblivion through my wickedness or my desire to hide my shortcomings.

"Though my home is now a thatched cottage with matting windows, earthen stove and rope-bed, this shall not stop me from laying bare my heart. Indeed, the morning breeze, the dew of night, the willows by my steps and the flowers in my courtyard inspire me to wield my brush. Though I have little learning or literary talent, what does it matter if I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely girls. This should divert readers too and help distract them from their cares."

From this we know that *A Dream of Red Mansions* was written in circumstances of dire poverty, after Cao had suffered the decline of his family fortunes from its heyday of power and affluence. His life experiences not only provided the material for the novel, they also raised his awareness and tempered his character. In Chapter One, he says that he spent ten years writing and revising the novel. In an early handwritten copy of the novel, under the title *The Tale of the Stone* (Jiaxu edition), it says in Chapter One: "Pages full of fantastic talk penned with bitter tears / All men call the author mad, none his message hears." There is this marginal note on this: "Only one who can hear the message has bitter tears and this book was written through the tears. On the threshold of the year 1762, the author died, his tears all spent, before the book was completed." The extant early handwritten copies all

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contain only the first 80 chapters. It is said that Cao wrote more chapters, but unfortunately they have not survived. The last 40 chapters of the present 120-chapter version were added by a later hand. In the preface to the 1791 edition, Cheng Weiyuan and Gao E say that the last 40 chapters were bought from a second-hand market, and that they merely edited them. However, some scholars are of the opinion that Gao E actually wrote the last 40 chapters, and that the story of the second-hand market was just a smokescreen. Although the last 40 chapters are clearly not up to the standard of the first 80 either philosophically or artistically, they round out the novel, tie up the loose ends of the plot and complete the sense of tragedy. Their creation was a lasting accomplishment; the fact that the 120-chapter version of the novel has been enjoyed by readers for over 200 years amply attests to this. As Cheng and Gao had revised Cao's first 80 chapters when publishing the 120-chapter version, it is necessary to compare the 120-chapter version with the early editions of the novel, before Cao Xueqin's original work can be seen in its true light.

A Dream of Red Mansions charts the course of prosperity and decline of an aristocratic family. It is a tragedy of love and marriage. The hero of the novel is Jia Baoyu, a direct descendant of the Jia family of the Rong Mansion. An intelligent boy of excellent breeding, he is the heir of the Jia family. However, he has no inclination for the aristocratic way of life, which he finds hypocritical, hateful and corrupt. To him, pure beauty is to be found in young girls, including low-born servant girls. He says: "Girls are made of water, men of mud. I feel clean and

refreshed when I am with girls but find men dirty and stinking." Apart from the customary morning and evening salutation to his grandmother and parents, Jia Baoyu does his best to avoid taking part in the pastimes and activities of others of his station, and detests the pursuit of rank and wealth indulged in by other young gentlemen. His sole delight is mingling with the innocent and guileless young girls of the household in the Grand View Garden. He says to them: "In my own case, if I had any luck I should die now with all of you around me; still better if your tears for me were to become a great stream and float my corpse away to some quiet spot deserted even by crows or any other birds, to vanish with the wind, never again to be born as a human being. That's how I should like to die." By nature, Jia Baoyu has a deep aversion to feudal society. He is quite unmoved when his elders castigate him for his heretical inclinations and others consider him mad; on the contrary his rebellious nature becomes more ardent and firm under the impact of constant feudal oppression, culminating in his falling in love with Lin Daiyu and his marriage with Xue Baochai.

Marriage in feudal times was not based on love, but on considerations of family advantage. The Jias, although they have been a distinguished clan for generations, are in decline, not only economically — the income from their estates is no longer sufficient to support their lavish lifestyle — but more importantly, they are in decline morally and spiritually. Nowhere in the whole clan is mere a scion who gives them so much hope for their future prosperity as Jia Baoyu. In this situation, the Jias determine to marry him off to Xue Baochai, who comes from a noble and very

proper family. They see her as the very person not only to assist them with money but also to steer Baoyu back onto the road of feudal rectitude. The problem is that Baoyu does not love Xue Baochai, although she is an intelligent and beautiful girl, as her character is the opposite of his, being inclined to the ways of feudal orthodoxy. Baoyu has lost his heart to the frail Lin Daiyu, an orphan being brought up by her maternal grandmother, the matriarch of the household. Lin Daiyu manages to keep her self-respect in the midst of the grand and snobbish Jias, warding off slights and bullying with her candid and carping tongue. Her staunch, defiant character matches that of Baoyu well. The early period of the love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu has a childish naivete about it, but as they become more aware of their feelings their love ripens. However, as the fortunes of the Jia family worsen, the head of the household grows daily more anxious to correct Baoyu's waywardness so that the boy can restore the situation, hinting time and again that Baoyu and Baochai would make a perfect match and tightening the restrictions on Baoyu's freedom. The bonds of feudal oppression tighten around Baoyu and Daiyu. In this situation, Daiyu's health, always precarious, begins to fail rapidly. Eventually she dies of love and grief. Cao Xueqin's original intention was to have Baoyu marry Baochai immediately after Daiyu's death, only to find that he can not forget his sweetheart. He cannot live with Baochai, and finally leaves the family home. The "perfect match" turns into a tragedy.

Love Stories of talented young scholars and beautiful girls abounded in the Shunzhi and Kangxi reign periods, such as *The Cold Swallow of Pingshan* (*Ping Shan Leng*

Yan) and *The Story of the Soulmate* (*Hao Qiu Zhuan*). How does *A Dream of Red Mansions* differ from them? First of all, the author places the convoluted love and marriage plot in a realistic, complex and concrete social setting, which is not merely a stage and backdrop for the tragedy; the Jia family and its mansion also has an intimate connection with the birth, development and conclusion of this tragedy of love and marriage. The novel traces the roots of the emotional tragedy by means of describing the interactions between the love and marriage aspect of the plot and the social environment, including the mansion and its inhabitants. Secondly, Cao Xueqin treats the love affair between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu differently from the way such matters are treated in the traditional genre of novels featuring talented young scholars and beautiful girls. In the latter novels the characters are one-dimensional — the girls are invariably beautiful, intelligent and cultured, and the young men are invariably masters of poetry and other literary accomplishments, and are eager to gain fame. Moreover, even though literary talent is prominent in these novels, in the end it is the young men's winning rank and honor which is the key to his union in marriage with the girl of his heart. The love affair between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu is certainly not from this typecast mold. Baoyu is a talented person, but he scorns fame and fortune, and refuses to pursue an official position through the imperial examination system, resolutely rebuffing all — even intimates like Shi Xiangyun and Xue Baochai — when they urge him to be ambitious. In the eyes of most other people, Baoyu is a dullard. Of all the young ladies in the household, only Lin Daiyu understands him, sym-

pathizing with his straightforward nature, and his loathing of hypocrisy, affectation and worldly calculation. Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai are equally charming physically and intellectually, and Baoyu was attracted to both of them at first. In fact, for a while he clung to Xue Baochai, putting aside Lin Daiyu. But as he gains more experience of life, especially after he underwent the painful clash of feudal contradictions in his surroundings, the real objective of his love becomes clear, and he gradually distances himself from Xue Baochai, who has been urging him to adapt himself to the feudal mores, and he cleaves once more to his true soulmate Lin Daiyu. The foundation of their love is their mutual opposition to feudal thinking. The heroes and heroines of the other popular novels too have their struggles to exert control over their own lives, but their opposition is to the marriage conventions of the time, and certainly not to the basic principles of feudalism. In actual fact, the heroes of these novels are all paragons of what promising young men in feudal society were supposed to be like. There is in them no real opposition to the feudal system. They mostly excel in the imperial examinations, and when they do so their families become reconciled to their unconventional choices of marriage partners, and in the end harmony reigns. The love between Baoyu and Daiyu, on the other hand, represents a fundamental challenge to the interests of the feudal family. As an orphan, Lin Daiyu has no family connections who can help the Jia family financially; more importantly, she aids and abets Baoyu in his rebellion against feudal mores, leading him down a path that spells ruin for the family. So the Lady Dowager, the head of the Jia family, despite lov-