Dream of the Red Chamber

Dream of the Red Chamber is universally recognized as China’s greatest novel. Written primarily by Cao Xueqin (c. 1715–1764), this semi-autobiographical novel combines deep psychological insight with sharp social satire, all set in a Buddhist-Daoist mythological framework that emphasizes the futility of human desire, the impermanence of all things, and the complex interplay of illusion and reality.

Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹 c. 1715–1764) was born into a Chinese family of bond servants for the Manchu rulers. His great-grandfather, Cao Yin 曹寅, was a personal servant of Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (reigned 1662–1722), one of the highest officials of the land. However, early in Xueqin’s youth the emperor died, and his successor, the Yongzheng 雍正 emperor (reigned 1722–1736), turned against the Cao family, stripped its members of their official posts, and confiscated their wealth. The family fortunes took a brief turn upward after the death of the Yongzheng emperor but suffered another purge in 1739. From that time on Cao Xueqin lived in obscurity and poverty in Beijing, where he soon began working on his novel.

Creation of the Novel

Cao Xueqin had a few close friends who appreciated his gift for vivid description and imaginative writing, and he circulated chapter drafts to some of them as he wrote (the novel in its earliest version was called Story of the Stone). One of his relatives, who identified himself as “Red Ink-stone Studio” (Zhiyan zhai 脂砚斋), made extensive marginal comments on Cao’s manuscript, which Cao himself revised five times before he died in 1764, by which time he had completed at least eighty chapters. Almost three decades later, in 1792 Gao E 高鹗 and Cheng Weiyuan 程偉元 published the first printed version of the newly titled novel, Dream of the Red Chamber, 红楼梦 in 120 chapters. They claimed they had found a draft of the last forty chapters and had simply edited them into their final form. There has long been a controversy over the authorship of these last forty chapters, but since the late eighteenth century the 120-chapter version as published by Gao E has been the generally accepted version of the novel. The identity of Cao Xueqin as the novel’s principal author was established only in the twentieth century.

Jia Family: Prosperous but Precarious

Cao placed his novel in a mythological framework emphasizing the Buddhist message of the impermanence of all things, the dangers of emotional attachments, and the illusory nature of wealth and high rank. The story focuses on the large, prosperous, and prominent Jia 賈 family, whose high position is threatened because most of the men in the younger generation are wastrels with little or no chance to succeed in the all-important civil service examinations. The main protagonist of the story is a young boy who was
named Baoyu (Precious Jade 寶玉) for the precious jade stone found in his mouth when he was born (hence Cao’s original title). Baoyu is often chastised by his stern Confucian father, Jia Zheng 賈政, who desperately wants him to grow up, succeed in the examinations, and continue the family tradition of service in officialdom. Baoyu hates the insipid eight-legged essays (named after the rigid format of eight sections in parallel prose) required in the examinations, and he is literally sickened by the pressures placed on him to memorize the Confucian classics all for the sake of examination success and an official career. Most of the time he manages to avoid studying the classics because he is constantly indulged by his doting grandmother, the matriarch and dominant personality of the Jia family.

**Idyllic Life in Grand-View Garden**

Baoyu is an odd boy (most likely a self-portrait of the author) who much prefers the company of girls over boys, and he spends most of his time playing with his beautiful young female sisters and cousins and their many personal maids. When Baoyu’s eldest sister, Yuan Chun 元春, an imperial concubine, is allowed to visit her family for the one time in her adult life, the family builds a beautiful “Grand-View Garden” 大觀園—full of rocks, streams, trees, and pavilions—to welcome her. (This parallels events in the Cao family, who once built an elaborate garden to welcome the Kangxi emperor himself on one of his southern tours.) On her visit Yuan Chun urges Jia Zheng to let Baoyu and his sisters and female cousins make their home in the idyllic garden. Many chapters in the novel are devoted to lovingly detailed descriptions of the carefree lives of these young people in the garden, where they observe the beautiful changes of the seasons and entertain themselves with frivolous games, poetry, drama troupes, painting, embroidery, and the finest food and drink that money can buy.

**Tragic Love and Decline of the Jia Family Fortunes**

Over time the charmed lives of these young people are spoiled by the intrusions of cold reality. Baoyu falls in love with one of his cousins, Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 (Black Jade), who moves into his family compound after her mother dies. These two are portrayed as reincarnated divine beings whose love is predestined, but their love is tragic as they are not allowed to marry because Daiyu is judged by the senior women in the family to be too frail (she suffers from what appears to be tuberculosis) and too temperamental to be considered a good wife for Baoyu. Instead he is married to another beautiful cousin, Xue Baochai 薛寶釵 (Precious Clasp), who is much more robust and cheerful than the morose but talented Daiyu. The young maidsens and servants of the household meet their demises through disastrous arranged marriages, suicide, or even kidnapping.
Multilayered Complexity

While the romantic triangle of Baoyu and his two lovely cousins is a central theme of the novel, it by no means dominates the story, which includes over four hundred vividly drawn characters. No novel in the Chinese tradition portrays so many characters with such psychological depth and intimacy as Dream of the Red Chamber—servants are as lifelike and individualized as their masters. Dream of the Red Chamber is a paragon of philosophical ambition and multilayered complexity. The complexity begins with the language of the novel in which puns are ubiquitous and multiple meanings can be found on every page. Great tension exists between the Buddhist-Daoist framework of the novel, which emphasizes the illusory quality of sensory experience and emotional attachments, and the strong emotional commitment of the author to his characters and their loves, hopes, and vulnerabilities.

Interpretations and Significance

Dream of the Red Chamber has been variously read as: a stinging critique of Chinese society; the anti-Manchu cry of a Chinese patriot; a demonstration of the wisdom of the ancient Chinese classic divination text, The Book of Changes (I Ching 易經), as seen through the ceaseless cyclical alteration of opposites; a tribute to romantic love however tragic; a demonstration of Buddhist-Daoist awakening to the illusory nature of sensory experience and the dangers of emotional attachments; and a profound affirmation of the power of art to give shape and meaning to the chaos and disappointments of life that might otherwise end in despair and meaninglessness.

In the twenty-first century many critics have championed each of these views and more. No other Chinese novel has inspired half as much discussion and debate as Dream of the Red Chamber. The field of Red Studies or “Redology” (Hongxue 紅學) has spawned hundreds of books, thousands of articles, and even an encyclopedia devoted to the novel. As with Shakespeare in the English-speaking world, Proust in French literature, or The Tale of Genji in Japan, Dream of the Red Chamber has achieved an iconic status as the greatest and most illuminating work of fiction in all of Chinese culture.

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Further Reading