By Ann Waltner

Red Chamber Reflections

Minneapolis Institute of Art / Bridgeman Images

A family drama, meditative parable, and poetic masterpiece, Dream of the Red Chamber *has mesmerized generations of readers since its first appearance in 1754.*

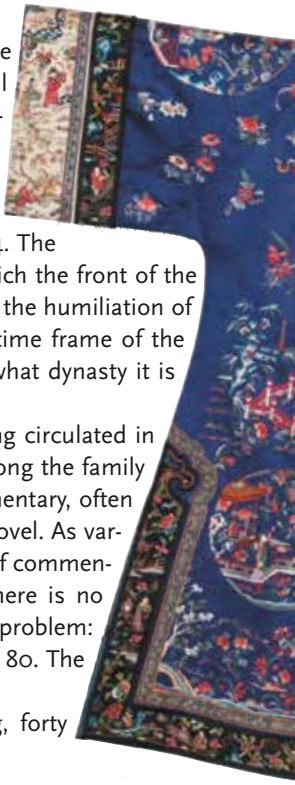
Imagine this: sometime around 1830 a young concubine named Zhou Qi, alone in her husband's study and feeling unwell, finds a manuscript of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* lying on his desk. She reads the novel with delight, noting with great pleasure that it described life's experiences from a woman's point of view in a way that she had seen in no other work of fiction. But some episodes did not quite satisfy her and so she wrote a series of poems about those selections. Her husband, Wang Xilian, published the poems and her short essay in his important 1832 edition of the novel. This vignette suggests ways in which reading *Dream of the Red Chamber* could be an active process; the novel provoked responses which might be read by future readers as part of the story. From the very beginning, it was a novel that asked to be tampered with.

Dream of the Red Chamber is a story of cosmic creation, of marriage choice, and of family decline, both financial and moral. It is a meditation on the nature of reality and illusion, of the interconnectedness of the dream state and the waking world. Thus the Monk begins the opera with the greeting, "Welcome to my dream."

Left: This Qing dynasty silk embroidery is a compendium of different scenes from Dream of the Red Chamber, *including depictions of young beauties fishing and the character Bao Yu flying a kite.*

The plot of the novel is prefigured by events which take place before the birth of two of the main characters. Jia Bao Yu is the incarnation of a stone and Lin Dai Yu is the incarnation of a flower. The stone captured water which nourished the flower. When Bao Yu and Dai Yu are incarnated as man and woman, she owes him a debt of tears to repay him for the water. She will have no happy ending.

The cosmic framing does not diminish the novel's interest in daily life, particularly the question of whom Bao Yu will marry. Bao Yu lives in an idyllic garden with Dai Yu, Xue Bao Chai, and assorted other female cousins and maids. Dai Yu is talented, lovely, sickly, and somewhat difficult. Bao Chai is talented, lovely, healthy, and sensible. The elders in the Jia family decide that Bao Yu is to marry Bao Chai, despite the fact that he has made clear that he wants to marry Dai Yu. They trick him into believing he is marrying Dai Yu; the trick marriage is a tragedy for all three of the people involved. By the time the marriage takes place, the Jia family is in dire straits. They are deeply in debt and in political trouble.



The novel is very much the product of Qing dynasty elite culture. Elite status in the Qing dynasty was conferred through success in the civil service examination system. Bao Yu's refusal to study for the examinations is one of the factors that foreshadows the decline of the family.

Ethnic tensions in the Qing were real but muted. The Qing rulers were Manchus, a group whose language, culture, and customs were quite different from those of the Han Chinese they conquered in 1644. The Qing conquerors forced all men to wear the queue, a hairstyle in which the front of the head was shaved and long hair in the back was worn in a braid. Thus the humiliation of subjugation was inscribed on men's bodies. The vagueness of the time frame of the novel—the novel announces to the reader that it will not tell us in what dynasty it is set—is perhaps one way of dealing with ethnic complexity.

Dream of the Red Chamber was first published in 1791, after having circulated in manuscript form since 1754. The manuscript circulated primarily among the family and friends of the author. Readers might return the novel with commentary, often written in the margins and sometimes even between the lines of the novel. As various versions of the text circulated, they accumulated layer after layer of commentary. The circulation of multiple manuscript versions means that there is no "original" version of the novel. And there is an even more serious problem: none of the extant versions of the manuscript extends beyond chapter 80. The novel apparently circulated for nearly forty years without an ending.

But the first published edition provided readers with an ending, forty chapters which had not been included in the earlier manuscript

versions. The preface to this edition tells us that a man named Cheng Weiyuan searched for missing bits of the novel everywhere "from antiquarian booksellers to piles of old discarded papers" and did indeed find drafts of much of the last forty chapters. That preface goes on to say that Gao E, the editor of the volume, simply edited and polished the found texts. Most scholars today dispute this version of events, and argue that Cheng and Gao E had a stronger hand in composing the final forty chapters than they admit. The uncertain status of the ending of the novel has served as an invitation to readers to imagine alternative endings. The Sheng/Hwang opera is based on the first eighty chapters of the novel: they, like countless others before them, have written an ending to the story which deviates from the Cheng/Gao version.

The first published edition of the novel begins with the statement "No one knows who is the author of this book." While it may seem odd that the name of the author became detached from the novel, fiction-writing was not a high-status occupation in eighteenth-century China. Very few authors gained fame, and even fewer gained fortune, by writing fiction. Cao Xueqin gained neither. He died in 1763 in poverty with no children who survived him. There was no one to see to the publication of the book, and no one even to remember that he was the author.

Yet the novel became a best seller almost immediately after its first publication. A contemporary commentator noted that almost every household in Beijing had a copy, which is certainly an exaggeration, but nonetheless suggests the popularity of the novel. Another observer noted that the ability to discuss the commentaries of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* was an essential skill for a person who aspired to be an engaging conversationalist. It was not just men who were readers of the novel. By the early nineteenth century, women of the elite in China were an important part of the reading and writing public and *Dream of the Red Chamber* was a significant part of their experience.

The commentaries were voluminous. By the late nineteenth century, scholarship on the novel began to be called "Hongxue"—which is conventionally, if somewhat awkwardly, translated as "Redology." Redology is still alive and well—several academic journals are devoted exclusively to the novel, and a number of lengthy television series produced in the last several years feature lectures on the novels by Redologists. Some early Redologists punctuated the text, and attempted to identify characters in the novel with real historical figures. Others connected the novel to the classics, particularly concentrating on issues such as the problem of desire. Still others concentrated on structural features, sometimes pointing out what we might call braided narratives—alternations of episodes featuring the masculine world with the world of women, of scenes of lustful depravity with scenes of discreet longing, of scenes of the poetic with the practical, of scenes of reality with illusion. Another strain of Redology prominent in the nineteenth century argued that the novel was about intrigues at the Qing court. Many Redologists believed that no detail was too small to investigate. As one such scholar put it: "Scattered

Left: On display at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, this silk-embroidered coat was created in the early twentieth century and depicts one of the pivotal scenes in Dream of the Red Chamber *in which the tragic female protagonist Dai Yu buries flower petals.* Gift of Merrill Randol Sherwin and Dr. Stephen A. Sherwin, 2014.2.

Below: Dream of the Red Chamber *has been adapted several times for cinema and television. In 2010, a new 50-episode TV series was made with Academy Award winner Tim Yip—who is the production designer for this opera—as its artistic consultant and costume designer.* Copyright Tim Yip/Tim Yip Studio

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Photo: *Carcassonne I*/RETNA. Cast, program, prices and schedule subject to change.

throughout the novel are a million undiscovered meanings. The rare good reader will find that understanding one detail leads indirectly to the perception of others that the reader had never thought of."

Interpretations of the novel changed in the twentieth century. Early twentieth-century commentators were particularly interested in exploring the nationalist—that is to say, the anti-Manchu—aspects of the novel, which is hardly surprising given the growing anti-Manchu sentiment prior to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911. These scholars argued that Bao Yu and Dai Yu represented Han Chinese and characters such as Bao Chai represented the Manchus. Thus the story was not a domestic tale, or even a metaphysical parable. It was a story about the potential—and perils—of national salvation.

With the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s came criticism of these earlier schools of Redology, and a desire for more "scientific" scholarship. In 1922, Hu Shi (1891–1962) demonstrated that the author of the first eighty chapters of *Dream of the Red Chamber* was Cao Xueqin. The rediscovery of the author was critical in terms of the interpretation of the novel. No sooner had Cao been established as author than autobiographical interpretations of the novel took precedence over other interpretations. Cao came from a once-great family of bannermen, ethnic Chinese who had a particularly close relationship to the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty. The Cao family suffered a catastrophic fall, mirrored in the fall of the house of Jia in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The Cao family had had an intimate relationship with the Kangxi Emperor, but fell afoul of his successor, the Yongzheng Emperor. Cao Xueqin was a boy when the family's fall took place, and the novel is tinged with nostalgia for a world gone by. The complicated relationship of the Cao family to the Qing emperor may in fact be the reason that the dynasty in which the novel takes place is never named, though numerous internal hints suggest that it is the Qing dynasty. Most scholars today agree that there are substantial autobiographical elements to the novel.

Political readings of the novel continued in the mid-twentieth century. Mao Zedong was on record as liking the novel, though his reading of it was that it was pri-

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Suggestions for further reading

David Hawkes and John Minford, *The Story of the Stone* (Penguin). This five-volume edition, published under one of its alternate titles, is the best translation of the novel. The translation is complete, including all of the poetry.

Wang Chi-chen, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Anchor). An abridged translation.

Andrew Schonenbaum and Tina Lu, *Approaches to Teaching The Story of the Stone (Dream of the Red Chamber)* (Modern Language Association). An excellent introduction to scholarship on the novel.

Anthony C.Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton University Press). A master scholar examines the novel.

Ellen Widmer, *Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Harvard East Asia Series). Shows how *Dream of the Red Chamber* was key in the experience of women readers in the nineteenth century.

Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (University of California Press). A terrific and vividly imagined book about a real-life Qing dynasty family of brilliant women.

First published in 1879, Honglou Meng Tuyong *is a series of woodblock prints of characters in the novel and with each image a poem about the character. The woodblock prints are based on paintings done by Gai Qi who died well before the book was published. The image here is of Princess Jia, accompanied by a poem by Zhou Qi.*

marily a condemnation of the ills of feudal society. In the mid-1950s, attacks began first on Yu Pingbo and then on Hu Shi for their interpretations of the novel, which in the eyes of some scholars (and later Mao himself) did not pay adequate attention to the issues of class struggle and the evils of feudal society. The attacks on Yu and Hu prefigured the anti-rightist campaign of the mid-1950s. Yu was persecuted during the campaign; Hu was largely spared because he had already taken up residence in the United States. Ironically, the political debates seem to have increased popularity of the novel. In the Mao years, the novel was hard, though not impossible, to come by. In more recent years, not only has publication of the novel flourished, but television series based on the novel have been immensely popular. The 1987 television series (36 episodes) has been rebroadcast 700 times. In 2010, a splendid new series was made with Tim Yip, who is production designer for this opera, as the artistic consultant and costume designer. (Both television series are available on youtube; the 1987 series is available with English subtitles.) The novel has never been apart from the world in which it was read, not in the eighteenth century and not today.

One of the ways we can appreciate the radical nature of the novel is to look at the sequels which were written to it. Dozens of them were written beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing until this day. Many of the sequels reflected a dissatisfaction with the ending of the 1791 edition of the novel. In many of the sequels, Dai Yu comes back to life, she is healthy, has a cheerful disposition, and is a good household manager. Bao Yu reconciles himself to life as an official. And the problem of which of the cousins Bao Yu should marry—Bao Chai or Dai Yu—is resolved by his marrying both of them, a solution which was perfectly acceptable in Qing society, but it is inconceivable in the context of the novel or the opera, in which neither woman would have played a secondary role as concubine. The sequels which tame the story of the novel, making Bao Yu into a suitable patriarch and Dai Yu into a suitable wife, show just how subversive the novel is.

This subversive aspect is one of the enduring sources of its appeal. That, combined with the problem of the ending, the vividness of the characters, the beauty of the language, and the metaphysical frame, make *Dream of the Red Chamber* a tale to be reread and retold. And a tale to be made into an opera in San Francisco.

Ann Waltner is professor of history at the University of Minnesota where she writes on gender and kinship in Chinese and world history. She has been an associate dean, director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Minnesota, and editor of the Journal of Asian Studies. *Waltner is the author of a free online course on* Dream of the Red Chamber, *accessible at* **z.umn.edu/redchamber**.