

Delving Deeper into *Dream of the Red Chamber*

With *Dream of the Red Chamber*, composer Bright Sheng and co-librettist David Henry Hwang have distilled the essential core of a 2,000-plus-page masterpiece of Chinese literature—arguably the single greatest work of the entire tradition—into two and a half hours of musical drama. The result is an enchanting new version of the tale in a new medium and language, an ambitious meld of a modern operatic idiom with eighteenth-century Chinese literary and cultural forms. This illustrated guide presents some cultural context to this quintessential story.

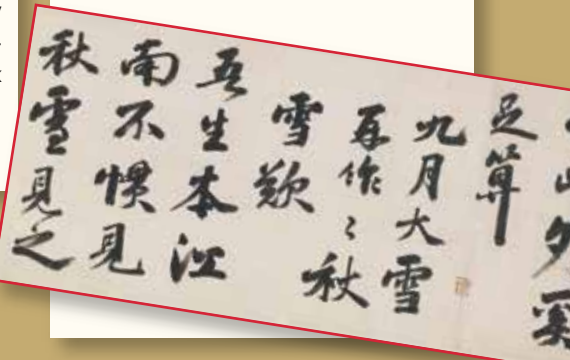


ZHONGGUO YANGLIUQING MUBAN NIANHUA JI

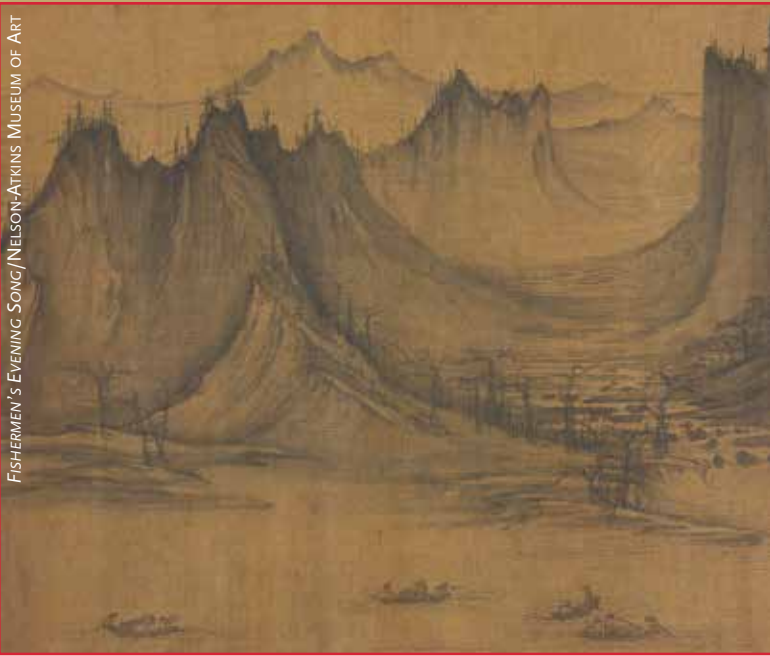
Lyric poetry Many of the young women of the story, including Bao Chai, are connoisseurs of the arts, and their witty repartee enlivens the garden parties and gatherings of the novel's central sections. The many allusions to these cultivated pursuits are what makes the novel such fascinating reading for students of Chinese culture. It is a treasure trove of ideas about aesthetics and especially of lyricism. In the novel, Bao Yu and Dai Yu share copies of two theatrical works famed for their exquisite arias on the theme of romantic love, *Peony Pavilion* and *Western Chamber*. The lovers recite their favorite lyrics from each of these works, which in turn awaken and quicken their love for each other.

Dai Yu is far and away the most accomplished poet among the many talented young women in the book. In both opera and novel, she helps Bao Yu polish a poem when his sister, Princess Jia, comes to visit their garden. Her poem on the theme of fallen flower petals is widely considered one of the most poignant in all of Chinese literature.

Buddhist concept of love The philosophical duality of love as both delusion and illumination is evident in both the book and opera. In important examples of the literature of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, love or *qing* takes on transcendental, even cosmic dimensions, as an instrument for gaining divine inspiration and, ultimately, self-knowledge by its devotees. Thus the two lovers, as the mythological flower and stone, take the plunge into the human world and through it seek to achieve genuine, experientially based insight. Yet the love story is also framed as the impossible pursuit of an enchanting illusion or, in Chinese, *huan*. As beautiful as Dai Yu and Bao Yu's love may be, in the Buddhist scheme of things, it is a mixed blessing. For those seeking enlightenment, love is a delusion that arises from attachment to worldliness, and, as the monk advises the flower and stone, must be forsaken.



Stephen Roddy is a professor of modern and classical languages at the University of San Francisco.



Baimiao Chinese novels generally tend to be filled to the brim with casts of miscellaneous, socially heterogeneous characters, even more so than in other similarly sprawling works like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. For obvious reasons, Bright Sheng and David Henry Hwang have excised the vast majority of these many secondary characters from the opera. Yet they remain faithful to the original story, particularly in how they convey the themes and events of this novel with elegant simplicity.

The co-authors have evoked the literary and artistic technique called *baimiao*. Meaning monochromatic, spare brushstrokes, this refined form of Chinese painting is meant to convey the mood or essence, rather than exhaustively depict a character or scene.

While employing the concept of *baimiao*, Sheng and Hwang have also developed certain literary and musical ideas from the original in new directions. The opera gives us three layers, or we might say three cornerstones, of the vast, labyrinthine edifice of this novel: first, its philosophical or allegorical frame; second, its political and social commentary; and third, the romantic triangle of the young heir to the Jia family, Bao Yu, and his two cousins, Lin Dai Yu and Xue Bao Chai.

Qin In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, music comes to symbolize and embody the ideal of harmonizing (*he*) or entente between friends or lovers, in the same way as the connection made between the musical performer and his or her audience. Among the various words for love used in the book, *zhiyin* or “the knowing listener” specifically refers to this notion—that is, music arising from the core of the player's inner being, which meets with full understanding from the discerning listener. This is how Bao Yu and Dai Yu often describe each other.

Dai Yu is a gifted player of the *qin* (or *guqin*), an ancient plucked zither consisting of a narrow box strung with seven silk strings. Believed to originate as early as the 14th or 15th centuries B.C., the *qin*—used both in ritual music and as an expressive solo instrument—was praised by no less than Confucius himself. For the opera, composer Bright Sheng incorporates the sounds of the *qin* in Act I, Scene 2 where Bao Yu observes Dai Yu playing the instrument in her chamber.

For these performances, the *qin* (pronounced ch'in) is played by Shanghai-born musician Zhao Yi. Her instrument was created by master craftsman Liqun Xiong of the Wu Xian Tang Qin Making Workshop in Yangzhou, China.



Chinese versus European opera Along with the European operatic tradition, the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* is also inspired by other traditional theatrical versions of the story, such as those of Peking (or Beijing) Opera, Kunqu, or Shaoxing Opera, particularly in terms of choreography, costumes, and set design.

How do these Chinese operatic genres compare with European opera? There is no easy answer, but production designer Tim Yip makes one important distinction, especially regarding sets. “Symbolism is a big part of Chinese traditional aesthetics. All you need are a few shapes and the audience can fill the rest of the scenery with their imagination,” says Yip. “Traditional Chinese opera contains formulas and guidelines in expressing emotions and actions; Western opera is based on creating quicker paced dramatic arcs. [For this production of *Dream of the Red Chamber*], rhythm is conveyed in the set and costumes, enhancing specific plot developments as emotions flare and then subside.”

