

Cáo Xuěqín

曹雪芹

1715–1763—Novelist; impoverished author of *The Story of the Stone*

Alternate names: formal name: Zhān 霑; personal sobriquet: Xuěqín 雪芹; style names: Qínǚ 芹圃, Qínxī jūshì 芹溪居士, Mèng Ruǎn 梦阮



Summary

Cao Xueqin was the author of *The Story of the Stone*, also known as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of China's greatest and best-known novels. Cao lived most of his life in poverty, and the work was left unfinished (in an 80-chapter version) upon his death. It was later edited into a 120-chapter version and published in printed form; several specialist journals and a series of conferences are currently dedicated to the unraveling of the novel's mysteries. Cao used his memories of growing up in one of China's notable families to create a masterpiece of fiction, in which realism and lyricism are uniquely combined. The novel is seen in some sense as a key to the entirety of Chinese culture.

Cao Xueqin is widely acknowledged to be the greatest writer of vernacular fiction in the history of Chinese

literature. His names in themselves tell a tale. His formal name (*míng* 名) was Zhān 霑 (probably signifying the “showering” on the Cao of Imperial Favor at the time of his birth). He is most often referred to by his humble personal “sobriquet,” Xueqin (Snow Cress, Cress-in-the-Snow). Among his other courtesy (*zì* 字) and style (*hào* 号) names were Qínǚ 芹圃 (Cress Garden), Qínxī jūshì 芹溪居士 (The Hermit of Cress Stream) and Mèng Ruǎn 梦阮 (Dreaming of [the poet] Ruan [Ji]). Cress is a humble little plant, and to “offer cress” (or the warmth of the sun) was to present a humble gift. This comes in an old story from the Daoist (Taoist) *Book of Master Lie* 列子: a peasant, believing the very ordinary plants around him—beans, nettles, cress—to be wonders, presented them as gifts to the local gentry (who were, needless to say, unimpressed). The image of this humble plant peeping out from beneath the snow is a poignant one, and an apt metaphor for this hidden

genius, about whose life we in fact know so little. There are apocryphal tales of Cao using the cress growing near his cottage to concoct remedies for his neighbors, when he lived in the hills to the west of Beijing. All of his names (and what we can deduce from them) help us to begin forming a picture of this obscure impoverished genius.

The Story of the Stone

By contrast with the author's personal obscurity, his great semi-autobiographical novel, *The Story of the Stone* 石头记 (hereafter *Stone*), or as it is more popularly known in China, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (or *Dream of the Red Chamber*) 红楼梦, is a monumental work known to every Chinese reader of literature. It was written in the middle decades of the eighteenth century and marks a high point in the long evolution of the Chinese art of fiction. It takes that art a long way from its jejune beginnings in the epic retellings of history of the Míng 明 dynasty (1368–1644), and equally far from the light sentimental romances that had proliferated in the early Manchu-ruled Qīng 清 dynasty (1644–1911/1912). *Stone* introduced a deep note of introspection and lyricism into fiction. This quality has never been matched since, though the work has been widely imitated and studied, and has spawned countless sequels. Its encyclopedic scope, its detailed recreation of the many-faceted daily culture of a traditional Manchu/Chinese aristocratic family, its inspired exploration of many of the

perennial philosophical and existential issues at the heart of Chinese culture, and its extraordinarily convincing and memorable depiction of human personality and of sentiment, have made it a much loved and debated work.

It has always been at the center of controversy, fascinating readers often to the point of obsession. In China, *Hóngxué* 红学, "Redology" or *Stone* Studies, has become a quasi-discipline in its own right, with several specialist journals and a constant stream of conferences dedicated to the unraveling of its mysteries. *Stone* arouses unusual passion in its readers. Old gentlemen have come to blows over the merits of the protagonist Jiǎ Bǎoyù's 贾宝玉 two female cousins, Lín Dàiyù 林黛玉, and Xuē Bǎochāi 薛宝钗, while prominent public figures—including in more recent times Chairman *Máo Zédōng 毛泽东 (1893–1976) and his last wife, *Jiāng Qīng 江青 (1914–1991)—have willingly involved themselves in the never-ending search for the book's "meaning," even elevating it to the status of a classic in the annals of class struggle, or using it ruthlessly as a tool in political campaigns. It has a special status within the Chinese literary canon, an almost talismanic power. It is seen in some sense as a key to the entirety of Chinese culture. It has, over the past hundred years, been translated into many languages, with two integral English versions appearing

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.



almost simultaneously in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from Beijing and London.

The Author's Family Background

Cao Xueqin was most probably born in 1715, into an illustrious Han-Chinese family that had from the 1620s enjoyed the peculiar status of “bondservants” (*bāoyī* 包衣, from the Manchu *booi*) to the Manchu conquerors, and had subsequently become part of the Imperial Household (Nèiwùfǔ 内务府), attached to the Imperial Plain White Banner. The Eight Banners (*bāqí* 八旗) were the military units into which the Manchus and their allies were administratively divided, each Banner “consisting of so many companies of fighting men together with their families and dependents and having its own landholdings and investments” (Hawkes 1979, 25; Spence 1966, 7–11). In other words, the Caos, though ethnically Chinese, once they had submitted to the Manchus and become their “slaves,” became culturally “honorary” Manchus. The women did not bind their feet, for example. They wore elaborate Manchu-style head-dresses and hair ornaments. They performed the Manchu-style salute, dropping to one knee. This is as true of the Caos as it is of the Jia family in *Stone*. Most of Cao Xueqin’s real-life friends were Manchu aristocrats. This cultural ambiguity placed Cao and his family in a special position, and may indeed have

inspired him with a vision of Chinese culture that was at one and the same time that of an “insider” and an “outsider.” This ambivalence lies at the heart of *Stone*.

Cao’s grandfather, Cáo Yín 曹寅 (1658–1712), was a wealthy official who held at various dates important posts in the Textile Administration at Nanjing and Suzhou, and was a close confidant of *Emperor Kāngxī 康熙 (1654–1722; r. 1661–1722). His mother, née Sun, had been the emperor’s wet-nurse, which would account for the special relationship between the two men. Cao Yín was able to provide the emperor with confidential information on many important matters, thus fulfilling the role that would under the previous Ming dynasty have been performed by the powerful (and often corrupt) corps of court eunuchs. He also hosted the emperor himself on several occasions during imperial tours of the south. Cao Yín was an important figure in the transitional period of the Manchu conquest. He was a “Manchu of the Manchus, he could ride and shoot with the best. Yet at the same time he was steeped in native Chinese culture” (Hawkes 1979, 1:28). He was entrusted during his lifetime with several important literary projects, including the compiling and printing of the monumental (and still indispensable) *Complete Poems of the Tang Dynasty* 全唐詩, and the production of the huge dictionary of phrases, *Pèiwén yùnfǔ* 佩文韻府.

Cao Yín became friendly with some of the leading literary figures of his day. In this respect he played a key role in the

integration of the Manchus into the literary elite of China. His circle included the brilliant young Manchu poet, Nàlán Xìngdé 納蘭性德 (1655–1685), son of the powerful courtier Míngjū 明珠 (1635–1708), of the great Nara clan, as well as the prominent poets Zhū Yízūn 朱彝尊 (1629–1709), Chén Wéisōng 陳維崧 (1626–1682), and Yóu Tóng 尤侗 (1618–1704). And when not engaged in his literary salon, he enjoyed partaking in the more muscular activities of his Manchu nobleman friends. For him, as the scholar and official Hán Tǎn 韓菼 (1637–1704) wrote, “the reading of books and the hunting of game were not things in natural opposition” (Spence, 66).

The Old Dream of Nanking

Although Cao Xueqin was born a few years after his grandfather died, he grew into his teens while the family fortunes were still unchanged. His adolescence was spent in highly cultured surroundings, in the company not only of literature and art, and of writers and artists, but also of all the accoutrements of high Chinese culture—the exquisite furnishings, clothes, and jewelry, and performances of music and drama—in a grand family establishment with all its servants, daily rituals, and elaborate paraphernalia. This enabled the impressionable youth to absorb the richness of his cultural heritage, and prepared him for the great novelistic task that destiny seemed to have allotted him. It should be noted that all of this, Cao Xueqin’s



Modern painting of Cao Xueqin.

entire life, unfolded before the incursions of Western powers had a chance to puncture the hermetically perfect Chinese universe. Apart from one or two imported clocks and other knickknacks, Cao’s world was in no way impinged upon by the West. He had not read Shakespeare or Dante, Virgil or Rabelais. His novel was part of the last great flowering of autochthonous Manchu and Chinese culture.

There is a continuing debate as to who Cao Xueqin’s father was. The ongoing controversy is ably summarized by the scholar Chen Weizhao, who covers



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publications as far as the first decade of the twenty-first century (2005, 190–196, 342–373, 657–695). Cao Yin's only son, Cáo Yǒng 曹颀, inherited his father's position (and serious debts) in 1712, when he was only nineteen years old. He died three years later, and the aging Emperor Kangxi gave exceptional permission for his cousin, Cáo Fǔ 曹頌, to be adopted posthumously as Cao Yin's son, thereby keeping the lucrative post of textile commissioner in the family. It is not certain which of these two gentlemen was the father of Cao Xueqin. On the whole, Cao Fu seems the most likely candidate.

Although Cao Xueqin himself spent the first twelve or thirteen years of his life living in Nanjing, enjoying the luxury of life in a wealthy southern family, things changed drastically in early 1728, when, during the early years of a lengthy and wide-reaching political power struggle and purge, the Cao family fell foul of Emperor Kangxi's fourth son and successor, Yīnzhēn 胤禛, *Emperor Yǒngzhèng 雍正 (reigned 1722–1735). Cao Fu was dismissed from his post. The emperor may have suspected the Caos of sympathizing with one of his rivals in the struggle for succession. The entire family was purged, and all their substantial property in Nanjing confiscated.

Cao Xueqin's Life in the North

Cao Xueqin, who was by now a teenager, followed members of his family

north to the capital, Beijing, where they still had a few houses and retainers. He lived there in relative poverty for the rest of his life. Information on the last three decades of his life is extremely scant. When the prominent writer and scholar of fiction *Lǚ Xùn 鲁迅 (1881–1936) lectured on the history of Chinese fiction in Beijing in the early 1920s (the lectures were subsequently rewritten as his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* 中国小说史略), he presented the brief facts as they were then generally accepted. It had actually been *Hú Shì 胡适 (1891–1962) who had established these facts, in his pioneer 1922 “Study of the Red Chamber Dream” 红楼梦考证, with which he prefaced the new edition of *Stone* published by the Yadong Book Company in Shanghai. His essay was a case study in the application of his empirical method, just as for him, and the populist May Fourth Movement 五四运动 in general, *Stone* was a case study in the literary use of the vernacular, *báihuà* 白话. Ironically Hu Shi's essay was based on earlier (and greatly neglected) Bannerman (*qírén* 旗人) sources such as Yáng Zhōngxī's 杨钟羲 (1865–1940) multi-volumed *Snow Bridge Poetry Talks* 雪桥诗话. Hu even visited Yang in Shanghai to locate the original poetic texts quoted in *Snow Bridge Talks*, only to be told that they had disappeared during the collapse of the Qing with the Xinhai revolution of 1911. It was only later that other editions turned up and were reprinted.



Fact and Fiction

While we have abundant historical sources for his grandfather Cao Yin, despite almost a century of intensive research, we really know little more today than we did then about his grandson Cao Xueqin. The world certainly knows a lot less about Cao Xueqin than it does about William Shakespeare, that other literary genius whose life continues to produce more questions than answers. It is one of the many ironies about *Stone* that while the novel contains an infinite amount of detail about the

“fictional” recreation of the author’s life and family, for his “real” life we are left with little more than tantalizing fragments and anecdotes. The temptation to use the novel as a basis for the life (to reconstruct truth from fiction) is a dangerous one, and one that has proved irresistible for many Chinese *Stone*-scholars. The most famous example of this tendency is the writer Zhou Ruchang, who died in May 2012, and whose many excursions into Cao Xueqin biography are marred by his reliance on material taken from the novel, on hearsay, and on sheer fantasy. It is so easy to confuse



Posters of young actresses who participate in a competition to win a role as one of the main characters in a television adaptation of *Dream of Red Mansion*. Image taken in *Daguan yuan* (Great View Park) in Beijing, modeled after the garden featured in the novel. Photo by Marjolijn Kaiser.



fiction and reality, especially since the novel itself deliberately sets out to do so, proclaiming that truth and fiction are but two sides of the same coin. In the words of the couplet on the gateway into the Land of Illusion, first glimpsed in the first chapter: “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true / Real becomes not real when the unreal’s real” (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:55). We must nonetheless be wary of extracting biographical fact from fiction. Jia Baoyu, for example, the novel’s young protagonist, is almost certainly a composite creation and not a strict self-portrait of the author.

It is possible, however, to make certain useful observations about the author on the basis of the novel. For example, in the second chapter, a minor character, Jiǎ Yǔcūn 贾雨村, produces a long list of the personalities in Chinese history who represent individualism or personal rebellion against society. The list includes Ruǎn Jí 阮籍 (210–263 CE), a member of that merry and thoroughly hedonistic neo-Daoist band known as “The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” 竹林七贤. As we have already seen, Cao Xueqin “named” himself after Ruan, he “dreamt of Ruan.” Ruan was a famous drinker and player of the *qin*, a zither-like string instrument (characteristics shared by Cao). Cao’s friends also compared him to another of the Seven Sages, Liú Líng 刘伶 (c. 225–280 CE), renowned for his drinking and for his penchant for wandering around stark naked. Liu, when reproached for sitting naked in the middle of his

room, famously replied (as recounted in chapter twenty-three of Liu Yiqing’s *New Account of Tales of the World* 世说新语): “Heaven and Earth are my pillars and roof, my house provides me with trousers and jacket. Gentlemen, what are you doing in my trousers?” From these little details, we can see something of how the author (and his friends) saw himself within the Chinese tradition. In a broader sense, this attitude (sometimes a pose) was shared by many of his contemporary aristocrats, men who were, as the British sinologist and translator Arthur Waley has pointed out in his brilliant life of the poet *Yuán Méi 袁枚 (1716–1797), always anxious to present to the public a persona as harmless eccentrics, in the prevailing political climate of purges and inquisitions (Waley 1956, 187).

David Hawkes, translator of the first eighty chapters in the Penguin Classics version, gives a sober assessment of the “facts,” stating boldly: “Of his childhood and early maturity we know virtually nothing” (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:22). Once Cao Xueqin reached the north, after the family’s misfortunes, he may have taught for a while in the Imperial Clan school, in a minor capacity. He may, like other impoverished Bannermen, have been receiving a tiny monthly allowance. He may have taught for a short while as a private tutor or schoolmaster. It is also possible that he may have sat for some examination at the age of about forty with a view to obtaining some sort of government employment.



But these are all conjectures based on the interpretation of cryptic allusions in the verses of his friends (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:23–24).

He probably died on 12 February 1763, on the eve of the Chinese New Year. His death is said to have been largely brought on by the death of his infant (and only) son a few months earlier. He was survived by his second wife.

Cao's Friends: Portrait of the Man

The only real source for Cao Xueqin's life during the latter Beijing period (his maturity), the period during which he wrote *Stone*, consists of a small number of poems written by his young Manchu friends Dūn Mǐn 敦敏 (1728–post 1796) and Dūn Chéng 敦诚 (1734–1792), both members of the Imperial Aisin Gioro clan, directly descended from the Manchu founder Nurhaci's twelfth son, Ājìgé 阿济格 (1605–1651). Another poet-friend of Xueqin's was the Chinese Bannerman Zhāng Yíquán 张宜泉 (dates uncertain). All of their poems are conveniently reprinted in Yisu's *Hónglóumèng juàn* 红楼梦卷 (Materials on *The Story of the Stone*). The poems they addressed to their friend, or wrote about him, do not provide much in the way of facts; but they draw a vivid picture of their friend, a consistent character sketch of a charming, charismatic and much loved man, obsessively preoccupied with his "old dream" of the south and

with the book he was writing about it. His memories of his youth were vivid, and were often made the more so by the copious amounts of alcohol that he imbibed. Frequently the Dun brothers refer to his love of (and serious need for) "southern wine" (i.e., Shaoxing rice wine).

Dun Cheng, in a long preface to one of his poems, writes of meeting Xueqin at his brother Dun Min's villa. "It was a rainy day, and windy, and the morning was biting cold. My brother Min was out, and Xueqin was in serious need of a drink. So I pawned my sword for wine. Xueqin was overjoyed, and wrote a long poem to thank me for it!" Later, in the poem itself, Dun Cheng writes of Xueqin "bursting out in joyful laughter, tapping on a stone and rapping out a high-spirited poem . . ." (quoted in Yisu 1965, 1–2). This little vignette gives us a vivid picture of the man, and of the lifestyle of Xueqin and his aristocratic Manchu friends. Concerning Cao's abilities as poet and painter, the Dun brothers leave us with a few suggestive comments. His verse had a "weird" quality, like that of the ghost-haunted Tang poet Lǐ Hè 李贺 (790–816 CE). From his novel, we can see his extraordinary versatility with all the various genres of Chinese verse, and his delight in the writing of it. His painting, again according to the Dun brothers, was the ideal vehicle for his romantic notions, inspired as he was by the hills and streams outside his door, and by the flowers and birds he saw in front of his



home. He also played the seven-stringed *qin* with skill.

Dun Min wrote a short poem to be inscribed on one of the “rock” paintings that Cao specialized in, from which we can visualize the bold expressionistic style in which he painted:

Proud bones such as yours the
world finds rare;
These are the crags of a true
eccentric.
You wield your brush like a roof
beam, propelled by wine;
From out your bosom pour
rugged rocks.
(Quoted in Yisu 1965, 6–7)

In another poem, Dun Min writes of going to visit Cao, but finding his friend not at home. It is a simple quatrain in a traditional vein, telling us virtually nothing in the way of facts, but evoking nonetheless the timeless world of mind and sentiment that these friends inhabited.

Deep lies the wild stream neath
frozen clouds;
The wicker gate is shrouded in a
thin evening mist.
In the mountain village no one is
seen;
The sun sets in the cool of
evening.
(Yisu 1965, 7)

We know from the poems that Cao was proud and poor. In the last years of his life, he lived in a cottage on the western outskirts of Beijing, his family reduced to eating porridge, while he went on buying wine on credit, gazing wistfully each day out at the Western Hills, feeding (body and soul) on the sunset clouds, dreaming all the while of his old family home in the south, its pavilions now deserted, its halls crumbling away. His surroundings, however wretched, could not dampen his spirits, could not destroy his memories, or hold back his inspiration.

Cao wrote of himself and of the genesis of his novel:

Having made an utter failure of my life, I found myself one day, in the midst of my poverty and wretchedness, thinking about the female companions of my youth. . . . There and then I resolved to make a record of all the recollections of those days that I could muster—those golden days when I dressed in silk and ate delicately, when we still nestled in the protecting shadow of the Ancestors and Heaven still smiled on us. . . . However unsightly my own shortcomings might be, I must not, for the sake of keeping them hid, allow those wonderful girls to pass into oblivion without a memorial. . . . Reminders of my



poverty were all about me: the thatched roof, the wicker lattices, the crockery stove. But these did not need to be an impediment to the workings of the imagination.

(Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:xx)

Cao rose above these unpromising material conditions. He was a man of “unbridled mind; he rode with the white clouds” In 1761 Dun Min wrote:

By emerald streams and dark-green hills winds the path,
To the ivy-covered gate in the iridescent haze.

His quest for poetry has taken him to lodge with the monk;
To pay the wine-shop bill, he sells his paintings.

In the markets of Beijing his proud songs tell of his sorrows;
His tattered dream of Nanjing recalls the splendor of past days.

New grief and old pain in abundance,
A proud drunken melancholy . . .

(Yisu 1965, 7)

Several times his friends describe him as a lively talker, a man whose wit and personality lit up the company he was in. He would talk loftily, while “searching for lice.” Yù Ruì 裕瑞 (1771–1836), a later Manchu with family connections to the Caos, has given us a

description handed down in his family:

He was stocky, with a broad head and a swarthy complexion, a gifted talker, and a great hand at games. Wherever he went he brought spring into the room! People would never tire of listening to him talk and tell stories. That is why his novel is so marvelous! He once said that if anyone wanted to read his book, all they had to do was buy him some southern rice wine, and a roast duck, and he would gladly make an exchange! (Yisu 1965, 14)

Cao Xueqin, the player of games, and Cao the storyteller: both are borne out by his novel, with its detailed accounts of games, and its beguiling storytelling style.

There is a painting that has survived, purporting to be of Cao Xueqin. It is reproduced in Wu Shichang’s 1961 study. It shows Cao, to quote David Hawkes,

reclining on the ground in the midst of a bamboo grove through which a fast-running stream is flowing. He is leaning on a large rock, and his *qin* (that adjunct of cultured ease as indispensable to the Chinese gentleman as was the lute to his Renaissance counterpart) is lying on another rock a yard or two away with a cloth-wrapped



bundle of scrolls beside it. . . . It is a large, fat, swarthy, rather heavy face. The eyebrows are high, far apart and downward-sloping, like a clown's. The eyes are tiny, humorous and twinkling. There is a large, spreading, bulbous, drinker's nose, a Fu Manchu moustache and a large, rather fleshy mouth. It is an ugly face, but kindly and humorous. (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:22)

The Writing of *The Story of the Stone*

Cao's great, though unfinished, achievement was his novel *Hónglómèng* 红楼梦 (translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, by David Hawkes and John Minford under its other title *Shítóujì* 石头记 as *The Story of the Stone*). This masterpiece was written while he was living in poverty in Beijing, first in the city and later in a village west of the city. The novel circulated for many years in unfinished form, with hand-transcribed copies fetching a high price. Cao seemed to have great difficulty finishing or letting go of his life's work. "Given a revision to do, he would procrastinate, work on another part, change a previous section to accommodate his original text, go on a drinking binge, lend out or lose a chunk of the manuscript, forget the names of his characters, insert some entirely new material,

drop the whole project, and freeze up" (Levy 1999, 100).

Red Inkstone and Other Commentators

Many of the early incomplete transcriptions have been discovered over the past hundred years, and several of them have been reproduced in facsimile form. What make them especially interesting are the hand-written annotations by the author's family and friends, who use a variety of interesting pen-names or pseudonyms (Red Inkstone, Old Crock, etc.). Scholars are widely divided in their identifications of these commentators. Zhou Ruchang, for example, continues to believe that Red Inkstone was a woman. One thing is certain: all of them were familiar with the family history on which the book was based. Writing the novel seems to have become a family business. In addition to the insight they give into the novel itself, some of these scraps and jottings help us to piece together a little more of the story of Cao's life.

For example, in chapter 21 of the novel (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:420) there is a scene involving Baoyu with the maid Number Four:

All that day Baoyu stayed in his room, seeing no one . . .

Red Inkstone: Yet another of these useless, pestilential little creatures! All his life the author has suffered from his susceptibility to this kind of female. The



commentator has suffered all his life too from the same weakness. Other people derive pleasure from encountering such characters in their reading, but I, because of the harm they have done me in real life, derive only pain. The susceptible author is extremely grateful for the comment! (Chan 1986, 421–422)

In chapter 2 (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:73):

“Last time I was in Jinling,” said Yucun, “I passed by their two houses one day. . . . Even the rocks and trees of the gardens at the back. . . .”

Red Inkstone: “Why ‘at the back’? Why didn’t you say ‘to the west?’”

Author: “Because, my dear sir, I was afraid that the word ‘west’ would make you cry!” (Adapted from Chan 1986, 45)

The commentators sometimes comment tearfully on the author’s death, and lament the fact that he had left his great work unfinished:

Chapter 75:

Poems for the Mid Autumn are still missing. Waiting for Xueqin [to supply them].

Chapter 22:

The rest of this has got torn off and lost. Awaiting replacement.

Odd Tablet, 1767 [four years after Cao Xueqin’s death]: Alas! Xueqin died without being able to finish this chapter!

Chapter 1:

Pages full of idle words

Penned with hot and bitter tears . . .

Only one who understood the secret message of this book could have the hot and bitter tears with which to finish it. Xueqin ran out of tears, and departed this life on the last day of the year *renwu* [12 February 1763] leaving this book unfinished. I have wept so much for Xueqin that I fear I shall soon run out of tears myself. I often wish I could find that Green Sickness Peak, and ask Brother Stone about his story. What a pity there is no scabby-headed monk to take me there! If only the Creator would produce another Xueqin and another Red Inkstone to complete this book, how happy the two of us would be, down there together in the World of Shades! Written in tears, eighth month of the year *jiashen* [1764].

Chapter 22 (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:434):

Red Inkstone: Delightfully imagined and beautifully written! I am sure this really happened.



Odd Tablet: There must be few of us still left who can recall the incident which is the subject of Red Inkstone's comment. A painful thought! Last time I read through this passage I wrote "There must be few of us left who can recall this incident." Since then, in only a few years, Xueqin, Red Inkstone and Almond have all successively passed on, leaving—summer 1767—this Old Crock as the sole survivor! A painful thought indeed! (Chan 1986, 432)

The novel was finally printed for general sale in early 1792, without any of the family commentaries, in a 120-chapter version edited by another Bannerman, Gāo È 高鹗 (c. 1740–1815) and his friend Chéng Wěiyuán 程伟元 (d. 1818). Gao and Cheng may have been working on fragments of Cao's ending. It is in this "completed" guise that the book is most commonly read today.

The Achievement

It is hard to sum up the achievement of this great novel, and therefore of this great artist, in a few words. It is written in such beautiful Chinese, a perfect record of the eighteenth-century educated vernacular—so much so that the eminent twentieth-century linguist Wáng Lì 王力 in his *Grammar of Modern Chinese*, *Xiàndài Hànyǔ yǔfǎ* 现代汉语语法, takes every one of his examples from *Stone*. Its

scope is so large, its aspirations so vast and awe-inspiring. It makes such a deep impact on its readers. And yet its message is far from easy to paraphrase. It tells the tale of a Magical Stone and its incarnation into a wealthy family, where through personal experience of the Red Dust (*kànpò hóngchén* 看破红尘) that "real" world of human love and suffering, and of the accompanying disenchantment of the human condition, the Stone Incarnate (Jia Baoyu) ultimately attains enlightenment. It is, as David Hawkes has written, an "unfinished novel written and rewritten by a great artist with his very lifeblood" (Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:46). Cao Xueqin wrote in the very first chapter:

Pages full of idle words

Penned with hot and bitter tears:

All men call the author fool,

None his secret message hears.

(Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:51)

The "secret message" continues to work its spell, to enchant readers. It has to do not only with love ("its main theme was love; it consisted quite simply of a true record of real events" [Cao and Gao 1973–1986, 1:51]), but with life itself, with the very nature of reality and illusion. It reaches back to the great Daoist classic *The Book of Zhuangzi* 庄子 (another individual "author" whose biography would be difficult to write; as Steve Coutinho writes in his biography of Zhuangzi starting on



page 149 of this dictionary, “Nevertheless, even if the anecdotal information is inaccurate, indeed even if ‘Zhuangzi’ were to turn out to be a fictitious character, there is still much we can learn about the historical, textual, and social context, and the narrative and philosophical significance of the historical personage as traditionally understood”). In Daoist manner, *Stone* plays with the notion of dream as the ambivalent fabric of both life and illusion, a fabric woven of both truth and fiction. It treats throughout its pages of the nature of passion and desire. It is a story that tries to tell the truth. It is “fiction that does not falsify” (Yu 1997, 267). Anthony Yu, in his penetrating study of the novel, quotes its concluding words, a quatrain whose author may have been either Cao Xueqin or Gao E:

When grief for fiction’s idle words
More real than human life appears,
Reflect that life itself’s a dream
And do not mock the reader’s tears.

(Cao and Gao 1973–1986, vol. 5, 376)

“Not to mock the reader’s tears,” comments Yu, “is to avow both the potency and illusion of fiction, and that is great pity and wisdom, indeed!” (Yu 1997, 151).

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Further Reading

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