

A Guide to Reading

Story of the Stone/Dream of the Red Chamber

(based on the translation by David Hawkes [Penguin Books, 1973])

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Introduction

The Story of the Stone (Shítóuji 石头记, better known as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Hónglóumèng 红楼梦) is universally considered the greatest of the “Four Great Classical Novels” (Sìdà míngzhù 四大名著) of traditional Chinese literature. It was written by Cáo Xuěqín 曹雪芹 in the 17th century and its dramatic setting is the same era. The complicated narrative, with many subplots, chronicles the gradual decline of the fictional Jia family. Although, when the novel begins, the Jias are immensely wealthy and distinguished, the problem is that, “They are not able to turn out good sons.... The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next” (74). The novel centers on the Rong-guo wing of the family, whose eldest surviving son is Jiǎ Bǎo-yù (贾宝玉), a bright and kind-hearted but unambitious adolescent. Early in the novel, he meets his cousin, Lín Dàiyǔ (林黛玉), who is beautiful and brilliant, but also prim and touchy. The two will fall in love, but in Chapter 1 we learn that Bao-yu is the incarnation of a supernatural stone, while Daiyu is the incarnation of a magical flower, and that the two must learn a lesson through “the tears shed during the whole of a mortal lifetime” (53). The lesson is the danger of “attachment” (even a seemingly good attachment like romantic love).

One of the difficulties confronting an English-speaking reader of the novel is keeping straight the large number of Chinese names. Note that the translator has provided you with several tools that you should make frequent use of: (1) a guide to the characters found in volume 1 (beginning on p. 535), and (2) several genealogical charts, beginning on p. 541. In addition, the translator has used the convention of *translating* the names of servants (the maids and pages), and only *Romanizing* the names of family members. For example, Bao-yu’s primary maid is Aroma and his primary page is Tealeaf, while Dai-yu’s primary maid is Nightingale. In the following summary of the first few

chapters, the names of the most important characters (which you should memorize) are in **boldface**.

Chapter 1

A magical stone (that was left over when Nü Wa rebuilt the Heavens) waters a flower, Crimson Pearl, with his dew, turning her into a fairy.¹ She wishes to repay him for this kindness but cannot do so in their current form, so a pair of immortals, Buddhist monk and a Taoist (Daoist) priest, arrange to have them reincarnated as humans. The magic stone will become **Jia Bao-yu** while the flower-fairy will become **Lin Dai-yu**.

In a dream, an aged scholar, Zhen Shi-yin, runs into the monk and priest and questions them. When he awakens, the same monk and priest attempt to take his baby daughter from him, warning him that she is an “ill-fated creature who is destined to involve both her parents in her own misfortune” (55). But Shi-yin refuses to hand her over.

Shi-yin befriends an impoverished young scholar in the neighborhood, Jia Yu-cun, and gives him the money to travel to the capital to take the civil service examination (a pathway to power and lucrative government positions). After Jia Yu-cun leaves, Shi-yin’s daughter is kidnapped, and his house burns down. He and his wife are forced to eke out a living as farmers, until Shi-yin achieves enlightenment after an encounter with the Taoist immortal, and himself becomes a Taoist wanderer.²

Chapter 2

Jia Yu-cun passes the examination and gets an official appointment, but then is fired for corruption. He goes to work as a tutor to **Lin Dai-yu**, the daughter and only child of an important official. Dai-yu’s mother dies, and while she is mourning Yu-cun has plenty of free time.

Yu-cun runs into an old friend, and the two of them discuss distant relatives of Yu-cun, the wealthy Jia family of the capital. We learn that the family has two wings,

¹ Nü Wa and her husband Fu Xi are the Eve and Adam of Chinese myth. Supposedly, the Heavens began to collapse, and Nü Wa made bricks and repaired them. The fact that the novel opens with the story of Nü Wa (and does not mention Fu Xi) reflects the strong female characters in the narrative.

² The story of Zhen Shi-yin is a micro-parallel of the whole novel. Shi-yin is also very important in the narrative for at least two other reasons, one of which it took me several readings to figure out.

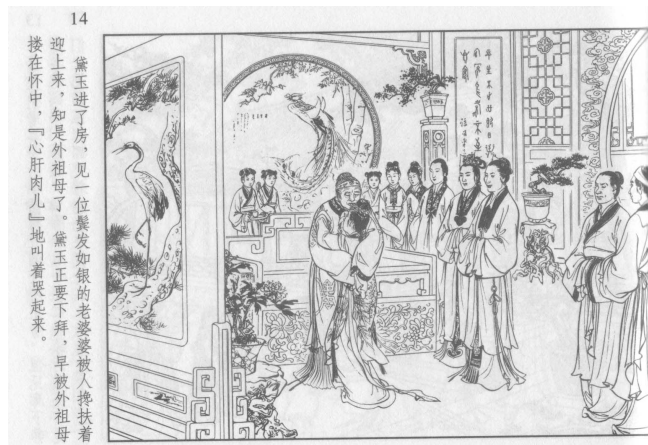
Rong-guo and Ning-guo (descended from two illustrious ancestors), which live in sprawling compounds across the street from each other. “Both masters and servants” in these households, “all lead lives of luxury and magnificence” (73-74). The oldest surviving son in the new generation of the Rong-guo wing of the family is a boy who was born with a jade stone in his mouth. As a result, he was named **Bao-yu** (“Precious Jade”). Jia Yu-cun presents an elaborate theory about the cause of his peculiarities of character.

Chapter 3

Since **Lin Dai-yu**’s mother has recently passed away and she has no siblings, her grandmother, **Grandmother Jia (Lady Jia)**, invites her to come live with Dai-yu’s cousins in the Rong-guo mansion. Dai-yu’s father encourages her to go and asks Jia Yu-cun to accompany her, saying that he will write him a letter of introduction to his brother-in-law, **Jia Zheng**, asking him to help Yu-cun get an official position. (Jia Zheng is also Grandmother Jia’s son.)

When Dai-yu arrives at the Rong-guo mansion, she is greeted by Grandmother Jia, who introduces her to her aunts and her cousins. Her relatives notice that “although she was still young, her speech and manner already showed unusual refinement. They also noticed the frail body which seemed scarcely strong enough to bear the weight of its clothes, but which yet had an inexpressible grace about it...” (90).

Lin Dai-yu Meets Grandmother Jia, from a Recent Manga Version of the Novel:



Soon after that, Dai-yu’s aunt, **Wang Xi-feng**, makes a dramatic entrance. She is dressed in the finest clothes and is said to have “a slender form, / seductive grace; / the ever-smiling summer face / of hidden thunders showed no trace; / the ever-bubbling laughter started / almost before the lips were parted” (91).

Dai-yu is taken to meet her uncles, Jia She and Jia Zheng, but they are both unavailable. She does see her Aunt Wang (Lady Wang) again, who warns Dai-yu about her son (**Bao-yu**), “I have a little monster of a son who tyrannizes over all the rest of this household” (97). Dai-yu realizes that this must be her “boy cousin who was born with a piece of jade in his mouth and who was exceptionally wild and naughty. He hated study and liked to spend all his time in the women’s apartments with the girls; but because Grandmother Jia doted on him so much, no one ever dared to correct him” (97-98).

Dai-yu has dinner with Grandmother Jia, who afterwards asks her about her reading habits. Dai-yu states matter-of-factly that she is studying the *Four Books*.³ They are soon interrupted by the arrival of **Bao-yu**. Dai-yu and Bao-yu feel that they have met each other before (which they have, but not in this lifetime). Bao-yu becomes upset when he discovers that Dai-yu does not have a special jade like his, but Grandmother Jia calms him down.

Lin Dai-yu and Jia Bao-yu from a Popular 1987 Chinese TV Adaptation of the Novel:



That night, Dai-yu blames herself for upsetting Bao-yu, but Bao-yu’s maid, **Aroma**, explains that it is not her fault, because his moods and behavior are often unpredictable. Aroma is a bright young woman who “had a certain dogged streak in her nature” that made her “exclusively and single-mindedly devoted to Bao-yu” (106).

³ The *Four Books* (*Great Learning*, *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Mean*) are what Bao-yu and other boys are supposed to be studying to prepare for the civil service examinations. Girls normally do not study them, even in upper-class households.

Chapter 4

Jia Yu-cun is now a county magistrate, and is hearing the case of a man who was murdered over the purchase of a servant-girl. Yu-cun is about to issue a warrant for the murderer's arrest, but he is warned not to by his usher, who informs Yu-cun that the murderer is Xue Pan, a nephew of his benefactor, **Sir Zheng**. (Yu-cun also learns from the usher that the servant-girl, Caltrop, is actually Ying-lian, the daughter of Zhen Shi-yin, who was kidnapped as a child.) Yu-cun sees to it that the family of the murder victim is paid off, while Xue Pan travels to the capital.

Xue Pan becomes a guest at the Rong-guo mansion with his widowed mother (Aunt Xue), his sister, **Xue Bao-chai**, and the servant girl (Caltrop). Whereas Xue Pan is debauched, cruel, and stupid, his sister Xue Bao-chai is “a girl of flawless looks and great natural refinement,” who “had been taught to read and write and construe – all of which she did ten times better than her oafish brother” (118). However, when her father died, “she laid aside her books and devoted herself to needlework and housewifely duties in order to take some of the burden off her mother's shoulders” (118). **Xue Bao-chai** ends up forming the third side of a love-triangle with **Bao-yu** and **Dai-yu**. Bao-chai is the “good girl” whom Bao-yu loves like a sister and “ought to” marry; Dai-yu is the unconventional girl he will fall in love with.

If you can remember the names in boldface above, you will have gone a long way to following the primary storyline of the novel. However, many lesser characters (like Grannie Liu) and subplots (like Jia Rui's attempt to seduce Wang Xi-feng) are very interesting and revealing, so don't gloss over them.

Famous Expressions from This Novel

瘦死的骆驼比马大: A starving camel is still bigger than a horse.

假作真时真亦假: Truth is fiction when fiction becomes true.