



The Dream of the Red Chamber (Selection)

Cao Xueqin, David Hawkes (Translator)

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The Dream of the Red Chamber (Selection) Details

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From Reader Review The Dream of the Red Chamber (Selection) for online ebook

Clancy says

This is a strange little dream of a book, weirdly suited to my flu delirium.

Robert Sheppard says

WHAT EVERY EDUCATED CITIZEN OF THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
THE GREAT CLASSICAL NOVELS OF CHINA---"THE DREAM OF RED MANSIONS" BY CAO XUEQIN, "THE JOURNEY TO THE WEST" BY WU CHENGEN, "THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS" by LUO GUANZHONG, "THE WATER MARGIN or ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS" by SHI NAI'AN, "THE SCHOLARS" BY WU JINGZI, AND THE EROTIC CLASSIC "THE JIN PING MEI" OR "GOLDEN LOTUS"---FROM THE WORLD LITERATURE FORUM RECOMMENDED CLASSICS AND MASTERPIECES SERIES VIA GOODREADS—ROBERT SHEPPARD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Chinese culture is renowned for its addiction to compiling "Lists of the Greats," from the Four Great Inventions of China (Paper, the Compass, Printing and Gunpowder) to the Four Great Beautiful Women (Yang Guifei, Xi Shi, Yang Jiaojun and Diaochan) to the Three Great Tang Dynasty Poets (Li Bai (Li Po), Du Fu and Wang Wei) to the Four Great Novels of Chinese Literature. Thus every educated Chinese person was expected to have read, or at least to have thoroughly read about, The Four Great Novels: The Qing Dynasty Classic the Hong Lou Meng, or "The Dream of Red Mansions" by Cao Xueqin, the Xi You Ji, or "Journey to the West" by Wu Chengen featuring the fabulous Monkey-King Sun Wukong, the great historical epic "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by Luo Guanzhong, and the classic "Robin Hood" tale of gallant outlaws "Shui Hu Zhuan," or "The Water Margin" by Shi Nai'an.

Chinese scholars generally added two additional novels as an "Apocrypha" to this "Canonic Prose Bible" of The Four Great Novels, which officially you shouldn't have read (like the Marquis de Sade or Lady Chatterly's Lover in the West), but which if you were a real intellectual you definitely should have: The erotic classic the Jin Ping Mei, or "The Golden Lotus" which was excluded from inclusion in the canon because of its sexual, immoral and pornographic content, despite its admitted literary excellence, and the "Ru Lin Wai Shi," or "The Scholars," by Wu Jingzi, also downgraded from classical status due to its bohemian counter-cultural satire on and rejection of traditional Confucian scholars and examination-passing officials as mindless conformists and intellectual ciphers.

In the not so remote past, education centered on learning the cultural tradition of one's own nation was assumed to be an adequate foundation for functional adulthood and citizenship. Thus Chinese scholars concentrated on the Confucian heritage and with little effort given to understanding other civilizations and traditions, Christians were content with the Bible and their own national classics and Islamic nations were happy if one could recite the Koran by heart. In today's cosmopolitan globalized world of transnational business and the Internet familiarity with one's own national history, national culture and literature is no longer an adequate preparation for adult life in the globalized real world.

Thus each educated person in the modern world must have a basic familiarity with World Literature in addition to his own national or regional literature, accompanied of course with a basic knowledge of World History, World Religions, World Philosophy and universal science. With the increasing importance of a "Rising China" in world affairs and culture it is thus incumbent on every educated person in the world to have some basic familiarity with these six classics of Chinese Literature. Thus World Literature Forum in this "Recommended Classics and Masterpieces of World Literature Series" provides the following very basic introduction to these works, perhaps in a globalized version of E.D. Hirsch's "What Every American Should Know" reformulated as: "What Every Citizen of the World Should Know in the 21st Century."

THE IMMORTAL SAGA OF FAMILY DECLINE AND SPIRITUAL FATE, "HONG LOU MENG," OR "A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS"

The theme and saga of family decline is a universal motif in World Literature, embracing such classics as Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks," the English "Forsyth Saga" of Gallsworthy, "Brideshead Revisited" by Evelyn Waugh, and "One Hundred Years of Solitude" by Gabriel García Márquez. The Dream of Red Mansions is one of the great exemplars of this genre, movingly telling the tale of the decline of the Jia family, laced with Buddhist spiritual fore-fated melancholy, from success and influence in the Qing Dynasty Imperial Court, through demise, weakening of character, disaster and their fall into relative obscurity.

Scholars and popular readers have agreed that the "Dream of the Red Chamber" (also variously entitled A Dream of Red Chambers or The Story of the Stone) is the greatest Chinese novel, though differences of opinion have developed as to the exact nature of its greatness since its publication. Indeed, in China there is a whole virtual branch of knowledge or cottage industry which is known as "Red-ology" in the interpretation of the work, about which a similar amount of criticism has been written as comparable with that of Shakespeare criticism in England or Goethe criticism in Germany.

The Dream of the Red Mansion also serves as a veritable encyclopedia of imperial Chinese society and culture in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) introducing over four hundred characters hailing from all walks of life and social classes with intricate subplots and detailed descriptions of buildings, gardens, furniture, cuisine, medicines, clothing, poetry, etiquette, games performances and pastimes of the aristocracy and others. The novel has semi-autobiographical features as the author Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) also came from a declining family, successful in the early Qing Dynasty, but reduced in fortune and circumstances until the author died in relative poverty and obscurity while completing his immortal epic in Beijing.

Reduced to its most central characters, the story focuses on a young man of the Jia family, Jia Baoyu, coming of age surrounded by female cousins and slightly effeminate and romantic in his temperament, who falls in love with but cannot marry Lin Daiyu, a "poor relation" cousin who has a spiritual beauty that accompanies her declining health. His "Golden Days" are spent cavorting with these cousins and friends in aristocratic pleasures and cultivated pastimes such as writing poetry couplets to each other, watching Chinese Opera performances, and frolicing in the Pleasure Garden of the family estate. As the years go by, Jia Baoyu, protected and spoiled by his doting grandmother, interminably procrastinates in pursuing the twin adult responsibilities urged on him by his parents: His stern Confucian father urges on him the duty of studying hard, passing the Imperial Examination, becoming a court bureaucrat and restoring the family's declining material fortunes; His mother urges that he find an appropriate match as a wife from a successful aristocratic family that can extend and enhance the waning power and wealth of the extended family. Instead, Baoyu

dallies in adolescent games and pleasures, sexual experimentation and petty intrigues, holding on to the "splendor in the grass" of the family Pleasure Garden, and feels that his love-bond with his poor cousin, the ailing Lin Daiyu is spiritually fated, which it proves to be to the unhealthy detriment of all.

The immense novel also operates powerfully on a symbolic spiritual level with the opening chapter, from which the alternative title "The Story of the Stone" derives, literally containing the entire novel condensed into symbolic form. Following ancient Chinese Taoist and Buddhist myth, a stone rejected by a goddess who was repairing the sky is picked up by a Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest and taken to the world of the mortals, to be found eons later by another Daoist with the story of its worldly forefated experience inscribed upon it. Unfit for the pure unadulterated life and condition of heaven, the stone is forefated to suffer birth and death in mortal life below, yet also tragically retains alloyed within itself the divine substance of heaven. Before the stone enters upon mortal life and destiny, however, it, like the "Little Prince" of Exuperay, tenderly waters with sweet dew a lovely flower not of this world, who in turn incurs a karmic debt towards the stone, which must be repaid in the mortal world of human life. The story of the stone is thus the inscribed fate of the stone written on itself, suspended somehow ever-insecurely, as of all human endeavor, somewhere between heaven and earth, but also becoming in reiteration or reincarnation the story and destiny of Jia Baoyu as an individual human mortal, who like the Biblical "sheep gone astray" of Isiah's Suffering Servant passage, or the miscast ploughman's seed, finds another more existential and singular destiny, fatedly unhappy in this world's material context. Thus we learn in the novel that Jai Baoyu was born with a jade stone in his mouth, trailing as it were Wordsworthian "clouds of glory" in his birth, and from thence relives the story of the stone in his ill-fated mortal life, while his beloved Lin Daiyu, a reincarnation of the beautiful other-worldly flower loved and watered by the stone in heaven, pays her karmic debt to the stone in her undying yet ill-fated love and devotion for Jia Baoyu in this world. Meanwhile, as each of the characters works out their spiritual destinies, the Jia family declines further and further in its worldly fortunes.

THE "JOURNEY TO THE WEST," OR "XI YOU JI" AND THE MONKEY-KING

Perhaps the most beloved novel by all Chinese people, from children to adults, is the immortal "Journey to the West" of Wu Chengen, which tells the story of the pilgrimage of the Buddhist Monk Xuanzong to India to obtain and translate Holy Buddhist Scriptures, aided by the magical Monkey-King, Sun Wu Kong, a lovable "Pigsy" or Zhu Bajie character endowed with gargantuan physical strength and appetites, and a down-to-earth and practical monk "Sandy" or Sha Hesheng. In the long narrative of their adventures they repeatedly are assaulted en route by demons and evil forces plotting to defeat the Tang Monk's spiritual mission, but which are always defeated by the combination of talents and forces of the pilgrim brotherhood, led by the rebellious and precocious genius and magical powers of the Monkey King, a figure derived from the earlier character Hanuman in the Indian Ramayana. As both the Journey to the West and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms have already been treated in greater depth in other blog entries in this series I will not go into great depth in their description.

THE "ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS" OF LUO GUANZHONG

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms tells the historically true story of the wars and struggles between the

three kingdoms, Wei, Shu and Wu, which arose between 169 AD and 280 AD when the Han Dynasty Empire, comparable in scope and population to the contemporaneous Roman Empire, broke apart before again achieving reunification. As a novel loosely based on real history but treated with artistic license, like Dumas's "Three Musketeers" saga it tells the story of the "Iron Brotherhood" of devoted friends and heroes Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who swear their "one for all and all for one" oath of allegiance to restore the Han Dynasty in the famous Oath of the Peach Garden, also vowing to protect the oppressed. They are opposed by the arch-Machiavellian dictator Cao Cao, whom they must defeat, but are aided by the genius general Zhuge Liang. The story of their struggle, ultimately successful but not before their deaths, has become as familiar to all Chinese, Japanese and Korean persons as the stories of Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra are in the West.

"THE WATER MARGIN" OR "ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS" CLASSIC OF OUTLAW GALLANTRY AND ADVENTURE---SONG JIANG THE "CHINESE ROBIN HOOD"

The 14th Century classic "The Water Margin" (Shui Hu Zhuan), also known as "Outlaws of the Marsh" as translated by American expatriate Sydney Shapiro, and "All Men Are Brothers" as translated by the first female American Nobel Prize Winner Pearl Buck, is written in vernacular Chinese and attributed to the writer Shi Nai'an. The "Robin Hood-esque" story, set in the Song Dynasty, tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gather at Mount Liang (or Liangshan Marsh) to form a sizable army of adventurous outlaws before they are eventually granted amnesty by the government and sent on campaigns to resist foreign invaders and suppress other rebel forces. As such it depicts many of the contradictions in feudal Chinese society, based on repression and exploitation of the mass peasantry by a corrupt and oppressive landed aristocracy and imperial bureaucracy, which generated, repressed and often co-opted its opponents. The novel focuses on the exploits of the outlaw Song Jiang and his thirty-six sworn brothers and their heroic adventures, reminiscent of the tales of "Robin Hood" of Sherwood Forest in the West.

THE CHINESE EROTIC CLASSIC "JIN PING MEI" OR "THE GOLDEN LOTUS"

The "Jin Ping Mei" or "The Golden Lotus," is a Chinese naturalistic novel composed in vernacular Chinese during the late Ming Dynasty by an unknown anonymous author taking the pseudonym "Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng," or "The Scoffing Scholar of Lanling." circulated first in surreptitious handwritten copies then printed for the first time in 1610.

Its graphically explicit depiction of sexuality has garnered the novel a level of notoriety in the Chinese world akin to "Fanny Hill," "Lady Chatterley's Lover" or the Marquis de Sade in Western literature, but critics nonetheless generally find a firm moral structure which exacts moralistic retribution for the sexual libertinism of the central characters.

The Jin Ping Mei takes its name from the three central female characters — Pan Jinlian (Golden Lotus), Li

Ping'er (Little Vase), a concubine of Ximen Qing, and Pang Chunmei (Spring plum), a young maid who rises to power within the family of the decadent libertine Ximen Qing. Princeton University Press in describing the Roy translation calls the novel "a landmark in the development of the narrative art form----not only from a specifically Chinese perspective but in a world-historical context.....noted for its surprisingly modern technique" and "with the possible exception of The Tale of Genji (1010) and Don Quixote (1605, 1615), there is no earlier work of prose fiction of equal sophistication in world literature."

The Jin Ping Mei is framed as a spin off from the classical novel "The Water Margin." The beginning chapter is based on an episode in which "Tiger Slayer" Wu Song avenges the murder of his older brother by brutally killing his brother's former wife and murderer, Pan Jinlian. The story, ostensibly set during the years 1111–27 during the Northern Song Dynasty, centers on Ximen Qing, a corrupt social climber, libertine and lustful merchant who is wealthy enough to marry a consort of six wives and concubines. After secretly murdering Pan Jinlian's husband, Ximen Qing takes her as one of his wives. The story follows the domestic sexual struggles of the women within his household as they clamor for prestige and influence amidst the gradual decline of the Ximen clan. In the Jin Ping Mei, anti-hero Ximen Qing in the end dies from an overdose of aphrodisiacs administered by Jinlian to which he has become addicted and dependent in order to keep up his sexual potency. In the course of the novel, Ximen has 19 sexual partners, including his 6 wives and mistresses, with 72 intimately described sexual episodes, a level of erotic repetition reminiscent of the works of the Marquis de Sade and Henry Miller, in "Nexus," "Sexus" and "Plexus." Needless to say, the Jin Ping Mei through most of history was severely repressed by the puritanical Confucian authorities as criminal pornography, though its libertine anti-hero Ximen Qing receives full poetical justice and punishment for his crimes. Even today mention of its name, like de Sade in the West, will bring a blush of embarrassed shame to most Chinese cheeks, young and old.

THE SCHOLARS, OR "RU LIN WAI SHI" BY WU JINGZI

"The Scholars" written in 1750 by Wu Jingzi during the Qing Dynasty describes and often satirizes Chinese scholars in a vernacular Chinese idiom. The first and last chapters portray intellectual recluses, but most of the loosely-connected stories that form the bulk of the novel are didactic and satiric stories, on the one hand admiring idealistic Confucian behavior, but on the other ridiculing over-ambitious scholars and criticizing the civil service examination system, describing the officials and orthodox scholars who succeed in the system as mindless conformists and intellectual ciphers whose knowledge rarely exceeds the "Cliff Notes" and cram course exam fakery of the times, exemplified by the rote mechanical guidebooks to the "Eight-Legged Essay" for the Imperial Examination.

Instead, the novel honors the somewhat bohemian and counter-cultural intellectual circles on the fringe of official society frequented by actors, poets, artists, bibliophiles and the true scholars of the heart who despise the official poseurs and consequently lead insecure lives and suffer financial decline. Promoting naturalistic attitudes over belief in the supernatural, the author rejects the popular belief in retribution: his bad characters suffer no punishment. The characters in these stories are intellectuals, perhaps based on the author's friends and contemporaries. Wu also portrays women sympathetically: the chief character Du treats his wife as a companion and soulmate instead of as an inferior. Although it is a satiric and counter-cultural novel, a major incident in the novel is Du's attempt to renovate his family's ancestral temple, suggesting the author shared

with Du a belief in the importance of a true and authentic Confucianism as opposed to the poseur Confucianism of the ruling bureaucratic class.

SPIRITUS MUNDI AND THE CHINESE NOVEL

My own work, *Spiritus Mundi*, the contemporary epic of social idealists struggling to save the world and avert WWIII with a revolutionary new United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, also draws on Chinese tradition. Over a third of the novel takes place in China and the novel was written entirely in Beijing. One of the main characters of the mythic portion of the novel is the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, who along with Goethe guides the protagonists on a Quest to the center of the earth and to the black hole at the center of the Milky Way Galaxy to save the world from a conspiracy to bring about WWIII. In China I knew Sydney Shapiro, the translator of "The Outlaws of the Marsh" and also worked with the daughter of Gladys Yang, the translator of the "Dream of the Red Mansion."

World Literature Forum invites you to check out the great Chinese novelists of World Literature, and also the contemporary epic novel *Spiritus Mundi*, by Robert Sheppard. For a fuller discussion of the concept of World Literature you are invited to look into the extended discussion in the new book *Spiritus Mundi*, by Robert Sheppard, one of the principal themes of which is the emergence and evolution of World Literature:

For Discussions on World Literature and n Literary Criticism in *Spiritus Mundi*:
<http://worldliteratureandliterarycrit...>

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Spiritus Mundi, Book II: The Romance <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CGM8BZG>

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Ann says

Another book that's probably great, but the edition was poor.

Paul Bard says

Well, it's clearly a great work of imaginative genius.

But the complexity of names is also way more baffling than Tolstoy's War and Peace or Grossman's Time and Fate. I wish we had a simple way of transliterating the names distinctly!

Anyway, it was an entertaining read. The poetry was surprisingly good in translation too.

Obvious deserves its classic status, but I do not think I will read the whole thing because of the sheer number and difficulty of the names.

"But your kind of lust is different. That blind, defenceless love with which nature has filled your being is what we call here 'lust of the mind'. 'Lust of the mind' cannot be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning. Either you know what it means or your (sic) don't."

So says Disillusionment. I'm reminded of Manon Lescault or Adolphe here; that romantic figure. Ironic then that they all would have been written at the same time a world away!

On a personal note, it is a pleasure to be reading fiction again.

Ebookwormy1 says

#11 Best Sellers of all time, estimated 100 million copies sold

At over 2500 pages spread over 5 volumes, Hawkes English translation of this Chinese classic, titled Story of the Stone, is considered the gold standard. But it's a lot. Twice as long as War & Peace, but, I am told, just as epic.

In the event that you aren't ready to make that commitment, but want a taste of this work, Chi-Chin Wang's abridgment, at some 300+ pages will give you just a taste. Hawkes also has a selection book at just under 100 pages, but that feels too short.

For more information on why the Dream of the Red Chamber is cherished in China, but largely unknown in the West, see
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

I WANT to read this, but when to get the time? I think I could get through this short form quite easily, but I'd really rather conquer the long form to get the entire experience.

Want to read #10 best seller of all time? See

And Then there were None/ Ten Little Indians, Christie, 1939

Augustus says

Only 81 pages.

A mish-mash of things - songs, poems, fantasy, school antics. Not interesting, sadly.

Jacqueline says

long, beautiful, historical, romance and one great Chinese literature piece

Frank says

I love these lil' Penguin books. I'm pretty sure that I'm just going to take the taste of this 250 year old Chinese novel and just move along. Very surprising humorous approach though...who know? If this resonates, maybe I'll actually give it a shot.

And half a lifetime's anxious schemes
Proved no more than the stuff of dreams.

Andrew says

Most underwhelmed.

I appreciate this is a couple of excerpts which didn't relate to one another, but it read like a list, with no magic whatsoever to commend it.

I shall not, however, hold it against the greater work, which I still intend to read - and get to know the Jia clan in all their petty awfulness, or grand magnanimity. There are two versions to tackle: The Dream of the Red Chamber [1760], by Tuttle; or the 5-volume Penguin Classics series of The Story Of The Stone, starting with The Golden Days. Hmm...
