

# Gazing into the remembrance and repentance in the Red Chamber



In the shining crown that is the history of Chinese literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is undoubtedly the brightest gem. The author Cao Xueqin's depths of thoughts and culture, as well as the artistic achievements of his fiction writing, have attracted the devoted attention of numerous readers, commentators and researchers. Since its inception more than two hundred years ago, we have continued to dig out the self-realized implicit or explicit profound meanings buried deep in the novel. As Lu Xun said, different minds will see different faces in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, whether love, sex, Taoism or romance, or a cultural nationalism that favors the Han Chinese and excludes the Manchu. In the present era where everyone has the right to speak, a thousand readers will have a thousand different versions of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

However, do readers have the absolute right to interpret the novel? When we look into the

depths of this gem and see the essence of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is there still a central theme that supported and assisted the author to finish the hundreds of thousands of words during his "ten years of extraordinary hard work" and walk through his "tearful and sorrowful" journey of creation? In her book *A Grand View of The Red Chamber (General Introduction)*, Professor Li-Chuan Ou of the Department of Chinese Literature of National Taiwan University points out that the unavoidable common problems in the hundreds of years of Redology [a field of study devoted to *Dream of the Red Chamber*] were caused by our excess self-consciousness: "self-satisfaction projected in the vision of the general public." Readers do have the right to speak of history, but if they uphold the understanding that "the past and the present share unequivocally the same context," they will easily fall into the trap of "all Six Classics are my footnotes," and reading the classics will also translate into the readers' pursuit of self-positioning. They will adopt an attitude of "taking things for granted" about a world with which they have never been in contact, resulting in a misunderstanding of the distance created by self-awareness and the gap in time.

Therefore, the first introduction to *A Grand View of The Red Chamber* takes the form of a re-reading and understanding of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Professor Ou returns to the

times and social class of the author, and sets the tone of the book to be "remembrance and repentance." *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a remembrance of the author Cao Xueqin about his past experiences, but it is also, in the moment when everything has decayed, his sadness and repentance about the glory of the past.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* is the narrative of a woman's tragic destiny, but it is also Cao Xueqin's silhouette of the fate of his family collapse. The two tragedies are combined into one, and they reinforce each other and thus form scenes of "Qinhuai and Yangzhou are old dreams, but the people remain and have long awakened from the dreams." They are sighs and remembrances of changes in phases, and endings. This deep pain is from the destruction of a family, but it is also from the passing of youthful years, and it can be further applied from a family to the entire world. In this repeated reasoning, it brings forth a beautiful but inevitable disillusionment of the cosmos.

The author was remembering the "past" and lamenting fate. Instead of the traditional Redology discourse that takes this as criticism of the feudal aristocracy, Professor Ou believes that writing about aristocracy, which has been regarded as ironic and extravagant in the past, is in fact the beautiful memories that the author had used his whole life to write into the novel. The collapse

of paradise in *Dream of the Red Chamber* was truly built on the exclusive spiritual nobility of the true aristocracy.

Cao Xueqin had no intention of going against imperial power and ethical rituals. On a spiritual level, Cao Xueqin highly agreed with his own social class, and among the hearts of commentators who were in the same cultural circle, such as Zhiyanzhai, they also were deeply proud of their own class culture. The most basic of these is the name “Daguanyuan [Grand View Garden]” that the “Daguan [Grand View]” is a manifestation of the Confucian culture. Among the traditional culture of the elite, especially among the upper class that shared in imperial power, the Confucian culture had long been deeply rooted in its genes and souls, constructed as the basic understanding of the universe, and its ultimate concern was the practice of imperial power, which was to “have a grand view of the whole world.” Therefore, the descriptions of the collapse of paradise and the “end of the world” in the novel came from the contrast between the spirits of the true “aristocracy” and their unworthy

descendants. For the so-called aristocracy, in addition to their high level of financial and material enjoyment, they also needed to have character and cultivation that far exceeded those of the common people. Having received a poor education and undergone spiritual degradation, the unworthy descendants could no longer support the huge and heavy responsibility and outer shell. This was also the beginning and ending of the collapse of a century-old family, and it was also the basic tone of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a literary work of remembrance and repentance.

Therefore, the elegy written by the author is not just about the weakness of a transcendental “human” who cannot retain his youth during the flow of the cosmos, but it was also Cao Xueqin’s self-repentance about emphasizing individualism so much as to disengage from collective responsibility and unable to continue the family line and carry on the family mission. This painful projection is manifested in Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of the entire novel. Only gazing through this character on the fate of his dying family, a work of remem-

brance that is out of this world can be truly shown.

In an era and class system very different from today’s world, the feudal and ethical code itself probably had a meaning that may be completely different from our modern understanding, and the readers must be faced with the test of accepting and respecting an alien culture. Through “A Grand View of The Red Chamber,” Professor Ou hopes to advocate this new understanding of the main theme of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and this is an important message she wishes to convey to the many readers who enjoy *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

#### Reference

Li-chuan Ou. (2014). *A Grand View of the Red Chamber Dream: General Introduction*. 大觀紅樓（綜論卷）. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

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## The Ancient Greek concept of justice

In Greek mythology, the goddess Dikē (Justice) is a daughter of Zeus and Themis. She has two sisters, Eunomia and Eirene, and together they are called the Horae and embody order and harmony. Since modern times, the physical embod-

iment of Justice has had three main characteristics: a sword in her right hand, scales in her left hand, and a blindfold over her eyes, representing her fairness in judgement. Contemporary concepts of justice, including judicial justice, procedural justice,

distributive justice, and rectified justice, are all rooted in ancient Greek political and ethical philosophy. As a virtue, justice is closely related to the idea of order and harmony in ancient Greece. To understand justice, this book therefore returns to “the original