



The Dream of the Red Chamber

Cao Xueqin

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The Dream of the Red Chamber Cao Xueqin

Cao Xueqin (Chinese: ???; (1715 or 1724 – 1763 or 1764) was a Chinese writer during the Qing dynasty. He is best known as the author of Dream of the Red Chamber, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

Cao was born to a Han Chinese clan that was brought into personal service (as booi aha or bondservants) to the Manchu royalty in the late 1610s. His ancestors distinguished themselves through military service in the Plain White Branch (????) of the Eight Banners and subsequently held posts as officials which brought both prestige and wealth.

During the Kangxi Emperor's reign, the clan's prestige and power reached its height. Cao's grandfather, Cao Yin (??), was a childhood playmate to Kangxi while Cao Yin's mother, Lady Sun (??), was Kangxi's wet nurse. Two years after his ascension, Kangxi appointed Cao's great-grandfather, Cao Xi (??), as the Commissioner of Imperial Textiles (??) in Jiangning, and the family relocated there.

When Cao Xi died in 1684, Cao Yin, as Kangxi's personal confidante, took over the post. Cao Yin was one of the era's most prominent men of letters and a keen book collector. Jonathan Spence notes the strong Manchu element in the lives of these Imperial Household bond servants. They balanced the two cultures: Cao Yin took pleasure in horse riding and hunting and Manchu military culture, but was at the same time a sensitive interpreter of Chinese culture. By the early 18th century, the Cao clan had become so rich and influential as to be able to play host four times to the Kangxi Emperor in his six separate itinerant trips south to the Nanjing region. In 1705, the emperor ordered Cao, himself a fluent poet, to compile all surviving shi (lyric poems) surviving from the Tang dynasty, The Complete Poems of the Tang.

When Cao Yin died in 1712, Kangxi passed the office over to Cao Yin's only son, Cao Yong (??). Cao Yong died in 1715. Kangxi then allowed the family to adopt a paternal nephew, Cao Fu (??), as Cao Yin's posthumous son to continue in that position. Hence the clan held the office of Imperial Textile Commissioner at Jiangning for three generations.

The family's fortunes lasted until Kangxi's death and the ascension of the Yongzheng Emperor to the throne. Yongzheng severely attacked the family and

later confiscated their properties, while Cao Fu was thrown in jail. This was ostensibly for their mismanagement of funds, though perhaps this purge was politically motivated. When Cao Fu was released a year later, the family, completely impoverished, was forced to relocate to Beijing. Cao Xueqin, still a young child, lived in poverty with his family.

Henry Bencraft Joly (1857-1898) was British Vice-Consul in Macao and translator of Ts'ao Chan's Hung Lou Meng: The Dream of the Red Chamber, a Chinese Novel in Two Books. He had three brothers. His only daughter, Vivien, married Hugh David Beddington, son of Keith Lionel Beddington CBE.

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