2.1: Cáo Xueqín (1715 or 1724 - 1763 or 1764)

Cáo Xueqín (c.1715-c.1763) The Story of the Stone (1791) Chinese Near East and Asia The Story of the Stone (also known as The Dream of the Red Chamber, Hongloumeng, or Hung-lou-meng) is a novel attributed to Cáo Xueqín of 18th-century China. Cáo (surname) Xueqín (literary name) is also known as Cáo Zhan or Ts'ao Chan. Generally regarded as the greatest Chinese novel, this novel shows the decline of the wealthy Jia (Chia) family. Cáo's own family experienced a similar decline during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). The first eighty chapters were written by Cáo and circulated in manuscript copies. In 1791, the writer Gao E (ca. 1740-ca. 1815) published a complete 120-chapter version, probably adding an additional forty chapters to the overall work. The novel portrays the experiences of close to forty main characters and about 400 minor characters. The framework of the story tells the tale of a flower that gives life to a conscious stone in the mythic world of the past; in the main narrative, the flower and the stone are both incarnated as humans and become part of a love triangle. In addition to the romance, the novel also sheds light on 18th-century Chinese society and probes into the ideas of truth and illusion. The first complete English translation is The Story of the Stone (1973-1986) by David Hawkes and John Minford. Consider while reading:

1. In what specific ways do you think this novel sheds light on 18th-century Chinese society?
2. How do Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism function in the novel? How do these religio-philosophies seem to co-exist or conflict with one another in the novel?
3. Compare the romantic aspect of this novel to another romantic story with which you are familiar. What are their notable similarities and differences?

Written by Kyounghye Kwon