

BEGINNINGS AND DEPARTURES: THE *DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER*

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Chapter One of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦) consists of a series of beginnings or “false starts” as one critic has characterized them.² The first of three narrative episodes which make up the prologue casts the protagonist’s mythic origin in the primordial past. A brief summary of the familiar story runs as follows. In order to repair a leaky sky, the goddess Nüwa moulds 36,501 five-colored rocks. In the end she finds use for only 36,500 of them.³ Having become sentient and quasi-anthropomorphic, the supernumerary rock is despondent over his rejection. One day, while lamenting his misfortune, Stone sees a Buddhist monk and a Daoist prelate approaching and overhears them reminiscing about the prosperity of the sublunary world. Stone is sorely tempted to partake in the sensual pleasures that the two have described so vividly and begs them to help him descend to earth. Having unwittingly enticed Stone, the Buddhist and the Daoist now try to warn him of the transient and illusory nature of earthly pleasures. Their words, however, fall on deaf ears. Stone is determined to seek his fulfillment on earth. The subsequent narrative, or the novel proper, is thus literally consequent upon Stone’s fateful departure from the ethereal world.⁴

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² See Richard Kunst “The Beginning and Ending of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*,” M. A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1969, 1.

³ On the symbolic significance of the number of the stones and their size, see Michael Yang, “Naming in *Honglou meng*,” *CLEAR* 18 (1996): 71-72.

⁴ For the myth of Nüwa mending the sky, see Wen Yiduo “Fuxi kao 伏羲考” in *Wen Yiduo quanji* 闻一多全集 1: 3-68 (Shanghai: Kaiming, 1948), and “Gaotang shennü chuanshuo zhi fenxi 高堂神女传说之分析” *ibid.*, 1:81-116; Derk Bodde “Myths of Ancient China,” in Charles Le Blanc and Dorothy Borei eds., *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 61-65; Andrew Plaks *Archetype and Allegory in the “Dream of the Red Chamber”* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), 27-42 and Jing Wang *The Story of the Stone* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992), 42-62.

An immense time span separates the first episode from the next. Eons have passed before a Daoist named Vanitas chances upon Stone, who has since returned to the ethereal world. Or rather, the Daoist finds a rock bearing an inscription of Stone's earthly sojourn; hence the original title of the novel, the *Story of the Stone*.⁵ After perusing it, the Daoist acknowledges to Stone, author of the inscribed tale, that it indeed has some interest, but he maintains that it is also seriously flawed. Despite his initial reservations, Vanitas agrees to transcribe the narrative. This episode, which contains a lengthy debate between Stone and the Daoist on the tale's literary merits or lack thereof, is an important point of departure from what Stone describes as an exhausted narrative tradition. As such, this section will feature prominently in the subsequent discussion. The third and final episode of the prologue introduces a set of new characters including the penurious scholar Jia Yucun, who serves an ingenious narrative link between the mundane and the ethereal world.

Vestige of Tradition or Sign of Innovation

Despite its exceedingly complex nature, scholars are curiously indifferent to the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Instead, they are fixated on the missing part — the ending — of the novel, looking for clues and hints in every conceivable place. A review of the scholarly and critical literature on the novel reveals few studies of the novel's extraordinary beginning. In a way, that is only to be expected. The prospect of “completing” the novel in some way, or even figuring out its overall design is too tantalizing a challenge to resist.⁶ From time to time new theories put forward, some more plausible than others. Granted, to the extent that the significance of a narrative rests on its ending, the task of evaluating the novel is made more difficult without its conclusion.

The absence of critical attention to the beginning of the novel can also be attributed to other factors, some of them ideological. Critics in mainland China dismiss the mythic elements of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* as dregs of a “feudal” belief system, choosing to emphasize realistic elements instead.⁷ Expatriate scholars such as Zhao Gang hold that the allegorical elements in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* result from the influence of its commentator

⁵ The Daoist's name, *Kongkong daoren*, has been variously translated as Kosmo Kosmos (Lucien Miller), Vanitas (David Hawkes), and Reverend Void (Hsienyi and Gladys Yang). For a paronomastic study of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, see Michael Yang “Naming in *Honglou meng*,” 69-100.

⁶ According to one account, there are more than half a dozen *xushu* 续书 (continuations, sequels) to the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. See Jiang Hesen 蒋和森 *Honglou meng gaishuo* 红楼梦概说 (Shanghai: Guji, 1979), 14.

⁷ Mao Xing 毛星 is a representative of this point of view. See his “Ping Yu Pingbo xiansheng de sekong shuo 评俞平伯先生的色空说 *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 No. 63 (Jan. 1955): 58-64.

Zhiyan Zhai.⁸ Still others, Yu Pingbo and Wu Shichang among them, dismiss the mythic framework on textual grounds, seeing it as a spurious interpolation by Gao E, editor of the first printed version of the novel.⁹ Lumping together the supernatural elements in the novel, Wu Shichang writes,

These stories are obviously too superstitious to be convincing. They are hardly relevant to the central theme of the novel or to other stories. Even if they are well written, so many of them must be boring to any reader; and the great space they occupy in the last forty chapters does little justice to the novel or to its reader. They look like grotesque buildings artificially scattered on one-third of a well-designed garden, neither serving any useful purpose or adding any pleasant sight for the visitor.¹⁰

Other critics regard the beginning of the novel as a product of literary inertia. In his preface to Chi-chen Wang's English translation of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the venerable sinologist Arthur Waley comments on its framework within the historical context of the Chinese narrative tradition. Waley begins by noting the historical hierarchy governing Chinese literature or written texts in which the Confucian canon was ensconced at the top while fiction was relegated to the bottom. Therefore, to ensure a measure of respectability, the author of the vernacular narrative superimposed a didactic framework on his work. Waley writes, "Even the most licentious of Chinese novelists did indeed make some show of pointing a moral, but the pretense is usually carried out in such a way as to irritate those who read for pleasure without appeasing those who read for improvement."¹¹ Despite its overall break from convention, Waley sees the *Dream of the Red Chamber* as tradition-bound in two important respects, namely, in its didactic framework and its oral mode of narration. Unlike its predecessors, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* does not recycle historical materials, but it nevertheless shares certain characteristics with them:

It has their inordinate length [...] their lack of faith in the interestingness of the everyday world, leading to the conviction that a realistic story must necessarily be set in a supernatural framework. It has the storyteller's tendency to put far more art into the technique of the individual *séance* or chapter, than into

⁸ See Zhao Gang 赵岗 and Chen Zhongyi 陈钟毅 *Honglou meng xintan* 红楼梦新探 (Hong Kong: Wenyi, 1970), 153-164; 206-211.

⁹ According to Wu, "All these jejune, superstitious, absurd stories designed to fill space which would otherwise have to be filled with grander, more tragic and complicated episodes as those drafted by Ts'ao Chan and revealed in Chih-yen's commentary." See Wu Shichang *On the Red Chamber Dream* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961), 282. Yu Pingbo also attributes the supernatural elements to Gao E. Yu makes a tenuous distinction between Cao Xueqin's use of parables and allegories and Gao E's superstitious beliefs. See his *Honglou meng yanjiu* 红楼梦研究. Neither Wu Shichang nor Yu Pingbo makes a convincing case for the interpolation theory. Nor are Zhao and Chen very persuasive.

¹⁰ See Wu, 308-309.

¹¹ *Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. Chi-chen Wang (New York: Doubleday, 1929), viii.

the construction of the work as a whole. It has the same moralizing tendency; for as I have said, Chinese fiction is always on the defensive — is always, with an eye on official Puritanism, trying to prove that, like serious and approved literature, it has a “message.”¹²

According to Waley, what makes the *Dream of the Red Chamber* such a milestone in Chinese literature is its realism. Waley asserts that all realistic novels are autobiographical. Following Hu Shi’s lead, Waley asserts that Cao Xueqin’s innovation lies in modeling his characters upon himself and his family. Indeed, only by using a “rigid framework imposed by tradition” is Cao able to prevent himself from committing “the error of transcribing with too careful a fidelity the monotonies of actual life.”¹³

To Waley, then, the beginning is paradoxically a shortcoming as well as an asset. However, the novel’s debt to tradition appears rather modest if one examines the *Honglou meng* carefully. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* departs from convention at the very outset in conspicuously lacking the customary prefatory poem and its attendant prose commentary.¹⁴ Even such a full-fledged literary work as *The Scholars* preserves the entire traditional opening sequence. However, the oral residues in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* are minimal. They are confined to the retention of the traditional framework and some terminology from oral storytelling. However, as I intend to argue, the framework is put to such a radically different purpose that it is no longer a simple throwback to the *huaben* 话本 tradition.

Of the extant eighty chapters by Cao Xueqin, only Chapter Two has a prefatory poem, but it functions very differently from its traditional counterpart in *huaben* fiction. It is not didactic but epigraphic, which explains the absence of the explanatory prose commentary. It does not usher in the narrative but rather serves as a self-conscious commentary on the technique of introducing the Jia family from an outsider’s perspective:

Who can guess the outcome of a game of chess?
Incense burned out, tea drunk — it’s still in doubt.
To interpret the signs of prosperity or decline
An impartial onlooker must be sought out.¹⁵

一局输赢料不真，
香销茶尽尚逡巡。
欲知日下兴衰兆，

¹² *Ibid.*, x-xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁴ For a brief but interesting discussion of the novel’s opening sequence, see David Rolston *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 265.

¹⁵ *A Dream of Red Mansions*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1978), 19. This poem appears in a manuscript copy with a preface by Qi Liaosheng. It is not found in other editions.

须问旁观冷眼人。

Besides this prefatory poem, the narrator also uses the storyteller's terminology, “*huashuo*” 话说 or “the story tells” at the beginning of a new chapter. In most of the extant eighty chapters by Cao Xueqin the narrator uses the phrase “*huashuo*.” Variations include “*queshuo*” 却说 (chaps. 2, 3, 4, 6) and “*qieshuo*” 且说, which appears once in Chapter Fifty-five. Chapters Five and Thirty-Seven are slightly different. Each of these two chapters begins with a sentence summarizing the previous chapter: “The fourth chapter told briefly how the Xues came to stay in the Rong Mansion, but now let us return to Daiyu” (Yang and Yang 67).¹⁶ A more literal translation would read, “Since in the fourth chapter [we've] already briefly explained how the Xues came to stay in the Rong Mansion, in this chapter [we cannot] continue to dwell on that.” The narrator then picks up the narrative: “Now let us tell (*rujin qieshuo* 如今且说) how since Lin Daiyu came to the Rong Mansion, the Lady Dowager had been lavishing affection on her, treating her in every respect just like Baoyu so that Yingchun, Tanchun and Xichun, the Jia girls, all had to take a back seat” (Yang and Yang 67).¹⁷ Similarly in Chapter Thirty-seven:

Jia Zheng, having been appointed this year an Examiner of Provincial Education, chose the twentieth of the eighth month to start his journey. On that day, after paying his respects to the ancestral shrines and to the Lady Dowager, he was seen off by Baoyu and other young men of the family all the way to Pavilion of Parting. But his doings need not concern us here. [But let us tell how ...]

却说贾政出门去后，外面诸事不能多记。单表 ...” (Yang and Yang 532).”

This appears to be the extent of Cao Xueqin's appropriation of the oral storyteller's terminology.

The slight or downright dismissal of the beginning of the novel is regrettable, especially in light of the insights that more focused studies have yielded. Since the 1970s, several critics have examined the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in some detail. Lucien Miller, for instance, devotes a third of his monograph on the *Dream of the Red Chamber* to its mythic framework, arguing that it is integral to the moral design of the novel. In Miller's opinion, the view of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a realistic work is impoverishing: “the reason why the so-called ‘realistic story’ must be set within a supernatural framework is because Cao Xueqin's imaginative vision and polysemous style require it. Instead of opting for one world over another, the artist presents, through a variety of styles, a unified vision in which the supernatural and the natural cohere in a work of mythic, rather than

¹⁶ This opening sentence is left out in David Hawkes' translation.

¹⁷ As Haun Saussy points out, this sentence could be by some external hand. See Saussy “Reading and Folly in *Dream of the Red Chamber*,” CLEAR 9 (1987): 27.

‘realistic,’ fiction.”¹⁸ The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is far too complex a work for us to read it in terms of the facts of history, politics, biography, or dialectical materialism.

Richard Kunst is another critic who has carefully examined the beginning of the *Honglou meng*. The first half of Kunst’s two-part thesis is a textual study of the various extant editions of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In other words, it is largely concerned with the question of textual authenticity. In the second part of his thesis Kunst then makes the transition from textual analysis to literary criticism. In the chapter entitled “The Artist and his Work,” Kunst’s focus is on highlighting the overall narrative design of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* through a reading of its beginning. According to Kunst, there are three planes of illusion in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*: the mythic, the mysterious, and the mundane. “As the activities on each new plane become increasingly hollow, those of the preceding plane come to appear a little more ‘real.’”¹⁹

Kunst is primarily interested in the architectonics of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, its solid construction or “profound sense of stability.” However, Kunst likewise sees Cao Xueqin’s use of the mythic framework as a carryover from the vernacular tradition, and as such it is perceived as conservative at best, and anachronistic at worst:

That [the characters’ roles] are explained in the context of a familiar myth or historical incident is almost a tradition in Chinese popular literature, a somewhat tired one which Tsao still chose to abide by. Many previous stories and novels, *Monkey (Hsi-you chi)* and an early version of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (San-kuo-chi ping-hua)* among them, commenced with a tale or legend which would serve to increase their universality, to link the story which followed with a broader tradition. The story would then assume a place in that tradition and derive authority and security from it. One might have thought Tsao Hsueh-ch’in’s disdain for treading worn paths in literature would have precluded the device. ...²⁰

Having said that, Kunst goes on to concede that “in justice to [Tsao, he] has used it in a successful and original manner, particularly as the prologue shifts to the literary debate of the Stone and the Taoist of the Great Void.”²¹

To me the most illuminating reading of the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is Anthony Yu’s “History, Fiction and the Reading of

¹⁸ Lucien Miller *Masks of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber: Myth, Mimesis, and Persona* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1975), 11.

¹⁹ The three planes of illusion refer to the legend of Nüwa, Zhen Shiyin’s dream, and the introduction of the human world represented by the conversation of Leng Zixing and Jia Yucun. See Richard Kunst “The Beginning and Ending of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.” M. A. Thesis. University of California, Berkeley, 1969), 31-32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

Chinese Narrative,” published in 1988.²² Yu situates his interpretation in the context of the complex relationship between Chinese historiography and fiction. Yu juxtaposes the four masterworks of Ming fiction, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Journey to the West*, and the *Golden Lotus*, and finds that with the exception of the *Journey to the West*, they all “exhibit certain textual features at their beginnings that are consistent with their generic tendency to simulate history.”²³ At the same time there is an increasing inventiveness and narrative sophistication in *Outlaws of the Marsh* and the *Golden Lotus*.²⁴ However, only in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* do we witness a “revolutionary” break with tradition.

After noting the “dazzling complexity and narrative virtuosity” of the novel’s beginning, Yu goes on to examine the meta-fictional aspect of the first chapter of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The novel’s extraordinary degree of reflexivity makes it virtually *sui generis* in the Chinese narrative tradition. Each of the three narrative planes — the mythic, the philosophical, and the mundane, introduces a different temporal dimension and adds complexity to the opening chapter.²⁵ Yu’s astute analysis bears repeating here:

Through these triple lines of narration and an increasing variety of rhetorical devices as he tells his story, Cao Xueqin the author is in fact engaging the reader in an unprecedented and continuous discussion on the nature of fiction itself and, simultaneously, on the nature of reading. To the question of origin posed at the beginning, the expected answer would have been some source of experience drawn from either national or personal history. [...] Instead of being given the satisfaction of knowing the book’s origin, the reader is warned at once of deceptive appearance and of hard work. ...

This revolutionary juxtaposition of the problem of representation and the process of reading — an astonishing measure of the work’s insistent and intriguing reflexivity — obtains throughout the first chapter of the novel. As we move further through the narrative’s lengthy course, not only do its characters have occasion to debate the function and merit of all the major literary genres of poetry, drama, fiction, and literary prose [...], but [Cao Xueqin] also exploits repeatedly a network of polyvalent signification generated by such key terms as *meng* 梦 (dream),

²² Anthony Yu “History, Fiction and the Reading of Chinese Narrative,” *CLEAR*, 10 (1988): 1-19. An expanded version of the essay appears in his *Rereading the Stone* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 26-52.

²³ Yu, “History and Fiction,” 15.

²⁴ Yu cites the mythic framework in *Outlaws of the Marsh* and the allusion to Xiang Yu and Liu Bang in the first chapter of the *Golden Lotus* as evidence, *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁵ Yu’s three lines of narration — the myth of Nüwa, the debate between Stone, the Buddhist monk and the Daoist, the parade of human characters, relatives of the Jia family — overlap but do not correspond to Kunst’s triple planes of illusion.

huan 幻 (fantasy, illusion, enchantment), *jian* 鉴 (mirror), and the more colloquial *hulu* 葫芦 (gourd, but metonymically, riddle) to modulate the effects of his creation. By characterizing his story as dream, fantasy, and riddle, the author calls attention to both its fictive nature and its enthralling eroticism.²⁶

In Yu's view, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* reminds the reader of the double-edged nature of fiction: "The acknowledgment that the text seeks to exact from its reader is [...] not only that fiction betokens a systematic reinforcement of illusion, but also that it focalizes, ironically, both the need and danger of that reinforcement."²⁷ The first chapter of the novel constantly "stresses the duplicity of the fictive mode of being; it is both baseless (*huangtang* [荒唐]) and entertaining (*you quwei* 有趣味), both fabulous (*dahuang* 大荒), unverifiable (*wuji* 无稽), undatable (*wu chaodai nianji ke kao* 无朝代年級可考), and yet truthful (*zhen* 真)."²⁸

Thus, Anthony Yu, Lucien Miller, and Richard Kunst stand out as the few critics who have given the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* its due. In Anthony Yu's reading, in particular, the beginning is no longer a carryover from tradition, a spurious addition, or an ugly carbuncle. On the contrary, it is a highly significant, highly contested site with much to teach us about what one might call the "dynastic struggle" between historiography and fiction.

My reading of the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is akin to that of Anthony Yu's, but focuses on a slightly different facet of tradition. I am interested in the ways in which the narrator self-consciously takes on the *fictive* tradition and departs from it. To put it in another way, if Anthony Yu is concerned with the inter-generic entanglement between historiography and fiction, I am more interested in the *intra-generic* strife invoked by the narrator at the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. As Anthony Yu has shown, Cao Xueqin's relationship with tradition is far more complex than critics would allow. However, it seems to me that the narrator is casting off not only the yoke of historiography but also the stultifying influence of its offshoot, namely fiction. Both are subsumed by the Chinese term *yeshi* 野史, so when the narrator dismisses it as tired and trite, he is referring not just to unorthodox histories, but more specifically, to fictional narratives.²⁹

Instead of deriving "authority and security," as Kunst puts it, the relationship between the author, Stone, and tradition is one of antagonism rather than of cozy identification. The only way Stone can assert his authority is by displacing his precursors. Hence, the palpable sense of rivalry with the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ When *Kongkong Daoren* expresses concern that Stone is breaking two cardinal laws of writing — a verifiable reign period and an edifying subject matter — the narrator replies, "But in my opinion, conventional *yeshi* all follow the same tracks. By doing away with the routine, I'm actually being far more novel and original (但我想, 历来野史, 皆蹈一辙, 莫如我这不借此套者, 反倒新奇别致)?"

established narrative tradition. Cao Xueqin's Stone heralds the arrival of a new narrator, who is eager, compelled in fact, to delineate differences from his literary precursors. One might say that the narrator is suffering from an unprecedented case of anxiety of influence.

Origin, Originality, the *Dream of the Red Chamber*

From the very beginning the narrator is preoccupied with origin and originality in a way that sets the novel apart from its predecessors. If one ignores the interpolation, the very first sentence of the novel reads: "Gentle reader, what, you may ask, was the origin of this book? Though the answer to this question may at first seem to border on the absurd, reflection will show that there is a good deal more in it than meets the eye."³⁰ Thus begins the leisurely account of the origin of the book, which, as we have seen, is tied to the mythic origin of the protagonist. Were it not for Stone's fateful rejection by the goddess Nüwa, there would be no tale, no *Dream of the Red Chamber*, to tell. Interestingly enough, even though Stone attributes his elimination to a lack of outstanding qualities, Nüwa's decision seems totally arbitrary. Each measuring "twelve by twenty-four *zhang* 丈 square", the 36, 501 five-colored rocks are indistinguishable from one another. Excess seems the only reason for Stone's being left out. His obsession with narrative originality, therefore, contrasts with, if it does not actually stem from, this primal redundancy. Anxiety of being a latecomer yet again, this time in an established literary tradition among a hoard of competing authors, seems to be at the bottom of Stone's strident debate with Vanitas.

The Daoist monk objects to Stone's narrative on two grounds. From Vanitas' perspective, the narrative deviates or departs from tradition in two respects, namely, it is not anchored in a definable historical period nor is it properly didactic:

Brother Stone, according to what you yourself seem to imply in these verses, this story of yours contains matter of sufficient interest to merit publication and has been carved here with that end in view. But as far as I can see (a) it has no discoverable dynastic period, and (b) it contains no examples of moral grandeur among its characters—no statesmanship, no social message of any kind. All I can find in it, in fact, are a number of

³⁰ *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 43. Most modern editions of *Honglou meng* begin with what is really the last paragraph of the "general principles" or *fanli* 凡例 which somehow made its way into the text proper. The General Principles are editorial comments. Hawkes excises the editorial intrusion in his translation. For a detailed discussion of the differences of Chapter One of the novel among the various editions, see Kunst 6-10. See also Chen Yupi's 陈毓黻 "*Honglou meng shi zenyang kaitou de* 红楼梦是怎样开头的?" "How does the *Honglou meng* begin?" *Wenshi* 文史 3 (October 1969): 333-338. All page references are to David Hawkes' translation unless otherwise noted.

females, conspicuous, if at all, only for their passion or folly or for some trifling talent or insignificant virtue. Even if I were to copy all this out, I cannot see that it would make a very remarkable book.³¹

Vanitas' objection is that the narrator deviates from the mould of vernacular fiction influenced by historiography. One recalls that in order to elevate the status of a narrative Feng Menglong (1574-1646) invariably sets it in a specific time and place thereby lending it an aura of authenticity. Stone dismisses Vanitas' objection as silly. The problem, if it is a problem at all, could be easily fixed by assigning a dynastic reign to the tale, but to do that would be following a tired and worn-out tradition. The narrator chooses not to take that approach:

'Come, your reverence,' said the stone, 'must you be so obtuse? All the romances ever written have an artificial period setting — Han or Tang for the most part. In refusing to make use of that stale old convention and telling my *Story of the Stone* exactly as it occurred, it seems to me that, far from *depriving* [Hawkes' italics] it of anything, I have given it a freshness these other books do not have.'³²

By exposing the convention of setting a story in a certain dynastic period as what it is — a hoary, old convention — Stone *qua* narrator is able to break from the yoke of historiography and embrace fiction, as Anthony Yu points out.

Vanitas' second objection has to do with the function of literature. He considers the tale unworthy of wide dissemination because it lacks obvious edifying value. This charge requires a more serious response. To counter the monk's objection, Stone launches a systematic attack on tradition. He assails previous narratives genre by genre — historical romances, erotic novels, and boudoir romances — on literary and moral grounds:

Your so-called "historical romances", consisting, as they do, of scandalous anecdotes about statesman and emperors of bygone days and scabrous attacks on the reputations of long-dead gentlewomen, contain more wickedness and immorality than I care to mention. Still worse is the "erotic novel", by whose filthy obscenities our young folk are all too easily corrupted. And the "boudoir romances", those dreary stereotypes with their volume after volume all pitched on the same note and their different characters indistinguishable except by name (all those ideally beautiful young ladies and ideally eligible young bachelors) — even they seem unable to avoid descending sooner or later into indecency.³³

³¹ *The Story of the Stone*, 49.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

All these narratives are morally reprehensible and literarily bankrupt. As far as the narrator is concerned, even the most sententious of them are really poor excuses for the authors to exercise their meager literary talent. It is interesting to note that Stone reserves his harshest criticism for the genre with which his own narrative seems to share the most characteristics, namely, the “boudoir romances.” There is almost something visceral in Stone’s rejection of that genre, which is said to be not only morally vacuous but also formulaic and cliché-ridden. The effort to distance himself from it, lest his own narrative be mistaken for one of the despised boudoir romances, is striking:

The trouble with this last kind of romance is that it only gets written in the first place because the author requires a framework in which to show off his love-poems. He goes about constructing this framework quite mechanically, beginning with the names of his pair of young lovers and invariably adding a third character, a servant or the like, to make mischief between them, like the *chou* (clown) in a comedy.

What makes these romances even more detestable is the stilted, bombastic language — inanities dressed in pompous rhetoric, remote alike from nature and common sense and teeming with the grossest absurdities.³⁴

Having made it abundantly clear that this is a literary patrimony he is happy not to inherit, Stone then goes on to stake a claim for the superiority of his own narrative. Although his characters are not paragons of virtue, they are infinitely superior to their counterparts in the scurrilous material that masquerades as edifying fiction, if only because his characters are based on careful personal observation and, therefore, are more realistic. They are also far more entertaining. Even his poems are better. Although his narrative is not overtly didactic, the narrator claims that it has sufficient value as entertainment:

Surely my “number of females”, whom I spent half a lifetime studying with my own eyes and ears, are preferable to this kind of stuff? I do not claim that they are better people than the ones who appear in books written before my time; I am only saying that the contemplation of their action and motives may prove a more effective antidote to boredom and melancholy. And even the inelegant verses with which my story is interlarded could serve to entertain and amuse on those convivial occasions when rhymes and riddles are in demand.

All that my story narrates, the meetings and partings, the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs of fortune, are recorded exactly

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

as they happened. I have not dared to add the tiniest bit of touching-up, for fear of losing the true picture.

[Nowadays the penurious are burdened by the need to find food and clothes. The wealthy never feel that they have enough. Even if they have a moment of leisure, they indulge themselves in sex or court worries, addicted as they are to money. How on earth will they find the time to read edifying books? I don't wish for people to heap praises on my story, nor do I necessarily want them to examine it with great delight.

今之人，贫者日为衣食所累，富者又怀不足之心，纵然一时稍闲，又有寻愁之事，那里有工夫看那理治之书？所以我这一段故事，也不愿世人称奇道妙，也不定要世人喜悦检读].³⁵

My only wish is that men in the world below may sometimes pick up this tale when they are recovering from sleep or drunkenness, or when they wish to escape from business worries or a fit of the dumps, and in doing so find not only mental refreshment but even perhaps, if they will heed its lesson and abandon their vain and frivolous pursuits, some small arrest in the deterioration of their vital forces. What does your reverence say to that?³⁶

By dismissing traditional didactic books as irrelevant and rejecting the model of the annals as he has done earlier, Stone effectively undermines the two of the cornerstones of Chinese historiography and their pale fictional permutations. Literature is no longer justified by the didactic uses it can be put to. The idea that entertainment in and by itself is sufficient is radical.³⁷ It jettisons didactic value for a new criterion. Stone calls for a new kind of narrator, who must now objectively “record” life. Verisimilitude is to reign supreme; artificiality is to be eschewed at all costs.

Thus Stone ends his passionate polemic and ushers in a new and different kind of fiction. It contrasts with the almost reverential attitude of the typical narrator in Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* anthologies. The latter's conformity, the care with which the narrator assigns each tale a specific dynastic reign period, and his reverential attitude toward literary predecessors all point to the persona of an oral narrator. The emphasis on an impeccable provenance is an effort to establish the authenticity of the tale, to obliterate any traces of difference or originality. On the other hand, Stone presents himself as a narrator who is anxious to sever links with other texts, who claims to be

³⁵ This passage is not found in Hawkes' translation. Hawkes does not base his translation on any particular edition of the novel as he points out in his introduction.

³⁶ *Story of the Stone*, 50.

³⁷ For the vast range of reading materials for entertainment in the Qing period, see Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1979), 113-115..

unencumbered by tradition, in other words, the kind of narrator often associated with print cultures.³⁸ His narrative is supremely autonomous rather than intertextual.³⁹

Walter Ong writes, “a text cannot be created out of lived experience. A novelist writes a novel because he or she is familiar with this kind of textual organization of experience.”⁴⁰ This is precisely what the narrator claims: his narrative is drastically independent of other narratives. “Originality” and “creativity” have now become of paramount importance. His originality, as pointed out earlier, paradoxically, derives from his commitment to his role as a *histor*, accurately observing and recording life without any embellishments, but unlike the traditional official historian, he is not interested in writing any grand narratives celebrating the words and deeds of laudable people.

The desire to stand apart from existing literature brings to mind Stone’s earlier ascription of his rejection by Nüwa to his *wucai* 无才 (lack of talent). This lack or absence, however, is based more on perception than on reality. To all intents and purposes all 36,501 rocks are identical. In fact, their uniformity is a deliberate result of the goddess’ preparation for her heaven-mending project. He is rejected because he is at the end of the long line of usable blocks, because he is belated. In his depressed state Stone longs for some outstanding attributes that might have caught the goddess’ eye. Stone the narrator runs the same risk of being crowded out by a long established narrative tradition (*lilai yeshi* 历来野史) with thousands of works from the same mold (*qianbu gong chu yi tao* 千部共出一套). His only recourse is to strike out on a different path from his literary forbears and confreres.

This kind of intricate, “familial” relationship between latecomers and predecessors has been the subject of several studies. Martin Huang discusses what he calls “intertextuality and novelistic subversion” in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margins*, and the *Golden Lotus*. However, Huang’s exposition of “anxiety of precedents” strikes me as much less persuasive than his account of the “dehistoricization” of the Chinese novel, largely because of the conspicuous absence of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* from his analysis. Huang defines “intertextual subversion” as the way a novel “asserts its originality by subverting the basic assumptions (ideological or aesthetic) in a prior text through various intertextual strategies.”⁴¹ Intertextual subversion can manifest itself in the form of “imitation, repetition or even direct derivation and achieves an effect which often amounts to that of a parody.”

³⁸ Another writer who places an inordinate amount of emphasis on originality is Li Yu, who of course predates Cao Xueqin. It is no coincidence that Li Yu was a renowned printer and perhaps the first professional writer in China. But nowhere in his stories does the narrator mount an attack on tradition the way Cao Xueqin’s narrator does.

³⁹ For a study of intertextuality in the Chinese tradition, see Karl S. Y. Kao’s “Aspects of Derivation in Chinese Narrative,” *CLEAR* 7 (1985): 1-36.

⁴⁰ Walter Ong *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 133.

⁴¹ See Huang, “Dehistoricization and Intertextualization: the Anxiety of Precedents in the Evolution of the Traditional Chinese Novel,” *CLEAR* 12 (1990), 59.

Huang specifically links intertextual subversion with the “anxiety caused by the intimidating existence of its canonical or near canonical predecessors.”⁴²

The examples that Huang cites, however, do not seem to bear out the antagonism that he posits at the outset of his analysis. Huang shows how the concepts of *yi* 义, which Huang translates as “personal honor,” and *ren* 仁 or benevolence as they are represented in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are variously subverted or parodied in *Outlaws of the Marsh*.⁴³ It is not immediately clear why one cannot describe similar thematic echoes in the later *Outlaws of the Marsh* as ironic or playful rather than subversive or even antagonistic. For instance, after observing the thematic similarities and differences between Liu Bei’s visits to Zhuge Liang in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and Song Jiang’s efforts at recruiting Lu Junyi in *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Huang concludes that the central difference is that strategically, in the latter, coercion has replaced humble invitation.⁴⁴ This may well be irony, parody or satire, all of which seem interchangeable in Huang’s scheme, but it is quite possible that the difference is driven by character rather than by an abstract interest in subverting the notion of *zhiyin* 知音 (appreciation of a kindred spirit). It would be out of character for the princely Liu Bei to resort to any high-pressure tactics. The difference or parody lies, therefore, more in the contrast between the dignified and principled Liu Bei and the cunning, no-holds-barred Wu Song and his bandit cohorts.

The crucial point seems to be the absence of a conspicuous, well-established canonical tradition in Huang’s analysis. One fails to detect any palpable or even concealed uneasiness in the successor texts. In view of the “prepubescent” state of the Chinese vernacular novel at this stage, one would almost be tempted to posit a mother-son relationship, instead of conceiving the relationship between *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh* as constituting some kind of Oedipal conflict.⁴⁵ In other words, instead of being potentially paralyzed by their predecessors, Luo Guanzhong and company are invigorated by them. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Luo Guanzhong is traditionally believed to have had a hand in both the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*.

It seems that the prerequisite for “the anxiety of precedents” is an overbearing tradition or the “intimidating presence of [...] canonical or near canonical predecessors.”⁴⁶ Therefore, on the face of it, it is more plausible to

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59-64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Huang does not suggest such an antagonistic relationship. However, as pointed out earlier, he does link intertextual subversion to the “anxiety caused by the intimidating existence of its canonical or near canonical predecessors.” One wishes for a detailed explanation of the leap from parody to satire to subversion, and their putative root cause in “anxiety of precedents.”

⁴⁶ Huang, 59. As Huang points out, the term, “anxiety of precedents” is adapted from Bloom’s anxiety of influence because Huang wishes to avoid the Freudian overtones, although he does not explain why (48, note 13). Perhaps it is to minimize the sense of antagonism or “heroic struggle” which seems central to Bloom’s theory? *The Romance of*

find a “high consciousness of prior texts” in the *Golden Lotus*. Such early champions of vernacular fiction as Li Zhi and Yuan Hongdao and seminal commentators like Jin Shengtian and Mao Zonggang (1630?-1700?) actively participated in constructing a new literary canon.⁴⁷ By lavishing on *Outlaws of the Marsh* and the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* praise, and the kind of attention and care associated with the annotating of classical texts, Jin Shengtian and his followers sought to confer respectability and authority on the oft-despised genre. It was only a matter of time before the *Golden Lotus* acquired its own commentator in Zhang Zhupo (1670-1698). The influence of prior texts is, therefore, eminently demonstrable. As is well known, the adulterous affair between Wu Song’s brother and his sister-in-law, Pan Jinlian, an episode from the *Outlaws of the Marsh*, becomes the springboard for the *Golden Lotus*. Critics have studied the parodic elements in the novel; what is less clear is to what extent such elements constitute manifestations of anxiety of precedents.⁴⁸ As Huang puts it, “the author takes *Shuihu zhuan* as a point of departure for his own innovative novelistic adventure.”⁴⁹ It seems that far from exhibiting any overt anxiety or neurosis vis-à-vis a prior tradition, the *Golden Lotus* unceremoniously claims the story of Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing, and spins its own elaborate tale of sexual passion.

The presence of an authoritative tradition in classical Chinese poetry makes it particularly amenable to the Bloomian analysis of anxiety of influence. For this reason, Stuart Sargent’s study of Song poets’ ambivalence toward their Tang predecessors strikes one as a more successful attempt than Huang’s.⁵⁰ Through a close reading of Song poetic texts and what he calls “meta-literary” statements, Sargent systematically demonstrates the ways various Song poets “make space” for themselves. Only through such diverse

the Three Kingdoms was certainly a prior text to *Outlaws of Marsh*. To what extent does the predecessor constitute a canonical or even near canonical tradition?

⁴⁷ Cf. “Chin Sheng-t’an on How to Read the *Shui-hu chuan* (The Water Margin),” David L. Rolston, ed. *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 124-51. “There is a consistent attempt [...] to raise the status of the novel by comparing it to canonical texts,” 129. In his *Traditional Chinese and Fiction Commentary*, David Rolston writes, “instead of arguing that [the vernacular novel] was a new and rising genre of literature suited to the times, as had Li Zhi [...] and others, he (Jin Shengtian) tried to associate fiction with the classics and belles-lettres,” 25. See also Mao Zonggang and his father Mao Lun’s commentaries on the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in *How to Read the Chinese Novel*, 146-95.

⁴⁸ See for instance, Katherine Carlitz *The Rhetoric of Chin P’ing Mei* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986). In Huang’s view, the most “prominent” site of the “omnipresence of the anxiety of precedents” is the first chapter of the novel. Again, the anxiety is alleged, but not explained. Huang finds the concept of *yi* is given a parodic, subversive twist in the first chapter, particularly in the paradoxical portrayals of Xiang Yu and Yu Ji, and later the depiction of Song Huilian’s suicide. One is tempted to ask, what exactly constitutes parody and subversion? Insofar as the central moral lesson introduced at the beginning of the novel is the pernicious effects of sexual passion or *qingse* 情色 it is difficult to see the subversiveness of this seemingly innocuous message, or the first chapter.

⁴⁹ Huang, 64.

⁵⁰ See Sargent “Can Latecomers Get There First?” *CLEAR* 4 (1982): 165-198.

strategies as imitation and completion, antithetical correction, identification with the predecessor, revelation of the precursor's precedents, elevation of the self as the source of poetry, and replacement of or anteriority to the predecessor are Song poets such as Su Xun and Huang Tingjian able to emerge from the shadows of Du Fu and company.⁵¹ For a comparable example of anxiety of influence in the Chinese fictional tradition, one has to turn to the *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The collective weight of the historiographical and fictive tradition or *yeshi* is such that Stone feels obliged to mount a frontal assault on its basic tenets. Far from being a guarantor of veracity as *Vanitas* suggests, historical date can equally serve to mask what is spurious.⁵² Nor can the value of a narrative be justified by its instructional uses. A record featuring a cast of men of great virtue and their heroic deeds is no more likely to meet approval from common people (*shijing suren* 市井俗人) than one with a group of extraordinary ladies of no great accomplishments. However, Stone reserves his greatest scorn for the popular romances of the day. It is all the more noteworthy then that despite his vociferous protestations to the contrary, the boundaries between history and boudoir fiction on the one hand, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* on the other, have been notoriously murky throughout the novel's reception history. As Yu points out, "It is an immense irony that *Hongloumeng*, a work that has little parallel in Chinese literary history by virtue of its reflexive emphasis and examination of its own fictionality, has been treated in much of Chinese scholarship of the last hundred years as virtually an historical document."⁵³ One can add that equally ironic is the welter of *caizi jiaren* fiction in the Qing and Republic periods and now works in other popular media inspired by the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The recipient of so much of Stone's bile thrives on the popularity of his tale.

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Chirographic Culture

To what extent is the new narratorial voice in Cao Xueqin's novel tied to the chirographic culture? Can one make a case for such a connection? Edward Said has shown that the notion of "beginning" can mean a wealth of things, ranging from the commonsensical to the abstract; beginning can "designate a moment in time, a place, a principle, or an action."⁵⁴ Underlying statements such as "Mozart began to compose music at an early age"; "At the beginning of the film there is a sequence of striking images," or "In the beginning was the Word" — is the concept of precedence and/or priority. In a literary work we can regard beginning "as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works; a beginning immediately establishes relationships

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵² For the importance of chronological time as a mark of authenticity in historiography, see Arnoldo Momigliano "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," 67-106, quoted in Yu, 3.

⁵³ Yu, 19.

⁵⁴ Edward Said *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 4.

with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both.”⁵⁵ In this sense a beginning is the point at which a work becomes part of the enormous textual web that is our chirographic culture. Furthermore, I will venture to say that in a chirographic, and even more so in a print culture, the notion of beginning necessarily entails discontinuity or difference.

In oral cultures one does not begin in order to depart, in the sense of deviating from one’s predecessors. In fact, the notion of beginning in oral cultures is vastly different. One could describe these beginnings as “pure” or “intransitive,” to use Said’s terms. In other words, they are arbitrary starting points. When Homer starts the *Iliad* with Achilles’ ire, it is not a stroke of genius as claimed by centuries of pious scholars and critics. As Walter Ong points out, “[s]tarting in ‘the middle of things’ is not a consciously contrived ploy but the original, natural, inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative.”⁵⁶ Horace’s *res* is a construct of literacy. By imputing to the Homeric epics “conscious deviation from an organization which was in fact unavailable without writing,”⁵⁷ Horace and his followers are merely showing their own chirographic prejudice.

With the advent of printing, beginnings take on special significance. The printed text gives rise to a sense of noetic closure. In the West, the modern notion of “originality” and “creativity” has been traced to Romantic egotism, “which was a response to the palpable diminution of the meaningful self” in a fast industrializing and increasingly anonymous world.⁵⁸ No doubt commercial printing, with its obligatory authors’ signatures and copyrights, helped boost one’s sense of individuality, not to mention ownership. The nineteenth-century polemics on the necessity of originality were disseminated through print, which in turn, through its ability to generate vast quantities of copies, exacerbated the polarity between originality and imitation.

In China one begins to detect mounting pressure on the writer to differ from prior texts in the seventeenth century, during the boom in commercial printing. The case of Li Yu (1611-1680) — perhaps the first professional writer in Chinese literary history — is particularly instructive. Li Yu, who is remarkably candid about the mercenary character of his literary enterprises, makes an explicit link between originality and profitability. Li Yu is assiduously vigilant against copycats who might wish to cash in on his creativity. In *Casual Expressions of Idle Thoughts* (*Xianqing ouji* 闲情偶寄) he delivers a stern warning against would-be knock-off artists and even

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ Ong, 144. For a detailed analysis of oral memory and the story line, see Ong, 141-47. Ong draws on Berkley Peabody’s work and points out the incompatibility between linear plot (Freytag’s pyramid) and oral memory. The oral poet simply recalls and “stitches together” traditional themes and formulas.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

⁵⁸ See Thomas McFarland *Originality and Imagination* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 2. McFarland cites population and technology as two factors contributing to the individual/society duality.

threatens to take legal action.⁵⁹ As a professional writer, bookstore owner, and printer whose livelihood depended on the likes and dislikes of his patrons, Li Yu was keenly aware of the importance of intelligence, wit, and above all *xin* 新 (novelty) and *qi* 奇 (surprise).

This new emphasis on textual independence is as much a result of the boom in late Ming commercial printing as it is a product of the *xinxue* 心学 philosophical tradition associated with Wang Yangming (1472-1529), Li Zhi (1527-1602), and Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610).⁶⁰ Wang Yangming's belief that one can find his moral bearings by looking inward signals a radical departure from the orthodox emphasis on the received text-based Confucian canonical tradition sanctioned by the state and reinforced by approved exegeses. Rather than relying on external patterns, one must turn inward for the source of truth. This privileging of the self as the originator of intellectual creativity is further facilitated by fast expanding commercial printing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁶¹ The technologizing of the word, to borrow a phrase from Ong, contributed to a new anxiety of influence. "Manuscript cultures had few if any anxieties about influence to plague them, and oral cultures had virtually none."⁶² Manuscript culture is quite comfortable with intertextuality. Not yet completely severed from the oral world, it weaves texts out of existing ones, "borrowing, adapting, sharing the common, originally oral, formulas and themes, even though it worked them up into fresh literary forms without writing."⁶³ In a print culture an aspiring writer is under all sorts of legal, institutional and ethical pressures to abstain from repeating existing texts. The taboo against verbatim repetition or plagiarism is but the most concentrated expression of the pressure to establish difference from all existing texts. A beginning then becomes that momentous point at which the writer needs to establish difference from his predecessors. To adapt a term from Said, beginnings are now "transitive," weighted.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ See Patrick Hanan *The Invention of Li Yu* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 14-15.

⁶⁰ On Chinese printing, particularly during the Ming, see K. T. Wu "Ming Printing and Printers," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 (1943): 203-260; Robert Hegel *Reading Illustrated Fiction in late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 127-163, and Oki Yasushi "Minmatsu Konan ni okeru shuppan bunka to kenkyu," *Hiroshima daigaku bungakubu kiyō* 50, special issue no. 1 (1991): 1-176.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Kai-wing Chow's article "Writing for Success: Printing, Examinations, and Intellectual Change in Late Ming China," *Late Imperial China* 17.1 (June, 1996): 120-157. Chow writes, "The expansion of commercial printing during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had contributed to the unlocking of the relationship between the imperial state, the gentry class, and the Cheng-Zhu Confucian orthodoxy. Expansion in commercial printing had contributed to the creation of an intellectual milieu that encouraged open and pluralistic interpretations of the Confucian canon in the civil service examinations," 122.

⁶² Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 134.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁴ Here I am synthesizing Ong and Said's work. Said does not see "transitive and intransitive" beginnings as emblematic of literacy and orality. Said does not address the question of orality or literacy per se. He is interested in examining "the great masterpieces of high modernism" (xiii), that is, products of typographic cultures. I am extending his

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is indisputably a work of literacy far removed from the world of orality. That one of the pioneering Chinese linguists Wang Li cited the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in his seminal works *Zhongguo xiandai yufa* 中国现代语法 (*Modern Chinese Grammar*; 2 vols., 1943-44) and *Zhongguo yufa lilun* 中国语法理论 (*Theory of Modern Chinese Grammar*; 2 vols., 1944-45) is powerful proof of the work's canonical status in the Chinese, albeit modern, chirographic tradition. While scholars argue over whether *huaben* fiction is written *ab initio* or whether it is a product of orality, it is a given that the *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents the acme of Chinese chirographic culture. Whereas there are large doses of oral residue in Feng Menglong's *huaben* fiction, Cao Xueqin's the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is conceived wholly as a chirographic work and has been received as such.

Chapter One of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is particularly remarkable inasmuch as it is centrally concerned with literary genesis. One is struck by the way the beginning lays bare its literary, that is, chirographic conception. Chapter One abounds in references to various facets of writing. The tale of the stone is engraved on a rock. The Daoist and the Buddhist Monk inscribe words on the stone so that people will know it is a "marvelous object" (*qiwu* 奇物). The Daoist copies out the story of the Stone, which subsequently goes through various emendations. In a seemingly innocuous passage, the narrator concludes his account of the genesis of the tale with a history of its transmission, a history which is marked by a series of inscriptions, transcriptions, and revisions:

For a long time Vanitas stood lost in thought, pondering this speech. He then subjected the *Story of the Stone* to a careful second reading. He could see that its main theme was love; that it consisted quite simply of a true record of real events; and that it was entirely free from any tendency to deprave and corrupt. He therefore copied (*chaolu* 抄录) it all out from beginning to end and took it back with him to look for a publisher. As a consequence of all this, Vanitas, starting off in the Void came to the contemplation of Form; and from Form engendered Passion; and by communicating Passion, entered again into Form; and from Form awoke to the Void. He therefore changed his name from Vanitas to Brother Amor, or the Passionate Monk, and changed the title of the book from *The Story of the Stone* to *The Tale of Brother Amor*. Old Kong Meixi from the homeland of Confucius called (*tiyue* 题曰; lit. entitled) the book *A Mirror for the Romantic*. Wu Yufeng called (*tiyue*) it *A Dream of Golden Days*. Cao Xueqin in his Nostalgia Studio worked on it for ten years, in the course of which he rewrote it no less than five times, dividing it into chapters, composing chapter headings, renaming it

insights without suggesting that transitive and intransitive beginnings are coterminous with literacy and orality. In any chirographic culture there is some oral residue.

The Twelve Beauties of Jinling, and adding an introductory quatrain. Red Inkstone restored the original title when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it.⁶⁵ (my italics)

This description of a parade of editors who tinkered with the title, altered the content and exercised various kinds of editorial control is extremely tantalizing.⁶⁶ In a sleight of hand, the narrator even casts the author, Cao Xueqin, as one of the editors of the narrative, further obfuscating the identity of a unitary author conventionally signified by a single signature. We are told that the successive editors were content with naming and renaming the narrative. Whatever one might make of this almost proprietary interest in the name of the narrative, it is clear that all the changes materialized on the surface of the manuscript with the help of a brush. Though never explicitly mentioned, the instrument of these changes, the brush, is present throughout the passage, hammering home the chirographic nature of the narrative.⁶⁷

Not coincidentally, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* presents a world that teems with authors. It is a world in which the written word figures conspicuously. Almost all the characters are accomplished poets and essayists. Their daily lives resolve around poetic societies and literary competitions. Noetic riddles and inscriptions authored by invisible forces greater than the characters portend their eventual fates. So defined is Daiyu by her literary sensibilities and talents that when she burns her poems before she dies the gesture amounts to symbolic self-immolation.

If the first chapter of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* engages the reader in a discussion on the nature of reading, as Yu eloquently argues, the novel's beginning also brings to the fore its own genesis shaped by multiple authors and editors. The prominence given to Red Inkstone, in particular, is prophetic. Throughout its reception history, the novel's most famous and elusive commentator looms large. His cryptic hints send the reader in various directions to fill the various gaps. Red Inkstone's insider status, putative influence on Cao Xueqin, and privileged knowledge endow the commentator with an importance among many scholars that surpasses that of the author, since Cao Xueqin's last chapters are no longer available. Red Inkstone's words are all we have to go by. The circle of editors and commentators, who are necessarily the novel's readers, constitutes a small community of writers who actively participate in its creation. Reading leads to writing.

⁶⁵ *The Story of the Stone*, 51.

⁶⁶ The identity of these shadowy editors has sent scholars on a wild goose chase. Hu Shi and Wu Shichang have identified Kong Meixi as Cao Xueqin's younger brother Cao Tangcun, and according to Zhao Gang and Chen Zhongyi, Wu Fufeng is the pseudonym of Cao Fu, the author's father, but the identification is highly conjectural at best.

⁶⁷ In this connection it is interesting to note the difference between Hawkes' translation and the Chinese original. Instead of Hawkes' more ambiguous word "called," in the Chinese original, the word "tiyue 题曰" (to entitle), which obviously implies writing, is used; Kong Meixi "entitled" (tiyue 题曰) the narrative *A Mirror for the Romantic*. Wu Yufeng also "entitled" (tiyue 题曰) the narrative *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The novel circulated in manuscript before it was first published in 1791, nearly three decades after the author's death; more than a dozen copies are known to exist. Why publication took so long when the technology of mass-producing identical copies was available is an interesting question. Whatever the answer, spending a vast amount of money to acquire a handwritten copy of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* or commissioning someone to copy the voluminous novel painstakingly by hand objectifies it. Its materiality speaks of its intrinsic, as well as enhancing its extrinsic, value. Evidence suggests that at least ten years before Cao Xueqin's death admirers of his work began to hand-copy the novel. The devotional aspect of disseminating the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in manuscript — initially among a small circle of friends — cannot be overlooked.

Even as the reader-turned scribes paid homage to the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, they introduced textual instability through variants and errors. At the same time authorial control becomes more and more diluted and the “origins” and originality of the tale less and less certain in a way that is inscribed in the novel's beginning. The first person to tamper with the tale is Vanitas, who after copying the inscription on the stone “from beginning to end” changes its title from *The Story of the Stone* to *The Tale of Brother Amor*, thus naming the novel after himself. It is but the first step in the slippery process of transmission from the original tale carved in stone. Each new copy obscures the original inscription, which recedes further and further into the background as the list of editors who change the novel's title suggests.⁶⁸ Instead of taking advantage of Stone's original inscription to make a rubbing, a form of printing which would reproduce it faithfully, Vanitas turns to hand copying. It is the brush that enables him and his followers, Kong Meixi, Wu Fufeng, Cao Xueqin, Red Inkstone, to join Stone and ultimately supersede him as the authors of the story. The transmission history described in the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is therefore the reverse of printing. Instead of fixing the text through printing, the copyist-editor-authors destabilize it by putting their own stamp, deliberately or not, on the novel. Hand copying is not only a gesture of veneration but also an opportunity for authorship. After posing the question of its own origins, the novel proceeds to unravel the very notion of pure unadulterated beginnings. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is tainted at the source. It illustrates how readers, commentators, scribes, all contribute to its writing.

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is symptomatic of the new neurosis that had spared writers of earlier times. The novel marks the end of a

⁶⁸ For an interesting discussion of Chinese rubbings, see Wu Hung “On Rubbings: their Materiality and Historicity,” in Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu eds., *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003): 29-72. As Wu points out, because each rubbing is treasured as a unique work of art in its own right, with time the original heavy stone stele, subject to ravages of time, becomes more and more elusive and ephemeral than copies of it on paper. The same mechanism seems at work in the *Honglou meng*. Each copy of the novel deviates from the “original” and from each other.

narrative tradition largely innocent of anxiety of influence. Chapter One, in particular, exhibits a level of self-consciousness that is all but unprecedented; only Li Yu's fiction is comparable in this respect. The narrator is clearly aware of his departure from tradition, and is, in fact, quite anxious to highlight the difference. Seen against the background of earlier vernacular fiction, the beginning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is nothing short of revolutionary. However, even as the first chapter of the novel stresses the need to differ from predecessors in a chirographic culture and emphasizes the autonomous status of this particular text, it reveals the impossibility of such autonomy. Writing has a way of entangling a text in a web of prior discourses. While origin and originality — Stone's twin concerns — are necessary points of departure, they prove ultimately elusive.