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Yu Pingbo's *Studies on The Story of the Stone*: A Book Review

Kaige Song

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Jilin University, Changchun 130012, Jilin, China.

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Corresponding author: Kaige Song, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Jilin University, Changchun 130012, Jilin, China.

Abstract

Yu Pingbo's Studies on The Story of the Stone is the authoritative work of Yu Pingbo's Redology studies (the scholarship on *The Story of the Stone*). It consists of three volumes with a total of sixteen essays. These essays address abundant research topics, such as the continuation of the novel, textual collation, the interpretation of content, the novel's style, and the incomplete state of the original manuscript. By the combination of textual collation and literary appreciation, Yu lays the foundation for the new paradigm of literary criticism. It inspires literary studies to conform to scientific research methods. He also embeds letters, diagrams, and annotations into his arguments. These devices make this book both interesting and persuasive. This book is China's classical representative work of Redology studies, implying enduring value for contemporary Redology scholarship. In recent years, the translation and dissemination of Chinese literary works have been gaining much emphasis. It remains necessary and urgent to make Redology enthusiasts and researchers in English countries pay attention to Redology scholars' classical studies.

Keywords

The Story of the Stone; Redology; Literary criticism; Translation

1. Introduction

In the long history of Chinese literary studies, research on *The Story of the Stone* (红楼梦), which is also usually known as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, has occupied a position of paramount importance. The novel is situated in the context of nascent world literature at that time and intervenes in the field of East-West comparative literature in the early modern period (Lu, 2024, p.207). It has attracted a large body of scholars and yielded a wealth of academic fruits, with distinguished Redology specialists such as Yu Pingbo and Hu Shi emerging as representative figures. As Wu summarizes, "the novel has inspired a ceaseless flow of critical interpretation, ranging from the allegorical, autobiographical, and bibliographical to the poststructural." (Wu, 2017, p. xi) At present, while Redology continues to engage with the frontiers of contemporary scholarship, it should also attach due importance to the invaluable intellectual legacy left by early generations of Redology scholars.

Yu Pingbo was a prominent Chinese Redology scholar, essayist, and poet. Yu's work cannot be accomplished without the social context. What is at stake is to take a sociological view to evaluate this work. The New Redology School, the most influential current in twentieth-century Redology, was led by Yu. The New Redology advocated bold hypotheses, cautious verification, and the application of scientific methods in literary research. These principles pervade Yu's lifelong engagement with *The Story of the Stone*. As early as 1923, Yu compiled and published his

research in a title of *The Discriminations on The Story of the Stone* (红楼梦辨). With time going by, however, he came to recognize that the book contained some errors requiring correction, along with discoveries that warranted inclusion. Accordingly, Yu revised and reorganized his Redology studies, publishing *Yu Pingbo's Studies on The Story of the Stone* in 1952. This work stands as Yu's representative contribution to Redology and, having been reprinted repeatedly in China, has become a landmark not only in the history of Redology but also in the broader history of Chinese literary scholarship.

2. Yu's Explorations on Various Topics and Research Perspectives of The Story of the Stone

Yu's work often incorporates his sociological research on narrative. This article seeks to discuss this point by examining its body parts. *Yu Pingbo's Studies on The Story of the Stone* is divided into three volumes, comprising sixteen essays in total. I set out to review these essays to produce insights into the current Redology studies.

2.1 Multidimensional Studies on the Last Forty Chapters

The first volume contains five essays, the central theme of which is the continuation of the novel. It was generally believed that *The Story of the Stone* consists of 120 chapters, with the first eighty composed by Cao Xueqin and the final forty attributed to Gao E or an anonymous one. The research on the last forty chapters has always been a hot topic (Chen, 2002). Yet few readers have examined in depth the difficulties, sources, and quality of this continuation. In his opening essay, Yu demonstrates that continuation is, in fact, an impossibility. All extant versions of Chapter 35 lack a certain passage, but even supplying this single passage proves extremely difficult, let alone extending the narrative for an additional forty chapters. "One must thoroughly understand the characters' personalities and their environment before setting pen to paper." (Song, 2025, p. 5) For modern readers and writers, with centuries having passed since Cao's time, the task becomes even more unfeasible. Thus, Yu concludes that continuation is ultimately a thankless undertaking. Subsequently, adopting a rigorous scholarly attitude and grounding his arguments in factual evidence, Yu offered a measured assessment of the chapter titles and textual content of Gao E's continuation. He first clarified that the forty chapter titles were not part of Cao's original composition. Before the publication of the 120-chapter version by Gao E and Cheng Weiyuan, the versions circulating in society all contained only eighty chapters. In order to circulate the continuation together with the original, Gao and Cheng falsely claimed that the work had originally contained 120 chapter titles. By comparing the titles of Gao's forty chapters with the content of the first eighty chapters, Yu uncovered numerous contradictions. For example, the narrative indicates that Bao-yu's ultimate fate should be one of destitution, yet the title of Chapter 119 proclaims "Bao-yu becomes a Provincial Graduate and serves worldly ties". This contradiction alone makes it indisputable that the final forty chapters are a continuation. Yu acknowledged those elements of the continuation that were well executed while also directly pointing out its errors. In the third essay, he enumerated the places where Gao's continuation is supported by evidence from the first eighty chapters—for example, the early death of Dai-yu, Bao-chai's widowhood, and Tan chun's distant marriage. The fourth essay, by contrast, is devoted to a critique of the continuation. Yu's criticism is guided by three criteria: whether the continuation conforms to reason, whether it moves the reader, and whether it resembles the style of the first eighty chapters. Regrettably, Gao's continuation fails to meet all three. For instance, Dai-yu's illness alternately improves and deteriorates without coherence, violating the criterion of plausibility. Yu further observed that one of the principal reasons for Gao's shortcomings lies in the disparity between Gao's social background and Cao's own life experience. Generally, drawing on abundant textual evidence, Yu provided a balanced and historically informed evaluation of Gao E's forty-chapter continuation. His work not only clarifies Gao's role in the transmission of *The Story of the Stone*, but also advances the study of the novel toward greater rationality and methodological rigor. Yu was a scholar who grew up against the background of the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth era. His teaching experiences at Beijing University and Tsinghua University earned him significant social and cultural capital and academic status. They all influenced his usage of textual evidence in his research.

2.2 Macro-level Stylistic Analysis and Micro-level Narrative Meanings

The second volume comprises six essays. This section covers both macro-level inquiries into the stylistic features of *The Story of the Stone* and micro-level discussions of specific topics, such as the narrative locations and the death of Qin Keqing. Regarding Cao's authorial stance in composing *The Story of the Stone*, various biases have long

prevailed within Redology, with few persuasive explanations. In the opening essay of this volume, Yu incisively argued that Cao's authorial attitude must be examined in light of two aspects. "The first is to examine the author's own words within the novel itself" (2025, p. 75), and "The second method is to look at the context in which the author lived—his environment and the history of his life" (Song, 2025, p. 75) Yu affirmed the autobiographical dimension of the novel, noting that many of Jia Bao-yu's traits reflect those of Cao himself. On this basis, Yu argued in the second essay that the style of *The Story of the Stone* is rooted in lived reality. "All the characters and events in the novel have real-life prototypes, so the author's greatest skill lies in lifelike portrayal." (Song, 2025, p. 85) In depicting their virtues, Cao also revealed their flaws: Dai-yu's sharp tongue and petty temperament, Qin Keqing's licentiousness, and Wang Xifeng's scheming and duplicity are prime examples. The third essay investigates the question of geographical setting in *The Story of the Stone*. Drawing upon linguistic clues in the text, the vicissitudes of the Cao family, and Cao's biography, Yu concluded that the narrative takes place primarily in Beijing, though interwoven with reminiscence and imagination, thus incorporating many landscapes of the Southern region. Yu's detailed examination of such specific topics demonstrates both the rigor and comprehensiveness of his scholarship. What is most commendable in Yu is his grounded scholarly spirit. His critique of the flaws in Gao E's continuation was not mere armchair theorizing; he himself advanced his own views on the novel beyond the first eighty chapters. In the fourth essay, he explored the destinies of the Jia clan, Bao-yu, the Twelve Beauties of Jinling, and other figures beyond Chapter 80. The fifth essay explored the cause of Qin Keqing's death. Two explanations had long circulated. She died of illness, or she hanged herself. Yu cited extensive correspondence on this topic between himself and his friend Gu Jiegang. Through cross-examination of multiple sources and sustained discussion, they ultimately confirmed that Qin Keqing committed suicide by hanging. The correspondence was not simply personal letters, but the carrier of academic communities. It illuminated how Redology findings came into being in social relations. In the sixth essay, Yu examined another supplementary version of the text. Yu and Gu discussed the fates of Bao-yu, Bao-chai, and Xiangyun, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of this version against Gao's continuation. The discovery of this supplement enriched the primary materials of Redology, laying the groundwork for later textual studies of the novel.

2.3 Several Versions of The Story of the Stone and Its Title

The third volume comprises five essays, focusing chiefly on the textual history of several versions of *The Story of the Stone*. The first essay investigates the incomplete state of the manuscript of the first eighty chapters. "This so-called 'completion' is only in a general sense, as the text was not finely polished or revised in detail." (Song, 2025, p. 161) Yu identified several types of incompleteness, including missing chapters, missing chapter-endings, missing chapter titles, and discrepancies in titles across different versions. The second essay bears a particularly striking title. While the expression "the last forty chapters" is common, this essay instead explores "the last thirty chapters". Yu explained that "the number of chapter headings depends on the division of chapters, which varied in size." (Song, 2025, p. 173) Based on his study of several annotated versions bearing the commentary of Zhiyanzhai, Yu argued that the original manuscript comprised 110 chapters in its detailed division, or 100 chapters in its broader division. Thus, the claim by Cheng and Gao that the novel originally had 120 chapters cannot be sustained. From a sociological perspective, Yu was not only a scholar finding out the existing mistakes, but also a social actor who attempted to reconstruct the textual authority and authenticity. The third essay examines the drinking game scene in Chapter 63. Yu analyzed the seating order of the characters and presented the arrangement in diagrammatic form, rendering the discussion both clear and interesting for readers. He also offered interpretations of the verses each character drew by lot. The fourth essay corresponds to the Preface of the book. There Yu had noted that one reason *The Story of the Stone* is considered a "marvelous book" lies in its multiple titles: *The Story of the Stone* (石头记), *The Tale of Brother Amor* (情僧录), *A Dream of Red Mansions* (红楼梦), *The Mirror of Love and Lust* (风月宝鉴), and *The Twelve Beauties of Jinling* (金陵十二钗). This essay provides textual corroboration and explanation of this phenomenon. The fifth essay discusses Yu's collation of the opening chapter across different versions, listing five textual witnesses that future scholars may further consult.

3. Advantages and Limitations of Yu's Work

Yu Pingbo's Studies on The Story of the Stone includes Yu's painstaking revisions and careful emendations, embodying both his rigorous scholarly attitude and his deep passion for Redology. The book displays a pronounced

sense of scholarly problem-consciousness and intellectual innovation. On the one hand, Yu did not uncritically accept the received claim that the continuation belonged to the original work. Instead, he perceptively identified the continuation as a crucial research problem. Drawing upon close reading of both the original and the continuation, as well as multiple forms of evidence, he composed a series of studies. On the other hand, unlike most Redology research of his contemporaries, Yu skillfully integrated letters, diagrams, annotations, and other devices into his arguments. These devices not only enhanced the accessibility of his essays but also strengthened their persuasiveness.

Because *The Story of the Stone* is "the most vivid and comprehensive reflection of late imperial culture and social institutions" (Anthony, 1997, p, xi), there are bountiful Redology topics to explore. The Redology topics addressed in this book represent a vast, complex, and often contested field. Yet Yu accomplished this formidable task with distinction. The work exhibits three overarching scholarly characteristics. First, its scope is wide-ranging. The subjects explored include the continuation of the novel, textual collation, interpretation of content, and the author's attitude, thereby setting directions for the further expansion and deepening of Redology. Second, its methodology is scientific. Yu's scholarship integrates both philological rigor and aesthetic sensitivity. By combining textual criticism with literary appreciation, he inaugurated a new paradigm of literary criticism and inspired later efforts to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches in Redology. Third, its exposition is lucid and accessible. While maintaining scholarly rigor, the language remains approachable, meeting the needs of both specialists and general readers of *The Story of the Stone*. Through his profound expertise, Yu expanded the horizons and methodologies of Redology, showing his professionalism and forward-looking vision. The materials and perspectives presented in this work remain of enduring value to contemporary Redology scholarship. However, Yu's work also has its shortcomings. For one thing, constrained by the social and historical contexts, Yu can only touch upon the limited research materials. Therefore, some of his ideas need more evidence. For another thing, his evaluation of Gao's continuation is far too strict. The literary and socio-cultural values of Gao's continuation should still be highlighted. Yet, the shortcomings do not influence the classical and academic status of this work. In the era of big data, more advanced statistical methods and text mining techniques can be utilized to reexamine Yu's ideas and findings. For example, a Principal Component Analysis is performed to investigate the disputed authorship of the novel (Zhu, Lei & Craig, 2020). Word-length distribution is employed to identify authorship attribution (Yu, Liu & Feng, 2022).

In recent years, research on *The Story of the Stone* has been gaining increasing attention in the English-speaking world. Not only has the number of English journal articles grown, but several monographs devoted to the subject have also appeared. Hou uses a corpus method to explore the nominalization phenomenon in three translation versions of this novel (Hou, 2014). In addition, in another representative monograph, both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to explore this novel's literary and translation implications (Moratto, Liu, & Chao, 2022). Nevertheless, the classic studies of Redology in China have rarely been translated into English and made accessible to English readers. Fortunately, in 2025, the English translation of *Yu Pingbo's Studies on The Story of the Stone* was published by New Vision Press in the United States. This is the first time that a Chinese scholar's foundational Redology monograph has been translated into English, marking a significant step for the transmission and promotion of Redology. It can be confidently anticipated that more classic Chinese monographs on *The Story of the Stone* will be translated into English and other languages in the future, thereby attracting more scholars to this field and further enhancing the novel's international influence.

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