ISSN 3034-3836 (Online)

Dialogue of Cultures

Original article
UDC 78.01, 782, 821.581
https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.2.117-132
EDN KVJVJX

Cao Xueqin's Novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the Opera of the Same Name by Bright Sheng and David Henry Hwang in the Space of Art Historical Discourse

Zheng Yue

Saratov State L.V. Sobinov Conservatoire,
Saratov, Russian Federation,
1318208266@qq.com✉, *https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9199-8120*

Abstract. Cao Xueqin's classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* was vividly reimagined in the eponymous academic opera by Bright Sheng and David Henry Hwang in a production that seamlessly integrates Eastern and Western cultural traditions. Due to its intriguing manifestation of aesthetic dialogue between East and West, the work has become a significant subject of contemporary art history research. In order to understand the problems of transforming literary sources into academic opera and specific mechanisms of interspecific artistic transformation, along with the particular aspects of cultural dialogue between East and West in the context of a globalised space, a wide range of scholarly literature should be considered. In the article, the work is considered according to the following aspects: general works on the writer Cao Xueqin, those specifically dedicated to the history of the composition, the ideological circle and philosophy of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, works that discuss the characters and the specifics of their interaction, modern works that consider the creation and dramaturgy of Sheng and Hwang's opera, as well as research on traditional Eastern aesthetics and artistic production of modern opera.

Keywords: Cao Xueqin, "Dream of the Red Chamber" (novel), "Dream of the Red Chamber" (opera), Bright Sheng, David Henry Hwang, redology, art history

For citation: Zheng Yue. Cao Xueqin's Novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the Opera of the Same Name by Bright Sheng and David Henry Hwang in the Space of Art Historical Discourse. *Russian Musicology*. 2026, no. 2, pp. 117–132. https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.2.117-132

Translated by Thomas Alexander Beavitt, Laboratory for Scientific Translation (https://nauka-perevod.ru/eng).

© Zheng Yue, 2026

Роман Цао Сюэциня «Сон в красном тереме» и одноимённая опера Б. Шэна и Д.Г. Хвана в пространстве искусствоведческого дискурса

Чжэн Юэ

Саратовская государственная консерватория имени Л.В. Собинова,
г. Саратов, Российская Федерация,
1318208266@qq.com✉, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9199-8120

Аннотация. Классический роман Цао Сюэциня «Сон в красном тереме» получил яркое претворение в одноимённой академической опере Брайта Шэна и Дэвида Генри Хвана, органично объединившей в своём пространстве восточные и западные культурные традиции, что стало интересным примером эстетического диалога Востока и Запада и сделало данное явление значимым объектом современного искусствоведческого исследования. Для понимания проблем претворения литературного первоисточника в академической опере, механизмов межвидовой художественной трансформации, а также особенностей культурного диалога Востока и Запада в условиях глобализированного пространства оказалось важно изучение научной литературы широкого диапазона. В статье она рассматривается по следующим направлениям: труды о творчестве писателя Цао Сюэциня; об истории сочинения, идейном круге и философии романа «Сон в красном тереме»; о героях, их характерах и специфике взаимодействия; работы по вопросам создания и драматургии оперы Шэна и Хвана; исследования о традиционной восточной эстетике и художественной постановке современной оперы.

Ключевые слова: Цао Сюэцинь, роман «Сон в красном тереме», опера «Сон в красном тереме», Брайт Шэн, Дэвид Генри Хван, редология, искусствоведение

Introduction

Cao Xueqin's[1] novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Palladius system: *Hong lou meng*; Chinese: 红楼梦) [1; 2; 3] is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. It is a large-scale work comprising many relatively independent parts. According to the author, the book "was created over the course of ten years <…> the text was supplemented five times and repeatedly edited," [1, p. 4] which testifies to the desire for artistic perfection. The result was the creation of a work that was to become an outstanding monument of Chinese culture.

According to surviving manuscript materials, the author's text of the novel included eighty chapters. However, the commentary of Zhi Yanzhai[2] refers to a continuation that was subsequently lost. The completion of the novel in the form of forty chapters is credited to Gao E. It is precisely thanks to this that the reader gains the opportunity to follow the continuation

[1] Cao Xueqin (1715–1763) — novelist, poet and artist.

[2] Zhi Yanzhai is the pseudonym of the first critic of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

of events and form a complete picture of the characters' fates. The novel's multifaceted dramaturgy includes several plot lines: the love story of Baoyu, Daiyu and Baochai, the decline and ruin of the noble Jia clan, the fates of numerous female characters, as well as portrayals of social contradictions and moral conflicts of feudal Chinese society.[3]

The narrative, which is saturated with symbolism and allegory, is constructed around a synthesis of prose text and poetic inserts to give the work its notable multi-layered quality. At the same time, the language of the novel itself is distinguished by a high degree of poetic quality, especially in the descriptions of nature and the relationships between the characters. The sophistication of style, the depth of imagery, and the emotional expressiveness allow the reader to subtly perceive the inner world of the characters and the dynamics of their feelings. It was precisely this poetic quality, combined with vivid dramaturgy, that made the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* a particularly favourable basis for an operatic adaptation.

The fate of the work and its interpretation in the form of publications with commentary and scholarly works unfolded at a time of great socio-cultural change, when the traditional system of values and artistic representations began to collide with external influences. Following the Opium War,[4] China was forced to open its trading ports, leading to gradually increasing cultural exchange with the West. Thus, the distribution and reception of the novel occurred at a time of expanding contacts with Western countries. Thanks to its translation into many languages, the book became known throughout the world.

The international recognition of the novel and its widespread dissemination in the Western cultural environment contributed to the emergence of new forms of artistic understanding of this work, including in the field of musical theatre. One of the most significant examples of such an engagement with this classical Chinese plot was its academic operatic adaptation. Having heard of Bright Sheng's composition work,[5] David Gockley, former director of the San Francisco Opera, decided to approach the composer with the initiative to adapt Cao Xueqin's novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* into a musical-theatrical work. Intrigued by the idea, Sheng invited the experienced screenwriter David Henry Hwang[6] to create the libretto

---

[3] For the first eighty chapters, the love between Baoyu and Daiyu is still blossoming — the protagonists experience deep mutual affection and cannot imagine life without each other. However, their relationship is destroyed by the intervention of the family, who replace the bride on the wedding day. The tragic destruction of love becomes the novel's climax, vividly revealed in Gao E's conclusion, in which he creates expressive and psychologically compelling images of the older generation — Mother Jia, Madam Wang, and Wang Xifeng — that emphasise their cruelty, imperiousness, and treachery. Against this backdrop, Baoyu's obsession and Daiyu's despair, as well as her death, which is accompanied by the music of Baoyu and Baochai's wedding, are revealed in a particularly tragic way. Baoyu himself, despite having achieved success in the state examinations and received an official position, ultimately retreats from the world to a monastery. Thus, the love story of Baoyu and Daiyu, who rebelled against feudal norms and social restrictions, ends in deep tragedy. The contrast between Daiyu's death and the solemn wedding ceremony of Baoyu and Baochai creates a particularly strong artistic effect.

[4] The First Opium War took place between 1840 and 1842, while the Second was fought in the years between 1856 and 1860.

[5] Bright Sheng (b. 1955, Shanghai) is an American composer of Chinese origin, conductor and pianist of international renown.

[6] David Henry Hwang (b. 1957) is an American writer, also of Chinese descent.

for the opera. The San Francisco Musical Theatre hired Lai Shengchuan[7] as director, and Ye Jintian[8] as stage designer and costume designer. As a result of a long and complex process of intercultural artistic communication, the project was successfully implemented.

On September 10, 2016, the San Francisco Opera hosted the world premiere of the English-language opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*, [4] which became an important cultural event in terms of introducing Western audiences to the artistic world of the Chinese classical tradition. This significant creative experiment generated a wide public and audience response, which was particularly evident in the demand for the performances. With a capacity of 3,150 spectators, the San Francisco Opera's attendance was 97%, some performances completely selling out with standing room only. It seems that many people wanted to see firsthand how Western opera would interpret classical Chinese literature. The success of this opera, in turn, attracted the attention of researchers.

In the operatic interpretation, as in the novel, the central place is occupied by the love triangle of Baoyu, Daiyu and Baochai, while conflicts within aristocratic families and the struggle for power form a secondary, but closely connected to the main storyline. This structure heightens dramatic tension by emphasising the connection between the characters' personal lives and the rise and fall of their families.

Both the novel and the opera are examples of highly artistic works, whose detailed study is relevant to scholarly research. The present article sets out to review and systematise art criticism literature related to Cao Xueqin's novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the opera of the same name by Sheng and Hwang, as well as analysing the main directions of their study in traditional and modern scientific discourse. Here the main aim is to identify and summarise existing research approaches to the work of Cao Xueqin, systematise the problems of the novel, including the rich system of characters, as well as to consider the dramaturgy of the opera along with issues of interaction between Eastern and Western artistic traditions. Taking this approach, we will identify the most significant aspects of the study of the literary source and its operatic interpretation, as well as outline the prospects for further research in the field of interspecific artistic transformation and cultural dialogue between East and West.

Creativity of Cao Xueqin

The sources and theoretical works that are the subject of this study can be grouped into several main areas. The first group comprises works that shed light on issues related to the life of Cao Xueqin, given that historical events left a particular autobiographical imprint on the novel's plot, as well as studies of his literary work.

The Palace Museum of the Ming and Qing Dynasties has an archives section that contains the book *About the Jiangning Weaver Cao: Family, Documents, and Historical Materials* (1975). [5] This book, which was created in the Palace Museum, is an important source for revealing the family's history during the Qing Dynasty. The book provides an insight into the position and influence of the Cao family in politics, economics and culture.

The researcher Feng Qiyong argues that to gain a deeper understanding of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is especially important to understand the history and origins of the author and his family. In *Narrative Essay on Cao's Studies* (1992) [6] he examined the origins of the

[7] Lai Sheng-chuan (b. 1954) is a playwright and director from Taiwan Province of China.

[8] Ye Jintian (b. 1967, Hong Kong) is an art director, costume and set designer.

Cao family and the changes it underwent under the influence of historical events. By collecting and analysing biographical documents, Wu Xinlei and Huang Jinde in the book *Jiangnan Family History of Cao Xueqin* (2009) [7] developed the issues of origin, migration and development of the Cao Xueqin family, as well as testing hypotheses, presenting facts and evidence about the events of the writer's life related to his youth in Nanjing, the service of his ancestors as inspectors of silk manufactories, the prosperity and fall of the Cao clan, as well as the prototypes of the characters and places of action of the novel. In his work *Genetic Examination of the Families of Cao Cao and Cao Xueqin* (2017), [8] Kang Dongdong combines modern DNA science and technology with historical documents and archaeological data to conduct a comprehensive study of the history of Cao Xueqin's family. His theoretical generalisations not only fill a gap in historical research, but also facilitate subsequent study of the work of the famous writer.

One of the volumes of the anthology edited by Wu Enyu [9] presents unknown works by Cao Xueqin (2019). The author collected and analysed a wide variety of works. This book is important for understanding the creative thought and artistic style of Cao Xueqin. By expressing his thoughts about the value of the Chinese author's works, Wu Enyu provides important recommendations about the artistic world of his creations.

Thus, new methods and approaches open up additional perspectives for understanding the historical origins of Cao Xueqin's family and expand the possibilities for revealing the content of the novel. The interdisciplinary study of genetic data not only enriches the tools of historical research but also provides new clues and foundations for understanding history. In order to provide a deeper understanding of the historical evolution and cultural heritage of the Cao family, genetic data has also been used. By studying the customs of the Cao family, scholars identify the characteristics of the writer's creative style and his ideological orientation to support a more accurate interpretation of the cultural subtext of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the plot of the subsequent opera. Despite using Western operatic form, Sheng and Hwang's composition retains the historical context, cultural subtext, and spiritual content of the novel. Thus, when understanding how traditional Chinese values are reimagined in the stage version, accounts of the origins of the Cao family provide an important historical and cultural background for the play.

Poetics and Philosophy of the Novel

A separate group of studies consists of the works of famous philosophers and art historians, which are dedicated to aspects of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* that include the process of its composition, conceptual spheres and problems, editions of the work, questions of its incompleteness and the emergence of stylistically different versions of the text in this connection.

The Chinese writer and researcher Yi Su became the author of a fundamental work (1963), which was included in the book series *Collection of Scientific Materials on Classical Literature.* [10] His theoretical work consists of six parts. The first contains information about the creators of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* — Cao Xueqin and Gao E (the author, who wrote the last forty chapters of the novel). The second part is devoted to editions, sequels, musical and theatrical performances and imitations of the book. The third part presents an analytical commentary on the plot, as well as offering a characterisation of the characters in the novel. The fourth part includes a review of film music and other works based on the novel, as well as poems, paintings, songs, Cao Xueqin's diaries,

official documents and decrees. The fifth part analyses poems from the novel, most of which acquired independent artistic significance to form the basis for much subsequent novel writing. The sixth part is a collection of texts by Chinese literary scholars, thinkers and critics of the 19th and 20th centuries about *Dream of the Red Chamber*, revealing the depth and multidimensionality of the ideas embedded in the book, which gives the reader a complete understanding of the significance of the book in the history of Chinese culture. Yi Su not only provides researchers with a wealth of factual material, but also makes it more accessible for use through systematisation and classification.

In his 1973 book *A Study of "Dream of the Red Chamber"* [11] Yu Pingbo examines the background, ideological subtext and artistic features of the novel. He pays special attention to such important episodes as the rise and fall of Daguanyuan,[9] the fall of the House of Jia, and the love tragedy between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, which reveal the suffering of lower-class people and the hypocrisy of the feudal family system. In addition, the literary scholar focuses on the art of versification, which reveal the poetic talents of such characters as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. Yu Pingbo's interesting aspects, research methods, and ideas became valuable reference points for later researchers.

In his 1973 book *Cao Xueqin and his "Dream of the Red Chamber,"* [12] Li Xifan examines in detail the background to the creation of the novel, as well as the thematic ideas of the work. He argues that *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is not only a literary masterpiece, but also a political and historical novel with profound social significance. The researcher notes that Cao Xueqin reveals the dark sides of human nature that accompanies people's desire for glory, as well as expressing a longing for freedom, equality and true love. In addition, Li Xifan's book introduces the history and current state of redology,[10] as well as the literary scholar's own experience and achievements in this field.

Zhou Ruchang's work *A New Argument for "Dream of the Red Chamber"* (1976) [13] is a work of great scholarly value, not only containing interesting information, but also contributing to the development of redology by outlining new research perspectives. The book draws on a wide range of sources, such as general history, political works, archives, local historical records, anthologies, genealogies, biographies, notes, and other historical materials. In fact, all subsequent articles, reviews, books and periodicals on redology were created under the influence of the large-scale work of Zhou Ruchang. This book today is cited as a sign that the study of redology has entered a new stage — an era of systematic, comprehensive scientific research.

In his 1989 *A Study of the Novel "Dream of the Red Chamber,"* [14] which focuses on the time of the book's creation and its editions, Hu Shi offers many new ideas and conclusions. By comparing the versions of the novel's continuation to identify the differences and features of each of them, the work lays a solid

---

[9] Daguanyuan (Chinese: 大观园) is a residence built by the Jia family for their daughter Jia Yuanchun, who became a princess. It symbolises the greatness of the Jia family. Daguanyuan epitomises the author's ideals of life and society. The great garden thus becomes the embodiment of the realm of illusion in the mortal world. The plot of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* mainly unfolds at Daguanyuan.

[10] Redology (Chinese: 红学) is an academic field of study that focuses on everything related to the work of Cao Xueqin and his novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, from analytical research on the content and character system to the broader context, including history, philosophy, society, economics, traditional Chinese medicine, etc.

foundation for further theoretical research. In terms of methodology, Hu Shi emphasises empirical analysis of historical materials and logical reasoning, avoiding subjective assumptions and hasty generalisations. This scholarly approach ensures the reliability of the author's research findings regarding the *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

From a bibliographic standpoint, Cao Xueqin's book is examined in Zhu Danwen's 1992 work *Arguments and Facts about the Source of the Novel "Dream of the Red Chamber."* [15] The researcher provides a detailed description of the history of the creation of the novel. She argues that the main reason for the confusion in the chronology of events is due to the repeated editing of the text by Cao Xueqin himself. A large number of contradictions that objectively exist in the novel, such as the age of the characters and the temporal and spatial background of the plot, are due to the many textual interconnections and issues arising from co-authorship. Such additions, deletions and mergings, however, not only lead to chronological confusion, but also reflect the complex psychology and artistic searches of the author in the creative process.

Cao Zuyi's 2006 book *"Dream of the Red Chamber" and Mount Dagushan* [16] examines the connection between the events of the novel and the small town near Mount Dagushan where the book was written. The author studies the influence of the natural landscape, historical background and regional culture of this area on the creation of the work. The beautiful scenery and secluded geographical location of Dagushan,[11] according to Cao Zuyi, are associated with the personalities and destinies of the characters, as well as the development of the plot.

In the 1981 book *The Two Worlds of the "Dream of the Red Chamber,"* [17] Yu Yingshi notes that Cao Xueqin created two contrasting worlds in the novel: while Daguanyuan represents an ideal, the other — the society outside Daguanyuan — is all too real, being filled with life's contradictions and ugliness. By exploring the relationship between these two worlds, the researcher emphasises their interaction and influence on each other. He comes to the conclusion that the ideal world is beautiful, but eventually collapses, while the real world is ugly, but omnipresent. By making the novel's content more comprehensive, this contrast allows readers to more deeply understand the author's creative intent and its ideological subtext.

In another scholarly work, Du Jinghua [18] explores the psychological world of the characters in Cao Xueqin's book. The author reveals the inner world and emotional states of the main characters, such as Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, as well as the socio-psychological environment and the concept of life and death reflected in the novel. Through the interpretation of dreams, he reveals the deepest fears, desires and aspirations of the characters, and the writer's reflections on the philosophical questions of life, death and destiny.

In 2011, Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei jointly published the book *Commentary on the Novel "Dream of the Red Chamber" — in Search of Hidden Meanings in "Notes on Stone."* [19] In it, Wang Guowei analyses the aesthetic and ethical values of the novel. Cai Yuanpei revealed the deep meanings and

[11] During the period of writing the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Cao Xueqin had settled near Mount Xishan in the suburbs of Beijing (he lived for some time at the foot of Mount Dagushan before moving to the Xishan Mountains).

clues to its plot. This research work, with its significant results and unique perspectives, occupies an important place in the history of redology studies.

Kong Fanfang and Chen Junling (2013) examine Cao Xueqin's literary masterpiece from a philosophical perspective. [20] They focus mainly on the ideas of simple materialism and dialectics contained in the book. These ideas are vividly demonstrated through the novel's characters and plots, allowing readers to deeply experience the multifaceted nature and complexity of life.

In his 2018 work, [21] Liu Zaifu emphasises that the philosophy embedded in the content of the novel does not belong to one teaching, but represents a fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism that forms a unique and symbiotic system. This system is not only reflected in the plot and characterisation of the novel, but also has a profound influence on its overall structure and ideological core. Liu Zaifu also evaluates *Dream of the Red Chamber* from an aesthetic perspective. He argues that the novel is the pinnacle of Chinese creativity, whose unique charm consists in the interpenetration and mutual influence of the author's philosophical ideas and aesthetic concepts.

Thus, these works allow us to more accurately understand the social customs, values, and creative intentions of Cao Xueqin as reflected in the novel. By focusing on the problems of human nature, destiny and ethics, the works of a philosophical orientation help to understand the creative concept of Cao Xueqin and the philosophical ideas contained in the book. For the analysis of the opera, this range of questions is especially significant, since the philosophical ideas of the novel are reflected not only in the text of the libretto, but also in the musical dramaturgy, the system of leitmotifs and stage symbolism. Thanks to this system, it becomes possible to trace which philosophical meanings were preserved in the opera, and which received a new artistic interpretation.

Characters of the Novel

A separate group of works consists of works that offer characterisations of the novel's protagonists. In the 1983 book by Wang Kunlun *Characters in the Novel "Dream of the Red Chamber,"* [22] the personalities of the heroes and their destinies are analysed to reveal the vices of society. Based on the book's main ideas, which are related to the fight against feudalism and the glorification of free life and individual goodness, the researcher divides all the characters into two categories: those who "support feudalism" and those who rebel against it.

Zhang Jie's 2003 work [23] focuses on the artistic subtext and the unique charm of the dialogues of the characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The researcher asserts that these dialogues not only convey the inner world and character of the heroes, but also reflect the customs and cultural atmosphere of the society of a certain historical period. However, in addition, they contain a rich philosophy of life and moral ideas.

Li Ruixue (2020) [24] also emphasises the importance of dialogue in the novel. Like Zhang Jie, she argues that the characters' communication style is one of the main means of characterising them and revealing their inner world. In the novel, it is each character's unique mode of speech that fully reflects his or her personality traits and state of life. The researcher notes that Cao Xueqin often uses metaphor, symbolism, and other rhetorical devices, which give the dialogues artistic beauty. This subtle and profound way of expression not only enhances the aesthetic impact of the work, but also forces the reader to seriously consider the deep meanings hidden behind the characters' words.

O Lijuan's 2020 book *Characters in the Novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"* [25] offers a thorough analysis of the main characters of the book. The researcher pays attention to the characters' appearance and behaviour to reveal their inner world and emotional changes. Her approach is based on knowledge and methods drawn from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, mythology, etc. to create a "three-dimensional" interpretation of the novel's characters. Using this interdisciplinary approach, she reveals the richness and complexity of individuals, as well as the complex relationships and interactions between them.

Ren Jingli (2022) [26] takes a textual analysis approach to show how Cao Xueqin uses the expressive means of literary language to create vivid and voluminous characters. Focusing on the linguistic features of the novel, she reveals their role in representing the individual traits of the characters. In her opinion, the writer's verbal art serves as an inspiring example for contemporary literary creativity.

Thus, the works of the third group provide a deep analysis of the characters of the novel, revealing their character traits, the motivation for their psychological actions and the trajectory of their destinies. The cited books and articles offer new methods for studying the work's protagonists and their interactions. On the basis of this literature an idea is formed of how to analyse characters when studying the opera *Dream in the Red Chamber*, since the characters of the novel's heroes and the features of their relationships also become the foundation of musical dramaturgy. By comparing the novel and the opera, it is possible to see which character traits were retained, which were enhanced, and which were artistically reimagined.

Dramaturgy of the Opera

We will highlight in a separate group of works those that examine the issues of the creation and artistic dramaturgy of the opera by Sheng and Hwang, as well as aspects of its reception by the general public.

In his critical notes,[12] Han Xianyang analyses and evaluates the work from several points of view, focusing on the issues of creating the libretto and interpreting the original text of the novel (the opera is written in English). Han Xianyang believes that Sheng and Hwang's musical-theatrical project is not only a successful artistic attempt to adapt a literary work to the stage, but also a useful contribution to cultural exchange between China and the West, which may help to inspire people to pay attention to Chinese classical literature and traditional culture.

The 2017 work by Zhang Xue [27] studies the text of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* from the point of view of linguistic aspects, focusing in particular on the problem of interaction between words and music. In her opinion, this is a very successful adaptation. In particular, it serves as a model for foreign translation of Chinese literature and thus provides a new impetus to cultural exchange between China and the West.

---

[12] See: Han Xianyang. The opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* is stirring San Francisco. *International news: magazine "Guangming Daily"*. 2016. September 19. (In Chinese) URL: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NzM0MzQ4MQ==&mid=2654519167&idx=3&sn=c4796ab2ab1481e93048c9fc792fb86e&chksm=bd1766e98a60efff470ccd8c90127378452b761fc7bf13dbf63f8c0503907b892fb7946baad3&scene=27 (accessed: 04.04.2026); Han Xianyang. Why did the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* become popular in the USA? *International news: magazine "Guangming Daily"*. 2016. 19 October. (In Chinese) URL: https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-10/11/nw.D110000gmrb_20161011_1-12.htm (accessed: 04.04.2026).

Bright Sheng, Wei Lingzhi, Guo Yamei, Gu Yinuo, and Zhao Shengqing (2017) [28] discuss the artistic value, creative process and cultural implications of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Wen Lu and Jiang Bo (2017) present an English-language production of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the format of an analytical interview with the director Lai Shengchuan.[13] Systematising information about the genesis of the project, the composition of the creative team, and the adaptation strategy, the authors emphasise that the opera was created by a team of Chinese artists with intercultural experience. When working on the production, the director was guided by the principles of "artistic integrity," giving priority to the musical nature of the opera genre. The stage movement and acting of the artists were constructed in accordance with the musical and dramatic logic of the score, which testifies to a deep mastery of the material and a conscious adherence to the traditions of Western opera. According to the adaptation strategy, the emphasis was shifted to the love story of Baoyu, Daiyu and Baochai while reducing the secondary characters and plot branches. Thanks to this, the spiritual core of the original was preserved in the limited space of the theatre, while accurately reflecting the fate of the family and historical changes as well as integrating Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist cultural meanings. The interview between Wen Lu and Jiang Bo is valuable as a source for the analysis of the structural reorganisation of Eastern classics in Western operatic form and the mechanisms of its intercultural representation.

A short article by Liu Huafang (2018) [29] highlights the innovative achievements of the work. According to the researcher, the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a successful attempt to tell a Chinese story in the language of Western music. This cross-cultural fusion not only expands the opera's audience but also opens new avenues for the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

Deng Lin (2019) [30] examines the features of the process of creating an integrated musical-theatrical work that combines elements of traditional and Western culture in its space. It also reveals some of the problems faced when adapting works as part of the process of cross-cultural communication.

The authors of this group of reviewed works have made important contributions to understanding the history of the creation of the opera *Dream in the Red Chamber* and its stage embodiment. Thanks to these theoretical works, it becomes possible to trace how the novel was transformed into operatic form.

Eastern Aesthetics and Opera Scenography

The fifth group of scholarly studies is devoted to the problem of interaction between the traditional Eastern aesthetics of the novel and the artistic creativity of modern opera.

Zhang Fangsong's (1994) [31] study focuses on the clothing of the novel's characters and its colour palette. In particular, it is noted that Cao Xueqin, who came from a family associated with weaving production and knew the technologies of the weaving craft very well, organically integrated this knowledge as symbolic codes into the artistic structure of the work. Specific patterns of costumes and colour differences allow Zhang Fangsong to differentiate the social status of the Jia family characters and their individual

[13] Wen Lu, Jiang Bo. Director Lai Shengchuan stages the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*: Following the laws of art. Beijing: Youth Daily Newspaper. 17.08.2017. (In Chinese)
URL: http://culture.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0817/c1013-29475684.html (accessed: 04.04.2026).

qualities, using the categories of costume and colour as a means of artistic characterisation. Particular attention in the study is paid to the detail and semantic richness of the descriptions of clothing and colour in the first eighty chapters, which contrasts with their laconicism in the following forty chapters; this textual contrast is considered as an indirect argument in the discussion of the problem of the dual authorship of the novel.

Systematising the functions of colour in traditional Chinese costume, Deng Xiaoxue (2011) [32] points out that Cao Xueqin builds the colour dominant of the novel around the opposition of "red" and "green": the first symbolises the rise and decline of the Jia family, while the second refers to the unique poetics of Baoyu and Daiyu's mutual love. The researcher emphasises that the diversity of colour names and their combinations is subject to certain laws of colouristics, as well as a strict system of class restrictions, which at the institutional level reveals the ritual-hierarchical structure of feudal society. Deng Xiaoxue also analyses the correspondence of the costume to the characters' personalities, noting the idealisation of natural beauty and the emphasis on the spiritual charm of women, correlating the textual descriptions with the development of fabric dyeing technologies in the Ming and Qing eras. As a result, a thesis is put forward about the importance of understanding the costume and colouristic system of the novel for the modern practice of costume design — both in terms of demonstrative forms of adaptation and in the field of specialised research.

Jiang Yao (2025) [33], who examines the novel in three dimensions — the historical and cultural context of the era, the colour expression of the costume and the formation of the artistic image — substantiates the deep integration of the art of clothing and the literary expressiveness of the work. In her opinion, descriptions of clothing not only represent the social appearance of early Qing society during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, but also reveal the structural features of the feudal hierarchy. At the level of colour, the novel displays a variety of hues (from bright red to begonia), as well as using colour contrasts to model characters, convey their inner states, and create aesthetic space. In terms of image-building, costume functions as a means of symbolising status, demonstrating individuality, and expressing feelings, becoming an important artistic mechanism for the development of narrative.

These studies, which are located at the intersection of literary studies and visual arts, form a theoretical basis for understanding the methods of textual representation of Eastern aesthetics. The body of the works examined adequately reveals the internal structure and mechanisms of expression of Eastern traditional aesthetics in the literary text — at the levels of the costume system, colour symbolism, aesthetic semantics and figurative characteristics, which creates a theoretical basis for understanding the visuality and symbolic nature of the novel. However, with the transition of this aesthetic system into the space of a modern synthetic artistic form, i.e., opera as a music-centric genre that unites scenography, performance and visual design, new problematic fields arise associated with the transformation of expressive means and the logic of artistic representation.

In the field of contemporary intermedia practice, Ye Jintian, in his monograph *Creative Aesthetics of Ye Jintian* (2016), [34] formulates the concept of "new orientalism" as the aesthetic core of his work, which implies a synthesis of Eastern tradition and Western culture. His work on the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a substantive implementation of this concept: at the level of artistic logic, he rejects one-sided cultural borrowing, instead forming a visual-

artistic system that combines the virtual and the real in the Chinese cultural context; at the level of interpreting the text of the novel and its refraction in figurative terms, the emphasis is on identifying the spiritual core of the work, and not on reproducing external signs; at the level of visual representation, he advocates a modern translation of traditional elements and their intercultural adaptation; at the methodological level, he engages in a search for an aesthetic balance of "half reality — half fantasy." This practice opens up new possibilities for the contemporary interpretation of classical literature, laying a theoretical foundation for the visual transformation of traditional aesthetics in opera and the performing arts.

In general, contemporary research, encompassing textual aesthetics, the system of costume and colouristic symbolism, visual transformation, and intercultural operatic adaptation, has made significant progress in understanding the ways of actualising Eastern traditional aesthetics in the context of contemporary art. At the same time, the complex integration of the Eastern aesthetic paradigm and the synthetic nature of modern opera — taking into account the literary text, stage visuality, musical structure and mechanisms of intercultural communication — requires further theoretical development. It is precisely in this problematic field that the theoretical perspective and scientific significance of the problem of traditional Eastern aesthetics and the artistic creativity of modern opera are formed.

Russian-Language Studies

A separate group consists of studies published in Russian. While Cao Xueqin's classic novel is already widely known in China, it is gaining increasing popularity in Russia every year. It has been translated into Russian and reprinted several times. The novel attracts not only ordinary fans of Eastern literature, but also researchers from various fields of scholarly and humanitarian knowledge. One of the most fundamental was the study by Gao Haiyong (2001), [35] which examines the tragic motifs of the novel based on an examination of the features of the author's concept, composition and artistic techniques for revealing the main ideas. Anna Trunova's large-scale study (2017) [36] describes the influence of the novel on the subsequent literary process in China.

One of the main directions in the study of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* involves a consideration of its cultural and general historical context. Ekaterina Kolitenko (2008) [37] regards the novel as a source of knowledge about the culture of China in the 18th century, which is especially important for understanding the historical accuracy of the depiction of social structure and traditions. Zhang Lin and Zheng Luyan (2020) [38] analyse the semiotic system of clothing and ornaments to identify the symbolic codes used by Cao Xueqin. In turn, Wan Qinle (2019) [39] draws a parallel between the nihilism of the novel's protagonist Jia Baoyu and the image of Bazarov in Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, which provides a basis for considering the work from a comparative literary perspective.

Of particular interest is the review article by Dmitry Voskresensky (1995), [40] which was published in the third volume of one of the Russian editions of the novel. There are also several modern articles that discuss various aspects of Cao Xueqin's work. Valeria Maksimenko (2024) [41] reveals sentimental motives in the novel, Qian Zixing (2024) [42] analyses the meaning of names, Dema Angamaeva (2024) [43] studies stratagems, etc. There are also several works by Cui Shuo (2021, 2022) [44; 45] dedicated to the opera by Sheng and Hwang.

Thus, studies on the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, published in Russian, cover a wide range of topics and approaches. An important place is occupied by the analysis

of tragic motifs, the influence of the novel on subsequent Chinese literature, as well as its cultural and historical context. Special attention is paid to symbolism, comparative literary study and the specifics of the depicted traditions. Contemporary works continue to explore in depth various aspects of the work, including its influence on opera. This testifies to the growing interest in the novel and the versatility of its scholarly research.

Conclusion

Based on the review of works on the stated issues, the following conclusions can be drawn. Existing studies focus either on the study of the artistic world of Cao Xueqin's novel, its philosophical and aesthetic ideas and system of characters, or on the analysis of the musical and dramatic features of Sheng and Hwang's opera of the same name. The works of the first group reveal the features of the creative personality of Cao Xueqin and the place of his novel in the history of Chinese literature; the studies of the second group are devoted to the history of the creation of the work, its ideological circle and philosophical and aesthetic issues; the third group of works demonstrates the system of characters, their personalities and features of interaction; the works of the fourth group examine the process of creating the opera and the specifics of its musical and dramatic solution; the fifth group addresses issues of traditional Eastern aesthetics and the principles of artistic staging of modern opera; a separate group consists of studies in Russian, contributing to the introduction of this issue into the space of Russian-language art criticism discourse. Within the framework of the designated groups, the topic related to the processes of interspecific transformation of artistic text, the features of stage interpretation and the interaction of various cultural and aesthetic traditions is of particular interest. Indeed, to this day it remains underdeveloped. In this regard, addressing the problem of the implementation of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the space of operatic art seems to be a relevant and promising direction of research, allowing us to identify the mechanisms of interaction between literary and musical-theatrical texts, as well as to expand our understanding of the forms of artistic interpretation of classical literary heritage in modern academic opera.

References

1. Cao Xueqin. *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1987. 958 p. (In Chinese)

2. Cao Xueqin. *Dream of the Red Chamber: novel: in 2 vols.* Trans. from Chinese by V. Panasyuk, L. Menshikov. Moscow: AST Publ., 2024. Vol. 1. 976 p. (In Russ.)

3. Cao Xueqin. *Dream of the Red Chamber: novel: in 2 vols.* Trans. from Chinese by V. Panasyuk, L. Menshikov. Moscow: AST Publ., 2024. Vol. 2. 960 p. (In Russ.)

4. Opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Music by Bright Sheng, libretto by David Henry Hwang and Bright Sheng. Based on the book by Cao Xueqin; Commissioned by San Francisco Opera. New York, 2016. 525 p.

5. *About the Jiangning weaver Cao: family, documents, and historical materials.* The Palace Museum of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Archives Department. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975. 222 p. (In Chinese)

6. Feng Qiyong. *Narrative essay on Cao's studies.* Beijing: Guangming Daily Publ., 1992. 170 p. (In Chinese)

7. Wu Xinlei, Huang Jinde. *Jiangnan family history of Cao Xueqin.* Harbin: Heilongjiang Educational Organization Publ., 2009. 320 p. (In Chinese)

8. Kang Dongdong. *Genetic examination of the families of Cao Cao and Cao Xueqin*. Shanghai: Caijin University Press, 2017. 280 p. (In Chinese)

9. Wu Enyu. *Anthology of Wu Enyu. Unknown works of Cao Xueqin.* Beijing: Commercial Press, 2019, vol. 4. 311 p. (In Chinese)

10. Yi Su. *Collection of scientific materials on classical literature: "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963, vol. 1. 652 p. (In Chinese)

11. Yu Pingbo. *A study of "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1973. 183 p. (In Chinese)

12. Li Xifan. *Cao Xueqin and his "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1973. 61 p. (In Chinese)

13. Zhou Ruchang. *A new argument for "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1976. 1182 p. (In Chinese)

14. Hu Shi. *A study of the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1989. 133 p. (In Chinese)

15. Zhu Danwen. *Arguments and facts about the source of the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House, 1992. 410 p. (In Chinese)

16. Cao Zuyi. *"Dream of the Red Chamber" and mount Dagushan*. Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Publishers, 2006. 260 p. (In Chinese)

17. Yu Yingshi. *The two worlds of the "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Táiwān: Taiwan: Joint Publishing Division, 1981. 305 p. (In Chinese)

18. Du Jinghua. *The psychological world of "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: Yanshan Publishing House, 1992. 278 p. (In Chinese)

19. Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei. *Commentary on the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber" — in search of hidden meanings in "Notes on Stone"*. Shanghai: Ancient Books Publishing House, 2011. 106 p. (In Chinese)

20. Kong Fanfang, Chen Junling. Analysis of philosophical thoughts of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Social Sciences Journal*. 2013, issue 5, pp. 39–42. (In Chinese)

21. Liu Zaifu. Philosophical essay on the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Bulletin of Shanxing Normal University (publication on philosophy and social sciences): a study of ancient Chinese literature*. 2018, issue 4, pp. 5–16. (In Chinese)

22. Wang Kunlun. *Characters in the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore Publishing House, 1983. 257 p. (In Chinese)

23. Zhang Jie. Brief discussion of the artistic characteristics of character dialogue in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Bulletin of Hebei Tourism Vocational College*. 2003, issue 4, pp. 58–60. (In Chinese)

24. Li Ruixue. A brief analysis of the art of character dialogue in the linguistic art of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Journal of Comparative Studies of Cultural Innovations*. 2020, issue 5, pp. 77–78. (In Chinese)

25. Lijuan. *Characters in the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2020. 532 p. (In Chinese)

26. Ren Jingli. Discussion on the linguistic art of characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Literary Review*. 2022, issue 5, pp. 13–15. (In Chinese)

27. Zhang Xue. Looking at the adaptation of the English opera version of *Dream of the Red Chamber* from the perspective of multiple systems theory. *Masterpiece Assessment Magazine*. 2017, issue 6, pp. 13–14. (In Chinese)

28. Bright Sheng, Wei Lingzhi, Guo Yamei, Gu Yinuo, Zhao Shengqing. A story about the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Journal of Cao Xueqin Studies*. 2017, issue 4, pp. 132–150. (In Chinese)

29. Liu Huafang. The English-language opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*: a successful experience of representing Chinese history through Western language means. *Dramatic Literature: Dramatic Art Monthly.* 2018, issue 1, pp. 107–110. (In Chinese)

30. Deng Lin. A study of the adaptation of the novel in the English version of the opera *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Dramatic Literature: Dramatic Art Monthly*. 2019, issue 5, pp. 136–139. (In Chinese)

31. Zhang Fangsong. Artistic significance of costumes and color in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Journal of Research on Dream of the Red Chamber*. 1994, issue 1, pp. 83–96. (In Chinese)

32. Deng Xiaoxue. Aesthetic meaning of color in clothing in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Bulletin of Shanxi University of Finance and Economics*. 2011, issue 4, pp. 242–243. (In Chinese)

33. Jiang Yao. Costume art and literary charm in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Journal of Research in Art Education*. 2025, issue 1, pp. 82–84. (In Chinese)

34. Ye Jintian. *Creative aesthetics of Ye Jintian*. Beijing: New Star Publishing House, 2016, 348 p. (In Chinese)

35. Gao Haiyong. *Tragic motifs in the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber"*. Moscow, 2001, 168 p. (In Russ.)

36. Trunova A.S. *The influence of Cao Xueqin's classical novel "Dream of the Red Chamber" (18th century) on the literary process in modern China*. Moscow, 2017. 371 p. (In Russ.)

37. Kolitenko E.E. The novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*: some aspects of Chinese culture. *Izvestiya Vostochnogo instituta Dal'nevostochnogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* (Bulletin of the Oriental Institute of Far Eastern National University). 2008, no. 15, pp. 128–132. (In Russ.)

38. Zhang Lin, Zheng Luyan. Semiotic system of clothes and decorations in Cao Xueqin's novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Nauchnyi dialog* (Scientific Dialogue), 2020, no. 1, pp. 242–256. (In Russ.) https://doi.org/10.24224/2227-1295-2020-1-242-256

39. Wan Qinle. A Comparative analysis of the nihilists Jia Baoyu in the novel *A Dream in the Red Chamber* and Bazarov in the novel *Fathers and Sons*. *Kazanskii vestnik molodykh uchenykh* (Kazan Bulletin of Young Scientists), 2019, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 28–37. (In Russ.)

40. Voskresensky D.N. The saga of a big family. In: Cao Xue-qin. *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Moscow, 1995, vol. 3, pp. 561–585. (In Russ.)

41. Maksimenko V.A. Sentimental motives of the poetic creativity of "Begonia Poetry Society" on the pages of the novel *Dream in the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin. *Nauka v megapolise — Science in a Megapolis*, 2024, no. 1, article 5. (In Russ.)

42. Qian Zixing. An analysis of name meanings in Chinese literature based on the example of the work *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin. *Russian Linguistic Bulletin*, 2024, no. 6, article 19. (In Russ.) https://doi.org/10.60797/RULB.2024.54.10

43. Angamaeva D.R. Stratagems in Chinese literature (based on the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*). In: *Asia-Pacific Region: History and Modernity – 17: Proceedings of the scientific and practical (correspondence) conference of young scientists (Ulan-Ude, May 17, 2024).* Ulan-Ude, 2024, pp. 5–9. (In Russ.)

44. Cui Shuo. Themes, plots, and characters in Bright Sheng's operas. *Kul'turnaya zhizn' Yuga Rossii — Cultural Studies of Russian South*. 2021, no. 4, pp. 32–41. (In Russ.)
https://doi.org/10.24412/2070-075X-2021-4-32-41

45. Shuo Cui. Timbre specificity as a reflection of Chinese cultural identity in Bright Sheng's opera *Dream in the Red Chamber*. *Bulletin of Vaganova Ballet Academy*. 2022, no. 4, pp. 150–162. (In Russ.)

Information about the author:

Zheng Yue — Post-Graduate Student of the History and Theory of Performing Arts and Music Pedagogy Department, Saratov State L.V. Sobinov Conservatoire, Saratov, Russian Federation.

Информация об авторе:

Чжэн Юэ — аспирант кафедры истории и теории исполнительского искусства и музыкальной педагогики, Саратовская государственная консерватория им. Л.В. Собинова, г. Саратов, Российская Федерация.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 31.03.2026
Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 13.05.2026
Accepted / Принята к публикации: 15.05.2026