

# Red Chamber still inspires dreams

Students across China seek like-minded souls who are equally entranced by 18th century classic book

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**T**he appeal, half-desperate and half-defiant, appeared at the start of the 2008 autumn term at Nanchang Aviation University in East China's Jiangxi province.

"Do you think it's possible to start a *Dream of the Red Chamber* association at a school like ours?" a student posted online. "I think if a university doesn't even have a *Red Chamber* association then it cannot be called a university."

Published posthumously (and unfinished) in 1791, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been declared a masterpiece and "the book of the millennium" in translation, yet remains almost unknown in the West.

In China, though, the book — a vast, allegorical portrait of Qing household life, sometimes known as *The Story of the Stone* — is so beloved, it has spawned its own field of scholarship, known as redology (红学 *hóng xué*). For professional redologists (红学家 *hóng xuéjiā*), there are mysteries to solve and manuscripts to authenticate; while for regular fans, there are period costumes, themed parties and endless WeChat articles to share.

The aviation student's plea in this case fell on largely deaf ears. The author updated the thread just two months later to say that he had given up due to lack of interest, though he logged on five years later to urge new students to keep trying.

Founded in 2005, the Renmin University *Red Chamber* Association (Renda Hongxue) is the kind of club likely envisioned by the student at Nanchang. Following the formation of similar organizations at Peking and Tsinghua universities in Beijing, a group of students set out to create a space on campus where they could host literary lectures, throw potlucks and socialize with others who shared their love of a 200-year-old book.

Former Renda Hongxue president Wang Junyan said that while the club followed its illustrious fore-runners in inviting literature professors and scholars to give talks, over time it has come to emphasize social aspects rather than academic.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* closely mirrors the experiences of the author's grandfather, Cao Yin (曹寅), once a prominent southern official for the Kangxi Emperor (康熙帝). When Kangxi died and Emperor Yongzheng (雍正帝) took over, the family fell out of favor and was purged, the Caos exiled themselves to a *hutong*, or traditional alleyway, in Beijing — far from the grandeur of their original mansion.



# 红

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# 学

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*hóngxué redology*

## Word box

四大名著 *Sì dà míngzhù*  
Four great classical novels

《红楼梦》 *Hónglóumèng*  
*Dream of the Red Chamber*

红学 *hóngxué redology*

红学家 *hóngxuéjiā redologists*

汉服 *hànfú traditional costume*

古琴 *gǔqín seven-string zither*

草根 *cǎogēn grassroots*

"There was so much beautiful poetry ... the characters are so realistically drawn and nuanced. It's a very moving story, handed down through history," said Wang.

New members typically meet at an autumn introductory session.

Activities of the group include themed games or handicrafts, an annual pilgrimage to the author's old home at the Beijing Botanical Gardens, and biweekly meetings where members discuss *Red Chamber*-related articles.

"People can just join the WeChat group and come to the meetings, and we might chat about anything," Wang said. "It's more the idea that you get to talk to other people who've felt an interest and a connection."

Plenty of other clubs take a more rigorous approach, though. The *Red Chamber* Cultural Society at Chang'an University, in the northwestern city of Xi'an, hosts regular talks on the novel, prepared by the students themselves.

On a national level, the *Red Chamber* Fan Club has chapters in all major Chinese cities to help high school and university students start their own clubs. They also hold weekly public readings at their Beijing headquarters, and celebrate most lunar calendar holidays with traditional activities like kite-making or flower-watching, both described in lavish detail in the novel.

Though ostensibly a family drama about 18th-century aristocracy,

*Dream of the Red Chamber* has long enjoyed an eclectic fan base. In the mid-1700s, when hand-copied manuscripts of Cao's original chapters began to circulate, the text's rich examples of foreshadowing, poetic verse and literary allusion inspired scholars to add their own annotations as they transcribed the work. This interest only grew after Cao died sometime in the 1760s, leaving behind only 80 finished chapters of the 120 found in most modern editions of the work.

In the centuries that followed, scholarly commentary, speculation and attempts to definitively conclude the saga grew into the discipline of redology, with a diverse body of adherents.

Prominent political scientists Hu Shi (胡适) and Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培) fought over the best way to fulfill the author's intended ending. Writer Eileen Chang reused sentence structures and themes from the novel in her short stories, while Chairman Mao Zedong said he had read the novel five times, praising its critique of class relations: "To not read (the novel) is to not understand China's feudal society ... anyone who has not read it three times had no power to discourse."

"It contains all elements of Chinese culture, traditional practices that are described in detail," said Liu Xiaolei, professor of Chinese literature at the Beijing Institute of Technology. "Also, the author wrote about

very 'soft' subjects, such as love, the life of the aristocracy, young women — it's very beautiful and poetic ... These things made it easy to access."

It is also a work that can move with the times, with adaptations for TV, film, theater and opera. The book's wide embrace of culture ensures its appeal across many interests.

At Renda Hongxue, Wang said: "We'll perform at the annual student showcase with the *hanfu* (traditional costume) society or the *gǔqín* (zither) society, and introduce the show with a line from the novel, or act out a scene. We're just one of many clubs on campus catering to those with an interest in traditional culture."

As interest in the novel moves away from what Liu calls the "niche study" of redologists and their habit of "delving into hidden political meanings," social media accounts have sprung up for and by the "grassroots", rather than academic experts. These analyze and adapt the novel's pertinence to issues as diverse as parenting or modern relationships.

The *Red Chamber* Fan Club now streams its weekly public readings on WeChat, and a few accounts host events where fans around the country will read a chapter or related essay, then discuss afterward in a WeChat group.

"Modern fans are definitely not like mainstream redologists, as their interests are much more varied," said Liu, who runs her own *Red Chamber* WeChat account. "Some are fanatics, who never really 'left' the novel and actually imagine themselves to be the characters, but I think most people who follow me just love the novel and are looking for something deeper."

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