



The known ending: narrative closure and reading experience in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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Received: 2 August 2023 / Revised: 27 September 2023 / Accepted: 28 September 2023 /
Published online: 4 December 2023
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Abstract Different from most traditional Chinese full-length novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 written by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1710?—1765?) begins its narrative by declaring that the whole story in its entirety has been finished and completed. This essay approach this narrative design from a different perspective, namely, the temporal structure and explore how the emplotments with a predestined ending point right at the beginning of the novel are constructed and their effects on the reader's experience. To better illustrate this mechanism, I will first examine the indication of a known ending in the framework of narrative theory and then look into the twofold layers that the novel adopts in its first chapter to persuade its readers that the whole story is built on a recollection and remembrance. In doing so, I explore how the construction of a known ending beforehand affects the reading experience at the cognitive and affective levels.

Keywords Narrative closure · Reading experience · Temporal rhetorics · *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Introduction

Mainly deriving from historiographical and folk writings, most traditional Chinese full-length novels choose to initial their narrative with a spatialised pattern by setting the order of the world, whether it is historical, universal, or ethical.¹ Different from this

¹ For example, *Three Kingdoms* begins with a general statement about the wars of states in history as part of the cyclical pattern, *The Journey to the West* first describes the entire progress of the formation of the human universe before telling the story of the Monkey King, and *Water Margin* starts with the destruction of a mysterious seal, which is the symbol of the law of heaven before introducing the stories of the heroes.

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well-established pattern, the eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 written by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1710?—1765?) begins by declaring that the whole story of the book is derived from the memory of a magic stone, as well as a frustrated literati.

Setting a narrative closure right at the beginning in the novel not only indicates how a story ends beforehand, but also decides how the narrative should be followed and understood. Because it deliberately creates a temporal distance between the point at present and that in the future within the reading experience. This “temporal distance”, according to Stephen Owen, could be corresponded to the “fictional distance” that “mediates ‘pity and fear’ of the audience of tragedy”.² Owen does not go further to explain what exactly the “distance” looks like nor its mechanism, but his observation does suggest that the temporal aspects could be crucial to achieve a certain literary effect and to invoke certain understandings and feelings of the reader.

This suggestion serves as the starting point of this essay to investigate into the temporal aspects of narrative strategies adopted by *Dream of the Red Chamber*. More specifically, it attempts to explore how the emplotments with a predestined ending point right at the beginning of the novel are constructed and their effects on the reader. To better illustrate this mechanism, I will first examine the indication of a known ending in the framework of narrative theory and then look into the twofold layers that the novel adopts in its first chapter to persuade its readers that the whole story is built on a recollection and remembrance. In doing so, I explore how the construction of a known ending beforehand affects the reading experience at the cognitive and affective levels.

Narrative closure and the followability of a story

Narrative closure not only completes and finishes a story, but it also affects how the reader understands the structural meaning of the story as a whole. In his book, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Frank Kermode takes “clock’s tick-tock” as a model of “plot” and takes the interval between two sounds are “purely successive disorganized time” that we need to make sense of. It is the fact that we use fiction to “enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure” that bestows “significant duration” upon the interval in between.³ In a similar sense, Barbara Smith also notes that the ending in a poem provides “the sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or ‘clinch’”, because “the occurrence of the terminal event is a confirmation of expectations that have been established by the structure of the sequence, and is usually distinctly gratifying”.⁴ In *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur talks about three ways in which plot is mediated. The third way concerning temporal

² Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The experience of the past in classical Chinese literature* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 10), 57.

³ Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending: Studies in the theory of fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6), 45.

⁴ Barbara H. Smith, *Poetic closure: A study of how poems end* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 14), 2.

configuration is about “grasping together” the “succession of events” and drawing the “unity of one temporal whole” from these events. This is better demonstrated in “the story’s capacity to be followed”. According to Ricœur:

To follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripeteia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfilment in the “conclusion” of the story. This conclusion is not logically implied by some previous premises. It gives the story an “end point”, which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole. To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story.⁵

By drawing an analogy between the process of emplotment and knowledge, Ricœur highlights a synthetic process in narrative in which successive actions and incidents are grasped together into a configuration of knowledge. When analysing the “configurational dimension” of the emplotment, Ricœur talks about its “temporal features”. Apart from transforming the succession of events into “one meaningful whole”, another important aspect of this configuration is the plot imposing a sense of ending on the “indefinite succession of incidents”. And this “structural function of closure”, according to him, is better manifested in the “act” of “retelling” a story rather than in that of “telling”, because “as soon as a story is well known, to follow the story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of the meaning attached to the story, as to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end”.⁶

In other words, if a narrative can be regarded as an illusion of a succession of events, then following a narrative is to move forward towards an endpoint of this succession to fulfil the expectation. However, as he points out further, as long as a story is well known, the following and understanding the story is not to discover within the recognition of its meaning as to understand the events leading to the known ending. The quality of time is thus changed from this new understanding, as the initial course of action is illuminated by the terminal consequences. It is with this narrative framework that I will then turn to the twofold layers *Dream of the Red Chamber* adopts to begin its story, at both levels of emplotment and narrative structure.

Reading the ending at the beginning

At the beginning of the novel, the narrative depicts a fantastic encounter between a mythical stone and two clerics. Discarded from the celestial repair by the goddess Nüwa, the magic stone rests at the foot of Blue Ridge Peak of the Great Fable Mountain. One day, a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest come along talking about the glory and wealth in the world of mortals. With its “mind” bestirred, the stone

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Time and narrative. Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 12), 66–67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

speaks out and begs the clerics to take it to this world of mortals by being transformed into a small piece of jade to the male protagonist. After staying with him through his lifetime, the stone returns the same place bearing the inscription of the whole story, which accounts for the other popular name of the novel, “*The Story of the Stone*”:

因有個空空道人訪道求仙，從這大荒山無稽崖青埂峰下經過，忽見一大塊石上字跡分明，編述歷歷。空空道人乃從頭一看，原來就是無材補天，幻形入世，蒙茫茫大士、渺渺真人攜入紅塵，歷盡離合悲歡、炎涼世態的一段故事。後面又有一首偈雲：

無材可去補蒼天，枉入紅塵若許年。

此系身前身後事，倩誰記去作奇傳？

詩後便是此石墜落之鄉，投胎之處，親自經歷的一段陳跡故事。

A Taoist known as Reverend Void, searching for the Way and immortality, came to Great Waste Mountain, Baseless Cliff and the foot of Blue Ridge Peak. His eyes fell on the inscription on a large stone which was still discernible and he read it through. It was an account of the Stone's rejection for repairing of heaven, its transformation and conveyance to the world of men by the Buddhist of Infinite Space and the Taoist of Boundless Time, and the joys and sorrows, partings and encounters, warm and cold treatment from others it had experienced there. On its back was a Buddhist verse:

Unfit to mend the azure sky,

I passed some years on earth to no avail;

My life in both worlds is recorded here;

Whom can I ask to pass on this romantic tale?

There followed the name of the region where the Stone fell, the place of its incarnation, and the story of its adventures.

(HLM,1: 4; DRM 1:4)

Great scholarly attention has been paid to the thematic significances of this passage because of its mythical design. Some stress its heavenly, spiritual, and transcendental quality that is in contrast to the human world in the main body of the novel. For example, Miller Lucien reads the mythical narrative of the stone in chapter one as an integral part of the whole vision of reality, in which a heavenly and earthly construction are unified.⁷ Robert Hegel presents dreams in *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a means of communication between spiritual and mundane levels of existence, with realistic detail from actual life, setting these images against the great cosmic order to which individual action must conform.⁸ Others focuses on the problem of the fictionality and authenticity of the narrative itself. Qing critic Wang Xilian 王希廉 (1805–1877) notes that the intention of including the story of the stone is to narrate a lifetime experience in the name of an “eyewitness” (*qinli* 親歷), and

⁷ Lucien Miller, *Masks of fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber: Myth, mimesis, and Persona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 8).

⁸ Robert Hegel, “Heavens and hells in Chinese fictional dreams.” *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture* (4): 4.

to suggest that it “narrates the thing as it is rather than making fiction out of it” (*shi xu qi shi, bingfei niezao* 實敘其事，並非捏造). In stark contrast to Wang Xilian’s remarks, modern scholar Wang Jing regards the literary design of the inscribed stone as “a critique of the previous generic convention” which stresses eye-witnessing and true record, and “a defense of the authority of fiction in its own right”.⁹ In a departure from the discussion on the problem of fictionality, I suggest that the large, inscribed stone resting at the foot of Blue Ridge Peak of the Great Waste could be taken as a physical symbol of an individual’s lifetime memory.

In his study on historical continuity in France, French historian Pierre Nora coins the term “lieux de mémoire”, or “sites of memory” to define a physical place, object, or event that has “acquired the meaning of a symbol in the memorial heritage of a community”.¹⁰ In a similar sense, in his study on images of “ruins” in Chinese painting, art historian Wu Hung notes that “historical traces and erasure” stimulates a sentiment of mourning for the past, which is defined by “an introspective gaze, a gap of time, effacement and memory”.¹¹ While Nora mainly talks about place as related to a community or a nation, and Wu discusses visual places in the painting, their indication that a physical place could be regarded as an embodiment of certain memory is enlightening for us in re-examining the temporal indication of the inscribed stone resting at the foot of Blue Ridge Peak after experiencing a lifetime in the world of mortals.

Despite the stone’s declaration that it has passed “some years on earth to no avail”, it has changed fundamentally from what it was before going there. By the time the Reverend Void saw the stone, it is no longer the stone which tried to fit into the grand history of mankind as a whole, but an individual site loaded with personal memory because it has “inscriptions” of its lifetime experience on its back. Being, witnessing, remembering will not keep the experience of past, it has to find a way to recover this period of time: the stone chose to use the structure of language to represent it. As Nicola King notes, “all narrative accounts of life stories...reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives to the past.”¹² In the case of the stone, the inscriptions of a lifetime of experience are the entry point to remembering and recalling. Narrative provides the individual with a unique form of access to past experience. More importantly, the whole story, therefore, is built on a retrospective individual fictive gesture. A temporal paradox lies in the emplotment: the story of the stone in the world of mortals that the readers will be reading has already been completed and even inscribed on the stone: what will happen has already happened. The mythical arrangement not only indicates the fictive quality of the story but also reveals the

⁹ Jing Wang, *The story of stone: Intertextuality, ancient Chinese stone lore, and the stone symbolism in Dream of the Red Chamber, water margin, and the journey to the West* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 15), 256.

¹⁰ Pierre Nora, “General introduction”, in *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Memoire, volume 1: The state*, ed. Nora, P. & David P. Jordan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 9), vii.

¹¹ Hung Wu, *A story of ruins: Presence and absence in Chinese art and visual culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 5), 18.

¹² Nicola King, *Memory, narrative, identity: Remembering the self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 7), 2.

retrospective rhetoric of the narrative. However, by its nature every fiction has to be retrospective, because only in retrospect do we recognize what is significant and what is not. However, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the whole story is designed in the form of the recounting of the stone's past experience as an explicit dramatization. As Anthony Yu observes, "the account of the stone's life in both worlds (*shen qian shen hou shi* 身前身後事) is told in its entirety initially only as a summarized, hence completed, process of reading and reception by a dramatized figure in the narrative named Vanitas or Kongkong Daoren, and the details are then to be filled out at great length in retrospect."¹³

While the author creates a retrospective vision through the mythical story of the inscribed stone, he also reinforces the vision through a monologue in the preface of the novel, in which a frustrated literati talks about his regret for his misbehaviour during his youth:

今風塵碌碌，一事無成，忽念及當日所有之女子，一細推了去，覺其行止見識，皆出於我之上。何我堂堂之鬚眉，曾不若彼裙釵哉！實愧則有餘，悔又無益之大無可奈何之日也！當此時，則自欲將已往所賴，上賴天恩，下承祖德，錦衣絢綉之時、飫甘饜美肥之日，背父母教育之恩，負師兄規訓之德，已至今日一事無成、半生潦倒之罪，編述一記，以告普天下人。我之罪固不能免，然閨閣中本自歷歷有人，萬不可因我之不肖，自護其短，則一併使其泯滅也。雖今日之茱椽蓬牖，瓦灶繩床，其風晨月夕，階柳庭花，亦未有傷於我之襟懷筆墨者。雖我未學，下筆無文，何為不用假語村言，敷演出一段故事來，亦可使閨閣昭傳，復可悅世之目，破人愁悶，不亦宜乎？

In this busy, dusty world, having accomplished nothing, I suddenly recalled all the girls I had known, considering each in turn, and it dawned on me that all of them surpassed me in behaviour and understanding; that I, shameful to say, for all my masculine dignity, fell short of the gentler sex. But since this could never be remedied, it was no use regretting it. There was really nothing to be done. I decided then to make known to all how I, though dressed in silks and delicately nurtured thanks to the Imperial favour and my ancestor's virtue, had nevertheless ignored the kindly guidance of my elders as well as the good advice of teachers and friends, with the result that I had wasted half my life and not acquired a single skill. But no matter how unforgivable my crimes, I must not let all the lovely girls I have known pass into oblivion though my wickedness or my desire to hide my shortcomings... Though I have little learning or literary talent, what does it matter if I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely girls.

(HLM, 1:1-2; DRM: 1-2)¹⁴

This famous preface of the novel could remind readers of Chinese traditional lyrical writing of remembrance like poems by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (c. 813–858), Qian

¹³ Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the stone: Desire and the making of fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 16), 117–118.

¹⁴ While some scholars argue that the paragraph is written by Zhiyanzhai, (e.g., see Feng Qiyong 馮其庸, "lun zhiyanzhai chongping shitouji jixu ben fanli" 論《脂硯齋重評石頭記》甲戌本“凡例” [On the preface in the Jiaxu version of "The story of the stone: Re-annotated by first"] *Dream of the Red Chamber xuekan* 紅樓夢學刊 11, no. 04: 175–207.), there is little doubt that the idea is a recount of the author Cao Xueqin himself.

Qianyi 钱谦益 (1582–1664), and Wu Weiye 吴伟业 (1609–1671); song lyrics by Yan Jidao 晏几道 (1038–1110), Jiang Kui 姜夔 (c. 1155–c. 1221), and Wu Wenying 吴文英 (c. 1200–c. 1260); accounts of how collections are lost, such as those by Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–c. 1155), Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–c. 1298), and Yuan Haowen 元好问 (1190–1257); memoirs of cities in the aftermath of political turmoil like *The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendour* (*Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄), *Memoirs of Wulin* (*Wulin jiushi* 武林舊事), Record of A Golden Millet Dream (*Mengliang lu* 夢梁錄) and *Reminiscences in Dreams of Tao An* (*Tao an meng yi* 陶庵夢憶).¹⁵

In this sense, the confession has been analysed with an autobiographical emphasis by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), the famous scholar on *Dream of the Red Chamber* of the Republican period. Hu corresponds the details suggested in this paragraph to the historical material of Cao Xueqin. He proposes that the narrator of this preface is the protagonist Jia Baoyu, who was in a state of utter poverty and misfortune when writing the novel. This, he then argues, coincides exactly with the basic “facts” of Cao Xueqin’s life experience that is derived from poems dedicated to him by his friend. Therefore, the readers could deduce the conclusion of the novel that the Jia family is bound to decline and Baoyu is bound to be reduced to poverty according to the self-statement in this paragraph.¹⁶

While one judges an interpretation like this as sensible or farfetched depends on one’s recognition on the literary essence of this text, whether it is a factual account of the narrator’s autobiographical experience in reality or a part of the narrative designs of fictional assumption. However, what I want to suggest here, is that what the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* tries to do in the preface is less to remind the reader of his actual experience in reality, than to construct a retrospective gesture as well as a mode of narrating and reading. In other words, the primary function of this preface is to show the attempt to recapture the meaning of an earlier life through literary representation. The whole story is built on a fictive premise of retrospection, of a remembering gesture from the point of present. The arrangement not only indicates the fictive quality of the story but also reveals the retrospective rhetoric of the narrative. Although by nature, every fiction has to be retrospective. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, this perspective has significantly changed not only the events depicted in the novel but also their relationships.

It can be observed that in the text the narrator begins with a confession in a sentimental and regretful tone, saying that he is responsible for the decline of his family and the disappearance of past happy times. However, while the author attributes the loss to a moral flaw, when he recalled those experiences, no detail is mentioned

¹⁵ Qing critic Wu Chongyao 伍崇曜 (1810–1863) remarks in his postscript to *Reminiscences* that the narrative is full of “emotions of one’s life experience” (*shenshi zhi gan* 不胜身世之感) after the “the vicissitudes of life over time” (*dilaotianhuang cangsang* 地老天荒沧桑). See Zhang Dai 张岱, *Tao’an meng yi* 陶庵夢憶 [Reminiscences in dreams of Tao An] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 3), 105.

¹⁶ He summarises three basic “facts” of Cao Xueqin’s life experience from poems that are dedicated to him by his friend: (a) He had an “old splendid dream” (*fanhua jiu meng* 繁華舊夢) (quoting a line from Cao’s friend 敦誠) (b) he had a talent in art and literature (c) his last years were spent in a state of poverty. See Hu Shi 胡適, and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Shituo ji suoyin & *Dream of the Red Chamber kaozheng* 《石頭記索隱》《紅樓夢》考證 [Exploration of the concealment in The Story of the Stone & Textual research on The *Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 13), 95.

at all. All those splendid gatherings and wonderful banquets of aristocratic life have been simply summed up as “dreams and illusions”. And if we scrutinise more closely, we could find that the centrality of his emotion of guilt and pain seems to be affected less by what he had done wrong than the relationship with certain moments in the past when the devastating event has not yet happened and when he had all the privilege and chance to be different: when he was “dressed in silks”, when he “was delicately nurtured”, and when he was blind to kind advice and good and wise companions. The issue at stake is not the meaning of past, but the tension between the moment when everything has ended and the moment in the past when things have not yet happened. And what he really wants to emphasise is less a moral reflection than a temporal gap between the past when everything has yet to happen, and the present, when everything is completed. It is for this huge gap in time that the author feels regretful. It is first and foremost created by a temporal gap. It is a gap of loss, of regret and of unfulfillment, an unspoken wish to relive the past once again and to act differently. Yet the ending is placed here, fixed and unchangeable. And in the present moment of writing this preface, possessing the knowledge of which he was ignorant before, he would like to write and “narrate” (*bianshu* 編述) his experience as if the things that were done and the people he has let down could be remedied through the making of a narrative.

Conclusions

This essay has analysed how the author generalises and summarises the stories in the novel in its entirety as completed and finished in the form of recollection and remembrance. The construction of this assumption is twofold: it assumes that all the stories of the novel derive from the inscriptions on a mythical stone which has returned from the world of mortals in chapter one, but also draws on the early aristocratic life of the frustrated narrator in the confessional preface. The reader thus learns that the whole story is finished and is derived from a personal remembrance and recollection of the past and portrays a sense of conclusiveness that the author wants to establish in his reader’s mind right at the beginning of the narrative.

By introducing stories of a frustrated man of letters and an inscribed stone coming from the world of mortals in their entirety as completed and finished, the author creates an assumption in readers’ minds that the narrative is a remembrance and recollection of the past from the present. The breaking of the continuous and permanent flow of “right now” with the evocation of senses of conclusiveness and impermanence thus greatly shape the cognitive and affective experience of the inevitable fading and loss that the author tries to convey throughout the novel.

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