Abstract

A Dream of the Red Mansions (红楼梦), being the sole novelist effort by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹), is hailed as one of the greatest pieces of writing in Chinese literature. The novel surpasses its likes by comprising verses in various forms, each serving as a literary device in delivering its theme and in moulding its characters. These verses, mainly poems (诗), resemble those from the Tang in many ways. Not only are poems common in the novel itself, criticisms on poems and their respective poets also form an integral part of the story. Although these criticisms represent the view points of Cao Xueqin himself to a certain extent, they can actually find many of their origins in the Tang criticisms. Furthermore, being from a family of great fame in the mid-Qing, Cao Xueqin inherited valuable literary traditions. His grandfather, Cao Yin (曹寅), was involved in the compilation of Complete Poems of Tang (全唐诗), under the royal order of Emperor Kang Xi (康熙). This allowed him to be acquainted with countless poems from the Tang. Cao Xueqin spent much of his childhood in his grandfather’s library; he was therefore much rooted in the knowledge of literature one thousand years preceding his time. This was very much reflected in his novel.

The purpose of this thesis is thus to discover how poems and criticisms from the Tang had affected those found in the novel. Comparisons are made
through research mainly on various appreciations of Cao Xueqin’s poems. A number of collections of Tang poets are investigated. The main body of this thesis reviews how different periods of Tang poems have been cited and used differently in the novel. It is discovered that the literary style of Cao Xueqin actually resembles some of the Tang poets. The second part of the main body then compares both the criticisms from the novel and those from the Tang, citing examples to conclude that Cao Xueqin knows not only poems from the Tang, but also the views of critics from the Tang on poetry as an art form.