Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss the role of the "preamble" in classic Chinese novels. Inherited directly from the *huaben*, the preamble, or *xiezi*, is one of the three major components in the structure of the classic Chinese novel, other than the main text and the ending. The preamble has a rather fixed structure in itself, normally comprising of three parts: one or more opening poems; followed by a short discussion of the subject; and sometimes one or more short stories are also included. The structure of the preamble can however, be altered by a certain extent, depending on the needs of the novel. The main task of the preamble is to lead into the main context of the novel.

In this paper, the preambles of four important classic Chinese novels will be discussed in chronological order, namely *The Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shui Hu Zhuan*), followed by *Gold Vase Plum* (*Jin Ping Mei*), *The Scholars* (*Ru Lin Wai Shi*), and lastly *A Dream of the Red Mansions* (*Hong Lou Meng*). Apart from discussing the roles of the preambles in the different novels, this paper will also look into the gradual increase in importance and area of the preamble, whereby it eventually merges completely into the novel, as in the case of *A Dream of the Red Mansions* (*Hong Lou Meng*).