Hong Lou Meng (The Dream Of The Red Chamber, sometimes translated as A Dream Of Red Mansions 《红楼梦》) is generally considered the greatest Chinese novel ever written. Since its first publication in 1791, the study of the book has continued to attract enthusiastic response and critical attention among academic circles in China and abroad.

However, much of the effort is spent on research on the author Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) himself and most literary studies are centred on the Rong Mansion (荣国府) in the novel. The Ning Mansion (宁国府) has never aroused as much scholarly interest and popular devotion as the above mentioned areas.

Realising the significance of the research topic, this thesis aims at a critical review of the plot and a literary analysis of the most important characters of the Ning Mansion in Hong Lou Meng. Encyclopedic in scope, this novel meticulously engages in almost every facet of life in feudal Chinese society. From a textual-criticism point of view, this study offers an insight interpretation of the inscription 'Say not all evil comes from the Rong Mansion. Truly, disaster originates from the Ning' (漫言不肖皆荣出, 達畔开疆实在宁). The prosperity and decline of the Jia family (贾府), particularly the Ning Mansion, which has an intimate relationship with the Rong Mansion, form the main thread running through the whole novel. Cao Xueqin depicts the inevitable doom of the Ning Mansion, for around the household unfolds all sorts of closely interconnected conflicts, including unworthy descendants who lead a despicable life. The complex development of these internal conflicts finally results in the utter bankruptcy of the Jia family. Their estates were confiscated and they fell into disgrace. Thus the vast complex artistic structure of the novel is carefully integrated, fully projecting the theme of the collapse of feudalism.
Hou Lou Meng is unique for it not only has profound ideological content, but also presents a plot which is so brilliantly interwoven that readers are fascinated and moved by it. With superb artistry, Cao Xueqin presents a panoramic genre-painting, a gallery of highly developed individual characters.

Attempts have been made in the thesis to examine in detail some of the most important characters of the Ning Mansion. Through detailed descriptions of their daily life, the author succeeds in depicting their different idiosyncrasies, thoughts and feelings. With the use of dialogue, he shows with remarkable skill the individual personality of each character. The interpretation offered in this thesis will lead readers to a better understanding of the artistic attainment of Cao Xueqin so that they can derive greater appreciation of his distinctive style.

Cao Xueqin did not finish his monumental work. The last forty chapters in the present novel were the work of Gao E (高鹗). Having thoroughly reviewed and scrutinised the whole novel in the earlier part of the thesis, the finding is that in completing the novel, Gao E went back to the original and made certain revisions which ran counter to Cao Xueqin’s initial intention. The expectations set up in the first part of the novel written by Cao Xueqin, such as the ultimate downfall of the household, were not realised in the latter part written by Gao E. Gao E’s portrayal of life also falls short of Cao Xueqin’s masterful technique. The findings also confirm Cao Xueqin’s intention of using the Ning Mansion not only to depict the Jia family from its peak to its decline, but also to represent the typical noble and prominent families in eighteenth century Chinese society. Since the Ning Mansion epitomizes the dark rule of feudal society as a whole, so its decline reflects the entire fabric of Chinese feudal society, which was tottering on the verge of final collapse.

With ample justifications, scholars today regard Hong Lou Meng as one of the world’s literary masterpieces. It is indeed a great Chinese novel which belongs to a fine literary tradition. With its substance and refinement of artistic expression, it marks a peak in the development of classical Chinese literature.