ABSTRACT

As China’s greatest novel, *The Story of the Stone* is noted for its magnificent representation of the female and deep sympathy toward the girls. These achievements are closely related to a specific fad in literati society of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. Through an analysis of the novel’s description of beauty, sentiment and talent of the girls in the Grand-View Garden, one of the novel’s main settings, this dissertation is intended to reveal a connection between the fictional maiden world and the faddism of women in literati’s writing of the period when the novel was produced.

The appreciation of the female is one of remarkable themes of literati culture of 17th and 18th century China that made an obvious impact on the novel. This is visible in Cao Xueqin’s admiration of girl’s flower-like beauty, their luster and grace in manners, and particularly, their moral purity, which the novelist associates with the clean water. However, the novelist deplores his beloved world while eulogizing its admirable beauties. “Ill-fated belle” (*红颜薄命*) therefore is a thematic concern as much emphasized in the novel as it appeared in literati writing during the same period. In the novel, *qing* (love) and *yu* (lust) are two concepts entangled with each other. By his presentation of the maiden characters’ *qing*, including Daiyu’s love to Baoyu, the novelist makes a conclusion to the disputes about this issue in the narrative argument begun in the Ming period. The author, like his predecessors and contemporaries, also uses the talented and beautiful women as a metaphor to express his own frustration at being dismissed. Behind his deep sympathy with and pity for the girls, Cao is also deploring himself and all frustrated literati like him. Thus, the description of the girls in the Grand-View Garden parallels with an important aspect of the late-Ming and high Qing literati culture.