

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of the Clan Relationship and Clan Governance System in the Chinese and Western Aristocratic Families—Take *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Age of Innocence* as Examples

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Received: October 29, 2024 Accepted: November 26, 2024 Online Published: November 28, 2024

doi:10.22158/jecs.v8n4p123

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v8n4p123>

Abstract

A Dream of Red Mansions, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, and *The Age of Innocence* by American author Edith Wharton both depict the love stories of three noble youths in feudal aristocratic families against the backdrop of significant social changes. This paper seeks to compare the clan relationships and governance systems portrayed in both works, highlighting the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western aristocratic families. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to the broader field of cultural comparison between Chinese and American literature.

Keywords

A Dream of Red Mansions, *The Age of Innocence*, Chinese and American literature

1. Introduction

A Dream of Red Mansions written by Cao Xueqin, and *The Age of Innocence* written by American author Edith Wharton, both narrate the love stories of three young aristocrats. Despite being set in different cultural contexts, these two literary masterpieces share striking similarities in their main character settings, character personalities, and marriage relationships. Hence, most research has focused on comparative studies of characters and their love affairs. For instance, Huo (2008) aims to explore the parallel comparison of their characters, emotional pursuits, and life destinies. However, the portrayal of aristocratic life in both books is particularly noteworthy, which can be attributed to the family backgrounds of their respective authors. Therefore, this paper intends to primarily compare the

clan relationships and governance systems of Chinese and Western aristocratic families as depicted in these two literary works.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *A Dream of Red Mansions and Cao Xueqin*

A Dream of Red Mansions, penned by Cao Xueqin, also known as Cao Zhan, is a literary masterpiece that transcends borders and time. Written in the latter half of the 18th century, this novel holds a significant place not only in Chinese literature but also in world literature.

Born into a noble and influential family that experienced a decline from prosperity to poverty, Cao Xueqin's upbringing provided him with unique insights into the lives of the ruling class and the ways of the nobility. This contrast between his luxurious boyhood and his later struggles with poverty allowed him to develop a profound understanding of life, which he skillfully incorporated into *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

The study of this literary gem is as vast as the night sky, with each star representing a different facet of the novel. Through their research, scholars have uncovered new perspectives on the work and its significance in both Chinese and global contexts, including the study of the author, textual analysis, artistic adaptation, contemporary cultural construction, the study of Chinese traditional culture behind the book, translation of the book, and communication study of the book (Zhao & Yao, 2021).

2.2 *The Age of Innocence and Edith Wharton*

The Age of Innocence, a novel authored by Edith Wharton and published in 1920, offers a vivid portrayal of upper-class New York society during the late 19th century. The narrative is presented as an anthropological study of this society, with references to families and their activities being likened to tribal customs. This Pulitzer Prize-winning work was penned in the aftermath of the First World War, which Edith Wharton experienced firsthand in Paris. Research on *The Age of Innocence* primarily revolves around feminism, character analysis, and translation studies, with sporadic review articles discussing its research status. Despite gaining increasing attention, limited research has been conducted on this book.

The two books under investigation have largely overlooked family relations and governance, yet the depiction of aristocratic families is a common thread running through both works. Therefore, this paper aims to bridge the gap in comparative studies of family culture between Chinese and Western literature by comparing the family relations and governance systems of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Age of Innocence*.

3. A Comparative Study of the Clan Relationship and Clan Governance System in the Chinese and Western Aristocratic Families

3.1 *A Comparative Study of the Clan Relationship*

3.1.1 Clan Relationship in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

The "four great families" (Li, 2018) in Jinling, as depicted in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, refer to a feudal interest group primarily composed of the "Jia, Shi, Wang, and Xue" clans. Led by the Jia family (comprising both Rong and Ning two Fu), they formed a family monopoly through strategic marriage alliances and other means to secure economic interests and political resources.

The four families are connected by relatives and are a community of interests. The four families of Jia, Shi, Wang and Xue are related by marriage. Because of the high status of the Jia family, the Shi family, the Wang family and the Xue family all married daughters to the Jia family. The four families of Jia, Shi, Wang, and Xue are interconnected through marriage ties. Due to the high status of the Jia family, all three other families have married their daughters to them. The second-generation daughter married Jia Daishan, who is also the second generation of Rongguo Duke. This lady is the highest living authority executing the Rongguo House and the oldest and most respected of the entire clan, yet she is also a doting person—Lady Dowager (Ma, Wang, & Wang, 2019). The third generation of the second daughter from the Wang family married Jia Zheng, the third-generation heir of the Rongguo House, and she is referred to as Mrs. Wang. Wang Xifeng, the fourth generation legal eldest daughter of the Wang family, married Jia Lian, the eldest son of the Rong Guo House. Additionally, the third daughter of the third generation of the Wang family married the third-generation legal eldest son of the Xue family, who is known as Aunt Xue. Finally, Xue Baochai, the fourth-generation eldest daughter of the Xue family, married Jia Baoyu. These four families are connected through marriage and share common interests, forming a small monopolistic group.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the four families are intricately connected, affecting each other's fortunes. The downfall of the Jia and Wang families has also led to the decline of the Xue family. As a result, these families have gradually withdrawn from court influence. The descendants of the Duke of Ning were demoted to a lower rank, with Jia Zhen inheriting only the third rank of General Wei Lie, and Jia Zheng being just a fifth-rank official in the Ministry of Labor.

The Xue family, as a royal supplier, profited greatly from their exclusive monopoly on royal supply and had close ties to officialdom. However, due to the low status of merchants during that era, they couldn't hold high-ranking positions in the government. Shi Xiangyun's parents died early, leaving her with two uncles, Shi Nai and Shi Ding. Despite this, it is clear that the Shi family has declined.

The only two members of the four families who could maintain political status in court were Jia Yuanchun and Wang Ziteng. As Wang Ziteng's power waned, so did the influence of the four families. With the sudden deaths of Jia Yuanchun and Wang Ziteng, the day of complete decline for the Jia family and the four families was not far away.

3.1.2 Clan Relationship in *The Age of Innocence*

Wharton's portrayal of New York society as a "pyramid" in her novel highlights her keen insight into the social structure of the city. The New York of Archer's time was a small and elusive pyramid, with few opportunities for upward mobility. The base of this pyramid was comprised of what Mrs. Archer referred to as "plain people," an honorable but obscure majority of respectable families who had been

elevated by marriage to one of the ruling clans.

From this wealthy but unremarkable foundation, the pyramid narrowed sharply upwards, comprising a compact and dominant group represented by families such as the Mingotts, Newlands, Chiverses, and Mansons. At the pinnacle of this pyramid were the Dagonets of Washington Square, who hailed from an old English county family allied with the Pitts and Foxes. The Lannings, who had intermarried with descendants of Count de Grasse, and the van der Luydens, direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan, also occupied the upper echelons of society. These families were related through pre-revolutionary marriages to several members of the French and British aristocracy and were approaching their twilight years.

The clan relationships in *The Age of Innocence* bear a striking resemblance to those of the Boston Brahmin, an American aristocracy that emerged during the 19th century. The term "Brahmin Caste of New England" was first coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in an 1860 article published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Originally referring to the priestly caste within the Hindu caste system, the term was later applied in the United States to describe the wealthy and influential families of British Protestant origin that played a significant role in shaping American institutions and culture.

The Boston Brahmins (Kresser, 2006), also known as the Boston elite, are considered members of Boston's traditional upper class. They are often associated with a refined New England or Mid-Atlantic dialect and accent. Typically, descendants of the earliest English colonists are seen as the most representative of the Boston Brahmins.

3.2 *A Comparative Study of the Clan Governance System*

3.2.1 Clan Governance System in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

The management of Jia's clan affairs places great emphasis on the continuity and preservation of the family lineage. The main house, known as Ningguo House, follows the traditional patriarchal inheritance system. According to this system, Jia Jing should be the head of Ningguo House. However, Jia Jing is a devout Taoist who resides in a temple and does not involve himself in the affairs of the household. Therefore, the actual leadership of Ningguo House falls to Jia Zhen.

Rongguo House has its legal heir, Jia She, who is the eldest son. However, due to the presence of the highly respected Lady Dowager, he lacks real power to govern the household. Although Jia Zheng holds a higher political status, he is not part of the Jia Family's ancestral lineage. As a result, major decisions concerning both houses are made by Jia Zhen, who is the head of the Mian House. Jia Zheng cannot act independently within Rongguo House and must consult with his brother Jia She.

The family governance depicted in "A Dream of Red Mansions" exudes a strong influence on the feudal patriarchal system. From the end of primitive society until the Opium War of 1840, families or clans played a significant role in Chinese society. They underwent five major stages: the patriarchal family during late primitive society, the patriarchal family during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties when slavery was prevalent, the clan system during the Qin and Han dynasties, the family clan from the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties, and finally, the feudal family system that lasted

from the Song Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty (Li, 2022).

The patriarchal system aimed to consolidate political privileges, and property rights of the aristocracy who owned slaves, preventing them from being dispersed or weakened. It also sought to maintain order within the ruling class and strengthen its rule over slaves and commoners. This system had a profound impact on future generations, with the core being the succession system based on the first wife's eldest son as the legal heir to the throne (Zhou & Yu, 2022).

The internal management of a clan primarily encompasses several key aspects. Firstly, it involves registering the family account to maintain accurate financial records. Secondly, organizing ancestor worship activities is crucial for fostering a sense of filial piety and cultural heritage among clan members. Thirdly, formulating codes of conduct and enforcing family laws are essential for maintaining discipline and order within the clan. Fourthly, compiling a family tree helps to preserve the lineage and history of the clan. Additionally, administering the righteous property of the clan ensures that resources are allocated fairly and sustainably. Furthermore, organizing propaganda and educational activities promotes knowledge dissemination and cultural preservation. Lastly, mediating disputes between families helps to resolve conflicts peacefully and maintain harmonious relationships within the clan.

3.2.2 Clan Governance System in *The Age of Innocence*

In this novel, New York high society is governed by a complex system of social rules that dictate almost every aspect of its members' lives. These rules are generally unspoken and go unnoticed until someone transgresses them, as Ellen Olenska does. The primary goal of New York society is to avoid scandal and the negative consequences that come with it, and these rules aim to safeguard all people from any unpleasantness.

As Wharton describes it, the social code revolves around three key principles: "form," "taste," and "family." "Form" pertains to fashion and dictates that everyone in high society conform to certain standards of appearance and behavior so that no one stands out from the crowd. However, the form seems to be concerned only with outward appearances and is unconcerned with any hypocrisy that may exist underneath.

"Taste" is considered to be the guiding principle behind "form." Taste relates to society's obsession with innocence; characters cannot let on through any action or way of dressing that they are not perfectly ignorant of everything regarded as taboo. For example, Ellen wears a dress to the opera that is judged to be in bad taste because it's too low-cut.

"Family" acts as a unifying principle in New York, as people are expected to exhibit loyalty to their relations above all else, and families frequently intermarry, which consolidates loyalties and connections. Families must do their best to keep their members in line with society's rules, but they must also present a unified front when one of their members does transgress "form" or "taste"—in other words, in the face of scandal. For example, though the Wellands and the Archers don't entirely approve of Ellen's way of life, they band together to help her when other families socially reject her.

4. Conclusion

The aristocratic family relationships depicted in the two books share numerous similarities. Marriage within the family serves as the primary means of maintaining family stability, and each family is closely intertwined economically and politically. Simultaneously, the prominent families in both books are gradually on the decline, and the seemingly unshakable class has long been dissolved by the tides of history.

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