

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Aristocratic Marriage Cultures in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Age of Innocence*

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Received: May 22, 2026

Accepted: June 17, 2026

Online Published: July 30, 2026

doi:10.22158/jecs.v10n3p38

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v10n3p38>

Abstract

From the perspective of comparative literature, this paper focuses on the aristocratic marriage cultures in Dream of the Red Chamber and The Age of Innocence, aiming to reveal the similarities and differences in power operations under Chinese and Western family systems. By integrating Pierre Bourdieu's Symbolic Capital Theory and Michel Foucault's Biopolitics, this paper analyzes the political and economic functions of marriage, female dilemmas and resistance. It is found that both Chinese and Western marriages are treated as instruments to integrate family interests. However, the former is driven by patriarchal ethics, while the latter is constrained by capital logic and social etiquette. This study offers practical implications for reflecting on contemporary marriages.

Keywords

Marriage Culture, Comparative Literature, Dream of the Red Chamber, The Age of Innocence

1. Introduction

Marriage has long been regarded as an important social institution. Beyond the relationship between two individuals, it often reflects broader concerns such as family interests, social expectations, and cultural values. Although set in different eras and backgrounds, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (hereafter DRC) and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (hereafter TAI) similarly reveal how power oppresses individuals in aristocratic marriage cultures. Jia Baoyu is forced to abandon "the pledge between plant and stone" for "the union of gold and jade" (Cao, 1982). Ellen Olenska is ostracized by New York high society because of her seeking a divorce (Wharton, 2017). By telling their stories both works prove how marriage gradually becomes a crucial tool for consolidating family interests.

The focus of existing research is rarely on the similarities and differences of power operations of marriage systems in the East and the West. This paper attempts to reveal the nature of marriage by examining it

from the perspectives of Eastern patriarchal ethics and Western capital logic. By exploring how family interests override individual emotions and how etiquette and morality regulate the female body in the two novels, it is attempted to break the stereotype of “Eastern oppression, Western freedom”, contributing to contemporary discussions of marriage ethics.

2. Functional Similarities of Marriage Systems

According to the *Book of Rites*, marriage is not a private affair between two individuals but an alliance between two families. (Dai, 2016). In both two works, the marriage choices of aristocratic members never belong to themselves. According to Bourdieu’s (2012) Symbolic Capital Theory, marriage is essentially a tool for the upper class to restructure political capital and exchange economic resources. Although having distinct cultural traditions, Chinese and Western aristocratic families present great similarities in the social functions of their marriage systems. They sacrifice individual emotions in exchange for the preservation and prosperity of the family lineage.

2.1 Political Alliances

In DRC, the marriages create a tight political alliance network among the four families, Jia, Shi, Wang, and Xue. The Shi family marries their daughter to the Jia family, so Dowager Lady Jia controls the Jia household. The Wang family strengthens its influence by two strategic marriages. Lady Wang marries Jia Zheng, while Wang Xifeng marries Jia Lian. In this way they seize control over the finances and household management. The Xue family lacks the political prestige and takes refuge in the Jia family, converting economic capital into political capital. These marital alliances make the families thrive and decline together, which perfectly demonstrates the consolidation of family resources as noted by Fei Xiaotong in *From the Soil* (2020). When Lin Daiyu loses her political value following her parents’ deaths, her pledge between plant and stone with Baoyu is suppressed; personal emotions prove powerless when confronted with patriarchal family interests.

In TAI, the upper class of New York constructs class fortresses through marriage. The Archer family (an old lineage of lawyers) marries into the Welland family (members of New York’s old Dutch-descended elite), while Julius Beaufort (a nouveau riche banker) is excluded from the core circle, and his well-born wife remains socially stigmatized because of his outsider status. Historian Coates (2015) points out that the 19th-century American emerging bourgeoisie attempted to convert economic capital into symbolic and social capital by imitating European aristocratic intermarriage patterns. Newland and May’s marriage is essentially a conspiracy between two families over a strategy to preserve family prestige and class continuity. Thus, both Eastern patriarchal ethics and Western class orders utilize marriage to preserve the interests of dominant social groups. In both novels, marriage helps maintain existing social relationships and preserves the advantages enjoyed by elite families.

2.2 Economic Exchange

In DRC, marital alliances often function as a means of linking economic wealth with political prestige. The Xue family, despite its immense wealth as a merchant household serving the imperial court,

possesses limited political influence, a weakness reflected in Xue Pan's legal troubles. At the same time, the Jia family faces mounting financial difficulties, particularly after the extravagant expenses associated with Imperial Concubine Yuanchun's visit. Under these circumstances, Baochai's marriage into the Jia family can hardly be regarded as accidental. As Li Bozhong (2021) notes, under the trend of convergence between merchants and scholar-officials in the Qing Dynasty, merchant families frequently used marital alliances as a strategy for gaining access to elite political networks. Aunt Xue carefully cultivates Baochai as an ideal woman embodying the traditional virtues of morality, proper speech, graceful appearance, and domestic competence (De, Yan, Rong, Gong in Chinese). Her marriage thus becomes a calculated family strategy for converting economic capital into political and symbolic capital. When the Jia family gradually falls into financial difficulty, the wealth of the Xue family becomes increasingly important. Therefore, Baochai's marriage serves the needs of both families. In this process, little attention is paid to Baochai's personal feelings because family interests remain the primary concern.

A similar situation also occurs in TAI. May and Newland's marriage is not mainly based on personal affection. It also reflects that two well-established families try to preserve their social standing. The connection between two families helps reinforce their position within the upper class of New York. Once Newland questions the expectations imposed on him, he is reminded by his mother that marriage involves obligations extending beyond personal desire. Family reputation, social status and economic security all play a role in making marital choices. Thus it can be seen marriage in both novels is closely connected with family interests. Compared to personal feelings, women are often valued more for the advantages their marriages may bring to the family as a whole.

2.3 Cultural Background

Among the female characters in DRC, Baochai best embodies the qualities revered by Confucian society. Many of her words and actions conform to the expectations of women in traditional society. For example, in Chapter 8 she refers to the story of "cutting the loom" when advising Baoyu to devote himself to study and prepare for the imperial examinations. In Chapter 28 she decides not to compete for Baoyu's affection and behaves with restraint and propriety instead. It's believed that Baochai places family expectations and social obligations above own feelings. Because of these characteristics, she accords to the ideal female image in traditional texts such as *Lessons for Women* and *Inner Precepts*. As Li Yinhe (1995) notes, Confucian ethics encouraged women to value obedience and family responsibility. Baochai's character reflects many of these expectations.

In contrast, May represents the ideal young woman admired by New York high society. She is often described as innocent, graceful and well-mannered. These qualities make her fully in line with the value standards of her social circle and an appropriate wife. But her innocence should not be understood just as a natural trait. Instead, it reflects the expectations placed upon women in Western elite society. For example, even after being aware of Newland's feelings for Ellen, May continues to protect her marriage and fulfill the social expectations on her. Her announcement of pregnancy stops Newland from leaving, this proves her awareness of the social responsibilities attached to marriage and family life. Richardson

(2018) points out that the ideal of female innocence in the 19 century often concealed restrictions on women's independence. May's character reflects this contradiction.

Although Baochai and May live in different cultural environments, both of them are expected to fulfill social ideals of female instead of pursuing their own desires. Their value within marriage is maintaining family interests and social stability. That's why their personal identities are often overshadowed or ignored. In two novels, the marital alliances are linked to family wealth and status, and become part of a larger social framework. In this context, the stories of Daiyu and Ellen hold special significance. Daiyu burns her poems and Ellen decides to leave New York. Their experiences reflect their inability to reconcile personal feelings with social expectations. But at the same time, it's a kind of resistance of the characters. These endings reveal the conflict between individual aspirations and social expectations, and it lies at the center of both novels.

3. Mirror Images of Female Dilemmas

In both novels, it is found the oppressive nature of marriage in aristocratic families. Whether situated in Eastern patriarchal societies or in Western capitalist elites, women are objectified as instruments to cater to social and family interests.

3.1 *The Politicization of the Female Body*

In DRC, Lin Daiyu's delicate appearance and poor health actually are important aspects of her character. Her frequent illness, sleeplessness and physical weakness are often noticed and discussed by members of the Jia family. These traits make her appear fragile and dependent, which corresponds to traditional expectations of feminine gentleness and obedience. As Daiyu's health continues to decline, her position within the family's marriage arrangements also becomes increasingly uncertain. In this way, her physical condition is closely connected with the expectations placed upon women in the patriarchal family system. A similar form of social control can be found in TAI, although it operates in a different way. Ellen attracts criticism because she seeks a divorce and attempts to live according to her own wishes. Rumors about her life in Europe are widely spread among New York society, and her behavior is often judged against prevailing standards of female respectability. Mrs. Beaufort's warning that "a respectable woman does not receive gentlemen alone" reflects the strict social codes governing women's conduct. Ellen's desire for personal freedom is therefore interpreted as a challenge to accepted social norms.

Although Daiyu and Ellen live in different cultural environments, both face pressure from families or societies that seek to regulate female behavior. Daiyu's frailty is associated with traditional expectations of women, while Ellen's independence is viewed with suspicion by the society around her. Their experiences demonstrate how women's lives and choices are often shaped by social expectations rather than personal preference.

3.2 *Female Silence and Resistance*

The silencing of women is a common feature in both novels. In DRC, Yingchun has little control over her own marriage. When Jia She arranges her marriage to Sun Shaozu, she accepts the decision without

open resistance. Her experience reflects the lack of choice available to many women within the patriarchal family. In TAI, May Welland faces a different situation. After realizing Newland's feelings for Ellen, she chooses to maintain the appearance of a stable marriage rather than confront the problem directly. Although they have different responses, both characters show how social expectations influence women's decisions and restrict their ability to act freely.

At the same time, silence should not always be regarded as complete obedience. In certain situations, it becomes one of the few ways available for women to express their dissatisfaction. A notable example is Daiyu's decision to burn her poems after knowing Baoyu's marriage. The poems record her deepest emotions and personal hopes. By destroying them, she not only brings an end to her love but also expresses her disappointment with a reality that leaves little room for her own wishes. Her silence therefore carries a sense of protest, even though it is not expressed openly.

Ellen adopts a different response. Rather than remaining within a society that constantly judges her behavior, she chooses to leave and return to Europe. She refuses to explain herself to those who criticize her and instead distances herself from the social environment that limits her freedom. Although Daiyu and Ellen take different paths, both attempt to preserve their dignity when faced with circumstances they cannot fully control. Their experiences reveal the continuing conflict between personal desire and social expectation in the two novels.

3.3 Different Foundations of Marital Legitimacy

The different attitudes toward cousin marriage in the two novels reflect broader differences in family values. In DRC, the relationship between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu is supported by the romantic story of the pledge between plant and stone. Grandmother Jia also favors their union, suggesting that close kinship ties are not regarded as a major obstacle to marriage within the Jia family. Although the Lin family has lost much of its former influence, Daiyu remains an important member of the family's kinship network through her maternal connection to the Jia family. As a result, the difficulties surrounding her marriage to Baoyu are related more to family interests and changing circumstances than to concerns about blood relations.

A different situation appears in *The Age of Innocence*. While Old New York society maintains a relatively closed social circle, marriage decisions are influenced more by social position and reputation than by kinship considerations. Ellen's unsuccessful marriage is not associated with family relations but with her husband's behavior and her inability to adapt to the expectations of New York society. The novel therefore places greater emphasis on social standing and cultural compatibility when discussing marriage.

The comparison between DRC and TAI highlights different priorities in the two societies. The former pays greater attention to family connections and kinship relationships, whereas the latter focuses more on social reputation and class identity. Even so, neither novel presents marriage as a matter determined entirely by personal feelings. Family expectations and social pressures continue to influence important decisions and shape the lives of the characters. As a result, individual desires are often subordinated to broader familial and social expectations.

4. Conclusion

By comparing *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Age of Innocence*, it is found that although they have different cultural backgrounds, marriage in both novels is connected with the maintenance of family interests and social order. In this case individual emotions are usually give way to social expectations, and women's choices are constrained by forces beyond their control.

In addition, the two novels reveal different foundations of marriage in aristocratic families. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is kinship relations and patriarchal ethics that play a crucial role in marriage arrangements. In contrast, *The Age of Innocence* places greater emphasis on social reputation and class status. These differences reflect the distinct historical and cultural conditions of the East and the West. With the swift advancement of civilization and society, individuals usually have greater freedom in their own marriage choices nowadays. However, some external factors like family background, social status, economic benefits and so on is continuing to influence people's choices. As a consequence, the issues put forward in the two novels still have great significance in contemporary discussions of marriage and individual autonomy.

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