

# *A Comparative Study of the Traditional Views of Marriage in China and the West—Take a Dream of Red Mansions and Pride and Prejudice as Examples*

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**Abstract:** The thesis makes a comparative study of the traditional views of marriage in China and the West with *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice* as examples. Based on the concept of the right match and unequal status of husband and wife in marriage, this paper analyzes the similarities in the two views of marriage. Based on different degrees of freedom in choosing a spouse, different criteria for choosing a spouse, and different purposes of marriage, this paper mainly discusses the differences between the two views of marriage by exploring the deep reasons for the differences in terms of the life experiences of the authors, breadths and depths of the novels, and marriage system. This paper aims to help readers have a right view of marriage and gain happiness after understanding the traditional views of marriage in China and the West.

## 1. Introduction

As world-renowned literary masterpieces, *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice* have many similarities in the description of love and marriage, but they also reflect different characteristics of Chinese and western cultures. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is an immortal novel created by the novelist of Qing Dynasty, Cao Xueqin. It describes the prosperity and decline of a large feudal family. At the heart of the novel is a tragic love story between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. It is a masterpiece of realism and a famous book on marriage and love all round the world. *Pride and Prejudice* is the representative work of the famous British female novelist, Jane Austen, and it is a classic novel about love and marriage. It mainly revolves around the different love stories and marriages of several young couples. The ending of the novel is a happy one which shows that love can break the barriers of *pride and prejudice*. The traditional Chinese concept of marriage reflected in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and that reflected in *Pride and Prejudice* have both similarities and differences. Taking the two novels as examples, this paper will make a comparative study of traditional Chinese and Western marriage concepts and explore the deep reasons for the differences. On the theoretical level, studying the differences between traditional Chinese and Western concepts of marriage is of great significance to further understand the spiritual wealth contained in Chinese and English literature. It is hoped that people can critically inherit the historical and cultural

traditions, thus promoting the construction of contemporary family and marriage morality. In practice, different cultural backgrounds lead to the different concepts of marriage in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Understanding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures is of great importance to improve cross-cultural communication skills. Additionally, it can successfully assist people in reducing unnecessary conflicts in cultural exchanges and fostering an increase in the depth and breadth of cultural exchanges between the east and the west.

## 2. Similarities between the Concepts of Marriage Embodied in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice*

### 2.1 Emphasis on Right Match

According to Pei, Fu and Huang, Elizabeth is actually the representative of Jane Austen[1]. She expresses everything that Austen wants to express. They both believe that a happy marriage is grounded upon mutual attraction. Whether in Chinese or Western society, since ancient times, there is an extremely important standard in choosing the spouse, which is the right match. It is believed that the environment from which a person comes from determines his character, upbringing, and abilities, and the person's family background becomes a lifelong imprint which directly influences his future achievements.

There are cases to illustrate the right match in marriage in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Mother Jia is the lady of the Shi family, and Jia Lian marries Xifeng, the daughter of the "King of Jinling", one of the four major families. Both marriages are within the feudal ruling class[2]. Numerous tragedies occur under the traditional marriage system as a result of people's prejudices against one's family origin. The combination of Daiyu and Baoyu, for example, is not a suitable match when compared with the combination of Baoyu and Xue Baochai from the traditional standpoint. Despite the fact that the romance between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu has raised the expectations of many readers, they are unable to be together from the beginning due to the discrepancy in their family backgrounds and economic strength. As a result, the love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu will certainly end in tragedy.

In contrast to the implicitness of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Austen portrays people's pursuit of wealth in a much more obvious manner in *Pride and Prejudice* at the novel's outset: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife"[3]. Despite the fact that Darcy and Elizabeth place a higher value on love than money at the moment, they are inexorably influenced by the social atmosphere. For example, when Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is humiliated by Darcy's Aunt, she points out that Darcy is a gentleman, and her father is also a gentleman. Elizabeth believes that they are members of the same social class and that their differences are only a matter of social rank within the middle class.

Although Austen emphasizes that family background is not the most essential factor in marriage, the notion of family background in marriage is still reflected in her work, which is viewed as a limitation of Austen's work. However, it is this limitation that demonstrates the importance of family background in marriage at that time in the west. Overall, the society that Austen depicts in *Pride and Prejudice* is a highly materialistic one which places a higher value on money over love and relationships.

### 2.2 Unequal Status of Husband and Wife in Marriage

Many examples from books in ancient China demonstrate the high status of men in the traditional society. Women are regarded as the tools of male clans whose job is to inherit lineages

and they are more like commodities which can be bought and sold at will. Cao Xueqin directly exposes these feudal bad practices in the concubine election of Jia family in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Elders can arbitrarily choose concubines for their children, and wives and children can also select concubines for their husbands or fathers in order to please them.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the author does not directly describe people's pursuit of money, but shows the discrepancy between men and women through the thoughts and behaviors of women in the western society. Women were not welcomed by the patriarchal culture in which they lived at the time. They were unable to generate money and provide for themselves via their own efforts. They had to rely on males to provide them with the fundamental security in their life through marriage.

### **3. Differences between the Concepts of Marriage Embodied in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice***

#### **3.1 Different Degrees of Freedom in Choosing a Spouse**

Traditional Chinese ideas are based on the feudal ruling class with the aim to maintain social stability. Some inherited customs, cultures and concepts are linked to political and economic interests of the society at that time. It boils down to the rulers doing their best to limit the freedom of thought of the common people. Free love is a channel for the expression of liberation of thinking. As a result, individuals were unable to enjoy the freedom of love in ancient times.

The western society of the same period was completely different. Democracy, as well as freedom of opinion and expression, has been championed by western culture since the Renaissance period. Despite the fact that the consciousness of gender equality had not yet been fully formed in western society at that time, when young people were choosing their marriage partners, their parents would still take their children's ideas into account. Most parents would do everything in their power to ensure that their children's marriages were happy. In Austen's novel, Mrs. Bennett always hopes that her daughters marry rich people, but she finally agrees to the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, fulfilling this hard-won love. This reflects a popular belief at the time that women were able to choose their own husbands because of the social circumstances in which they lived.

It is clear that the traditional concept of marriage in Western society is significantly more liberal than that in contemporary Chinese society. The traditional view of marriage in Western civilization promotes the liberation of human nature while simultaneously emphasizing the pursuit of one's own interests. It stands in sharp contrast to the traditional Chinese way of life and customs.

#### **3.2 Different Criteria for Choosing a Spouse**

In the traditional Chinese society, the elders of the family place great importance on the character of the woman, which includes being virtuous, sensible, and capable of doing housework. Because it is widely considered that "one of a woman's merits is her lack of talent," there are virtually no standards for women's aptitude in ancient societies.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, Elizabeth is portrayed as a brilliant, lively, and wise female with a distinct personality who has a strong sense of self. She does not defer to conventional authority and has the fortitude to pursue real love despite the obstacles she may face. When Jane Austen depicts Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage, she is trying to convey to the world the idea that a good marriage should be built on mutual understanding, respect, and love rather than on men's wealth, social position, and women's virtue. It is difficult to find in Elizabeth the basic characteristics that women should have by the traditional Chinese notion of marriage, which reflects the fact that women in traditional Western culture enjoy a far greater degree of independence. The rise of the capitalist economy has resulted in a greater support for the ideal marriage founded on

love.

Compared with the Qing Dynasty at the end of the feudal society, the criterion for choosing a spouse demonstrates the emergence of female awareness in Western civilization, where free love is truly valued.

### 3.3 Different Purposes of Marriage

The difference between Chinese and Western views on marriage in the 18th and 19th centuries is reflected in the different purposes of marriage.

People in the Chinese feudal society consider marriage to be a wonderful means to protect the interests of two families at the same time. Females become the victims of patriarchal interests. To provide an example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Yuanchun enters the palace and rises to the position of noble concubine, bringing happiness and fortune to the Jia family. Tanchun marries the person who lives in the border area in order to strengthen the bond between the two families. The objective of marriage, on the other side, is to reproduce offspring, which is another significant goal. It is possible to be unfilial for children in three ways in traditional Chinese society, with the worst being having no descendants. In ancient civilization, the most essential responsibility of a woman in a marriage is to inherit the lineage and nurture her offspring[4].

The purpose of marriage in western society is substantially different from that in Chinese feudal society. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Jane respectively get married in pursuit of love. Considering the society at that time, the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is not realistic. First and foremost, Elizabeth would not reject a wealthy and important man like Collins in the culture of the time, because his wealth and social standing are two of his most enticing characteristics, and no lady would decline his proposal due to these factors. The second point is that, because Darcy is wealthy and attractive, he would not pick a wife like Elizabeth, but rather would marry a wealthy woman, which was also the most popular attitude of marriage in society at the time. Elizabeth and Darcy do not follow the traditional marriage pattern simply because their love for one another is strong enough. Elizabeth and Darcy are finally able to tie the knot as a result of their shared quest for love. Marriage and love are important to them, and their pursuit of love challenges the current view of marriage in society. It also has a significant impact on the enlightenment of modern individuals in their marriages.

For others in *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte gets married for a comfortable home and a higher social position, and Lydia gets married because of her own passion and vanity[5]. They all get married to satisfy their own needs and achieve their personal goals.

## 4. The Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Western Traditional Views on Marriage

### 4.1 The Life Experiences of the Two Authors

The decisions made by the two heroines (Lin Daiyu and Elizabeth) in terms of love and marriage represent the viewpoints of the two authors. They hold that marriage should be founded on love and that individuals should not marry for reasons of prestige, wealth, or livelihood. The two novels have different endings, reflecting the different life experiences of the two authors[6].

Cao Xueqin (1715-1763), the author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, was born in a feudal aristocratic family. Cao Zhenyan is his great-grandfather, who was assigned to the position of Siyan (an ancient official in charge of the sale of salt) as a result of his outstanding military achievements. The three generations of the Cao family have successively served as Jiangning Weaving for more than 60 years starting from Cao Xi. The turning point, however, occurred during the early years of

Emperor Yongzheng. As a result of the Qing Dynasty's internal political battle, the Cao family suffered a succession of blows that led to their downfall. Therefore, Cao Xueqin was raised in such a feudal aristocratic household that eventually fell into a state of destitution. Cao Xueqin first became aware of the coldness, indifference, and hypocrisy of the world as a result of the family's slow decrease in status. Therefore, he despised the powerful and stayed away from officialdom. He had a difficult life. As a result of his personal experiences, he had a more somber and comprehensive grasp of feudal society than other people.

When Cao Xueqin wrote *A Dream of Red Mansions*, he was almost forty. At this time, he had experienced hardships, tasted the ups and downs of the world, and was full of anger and sorrow. He is the prototype of Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of the story *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Jia Baoyu's sisters, Yuanchun, Tanchun, Yingchun, Xichun, Shi Xiangyun, Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, etc, have successively become victims of the feudal ethics and marriage system. *A Dream of Red Mansions* meticulously sketches a picture of blood and tears, which profoundly exposes the evil of the feudal marriage system and reveals that this decadent society has come to an end.

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was born in a rural village in southern England. She grew up in a literate, middle-class pastor's family. Jane Austen's father, George Austen, was a rector of Steventon. She was taught by her parents at home and she never attended a formal school. She was unmarried and died at the age of forty-two. In her time, the British Industrial Revolution was on the rise with the emergence of various new ideas and trends, which have gradually become the mainstream of British society. The capitalism had been fully developed, and the bourgeoisie was already quite powerful and dominant in society. Although Jane Austen grew up with gentlemen and ladies of the aristocracy, her life circle was narrow. However, due to her knowledge and insight, what she was concerned most was the fate of women. She was able to observe the society she lived in and the people and things around her from unique perspective. She carefully studied the characters of various people. The gentlemen and ladies in her novels are all models of etiquette.

Jane Austen has written six novels in her life. The laws and procedures of the old world are twisted and turned in these straightforward stories. Jane Austen, under the influence of many new ideas and trends, has developed her own unique view of the numerous types of marriage that she has witnessed during her life. The majority of her stories are set in the countryside, and the majority of these marriages have a happy ending, which is in keeping with people's ideal aspirations of secular life. In her writings, there is neither an exciting European conflict nor a stumbling vanity to be found. Austen herself summarizes the most prevalent elements of these works in a family letter: "Three or four households in a country village, this is what I have depicted in a little (two-inch-wide) ivory painting." Her summary shows her moral view on life, particularly marriage. She criticizes most of the marriages at that time and convinces readers that a "perfect marriage" is achievable. *Pride and Prejudice* praises intelligent and rational marriage through comic scenes, and at the same time it mocks those absurd characters in society who are dumb, greedy, snobby, and overconfident in their abilities.

## 4.2 Different Breadths and Depths of the Two Works

The breadth and depth of descriptions about marriage in the two works are quite different. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is widely regarded as the definitive work on feudal society. Its depiction of love and marriage is far more comprehensive and in-depth than that of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the author explores many different types of love and marital disasters that occurred in the lives of individuals ranging from the emperor to slaves. In this painting, the tragedies of love that occurred between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, You Sanjie and Liu Xianglian, Si Qi and Pan Youan, Xiangling and Feng Yuan, and others are shown. Additionally, it depicts the tragic marriages of Jia Baoyu and Xue Baochai, Wang Xifeng and Jia Lian, Yingchun and Sun Shaozu, and other couples in the novel. In contrast, the extent of marriage and love presented in *Pride and Prejudice* is more limited. There are only four couples of young men and

women in love.

What's more, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, love and marriage are entwined with societal struggles, family conflicts, and character difficulties, all of which represent a more profound social content. For example, Wang Xifeng makes a riot in Ning-guo House and plans to kill Second Sister You. It shows not only the existence of familial tension, but also the cruelty of the system of wives and concubines. It depicts the degeneration of noble families as well as the gloom of feudal officialdom in the period. Si Qi and Pan Youan are expelled from the Prospect Garden and their parents do not approve their love. Their persecution by both the ruling class and patriarchal clan systems forces them to commit suicide out of love for one another.

While in *Pride and Prejudice*, the four couples are essentially from the same socioeconomic class, therefore it is unlikely that they will face much resistance from their parents or from society as a whole. They can get married without ending in tragedy. In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are no conflicts as sharp as those in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Darcy, for example, is a member of the aristocracy and the owner of Pemberley Manor. Elizabeth, despite the fact that she does not own many assets, belongs to the middle class. Between the two, there is neither an impassable social class difference nor an insurmountable moral chasm that poses a danger to the existing social order.

The gentlemen and women in *Pride and Prejudice* have tranquil and pleasant lives. They feast, dance, and fall in love with one another. There is no need for them to be concerned about the terrible fate of women that may be found in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. For those who don't have much wealth, they need to consider whether or not they can find a suitable spouse who has a substantial quantity of wealth to share. *Pride and Prejudice* portrays the social reality of the bourgeoisie at the time of the novel's publication—economic reasons are prevalent in the matters of love and marriage.

### 4.3 Social System and Marriage System

At the time when *A Dream of Red Mansions* was written, China was a typical patriarchal society, and females were expected to obey their parents' orders when it came to marriage. Young men and women do not have the freedom to interact and fall in love with one another as adults. Young people do not have the ability to choose their own spouses and must instead go by "the commands of their parents and the words of the matchmaker" in order to marry someone they do not know or have never met before. It is precisely because of the existence of these bad customs that China has staged numerous marriage and love tragedies since ancient times.

In China's feudal society, the communication between men and women was very limited, and the scope of women's communication was strictly controlled. The narrow social circle of women determines that their chances of getting a happy marriage are very small. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, Si Qi and Pan You'an are cousins, so they can communicate easily and understand each other and thus fall in love with each other. But they do not have the right to decide their marriage. Without marriage autonomy, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu love each other but they cannot get married. Jia baoyu and Xue Baochai get married without love because of the "arranged words by their parents". Patriarchal system and feudal ethics lead to the tragic death of Daiyu, make Baoyu become a monk, and Baochai a widow.

The awakening of some middle class women's consciousness of right makes them begin to view marriage from a different perspective and pursue free love, which is a reflection of the expansion of liberalism from the economic field to the ideological and cultural field"[7]. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's view of free and equal marriage is the embodiment of this social change. Although Elizabeth's mother thinks that Collins is a good marriage partner, when Elizabeth firmly rejects Collins' proposal, she cannot force Elizabeth to accept the marriage.

In ancient China, the system of polygamy was practiced. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, women cannot control their destiny regardless of their status and ability, because they cannot overcome the "congenital defect" of being a woman. Men can have a wife and several concubines at will.

In the West, monogamy is practiced. This system maximizes the rights and obligations of the two parties in marriage. Both husband and wife have equal status and enjoy the same rights. Mr. Bennett marries a narrow-minded woman because of his lust for youth and beauty, and his love for her ends shortly after the marriage. But because of the existence of his daughters, he cannot divorce at will; and because of the monogamous marriage system, even if he is dissatisfied with his wife, he cannot find another love.

## 5. Conclusion

Adopting the method of comparative analysis, this paper explores the similarities and differences of the concepts of marriage and their reasons reflected in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Pride and Prejudice* under different cultural backgrounds between China and the West in the 18th and 19th centuries. Based on the concept of the right match and unequal status of husband and wife in marriage, this paper analyzes the similarities in the two views of marriage. Based on different degrees of freedom in choosing a spouse, different criteria for choosing a spouse, and different purposes of marriage, this paper profoundly discusses the differences between the two views of marriage by exploring the deep reasons for the differences in terms of the life experiences of the authors, breadths and depths of the novels, marriage system and social system. The findings of this research have significant practical implications today: marriage should be built on love, and a marriage without love is not a happy one. It is not appropriate to base marriage on money and social position. Without love in marriage, even if you gain honor and respect, you are not happy. Of course, a marriage completely divorced from money and status is unwise. A rational marriage based on true love and mutual respect is the most ideal one. By comparing different views on marriage in China and the West, people can have a deeper understanding of the origins of different cultures in China and the West, and the communication between China and the West can be promoted.

The marriages of different characters in the two novels are worth studying more deeply. For example, the comparative study of Charlotte and Xue Baochai, and that of Elizabeth and Lin Daiyu can be conducted. In addition, the research can be conducted from the perspective of feminism at a deeper level, which is concerned with the situation and status of women in society. The emergence of feminist consciousness in the characters of these two classics of global literature is worth delving into in more detail. Feminism aids in the understanding of social notions like as marriage and love in both China and the West.

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