

Echos of Dream of the Red Chamber in the Female Images of Eileen Chang's Fictions

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Abstract: *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin, renowned as one of the greatest Chinese novels, has produced significant and lasting impacts on literati of all generations for its profound life philosophies, broad philosophical framework, and unique understanding of the universe. Eileen Chang's lifelong fondness for *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which the tragic fate of women is prominently manifested, has influenced her novel writing styles. Beginning with Eileen Chang's emotional attachment to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, this paper discusses the similarities between Eileen Chang and Cao Xueqin in terms of life experience, mentality, and aesthetic preference and analyzes the influence of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on female images created by Eileen Chang ideological-wise, artistic-wise, and aesthetic-wise. In terms of writing, Eileen Chang has integrated the tone and mood of classic novels with modern novels, inherited the aesthetics, and created female images that strongly echo *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

1. Introduction

As one of the benchmarks of classic novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has influenced numerous writers. Over the course of history, *Dream of the Red Chamber* serves as a hub that epitomizes Chinese culture and the essence of literature on the one hand and significantly impacts the subsequent literature creation on the other hand. However, most writers simply imitate and copy, while Eileen Chang stands out with her deep understanding of the novel and skillful integration with her personal experience. The female images created by Eileen Chang embody her deep insights into the status of women at that time with the tone and mood of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Contemporary Chinese literati, more or less, have been influenced or inspired by *Dream of the Red Chamber* artistic-wise, which is a remarkable trend in literature history. When it comes to how Eileen Chang inherited and developed traditional culture, the first thing that comes to mind is the deep tie between her and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It is also one of the major tasks in the "study of the influence of *Dream of the Red Chamber*", showing how this work inspires and provides abundant source materials for contemporary writers. *Dream of the Red Chamber* has influenced Eileen Chang since her young age, establishing the creative style of female images in Eileen Chang's later works. Focusing on "female", this paper studies the influence of the ideological, artistic and aesthetic values of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on the female images created by Eileen Chang, provides references for the interpretation of Eileen Chang's views on creation and life based

on previous studies and well-reasoned arguments.

2. Analysis of Eileen Chang's Complex of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The strong attachment of Eileen Chang to *Dream of the Red Chamber* is rooted in her similar family background and experience, as well as the social background with Cao Xueqin. Both as a scion of the once wealthy and influential family, the two writers witnessed the decline of their families. In the ups and downs of life, they echoed and bonded with each other. Eileen Chang's grandmother was born into the family of Li Hongzhang, a Chinese general in the Qing Dynasty, while her mother came from the family of Huang Yisheng, who was also a military official in the Qing Dynasty. Eileen Chang and Cao Xueqin, who were both born into aristocratic families, had personally undergone the falling of their families and experienced the transition from splendor to deterioration. These astonishing similarities have deepened the emotional attachment of Eileen Chang to Cao Xueqin and his masterpiece. Eileen Chang has a life experience similar to that of Cao Xueqin and her works also reflect the literary spirits of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Through her gorgeous, profound, and sharp words, the wane of aristocratic families resembling disappearing sunbeams, the wretched lives of people and the collapse of noble families in times of struggles are unveiled.

"Where does a distinctive writer find his or her resources, and how does he or she organize these resources to impress us and evoke emotions in us that we were not aware of" [1]. According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the enlightening books read by a writer in his or her childhood impose lasting and significant influence on the writer's techniques, styles, and other aspects in writings and art fields. Imitations of these enlightening books usually can be directly seen from the early works of the writer [2]. Claudio Guillen, an American scholar, also points out that "influence" is an internal psychological effect that could be found in the influenced works with implicit traces[3]. *Dream of the Red Chamber* exists in the subconscious of Eileen Chang and the influence of the novel is constantly deepened as the life of Eileen Chang unfolds. Eileen Chang has a deep fondness for *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In her work *Nightmare in the Red Chamber*, she mentioned that she had been reading *Dream of the Red Chamber* since childhood and re-read it every few years. Each time she read it, she experienced new feelings, which seems to echo her life experience [4]. She devoted most of her time to the study of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a novel not only influencing her literary creations but also being internalized in her inner psychological world.

Hidden facets of humanity are exposed in the delicate writings of Eileen Chang: selfishness, triviality, indifference, hypocrisy, distortion, and abnormality. Throughout her works, she thoroughly discloses the false adoration, the loveless marriage, the indifferent attitude, and the fragile reality. In the male-dominated society, women's rights of self-determination are often neglected. Women either hide their true selves or suffer the oppression, being tortured both mentally and physically, and ultimately choose to numb themselves emotionally. They have nowhere else to hide when faced up with the cruel fate. Female characters created by Eileen Chang vary from each other, but readers are able to feel the constraints forced upon these characters by their declining families. Struggling or accepting, they are unable to escape the tragedy of life and are eventually engulfed in the bleak, depressing void. There are some typical characters such as Ge Weilong and Madame Liang from *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* (hereinafter referred to as *The First Brazier*), Cao Qiqiao from *The Golden Cangue*, Ah Xiao from *Steamed Osmanthus: Flower Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn*, Xu Xiaohan from *The Heart Sutra*, Wang Jiaorui and Meng Yanpeng from *Red Rose, White Rose*, and Bai Liusu from *Love in a Fallen City*. They might be a lascivious and arrogant noblewoman, a lost mad woman, a busy maid, a schoolgirl falling into a

trap, a young girl experiencing her first love, or a divorced woman seeking the home. Through carefully reading and comparing, the author finds the common ground of Eileen Chang's works and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. They all manifest the subversion of feudal thoughts and reflection on the meaning of women's existence.

3. "Red Chamber Echos" in Female Images

In the writing of classic novels, character is one of the three major elements of great significance. Character-building directly relates to the quality of the novel. Hence, writers usually are committed to building and developing characters. In terms of building character images, especially female characters, Eileen Chang draws on demeanors of characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The female elder image of a family carved by Eileen Chang shares extended commonalities with Grandmother Jia from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Meanwhile, Chang is good at portraying the traditional image of women who are constrained by feudal etiquette as well as women who live in the "invisible zones".

Su Tong once shared his view that Bai Liusu from *Love in a Fallen City* reminds him of Lin Daiyu appearance-wise [5]. Lin Daiyu's appearance is depicted in the third chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*: with willow leaf eyebrows, a pair of watery eyes, a thin body, she resembles a delicate and exquisite flower in the water when she sits calmly and quietly, and a slender willow branch blown by breeze when she walks [6]. In general, Lin Daiyu has a pair of eyebrows and eyes as if from paintings, as well as a slender and delicate physique. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang's description of Bai Liusu embodies the physical features of a classic beauty like Lin Daiyu: her petite body never tells her ages. She boasts a small waist and a pair of alluring, watery eyes [7]. Her slender and petite body chimes with the willow-like bearing of Lin Daiyu while her moist eyes mirror the dewy and clear eyes of Lin Daiyu.

Not only does Bai Liusu share similar features with Lin Daiyu physically, but also temperamentally. It can be said that the image of Bai Liusu is created upon that of Lin Daiyu. They both come from similar family backgrounds with unstable life paths, leading to the resonance of their temperaments. The temperament of Lin Daiyu is sentimental and depressed. However, covered by a spirit of rebellion, these traits are not solely manifested. From the perspective of life philosophy, Lin Daiyu respects those who show her the same respect, exemplifying the rudimentary idea of contemporary equality. From the perspective of political ideology, Lin Daiyu holds rebellious thoughts and acts as "a rebel against feudalism" that guides subsequent generations on the path of life. From the perspective of marriage, Lin Daiyu insists that marriage should be based on love while love should be established on common rebellious thoughts. The aforementioned perspectives compose the essential traits of Lin Daiyu's personality [8]. Bai Liusu shows many alike personal traits with Lin Daiyu, demonstrating certain cultural accomplishments and qualities. She showcases her strength and independence in adversity, sticks to her values and feelings, and pursues real and inner satisfaction.

In *The Golden Cangue*, Eileen Chang portrays a female elder image that is isomorphically alike to that of Grandmother Jia in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. There are some evident similarities: both women are widowed. Both have shown shrewdness and independence in managing their large families and estates after the loss of their spouses. Both, as the pillars of the family, have absolute power and management control. The presence of the two characters has greatly increased the similarities of the two works. If the character of Old Mistress in *The Golden Cangue* was missing, the narrative of the family would have been utterly different from that of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It is exactly the character of Old Mistress that infuses *The Golden Cangue* with a touch of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The way that the main character Cao Qiqiao appears for the first time in the novel resembles that of Wang Xifeng, who was introduced to readers as a "latecomer". The late arrival of Wang Xifeng, depicted subtly and vividly by Cao Xueqin, captures the reader's attention and leaves room for further details to develop Wang Xifeng's image. If Wang Xifeng appeared alongside Grandmother Jia, Xue Baochai, or Lin Daiyu, perhaps, she would be given fewer descriptions in the novel, and her image would also be less prominent. In the first appearance of Wang Xifeng, people hear her before seeing her. People stared at her in silence as she demonstrated her presence in her approach, not rigidly adhering to feudal etiquette. The unique belated appearance is also employed in *The Golden Cangue*. From the conversations at the beginning of the novel, readers have learned snippets of Cao Qiqiao, thus expecting her appearance. The "late arrival" of Cao Qiqiao has undoubtedly captivated readers. Her later arrival then caused whispers among the crowd, which added to her presence. Cao Qiqiao also seemed to notice that the slightly late arrival was not striking enough. Therefore, she intentionally elicited the noisy confusion. Before sitting, she placed one of her hands on the door frame and the other on her waist. The first unusual appearance of Cao Qiqiao shows readers her extraordinary prominence in the rigid aristocratic family and readers are captivated as if they have experienced the story of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in person [9]. The description of Cao Qiqiao has borrowed that of Wang Xifeng from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It is undeniable that Eileen Chang has handled it cleverly, ensuring that the first appearance of Cao Qiqiao is as striking and unforgettable as that of Wang Xifeng.

In *The First Brazier*, Madame Liang is also a character similar to Wang Xifeng. She speaks sharply and leads an extravagant lifestyle akin to Wang Xifeng. When Madame Liang met Ge Weilong for the first time, she spoke with directness. Her unequivocal manner coincides with the forthrightness of Wang Xifeng. Meanwhile, the trepidation of Ge Weilong when she first came to the Liang house mirrors the uneasiness of Granny Liu when she visited the Grand View Garden. It is likely to notice after reading attentively the works of Eileen Chang that various characters created by her bear a striking resemblance to those in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

4. The Inheritance of Tragedy

Eileen Chang is especially fond of portraying love stories in the past ages. A sense of grief over women's fate at that time is demonstrated through the tragedies wrote by her, a sentiment also being prominent in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The female characters crafted by Eileen Chang and Cao Xueqin are subordinates of the feudal society, who seem destined to have a tragic life. They use marriage as a shield in the male-dominated feudal society, which leads to the tragedy of their lives and exposes their personal and psychological vulnerability.

Qin Keqing from *Dream of the Red Chamber* with a humble background, took every step after careful consideration and proceeded with caution. She had been on pins and needles, hoping to earn appreciation and respect from everyone in the Jia Family and even the servants. In the eleventh chapter, when Qin Keqing was heavily sick, she kept mentioning the goodness of her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and aunt and remembering the days when she could pay filial piety to the elders. The reason that she was beloved in the Jia Family is also the reason that exhausted her. Beauty and wisdom never brought her happiness, only bitterness and suffering. Female images such as Qin Keqing in *Dream of the Red Chamber* have clearly shown the sacrifice of women who endeavored to protect their so-called "marriage". Sometimes, they even became the defender of the feudal thoughts. For example, Jia Yingchun's death is directly related to the feudal marriage. Even as fierce as Wang Xifeng, she could not escape the fate of being divorced and abandoned. As a tragic representative of women in the imperial palace, Jia Yuanchun, with a seemingly elegant and graceful lifestyle, ultimately became a victim of palace intrigue. Generally speaking, most of the

women in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are unable to escape from their tragic fate due to feudal ethics.

Similarly, in *Half a Lifelong Romance*, written by Eileen Chang, Manzhen was introduced to Zhu Hongcai by her older sister Manlu as a "gift". Manlu was hoping that Manzhen would be able to give birth to a child for Zhu Hongcai. Initially, Manlu was a dancer being manipulated and oppressed. However, she gradually became one of the suppressors and joined Zhu Hongcai in committing the crime, being transformed into a defender of the feudal marriage. In *The First Brazier*, Madame Liang pursued material pleasures and suppressed inner affection when she was a teenager. When she experienced emotional outbursts, ages had passed. Meanwhile, feudal ethics constrained her from easing her desires. Eventually, she sacrificed the future of a young woman named Ge Weilong only to satisfy her longing for love. In other works of Eileen Chang, Xu Xiaohan from *The Heart Sutra*, Wang Zhijia from *Lust, Caution*, Wang Jiaorui from *Red Rose, White Rose*, and Bai Liusu from *Love in a Fallen City* all suffered from the constraints of the feudal system. They were engulfed by desires and bore loneliness all alone. Struggling in the cruel society, they experienced all the pains and sorrows in the world.

Eileen Chang has captured the essence of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She calmly examined the decline of the Grand View Garden and depicted a group of neglected women in her creations. They were miserable and worthy of compassion. Meanwhile, these characters showed their vulnerability, selfishness, oversensitivity, and mundanity, constantly lamenting their fate to themselves. Both the works of Cao Xueqin and Eileen Chang tell tragedies with anxiety, sorrow and despair. The pessimism due to the conflict between feudalism and freedom emerges as the two writers' shared creative spirit.

5. Wordings in the Style of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The wording of Eileen Chang's works has been greatly influenced by *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Expressions resembling *Dream of the Red Chamber's* use of words abound in Eileen Chang's works. Eileen Chang has made great efforts in emulating the wording art of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which can be felt throughout her works.

Eileen Chang often quotes classic lines from *Dream of the Red Chamber* in her works. For example, in *Lianhuan Tao*, Nixi accused Yinguan, "You never-learning bastard, how can I ever find anything attractive in you?", which is very similar to what Yuchuan said in *Dream of the Red Chamber*: "Lie down! The karma in past lives must have come at me in this life. How can I ever find you attractive!" As previously mentioned, Wang Xifeng from *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Madame Liang from *The First Brazier* share some common grounds. In the latter work, Ge Weilong once described Madame Liang as a "glassy person with a crystal heart" (used to describe people who are absolutely smart and wise), indicating her intention for her aunt that she wanted to stay in Hong Kong to continue her studies. It is a description borrowed from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which was said by Li Wan to describe Wang Xifeng. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Baoluo learned that she had lost a good match due to Liusu, so she complained to her mother. Then the Fourth Mistress rebuked Liusu as one "whose heart was blinded by pork oil", implying that Liusu was delusional for wanting to be married into the Fan Family. This is similar to Wang Xifeng's accusation to Lady You in *Dream of the Red Chamber* that "you are blinded by phlegm and muffled by grease". Other comparable references include expressions such as "filthy beast" and "dishonor your name and family", which can be found in *Dream of the Red Chamber* [10]. Eileen Chang's application of expressions from *Dream of the Red Chamber* has fully demonstrated her mastery of the novel.

Based on the analysis above, Eileen Chang's emulation of the wording of *Dream of the Red*

Chamber is noticeable, showing the influence of the novel on the writing style of Eileen Chang.

6. Conclusion

Immersed in Shanghai culture, Eileen Chang vividly depicts the miserable fate of women under the influence of feudal thoughts. In her writings, the main female characters are usually trapped by traditional feudal ethics, lacking the power to resist injustice and even losing themselves to decadence. Both Eileen Chang and Cao Xueqin have realized the weak position of women in their societies. The way Eileen Chang crafts her female characters have extended the core value of traditional Chinese literature, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and established new paths that combine contemporary literature expression skills and artistic connotations. Nevertheless, this paper is limited to the study of partial female characters in Eileen Chang's works and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Discussions on male characters, imagery, and poetic field are not involved. The author hopes that, in the future, these discussions will be included so as to deepen the study of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, provide novel insights into the internal connection of literature inheritance and further explore the creation intention and textual meaning of Eileen Chang, which would be of great significance to the study and examination of the connection between past and present Chinese literature.

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