

BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND TEARS:
NOVELS OF MARRIAGE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

by

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Abstract

The great classics of eighteenth-century England and China, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, both revolve closely around women's relationship with marriage and address its underlying inequality. It is clear that matrimony is reinforced on women by societal pressure, yet the authors project different reactions to the oppression in the plots, thus resulting in drastically different endings: a comedy in the former, and the latter a tragedy.

Yet why do these two novels of quasi-similar subject matter and identical social critique settle for completely opposite closures? While both criticizing marriage as a societal constraint for women, why did Cao choose to present his criticism as tragedy while Austen opted for comedy? How does marriage represent a viable choice of happiness for women in *Pride*, yet it rarely leads to happy endings but often conjugal miseries in *Red Chamber*? I intend to probe into these questions in this thesis. Through a comparative analysis of the two novels on the subject of women's designated roles revolving around matrimony, we see the relations between the stories and the social backgrounds in which they are situated, and further relate to the authors' life experiences from which their different attitudes derive.

This analysis will be conducted in a linear progression according to a woman's prescribed matrimony-oriented role change throughout her life, that is, from a daughter to a wife. In this manner, we are then able to examine the crucial elements that influence women during different phases of their lives, and further discover the differences and similarities between the two novels in these aspects: prenuptial female education, social necessity of marriage, and the transformation of women's power through marriage. In the end, we see that the authors' distinct artistic choices regarding the outcome of *Pride* and *Red Chamber* are affected by a feminist ideal against patriarchal subjugation, yet the way in which they express this ideal inevitably reflects their personal attitudes when facing oppressions.

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Short Titles

Domestic: Stewart, Maaja A. *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1993.

HLM: Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 and Gao E 高鶚. [1791] 1991. *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber). 3 vols. Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi.

Precious: Mann, Susan. *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Pride: Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. [1813] 2003. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics.

Stone: *The Story of the Stone*, a translation of *HLM* by David Hawkes (vol. 1, 1973; vol. 2, 1977; vol. 3, 1980) and John Minford (vol. 4, 1982; vol. 5, 1986). New York: Penguin Books.

Introduction

My first contact with *Dream of the Red chamber* (*Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢) and *Pride and Prejudice* occurred when I was not yet old enough to comprehend the first-hand languages of Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) (1715?-1763)¹ and Jane Austen (1775-1817): the former relatively archaic, the latter a whole different writing system. Through the abridged and translated versions, however, *Red Chamber* and *Pride* did not fail to enchant me, creating emotions that overwhelmed an eight-year-old girl. While the former sank a rock of sadness to the bottom of my heart, the latter left a smile on my face the moment I closed the book. More than a decade later, after repetitive ventures through the original versions, these two eighteenth-century classics engaged in conversations with one another in my mind. Seemingly, both *Pride* and *Red Chamber* revolve closely around women's relationship with marriage and address an underlying gendered inequality. Yet how can two novels of quasi-similar subject matter and nearly identical social critique settle for completely different endings? While both criticize marriage as a societal constraint upon women, why did Cao choose to present his criticism in tragedy while Austen decided on comedy? How does marriage wind up a viable choice of happiness for women in *Pride*, yet it rarely leads to happy endings but often conjugal miseries in *Red Chamber*? After Austen's mockery of women's craze for marriage throughout the novel, how is it acceptable for the reader to see even the most unconventional protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, walk the traditional path in the end? By juxtaposing the endings of *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, which are of fundamentally

¹ To be more specific, also Gao E (高鶚) and Cheng Weiyuan (程偉元), the known editor and author of the last forty chapters derived from a fragmented manuscript of Cao. The authenticity of the last forty chapters in *Red Chamber* is a hotly debated issue, as the manuscript Cao passed on was only complete in the first eighty chapters. The Chinese version of *Red Chamber* I used is largely based on the Gengchen Version (庚辰本) of the Gao-Cheng publication. For English translation, I consulted the works of David Hawkes and John Minford.

different outcomes, what can we learn from this distinction derived from their similarities? These are the questions that I intend to examine in this thesis. Through a comparative analysis of the two novels on the subject of women's designated roles revolving around matrimony, we can see the relations between the stories and the social backgrounds in which they are situated, and further relate to the authors' life experiences from which their different attitudes derive.

Both novels can be considered as eighteenth-century creations: *Pride* was first written in 1796-97 and published in England in 1813 after several revisions; while the manuscript of *Red Chamber* was written in the mid-eighteenth century and started to circulate in China not long thereafter. Interestingly, both authors refrained from defining the historical background of their respective novels. Austen's works are known for "an avoidance of central historical realities."² Cao narrates explicitly in *Red Chamber*—many have argued for political safety—that the story cannot be dated in a discoverable dynastic period.³ However, *Pride* and *Red Chamber* are by no means removed from the social backgrounds of their authors. In Stewart's contextualization, Austen's novels can be placed in the time she lived. By the same token, Levy asserts that *Red Chamber* is an authentic embodiment of eighteenth-century Chinese culture, and specifically depicts the life of Chinese nobility in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).⁴ More precisely, *Pride* and *Red Chamber* both are situated in the century when the respective societies remained politically imperial while the socio-economical scenes underwent rapid changes. At a superficial level, the fundamental distinction between the societies in *Pride* and *Red Chamber* is ideology based on culture. Yet within this clichéd dichotomy of Eastern and Western cultures, Cao chose to embrace and

² *Domestic* 1.

³ The beginning chapter explains that the story is from an inscription on a stone. Hence *Red Chamber* is also known as *The Story of the Stone*.

⁴ Levy 1999: 1-3.

condemn Confucian constraints at the same time, whereas Austen managed to present a society void of such dogma.

The lengths of the two novels differ greatly, for *Red Chamber* is roughly four times longer than *Pride*; however, the messages they deliver to the reader are surprisingly similar. First of all, they both criticize traditions that restrain women in their respective societies: *Red Chamber* is widely known for its disapproval of the politically feudal, socially Confucian, patriarchal society in eighteenth-century China; the plot of *Pride* shares that anti-patriarchy sentiment, showing the irony of the British imperial legislation that was based on gender prejudice. Secondly, through the scrutiny of fundamental gender inequality that is accepted as a tradition, both novels promote free will and personal choice: While arranged marriage is a norm in *Red Chamber*, the protagonists are not free agents of their own lives, hence the tragedy of Dai-yu who dies in longing for freedom; on the other hand, arranged marriage in *Pride* is presented as an out-dated tradition that is heavily renounced by the heroine, Elizabeth, who appears to be a firm believer of personal choice. From the two points above, we see that both novels share a feminist ideal in confronting a fairly unfavorable reality for women, and this ideal is presented in distinct tones, namely, mocking versus mourning.

To investigate the reason behind these drastically different emotions projected in the plot of *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, a close comparison of women's roles in the novels is necessary. This will be conducted in a linear progression according to a woman's matrimony-oriented role change throughout her life, that is, from a daughter to a wife. In this manner, we are then able to examine the crucial elements that influence women during different phases of their lives, and further discover the differences and similarities between the two novels in these realms. Chapter One is dedicated to the topic of female education. Whether in the form of schooling or verbal instruction from the elders, the chapter revolves around this question:

“What makes a girl eligible for marriage?” It argues that in both novels, the education provided to single women has its limitations, for it is eventually a tool to integrate women into the patriarchal society. Chapter Two progresses with the aim of female education—matrimony; it examines the social necessity of marriage and its impact on women’s lives through a doubt about its fundamental existence: Why is marriage the designated proper ending for women? The final chapter investigates the fundamental difference between a married woman and a single woman, focusing on the central question of “What is changed in terms of a woman’s power after she marries?” It argues that in both novels, the overall power of a woman increases as she moves onto the role of wife: marriage not only raises her status as a grown-up with not only more independence but also domestic power.

This comparative project of *Pride* and *Red Chamber* allows us to see how a similar societal critique of different social context can be delivered to the reader in completely opposite tones, thus resulting in dissimilar endings. This offers me an opportunity to examine my initial reaction to the two novels. While I sat and wept for the saddening dénouement of *Red Chamber* that is shrouded by death, desperation, and loneliness, it is not simply because Cao does not offer a fairytale ending like Austen does. Through the lens of *Red Chamber*, *Pride* can be seen as an ally that resorts to ironic comedy in criticizing gender inequality; moreover, it is a fictional paradise created to empower women’s right to choose, something that is not even an option in *Red Chamber*.

CHAPTER I

“Grooming a Daughter for Marriage”: Female Education before Matrimony

In the societies of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, marriage is the pole around which women spend their lives revolving. From the day a girl is born, she is expected to grow into an eligible young lady in anticipation of her role as a wife. But what makes a girl desirable in the marriage market? According to Susan Mann, in the High Qing period,⁵ “erudition marked a woman as a highly desirable marriage partner,” therefore “the education of daughters” grew “increasingly important.”⁶ However, as Mann further reveals the purpose of this education—to prepare a learned mother who can provide for her sons an “early childhood education” to succeed in official exams in the future,⁷ we see that this education is gendered in order to integrate women into a patriarchal society; it aims at the fulfillment of women’s designated roles as wives and mothers, instead of personal growth. This is the common ground of *Pride* and *Red Chamber* in the discussion of female education, which can be examined in two interconnected aspects: value installation and knowledge persuasion.

Propriety is a mutual female value in *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, only expressed in different patriarchal confinements. In *Pride*, women’s behavior is expected to comply with the proper code of conduct in their socialization, especially with men, as a ball or a dinner event is often considered a venue of future-spouse sighting. On the other hand, as premarital mingling is absent in the society of *Red Chamber*, a match is often decided based on a woman’s reputation. Therefore, every behavior of single women is monitored by the

⁵ “High Qing” refers to the zenith of the Qing Dynasty, the “Kang-Qian Golden Age” from 1681 to 1796. It is widely believed that *Red Chamber* is situated in this period.

⁶ *Precious* 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*

commonly proclaimed virtues ingrained in Confucian doctrines: loyalty (*zhong* 忠), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), fidelity (*jie* 節), and righteousness (*yi* 義).⁸ These virtues, assert Du and Mann, are “rarely defined in the abstract” but “displayed in action,”⁹ as exemplified in the tragedies of Chess and You San-jie, who prioritize the maintenance of virtues over their own lives. As for the knowledge acquisition aspect of education, both novels show that it is heavily influenced by moral edification, which, especially in *Red Chamber*, often impedes the former. In other words, *Pride* and *Red Chamber* demonstrate the patriarchal limitations imposed on female education that accentuate womanly values and marginalizes intelligence. After all, the ultimate purpose of education for women, as implied, is matrimony. In *Pride*, an “accomplished lady” is praised and sought after by suitors; in *Red Chamber*, “virtuous women” are considered proper for marriage. However, what are the real implications of “accomplishments” and “virtues”? As we probe into the heart of the question, it is necessary to evaluate the role of female education in the novels according to the hypothesis that these appraisals are but chauvinist tools that the society utilizes to shape the image of an ideal wife: either accomplished or virtuous, and by all means proper.

The “Proper” Lady

According to Maaja A. Stewart, in eighteenth-century England, a man was encouraged to show his affection for a woman, but not the other way around, for she might “render herself deeply ridiculous.”¹⁰ Jane Bennet in *Pride* is a perfect model of this statement. Although she and Mr. Bingley grow fond of each other the first time they meet, Jane’s discipline as a proper lady does not allow her to express too much of her inclination, let alone a love-at-first-sight excitement. In the eyes of Bingley’s good friend, Mr. Darcy, Jane’s interaction with Bingley is “open, cheerful, and engaging,” yet her “serenity” leads Darcy to

⁸ Du and Mann 2003: 219.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Domestic* 47.

conclude that “her heart [is] no likely to be easily touched.”¹¹ This observation sufficiently demonstrates how women are judged when interacting with men, and how those judgments determine their marital prospect. Darcy’s interference eventually affects Bingley’s actions and delays the marriage, however wrong his perception is. This misunderstanding, which almost aborts Jane and Bingley’s happy union, shows that women in *Pride* are bound by propriety to act reservedly, yet their “proper” behavior can also, ironically, distance them from their goal—marriage. Unaware of her victimized role in this contradictory womanly value, Jane continues to conceal her emotions in receiving Bingley’s returned attention “with tolerable ease, and with a propriety of behaviour equally free from any symptom of resentment, or any unnecessary complaisance.”¹²

As Mary Poovey asserts, “Austen spent her entire life in the very heart of propriety,”¹³ the concept of propriety is a fairly common theme in Austen’s novels, and thus expected in *Pride*. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that when the outspoken protagonist, Elizabeth, becomes affectionate to Darcy, she also falls under the restraining proper conduct for ladies who wish to marry. During two social dinners at the Bennet household, Elizabeth wishes to express her gratitude to Darcy for his generosity in saving Lydia’s reputation, yet she fails to do so for “he was not seated by her.”¹⁴ Amusingly, the narration serves as the monologue of Elizabeth, who waits with agony for Darcy’s approach the whole evening, hoping to converse, and yet she becomes disappointed when he walks away. She dares not ask the girl next to her to move over and yield a seat at the tea table for Darcy, but can only “follow him with her eyes.”¹⁵ To Elizabeth’s understanding, she and Darcy are “confined for

¹¹ *Pride* 195.

¹² *Ibid*: 324.

¹³ Poovey 1984: 172.

¹⁴ *Pride* 324.

¹⁵ *Ibid*: 330.

the evening at different tables,”¹⁶ yet this confinement, too, symbolizes the restrained behavior of women by proper conduct.

If Elizabeth and Jane agonize over the emphasis on propriety of their society, they would suffocate immediately in the Confucianism-dominated community in *Red Chamber*, in which it is common to see women, products of this doctrine, readily trade their lives for propriety. Chess, a maid who is dismissed from the Jia mansion upon the revelation of her romantic relation with her cousin, commits suicide to protest against her mother’s opposition to their marriage. During the quarrel with her mother, Chess speaks like a dogmatic Confucian: “A girl can only marry once...It was my mistake, I let him take me, and right or wrong I’m his now and no one else shall have me...I’d wait for him now even if I had to die waiting. I’d rather die than let you marry me to someone else.”¹⁷ Her words are understandable from the popular Confucian dictum of “A good woman does not serve two husbands” (*yi nü bu shi er fu* 一女不事二夫),¹⁸ yet her violent way of dying—“she took a run at the wall and dashed her head against it. She split her skull open, the blood came pouring out and in a moment she was dead!”¹⁹—seems to suggest the author’s criticism of the chastity cult.²⁰

¹⁶ *Pride* 331.

¹⁷ *HLM* 92.1259; *Stone* 4: 251.

¹⁸ Ko 1994: 186. See also p. 81: Confucian dictum of “perseverance from beginning to end; not to serve two [masters] unto death” (*cong yi er zhong; zhi si bu er* 從一而終 至死不二).

¹⁹ *HLM* 92.1260; *Stone* 4: 251-2.

²⁰ Although the case of Chess seems to be an extreme comparison to what Elizabeth and Jane suffer from, it is noteworthy that in a society where arranged marriage is the norm, “proper” pre-marital interaction of men and women is in fact no interaction at all, and most brides and grooms meet each other for the first time in the nuptial chamber. Therefore, in the society of *Red Chamber*, the socialization between unmarried women and men (such as that between Elizabeth and Darcy) does not even exist—with the exception of Bao-yu and his female cousins’ cohabitation in the Grand View Garden. See also Edwards, Louise 2001: 116.

In late imperial China, womanly virtues were dominated by the chastity cult, which “defined a woman’s ultimate moral obligation.”²¹ Flourishing in China during the Ming-Qing period, the chastity cult “honored two female virtues: purity and martyrdom.”²² The misfortune of Chess exemplifies that this cult has heavily influenced women in *Red Chamber* who, married or single alike, are prepared to sacrifice their lives for their reputation. As Chess dies to guard her fidelity, another woman, You San-jie, discards her own life for a romance that has not even blossomed. Her unrequited love for Liu Xiang-lian lasts five years, during which San-jie patiently “waited as long as it will take—ten years if necessary.”²³ Shrouded in an identical mentality, San-jie appears less drastic than Chess who threatens to die upon the failure of marriage; she only declares her determination to become a nun if the man to whom her heart goes never comes for her. Nevertheless, upon Xiang-lian’s withdrawal of the engagement, San-jie’s reaction is no different than Chess—she cuts her throat with the engagement sword in front of her fiancé and the whole family. She sacrifices her life without the least hesitation, for she can tolerate renouncing the world, but not her reputation. “He probably thought of her as a shameless wanton, the sort of woman who throws herself at men, unworthy to be his wife,” thinks San-jie before she runs out to confront the man who broke her heart.²⁴ A die-hard adherent of Confucian doctrine, San-jie embraces “martyrdom” relentlessly in protesting against the false insinuations against her “purity.”

²¹ Du and Mann 2003: 219.

²² Ibid: 220.

²³ *HLM* 66.907; *Stone* 3: 296.

²⁴ *HLM* 66.912; *Stone* 3: 304.

As female martyrs of Confucian virtues “were as exalted as loyal ministers who died for their country”²⁵ in Chinese history, especially in the Ming-Qing period, we can imagine Chess and San-jie embrace death without hesitation for they are completely wrapped in this mentality. However, Xu Rundi suspects that this is a delusion and that these women “actually died for love, not moral principles.”²⁶ From this point of view, Chess and San-jie are in fact victims of an overly emphasized value edification that shackles women in the name of virtue. Similarly, in *Pride*, propriety is visibly a standard of respect and token of a woman’s eligibility for marriage; however, Austen softens the boundaries and allows Lydia to challenge the chastity cult that was also celebrated in eighteenth-century England after the Enlightenment.²⁷ As the youngest and loudest daughter of the Bennet family, Lydia behaves in a drastically different manner from Jane; she is presented as a wild, vain, and careless girl. Through the negative portrait of Lydia’s covetousness over men and hunger for male attention, Austen shows that a girl who disregards her propriety will end up with an equally disresponsible man, and yet this is the worst punishment for violating the propriety code. In contrast to Chess’s pitiable sacrifice for her longing of personal choice, Lydia, as a “rebellious heroine,” gets away with her “serious break with convention” without having to pay her dues.²⁸

A Woman of No Talent Is Virtuous

“Aren’t you going to kneel down? I am about to interrogate you,”²⁹ says Bao-chai to Dai-yu after she discovers Dai-yu’s reading of fictions. Dai-yu displays a “scarlet, shame-

²⁵ Ko 1994: 81.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Theodor Undereyck asserts the importance in the Education of girls as “to ensure that female piety and chastity is not harmed by being derided as foolish by libertine men on the false ground that women are intellectually inferior.” See Israel 2006: 575-6.

²⁸ Perkin 1989: 270.

²⁹ *HLM* 42.565; *Stone* 2: 332.

filled face and pitifully entreating voice”³⁰ after she recalls her citing from *The Return of the Soul* and *The Western Chamber* during a drinking game the day before, and begs for forgiveness from her cousin. This episode of the novel demonstrates an important truth in the society of *Red Chamber*: fiction is viewed derogatorily and is further warned against in female education, which perpetually emphasizes womanly virtue over knowledge acquisition. Fictions, in Waltner’s words, represent an oblique longing for freedom of Dai-yu,³¹ and in Bao-chai’s understanding, they will impede her moral cultivation. A proper and well-bred young lady should not dabble in romantic fictions that is traditionally considered mind-tainting and “makes young ladies forget about their parents and propriety.”³² In such society, female education is inevitably removed from an intellectual activity. Bao-chai, being a slightly elder cousin, feels the obligation to instruct Dai-yu. Perhaps one of the best spokespersons of the traditional expectation for women in *Red Chamber*, Bao-chai constantly asserts the importance of women’s proper business, which is by no means female literacy:

So, you see, in the case of us girls it would probably be better for us if we never learned to read in the first place... The little poetry-writing and calligraphy we indulge in is not really our proper business... As for girls like you and me: spinning and sewing are *our* proper business. What do we need to be able to read for? But since we *can* read, let us confine ourselves to good, improving books; let us avoid like the plague those pernicious works of fiction, which so undermine the character...³³

Later on in chapter sixty-four, Bao-chai, again and more directly, preaches to Dai-yu:

“A stupid woman is a virtuous one”³⁴: that is what the old proverb says. A girl’s first concern is to be virtuous, her second is to be industrious.³⁵ She may write poetry if she likes as a diversion, but it is an accomplishment she could just as well do without. The last thing girls of good family need is a literary reputation.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid; *Stone* 2: 333.

³¹ Waltner 1989: 78.

³² Ibid: 75.

³³ *HLM* 42.566; *Stone* 2: 333-4.

³⁴ In my opinion, a better translation is, “A woman of no talent is virtuous,” for stupidity is not necessarily implied in this proverb. The word *cai* (才) literally means “talent.”

³⁵ Hawke translated *nü gong* (女工) into “industrious” when it literally means “women’s work,” which is needlework. See also Mann 1997: 143-4.

³⁶ *HLM* 64.882; *Stone* 3: 256. For counterargument, see Mann 1997: 206.

The ambiguous definition of “*Nü zi wu cai bian shi de* 女子無才便是德” is hotly debated today, being a proverb generally thought to originate from Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Yet in the context of *Red Chamber*, Bao-chai clearly enunciates that women’s literary talent should not supersede her pursuit of womanly virtue. What proceeds virtue cultivation, then, is a woman’s contribution to the household through her needlework. According to Susan Mann, “rapid development of the Lower Yangzi economy was marginalizing women’s handicraft production during the eighteenth century.”³⁷ Although the situation in *Red Chamber* corresponds to historical context—women of the Jia family do not work around shuttles and needles to supply the needs of either the household or their own—the traditional emphasis of women’s skill in embroidery is still salient throughout the novel. The authority of the family, Grandmother Jia, says upfront to her granddaughter, Qiao-jie, who is diligent in reading, that “I’ve no objection to girls learning their letters...But needlework must always come first,” and “In a family like ours...we never *need* to do our own sewing...But it’s as well to know how. Then you will never be at the mercy of others.”³⁸

Although the Jia family provides education to both male and female offspring, the expectation for girls is quite different. As Mann suggests, in High Qing elite culture, boys receive schooling in aspiring to success in the official examinations that entail official position, yet girls “had no clear use for their writing” as they were “barred from taking examination or holding office.”³⁹ This explains Grandmother Jia’s apparent discouraging attitude toward female education, which, if any, should be orienting women toward their roles as wives and mothers. Therefore, probing into the content of Qiao-jie’s studying, we see that the education she receives is not necessarily for knowledge acquisition, but more for value instillation. In the chapter of Chess’s “heroic” death, ironically, the first half of the

³⁷ *Precious* 144.

³⁸ *HLM* 92.1258; *Stone* 4: 249.

³⁹ *Precious* 17.

chapter title reads, “Qiao-jie studies the *Lives of Noble Women* and shows a precocious enthusiasm for Virtue.”⁴⁰ Being a very young girl, Qiao-jie just learned to recognize over three thousand words, and is given *Girl’s Classic of Filial Piety* and *Lives of Noble Women Present and Past* to read. While both are moral edification materials for women, the latter, also known as *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳), is a collection of stories that “illustrate the virtues associated with proper womanly behavior in Confucian families and warn against the vices of jealous, vindictive, and evil women.”⁴¹ According to Jian Zang, it is a Confucian stricture that when a daughter reaches the age of eight, she should be taught this book “by rote so that she will know the woman’s way.”⁴² This “way,” in Cao’s depiction of Chess and You San-jie, seems to be a product of Confucian doctrine that smothers women’s freedom to think for themselves as individuals. Women throw themselves imprudently into death in the name of propriety, yet at the same time, they are unknowingly martyrs of such Confucian ideology. In the end, Cao shows us that women in *Red Chamber* are all inevitably victims of distorted female education. From Bao-chai and Grandmother Jia’s painstaking exhortation to Chess and San-jie’s martyrdom, it is almost painful to see little girls like Qiao-jie receiving the same value instillation and “shows a precocious enthusiasm”⁴³ in such learning.

Under the influence of Confucianism, women in *Red Chamber* are largely discouraged from education by the traditional authoritative values. A woman of no literary talent is thus praised as having more value. Likewise, eighteenth-century England was a period when Sir William Hamilton warned his niece to “Keep your knowledge of Latin a

⁴⁰ *HLM* 92.1253; *Stone* 4: 243.

⁴¹ *Precious* 2.

⁴² Zang 2003: 138.

⁴³ *HLM* 92.1253; *Stone* 4: 243.

dead secret... a lady's being learned is commonly looked upon as great fault."⁴⁴ This message in *Pride*, however, is not explicitly delivered but alluded to. In other words, Austen shies away from speaking directly against female education, but simply orients its purpose into women's craze for matrimony, presenting the accomplishments of a lady as a strong assess of her eligibility in the marriage market. Yet what does "accomplished" entail in a woman? During a conversation at Bingley's Netherfield estate, we see that an accomplished lady is one who masters skills in decorative arts such as playing piano-forte, "painting tables, covering screens and netting purses."⁴⁵ Miss Bingley says more explicitly,

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the world; and, besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions...⁴⁶

In investigating the mentality behind this encouragement of feminine talent cultivation, we can see that Austen is in fact poking fun at this notion of "accomplished ladies," which is conspicuous patriarchal. As stated by Mary Poovey, the accomplishments of eighteenth-century English women were but "thinly disguised opportunities for the display of personal charms" to raise the performer's value in the marriage market; these female educative activities were allowed "as long as it was strictly confined to certain areas and ultimately obedient to men's will."⁴⁷ In the end, as female education in *Red Chamber* is restricted to moral edification—or even distorted value instillation—to fulfill the Confucian "ideal order of separate spheres"⁴⁸ that is labeled "men" and "women" in society, women's learning in *Pride* is also restrained, in a less oppressive way, by a gendered expectation that they are to fulfill in order to score a husband.

⁴⁴ Porter 2000: 322.

⁴⁵ *Pride* 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Poovey 1984: 29.

⁴⁸ Ko 1994: 54.

Female Utopias: A Doomed Garden versus a Prevailing Heroine

According to Susan Mann, upper-class women in Qing times were often well-trained in needlework and the fine arts of poetry, painting, calligraphy, and music-making; however, these artistic skills are insufficient in the making of an eligible wife, for courtesans and professional entertainers also master them. Therefore, only moral instruction from classical texts set apart marriageable women of respectable upbringing.⁴⁹ Bao-chai's firm belief in virtues is derived from this motive. In her understanding, girls should study Confucian texts, instead of reading entertaining fictions, in order to cultivate their reputation in the marriage market. While this sentiment is shared by the whole society, there is very little room for talented women like Dai-yu to truly express themselves. Therefore, within the restraining frame of a patriarchal society in *Red Chamber*, Cao paints a beautiful garden that resembles, in Qian Ma's words, a "female utopia" that suspends the girls' up-coming destined roles as wives and mothers. Through Yuan-chun's vision, the creation of this community is for these "poetic young ladies [of the Jia family] who would have found inspiration in its scenery."⁵⁰ Indeed, the brilliant poetry created by the poetry club of the Jia girls is an essential part that makes *Red Chamber* an authoritative classic in Chinese literature. However, these literary graces can only survive within the realm of the garden. As shown in chapter forty-eight, Dai-yu and Tan-chun both "aghast" upon the news that Bao-yu has taken their poetry out to show other people. The core reason behind this is explained by Bao-chai in a conventional tone later in chapter sixty-four, saying that their poetry writing is in fact against their virtue cultivation. Through the self-constraint of the young ladies, Cao shows us that this utopia is not only created in a confined venue within the patriarchal society, but that its habitants,

⁴⁹ *Precious* 58.

⁵⁰ *HLM* 23.313; *Stone* 1: 455.

inevitably product of Confucianism, are realistic and perpetually aware that their gaiety is eventually evanescent.

In *Pride*, Austen also creates a utopia that allows female education to challenge the conventional ideals; this utopia, if not one of physical form, is the power to reason embodied by Elizabeth. As Roy Porter points out, the Enlightenment period in England was patriarchal and male-oriented, as exemplified in his quotation of Lord Chesterfield:

Women are only children of a larger growth. They have an entertaining tattle, and sometimes wit, but for solid, reasoning good sense, I never in my life knew one that had it, or who reasoned or acted consequentially for four-and-twenty hours together.⁵¹

Throughout the novel, Austen grants Elizabeth this power of reasoning by portraying her as the only female character that often seeks solitude for reflection. The narration of *Pride* very often dwells on Elizabeth's thought process, most prominently we see that the entire chapter thirteen of volume two is composed of her reflection upon Darcy's letter during her two-hour walk by herself. The ability to contemplate solitarily and decipher the complicated interpersonal relationships makes Elizabeth the most sensible female character in *Pride*. Elizabeth knows when to speak and when to conceal her thoughts, even to her close sister, Jane, in the case when she does not wish to affect Jane's already-depressed feelings about Bingley's withdrawal. Most important of all, Elizabeth's comments are sharp, critical, and witty, often addressing questions that are philosophically profound. In discussing Mr. Wickham's real character with her aunt, Elizabeth probes into the dark side of a financial-oriented nuptial match that people accept it as a reality of the time: "What is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end, and avarice begin?"⁵² In response to Jane's comment about Charlotte's marital decision,

⁵¹ Porter 2000: 322.

⁵² *Pride* 153.

she asserts the importance of “a proper way of thinking;”⁵³ and in objection to Jane’s siding with Charlotte, Elizabeth argues that “You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger security for happiness.”⁵⁴ Her intelligent remarks, always seeking the truths and questioning the untrue, often serve as a relief for the reader who cannot but applaud. In contrast to Mrs. Bennet who seems to be the kind of woman Lord Chesterfield refers to in the quote above, Elizabeth outlives her role as an eighteenth-century woman for Austen bestows her “the emancipation of the mind.”⁵⁵

Female education, as depicted in both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, is as decorative as a vase to the male-dominated world around women. Women’s learning is either to please men as brides-to-be, or to contribute to the patriarchal society as virtuous wives and mothers. Cao’s illustration of this limitation for women is almost relentless. One after another, his female martyrs embrace death in demonstration of their virtues, which are, sadly, the consequence of unreasonable and twisted moral edification instilled in women since they were little girls. However, the logic and reason lacking in women of *Red Chamber* is granted to Elizabeth in *Pride*. Through the mouths of the protagonists, Darcy and Elizabeth, Austen asserts the importance of extensive reading in addition to decorative skills of art. Being an avid reader who “prefers reading to cards,”⁵⁶ Elizabeth personifies the notion of knowledge as power, which allows her to become an active thinker. In Poovey’s words, Austen shows “the paradoxes inherent in the idea of the Proper Lady” in order to “criticize the way it shaped and deformed women’s desires” in eighteenth-century England.⁵⁷ If Elizabeth is an embodiment of female emancipation who, despite the limited society around her, educates

⁵³ *Pride* 135.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Porter 2000: 338.

⁵⁶ *Pride* 36.

⁵⁷ Poovey 1984: 46-7.

herself through reading, then the women in *Red Chamber* are not endowed with such opportunity. Indeed they embark on utterly brilliant poetry of impressive intelligence, yet their freedom of self-expression is constrained within the realm of the Grand View Garden. The poetic talent of the girls, eventually, is not the purpose or even necessarily the goal of education, but rather, often seen as a threat to what they “should” be committing themselves to—as future wives and mothers.

CHAPTER II

Marriage as a “Proper” Ending: The Social Necessity of Matrimony

According to Qian Ma, “in both traditional China and Western societies marriage was believed to be a woman’s ultimate goal in life.”⁵⁸ As indicated in the previous chapter, female education in both *Pride* and *Red Chamber* is oriented toward this goal; matrimony is thus presented as a fundamental theme of the two novels. The renowned opening line of *Pride*, despite a playful undertone, well situates the reader around this theme: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that, a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”⁵⁹ Ironically, the plot of *Pride* revolves around single women’s desire for husbands, instead of the other way around in accordance to the statement above. Through Mrs. Bennet’s outspoken impatience in marrying away all five of her daughters, Austen reveals the sentiment that regards marriage as a “must” for women in eighteenth-century England. However, Mrs. Bennet’s ridiculed character—a foolish mother who values matrimony more than morality—creates a dramatic irony, that is, a discrepancy between what she believes and what the reader sees to be reasonable. Therefore, this irony created in the beginning of the novel and embodied by Mrs. Bennet entices the reader to probe into the purpose behind this “must” for women.

In *Red Chamber*, the necessity of marriage for women is more directly questioned. Bao-yu, the protagonist who overtly criticizes marriage throughout the novel, speaking for his cousins that are forced into arranged marriages: “Why is it that girls have to get married as soon as they grow up? Once they’re married, they’re bound to change.”⁶⁰ This “change,” as shown in *Red Chamber*, is rarely for the good, but for the inevitable necessity of women in

⁵⁸ Ma 2004: 192.

⁵⁹ *Pride* 5.

⁶⁰ *HLM* 106.1424; *Stone* 5: 137.

eighteenth-century China, when gender inequality was fairly common in the society. The norm of arranged marriage silences women from voicing their desires, and in most cases in the novel, violently takes them away from their present happiness. The girls in the Grand View Garden are dispersed in this way by marriage, which rarely leads to conjugal felicity, but sadness or even tragedy.

In both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, the social necessity of marriage is under certain criticism, either satirized or chided, for it is mostly presented as a purposeful action of the families of the match, and the beneficiary part of this union surpasses personal happiness. While *Pride* most prominently emphasizes financial advancement through marriage, *Red Chamber* reveals marriage as a reproduction of social hierarchy.⁶¹ Regardless of how the intentions alter, resulting from different social backgrounds in which the two novels are situated, the role women play in their matches is somewhat similar—they are either the medium of conjugal transactions⁶² or the chips on the gambling table of arranged marriage.⁶³ Taking this argument into consideration, it is the dissimilar endings that put *Pride* and *Red Chamber* in contrastive relations. In a general sense, *Pride* ended comically: After refusing two marriage proposals, Elizabeth still winds up a happily married woman living in the grand Pamberley estate. Whereas in *Red Chamber*, tragedy falls on the protagonists in the end: Dai-yu dies broken-hearted and Bao-yu becomes a monk, leaving behind his pregnant wife, Bao-chai, for good. After the purpose of marriage is criticized in the novels, why is marriage still a viable choice of happiness for women in *Pride*, but not in *Red Chamber*? In this chapter, I intend to investigate this question in a comparative manner from the perspectives of the

⁶¹ Mann argues that “marriage in mid-Qing China was a contract that aimed above all at reproducing class structures.” Mann 1991: 221-2.

⁶² Braunschneider 2002: 137.

⁶³ *Precious* 13.

purpose behind marriage, husband-wife relationship, and lastly the overall tone toward marriage in the novels.

Marriage: A Transaction between Two Families

The oracles that Bao-yu steals a glance at in chapter five of *Red Chamber* reveal the eventual endings of the important female characters in the story. Looking at the very existence of the oracles, it represents the inescapable fates that Cao Xueqin prescribes for his characters; nevertheless, in a larger frame, it also symbolizes the norm of arranged marriage that constrains women in eighteenth-century Chinese society. According to Susan Mann, in High Qing times, “marriages were arranged through matchmakers whose interest in full disclosure was compromised by their interest in money, [thus] marriage was almost always based on incomplete information.”⁶⁴ Ying-chun, the second Miss of the Jia family, is a victim of this tradition. She is betrothed by her own father to a wolf-like man, who, before the match was settled, is described as the son of the Sun family that has had “a special relationship with the Jia family” for generations.

He was a tall, powerfully-built, impressive-looking young man; he drew a good bow, had a good seat on a horse, and knew how to bear himself well in company and please those whom it was important to please. Still under thirty and with his family’s not inconsiderable wealth behind him, he had excellent prospects...From every point of view...Jia She regarded this as being the almost perfect match...⁶⁵

Within a couple of lines of narration, we see that Ying-chun’s marriage is determined for these material qualities, according to her father’s will. In the following chapter, the real scheme behind this match is revealed: Jia She owes the Sun family five thousand taels, and thus betroths his daughter to Sun in compensation. Being a docile girl, Ying-chun is ill

⁶⁴ *Precious* 13.

⁶⁵ *HLM* 79.1096; *Stone* 3: 585.

treated by the family of her husband, and tragically dies after a year of conjugal life. In the words of Louise Edwards, Ying-chun is but a “mortgage payment” of her father.⁶⁶

The materialistic descriptions of Ying-chun’s match are essential, however little truth they entail when it come to the real character of the man, for families in eighteenth-century China planned marriages of “matching doors” so that the couples were “of roughly comparable social background.”⁶⁷ In other words, the information of the groom provided to Ying-chun’s family legitimizes the marriage, for the Sun family is considered compatible to the status of the Jia family. The maintenance of social class, instead of personal happiness of the couple, is the priority of a match. Under such a limitation, a proper marriage is supposed to be arranged by third parties, leaving no room for romance to blossom. Bao-yu and Dai-yu’s tragedy is thus the outcome of their attachment to each other, which is not only neglected, but also vetoed by the elders of the family who hold authority over the two’s marital decisions. From perspectives of the elders, Dai-yu’s “peculiar temperament” and “delicate constitution” disqualify her as a suitable mate for Bao-yu.⁶⁸ Although Grandmother Jia, the ultimate decision maker, “can understand that the two of them should have grown rather fond of one another, after growing up together and playing together as children,”⁶⁹ her harsh comment on these “foolish romantic attachments”⁷⁰ eradicates any possibilities of a happy ending. Dai-yu has been a preferred granddaughter of Grandmother Jia, arguably the second favorite placed right after Bao-yu, but when it comes to matrimonial decisions, she remains no favor of the elders. “If she is suffering from some form of lovesickness...she can expect no further sympathy from me either,”⁷¹ ruthlessly says Grandmother Jia. As for Bao-

⁶⁶ Edwards 1995: 139.

⁶⁷ *Precious* 12.

⁶⁸ *HLM* 90.1235-6; *Stone* 4: 218.

⁶⁹ *HLM* 97. 1317; *Stone* 4: 342.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*; *Stone* 4: 343.

⁷¹ *Ibid*.

chai, the chosen spouse for Bao-yu, her acquiescence toward the elders' manipulation and refusal to comment on her own marital decisions even when asked eventually brings her into a short, titular marriage of little conjugal affection.

As the two tragedies above allow us to look critically at the norm of arranged marriage that dominates women's lives in *Red Chamber*, the society in *Pride* seems to demonstrate more flexibility and tolerance for women. According to Maaja Stewart's contextualization of Austen's work in historical context, we can parallel the "apparently non-historical domestic existences" of the characters in *Pride* with "the rapidly changing economic and social institutions of the age," that is, from middle to late eighteenth century England.⁷² Although Austen inevitably alludes to class difference between aristocracy, gentry and merchants in *Pride*, the purpose of marriage in the novel is unlike that in *Red Chamber*—a "contract" aiming at "reproducing class structures"⁷³—instead, it is often presented as a "transaction" that "guarantees the economic viability of the marriage."⁷⁴ Therefore, the maintenance of social class through marriage is viewed as an outdated notion, which is personified by the pathetic character, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Representing the fading feudalism, Lady Catherine is perhaps the only believer of arranged marriage in *Pride* who firmly holds onto the union of her daughter and her nephew that is planned from their infancy. Naturally, Lady Catherine fails to impose her authority upon anyone but her daughter, and her condescending manner and nosy personality heavily contrast her real influence on no one but sycophants like Mr. Collins.

In *Pride*, Lady Catherine's ironic impotence points to a decline in the idea of arranged marriage, and suggests that the maintenance of social class through marriage is becoming an outmoded idea. At the same time, the dominating purpose of marriage seems to have shifted

⁷² *Domestic* 1-2.

⁷³ Mann 1991: 221.

⁷⁴ Braunschneider 2002: 137.

to financial advancement, which is overtly expressed by the loudmouth Mrs. Bennet. With five daughters and not a son, the Bennet household is under great economic stress from losing the estate to Mr. Bennet's cousin, Mr. Collins. In order to avoid poverty, the Bennet girls are under the pressure to find husbands. As the mistress of the estate, Mrs. Bennet takes on the responsibility of pushing as many daughters into marriage as she can. Upon hearing about Mr. Bingley's purchase of Netherfield Park nearby, Mrs. Bennet exclaims: "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"⁷⁵

Constantly we see Mrs. Bennet exclaims over the financial capability of single men who pass by her sight, for they are eligible to be her future sons-in-law. Even when her youngest daughter, the morally corrupted Lydia, elopes with Wickham, an officer without fortune but rather in debt, Mrs. Bennet still rejoices over such a match, for as long as her daughter is married to another household, it is an ease for the economy of the Bennet family, and "no sentiment of shame gave a damp to her triumph."⁷⁶

Mrs. Bennet's mentality, though rather mercenary, is commonly shared by women in her society. As Austen was fairly aware that in eighteenth-century England, "single women had an unfortunate propensity to be poor,"⁷⁷ she does not refrain from showing examples of this proclivity toward poverty that can only be prevented by matrimony. Charlotte Lucas's acceptance of Mr. Collins's proposal is a prominent instance, whereas Elizabeth Bennet's refusal becomes a relief of the apparently unfair situation, and establishes her as the heroine. Straightforwardly, Charlotte reveals to her best friend her intention behind this match: "I am not romantic...I ask only a comfortable home."⁷⁸ Being a twenty-seven-year-old unmarried woman, Charlotte is more than aware of the lack of choice in front of her. She is not only a

⁷⁵ *Pride* 6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*: 300.

⁷⁷ Perkin 1989: 54.

⁷⁸ *Pride* 125.

burden for her family, but also a stumbling block of the prospects in the marriage market for her younger sisters, who, according to tradition, are to wait until she is married to “come out” and socialize. This presents a distinct privilege Austen grants Elizabeth above all other female characters. With her father on her side, Elizabeth ignores her mother’s desperation and declines Mr. Collins’s proposal. Had she accepted Mr. Collins, she would have helped to keep the Longbourn estate in the hands of the Bennet family, but she resolutely turns away from trading her own happiness in this way. Elizabeth’s second refusal of marriage offer from Mr. Darcy even more strongly marks her as a believer of personal happiness above all. Although Mr. Darcy is much wealthier and attractive than Mr. Collins, Elizabeth still refuses to give her hand without affection. However, as her opinion of Mr. Darcy alters, she candidly turns a deaf ear to “the mighty”—Lady Catherine—and insists on following her own will. Her denial of Lady Catherine’s class prerogative demonstrates the gradual disintegration of aristocracy and gentry of the period: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal.”⁷⁹ Elizabeth’s unconventional actions may very well put her in peril, but under the favor of Austen, she was singularly allotted the right to decline selling out her happiness and voice her own will. In the end, we see that although both *Pride* and *Red Chamber* present marriage as a beneficiary action between two families, the transaction is often blindly done in the latter, disregarding the welfare of the couple; whereas in the society of the former, it is the consent of the persons concerned, especially the bride, that makes the final decision.

After the Wedding Bell: Husband-wife Relationship

The spotlights of both *Red Chamber* and *Pride* mainly focus on the unmarried protagonists. However, the relationship between the married husbands and wives also sheds light on what might happen after the wedding of the heroines, which is often left out in the novel. By observing distinct types of interaction between married couples in *Red Chamber*

⁷⁹ *Pride* 345.

and *Pride*, we can speculate why marriage has less potential of leading toward tragedy, but a farce at best, for women in *Pride*. Throughout the novel, the interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet shows that their marital relationship is not of utmost pleasure. From the very first chapter, Mr. Bennet's attitude toward his wife is either nonchalant—"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it"⁸⁰ or sarcastic—"I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."⁸¹ This adequately manifests that the communication between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is by no means one between soul mates. In chapter nineteen of volume two, a more honest report of their conjugal relationship is finally revealed:

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father, captivated by youth and beauty...had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection to her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown.⁸²

We can almost assume that "the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband" that Elizabeth has always observed "with pain"⁸³ highly influences her determination of marrying for foreseeable happiness rather than anything else. Consequently, the situation agonizes Elizabeth even more when she sees her confidant, Charlotte, having to enter the state of matrimony without a bit of affection, which is thus worse than the initial stage of her parents' marriage. Austen shapes Charlotte around the model of victimized women who are forced to marry under the pressure of societal necessity:

Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable: his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object: it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small

⁸⁰ *Pride* 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid*: 7.

⁸² *Ibid*: 231.

⁸³ *Ibid*.

fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative form want.⁸⁴

As her best friend persists in a woman's right to choose, Charlotte is the exact opposite who surrenders to what she *must* do in order to stay in line with the norm of the society. A believer in marriage as a *proper* rather than *happy* ending, Charlotte accepts Mr. Collins knowing that her "chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state,"⁸⁵ which is fairly thin to her believe. Her words attempt to console her best friend who distresses over the unjust situation, hinting that the Lucas household has perhaps been no better than the Bennets when it comes to an example of conjugal felicity, and ultimately, marriage does not mean happily ever after for everyone. As early as in chapter six of volume one, Charlotte already expresses this view in a clear manner: "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance... it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life."⁸⁶ By accepting the reality long before marriage, Charlotte knows very well the ways to enjoy the better of her marital life and avoid the worst—her husband.

Although the conjugal situations of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet as well as Mr. and Mrs. Collins do not seem to demonstrate any sort of pleasure, the patriarchal society of *Pride* is still one of greater gender equality than that of *Red Chamber*. After all, the husband-wife relationships in *Pride* are relatively equal when gender difference is at play. In Austen's rendition of that society, neither physical abuse nor vocal violence between couples is observed; however, it is quite the opposite in *Red Chamber*. According to Qian Ma, the chauvinist notion of husband-wife relationship in Chinese history is reflected in the Chinese characters for marriage:

⁸⁴ *Pride* 122.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*: 125.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*: 24.

In Chinese a man getting married is referred to as *qu* and a woman getting married is referred to as *jia*. The character *qu* is composed of two parts, the upper part meaning “to get” or “to obtain” and the lower part being a “woman.” Therefore, to a man marriage means to obtain a woman. The structure of the character also shows the wife’s inferiority by having “woman” placed in the lower part of the character. The character *jia* also has two parts—female and home—placed side by side, meaning that marriage offers a woman a home.⁸⁷

In *Red Chamber*, this idea is ostensibly shown in Ying-chun’s ill betrothal to Sun Shao-zu. Although her mismatch was foreseeable for her uncle Jia Zheng and her aunt Lady Wang, they cannot do anything afterward, for the Jia family is no longer Ying-chun’s home after marriage. The old saying Lady Wang refers to—“Marry a daughter, throw out the water”⁸⁸—pertinently corresponds to the etymology of these matrimonial characters. As a married woman heads off to her nuptial family she no longer belongs to her natal family, just like the water spilled on the ground cannot be retrieved. When Ying-chun returned to the Jia mansion for a visit, she could not help but reveal the wickedness of her husband, “an out-and-out libertine” who gambles, drinks, “corrupt[s] practically every maid and young woman in the house,” and, above all, who threatens to beat her and talks down on her as if she is a maid. Lady Wang, although she pities her niece, can only say, “He’s obviously an unreasonable man...but now that you’re married to him, there’s really nothing to be done...It’s a bad business. My poor child! I’m afraid it must be your fate.”⁸⁹ Absolute male dominance in the society of *Red Chamber* is such that women, as wives, cannot refuse being abused, even in life-threatening situations.

The relationship between wives and their husbands in the society of *Red Chamber* is extremely unequal, and this unfair situation is in fact grounded in law. According to Gu Jiantang, the Qing Dynasty, as a foreign government, continued to integrate Neo-

⁸⁷ Ma 2004: 194.

⁸⁸ *HLM* 81.1115; *Stone* 4: 32.

⁸⁹ *HLM* 80.1112-3; *Stone* 3: 610.

Confucianism with politics like the previous Ming regime (1368-1644) did.⁹⁰ As a result, the Qing laws regarding matrimony and familial relationships, as a legacy of the Ming legal system, is known for strict regulations for women in the name of womanly virtue.⁹¹ Moreover, one of the most chauvinistic legislation that stipulated the behavior of a wife can be dated even earlier back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), known as *qi chu qi chu* 七去七出 (The seven grounds for husbandly repudiation of the wife), which are “not having any children, immoral behavior, not serving parents-in-law, loquacity, committing robbery, jealousy, and incurable disease.”⁹² Legislations as such legitimize gender inequality in Chinese history. In addition to the great responsibilities they hold in their nuptial family, wives’ are expected to act virtuously at all times, including in situations of their husbands’ infidelity.

In *Red Chamber*, even a shrew like Xi-feng is bound by this entrenched tradition, and avoids showing direct jealousy to her husband’s clandestine marriage to a concubine, Er-jie. Upon discovering Jia Lian’s disloyalty, Xi-feng pretends to be ignorant about the affair for weeks. As a mistress, she interrogates the servants who helped with the event, calling them “black-hearted, worthless scum the lot of you!”⁹³ But Xi-feng dares not, as a wife, show even a sign of agitation in front of Jia Lian, for that would backfire against her own virtuous reputation and break the harmony within the Jia family. Whatever evil scheme she imposes on the poor concubine, Xi-feng does it behind the mask of a “virtuous” wife. Her true color is hidden from her husband and elders of the Jia family, who have the power to judge her

⁹⁰ Gu 1996: 106.

⁹¹ Lu Miawfen indicates that Neo-Confucianism in the Ming Dynasty is in fact an extremely male-oriented ideology that focuses on men’s political and philosophical pursuit. As men were preoccupied with their studies and intellectual discussions with one another, their wives were expected to be in charge of the whole family and hold responsibility over the harmony within the household (serving the elders, assisting their husbands, instructing her children, maintaining good relationships with the in-laws, and managing the servant etc.) See Lu 2003: 135.

⁹² Sekiguchi 2003: 43. See *Tang Code II*, p. 167.

⁹³ *HLM* 67.924; *Stone* 3: 325.

behavior as a wife and daughter-in-law of Jia household. The incidents of Ying-chun and Xi-feng demonstrate that in *Red Chamber*, patriarchal dominance in a conjugal relationship is insurmountable, for it is not only ingrained in the prevailing Confucian ideology but also integrated in the legal system. To the contrary, although *Pride* is also situated in a time when the matrimonial legislation is considered patriarchal, Austen shows that it is easier being a wife in her society than in that of Cao's.

Marriage: Happily Ever After?

The societal necessity of marriage is indeed omnipresent in the two novels. Young girls in *Red Chamber* must marry for they have no authority to their own lives. In *Pride*, women of little means stand in the chapel for financial reasons, except for the heroines who are bestowed privilege by Austen. From this point of view, we see the fundamental distinction of *Pride* and *Red Chamber* that leads to their entirely different endings. In the Confucianism-entrenched society of *Red Chamber*, it is next to impossible for the author to create a heroine who triumphs over multiple strata of hierarchies imposed on young women. The only gateway is to quit the world, that is, to die or become a nun. Dai-yu, the tragic heroine who longs for the freedom of marrying for romantic love, eventually dies broken-hearted because her lover, Bao-yu, under the constraint of his mother, "is not a free agent" either.⁹⁴ Xi-chun, the youngest Miss of the Jia family, chooses the other path and insists on her determination to follow Buddhism rather than falling under patriarchal control and forced to marry for others' benefit. Marriages in *Red Chamber* rarely lead to happiness for women, for the norm of arranged marriage smothers the possibility of the couple's happiness. Other than the prescribed oracles, women's destined conjugal tragedies can be detected from Bao-yu's negative attitude toward marriage throughout the story. In chapter seventy-seven, Bao-yu states that after girls are married, they are no longer pure because of "something in the

⁹⁴ Waltner 1989: 78.

male that infects them.”⁹⁵ Upon hearing his cousin Ying-chun’s upcoming marriage, and that she will take four of her maids with her to her marital household, Bao-yu stamps his feet, groaning that “five more decent people were now lost to the world.”⁹⁶

If Bao-yu’s explicit anti-marriage tone in *Red Chamber* foreshadows the tragic ending, we might see Elizabeth’s outspoken actions as the voice of Austen that chose mockery instead of sympathy. Julia Prewitt Brown points out:

The opening claim of *Pride and Prejudice* is either an instance of unalloyed irony or comic hyperbole...No matter how we read it, its finality is its irony (or comedy); it holds its “truth” and the resistance to its truth in one—the quintessential stance of the ironic comedies.⁹⁷

The structure of *Pride*, composed of a didactic beginning that entices doubts and a fairytale ending that provokes questions, invites the reader to fathom Austen’s mentality and her seriousness behind the making of the novel. A clear message is made, however, that marriage is not only a man-made institution, but also made for men. Women, as the passive party, revolves around the will of them and do not enjoy such power to act freely. Through Elizabeth’s atypical reaction to patriarchal dominance, though, we see that Austen asserts women’s right to choose in the society of *Pride*. Although men initiate marriage, women can choose to accept or decline it.⁹⁸ Passive-aggressively, Austen questions the traditional idea of marriage as the only *proper* ending for women. In contrast to *Red Chamber*, the social background in *Pride* permits more freedom to allow a comic ending, which, on second thought, seems to be too good to be true: the eloped Lydia is saved and married, the almost-rejected Jane and rebellious Elizabeth become wives of two wealthy men. In the end, the ultimate wishes of the fatuous Mrs. Bennet is fulfilled, however fairy-tale like it is. Both

⁹⁵ HLM 77.1059; *Stone* 3: 534.

⁹⁶ HLM 79.1097; *Stone* 3: 586.

⁹⁷ Brown 1979: 65.

⁹⁸ See also Poovey 1984: 29. “Before she married, a young girl possessed the power of what moralists called ‘her Negative’: the right to resist or even reject the proposal of a suitor.”

criticizing the patriarchal nature of matrimony, Austen chooses to stretch room for the heroines with ironies weaved within the happily-ever-after ending, whereas Cao prescribes the tragedies in the fatidic oracles from the start, as if alluding to the hopelessness of the system in which women are destined to be victims.

CHAPTER III

Marriage and Power Struggle: The Transformation of Female Power through Matrimony

After our previous discussions it becomes apparent that in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, women's roles throughout their lives revolve around marriage, and thus daughters are expected to become wives, and mothers thereafter. Yet as a woman's role alters, particularly from that of single to married, what is changed in terms of her power? In both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, we see that on a larger scale, a woman's power increases after she moves onto the role of a wife. Therefore, this increase of power seems to be the implied incentive for women to marry. Marriage firstly marks the maturity of a girl who parts with her natal family to create her own marital family, secondly grants her domestic power that enables her to have control over the household of her husband. However, this gain of power is fluid in the patriarchal societies rendered by Austen and Cao, and women's power struggle seems to be perpetual, though of a different degree, before and after marriage.

The plot of *Pride* revolves around an anxiety evoked by a longing of power gained through marriage, financial power in particular. Yet ironically, Mrs. Bennet, a married woman so to speak, most prominently embodies this longing. Through her role as a perpetually anxious mother who anticipates marrying off her daughters with explicit impatience, we see that marriage does not necessarily equal a carefree future. In Maaja Stewart's words, the anxiety in *Pride* is the result of "the economic vulnerability of women" in eighteenth-century England when women's right to entail was prohibited by law.⁹⁹ It is noteworthy that the core reason of Mrs. Bennet's distress is her lack of financial power to entail the Longbourn estate, and also her longing for her daughters to acquire domestic power

⁹⁹ *Domestic* 17.

that potentially secures their economic stability. The pushy attitude of Mrs. Bennet is thus based on more than her motherly motivation for daughters, but her role as the mistress of the estate, an estate that is falling out of her hands. In *Pride*, we see that Austen's discussion of women and power is presented in a fretful sentiment, for power struggle continues even after the wedding bell if the household fails to make ends meet. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, marriage is still displayed as a relief of this fret, and perhaps the single solution to all concerns of women's powerlessness in the novel—as long as she marries well.

In *Red Chamber*, however, this is not the case, for there are more than financial concerns at play in a marriage. In Zhang Bilai's opinion, *Red Chamber*, reflecting the society of eighteenth-century imperial China, is controlled by the “four great authorities”: political, clan, patriarchal, and religious.¹⁰⁰ Extremely hierarchical in nature, the power struggle among different authorities casts a shadow over women's lives in the Jia mansion. Therefore, the domestic power of a wife in *Red Chamber* is often unstable, for it is dependent on familial hierarchy. This intricate system seems to value primarily social status, followed by seniority and gender; hence we see Yuan-chun, the Imperial Concubine, holds political authority over her grandmother, the eldest member of the Jia clan whom all male family members revere highly. Although this complex chain of power provides certain opportunities for women to rise up, like Xi-feng, the shrewd daughter-in-law who holds power over hundreds of people in the Jia mansion, many scholars have suggested that her domestic power is fluid, as it is gained through her manipulation of the hierarchical system.

The cases of Mrs. Bennet and Xi-feng indicate that marriage is not a guarantee of a carefree future, for the domestic power gained through matrimony is not really stable.

However, the married status is still sought after by single ladies in both novels, voluntarily or

¹⁰⁰ Zhang 1978: 229. The Four Authorities, as indicated by Louise Edwards, first appear in Mao Zedong in his 1927 speech, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan.” See Edwards 1995: 63.

pressured, for they are generally more vulnerable than married women. In *Pride*, Austen presents a society in which single women are dependent financially and socially; however, she also shows the power they enjoy, that is, the power to choose their future spouses. This marks a prominent difference from the society of *Red Chamber* that is heavily overcast with multilayered hierarchies, beneath which we see women struggles for power—over others or simply over themselves—and those who contest the entrenched system, in Cao’s grave manifestation, often end up in death, for the only other loophole is to become a nun. Taking this as a sign of Austen’s comedy ending versus Cao’s tragic dénouement, this chapter serves as a dialogue between the two novels regarding conjugality as a life-changing experience of patriarchal nature: What sort of power do women have before marriage? What kind of power is then gained after the wedding bell? Based on the assumption that marriage is seen as a ladder for women to gain power, this discussion allows us to see the vicissitude of women’s power before and after marriage.

Before She Gets Married: Power Struggle of the Single Ladies

Unmarried women in *Pride* have little power. Financially, they are rendered vulnerable by law, which is explicitly written in the beginning of chapter seven: “Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed, in default of heirs male, on a distant relation.”¹⁰¹ This misfortune, as previously noted, is the central concern around which the plot of *Pride* revolves. Clearly, the underlying message is that there are five Bennet *girls* and not a son; therefore the children of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are deprived of the right to their father’s property on which they reside.¹⁰² As noted by Joan Perkin, the famous quote of Sir

¹⁰¹ *Pride* 29.

¹⁰² For a better understanding of the situation, Maaja Stewart well interprets it within the historical context of eighteenth-century England: “Entails...as Austen’s plot makes clear, exist in a world where the family is an important cultural and psychological support to the

William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-9) explains the sentiment behind this gendered legislation: "The law was 'for her protection and benefit, so great a favourite is the female sex in the laws of England,'" and that marriage is the only way to transfer "the protection of her father to that of her husband."¹⁰³ In the name of *protection*, Mrs. Bennet and her daughters are discriminated by the entail law based on their gender, and hence subjugated under patriarchal power. By portraying the legal heir of the Longbourn estate as a socially awkward sycophant of the aristocrats who is not only undeserving but also not in need of this entail, Austen ridicules the unfair system just as much as the characters of Mr. Collins.

Other than the lack of financial power, single women in *Pride* are socially bound by the code of propriety as well. According to Perkin, "being physically and economically the weaker sex their dependence, the theory went, was for their own good."¹⁰⁴ Throughout the novel, we see the Bennet girls gather in groups when they leave their house, especially during their walks to Meryton, the nearby town one-mile away from Longbourn. If single girls are to take trips, it is often because a married couple invites them, as Elizabeth joins the summer northward journey of her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner; and Lydia tags along Colonel Froster and his wife to Brighton. Lady Catherine also once dictates in this matter: "Young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life. When my niece Georgiana went to Ramsgate last summer, I made a point of her having two men servants go with her."¹⁰⁵ Although a constantly mocked character in *Pride*, Lady Catherine speaks of the truth: the English society depicted in *Pride* is heavily

individual and where women are protected by their men at the same time that women have to be excluded from the social advancement of the family and its name through the male heir."

See *Domestic* 22.

¹⁰³ Perkin 1989: 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ *Pride* 208.

influenced by laws that emphasize women's dependence on men, and thus regulates women with propriety-oriented lenses, especially in the case of young, unmarried women.

Like flowers that are best to be kept indoors, single women are not supposed to venture out side of their companions or protectors, for it is considered improper. And such is the case of Lydia's elopement that underscores the importance of male protection. The incident highlights not only the vulnerability of Lydia, but also that of her sisters—Elizabeth and Jane—who are the only sensible elders that would do anything to save to situation, yet are rendered extremely helpless because of their powerless status as single ladies. To Elizabeth's understanding, her youngest sister has “no money, no connections,”¹⁰⁶ and worst of all, Lydia has “no brothers to step forward” and an aloof father that “would do as little, and think as little” about this matter.¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth and Jane apparently seem to be more anguished than their father, yet as unmarried women, they are in no position to act on their anguish. The inability of the Bennet sisters in this incident not only lies in their lack of male protection to go about, but also their little financial ability. If Elizabeth and Jane possess greater fortune, would their have more control over the situation? Perhaps yes, but if we probe into other wealthy single ladies in the novel, the situation appears more complicated.

In *Pride*, we see that unmarried women with money easily become the target of men, as seen when Wickham tries to marry Mary King for mercenary intention. Mary's uncle, who offers protection to the young lady, eventually prevents this bad business. On the other hand, Anne De Bourgh and Georgiana Darcy, another two unmarried ladies endowed with a significant amount of wealth, are both more or less muzzled by their protectors. Anne is the frail only child who, under her dictator mother, barely utters a word in the novel, whereas Georgiana is presented as extremely shy and often quiet in social occasions. As Stewart

¹⁰⁶ Ibid: 269.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid: 274.

points out, Darcy's protection "leaves [his sister] mute and panic-filled. Her muteness is exacerbated by the guilt and shame for her one independent action—her aborted elopement with the villain Wickham."¹⁰⁸ While the Bennet girls suffer from having no brotherly support, on the flip side of the coin, the overwhelming guardians also limited Anne and Georgiana.

Even though the status of single women requires protection, which is a constraint per se, we should not ignore the freedom that they enjoy. In the society of *Pride*, young girls are allowed, and, as in the Bennet household, strongly encouraged to socialize in balls for the purpose of finding their future husband. "A lady's imagination is very rapid," says Darcy; "it jumps from admiring to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment."¹⁰⁹ Although an obvious mockery of single women's eagerness for marriage, Darcy's comment demonstrates perfectly that a nuptial relationship in *Pride* is based on a woman's own will and decision. When a man asks a woman for her hand, she can choose to give her consent or to decline, whether the situation is in a ball or a marriage proposal. Financial reason might affect this decision, as when Charlotte who marries Mr. Collins out of pure material reasons; yet after all, unmarried women in *Pride* are free agents who hold the power over their own lives.

This represents a significant contrast to the situation in *Red Chamber*. As mentioned before, third-party arrangement is the only proper way of a marriage; therefore the social mingling between eligible men and women does not exist in the society of *Red Chamber*. According to Susan Mann, the mobility of unmarried girls in High Qing times was constrained, and young upper class women "were expected to feel bereft and bored" as they are "cloistered in the women's apartments or, more happily, in expansive gardens such as those frequented by the Jia girls in *Dream of the Red Chamber*."¹¹⁰ The notion that well bred girls are supposed to be kept from the public's eyes has long been a tradition. From the much

¹⁰⁸ *Domestic* 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Pride* 28.

¹¹⁰ *Precious* 57-8.

quoted poem, “Song of Lasting Pain” from the Tang Dynasty, Yiang Guifei, one of the Four Beauties of ancient China, was “raised deep in the women’s quarters, where no man knew of her” (*yang zai shen gui ren wei shi* 養在深閨人未識) before she was chosen to be the highest imperial consort.¹¹¹ The talented Jia girls who are kept indoors before their designed marriage resemble yellow canaries that has beautiful appearance and divine voice, but doomed to a caged life. This distorted concept goes hand in hand with the Confucian womanly virtue; that a confined upbringing not only raises the mysteriousness of unmarried women, but also their social prestige.

The norm of arranged marriage, derived from this background, not only deprives young girls of their freedom to choose their own husbands, but also renders them at the mercy of those who are right above them in hierarchy. In the name of filial piety that is ingrained in Confucian doctrine, the unmarried girls are perpetually regarded by the elder guardians, usually parents, as juniors instead of individuals, whose fate they are entitled to manipulate.¹¹² This power that the elder has over the younger within a family is visibly the culprit of the tragedies of Ying-chun and Chess. Although the two are of different class—Ying-chun is the second Miss of the Jia family therefore an aristocrat, whereas Chess is a working-class maid—when it comes to their subjugation to their parents, there is no difference. The dénouement for both in the novel is death, caused by their parent’s unfortunate disposal of their marriage. Ying-chun, referred to by Louise Edwards as the “mortgage payment” of her father, is virtually tortured to death by her evil husband; whereas Chess violently kills herself to protest against her mother’s authoritative refusal of matching

¹¹¹ Bai Ju-yi (772-846). “Song of Lasting Pain.” Trans. Stephen Owen 1996: 442.

¹¹² In fact, young men are also bind by this notion. Bao-yu, albeit the only son of Jia Zheng and the favorite of Grandmother Jia, also has no say in his own marital decision, for his mother and grandmother are the ones to decide who is best for “their son/grandson.”

her with her lover. Whether objection or consent, the opinions of unmarried girls are not to be consulted in the most important event of their lives.

The tragedies of Ying-chun and Chess can perhaps be covered under the coat of filial piety, yet the situation is even more hideous when the power struggle happens between members of different class, such as a maid and a master. The death of Faithful, the maid of Grandmother Jia, is a brutal example. Being a young and attractive woman, Faithful inevitably becomes the fancy of Jia She, the elder master of Jia family. Her escape from his clutches is blessed by Grandmother Jia's favor for her, yet she is aware of this protection, and once her protector passes away, Faithful hangs herself. Ironically, the chapter in which this incident takes place is titled "A devoted maid renders a final service, and accompanies her mistress to the Great Void"¹¹³ while it is clearly shown in Faithful's thought process that it is the only way she can truly escape from the unfair hierarchy system.

Single ladies in *Red Chamber*, unlike those in *Pride*, are not free agents regarding their own marital decisions. In fact, they are not even entitled to remove matrimony from their life plan if they wish. Cao, like Austen, also provides his heroines with certain right to choose; yet within the heavily hierarchical system, besides death, the only other way for single women to break off the smothering reality is to become a nun. In refusing the master's fancy for her, maid Faithful declares "If I get really desperate, I can always shave my hair off and become a nun; or failing that, there's always suicide."¹¹⁴ This sentiment is shared by many other single ladies in *Red Chamber* as they try to avoid being disposed into marriage: Xi-chun, the fourth Miss of the Jia clan, chooses to become a nun after she witnesses the tragic outcomes of her cousins' arranged marriages. Her removed attitude described in the novel is a result of the negligence of the adults around her, who in turn should hold against

¹¹³ HLM 111. 1476. *Stone 5*: 207.

¹¹⁴ HLM 46.616; *Stone 4*: 416.

her wish for “it would look very bad for a girl from a family such as ours to enter a nunnery. That really is unthinkable.”¹¹⁵ It is obvious that the fate of a single Jia girl is completely at the disposal of the elder, even in the situation of renouncing the world. In the end, Xi-chun’s insistence is finally granted permission, and although Bao-yu’s poem expresses the despairing scene of this decision—“Alas, that daughter of so great a house / By Buddha’s altar lamp should sleep alone!”¹¹⁶—Xi-chun’s ultimate hope for herself as an individual is enabled by quitting the hierarchical system.¹¹⁷

In both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, unmarried status often seems to mark women’s susceptibility to oppression; the only difference lies in that the patriarchal pressure is most prominently from the outside society in *Pride*, whereas in *Red Chamber*, it mainly comes from the omnipresent hierarchy within the family. When single ladies in *Pride* are deprived of financial power and the liberty to go about as an individual, the Jia girls in *Red Chamber* seem to suffer none the less; moreover, autonomy of single girls in the novel is reduced to nunnery or death. This reveals the reason for Cao’s pessimistic tone of single women’s lives in *Red Chamber*. After all, it is not only his heroines that are constrained in the fixed hierarchical oppression, as the author, Cao himself was also part of the system in late imperial China, and historically a victim of this cruel reality.¹¹⁸

When Miss Becomes Mrs.: The Power of Married Women

¹¹⁵ HLM 118.1555; *Stone* 5: 319.

¹¹⁶ HLM 118.1556; *Stone* 5: 320.

¹¹⁷ It is noteworthy that in the Chinese language, becoming a monk or a nun is to *chu jia* (出家), which literally means to exit home. Xi-chun’s decision to enter a nunnery is to leave behind her home, which also symbolizes a heavily hierarchical center.

¹¹⁸ *Red Chamber* is widely believed to be a semi-autobiography of Cao Xueqin, for his family resembles the Jia family in the novel. The Cao family was favorable to the Kangxi Emperor (1654-1722) and became the target of confiscation when Yongzheng (1678-1735) succeeded to the throne. See Chen 2001: 90.

The most prominent difference between a single and a married woman is their legal status, which bestows relatively more autonomy on the latter as seen in *Pride*. After Lydia marries Wickham, she goes about the neighborhood just to hear people call her “Mrs. Wickham,” not to mention her flamboyant posture in showing off her ring. Yet what exactly is gained in her power through marriage? When Lydia declares to her oldest sister, “Ah, Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman,”¹¹⁹ it is conspicuous that marital status transcends seniority within the same generation. Marriage represents, in Perkin’s words, a relative freedom for women to create “a home and family of their own,” and “to go about and make separate friends, even sometimes of the opposite sex.”¹²⁰ In other words, the social constraint on ladies’ propriety seems to be relatively looser on married women, as they are under the lawful protection of husbands. Moreover, a sense of independence is granted to married women, though confined in the transference of detachment from their natal homes to nuptial households and does not imply full autonomy as an individual. Lydia, based on her frivolous character, absolutely enjoys this widened freedom to socialize after she marries, and her sense of superiority over Jane is based on the fact that she *is* legally independent from the Bennet family while her older sister is not.

In other marriages in the novel, we see another beneficial aspect of conjugality that is devoid in Lydia’s pathetic settlement with Wickham: financial security. This is the core motivation that molds Mrs. Bennet’s wish to stuff all her daughters into the white dress, and financial benefit is in fact only one of the implied aspects of married women’s domestic power. Marriage entitles a wife to the property of her husband, giving her the status of a mistress: the female master who holds control over the entire household and estates. For this mercenary lure, Charlotte decides to spend the rest of her life with the notoriously dull Mr.

¹¹⁹ *Pride* 307.

¹²⁰ Perkin 1989: 3.

Collins for whom she has absolutely no affection. For her good friend Elizabeth, Charlotte's decision is "disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem,"¹²¹ yet undeniably, marriage transforms Charlotte from a twenty-seven-year-old single woman of little means into the mistress of Mr. Collins's considerable estate in Kent. Charlotte's matrimonial position grants her material comfort and domestic power over "her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry,"¹²² for which she is willing to trade personal happiness.

Charlotte's image reveals the downside of marriage wrapped in the pretty cover of material comfort. Her nuptial decision is made to relieve the anxiety over her own livelihood that universally shrouds single women of smaller fortune in *Pride*. Although Charlotte's marriage is not a happy one, it promises her a foreseeable future that will prevent her from falling into the predicament of Mrs. Bennet, whose financial advancement is relatively less considerable. Hence the formula of "marriage equals a gain of financial power" that brings about a carefree future for the bride only works providing a strong economic power of the groom. This shapes an ideal marriage that is ultimately a reserved privilege of the heroine, Elizabeth. As a contrast to both her mother and her best friend, Elizabeth's marriage to Mr. Darcy demonstrates her joy and comfort as Mistress of the grand Pemberley estate sans suffering from a loveless household. Moreover, through her "lively" and "sportive manner" in interacting with her husband,¹²³ we see that conjugality also grants Elizabeth the power of self-assertion as a woman. Right before the end of the novel, Austen briefly alludes to the fact that the protection of a husband allows more freedom than that of a guardian. In her instruction to Georgiana, Elizabeth indicates "a woman may take liberties with their husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than

¹²¹ *Pride* 212.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Pride* 374.

himself.”¹²⁴ Marriage indeed marks Elizabeth’s independence from her natal family as a mature woman, but more importantly, it grants her the domestic power that not only provides financial security, but also asserts her autonomy as an individual that seemingly opens a window to women’s liberation.

The ending of *Pride* suggests that a woman’s power may increase through matrimony, and if lucky, it is possible that this power gained does not necessarily mean a sacrifice of happiness but a possibility of self-assertion for women. However, this formula is only half applicable to *Red Chamber*, for its underlying family structure is very different from that in *Pride*: a married couple sets up their own separate household in the latter whereas in the former, the bride marries into the home of the groom in which they settle. This tradition is the background of hierarchical oppression that limits a married woman’s domestic power in *Red Chamber*. According to Zhang Bilai, who interprets the novel with Mao’s theory of “four great authorities” in Chinese culture, the power division in *Red Chamber* is much more complex.¹²⁵ This hierarchical system, especially within the family, marks an essential difference between the two societies in *Pride* and *Red Chamber*. Married women in *Red Chamber*, like those in *Pride*, gain the recognition of maturity as a grown-up, yet her identity is still subordinate to her higher-ups in familial hierarchy. Therefore, the domestic power of women is fluid and subject to other authorities in *Red Chamber*.

¹²⁴ Ibid: 374-5.

¹²⁵ Zhang states that 1) the power of the government in a imperial society is the absolute dominating force; 2) the elder in the clan holds power over the whole clan, resembling the authority of the emperor over the empire; 3) patriarchal authorities is long ingrained in the widespread ideal of Chauvinism (*nan zun nu bei* 男尊女卑); 4) religious authorities is the omnipresent Buddhism influence in *Red Chamber*. It is noteworthy that Grandmother Jia, being the senior of the Jia clan, is granted great power albeit being female. This shows that within the same social class, patriarchal power is contested by seniority, granted that filial piety (*xiao* 孝) is a priority that comes only second to fidelity toward the political power (*zhong* 忠). See Zhang 1978: 229-86.

Such is the case of Xi-feng, the shrew and powerhouse in the novel, also a daughter-in-law of the Jia family. As in *Pride*, marriage in the Chinese context implies that when a woman marries, she gains “the claim to maintenance on her husband’s estate.”¹²⁶ Yet within an extended family like the Jia household, different generations cohabit in the Jia mansion; thus Xi-feng is not the only mistress, or female master, in the family. Hence the tensions and power struggles between the in-law women. Under a close examination of the Jia hierarchy tree, the domestic power Xi-feng holds over the mansion should, in fact, be in the hands of her mother-in-law, Lady Xing who is the wife of Jia She, the elder son of Grandmother Jia. Many have explained that Xi-feng’s domestic power is completely dependent upon her grandmother-in-law’s favor, which in turn evokes her mother-in-law’s contempt. Bai Du argues that, just as the picture accompanying Xi-feng’s oracle—an iceberg with a hen phoenix perched on the top of it¹²⁷—the iceberg being Grandmother Jia who eventually “melts,” leaving Xi-feng “vulnerable to Lady Xing’s revenge.”¹²⁸

Marriage in *Red Chamber* is a possibility for women to gain domestic power in her nuptial family, yet it is not a guaranteed benefit. The norm of arranged marriage leaves single girls in the hands of their higher-ups in hierarchy; in the words of Mann, it is often like a gamble, and “losing out was common.”¹²⁹ Ying-chun, who is sold into marriage and treated worse than a maid, is a pitiable chip on the gambling table of matrimony. In the society of *Red Chamber*, the status and power of a woman alter in accordance with that of her husband after marriage. Like the old rhyme mentioned by Lady Wang in explaining Ying-chun’s misery, “When rooster crows at break of day, / All his hen-folk must obey. / No choice for a

¹²⁶ Ebrey 1991: 2.

¹²⁷ *HLM* 5.81; *Stone* 1: 135.

¹²⁸ Edwards 1995: 101.

¹²⁹ *Precious* 13.

dog's wife / But to make the best of a dog's life."¹³⁰ This idea of women's lost of identity in their complete mergence with their husbands justifying the excuse of Lady Wang who, as Ying-chun's aunt, takes no action in protecting her niece, under the constraint that she is not the direct authority of Ying-chun in hierarchy. Ying-chun is perhaps one of the biggest losers in matrimony in *Red Chamber* who, after marriage, is not only deprived of her right to domestic power, but also falls from her original status as a Jia Miss to a marital status that brings her no privilege but torment.

In the society of *Red Chamber*, the uncertainty of arranged marriage is magnified by Ying-chun's conjugal tragedy, and her villain husband's absolute dominance also embodies the gender inequality stemmed from patriarchy. While she suffers, her aunt, Lady Wang, advises Ying-chun to accept her misery as fate, saying "not all the girls can be called to court like your elder sister."¹³¹ On the surface, Ying-chun and Yuan-chun seem to have drastically different conjugal fate: while the former marries a wolf-like evil man and lowers her status, the latter weds the highest authority—the emperor—and gains political power. According to Evelyn Rawski, in the Qing Dynasty, "entry into the imperial harem marked the onset of sustained relations between the concubine's family and the emperor, just as in the case of families providing a wife."¹³² Yuan-chun's relation with the court elevates her power above everyone in her family, including the elders, for she has become a member of the political authority, which diminishes her familial roles in the Jia family. As Zhang Bilai states, the ultimate power of the emperor is sustained by the underlying priority of fidelity (*zhong* 忠) over filial piety (*xiao* 孝). After marriage, Yuan-chun's relationship with the Jia family falls under imperial surveillance, and becomes one between the ruling class and the subjects. The

¹³⁰ *HLM* 81.1116; *Stone* 4: 32.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Rawski 1991: 189.

creation of Grand View Garden that costs great fortune is for Yuan-chun's visitation, and the night before her arrival, "no one in the Jia household, whether master or servant, had a wink of sleep throughout the whole of that night."¹³³

The power Yuan-chun gains via her imperial matrimony is undoubtedly the greatest among all married women in both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*. The marital status not only grants her the recognition of maturity, but also bestows her political power that transcends all authorities in the society of *Red Chamber*. However, this power is obtained through a sacrifice that is perhaps worse than Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins, which is purely out of mercenary intentions. Just as in every other arranged marriage, Yuan-chun's entering of the court is first of all not out of her own will. According to Rawski, during the Qing Dynasty, the drafting for the Inner Quarters of the court is enforced on every eligible girl before her betrothal, at the age between thirteen and fourteen.¹³⁴ As family status is among the criteria of the drafting, the aristocrat status of the Jia clan reinforces this business; therefore Yuan-chun was selected to serve the emperor's sexual need by a political order, in the disguise of an honor to the whole family. Her power and social status are highly raised accordingly, yet Yuan-chun is walled up in the palace where she lives a restrained life. During her short visit at home, the meeting between Yuan-chun and her father "takes place with her father standing outside the door-curtain of the room which she was sitting."¹³⁵ And sadly, when she dies, her closest families are kept outside of the room due to court regulations. In the end, as Yuan-chun tearfully complains—"what is the use of all this luxury and splendour...if I am to be always separated from those I love?"¹³⁶—we see that the mighty

¹³³ *HLM* 18.244; *Stone* 1: 354.

¹³⁴ Rawski 1991: 183.

¹³⁵ *HLM* 18.248; *Stone* 1: 362.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

political power she gains through marriage represents a loss of natal bond. And of which would she prefer? Does she have a choice?

In contrast to Elizabeth's marriage, the great power Yuan-chun obtains through matrimony does not signify her liberation as a person, but, to the contrary, marks her imprisonment. Yuan-chun's imperial marriage elevates her through multiple layers of hierarchies, and yet Cao demonstrates that in the society of *Red Chamber*, the higher she climbs on the ladder of authorities, the more trapped she is in the hierarchical system. In the discussion of women's power gained through marriage, we see that women in both *Pride* and *Red Chamber* are entitled to similar nuptial advantages in terms of social status and domestic power that entails financial security. However, it is also indicated that this formula is not fixed in either society, as a bride's conjugal felicity is dependent on the situation of the groom. A significant difference of the two novels lies in the hierarchical system in *Red Chamber* that renders married women at the mercy of their higher-ups in the family tree, or, in the case of Yuan-chun's imperial matrimony, the political authority that overpowers all.

Ideals and Realities

By examining the fluctuation of women's power in relation to matrimony, we see that the societies in *Pride* and *Red Chamber* are of different realities. While single girls in *Pride* lack financial and independent power, their rights to socialization and their own marital decisions are not constrained. In Austen's optimistic tone, matrimony seems to be a relief, if not a permanent one, of the anxiety resulting from unmarried women's vulnerability in society. On the other hand, single girls in *Red Chamber* face a graver reality, for social stratification and familial hierarchy render them at the mercy of others. Marriage, in Cao's pessimistic presentation, is not an answer to single woman's powerlessness, but often exposes them to more oppression; although domestic power is on the menu, there is no guarantee that it will be served after the wedding.

Around the realities, Austen and Cao both project an ideal, which is illustrated through two characters of seemingly comparable power gained through marriage: Lady Catherine and Grandmother Jia. Both of them are of higher status, whether in class or seniority, yet the former is heavily ridiculed whereas the latter is respected and praised. Lady Catherine, in Carol Howard's words, appears in *Pride* as "the potentially formidable member of the ruling class" yet "turns out to be a relatively powerless busybody who depends on weak-minded followers to reinforce her sense of her own importance;" in short, she is an "aging woman tenaciously clinging to her diminished power."¹³⁷ On the other hand, Grandmother Jia holds authority over the whole Jia clan throughout the novel until her death. Her likes and dislikes, beliefs and doubts, have the power to direct all matters within the Jia mansion, from daily trivia to the matrimonial decisions of her grandchildren. However, holding clan and senior authorities in hand, Grandmother Jia is not diligent in managing the clan, often leaving her power on Xi-feng, and simply enjoys festive events with delicacies and entertainments like plays.

As the privileged status of both Lady Catherine and Grandmother Jia is gained through marriage, they embody the ultimate powerful positions in life that single women long for in seeking matrimony. Yet their authority has drastically different effects according to their respective social backgrounds. Lady Catherine's authoritative manner turns out to be challengeable in Austen's mocking tone, which enables the heroine, Elizabeth, to contest against the conventional mighty. We can almost imagine Austen laughing while she writes, at the fading power onto which Lady Catherine desperately grabs, if in vain, when dictating Elizabeth's marital choice. Meanwhile, the authority of Grandmother Jia is firmly grounded on the entrenched hierarchical system in eighteenth-century late imperial China. The heavily chained society is the social background that Cao cannot easily forgo; therefore the only way

¹³⁷ Howard 2003: xxxi-ii.

to free his heroines from the unfair system is to victimize them, for female is perpetually the subjugated gender in power struggle.

Conclusion

Pride and Prejudice and *Dream of the Red Chamber* both center on the topic of women's relationship with marriage in their respective societies. My observation began in seeing the resemblances and overlapping features of the two novels on this subject; however, the "both" is often inevitably followed by a "but." Matrimony is reinforced on women through societal pressure, yet the authors project different reactions to the oppression in the plots. Marriage in *Pride* first appears as the source of stress for women, and ironically comes full circle by the end as the relief of their anxiety. On the contrary, matrimony in *Red Chamber* is presented as a girl's eventual *must*, something that is unchallengeable, whether it is a path to misery or even death. Through a close comparison of the two societies in relation to the historical backgrounds in which they are situated, it becomes clear that the two authors purposefully made very different decisions as their own ways of commenting on the status quo. *Pride* is a platform on which Austen tries to present an ironic equation to the reader (marriage leads to stress, which is resolved through marriage); she expects the reader to discover the fundamental contradiction of the plot that starts with a didactic opening line and ends with a "fairytale" closure. On the other hand, Cao seemingly exposes his heroines to the cruelty of patriarchal subjugation, which he presents as part of an entrenched Confucian ideology, making his statement by displaying the outcome of this subjugation in the most relentless manner. Therefore, we see that both Austen and Cao convey their dissatisfaction with gender inequality in the novels, but in doing so, they chose opposite directions: Austen stretches limits and bestows privileges upon the heroine, Elizabeth, allowing her to cross impossible boundaries; whereas Cao put himself in the shoes of the constrained women and offers no protection of any sort. By leaving the majority of his heroines in conjugal misery, Cao explicitly delivers his critique to the reader in the form of tragedy.

The contrast in the approaches of Austen and Cao is elaborated in our previous discussions. In Chapter One, we see that in both *Pride* and *Red Chamber*, female education is not respected as a pursuit of knowledge, but seen as an accessory in young girls' marriage plot. While Austen's privileged heroine contests this limitation, the distorted education is exemplified through female martyrs in *Red Chamber*. In Chapter Two, we delve into the social necessity of marriage and reveal its beneficiary aspect, especially to the families of the match. This demonstrates that although women in both novels are pressured to marry, the society in *Pride* provides more flexibility, whereas the strict hierarchical constraint in *Red Chamber* leaves no loophole for anyone to express their own will. Finally, the last chapter shows us that while single women in both novels are more dependent than those who are married, matrimony seems to answer the female vulnerability in *Pride*; yet in *Red Chamber*, it is but another chain shackling women deeper to a hierarchical system.

Through the rendition of Austen and Cao, the societies in *Pride* and *Red Chamber* share a conflicting sentiment between the authority and the individual. In the former, individualism is embodied by Elizabeth who is not afraid to challenge and even overthrow the authority figure, Lady Catherine. As for the latter, the hierarchical system appears to be omnipresent even within the family; hence the notion of personal freedom in such society is as frail as the health of Dai-yu, whose heartbroken death symbolizes the perpetually repressed individualism. Given the similarities in life between the two heroines with their authors, it is worth commenting on the backgrounds of Austen and Cao, which seem to influence their artistic decisions in the novels. According to Carol Howard, Austen lived a relatively untroubled life in the countryside of England; although her family of eight children was under financial pressure, she managed to remain single throughout her life, for her father and brothers maintained her and "must have made her feel more secure than the typical

‘spinster’ would have felt.”¹³⁸ Austen’s fairly peaceful life is a great contrast to the life experience of Cao, who is said to have grown up in luxury within an aristocratic family and to have fallen from the sky as a teenager when a change of the ruler altered the rest of his life. The new emperor, Yongzheng (1723-1735), was suspicious of the former emperor’s favorites and confiscated the property of many aristocrats. The Cao family was among the unfortunate and Cao Xueqin is said to live in great poverty until his death.¹³⁹ Although both faced financial predicament in life, Austen’s anxiety was eased by the safety net of her male family members, while the oppression Cao encountered was insurmountable, for it was an intentional act of the highest authority, the emperor. From this point of view, I venture to conclude that the difference in their life experiences more or less shapes the two authors’ artistic decisions. While Austen was well protected by her family under societal pressure, the downfall of Cao magnifies the multilayered hierarchical system in his society that leaves no loophole for escape.

In the end, we see that both Austen and Cao project an ideal through different tones that evoke either laughter or tears in the reader. As Austen personally admitted that *Pride* is “rather too light, and bright, and sparkling,”¹⁴⁰ it shows that the comic ending is how Austen expends as much tolerance as possible for the selected heroine, while containing irony within. Elizabeth is perhaps the imaginary alter ego of Austen who pictured how her life would be like without having the brotherly support. In this way, Austen was able to challenge the unfair reality through the voice of Elizabeth. By the same token, the heroines of Cao also speak for the ideal that he had in mind, only in a more dramatic and violent way. Given the female martyrs and victims who suffer from desperation, misery and finding no way out, the

¹³⁸ Howard 2003: xix.

¹³⁹ *HLM* Introduction.

¹⁴⁰ Letter to Cassandra Austen, Chawton, Thursday 4 Feb. [1813]; *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, pp. 299-300.

tragedy ending in *Red Chamber* is like a battlefield littered with corpses, reminding us of the cruelty of hierarchical and patriarchal subjugation that permeates the entire society. While tears are generated by this saddening dénouement, we sympathize with the suppressed women in *Red Chamber*; yet with the ironic comedy of *Pride*, we are in fact laughing *at* the ridiculed inequality and celebrating the triumph of the heroine who treads on the gender boundary.

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