

Deconstructing the “Integrated Personality”: How Baochai and Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* Transcends the “Desire-Survival” Paradigm of The Plum in the Golden Vase and Its Cultural Implications

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Abstract:

Existing studies on Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* as an “integrated personality” are limited. Comparisons with *The Plum in the Golden Vase* also remain superficial, failing to grasp Cao Xueqin’s creative core and the cultural evolution of classical female images. Centering on the feminine decomposition of late feudal scholars’ ideal personality, this study utilizes close textual reading and historical-cultural analysis to compare the “integrated Baochai-Daiyu” with the desire-driven female characters in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. It breaks the “Baochai-Daiyu opposition” to reveal their complementation as a complete scholar’s personality, linking their spiritual predicaments to late feudal culture—the collapse of Confucian “self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace” and Buddhist-Taoist “impermanence, reflecting collective scholar anxiety rather than individual female tragedy. It further clarifies Cao’s “ideal construction” and Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng’s “reality deconstruction,” confirming that Baochai-Daiyu transcends the “desire carrier” stereotypes in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* to become symbols of scholars’ spiritual pursuits. This study concludes that the integrated Baochai-Daiyu personality is a breakthrough in classical female portrayal, embodying Cao’s criticism of late feudalism and the pursuit of balanced scholar’s personalities. It fills gaps in existing research and offers a new path for classical novel comparison.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Chamber*; *The Plum in the Golden Vase*; late feudal scholar; feminine decomposition.

1. Introduction

Dream of the Red Chamber [1], one of Cao Xueqin's typical novels, has been widely recognized by academia as one of the pinnacles of classical Chinese novels. Previous cross-cultural studies have long been discussing the portrayal of two female protagonists: Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu. Scholarly interpretations of these two characters show notable divides between Chinese and Western academia, yet both sides have major gaps in making a holistic understanding of the female characters as a whole. This gap is precisely the fundamental starting point of this study.

Domestic studies mostly fall into two oversimplified frameworks. First, they focus on the "Baochai-Daiyu love rivalry", narrowing the two characters down to opposing choices in Jia Baoyu's emotional world. For example, some scholars only analyze the conflict between "Baoyu-Daiyu love" and the "gold-jade marriage alliance", completely ignoring the independent spiritual dimensions and subjective construction of the two characters. Second, they categorize the pair as "two poles of female beauty". Zhou Ruchang famously described Daiyu as "poetic" and Baochai as "worldly" [2], but failed to explore the spiritual core of scholars in the late feudal era that underpins this "beauty". A common flaw in these studies is their failure to place Baochai and Daiyu's behaviors and identities in the historical context of the "shrinking feudal system" during the Ming-Qing transition—leaving character interpretations disconnected from their historical roots.

Western sinologists, comparatively, face the issue of "theoretical misalignment". It refers to the inconsistency that arises from mismatches between real-world contexts and research subjects during academic studies or cross-context communication and dissemination. In *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction*, C.T. Hsia praised Baochai's tactful conduct using Victorian-era standards of "social virtue". He interpreted her "urging Baoyu to pursue an official career" as "moral perfection" [3], but completely ignored how Confucian thought—"self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace"—shaped Baochai's behavioral logic. This interpretation essentially cuts traditional Chinese scholar ethics with a Western modern ethical framework. In *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East*, Rey Chow framed Daiyu as a "rebellious resister to patriarchy" using second-wave feminist theory [4]. Yet she overlooked the lived reality of pre-modern Chinese women under the "san-cong si-de" (three obedient behaviors and four virtues) system: Daiyu's "sensitivity and perseverance" never broke free from the dependent

framework of the feudal family. Her so-called "resistance" was merely spiritual self-preservation, not a systemic challenge. In *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Stephen Owen drew parallels between Baochai's poem To the Tune of Linjiangxian: Willow Catkins and the Western "wise man" archetype [5]. However, he stripped away the traditional scholar-official's spiritual pursuit of "pursuing an official career to serve the country" embedded in the line "With favorable winds to bear me up, I'll ride the clouds to the blue sky", weakening the cultural background behind the poem.

The interpretations above are not comprehensive enough. They fail to address the cultural and philosophical roots of Baochai and Daiyu's spiritual predicaments and the practical question of how their ideal personalities might be realized. However, Cao Xueqin inherently portrays Daiyu and Baochai as two sides of the same coin for character building. Their images, taken together, form the core spiritual and cultural expressions of the female characters in the novel. Together, they carry Chinese intellectuals during the feudal period: the ultimate aspiration for a complete personality—one that requires both rationality and responsibility for engaging with the world, without any loss of inner poetry and sincerity.

Therefore, this study adopts textual analysis and comparative literary analysis. It compares female characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, centering on tracing the thread of the founding and sublimation of female portrayal in novels of manners. This approach highlights *Dream of the Red Chamber's* breakthroughs and transcendence of its predecessor in perceiving women's value and shaping spiritual connotations, clearly illustrating the pivotal shift in classical Chinese literature where female characters evolved from carriers of desire to spiritual subjects, focusing on the dimensional differences between "spiritual pursuit" (Chai and Dai) and "survival driven by desire" (e.g., Pan Jinlian). The research aims to achieve three goals: (1) define Baochai and Daiyu's unique value as "spiritual symbols of scholars"; (2) explore Cao Xueqin's ideological projections and cultural criticism embedded in the characters; (3) analyze the inherent connection between Baochai and Daiyu's spiritual predicaments and the late feudal era.

2. Analysis of "Baochai-Daiyu" Images: the Feminine Decomposition of Scholars' Ideal Personality in the Late Feudal Era

The portrayals of Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* [1] are not isolated opposites. Instead,

they are Cao Xueqin's "feminine decomposition" of the complete ideal personality of scholars in the late feudal era. Together, they form the "integrated Baochai-Daiyu" personality paradigm.

Baochai's image combines "responsibility for engaging with the world" and "wisdom for detachment from the world". Her "de-gendered traits" need to be interpreted from two dimensions. On one hand, her rational restraint and tactful handling of affairs reflect the traditional scholar's ideal of "self-cultivation and family regulation". She uses "Leng Xiang Wan" (cold fragrance pill)—a medicine made from flower stamens of four seasons and dew/frost/snow of four solar terms—to follow natural laws and restrain her inherent natural emotions and desires, balancing her personal needs with the family's interests. On the other hand, her "hiding wit and keeping modesty" is not mediocrity, but profound wisdom for detachment. She privately advised Daiyu to avoid criticism by staying away from "unorthodox books" (e.g., *Romance of the Western Chamber*), protecting Daiyu's dignity; she also humbly claimed "a woman's virtue lies in ignorance of talent" [1] to hide her own ability and avoid trouble, without fixating on the false reputation of "talented woman". This indifference to competing for worldly fame embodies her wisdom for detachment.

Baochai's dual traits are particularly evident in the Grand View Garden reform. She proposed "contracting the Grand View Garden" to reduce expenses and benefit servants (responsibility for engaging with the world). Yet she took no credit [1], instead stepping back to mediate conflicts behind the scenes and even using her own money to subsidize garden expenses (wisdom for detachment). This achieved a balance of taking responsibility without greed for gain, acting without showing off. However, she was trapped in the end of meaning of her era—even if her gender were changed, she could not resolve the fundamental collapse of ideals. Her image is essentially a spiritual epitome of feudal scholars in the late feudal era.

Daiyu, by contrast, represents the pure "detached" side of scholars in the late feudal era. Her purity, sensitivity, and poetic perseverance are not self-centeredness, but scholars' ultimate guardianship of truth and freedom. The "flower burial" is not just mourning for the authenticity of life, but also resistance to worldly rules. Her early death implicitly symbolizes the fragility of pure spirit in reality. The two seem to represent "engagement" and "detachment", but neither can exist without the other: without Baochai's rationality, the ideal personality would lose its foundation in reality; without Daiyu's poetry, the ideal personality would lose its spiritual warmth. This complementation is precisely Cao Xueqin's ideal vision of a complete personality of scholars.

Using Virginia Woolf's criterion in *A Room of One's Own*—"complexity and contradiction are the core of vitality for female literary characters" [6], and comparing with *Chin P'ing Mei (The Plum in the Golden Vase)*, another classic of social realist novels, we can clearly see the groundbreaking significance of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in female character portrayal. Female characters in the former are still trapped in stereotypical molds, while the latter transcends traditional female character paradigms through the three-dimensional portrayal of Baochai and Daiyu. As a classic novel focusing on feudal secular life, female characters in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* are mostly trapped in desire and survival struggles. They resist fate through love and desire, but fall into sin due to obsession with their images centered on individual struggles in the world. In contrast, Cao Xueqin entrusted the spiritual predicaments of traditional scholars to female characters, allowing Baochai and Daiyu to transcend gender narratives and become cultural symbols that embody both the ideal of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace" and the pursuit of "poetic existence". This three-dimensional portrayal echoes Woolf's modern expectation for female characters to have mental freedom and spiritual integrity, giving the female portrayal in *Dream of the Red Chamber* an advanced humanistic depth in classical literature.

3. Religious and Cultural Contexts Behind: Spiritual Predicaments and the Collapse of Confucian Ideals in the Late Feudal Era

Baochai and Daiyu's spiritual predicaments and final fates are rooted in the late feudal context of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. At their core lies the interweaving of the collapse of Confucian ideals of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace" and the Buddhist-Taoist concept of "impermanence", reflecting the cultural anxiety of Chinese intellectuals during the late feudal period.

From a Confucian perspective, Baochai's predicament of "engaging with the world" is the central concern of the narratives. In the late feudal era, the system of meaning that Confucianism had long regarded as the criterion had collapsed. The decline of the Jia family was irreversible, and the ideal of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace" lost its foundation. Baochai's strict adherence to the "Doctrine of the Mean" became a futile effort. This anxiety of working hard with no meaning is a collective predicament of Confucian scholars in the late feudal era. While the Western Enlightenment

was emerging at the time, Baochai knew nothing of this new „meaning“. She could only be trapped in the value vacuum described as „a vast expanse of whiteness, pure and empty“ [7]. Her fate implicitly mirrors the fated decline of Confucian culture at that time.

From a Buddhist-Taoist and social perspective, Daiyu's perseverance in „detachment“ conflicts sharply with the low social status of women. Daiyu's sensitivity and early death embody the Buddhist-Taoist concept of „impermanence of all things“. She retreated into her spiritual world to resist the „value vacuum“, but could not gain a foothold due to women's dependence in the feudal system (legally subordinate to men, with no social voice). Cao Xueqin's compassion for this predicament is the core motivation behind his chronicling the lives of women in the inner chambers: he witnessed the tragedy of women with outstanding talents being denied social recognition, and also saw the reality of men's „moral degradation“ due to their dominant social status. Thus, with Buddhist-Taoist „impermanence“ as the background, he used Baochai's and Daiyu's predicaments to expose the patriarchal system's oppression of human nature. His cultural criticism is hidden in the characters' spiritual struggles.

This critical logic stands in stark contrast to the late-Ming social realist novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. The difference stems from the social and cultural traits of their respective eras and the authors' ideological orientations. *The Plum in the Golden Vase* was created in the late Ming, a time of collapsed moral order and „desire overflow“ under the impact of the commodity economy. Its portrayal of men's degradation is often accompanied by the „female calamity theory“, implicitly holding the traditional view that women are the cause of men's corruption. Its criticism of the patriarchal system also mostly stays at the level of condemning individual desires, as the patriarchal system grew more rigid during the early Qing dynasty. Yet *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written in this period, saw Cao Xueqin break free from the framework of individual guilt. Instead, he directly pointed out the oppressive nature of the structure itself. This difference gives the two classics distinct depths and ideological dimensions in cultural criticism. By linking individual fates to systemic criticism and abandoning the „female calamity theory“, *Dream of the Red Chamber* not only achieves deeper cultural criticism than *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, but also stands out for its ideological breakthrough—breaking free from the traditional social realist novel's framework of „condemning individual desires“ to face the root causes of the cultural system.

4. Analysis of the Author's Ideological Projections: Compassion and Ideal Pursuits in a Dying Era

Through the integrated Baochai-Daiyu character building, Cao Xueqin deeply projected his criticism of the late feudal era, compassion for women, and pursuit of a complete personality. This ideology forms a complementary yet distinct spiritual dimension compared to the realistic criticism in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Cao's hidden goal behind female character building was to construct an „ideal utopia“: he knew well that the late feudal era had no way out, so he created the Grand View Garden as a „spiritual sanctuary for women“ [7]. Here, Baochai's rationality for engaging with the world and Daiyu's poetry for detachment coexisted, as he tried to protect „the conscience and vitality of society“ under a veil of warmth [7]. Though this projection was unrealistic, it implicitly contained his ultimate aspiration for a complete personality—and aligned with his stance of not modern feminism, but sympathetic to women. He refused to label Baochai and Daiyu simply as „victims“ of Confucian ethics or „rebels“ [3]. Instead, through their complementation, he expressed his expectation for scholars to have both responsibility and poetic spirit, the essence of which is „retaining hope amid despair“ [8, 9].

When compared with *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, the two works share „compassionate“ perspectives but take different ways. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng expresses compassion by directly confronting cruelty in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. He did not avoid Pan Jinlian's desires and sins. Yet, he also described her warm sides, such as her friendship with Chunlian. Through the tension between love, desire, and death, he exposed the complexity of human nature, ultimately guiding readers to „view oneself and others with compassion“ [8]. Cao Xueqin, by contrast, conveyed compassion by constructing ideals: he was well aware of the tragedies of women and scholars, so he used integrated Baochai-Daiyu to place his ideal of personality, and the Grand View Garden to avoid the cruelty of reality. The former is compassion through deconstructing reality, the latter is compassion through constructing ideals—both exemplifying the profound reflection on human nature and their eras [9, 10].

5. Conclusion

This study explores „integrated Baochai-Daiyu“ via textual analysis and cross-cultural perspectives, addressing gaps in existing research regarding the two characters' subjectivity, historical-cultural context, and the author's

ideological projections, and draws three core conclusions. Baochai and Daiyu are not opposing ideals of beauty or romantic rivals, but a feminized decomposition of the ideal personality of late-feudal intellectuals—complementing each other to form a complete personality paradigm, whose spiritual depth far exceeds the female characters in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* trapped in mundane desires. Their spiritual predicaments are rooted in the late-feudal cultural context, with their struggles essentially reflecting the literati's cultural anxiety, whereas *The Plum in the Golden Vase* mostly deconstructs reality to expose moral decay, lacking such idealistic sustenance. Cao Xueqin's ideology is deeply projected through the characters: he uses the Grand View Garden (a utopia) to embody his pursuit of integral personality and conveys compassion for women by writing about the inner chamber, and this stance of preserving hope amid despair, together with the unflinching realistic criticism in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, embodies the multi-dimensional spiritual orientations of classical Chinese novels.

The value of “integrated Baochai-Daiyu” discussions extends beyond literature—it breaks the mold of one-dimensional character creation, pioneers a paradigm of complex, multi-faceted images, and offers references for later literary character writing. More importantly, it holds cultural and modern significance: its ideal of a balanced personality (integrating rationality and poetry) provides insights for modern people coping with the divide between reality and spirituality, and controversies over its cross-cultural interpretations offer a model for dialogue between Chinese contexts and Western theories in comparative literature research.

Future research on Baochai and Daiyu could further incorporate broader Ming-Qing sociocultural details to analyze their real-world constraints concretely. Moreover,

when comparing *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, deeper investigations into the social systems of their respective eras and women's status in feudal families will deepen analysis of the roots of female representation differences between the two works, helping explore spiritual connections with other female figures in classical literature and, more profoundly, highlight *Dream of the Red Chamber*'s cultural weight as the “peak of classical Chinese novels.”

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