

The “A dream of Red Mansions tragedy” revealed in legend——The influence of the tragic consciousness of A Dream of Red Mansions on Eileen Chang

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Abstract:

A Dream of Red Mansions is a milestone in the history of Chinese tragedy art and has had a profound influence on subsequent writers, including Eileen Chang. Eileen Chang's love for *A Dream of Red Mansions* is closely connected with her childhood experiences. Although separated by time and space, the similarities between the two people's works are extremely precious. This article starts with Eileen Chang's work *Legend*, experiences the tragic beauty in different tragedies, and through a comparative analysis of the tragic descriptions in *Legend* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, experiences the influence of *A Dream of Red Mansions* on Eileen Chang's creation. Based on Schopenhauer's tragedy theory, this paper explores the inevitability and popular characteristics of tragedy in the two works, and analyzes the similarities in the description of female tragedies under the oppression of feudal ethics.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, A Dream of Red Mansions, Tragic consciousness, Female character

1 Introduction

Eileen Chang said that there are three things she hates in life: one is that shad has too many bones, the second is that crabapples have no fragrance, and the third is that *A Dream of Red Mansions* is unfinished (Chang, 2007). Eileen Chang is a pioneer writer in the modern literature of Shanghai since the 1940s. Zhiqing Xia called her “the best and most important writer in China today” in his *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Xia, 1982). The themes of her works

are rich and profound, combining the roots of classical fictions with the colors of urban fictions. Eileen Chang's love affair with *A Dream of Red Mansions* runs through her life, and her life is also very much like *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Eileen Chang is a descendant of a prominent official of the late Qing Dynasty. She was deeply influenced by her father in her childhood. She read *A Dream of Red Mansions Nightmare* for the first time when she was eight years old, and wrote *Modern A Dream of Red Mansions*, a long chapter-by-chapter novel of

pure butterfly poetry school, at the age of fourteen. Therefore, *A Dream of Red Mansions* planted a seed for her creation in her childhood. In her later years, Eileen Chang settled in the United States. In the situation of financial difficulties and poor health, she devoted herself to studying *A Dream of Red Mansions* and wrote the monograph *A Dream of Red Mansions Nightmare*, which shows the deep influence of *A Dream of Red Mansions* on her. By analyzing Eileen Chang's novel *Legend*, The Red Chamber Tragedy pressed in Eileen Chang's novel is analyzed. The "Red Chamber style" flows in Eileen Chang's *Legend* text. Wenjun Ji believes in Eileen Chang's "Red Mansion Family" - *A Comparative Analysis of Character Creation in Legend and A Dream of Red Mansions* that the characters in Eileen Chang's works seem to have a natural "Red Mansion bloodline", not to mention that the author herself confessed very frankly that *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the source of everything for me. The source of everything may not only refer to the writing skills of the characters, but also the influence of the outlook on life. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the source of inspiration for Eileen Chang's creation and the existence of a spiritual pillar (Ji, 2010). Scholar Xiaohong Tao believes that Eileen Chang inherited the tradition of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, using existential tragedy as a carrier and "desolation" as the tragic background to write about the ordinary lives of ordinary citizens and women in the boudoir in a prosperous city (Tao, 2008).

Most of the above studies have discussed the influence of *A Dream of Red Mansions* on Eileen Chang. Researchers have also conducted comparative analyses on individual novels, but the overall analysis is relatively small and somewhat scattered. This article compares and analyzes *Legend* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* and sorts out the influence of the tragic consciousness of *A Dream of Red Mansions* on Eileen Chang from the two perspectives of the tragic inheritance of the novel and the female tragedy.

2 Analyzing the inheritance of tragic themes

2.1 From personal tragedy to mass tragedy

The works of Eileen Chang and Xueqin Cao are both deeply carved by the mark of their own family's decline, which is in line with the saying that "Writers often produce better work when they are in trouble". Both of them were born into wealthy and scholarly families, but their fathers experienced a decline from prosperity. The two who grew up in a comfortable life looked down on the fickleness of life. Eileen Chang's grandfather was Peilun

Zhang, a famous eunuch in the Qing Dynasty, her grandmother was the only daughter of Hongzhang Li, a senior official in the late Qing Dynasty, and her mother also came from a prominent family. Her parents' marriage seemed to be a perfect match, but the good times did not last long, and the glory at its peak did not keep the mercy of fate. Cao's family was equally prosperous during Xueqin Cao's childhood, and Emperor Kangxi stayed at the Cao's house many times when he went to the south of the Yangtze River. Therefore, the Cao family's food, clothing and expenses were far above those of ordinary people. Unique life experiences have formed unique ways of dealing with the world. The two of them engraved their family imprint in the novel and gained insight into the common people.

It is not difficult to see from the novels of Eileen Chang and Xueqin Cao that tragedy is the common core of the novels all the time. The two authors incorporate the ups and downs of life and the prosperity and decline of families into their works. In *An Exploration of Eileen Chang's Complex in A Dream of Red Mansions*, Shihui He points out: "While inheriting the tragic connotation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Eileen Chang modernized it. Her works focus on creating a perverted world of human nature (He, 2019)" In *Seal off*, whether it is the "real person" Zongzhen Lu who is playing a trick, or the "good person" Cuiyuan Wu who turns the fake play into reality, they are both protagonists who briefly go astray in the "unreasonable dream", and their love tragedy is heartbreaking. Weilong Ge in *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* was originally a new woman who received Western education, but she fell into wealth and power unconsciously. Under the seduction of her aunt Mrs. Liang, she gradually degenerated from her original aspirations and became a socialite in the upper class and an accessory to a broken marriage. The love tragedy in *Sealed off* and the female tragedy in *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* both show Eileen Chang's eschatological perspective on life. In *Legend*, readers can feel the author's efforts to describe the loss of human nature in the modern morbid society, which makes the pessimism run through the whole book. Xunwu Chen points out in his article that *A Dream of Red Mansions* not only embodies the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, but also demonstrates the applicability of existentialist philosophy. *A Dream of Red Mansions* shows the protagonist's strong self-consciousness, embodies Sartre's idea of "nothingness" and emphasizes the non-materiality of the characters (Chen, 2022). For example, the plot of Daiyu burying flowers shows that Xueqin Cao uses Daiyu Lin to express his profound insight and philosophical thinking on the situation of life in the universe. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is also a tragedy. Unlike *Legend*, the author does not watch from the sidelines, but cares

about the essence of life with a compassionate eye, expresses deep sympathy for the inescapable tragic fate and the ultimate concern for the universe and life, shows the universal phenomenon of the decline of aristocrats under the feudal patriarchal system, and reveals the historical inevitability of the tragedy of *A Dream of Red Mansions* in the narrative.

2.2 The Tragedy of Legend in A Dream of Red Mansions

Schopenhauer proposed three types of tragedy in *The World As Will and Representation*. The first type is “It can be done through the extraordinary wickedness of a character, touching the extreme bounds of possibility, who becomes the author of the misfortune.” The second type is “it can happen through blind fate, i.e., chance or error.” The last one is “the misfortune can be brought about also by the mere attitude of the persons to one another through their relations.” He also pointed out, “This last kind of tragedy seems to me far preferable to the other two...We see the greatest suffering brought about by entanglements whose essence could be assumed even by our own fate, and by actions that perhaps even we might be capable of committing, and so we cannot complain of injustice. (Schopenhauer, Payne, 1958)” The third kind of tragedy was later called ‘existential tragedy’. Guowei Wang, a famous Chinese literary critic, believed that *A Dream of Red Mansions* belongs to the third kind of tragedy (Wang, 2005). In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the difference in fate is a proposition that all characters cannot escape. Even the alliance between Baoyu Jia and Daiyu Lin in their previous life could not escape the weighing of pros and cons that the family involved. Therefore, the protagonist is unable to transcend the secular world and resolve the entanglement of love and hate, and can only feel the outline of fate in the weddings and funerals of people. Xun Lu, a celebrated modern Chinese novelist, also said, “The small tragedies in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are common in society. (Lu, 2006)” Indeed, the existence of tragedy is a universal and popular phenomenon.

In *Legend*, Eileen Chang uses existential tragedy to perfection. The author reveals the bleak life theme in a plain and natural style, forming a “contrast of differences”, achieving an artistic effect of being subtle and light, but with a profound and heavy meaning. It tries to interpret the tragedy of life in the ordinary lives of ordinary people, showing the universality of existential tragedy. In the *Legend*, although *Love in a Fallen City* is set against the backdrop of war, allowing the protagonists Liuyuan Fan and Liusu Bai to display the protagonist’s halo of the “fallen city”. In fact, the novel uses a grand perspective

as an entry point to present an ordinary and torturous love tragedy (Tao, 2008).

On the other hand, in a patriarchal society, the “otherized” characters hope to achieve identity transcendence and personal liberation through love, but in the end, the result is counterproductive. Chuanqing Nie in *Jasmine Tea* is always marginalized in the family. If this is the case for men under patriarchal oppression, the fate of women is self-evident. The writer uses secular writing to depict the common tragedies in society. Whether it is Qiqiao Cao in *The Golden Cangue* or Yanli Meng in *Red Rose, White Rose*, readers can easily find from them that they are controlled by feudal ethics and family concepts but are powerless to resist their fate. In the works of Cao and Zhang, female characters are undoubtedly the objects that the authors focus on expressing tragedy.

3 Interpretation of the tragedy of female characters

3.1 The tragedy of the fate of female characters

The *Legend* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* both have an inescapable tragedy of fate when describing female characters. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Daiyu buried flowers, Baochai stayed alone in the empty room, etc. Their fates were deeply influenced by the rise and fall of the family, the social environment and feudal ethics. With the decline of the towering tree of Jia Mansion, it was difficult for the women in Jia Mansion to escape their tragic fate. The fate of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling was also firmly controlled by this invisible big hand. Take Baochai as an example. Facing the arrangement of the feudal patriarch, she knew in her heart that she was not the choice of Baoyu Jia, and she also understood that Baoyu and Daiyu were in love and recognized each other, but she had to follow the arrangement of her family. As Shan Mao wrote in *On the Image of Female Characters in Dream of Red Mansions*: This marriage was full of irony and farce from the beginning. This is the tragedy of Baochai’s fate, losing the power to choose her own love (Mao, 2014).

The same is true of the women in Eileen Chang’s works: Qiqiao Cao in *The Golden Cangue* is bound by money and the feudal marriage system. After being sold to Mr. Jiang by her brother and sister-in-law, she changed from a lively girl to a poor woman imprisoned by shackles. Her love, family affection and humanity have been distorted and no longer normal, and her own happiness and that of her children have been destroyed. Qiqiao Cao’s madness is not a personal pathological phenomenon, but the fall of the entire society. She is not only a victim, but also

the creator of a new round of tragedy. Weilong Ge in *Al-oeswood Incense: The First Brazier* gradually lost herself to love and money. At first, she had the dream of studying, but under the influence of her aunt, she gradually indulged in material enjoyment and put her dream aside. She fell deeper and deeper into the luxurious life and lost the opportunity to pursue a blood and independent life. In order to fit into those hypocritical and ugly social circles, Weilong Ge constantly caters to others, thus giving up her bottom line. From a simple female student, she became a woman who degenerates for material, money and vanity. In the end, she lost the ability to redeem herself and fell into an inescapable fate again and again.

This sense of powerlessness of fate is similar to *A Dream of Red Mansions*. These women have too many constraints. No matter how they struggle, they can hardly get rid of the tricks of fate and finally end up with a tragic ending. This is also the common point shown in the two works.

3.2 Tragedy under the oppression of feudal ethics

A Dream of Red Mansions shows the corruption and decline of feudal aristocratic families, which is another important reason for the tragedy of women and affects their fate. For example, Yingchun is honest and weak in character. She suffered a lot of grievances in her husband's family. The "three obediences and four virtues" of feudal ethics also prevented her from resisting. She wanted to go back to her parents' home for help, but still could not get strong support, and was finally tortured to death. Eileen Chang also criticized feudal ethics in her works.

Liusu Bai in *Love in a Fallen City* emphasizes male superiority and female inferiority and lifelong loyalty under the feudal ethics. Liusu Bai returned to her parents' home after the divorce. In the eyes of her brother and sister-in-law, she was an "ominous person" and a burden to the family. They not only calculated her financially, but also suppressed her mentally, leaving her no place in her parents' home. This kind of oppression of the feudal family made Liusu Bai lose her support and she could only pin her hopes on marriage. In the social environment at that time, divorced women were discriminated against, and Liusu Bai faced huge social pressure. If she wanted to get out of the predicament, she had to remarry as soon as possible and find a man who could provide her with economic security and social status. Therefore, she knew that Liuyuan Fan was not a good man, but she could only grasp this life-saving straw. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Liusu Bai struggled more for survival. As Chunyan Hu wrote in *A Brief Analysis of the Tragedy of Liusu Bai's Life in Love in*

a Fallen City: Liuyuan Fan, who was naturally romantic, would not stick to only one woman, and Liusu Bai was more like a moth flying towards fireworks, and in the end, only she was destroyed (Hu, 2022). Therefore, the social public opinion environment created by feudal ethics was an important factor leading to her tragedy. Chang'an in *The Golden Cangue* is the daughter of Qiqiao Cao. Qiqiao Cao was deeply poisoned by feudal ethics, and she unconsciously transferred her pain to her daughter Chang'an. She shaped Chang'an according to the standards of feudal ethics, made Chang'an bind her feet, smoke opium, and prevented her from accepting new ideas and new education. In a society where feudal ethics prevailed, the development space for women was severely restricted. Even if Chang'an had some thoughts of resistance, it was difficult for her to break free from the constraints of her surroundings. The role positioning and requirements of society for women made Chang'an have no autonomy in marriage and life. In the end, she could only live a tragic life under the shadow of her mother and the heavy oppression of feudal ethics.

As Xiaoxia Guo wrote in *The Image of Female Characters in Half a Lifelong Romance from the Perspective of Cultural Poetics*, The older generation's family background concept still exists. They will interfere with their children's free love with tinted glasses, always matching their children's marital happiness with family status, money and power, and habitually continue to play the role of arranging their children's marriages, becoming a stumbling block for the younger generation to carefully manage their married life based on love (Guo,2020). It can be seen that feudal ethics made many women who were already in difficult situations even more helpless and trapped in this inescapable cage.

Whether it is *A Dream of Red Mansions* or *Legend*, the tragic fate and unfortunate experiences of female characters deeply reveal the corruption and cruelty of feudal ethics, and the tragic fate of these women is a revelation and accusation of it. The women described by Eileen Chang are all flesh and blood. It is these sufferings that remind more women to boldly try and bravely break through the limitations of the outside world. In the future, more and more women will find their true selves.

4 Conclusion

A Dream of Red Mansions leads to a family tragedy through personal tragedy, and implies the tragedy of an era through the family tragedy. This kind of contemplative consciousness about tragic fate gave Eileen Chang a unique spiritual temperament and also influenced her literary creation to a certain extent. Because of this, both her

Legend and her life reflect her pessimistic perception of life and personal reflection on life circumstances, and this tragic creative concept also reveals a unique tragic beauty. By comparing and studying the two works, the author focuses on the food, clothing, housing, and transportation of the protagonists, showing the popular characteristics of existential tragedy.

Through systematic analysis of the motivations and characteristics of the tragedy in the work and through the tragedy of women, we further explore the personal and contemporary reasons for the tragedy. This article takes Eileen Chang's *Legend* as an example and analyzes the works in detail, but due to space reasons, it does not cover all of them. Future research can attempt to delve further and conduct a comprehensive comparison of Eileen Chang's works created in different periods to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the writer.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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