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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Comparison of Independent Female Images in Chinese and American Literature: A Case Study of Jia Tanchun in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind***

**Sirui Wang**

*Chengdu University of Technology, English, College of Foreign Languages, Chengdu 610059, China*

**Corresponding Author:** Sirui Wang **E-mail:** 870685642@qq.com

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**| ABSTRACT**

*A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Gone with the Wind* both feature many prominent female characters. Among them, Jia Tanchun in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* both have independent female thoughts. In spite of different time backgrounds and cultural tradition soil, the characters they portray have certain similarities. Comparing the similarities and differences of their independent thoughts can reveal the influence of social background on the development of feminism. The objective of the study is to make a comparison of these two characters and explore the inner link between the development of feminism and social background.

**| KEYWORDS**

*Gone with the wind*; *A Dream in Red Mansions*; comparison; Chinese and American literature; independent female images; social background

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### **1. Introduction**

*A Dream of Red Mansions* is a model of Chinese novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which tells the rise and fall of a feudal clan in ancient China. While *Gone with the Wind* takes the American plantation as the story scene, depicting the life of Southern Americans around the Civil War. Jia Tanchun in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* both have the characteristics of early independent women. Their image and fate, to some extent, reflected the development of a sense of independence for women in China and America at that time.

#### **1.1 Introduction to *A Dream of Red Mansions***

There are two narrative lines in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The first is the tragedy of love between the protagonists, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, and the second is the decline of Jia's family. And as the character studied in this paper is Tanchun, the third lady of Jia's family, the introduction mainly focuses on the second narrative line.

##### **1.1.1 Historical Background of *A Dream of Red Mansions***

*A Dream of Red Mansions* was written by Cao Xueqin in the 18th century, the end of feudal China. At that time, the Qing government closed the country, which was intoxicated by the dream of the so-called "Supreme Kingdom." Feudal despotism reached its peak, a hidden crisis under the appearance of the Prosperous Kang-Qian period; the whole dynasty reached the turning point of prosperity and decline. Under the oppression of the Three obediences and Four virtues of Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism, women had low status and could not display their talents. But At the same time, the Ming and Qing dynasties also witnessed the germination of capitalism, the development of the commodity economy, and, most importantly, the germination of anti-dogmatic and anti-feudal early progressive thought.

The family in *A Dream of Red Mansions* was actually created on the basis of Cao Xueqin's own family. Cao Xueqin's family was originally a big family, with three generations of it serving as officials. When the family was at its peak, it received the royal family four times. However, the family declined over time. However, the family gradually declined as time went by and was eventually expropriated by the royal family for being guilty of shortchanging.

### **1.1.2 Basic Storyline of a Dream of Red Mansions**

*A Dream of Red Mansions* mainly tells the story of a feudal family which gradually declined due to complicated external political factors and intense internal family conflicts, as well as the inferior offspring generation by generation, until it was convicted by the emperor and came to its very end.

*A Dream of Red Mansions* portrays various characters. Among them, female characters were mostly superior to male characters. Some of them were capable, some of them dared to love and hate, and even the author praised them at the beginning of the novel, "In spite of the majesty of my manliness, I could not, in point of fact, compare with these characters of the gentle sex."

## **1.2 Introduction to *Gone with the Wind***

Scarlett is the heroine of *Gone with the Wind*, so we need to understand the basics of the novel before we delve into her.

### **1.2.1 Historical Background of *Gone with the Wind***

As the ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity, and natural human rights advocated by the French Revolution rapidly gained popularity in the whole world, a feminist movement began to fight for the equality of women in politics, economy, and education from the 1830s. When the twentieth century came, the feminist movement in the West also began to flourish. It was during this period that author Mitchell (1993) wrote *Gone with the Wind*.

### **1.2.2 Basic Storyline of *Gone with the Wind***

The novel mainly tells the story of Scarlett, the daughter of a plantation owner in Atlanta in the south of the United States, who had lived a high-fed life but had to take care of the household and maintain the livelihood of the whole family after the Civil War.

## **2. The Research Method: Comparative Research**

The social background of Jia Tanchun in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* have similarities and differences, as well as their degree of ideological independence and fate. Therefore, the comparison of these two literary roles is helpful in exploring the connection between social background and the development of feminism.

This paper will compare the class they belong to, their ability to excel men, their historical background, the degrees of early feminine consciousness in them, and their endings in order to sum up the relationship between social background and the development of feminism.

## **3. The Characters**

The characters' personalities and fates are often tied to their experiences, so clearing the storyline related to Tanchun and Scarlett helps to compare them better.

### **3.1 Tanchun-Related Storyline**

#### **3.1.1 Making Shoes for Baoyu**

Tanchun made a pair of satin shoes for Baoyu. Her biological mother, concubine Zhao, was very angry about this as Tanchun never made anything for Jia Huan, her biological brother. Tanchun was also angered by her biological mother's imprudence. In her eyes, her sisters and brothers born from legal wives or concubines were all the same as her, and she had the right to choose to treat those who were close to her better: "If I make a pair of slippers in my spare time, I can give them to any brother I choose, and no one has any right to interfere" (Cao & Gao, 1994); "I don't owe any duty to anyone except our parents."

#### **3.1.2 Founding the Begonia Poem Club**

Tanchun accidentally came up with the idea of forming a club, so she sent an invitation to her fellows in the Grand View Garden and gathered them together. It was in the middle of autumn, and Jia Yun had just given Baoyu two pots of white begonia. So they took "begonia" as the title and wrote poems. Then, the Begonia Poem Club was successfully established.

#### **3.1.3 Managing Household Affairs**

When Wang Xifeng was ill, Tanchun was in charge of the household affairs of her family. When her biological mother's brother died, Tanchun acted according to the rules and issued subsidies according to the rules. As a result, the mother and daughter had a terrible quarrel because the mother thought her daughter should issue more for the sake of blood ties, and Tanchun cared only

about fairness. Tanchun embarked on the second step of reform, abolishing unnecessary expenses and reducing expenditure, canceling the monthly payment for hair and makeup for every girl, and appointing the female servants in the Grand View Garden to contract for different kinds of affairs. Tanchun's capability of management was recognized by the majority of the people in the Grand View Garden.

### **3.1.4 Reasoning with Concubine Zhao**

Baoyu's servant girl Fang Guan used rose paste to mess with Jia Huan. The concubine Zhao was furious when she heard about it. As a result, she fought with Fang Guan and made of fool of herself. Tanchun felt ashamed at this and advised concubine Zhao not to bother herself arguing with the likes of servant girls but to be self-respecting and not to demean herself.

### **3.1.5 Searching the Grand View Garden**

A pouch embroidered with a pornography diagram was found in the Grand View Garden, which made Lady Wang ashamed and irritated. So she asked Wang Xifeng to do a search in the Grand View Garden to uncover the owner of the pouch. When Wang Xifeng and the female servants in charge of this issue were searching in Tanchun's room, Tanchun felt insulted and decried the search as the mutual suspicion and deep internal contradictions in her family: "We must start killing each other first before our family can be completely destroyed" (1608). She beats Wang Shanbao's wife in the face when Ms. Wang pulls her clothes for her patronizing herself and looking down upon Tanchun just because Tanchun is concubine-born. "If you think I'm as good-natured as your young mistress, whom you bully just as you please, you're making a big mistake" (1610). Her words showed her integrity.

### **3.1.6 Her Distant Marriage**

Tanchun was supposed to marry Qi Jianhui, but the Qi family broke off the marriage when concubine Zhao let slip that Tanchun was concubine-born. Later, the court was defeated and decided to make peace with the "barbarian" country by marriage. Lady Dowager Nanan was reluctant to marry off her own daughter, thus accepting Tanchun as her nominal foster daughter and getting her married instead. Tanchun got no choice but to accept.

## **3.2 Scarlett O'Hara-Related Storyline**

Scarlett O'Hara, the lady of Tara, had many suitors, but Ashley was the only one she cared for. However, Ashley married her cousin Melanie as his wife, which made her green with envy, thus marrying Charles she did not love in anger. When the Civil War broke out, Charles died. To comfort her, Melanie invited her to stay with Charles' aunt in Atlanta, where her mood improved. Before long, the fighting in Atlanta was so intense that many people left for shelter. Scarlett's mother and sisters happened to be seriously ill at that time, and Scarlett wanted to go back to Tara. But Melanie was about to give birth, and as Ashley had entrusted Melanie to her, she had to stay and take care of Melanie. Meanwhile, Rhett Butler, a businessman with whom she had an unpleasant affair at a ball, visited her and offered her to be his mistress, but she refused. Later, the war ended, and Scarlett shouldered the responsibility of supporting the family, with the urgent problem being how to keep Tara. A young soldier named Will fainted at the gate of Tara due to severe injuries. Scarlett rescued him and took him in. Then he became Scarlett's, right-hand man. When the government levied taxes on Tara, Scarlett had no idea what to do and turned to Ashley, who had gone back from the war for help, but he was too much a coward to help and disappointed her. Then she thought of Rhett, who had shown her love, and promised him that she would marry him or even be his mistress if he could pay to keep Tara. But when she came to Atlanta to find Rhett, he was already in jail. While she was depressed, she met her sister's fiance Frank Kennedy, who had a sum of money in his hand. In order to keep Tara, she tricked him into marrying her and used his money to pay off the government. Later Rhett was released from prison, and with his help, Scarlett ran two lumber factories, for which she worked very hard regardless of Frank's feeling humiliated that his woman was out in business like a man. She even continued to work a month after giving birth to her daughter. When Frank died in the crossfire between the KKK and the army, Scarlett married Rhett Butler despite rumors. In spite of Rhett's loving her devotedly, Scarlett still could not get Ashley out of her mind. Rhett knows what his wife thinks, and after being disappointed, again and again, he finally gives up his love for Scarlett and leaves after his daughter falls from a horse and dies. Scarlett then realized that Ashley was a weak man and that Rhett was her true love. So she decided to return to Tara and wait hopefully for the future. "After all, tomorrow is another day" (Mitchell, 1993).

## **4. The Similarities Between the Two Female Characters**

After combing the story synopsis and storyline of the characters, we can find that these two characters have some commonalities. And according to the backgrounds and contents of the novels, the similarities between them mainly include the class they belong to and their ability to excel men.

### **4.1 The Class they Belong to**

Tanchun and Scarlett were both from the upper classes of their time. Tanchun was the third lady of the Jia family, which had been prosperous for over a hundred years, while Scarlett was the lady of Tara. In their era, the upper class received more diverse ideas

and had the economic foundation for progressive thinking, thus being more likely to produce progressive ideas of independent women.

But just because of the class they lived in, the bureaucratic landlord class, and the bourgeoisie, their independence was based on the exploitation of the working people. It could be said that the wealth created by the working people created opportunities for their independence. As a result, this kind of independent image has its class limitations.

#### **4.2 Their Ability to Excel Men**

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Tanchun early on showed the ability to outdo the male members of her family. Firstly, her literary attestation was high enough to find a poem club and composed poems with her like-minded siblings in the Grand View Garden. Secondly, she was also talented at managing family affairs. When she was in charge of managing the Grand View Garden, she was unassuming and handled matters, including affairs related to her own uncle, according to regulations, thus establishing her authority. Thirdly, she had ambitions that most of the male members of the Jia family did not share. Since the Jia family had prospered for so long, most of the male members lost their ambition. But Tanchun was different. She once said, "If I were a boy, able to leave this house, I'd have gone long ago to make my own way in the world, for then, of course, I'd know what to do." This ambition was rare at a time when women were repressed.

Similarly, Scarlett was also a woman of great capability. She was very responsible. In the case of the mother and sister, who was seriously ill, she resolutely stayed in the war-torn field to take care of the delivery of Melanie. It showed an act of courage that many men did not have. She also had the ability to go beyond men in business management. She managed two lumber mills successfully and was able to support her family.

### **5. The Differences Between the Two Female Characters**

Apart from similarities, there are also differences between them, which include their historical backgrounds, the degrees of early feminine consciousness in them, and their endings.

#### **5.1 Different Historical Backgrounds**

Although Cao Xueqin did not specify which dynasty *A Dream of Red Mansions* is about, it was probably set in China's Ming and Qing dynasties based on the background and plot. And Scarlett was set in the period around the Civil War.

First, they were in different political circumstances. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, China was still a feudal autocratic monarchy with the feudal autocratic system reached its peak. However, during the time of the American Civil War, the United States was already a democratic country with a republic.

Second, the economic circumstances were different. In The Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the establishment of employment relations, capitalism began to sprout. However, as the small-scale peasant economy was still dominant, coupled with the implementation of the policy of emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce, and closing the door on the country, the development of capitalism was rather slow. While during the time around the Civil War, the United States experienced the second industrial Revolution. Its capitalist economy developed rapidly, with its industrial output ranking first in the world.

Third, they lived in different cultural traditions. By the time Tanchun lived, Confucianism, dominated by the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu, was an orthodox thought. It had high moral requirements for people, especially women, and such requirements as "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" constrained women's behavior. Scarlett lived in a time when democratic ideas took root and women's status improved with the development of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the declaration of Independence explicitly mentions the idea that "all men are created equal," which has also become the theoretical basis of American feminism. "The 19th century saw an increasingly widespread and articulate statement of women's claims" (Walters, 2013, p. 4). Writers like Marion Reid constantly put forward the appeal of women in their books. It is precise to say that this period saw the struggles of and advances in feminism and can be seen as the "first wave of American feminism": "The so-called 'first wave of American feminism' began in the 1840s and is commonly marked by the first Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls in 1848" (Madsen, 2006, p. 3).

#### **5.2 Different Degrees of Early Feminine Consciousness in them**

Generally speaking, the degree of feminine consciousness Tanchun was lower than that of Scarlett. Tanchun certainly had a relatively independent mind compared with her peers, but her thinking was more restricted than Scarlett's. This was embodied in her inability to achieve her own career and her not being a male, and she simply let the elders dominate her life, including marriage. At the same time, her behavior was still governed by traditional moral rules, which she did not fight against.

Scarlett, on the contrary, dared to fight against public opinion. She had the courage to run her own business despite the comments of the others and her husband's displeasure and dared to choose her marriage regardless of the gossip. To some extent, she managed to live without men.

### **5.3 Different Endings**

Under the dual action of the external environment and internal personal factors, they had completely different endings.

Tanchun, constrained by her family ties and her submission to dignitaries and moral standards, took the place of the daughter of Lady Dowager Nanan and married to another country far away from home. Her ending was nothing short of a tragedy.

Compared with Tanchun, Scarlett's ending was much happier. Although Rhett had left her, she had her own career, could live independently of others, and was full of hope for the future as she said, "Tomorrow is another day."

### **6. Conclusion**

From the similarities and differences between Tanchun and Scarlett, we can easily see that the development of women's independent thought is closely related to the historical background. Therefore, comparing the images of independent women in Chinese and American literature can not only explore the development of Feminism in China and America at that time but also provide a reference for the development of feminism today, that is, the improvement of women's status cannot be separated from social development.

However, they both are artificial characters. Although the analysis and comparison of these two roles reflect the social situation at that time to a certain extent, the artistic processing of literature inevitably makes their figures idealistic and limited. For example, they are all in the upper class, well educated, and have good prerequisites for independent thinking, while the majority of civilian women at that time did not have these conditions, so the results of their analysis have class limitations. Therefore, if the study can be combined with a larger group of women in the real world at the time, the results may be more reflective of the social environment.

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