

# Exploring the Multidimensional Role and Deep Impact of Granny Liu in Dream of the Red Chamber

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## Abstract:

This paper delves into the character of Granny Liu in 'Dream of the Red Chamber', aiming to uncover its symbolic significance and its reflection and critique of traditional Chinese society and culture. The study focuses on Granny Liu's societal values, human traits, and her role as a cultural critic, unraveling through three dimensions: representation of social classes, true depiction of human nature, and cultural inheritance and critique. Granny Liu not only displays folk wisdom and optimism but also exposes the social contradictions and class disparities of feudal society, critiquing traditional culture and values. The article emphasizes that Granny Liu's image transcends her peripheral status to become a mirror in the novel, reflecting the true face of society and the complexity of human nature. Her story is not only a direct critique of feudal society but also embodies the longing for a more equitable and free way of life, showcasing the author's profound reflections and critical spirit toward humanity, society, and culture.

**Keywords:** Dream of the Red Chamber, Granny Liu, Role Meaning

## 1. Introduction

'Dream of the Red Chamber,' as the pinnacle of Chinese classical literature, is renowned not only for its complex character relationships, rich emotional entanglements, and profound social critique but also for its unique artistic charm and deep philosophical reflections, marking it as the epitome of Chinese classical novels. The novel situates over nine hundred characters within a specific temporal and spatial context, each with their unique position and significance, together forming a detailed and intricate tapestry of social life [1]. Therefore, the rich implications of character images in 'Dream of the Red Chamber' have become an inexhaustible topic for later generations. Granny Liu, as a peripheral character in the novel, though not occupying a central position, undeniably adds a unique flavor and deep symbolic meaning to the story [2].

In current academic research, there has been a substantial focus on the character of Granny Liu and her artistic value in 'Dream of the Red Chamber'. However, studies on her societal symbolic significance are less common. Thus, the theme of this paper will concentrate on the role and symbolic significance of Granny Liu in the first 80 chapters of 'Dream of the Red Chamber'. By delving into Granny Liu's character portrayal and her demonstration of societal values, human traits, and cultural critique through a series of events at the Jia Mansion, this paper aims to reveal the

crucial role of Granny Liu's character in deepening readers' understanding of the novel's themes and plot development, as well as her reflection and critique of traditional Chinese society and culture.

By studying the character and role of Granny Liu, not only can readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the artistic allure and cultural value of 'Dream of the Red Chamber', but they can also engage in deeper reflection on the life conditions, value concepts, and their complex relationships with the upper echelons of traditional Chinese society's lower-class characters. Furthermore, Granny Liu serves as a unique character who is both an outsider and a frequent participant in the grand family of the Jia Mansion. Her presence and actions, reflecting societal realities and tests of human nature, provide readers with a unique window to observe and analyze the social structure and cultural contradictions of Qing Dynasty society.

## 2. Overview of Granny Liu's Character

'Dream of the Red Chamber' is not only an excellent work with high artistic value but also a thought-provoking classic masterpiece. The novel reflects the life status of large families at the time and the gap between social classes, especially through the character development and plot progression involving Granny Liu [3]. Although Granny Liu does not appear in many chapters of 'Dream

of the Red Chamber, she plays a crucial role in the development of the story and the contrast between characters, displaying traits of gratitude, bravery, simplicity, humor, and optimism. The author portrays her vivid personality traits, reflecting genuine human nature and clear character relationships, winning the affection of many readers [4].

Granny Liu is a poor, rural elderly woman who seeks help from the Jia Mansion. Despite facing cold shoulders and ridicule, she never gives up. She witnesses the prosperity, luxury, and eventual decline of the Jia family. She appears in front of the Jia household as a comic figure. Through her perspective, we see the true faces of many characters: the kindness and benevolence of Grandmother Jia, the savvy of Lady Wang, the loyalty and righteousness of Ping'er, the naive affection of Baoyu, the elegant but affected Lin Daiyu and more. Granny Liu, a seemingly insignificant character without much education or worldly experience, proactively seeks solutions in difficult circumstances, demonstrating great wisdom in survival [5]. The novel weaves her storyline through her four visits to the Jia Mansion: her elaborate efforts to connect with relatives for livelihood, securing twenty silver coins; her gratitude and efforts to repay kindness with fresh vegetables, thus further connecting with the Jia Mansion; witnessing the decline of the Jia family, the death of Grandmother Jia, and Lady Wang's illness; and finally, her brave rescue of Qiao Jie, in return for the kindness once shown to her. These actions reflect Granny Liu's philosophy of life, her emotional intelligence, and wisdom [6]. She adheres to the belief that „man proposes, God disposes,“ actively seizing opportunities and preparing thoroughly to achieve her goals. She knows what to say to whom, skillfully handling various interpersonal relationships, and sincerely flattering in a way that is appreciated by others. Granny Liu, with her gratitude, loyalty, and willingness to stand up when the opportunity arises, showcases the kindness and simplicity inherent in human nature.

### **3. The Role and Impact of Granny Liu in ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘**

#### **3.1 .Representation of Social Classes**

Granny Liu's background and life conditions represent the lower class of Qing Dynasty society [7]. Through her eyes, readers glimpse the living conditions of the masses at that time: poverty and hardship, yet still maintaining optimism and wisdom in life. Her presence in the novel forms a stark social contrast, as the luxury within the Jia Mansion sharply contrasts with the poverty of the outside world. This not only deepens understanding of the Jia family's affluent lifestyle but also reflects the author's profound insight into the social class differences of the

time.

Living in the Grand View Garden, the Jia family seemed to dwell in the clouds, a lifestyle of lavish luxury far removed from the poverty-stricken laboring masses [8]. ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘ includes a segment describing the tenants delivering their rent to the Ning Mansion, illustrating the precarious existence of the lower classes who live at the mercy of the weather. Adverse conditions such as hail could destroy crops, injure people's livestock, and damage homes, leading to famine and the inability to pay rent. Granny Liu's life before entering the Grand View Garden is a microcosm of the lives of the lower class in feudal society. She lived with her daughter and son-in-law, helping with the children because the family struggled to prepare for the New Year and winter, forcing her to swallow her pride and seek aid from the Jia Mansion. At an advanced age, she still had to please her son-in-law and borrow money from wealthy households, hiding her pride for survival [9]. When visiting the Grand View Garden, Granny Liu was unbothered by the mockery from Wang Xifeng and others, even willingly playing the clown to win the ladies' laughter.

Despite this, Granny Liu eventually managed to get what she needed through her ability to read the room. Her interactions with the upper-class members of the Jia Mansion showcase the complex relationships between social classes. Her candidness and humor allowed her to cross class boundaries and establish a special connection with the members of the Jia family. These interactions not only reveal the upper class's ignorance and indifference to the lives of the lower class but also showcase the goodness and compassion inherent in human nature. The character of Granny Liu and her actions serve to mitigate social class conflicts to some extent, demonstrating the human connections based on inherent human decency.

#### **3.2 .A True Depiction of Human Nature**

Granny Liu's character embodies the survival wisdom and moral complexities of ordinary people in harsh environments. Coming from the countryside, Granny Liu is a ‚minor character‘ with little influence. However, as an elderly person with extensive life experience, even though she had never encountered a wealthy and powerful family like the Jia Mansion, life had taught her how to make a living and what to say to whom. Upon her arrival at the Jia Mansion and in the presence of Wang Xifeng, Granny Liu was always cautious and deferential, knowing well the principle of ‚bending the head under someone else's roof‘ to exchange her dignity and face for twenty taels of silver and a string of coins. Her smooth yet measured words and actions showcased Granny Liu's worldly wisdom and insight into human affairs [10].

During her visit to the Grand View Garden, Granny Liu met Grandmother Jia. She saw an old lady lying on a couch, with a beautiful maid wrapped in gauze massaging her legs, while granny Liu instantly recognized this distinguished elderly woman as Grandmother Jia, calling her „old immortal“ while humorously referring to herself as the „locust mother,“ endearing herself to Grandmother Jia. At the banquet, Granny Liu’s crude and amusing words made the young masters and mistresses burst into laughter. When teased by Wang Xifeng and Yuanyang, Granny Liu did not take offense or become angry. Instead, she displayed great wisdom in her foolishness, enlivening the otherwise solemn atmosphere of the Jia Mansion. Knowing she was expected to play the clown at the table, Granny Liu willingly played the fool, entertaining Grandmother Jia and the ladies [11].

What might seem vulgar and trivial on the surface actually contained profound wisdom in dealing with people. Her intelligence and wit helped her find a way to survive in poverty. Her actions, while sometimes appearing greedy, were fundamentally aimed at survival and protecting her family. This complex portrayal of human nature makes Granny Liu a three-dimensional, realistic character, reflecting the multifaceted nature of people in adversity. Through Granny Liu’s character, the author skillfully balances kindness and greed, showing the nuances of human nature. Through her actions and choices, Granny Liu demonstrates that even at the bottom of society, people strive to maintain a moral baseline, providing readers with a deeper understanding and reflection on her role in ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘ [12].

### 3.3 .Cultural Inheritance and Critique

Granny Liu in ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘ is not merely a vivid character; she also serves as a vessel for China’s rich folk culture and life wisdom. Through her eyes, readers glimpse the living conditions of the lower class in feudal society and their endless longing for a better life [13]. Her presence in the Jia Mansion, a symbol of feudal aristocracy, not only reveals the vast gap between the rich and the poor at the time but also exposes the injustices of life under the feudal system. More importantly, Granny Liu’s language and behavior reflect a deep folk cultural heritage. Through Granny Liu’s simple rural essence, the author contrasts the extravagance, spiritual emptiness, and moral hypocrisy of the Jia Mansion, making Granny Liu a mirror for the Jia family [14]. In the novel, the author depicts the poverty of the working class to showcase the decay of the Jia family’s feudal aristocracy. When Granny Liu first enters the Rong Mansion, she speaks of her dire circumstances, not even sure if she can survive the winter. The author uses emotions of pity, sympathy, and sorrow to

portray her character. As an elder, even older than Grandmother Jia, she lives with her daughter without a source of income or security and would never reach out to the Jia Mansion if there were any other options [15].

During her visit to the Grand View Garden, Wang Xifeng decorates her hair with flowers and teases her with long, heavy chopsticks and small quail eggs. During tea, she uses a complete set of cups, discarding the ones used by Granny Liu. This shows disrespect towards her, using nicknames like „female guest“ and „locust mother.“ Despite this, Granny Liu continues to flatter, demonstrating her lowly status in society [16]. Amidst the laughter of the ladies of the Jia Mansion, she reveals the world’s sorrows, indicating that the wealthy do not understand the sufferings of the common people. This highlights the impoverished life of the working class like Granny Liu. Through character and plot contrasts, the theme of social tragedy in the work is accentuated [17]. Moreover, the folk customs, linguistic art, and unique insights into life that she embodies not only add a rich folk color to ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘ but also make her an important bridge for the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture and folk wisdom [13]. Through the character of Granny Liu, Cao Xueqin not only shows deep sympathy for the lives of the lower class but also expresses respect and admiration for folk culture, emphasizing that in feudal society, seemingly insignificant folk culture and wisdom actually carry profound social value and human dignity. Granny Liu’s story becomes an important vehicle in ‚Dream of the Red Chamber‘ for criticizing old culture, advocating for cultural renewal, and progressive thought, reflecting the author’s deep pursuit of inherent goodness in human nature and social justice.

### 3.4 .The Symbolic Significance of Granny Liu

First and foremost, Granny Liu’s character symbolizes the wisdom of the folk and an optimistic attitude toward life. Granny Liu, with her unique peasant wit, engages in jesting and plays the fool, aiming to bring joy to Grandmother Jia and please others. In the process of asserting her presence, perhaps Granny Liu, possibly serving as a protagonist in these moments, is also swept up in excitement and joy. There might be instances where she forgets her humble village origins, but at that moment, she indeed becomes the butt of others’ jokes, seen as the „female guest,“ „locust mother,“ and „female bamboo strip.“ Whether driven by innate kindness and open-mindedness or out of survival necessity with shrewdness and wisdom, Granny Liu’s story, with its laughter tinged with tears, offers not only visual and auditory pleasure but also prompts reflections on life and human nature [18]. Despite facing the hardships and poverty of life, Granny Liu maintains

an optimistic outlook, using her wisdom and wit to find ways to survive in difficult circumstances. Her love for life and pursuit of simple joys reflect the resilient vitality and aspiration for a better life inherent in folk culture. This wisdom and optimism serve not only as her personal tools for survival but also represent the common attitude and strategy of the lower classes in the face of adversity.

Secondly, through the character of Granny Liu, the author reveals the profound social contradictions and class disparities within feudal society. Her background and experiences represent the living conditions of the vast majority of the lower classes, starkly contrasting with the luxurious life inside the Jia Mansion. This contrast not only highlights the injustice and the vast chasm between social classes but also reflects the irrationality of the societal structure and the drawbacks of the feudal system at the time [19]. The character of Granny Liu makes these social issues more concrete and visual, allowing readers to more directly feel the injustice of society and the urgent need for reform.

Moreover, Granny Liu's actions and words inadvertently critique the traditional culture and values of the time. Her admiration and criticism of the luxurious life at the Jia Mansion reflect disapproval of the hypocritical and pretentious lifestyle of feudal society. At the same time, her outspokenness and simple life philosophy challenge many of the rigid norms within feudal rites and teachings, showcasing a pursuit of values that are more authentic, egalitarian, and humane. Through the character of Granny Liu, the novel conveys a reflection on and critique of traditional culture and values, calling for progress and reform in society and culture.

In summary, Granny Liu's experiences and her observations of life at the Jia Mansion can also be seen as a critique of the feudal system and class concepts of the time. Her character and everything she goes through hint at the corruption and decline of feudal society, as well as the restrictions and oppression this system imposes on the lives of ordinary people. Moreover, to some extent, Granny Liu can also be viewed as a symbol of change and hope. Her longing for a fairer and better life reflects the people's aspiration for social transformation and hope for a better future [20].

#### 4. Conclusion

The profound classic 'Dream of the Red Chamber' features Granny Liu, a character of extraordinary significance despite not being a main character. Through a thorough exploration of Granny Liu's character and her experiences in the Jia Mansion, we not only recognize her important role in cultural inheritance, embodying China's rich

folk culture and life wisdom but also feel her profound impact in cultural critique. Granny Liu exposes various malpractices of feudal society and critiques feudal rites and teachings [13]. Her character exhibits folk wisdom, an optimistic attitude towards life, and a longing for a better existence. Her interactions with the people of the Jia Mansion reflect the profound social contradictions and class differences of feudal society. Granny Liu serves as a mirror reflecting society's true face and the complexity of human nature. Her story is a direct critique of feudal society and a call for a fairer, freer way of life. Essentially, Granny Liu's role in 'Dream of the Red Chamber' surpasses her status, deeply reflecting the author's thoughts and critical spirit towards human nature, society, and culture. It represents a reflection on and critique of traditional Chinese society and culture, as well as a longing for social progress and cultural renewal. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Granny Liu's character, showcasing her societal and cultural significance, yet it has limitations. Firstly, the literature review lacks comprehensiveness, limiting research perspectives. Secondly, the analysis overlooks potential interpretive angles such as gender and psychology. Additionally, the historical background analysis of Granny Liu's life is insufficient, and intertextual analysis is absent, limiting a deeper understanding of the character. Lastly, the conclusion section offers limited discussion on future research directions. Future studies should delve deeper into these aspects.

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