

# Cross-Culture Comparison Between A Dream in the Red Chamber and The Tales of Genji

Enya Chen<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tsinghua International School, Beijing, China

\*Corresponding author: enya.chen.2026@this.edu.cn

## Abstract:

The works *A Dream in the Red Chamber* as well as *The Tales of Genji* are both famous masterpieces of literature that represent their distinct cultures. Given the proximity of the years in which they were created, this paper compares the similarities and differences between the main characters—Baoyu and Genji, Murasaki and Daiyu, Baochai and Aoi—of the two books and analyzes the results using history and cultural elements. Based on the existing resources from other previous papers about this topic and historical texts from this period, the paper is composed with the support of objective evidence. Literature is the epitome of local culture, so the actions of characters reflect the criteria of societal roles. The result of this cross-cultural comparison concludes that the Qing Dynasty and Heian periods have similar religious structures and marriage systems. Yet, their cultures have different origins, and the characters have some individual variations.

**Keywords:** A Dream of Red Mansion, The Tales of Genji, Cultural comparison, history

## 1. Introduction

Studying pieces of different cultures can help people gain a better understanding of the history and religion of other cultures, allowing them to respect others' cultures and prevent the formation of cultural bias and stereotypes. Though "*A Dream in the Red Chamber*" and "*The Tales of Genji*" were formed under dissimilar social backgrounds and ideological perspectives, they consist of comparable elements and convey corresponding values. "*A Dream in the Red Chamber*" and "*The Tales of Genji*" can successfully represent the essence of their respective cultures. "*A Dream in the Red Chamber*" represents the great ideologies of China, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. It also demonstrates the historical elements of the Qing dynasty. Furthermore, this book uses descriptions of events in Jia Fu to imply the aristocratic life in the Qing Dynasty. "*The Tales of Genji*," on the other hand, is literature from the Heian period of Japan. It describes the life of Genji to indicate the mourning spirit of Japanese culture and the belief in karma. The details of Japanese architecture depicted in the book exhibit aristocratic cultures and early gender roles. Hence, it can be said that both of the two works share the demonstrations of their life and society backgrounds.

Besides, people often marvel at the high degree of similarities they find in these works. "The main characters, Jia

Baoyu and Genji, are both a mixture of divine and evil" [1]. They have the same fatal flaws—"lustful" and lazy—and receive similar miserable endings because of the rule of karma. Moreover, the narrative structure and settings of these books are also the same. They both use a third-person perspective to portray changes in a mansion. Due to this reason, there is already a lot of previous research and investigation about the resonance of these studies, such as "Material Sorrow and Leisure Sorrow: A Comparison between *Genji Story Illustration Scroll* and *Dream of Red Chamber Illustrations*." However, other research generally focuses on the sameness between the two main characters or the gender inequality and political relationships mentioned in the books, but none of the research ever specifically lists the role of different characters and the criteria for different identities in societies. This gap should not be ignored, and this study will explain these concepts in the following. This is also why this paper is important and valuable. It focuses on analyzing the differences of characters and explains the results through cultural and historical perspectives. Furthermore, elaborating on the specific identity features exhibited in the books can build a deeper connection between the readers and their culture and achieve the goal of empathizing with other countries' histories. Based on previous research and studies by others, this paper will contrast identity roles in both books through three aspects: role in marriage, identity in rela-

tionship and criteria for males. This paper will compare characters of the same role and function but in different books through their personalities, social backgrounds, endings, and distinct features, hoping to reveal the fundamental reasons for the similarities and differences in the results from cultural and historical perspectives.

## 2. The main male figure

### 2.1 . The Dream in the Red Chamber:

In the book “Dream of the Red Chamber,” Jia Baoyu, born and raised in one of the four aristocratic families, the Jia family, emerges as the main character. Despite his aversion to studying, Baoyu exhibits intelligence and a laid-back demeanor, particularly evident in his interactions with women. Growing up amidst a group of girls, he forms close relationships with them, consistently showing respect regardless of their status. His affection for Lin Daiyu leads him to desire marriage, yet he is deceived into marrying Baochai by his grandmother, resulting in a tragic outcome as he ultimately chooses to become a monk.

Throughout the narrative, Baoyu is portrayed as amorous. In Chapter Five, Jing Huan Fairy describes him as “the most lascivious (yin) person in the whole wide world, from modern to ancient [2].” The term “lascivious” in the text signifies a “lust of mind [2]” rather than mere physical desire. Baoyu’s romantic entanglements extend to various women in the Jia household, including his concubine Xi Ren and servant Bi Hen. Despite his flirtatious nature, his love is depicted as spiritual, transcending mere physical attraction. His affection for Daiyu, for instance, is characterized by respect and care, as he consistently supports and comforts her during times of emotional distress. Furthermore, Baoyu’s high social standing and admirable personality are evident. As the favored son of the wealthiest family in “Dream of the Red Chamber,” he enjoys privileges and receives a noble education. Despite his affluent upbringing, he displays a remarkable sense of egalitarianism, treating everyone with respect and compassion. In Chapter Eighteen, “when his servants demand rewards upon recognizing his talents, Baoyu responds with generosity and tolerance, highlighting his magnanimous nature” [2]. Additionally, his kindness extends beyond social boundaries, as seen in his compassionate assistance to Qing Wen, a sick and abandoned servant in the Jia household, demonstrating his disregard for class distinctions in his acts of empathy and support.

### 2.2 . The Tales of Genji:

Hikaru Genji is the son of the Japanese Emperor in the Heian period and Lady Kiritsubo who is the most favorable imperial concubine. Because Genji’s mom died when

he was small, his father lowered Genji’s identity into a commoner to protect him. Genji is a good aristocrat member who has passion and acts nice to everyone without consideration of class, but he becomes aggressive when he falls in love. Genji has a lot of concubines and lovers, but he likes Murasaki the most. “He kidnapped Murasaki when she was small and taught her based on his criteria for an ideal woman figure [3].” He also has a tragic ending: Murasaki dies, and Genji decides to become a monk. “The Tales of Genji records the romantic affairs of Genji, so it is objective to say that “lust” and “desire for love relationship” holds an emphasizing characteristic in Genji’s personality” [1]. Though Genji had a wife when he was 12, he has sex or keeps a secret relationship with other lovers. He fell in love with Rokujō and accidentally caused the death of his wife. His uncontrollable desire for love drives him to a taboo journey, which is his relationship with his stepmother, Lady Fujitsubo. Lady Fujitsubo looks similar to Genji’s mother, so she becomes Genji’s childhood crush. They had a son secretly who became the Emperor (III). From this previous evidence, it can be seen that the way that Genji shows love is more straightforward and aggressive. He sometimes breaks the moral rules and laws to satisfy his desire. Murasaki is a good example of this. She is Fujitsubo’s niece, thus they look similar. Genji fell in love with her when she was only ten years old, and he kidnapped her to raise Murasaki as a perfect lover. This forcible reaction scared Murasaki and her family, and it also formed an inequality status in their relationship.

Genji is described as a noble with good nature when he overcomes the impulse for love. This can be proved by Hanatirusato and Suetsumuhana. Lady Reikeiden’s younger sister, Hanatirusato is very talented and stays with Genji for a long time. “The author Murasaki described Hanatirusato as ugly and unsightly yet with a gentle disposition. Hanatirusato refused to have sex with Genji after they arrived in Natsunomachi because of her aging. Genji did not abandon or force her but treated Hanatirusato with proper manner and respect [4].” Furthermore, Suetsumuhana has an ugly nose, and she falls into poverty after the death of her father. Genji was not attracted by her after seeing her face, yet his kind nature let him take care of Suetsumuhana when she was sick. Genji brought her to his former home, Nijoin, where he cared for her for the remainder of her life.

### 2.3 . Comparison:

The two most striking similarities between these two male characters are their flirtatious nature and pleasant personalities. Both Baoyu and Genji have multiple relationships with different mistresses. In addition, they both have strong compassion and good virtues. Baoyu acts kindly

towards every character in the book without considering class differences, and he tolerates mistakes made by those around him. Genji protects the weak and provides consistent help for Hanatirusato and Suetsumuhana. His benevolent actions are not driven by love but by his good nature. They also share similar endings and social backgrounds. However, the way Baoyu expresses his love is gentler, whereas Genji's desire for love is more intense and direct. Baoyu treats Daiyu and his other girlfriends with respect and always follows their will, even though it upsets him. In contrast, Genji will do anything to satisfy his insatiable desire for love, sometimes at the expense of hurting his mistress' feelings. For instance, his compelling love for Murasaki not only harms Murasaki and her family but also evokes his wife and other mistresses.

### 3. The main female figure

#### 3.1 . The Dream in the Red Chamber:

Lin Daiyu is the heroine in A Dream of the Red Chamber. Though she was born into an aristocratic family, her mom died very early. After her mom's death, she moves to live with her grandmother, Jia Mu. Daiyu has an unhealthy body, which causes her to have a pessimistic attitude. It is easy for her to think things in a negative way, which exacerbates her sickness. "Her most distinct features are her gifted talent and resistance toward traditional rules" [3]. However, her resistance is soft and implicit. Her love with Baoyu is her biggest resistance toward the ancient marriage system, but Baoyu marries another girl, causing Daiyu to die alone.

Being described as one of the best poets in Jia Fu, Daiyu is the winner of the Chrysanthemum Poetry Contest. In the book, Daiyu finishes her poem, but she still wants to write more and reveal her talent. Thus, she helps Baoyu to "fool" his father and writes a poem for him. From this, it can be seen Daiyu's refusal to follow conventional customs mindlessly. "In Confucianism, people believe that virtuous women are foolish ones" [5]. However, Daiyu expresses her genuine talent rather than trying to hide it. In addition, she reads *The Romance of the West Chamber*, which does not follow the moral standards of feudal society. At last, Cao focused on describing the weakness of Daiyu through her physical and mental health. Her body has been unwell since she was a little child, and her pessimistic worldview makes matters worse. "In chapter 4, Daiyu weeps because Baoyu threw his jade on the floor, and she thinks everything is her fault [2]." This lack of self-confidence and sensitive attitude intensifies her illness.

As mentioned above, even though Daiyu is willing to fight the unfairness of society and pursue what she really

wants, her unhealthiness and societal background restrict her from doing so. For instance, "when Daiyu noticed Baoyu's and Baochai's marriage, she did not violate Jia Mu's will but fainted and died with sorrow" [1]. Daiyu's body is too weak for her to fight against mundane disciplines, so she always alerts her rebellion using poems but never drives it into action. She is mad when Baoyu flirts with other girls, but she has no power to stop him. She knows what she wants but she also knows she will never get it. This realization of the difference between ideality and reality forms Daiyu's complex characteristics and causes her to die in despair.

#### 3.2 .The Tales of Genji:

Murasaki is the wife of Genji. She had been taken away by Genji from her parents in her childhood. Thus, she strictly follows Genji's will and does everything she can to please him. Genji was very proud of the result of his education, and even after Murasaki's death, he thought, "Since childhood, she has never done anything that I do not like in my heart [6]." Furthermore, Murasaki never shows envy when Genji visits his mistress. However, this meekness of hers only floats on the surface; in her heart, she wants to get rid of the boundaries set by Genji. She wants to be a monk and stay away from Genji's oppression, but Genji refuses her last will. At last, she dies with sadness.

However, Murasaki hides her disappointment and sadness towards Genji under the surface. "In her heart, she feels a great sense of insecurity about Genji's dishonesty and amorous [3]." This insecurity gradually changes into indignation and jealousy. This conflict of her feelings and actions contributes to her complex characteristics. Genji requires understanding and tolerance from Murasaki, but Murasaki must endure her own stress and the stress brought by Genji. This forms an unequal relationship between them. However, Murasaki cannot oppose Genji's behavior since she fully depends on him. She is taught to stay meek to achieve happiness, but she still feels suffering after following Genji's will. In this book, she said, "Every woman is a possession of a man, and when that is the case, her life is secure. However, my experience is peculiar. It is very roving and fidgety." To end this experience of insecurity, Murasaki decides to become a monk. Genji refuses her request, causing her to die in pain and hopelessness.

#### 3.3 .Comparison:

"Daiyu and Murasaki have distinct features, and they share similar endings and conflicting natures. They both want to resolve their current situations but are powerless to resist the former rules. Daiyu shows her will to resist but never actually acts out. She cannot choose her true

love and cannot control her destiny. Murasaki suppresses her feelings and acts elegantly and tenderly. However, she feels disappointed by Genji's dishonesty and forcible love. She aspires for security and liberation but never achieves peace. Their similar experiences lead to a similarly miserable ending. They both die in pain and sadness. Daiyu is described as a talented and special existence who does not want to follow the rules of feudal society. Whereas Murasaki is portrayed as a perfect lover who always satisfies Genji's requests."

## 4. The Criteria for Marriage Partner:

### 4.1 .A Dream in the Red Chamber:

In the story of "A Dream in the Red Chamber," the author Cao Xueqin depicts Chinese marriage as a tragedy, with women having designated roles in societal perspectives. Xue Baochai is the wife of Jia Baoyu, one of the main characters in the book. She hails from the Xue family and is known for her good temper. After marrying Baoyu, Baochai becomes pregnant, but Baoyu decides to become a monk.

Throughout the story, Baochai is portrayed as an ideal marriage partner chosen by Grandmother Jia, reflecting Chinese criteria for a female spouse. Baochai behaves decently and strictly adheres to the rules of Confucianism. For example, "Baochai was praised by Jia Mu for reading the Biographies of Exemplary Women [5]," a Confucian text outlining the virtues and conduct expected of women, particularly those from aristocratic families preparing for marriage.

Moreover, Baochai frequently acts as a mediator in conflicts, such as the quarrel between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, where she soothes tensions by recalling pleasant memories. She also demonstrates consideration for her husband, comforting him when he misses Daiyu and allowing him to express his feelings. Her obedient and meek demeanor renders her a suitable gentlewoman.

Additionally, Xue Baochai shares a social status similar to that of her husband. Born into the wealthy Xue family, she belongs to one of the most powerful families in "A Dream of the Red Chamber," alongside the Jia, Shi, and Wang families. The marriage of Jia Baoyu and Xue Baochai symbolizes the long-standing alliance between these affluent families, serving both economic and political interests. Despite Baoyu's preference for Lin Daiyu, the marriage is arranged primarily for the benefit of their families rather than for love.

Finally, Baochai is compelled by her family to marry Baoyu, fulfilling their mission to revive their family's fortunes. In Chapter Forty, "Baochai lowers her head and silently cries when Aunt Xue informs her of the marriage

[2]," indicating her reluctance but also her adherence to Confucian ideals of filial piety and obedience.

### 4.2 .The Tales of Genji:

Aoi no Ue is the first wife of Hikaru Genji, the main character of The Tales of Genji. Aoi was already 16 years old when she married Genji, but Genji was only 12 years old. "She represents the epitome of Japanese cultural boundaries toward female marriage partners" [7]. Aoi is from an aristocratic family, which provides the formation of her prideful nature. When she finds Genji has other lovers, she does not choose to obey nor treat him nicely. She keeps distant from him but also leaves him some decency. Aoi's body becomes weaker when she gets pregnant. This happened due to the spirit of Lady Rokujo, which caused the death of Aoi.

Aoi does not obey Genji's will and fits herself under the criteria for women, but she resists Genji in her own way. Genji likes another woman, causing Aoi to treat him indifferently. Based on the book, Aoi never shows her will to please Genji. Genji does not like Aoi's apartness, so he spends more nights with another lover rather than with his wife. However, Aoi understands her weakness in the Japanese societal role, so her rebellion toward this political marriage is not aggressive but silent. "Aoi is raised like a princess, so her pride is very high. She always stays silent when Genji comes to visit her and hides her jealousy when he visits mistresses" [7]. Using distance to cover her emotions is the weak resistance of Aoi toward her marriage.

In this book, Aoi is the only daughter of the Minister of the Left, who holds huge political power and is a Japanese aristocrat. Moreover, Genji used to be a man in the royal family. Even though his identity changed into a commoner, he still has a wealthy background. The political marriage between them is arranged by Aoi's father and agreed upon by the Emperor. Aoi used to marry the crown prince, yet her father thought Genji would bring more benefit and status to the family and assigned his daughter to marry him. This sheds light on the miserable marital relationship between them because the purpose of this promised marriage is not romantic love but the political combination.

### 4.3 .Comparison

From the previous text, it can be seen that both Aoi's and Baochai's marriages have political purposes. Their marriages are arranged by a third party or the elders of their families. Furthermore, the marriage partners exhibited in the two books have similar social status. Baoyu and Baochai are from wealthy families, and Genji and Aoi are both members related to the Japanese royal household. This shows that the ancient criteria for marriage partners re-

quired a similar status between wife and husband. Moreover, the personalities of Baochai and Aoi are generally meek and virtuous. Although Aoi acts prideful and detached, she still bears the fact that Genji has many lovers and never complains about it. In comparison, Baochai always acts considerate towards her husband. When Baoyu missed Daiyu after their marriage, Baochai would comfort him and allow her husband to free his feelings.

## 5. Analysis and Explanation:

### 5.1 .Similarities

As mentioned before, Baoyu and Genji both have flirtatious features. Human behavior is the result of cultural and historical background. These similarities can be accounted for by the analogous cultural elements of ancient Japan and China [8]. The similar marriage system proves the legitimacy of a man having one wife and many concubines. Based on studies, Japanese marriage culture in the Heian period shows that a man can have multiple wives, though a woman can only have one husband [9]. Based on the ideology of the Ming Dynasty, males could also have one wife but multiple concubines (*san qi si qie*) [10]. Therefore, the authors of both *A Dream in the Red Chamber* and *The Tales of Genji* explain “lust” as a characteristic that has been blended into the nature of humanity but not a sin or fault of the character.

Furthermore, the meekness in the female characters such as Baochai, Daiyu, Murasaki, and Aoi also exhibits their “similar marriage and masculinity criteria” [8]. Arranged marriage represents marriages that are held by the elders of two families without the involvement of personal will. It usually has political or economic purposes, so the couples in this kind of marriage usually have similar social status and economic background. To implement the concept of arranged marriage, both Chinese and Japanese women of aristocratic families were trained to strictly obey their parents’ orders and sacrifice for the benefit of their families. All these similarities are contributed by the resonance between Chinese and Japanese marriage systems and social criteria.

Lastly, the kindness in both Baoyu’s and Genji’s personalities is due to their belief in Buddha. Based on the *Miraculous Tales of Lotus Sutra*, a famous Buddhist masterpiece, “the Bodhisattva Way shows that all men and women are equal. Everyone can become a Buddha and is an entity of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single life instant [11].” This explains why both Genji and Baoyu respect others without the considerations of their class. During the Qing Dynasty, “the Qing court supported Tibetan Buddhism to strengthen its ties and maintain effective control over the area [12].” Similarly, “a major

aspect of the Heian period was Buddhism. A significant contributing reason to the growth of Buddhism was its intimate relationship with the spiritual precepts of Shintō. [1]” In conclusion, the resonance of religious background forms the universal sympathy in the two characters’ personalities.

### 5.2 .Differences

In the books, Baoyu and Genji convey love differently. Due to the “Li” concept in Confucianism, ancient Chinese were required to exhibit their love in an implicit and soft way. This explains why “*A Dream in the Red Chamber*” describes Baoyu’s “lust of the mind”. However, the way that Genji shows his love is more intense. According to Shinto tales, the “marriage of gods” (i.e., the merged love and sex of Izanaki and Izanami) marked the beginning of Japan’s mythology. Consequently, there are no religiously based sexual taboos regarding Japanese gods. Rather, the Shinto culture of Japan has a liberal view of sex and love. Therefore, Genji’s behavior in the book has been deeply affected by Japanese culture.

The differences between Lin Daiyu and Murasaki may be explained by their different backgrounds and identities. Daiyu and Murasaki both have a conflicting nature. They want to escape from the oppression of social norms but are too powerless compared to society. Though Murasaki wants to revolt against reality in her heart, she must obey Genji and pretend to be a decent wife. In comparison, Daiyu can refuse Baoyu’s requests when she is unhappy and does not always adhere to social boundaries. Daiyu is the granddaughter of Jia Mu, who is an authority in Jia Fu. Therefore, she will not be abandoned even if she does not comply with Baoyu’s will. Whereas Murasaki was kidnapped and raised by Genji, so she does not have anyone else except her husband. She completely relies on Genji’s love, so she needs to hide her true feelings for survival purposes.

## 6. Conclusion

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* is one of the four greatest ancient novels in Chinese literature. The *Tales of Genji* is a famous Japanese literature written in the Heian period. The main characters of these two books have multiple similarities and differences. These two books both successfully represent Chinese and Japanese cultures at a certain period. Baoyu, Genji, Baochai, and Aoi have analogous social backgrounds and personalities. Daiyu and Murasaki live under similar situations and social norms. This happens because the Japanese Heian period and Chinese Qing Dynasty both follow Buddhism and the same arranged marriage system. However, they act slightly differently when making detailed decisions such as the

way to exhibit love and individual resistance. Genji uses a more forceful approach to express affection, while Baoyu uses a gentler one. This can be explained by variations of sex's definition in both cultures. The concept of Li in Chinese Confucianism binds Baoyu from sexual taboos, whereas Shinto of Japanese culture provides a liberal state of mind.

This paper gives readers a deeper understanding of the connections between the two books. It compares characters from different aspects and explains the results through cultural and historical perspectives. This cross-cultural comparison can gain more insights into human societies and increase a sense of universal belonging from history. Some limitations of this paper will be the exclusion of characters that are not lead characters. For instance, the servants and the parents of Genji and Baoyu. These characters also have a key representation in the book. However, due to the length of the paper, there was not the chance to elaborate on them. In the future, it is hoped that others could focus more on the comparison of small characters and scenes.

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