Buddhist and Zen Implications in Dream of the Red Chamber

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Abstract—Chinese classical work Dream of the Red Chamber not only contains various human affection but also refers to Buddhist thoughts, which mainly shows in three aspects: the view of cause and effect, impermanence and the idea of form and emptiness. By researching on poems in this wonderful work, we can savour so many Buddhist and Zen implications.

Keywords—Dream of the Red Chamber; Cause and effect; Impermanence; Form and Emptiness

I. INTRODUCTION

“A grasp of mundane affairs is genuine knowledge; understanding of worldly wisdom is true learning.” (A couplet in the principal room of Rong Household) Dream of the Red Chamber is a fiction that mirrors the rise and fall of the family and the Qing dynasty. Lu Xin, a leading figure of modern Chinese literature, designated the book as fictions about human interest (“Renqing” in Chinese). Jia Baoyu, a man with great infatuation, presents a dream of the red chamber together with his brilliant but ill-fated sisters, highlighting the human interest in the Grand View Garden. In the first chapter, the author has pointed the theme out with the monk’s words: “All good things in this world must end, and to make an end is good, for there is nothing good which does not end. Moreover, there is always “a blemish in an otherwise perfect thing and the road to happiness embraces many setbacks.” In a moment, extreme joy begets sorrow. People and things are all different. So, be in the end, a dream. Everything is an illusion!” These four sentences have been praised in the rouge versions to “sum up the theme of the book”, pointing out that Dream of the Red Chamber is full of Buddhist and Zen implications.

Dream of the Red Chamber, as a book of everything, is a fiction worthy of forever appreciation. There are many previous studies about Buddhist thoughts in that fiction. In this paper, only a few representative works are cited. Wang Guowei took Schopenhauer’s tragedy theory in his paper and further pointed out that sorrowful experiences come from lust and greed. Dream of the Red Chamber provides two ways to get rid of pain and sorrow. Xichun chose the religious way to live a greedy. Mei Xinlin analyzed various forms of dreams and illusions of the characters in the fiction using the Buddhist monk and the Taoist priest as the clue. He discussed the Buddhist’s enlightenment and philosophical spirit contained in Dream of the Red Chamber. From the perspective of tanyixue, a branch of Redology, Liang Guizhi pointed out that Chinese Zen is vividly reflected in Dream of the Red Chamber through three key aspects: the poem, the philosophy, and the life.

In essence, Dream of the Red Chamber accords with Buddhism’s view of people’s life, manifesting the wisdom of Buddhists in handling social things. Mainly, the Buddhist implications in the fiction can be seen in the following three aspects: causation, impermanence, as well as form and emptiness. In this paper, the author intends to share a few thoughts based on previous studies, so as to learn from colleagues as well as the readers.

II. CAUSATION: THE PLEDGE BETWEEN PLANT AND STONE

Causation is one of the basic thoughts of Buddhism. “If you care to know the past lives’ causes, look at rewards you are reaping today. If you wish to find out about future lives, you need but notice what you’re doing right now. This way you understand that your sorrow in this life comes from causes planted in lives in the past; while people who hold to kindness in this life will reap a good fortune in lives in the future.” (Liu Yi, Essay on Viewing the Three Teachings with a Balanced Mind, vol 1) These words tell clearly the two-fold causality in three lives in Buddhism. Three lives mean the lives in the past, this life, and the lives in the future. Two-fold causality means causes in the past decide the effects in this life while causes in this life will determine the effects in the future lives. Based on this thought, there even has appeared a song about causality in three lives, which is very popular among the general public. The song also proves that the view of causality has been well-accepted by Chinese people. Just as the saying goes that “Good deeds yield good fruits while evil deeds yield bad fruits”, “Good and evil will always be rewarded; it is only a question of time”, everyone lives in the cycle of cause and effect. Causes lead to effects for all alike.

In Dream of the Red Chamber, Buddhism’s causality can be seen in every detail. In the previous lives, attendant Shen Ying watered vermilion pearl plant beside the Stone of Three Incarnations. In this life, the attendant Shen Ying becomes Baoyu while the vermilion pearl plant becomes Daiyu, who repays her previous debt of gratitude with “a lifetime of tears”. In her past lives, the vermilion pearl plant grew right beside the Stone of Three Incarnations. In this life, the vermilion pearl plant grew right beside the Stone of Three Incarnations. Here, “Three Incarnations” refers to her destined causal relations with Baoyu. In this life, Daiyu shed as many tears as she can because the attendant Shen Ying...
offered her the sweet dew in the past lives. Causes of the past decide her debts at present. That’s why she cried till death and complained about nothing. In Dream of the Red Chamber, ever since Daiyu met Baoyu when he flung his jade stone away because she didn’t have one, Daiyu has started to shed tears for him. Her eyes “sparkled with tears” from autumn to winter, then from spring to summer. Daiyu dried her tears in the whole story just to show her gratitude for what Baoyu did in their previous lives. By the time Daiyu cried no more, her relations with Baoyu in this life also came to an end. The love affair between the two becomes the past. Only mottled bamboos in front of the Bamboo Lodge remain.

That is the causality in the fiction. With knowledge of Buddhism’s cause and effect in advance, it would be much easier to understand the feeling intertwined in Dream of the Red Chamber. Just as the poem The Mistaken Marriage says:

“Well-matched, all say, the gold and the jade; I alone recall the pledge between plant and stone. Vainly facing the hermit in sparkling snow-clad hills, I forget not the fairy in lone woods beyond the world. I sign, learning that no man’s happiness is complete: even a pair thought well-matched may find disappointment!”

Although everyone said that Baoyu and Baochai are “well-matched gold and jade”, Baoyu, in his heart, can only think about his pledge made with the vermillion pearl plant. After all, “well-matched gold and jade” is merely expectations of others. The pledge between stone and wood is the true cause in the past. Therefore, Baoyu can’t forget Daiyu, the plant with spiritual understanding besides the Stone of Three Incarnations, even though Baochai is gentle and elegant, with the quality of snow-like virtuousness. The vermillion pearl plant paid Baoyu back with a lifetime of tears and eventually died. She died and left Baoyu alone. As a result, he can’t show care and infatuation any more. Her death makes his heart empty. The end of their relations makes Baoyu an empty shell. Even though Baoyu and Baochai are married and treat each other with courtesy, Baoyu can’t tie to his heart in the end. Baochai is merely his wife nominally because he turns a blind eye to her. After Baoyu made the decision to become a monk, Baochai even though Baochai is gentle and elegant, with the quality of snow-like virtuousness. She knows nothing about the fiction. By the time Daiyu cried no more, her relations with Baoyu in this life also came to an end. The love affair between the two becomes the past. Only mottled bamboos in front of the Bamboo Lodge remain.

In the whole world, there isn’t unprovoked love and there isn’t unprovoked hatred. Daiyu is an immortal flower of fairyland with refined taste. She knows nothing about the nonsense in the official career. Baoyu is a fair flawless jade, who is well-protected from the mundane matters. He is an unambitious adolescent with a compassionate and thoughtful heart. The pledge of wood and stone in previous life prepares for their mutual affinity in this life. Though Baoyu and Daiyu fail to earn complete happiness in the end, presenting a heartbroken ending on a mundane level, the result is actually a vivid manifestation of the causality in three lives.

In Dream of the Red Chamber, everyone has their own consequences in line with what they did before. In The Birds Scatter to the Wood, the destinies of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling were laid out respectively: “The tears one owed have all been required in kind” refers to Daiyu while “She who did good escapes the jaws of death” points to Qiaojie. Qiaojie was Wang Xifeng’s only daughter. After the decline of Jia Household, Granny Liu saved her from being sold into concubinage by her maternal uncle. This way, Qiaojie escaped from her miserable life. It may seem that Qiaojie was merely too lucky. But in fact, it is the rewards of her mother’s good deeds. Occasionally, Wang Xifeng got some relief to Granny Liu.

“There with all your calculations and intrigues, you are too clever; they bring you no good but will cost you your life!” These sentences tell the story of Wang Xifeng. A woman with wit and vivacity finally lost her life with vast misery. A mansion of warmth and tenderness and the rich noble’s wealth, at last, were all gone. The story came to an end and the things quieted down. That is “Just as the cause is, so will be the effect. It revolves more than one life; with supreme subtlety, its rewards manifest.” Buddhism’s view of causation is the key to understanding Dream of the Red Chamber profoundly.

III. IMPERMANENCE: THE EVENTUAL DOWNFALL

The doctrine Buddhism uses to identify the truth is called “Three Marks of Existence” (“sanfayin” in Chinese): impermanence, no-self, and salvation. Impermanence means all conditioned things are in a constantly changing state. Things in the past are different from what they are at present. Things you have now will eventually fall part someday. That is, everything in life ends ultimately. What goes around comes around. Where there is convergence, there is dispersion. Impermanence points out that no-self is the core nature of all things in the world. As for salvation, it refers to the ultimate state of perfect quietude and liberation. Only complied with the three marks of existence can a Dhamma be called true by a Buddha. From the perspective of impermanence, all conditioned phenomena are impermanent at the instant. “Every conditioned thing is impermanent. They are always changing, not keeping the same appearance as before.” Indeed, everything in the universe is constantly changing and cannot maintain the same state. From the viewpoint of changes, we have also heard “the universe can hardly be the same for a moment” in a famous piece of writing before (Su Shi, Ode to the Red Cliff). Moreover, a great Buddha once enlightened people around with the reply that “The human life is at the length of a single breath.” In a moment, things could be totally different. What seems to be flourishing may turn out to be just as ordinary as a hold of sand.

In Dream of the Red Chamber, all characters in Grand View Garden have proved the impermanence of life. “Baoyu lived a good life but also faced many impermanent situations. Keqing hanged herself, Qin Zhong died young, being plagued by yasheng zushi, Baoyu almost lost his life several times; then Jinchuan jumped into the well, Second Sister You killed herself by swallowing a large piece of gold and his beloved personal maid Qingwen was dismissed from the Jia Household. All these finally overwhelmed him.” Although life in the imperial palace was extravagant, Yuanchun felt imprisoned and died at the young age of forty. Tanchun, who was outspoken and smart, married into a family far away from home and cried all day long. Yinchun became a victim of domestic abuse and constant violence of her ruthless husband. Xichun became a Buddhist nun, all alone by herself. Other sisters in the family also wound up with miserable endings, totally different from the beauty
and elegance in the past. The sadness spread, fogging up the land.

The Song of Burying the Fallen Flowers is a classic poem in Dream of the Red Chamber because it shows in precise the sadness and sorrow Daiyu having while burying the flowers. “The Song of Burying the Fallen Flowers is a true masterpiece that contains all the sorrow Daiyu has for her twisted fate”. From the fallen flowers, Daiyu thinks of her own loneliness and has a strong presentiment about herself ending tragically. When the peach trees in full blossom, the flowers are so enchanting and charming. However, they fall so soon that the peach trees lost all their beauty suddenly. That is the same with the beautiful sisters with an unhappy fate. Her red lips and rosy cheeks also fade instantly. Willows and elms are fresh and verdant, but lost girls are no longer appreciated and remembered. It is a pity that flowers have all fallen down. But there’s hope for them to be in full blossom next spring. While for ill-fated girls, they just take their regrets and resentment with them and go! So, at earth’s uttermost bound, where can a fragrant burial mound be found to bury the fallen blossom? Where can a pure land be found to provide a shelter for the dead maid? The girl who is now burying the flower has no idea where to go the next day. What makes us sign more is that after the death of the charming girl, we can’t even name a person to bury her and memorize her! The spring will past, the flower will fall and the beauty shall die. Even the brightest feelings couldn’t prevent the wind from shaking the flowers, and couldn’t stop the flowers from drifting apart in the running stream or scattering on the ground!

For everything in this world is impermanent, one has to see things through and cut the world-bound so as to end in a good way as a Buddha does. If things can’t be “ended”, things can no longer be “good”. As the poem All Good Things Must End goes, everyone in the world wants to be immortals, but they can’t “end” their aspirations to ranks, wealth and their bonds with their wife and kids. But even if clinging to these world-bound things, the result still can’t conform to one’s wishes. For those who do not give up their ranks, they will be buried in a tomb all the same even if they were emperors and kings; for those who do not give up money, they will lose all their wealth eventually even if they were the owner of gold and silver mines; for those who are obsessed with the beautiful women, they will inevitably change their mind in later life even if there were vows of eternal love. “All good things in the world must end, and to make an end is good, for there is nothing good which does not end.” What the Taoist said in the fiction explained appropriately the theme of the poem and pointed out that life is within constant changes and people should not get lost in the bustling world and forget the ultimate salvation that leads to silence. “At the height of honor and splendor, death comes for her; open-eyed, she has to leave everything behind as her gentle soul passes away, ..... you must find a retreat before it is too late!” (The Transience of Life) Only people who have tasted the impermanence of life can talk with such sorrowfulness. The Diamond Sutra notes that “Whatever you see, taste, feel, hear and think, they are all as visionary as dream and bubbles, and as momentary as dew and lightings. So that is it.” Without the insight of the Buddhas, one would be unable to see clearly the impermanence of everything in life and couldn’t grasp the truth and happiness ultimately. Once things can be “ended”, things can be called “good”. Once freedom is obtained, salvation is gained.

IV. EMPTINESS: A DREAM IN THE RED CHAMBER

As Buddhist classics always go: “There is nothing that does not fall into the impermanence!” Prosperity in life resembles a fancy dream. As the dream is easy to weaken up and disappear, the world within constant changes similarly will embrace its density of emptiness someday. Buddhas say that “The material form is no different from the void of shapeless emptiness, the material form is the same as emptiness, form is indeed emptiness, emptiness is indeed form.” (Heart Sutra) Here, “form” refers to everything that we can feel in the world. It presents itself because of various reasons but it is empty inside. While emptiness refers to empty in essence. “For a reason, there is the form. As an empty being, it is as visionary as the dream. That is, everything in the world is indeed empty in essence.” Across the world, there is no method to stay safe and sound forever, “ For a thousand years you may have an iron threshold, But the end must be a mound of earth.”(Fan Chengda, Walk in the Cemetery) If people do not understand this, they will be unable to appreciate all the dreams in life, they will suffer from pain in the cycle of cause and effect, they will not get freedom and they will lose their lives.

“Gone with the clouds spring's dream, flowers drift away on the stream.” (Fairy Jing-huan, Song of the Spring Dream) Dreams of the red mansion quickly fade with the moving cloud just as the fallen flowers with the running stream. Zhen Shiyin, a country gentleman depicted in the fiction, who dreamed of a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest while taking a nap at noon. He saw the precious jade in their hand and followed them unconsciously to the Illusory Land of Great Void. Thus, he witnessed the couplets hanging there: “When false is taken for true, true becomes false; if nonbeing turns into being, being becomes nonbeing.” When he woke up, he suddenly understood the meaning of form and emptiness. He then abandoned everything. Without feeling obligated to others, he embraced true freedom. In Dream of the Red Chamber, the Illusory Land of Great Void is a symbolic place that transcends time and space. It is the original place and ultimate ending for all sisters. “Come from the Illusory Land and gone to the Illusory Land,” means that it is illusory for people in the world to chase after material and emotional comforts and bring about trouble for themselves. People often take the real as the false and take the false as the real. What is illusory is taken as what is real, and in the end, reality becomes the illusion. All men come from nothing so all men are supposed to go with nothing. That is, people should be “Naked I go without impediment” (Ji Sheng Cao), but because of greed for money and power, they walk into a path of self-destruction. Falling down into the misery, they can’t be saved and finally lose everything.

After all, knowing that everything in the world is empty is crucial to transcend illusion and approach truth in the meditations. Layman Pang Yun from Tang Dynasty once said that “All that matters is the direct realization of the empty nature of all things. When this is achieved, that which is false is not perceived as real.” It means that people should give up the form of money and power and don’t let the dust in the bustling
world contaminate their pure mind. That’s the supreme Dharma-door in Zen meditation. In Dream of the Red Chamber, attendant Shen Ying becomes Baoyu to live a life that is wealthy, romantic and worldly. His life is appraised in the fiction like this: “The Stone’s true sphere and spirit lost, it takes a new form stinking and debased.” (Mocking Lines at the Stone) “Powder and rouge have dulled your precious lustre; days and nights within silk chambers entrap your heart; but you must wake at last from your sweet dream; poor lovers, when all debts are paid, must part.” (Scabby-headed bonze, Sign on the Precious Jade) When the love affair is over, they must wake at last from their sweet dream. Poor lovers pay back all their debts, and then face their departures. So, what will happen exactly after the romance is over? “She will see through the three springs and set no store by the red of peach-blossom, the green of willows, stamping out the fire of youthful splendor, to savor the limpid peace a clear sky. Though the peach runs riot against the sky, though the clouds teemed with apricot blossom, who has seen any flower that can win safely through autumn?” (Perception of the Transience of Flowers) That is, being rich and wealthy are only for a moment. So, do not mistake what’s false as real and do not be obsessed with false things. “An official household declines; rich noble’s wealth is spent. She who did good escapes the jaws of death, the heartless meet with certain retribution. Those who took a life have paid with their own lives; the tears one owed have all been required in kind..... When the food is gone, the birds return to the wood; all that’s left is emptiness and a great void!” (The Birds Scatter to the Wood) All things in the world are made up of four basic elements, five aggregates, and six guas. In the end, when all things are gone into emptiness, the world will finally unveil itself: “All that’s left is emptiness and a great void!” As the poem goes, “If predestined, why does their love come to nothing?” (Vain Longing) This sentence inspires people to see through the emptiness of love. “At the height of honor and splendor, death comes for her” (The Transience of Life) “A rich house, all its members at peace, is ruined at last and scattered.” (Ruined by Cunning) Indeed, everything is changing and everything is meant to be empty again. If a person indulges himself or herself into power and money, then it will “cause his or her life”. At the end of the poem, the idea of form and emptiness is stressed again. “All that’s left is emptiness and a great void!” This sentence is the best explanation for the idea of form and emptiness. “Since we come from the void, we should return to the void.” (Xichun, On Chanting Gatha) Even the unsuppressed beauty can’t escape the fate of sorrow and misery. What was so charming in the past turns into only bones in a moment. Today’s tombs bury exactly those pretty sisters in the red chamber.

Overall, Dream of the Red Chamber starts with a dream and ends with a dream, which echoes from beginning to the end. “It is the series of dreams overlapping together form the fantasy world that indicates life as a dream too.” The whole book reflects vividly the Buddhism ideas of form and emptiness. In the 12th chapter of Dream of the Red Chamber, a Taoist gave Jia Rui a Precious Mirror of Love. On one side, there stands Xifeng while on the other side, there is a skeleton. This mirror means to say that beautiful women are mere “the form” while in essence, they are empty too. Having this idea on mind, one can refrain from falling into appearance. For those who do not change their mind, they will eventually be trapped in the form. That’s why Jia Rui, the lewd man, lost his life in the end.

In the beginning chapter of the book, when a Reverend Void copied out The Tale of the Stone, he thought that “all manifestations are born of nothingness and in turn give rise to passion, by describing passion for what is manifest we comprehend nothingness.” This sentence explains appropriately how the form and emptiness revolve. The life of Baoyu happens to be the manifestation of nothingness to passion and then passion to nothingness.

“Alone, the lingering fragrance mixes with the sense of coldness; but what’s stronger than the coldness is the thoughts on the mind. Should this night have a dream with the wind, in the Red Mansion which floor would I go then?” (Nalan Xingde, Ci Poetry Collection of Drinking Water) Grand View Garden is filled with prosperous scenes, which only last for a while. They disappear easily like dust. All beautiful sisters are gone, but their fragrance lingers, in dreams calling people back to the red chamber. Though the theme of Dream of the Red Chamber is not to explain Buddhism’s thoughts, the author does have a profound and impressive understanding of Buddhism.

V. CONCLUSION

All in all, the pledge between the stone and wood manifests causality in three lives, the eventual downfall explains impermanence of all things in the world, and the dream of the red chamber identifies the form and emptiness of the whole story. With unique expressions, Cao Xueqin embedded Buddhist and Zen implications into Dream of the Red Chamber, enabling us not only to appreciate the delicate plots of the romance but also to savor the essence of Zen.

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