The Iceberg Phenomenon in Three of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling

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Abstract

The authors of this paper intend to deal with the iceberg phenomenon in three of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling (the English counterpart of Jinling, a name for Nanjing in Qing Dynasty, translated by Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang) in the novel of *A Dream of Red Mansions* to find out what truth is hidden between the lines. The paper thus focuses on the seven eighths of the truth between the lines in three of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling, who are believed to have potential impact on the fate of the whole mansion. The authors thus come to the conclusion that iceberg principle plays an irreplaceable role in the deep understanding of the novel.

Key words: *A Dream of Red Mansions*; Twelve beauties of Chinling; Iceberg principle

INTRODUCTION

*A Dream of Red Mansions* is an eminent masterwork in China, which takes an overwhelming position in the history of ancient Chinese literature. It is considered as one of the greatest and most artistic works among the ancient Chinese classics (Chan, 2012, p. 75). The novel is rich in ideas and cultural inheritance, because the more you delve into it, the more mysteries you will find out. The novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a controversial one, which, after two hundred years, can still bring us heated discussions and excited disputes by the “Redologists”, who are referred as to have made thorough studies on the novel. The sad love between Chia Paoyu and Lin Taiyu makes up a clue of the novel, through which the author demonstrates us the tragedy of the Jung Mansion, and what is more, the tragedy of the author’s family.

The author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Cao Xueqin, was born in an honorable noble family. He spent his childhood in comfort and luxury. His father inherited the title as a Textile Commissioner in Chiangning and enjoyed the emperor’s favor. But when the Yongzheng emperor ascended the throne, his father, Cao Fu, was dismissed and punished because of his financial misconduct. The property of the family was confiscated, and Cao Xueqin’s halcyon and luxurious days came to an end. Because of poverty, he had to move to a rustic hovel. Unfortunately, the nightmare did not end up in his poverty. In 1762, his young son died, a crushing blow to Cao Xueqin from which he had never recovered, and consequently in 1763, he passed away.

*A Dream of Red Mansions* was written under the condition that Cao Xueqin suffered the decline of his family to misfortune from its heyday of power and affluence. As what is expressed in Chapter one, when he says that he has spent ten years writing and revising the novel, it is inevitable for the author to put some historical events and the author’s own experience in the novel, although it is inappropriate to regard it as a political novel. What is quoted below shows what the author wants to tell the readers of his purpose on writing the novel: “I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely
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The twelve beauties of Chinling is a part of the novel A Dream of Red Mansions, written by the Chinese author Cao Xueqin. This novel is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of Chinese literature, alongside other novels such as A Dream of the Red Chamber and The Story of the Stone. The novel's intricate plot and rich character development have made it a benchmark in Chinese fiction.

In his novel, Cao Xueqin employs the Iceberg Principle, a technique that is also known as the Principle of Omission. According to Ernest Hemingway, this principle is used to describe a writing style where the author intentionally omits important details, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps. This technique encourages the reader to think beyond what is explicitly stated, much like how a small portion of an iceberg is visible above the water while the vast majority remains beneath.

The Iceberg Principle is particularly evident in the first register of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling. This register contains records of the twelve foremost beauties in the honorable province of Nanjing. The author, Cao Xueqin, purposefully omits the names of the other beauties to focus on the twelve most notable. This method helps to create suspense and intrigue, making the readers curious about the other beauties and the events that unfold.

The Iceberg Principle is widely used in literature to convey deeper meanings and to leave a mark on the reader's mind. It is a technique that challenges the reader to think beyond the surface level and to explore the deeper implications of the text. In the case of A Dream of Red Mansions, the Iceberg Principle is a tool that Cao Xueqin uses to craft a narrative filled with mystery and complexity. This technique has been praised for the depth it adds to the novel and for its ability to engage readers in a meaningful way.
as to their importance in the whole novel. For instance, Shueh Baochai and Lin Daiyu make up the apparent clue in the novel, so both of them are arranged in the first place of the Twelve Beauties. Chia Yuanchun shows up as the representatives of the honor of the Jung Mansion, whose life and experience plays a crucial role in the fate of the whole family, so she is listed at the third place. But there is one female who stands out—Miao Yu. She is not born in an honorable family of the Chia’s, the Wang’s, the Shueh’s or the Shi’s, who only shows up several times in the former eighty chapters, but who says few words. Obviously, compared with the sixth place. So, why does the author do it in such an extraordinary way? Is this only the author’s careless mistake? What can be read between the lines? What is hidden underwater?

### 1.1.2 The Position of Miao Yu

Why Cao Xueqin put Miao Yu in the First Register of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling arises too much fierce debate about his purpose and its significance. It seems that another female is more suitable for the position—Shueh Baoqin. She is born in a noble family, one of the four families of Chinling. She wins the affections of the suzerain who is nearly willing to betroth Baoqin to Baoyu. She shows too many times in the first eighty chapters, and even half of a chapter is used to emphasize on the description of her talent. As the Twelve Beauties of Chinling take such an important poison in the author’s mind that it is said that he almost intends to entitle Baoqin to Baoyu. She shows too many times in the first eighty chapters, and even half of a chapter is used to emphasize on the description of her talent. As the Twelve Beauties of Chinling take such an important poison in the author’s mind that it is said that he almost intends to entitle the novel as The Twelve Beauties, and after careful consideration, the author arranges Miao Yu, instead of Baoqin, in the First Register of Twelve Beauties of Chinling. Even if Miao Yu does not show up as many times in the whole novel as Baoqin, her irreplaceable position can be revealed in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the following detailed descriptions.

In Chapter Five, when Baoyu is directed by the Goddess of Disenchantment to visit the Grotto of Emanating Fragrance on the Mountain of Expanding Spring in the Illusory Land of Great Void, four fairies are accompanying Baoyu to drink tea, who are respectively Fairy of Amorous Dreams, Great Mistress of Passion, Golden Maid Bringing Grief, and Saint of Transmitted Sorrow. In fact, following some redologists’ studies, the four fairies might be the substituent of the four females who play essential roles in Baoyu’s life. If the readers read carefully in the novel, these four fairies may be the counterparts of Daiyu, Shi Xiangyun, Baochai, and the last one of them is Miao Yu. As we all know, the final forty chapters of the latest version of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is not accomplished by Cao Xueqin. The original one has already been lost, so we can only make some deductions on what the author’s intention is about the destiny of the Jung Mansion. Who is Saint of Transmitted Sorrow? “Transmit” means to transfer a kind of feeling to another, which foreshadows that in the lost chapters, after the whole Jung Mansion has fallen into decay, Miao Yu accompanies Baoyu to spend the dark time together not as lovers or spouses but as intimate friends, and finally, both of them leave sorrow behind and earn peace in their minds.

The importance of Miao Yu can also be revealed in another detailed description. In Chapter Five, there are eleven poems to describe the Twelve Beauties of Chinling in which Daiyu and Baocai share one poem. But only fourteen songs appear in the novel. Except the opening and ending one, there are twelve songs left. From the forth one on, all of the rest of the poems are arranged according to the order of the Twelve Beauties of Chinling. The second song describes the life of Daiyu and Baochai, whose fates are the same as what is described in the poem, so how about the third one? The third one Vain Longing is often used to describe the tragedy of Daiyu and Baoyu’s love, but in recent years, another voice has come out. The third song is said to be written to describe the life of Shi Xiangyun and Miao Yu. ‘Fair flawless jade’ not only stands for Baoyu, but also refers to Miao Yu, and “a flower in the mirror” indicates the relationships between Miao Yu and Baoyu, who are not lovers but who respect each other, understand each other and admire each other.

In the novel, some details can prove such a relationship. Miao Yu is high-hearted and sometimes a little bit conceited. But to the readers’ bewildermest she gives her own teacup to Baoyu to drink tea, which shows that Miao Yu treats Baoyu differently and intimately. But all of their emotions are ‘flowers in the mirror’, just as what the song is saying, a kind of vain longing, and thus it is reasonable to say that the third song is for Miao Yu and Xiangyun.

It is a pity that the last part of the novel has been lost, and therefore we do not know clearly what are the certain fates of all of the females, all of which turn to be hard-to-get mysteries, and we can only deduce what might be their true fates by studying the detailed descriptions in the novel and understand what is between the lines in the novel in a more reasonable way by using iceberg principle. Therefore, from what is the one eighth above the water, we can come to the above-mentioned two conjectures, which might provide us an explanation for Miao Yu’s position in the Twelve Beauties of Chinling.

### 1.2 The Poem of Chin Ko-Chin

The poem and the song describe the life and the fate of Chin Ko-Chin appear in Chapter Five:

> Love boundless as sea and sky is but illusion;  
> When lovers meet, lust must be king;  
> Say not all evil comes from the Jung Mansions,  
> Truly, disaster originates from the Ning.  
> (Cao, trans. 1978, p. 76)

Following the poem, we will be astonished by the fact that there is a picture to describe the woman’s fate: a beautiful woman hanging herself on a tower.
Besides the poem, there is a song for Chin Ko-Chin:

GOOD THINGS COME TO AN END
Fragrant dust falls from painted beams at the close of spring;
By nature passionate and fair as the moon,
The true root is she of the family’s destruction.
The decline of the old tradition starts with Ching,
The chief blame for the house’s ruin rests with Ning.
All their sins come about through love.
(Cao, trans. 1978, p. 76)

It seems that the author intends to reveal to the readers the real fate of Chin Ko-Chin, and even about the destiny of the whole Mansions, from what is written in the poem and in the song. But it is obscure. In order to have a profound understanding of the poem and the song, we feel it necessary to study the life experience of Chin Ko-Chin and the mysteries of her death.

1.2.1 The Life Experience of Chin Ko-Chin

The life experience of Chin Ko-Chin in the Ning Mansion leaves us a number of mysteries.

In Chapter Eight, Chin Ko-Chin’s family is shown to the readers:

Chin yeh, a secretary in the Board of Works, was nearly seventy and had lost his wife early. Having no children of his own he had adopted a son and daughter from an orphanage, but the boy had died leaving only a little female, Kong-Ching. She grew up to be a graceful, charming young woman. Because Chin was remotely connected with the Chia family, they arranged a match and she became Chia Jung’s wife. (Cao, trans. 1978, p. 131)

Chia Jung is the only son in the Ning Mansion, and his wife—Chin Ko-Chin is born an orphan and live in adoption. As the head of the Four Families, family background must be the essential factor when choosing a wife for a male in the Chia family. But Chin ko-Chin is born in penury; she is unexpectedly chosen to be the wife of the only son in the Ning Mansion. It is a mystery.

In Chapter Five, there is a description about the Lady Dowager. Baoyu is tired and wants to have a nap, and then Chin Ko-Chin wants to lead him to her own room.

The Lady Dowager had every confidence in his lovely slender young woman who with her gentle, amiable behavior was her favorite of all the great-grandson’s wives of the Jung and Ning branches. She was sure Baoyu would be looked after carefully.
(Cao, trans. 1978, p. 68)

The Lady Dowager, as the most authoritative person in the Jung mansion, shows her great affection for Chin Ko-Chin, and it seems that the Lady Dowager does not detest her family background, and in contrast, she shows her preference for it. That is an extraordinary phenomenon for the blue-blooded suzerain in the feudal society. It is also a mystery.

In Chapter Seven, when Chiao Ta shouts and curses in anger, he says:

Little did he expect to beget such degenerates, a houseful of rutting dogs and bitches in heat, day in and day out scratching in the ashes and carrying on with younger brothers-in-law. (Cao, trans. 1978, p. 116)

It implies that Chin Ko-Chin has improper relations with her husband’s father—Chia Zhen, and from what it is other people’s reaction to Chiao Ta’s utterances in the novel, it is not a secret. But the reaction of Madam Yu, the wife of Chia Zhen, is tasteful. In Chapter Ten, from what is shown in the conversation between Madam Yu and Aunt Huang, we know that Madam Yu is much concerned about Ko-Chin’s illness and worries a lot about her.

I told her: “Don’t trouble to pay your respects hear mornings and evenings, just have a good rest.” I told Jung ‘not to let anyone tire or annoy her, so that she can rest quietly until she’s better. If she fancies anything to eat, come to me for it... if anything were to happen to her, you would never find another wife with her good looks and sweet temper, not if you were to search around with a lantern.” (Cao, trans. 1978, p. 145)

As what is expressed in the above utterances, to our dilemma, Madam Yu does not feel angry or even shameful for Ko-Chin’s behavior and what is more, she thinks Ko-Chin is a great woman and no one can replace her in her position. That is not a normal reaction to someone, with whom her husband has relations, for a wife, or for a mother-in-law. It is another mystery.

From what is shown in the novel, there are many other mysteries about Chin Ko-Chin. The members in the Chia family show great respect and affections for Chin Ko-Chin. No one laughs at her family background and she is also not self-contemptuous for her inferiority. Her life in the Ning Mansion is more extravagant than other females in the Grand View Garden. That is abnormal. All of these mysteries are clues or hints left by the author to prove that a real family background of Chin Ko-Chin is not what is described in the novel at all. The author can not tell us directly about who she is for some confidential or even political reasons, and therefore, he shows us a woman whose life habits totally contradict with her exterior family background. What is the author’s intention and what the seven-eighths under the water about her real identity does he leave us? The most important iceberg phenomenon is described in the death of Chin Ko-Chin, which can reveal her real identity and the fate of the Chia family.

1.2.2 The Death of Chin Ko-Chin

Chin Ko-Chin dies all of a sudden. In Chapter Thirteen, after Xifeng dreams of Chin in her nap, a servant announces that “madam Chia Jung of the East Mansion has passed away.” That shocks everyone. In Chapter Ten, when doctor Zhang finishes writing a tonic, Chia Jung asks “if her life is in any danger?”, and then the doctor replies that “A man of your intelligence must know that at this stage it is impossible to predict how long the illness may last. We must see how she responds to this treatment. In my humble opinion, there is no danger this winter and if she gets through the spring equinox we may expect a cure.” The doctor’s reply implies that Chin’s illness is incurable and at least she can survive through the whole winter, but only a few days after the doctor’s diagnosis, she dies.
Although the death of Chin Ko-Chin is still a mystery for the researchers, based on the poem describing her, we can get some of the mystery out.

The first line “Love boundless as sea and sky is but illusion” might mean that all of her behavior and life experiences are deprived of love.

The second line “When lovers meet, lust must be king” might imply that the whole of her life and experience is filled with lust.

The third line “Say not all evil comes from the Jung Mansions” means all of the rumors about her are from the Jung Mansion.

The last line “Truly, disaster originates from the Ning” shows that the root of her disaster is from the Ning Mansion.

As what is expressed in the poem, it seems that the tragedy of hers is due to her improper relations with her father-in-law. And some redologists guess that the relation has been revealed so she hanged herself with disgrace. But if this is the only reason for her death, how are we to explain her superior position in the Ning Mansion? Instead a further assumption can give her death and her life in the Ning Mansion a good explanation. That is, Chin Ko-Chin is a royal daughter.

What is more, Chin Ko-Chin’s funeral is one of the grand scenes in the novel, and there is a special description about her coffin. When Chia Chen is searching for something good for making a coffin, Hsueh Pan arrives and says:

In our timber yard is some Chiang wood from the Iron Net Mountain across the sea, a coffin made of this would last for ten thousand years. My father bought this timber for Prince Yi Chung, but after his disgrace the prince did not take it. It is still with us because no one has ventured to buy it. (Cao, trans. 1978, p. 178)

Overjoyed by this news, Chia Chen has the timber fetched without delay. As is described, the coffin for Chin is precious which is originally made for a royal member. It does not meet the requirements of the feudal society as she is from a poor family, unless some facts are hidden. According to the historical study about the Qing Dynasty, from Kangxi emperor to Qianlong emperor, in which period the whole of Cao Xueqin’s family has experienced the ups and downs of dignity and power. As is known, the decline of the author’s family is related with some political struggle. At the terminal period of Kangxi’s reign, his sons are scrambling for the highest power. The author’s family stands on the side of the crown prince, but unfortunately, the prince loses himself in the fight, and the partisans are gotten involved, including the author’s family. The recourse of the novel is the reality of the Cao family. (Xu, 2005, p. 22) As A Dream of Red Mansions is believed to be an autobiographical novel, it is said that the whole fate of the author’s true life has been reflected in the novel. Therefore, the author tries to explain to us the whole story of his family in an obscure way through a mysterious woman Chin Ko-Chin. When speaking about the wood of the coffin, Shueh Pan refers to a person--Prince Yi Chung. In this way, the author shows us the political background of the novel and gives the readers some room to read between the lines. Therefore, Chin Ko-Chin is not a female who is adopted by a minor functionary, but her real identity is a royal member, whose family has lost the fight for the highest power, and who is hidden in the Ning Mansion for the sake of safety. But later on, her real identity has been out, and so she has to commit suicide to save the whole family. But she dies in vain. Just as what is said in the song Good Things Come to an End, it is the Ning family that determines the prosperity or decline of the whole families. The chief blame for the ruin of the house rests on the Ning. It is revealed that the decline of the mansions is due to the evils in the Ning mansion. The author can not disclose her background in the one eighth above the water, but in the seven eighths under the water she has to die, the comfort of whose life has to come to an end, while the whole mansion has compromised themselves by their relationship with Chin Ko-Chin.

1.3 The Poem of Yuan Chun

The poem of Yuan Chun and the song to describe her fate appear in Chapter Five:

For twenty years she arbitrates,
Where pomegranates blaze by palace gates;
How can the late spring equal the spring’s start?
When Hare and Tiger meet,
From this Great Dream of life she must depart.
(Cao, trans. 1978, p. 80)

In the picture there is a bow from which a citron was suspended. The song for her is written as follows:

The Transience of Life
At the height of honor and splendour
Death comes for her;
Open-eyed, she has to leave everything behind
As her gentle soul passes away.
So far her home beyond the distant mountains
That in a dream she finds and tells her parents:
“Your child has gone now to the Yellow Spring;
You must find a retreat before it is too late.”
(Cao, trans. 1978, p. 80)

1.3.1 The Life of Yuan Chun

The life of Yuan Chun affects the fate of all the members of the Chia Mansion. She is the pride of the whole family. Although Yuan Chun does not turn up many times in the novel, she has left the readers a deep impression. The formal appearance of her is in Chapter Eighteen when she visits her parents on the feast of the Lantern Festival. When she saw the Grand View Garden which had been richly embroidered, she did not show an excited face and just sighed silently and said that it was ‘too luxury’. The author shows the readers a rich but a talented and thrifty woman. All of the good traits of hers add much sadness.
to her death. She is just a tool for her family to guarantee their honorable life at the cost of her own happiness, and although she never complains of it in her life and instead tries her best to save the family, she does not have enough power to do it. The family can not be rescued by her alone even if she loses her life. She is just a woman whose life is doomed by the whole political environment of the feudal society. She is a tragedy.

1.3.2 The Death of Yuan Chun

Since the last chapters have been lost, the real destiny and the final ending of Yuan Chun is a mystery. But from what is written in the poem and in the song, we can get some clues on her ending. In the song, some obscure sentences can be read. “Open-eyed, she has to leave everything for her”. This sentence shows that she does not die by nature. She dies with her eyes open. She does not want to die, but she has to leave everything behind and puts an end to her own life. “As her gentle soul passes away. So far her home beyond the distant mountains” This lines shows that she is hanged by others in a place far away from her home, and she does not die in the palace, which proves once again that she does not die by nature, and instead she dies miserably. “That in a dream she finds and tells her parents, your child has gone now to the Yellow Spring, You must find a retreat before it is too late.” In her parents’ dream, she tells them to retreat or it would be too late. What kind of disaster does she want to warn her parent of? Why should they retreat? Maybe this is the only reason that can account for her death.

In the poem, the line ‘Where pomegranates blaze by palace gates” shows that she is pregnant, for pomegranate fruit is always used in Chinese as a metaphor to show that someone is going to give birth to some babies. The reason for a pregnant woman who has to die in a palace is obvious. The royal family can not permit her to give birth to a royal child for some political reasons and it comes to that she has to lose her life. From the historical study above, we know that the Chia Mansions have been involved in the fight for the highest power, but the party that the family has supported loses in the game. As the only token of her family honor, the emperor can not stand her staying alive in the palace to enjoy the respected life. Even if she is pregnant, she has to leave everything behind to end her life. Without her, the Chia Mansions will decline right away. And this is the case. Therefore, Yuan Chun is the victim of political struggle. Her tragedy is originated in her complex family background and the political environment at that time.

CONCLUSION

A Dream of Red Mansions is not only a tragic love story which has appeared in the Chia Mansions, but also a great masterpiece of Chinese culture and a panorama of Chinese feudal society. It is not the intention for the author to write a political novel, but as an autobiography, it is inevitable to relate some political background to the novel. The author does not tell the readers directly what he wants to say but gives us some hints or clues to find out the truth that is hidden between the lines—the seven eighths under the water. Therefore, it is valuable to study what can be read between the lines by applying the iceberg principle in order to better understand the novel.

REFERENCES