

The Tradition of Paternal Education in Jia's Mansion in The Dream of the Red Chamber

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transmission and transformation of paternal educational traditions within the Jia family as portrayed in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. By focusing on three generations—Jia Daishan, Jia Zheng, and Jia Baoyu—the research analyzes the evolution of parenting models, intergenerational dynamics, and conflicts within the framework of Confucian values and late feudal Chinese society. Through textual analysis, comparative study, and sociocultural contextualization, the findings reveal that while Jia Zheng's strict adherence to Confucian ideals embodies the preservation of traditional values, Baoyu's resistance underscores the growing tension between individual aspirations and established norms. The study concludes that paternal education functions both as a medium for transmitting cultural values and as a source of conflict, illustrating the intricate interplay between tradition and individuality. This analysis highlights the importance of balancing cultural heritage and personal development in the face of societal change.

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Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few that have investigated the intergenerational transmission and transformation of paternal education through a sociological lens. The paper's primary contribution is the finding that the comparison of paternal education across three generations in the Jia family reveals the complex interplay between societal traditions, family education, and individual growth.

1. Introduction

The Dream of the Red Chamber, also known as *The Story of the Stone* or *A Dream of Red Mansions*, stands as a cornerstone of Chinese literature, authored by Cao Xueqin during the 18th-century under Qing Dynasty (Moratto et al., 2023). This intricate narrative follows the fortunes and tribulations of the Jia family, capturing the nuances of aristocratic life and broader societal transitions. At its core, the novel serves as a profound exploration

of human relationships, traditional values, and the interplay between individual aspirations and societal expectations.

One of the central themes of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is the father-son relationship, a dynamic that resonates deeply within the framework of Confucian thought. In traditional Chinese society, paternal roles were closely associated with moral guidance, discipline, and the transmission of cultural values (Ho, 1998). Scholars' interpretations of this theme are often complex and sometimes contradictory (Bisetto, 2022; Gu, 2006; Levy, 1994; Moratto et al., 2023; Wagner, 1985). A prevailing scholarly consensus suggests that Jia Zheng, the patriarch of the Jia family, embodies the guardian of the feudal system and the custodian of traditional ethical values. His influence on Baoyu, his son and the novel's central character, is widely believed to have instilled spiritual repression and melancholy in the young protagonist, ultimately leading to Baoyu's rebellion and resistance against the societal norms and expectations placed upon him. Yet, an opposing viewpoint contends that Jia Zheng's actions and role as a father reflect conventional norms within traditional Chinese society. This perspective emphasizes the existence of a spiritual connection and inheritance between Jia Zheng and Baoyu, suggesting that their relationship transcends a simple narrative of repression and rebellion (Edwards, 1994; Gu, 2006; Mann, 1997; Xu, 2015).

While existing research has extensively analyzed father-son conflicts, particularly between Jia Zheng and his son Baoyu, the broader context of paternal educational traditions in the Jia family remains underexplored. This gap leaves significant questions about the transmission of values, the evolution of educational practices, and their impact on family dynamics.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study seeks to address this scholarly gap by examining the intergenerational transmission of paternal education in the Jia family. It focuses on how these traditions were upheld, modified, or challenged across three generations—Jia Daishan, Jia Zheng, and Baoyu. Through a detailed analysis of the text and its historical and cultural context, this research aims to unravel the intricate web of family education, its alignment with Confucian ideals, and its implications for understanding father-son relationships within the novel.

By delving into this theme, the study not only sheds light on the characters' interpersonal dynamics but also provides valuable insights into the broader societal and cultural forces that shaped family education in late imperial China. Ultimately, this research highlights the tension between adherence to traditional values and the emergence of individualistic tendencies during periods of societal transformation.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

To understand the complex dynamics of parental teaching across generations, this study builds upon the theoretical underpinnings developed by sociologist Edward Shils. Shils (1983) defines tradition as a series of variations centered around an accepted and transmitted theme, forming what he describes as a temporal chain. The essence of tradition lies in the relationships among these variations, which share a common theme, exhibit similarities and differences, and originate from a common source. This concept serves as the foundation for our analysis of the transmission of parental teachings across

generations, focusing on the interplay between the source of these teachings and their progression over time. As Shils (1983) observes, a tradition typically spans at least two cycles of three generations, providing a robust framework for examining the flow of parental teachings in this study.

Furthermore, Shils (1983) emphasizes that the views and paradigms parents pass down to their children are often shaped by the broader societal consensus. Each generation adapts and transmits these traditions, incorporating subtle modifications rooted in their familial experiences. This ongoing process transforms individuals into essential links in a chain that bridges the past and the present (Shils, 1975).

By employing this interdisciplinary framework, this study enhances our understanding of the intricate interplay between family dynamics, societal influences, and the enduring legacy of parental teachings. It sheds light on how these traditions evolve and persist within the ever-changing tapestry of human culture, offering insights into the continuity and adaptability of familial and societal values.

3. Methods

This study adopts a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to investigate the transmission and transformation of paternal education traditions within the Jia family, as depicted in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The analysis begins with a detailed examination of the text, focusing on the narratives, dialogues, and character developments related to the key figures of the Jia family—Jia Zheng, Jia Baoyu, and their predecessors. Through this textual analysis, the study seeks to uncover explicit and implicit themes of paternal education, revealing the underlying values and attitudes embedded in the novel.

To further understand the evolution of these traditions, a comparative analysis is conducted across three generations of the Jia family: Jia Daishan, Jia Zheng, and Jia Baoyu. This comparison highlights how paternal education practices were maintained, adapted, or challenged over time. By exploring the continuities and changes within the family's educational practices, the study reveals the dynamic interplay between tradition and individual agency.

In addition to the textual and comparative analyses, the research situates its findings within the broader historical and sociocultural context of feudal China, particularly during the Qing Dynasty. This contextualization examines the influence of Confucian ideology, familial hierarchies, and societal expectations on paternal roles and educational practices. The analysis also considers external factors, such as the societal changes and the decline of the Jia family, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding paternal education in the novel.

Finally, the study incorporates existing scholarly interpretations and analyses of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* to enrich its insights. By synthesizing previous research on Confucianism, family dynamics, and the novel's literary significance, the research offers a nuanced perspective on the role of paternal education traditions within both the fictional narrative and the cultural framework of the time. This integrated approach ensures a holistic understanding of the subject, emphasizing its relevance to both character development and the broader societal values portrayed in the novel.

4. Findings

As an important symbol in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Jia family not only reflects a deep respect for ancestral traditions and family heritage but also strictly adheres to patriarchal norms. Through an analysis of the paternal education across three generations—Jia Daxian (Jia Zheng's father), Jia Zheng himself, and Baoyu—it becomes evident that, although the educational methods between these generations differ in details, their adherence to Confucian thought remains consistent. This adherence is demonstrated in their study of the classics and the demand for discipline, particularly within the educational model in father-son relationships.

Firstly, the paternal figures not only follow Confucian educational principles but also convey these values through various educational methods. The emphasis placed by both Jia Daxian and Jia Zheng on education, particularly the moral development and scholarly training of their descendants, highlights their focus on family legacy and cultural identity. Jia Zheng, as a father, pays special attention to Baoyu's education, attempting to shape Baoyu's character through strict methods and aiming to pass on the family spirit and values. While this approach reveals the oppressive nature of patriarchy, it also reflects the Jia family's determination to maintain their social standing and cultural continuity.

However, despite the fathers' adherence to Confucian educational norms, the growth paths of the younger generation reveal noticeable differences. In Baoyu's educational journey, a complex conflict arises between the constraints of traditional Confucian values and patriarchal education and his personal free-spirited nature. Baoyu not only rejects the scholarly path his father Jia Zheng expects of him but also exhibits personal tendencies that contradict traditional Confucian moral concepts. This phenomenon reflects the profound influence of societal changes on individual character and educational methods. Regarding the father-son educational model of this generation, it is worth noting that despite Jia Zheng's strict measures in educating his children, Baoyu still fails to fully adapt to this traditional form of education. Baoyu tends to pursue self-actualization and individual development rather than entirely adhering to his family's and father's expectations. In this aspect, he represents a rebellion against traditional values and an awakening of individualism.

These generational differences in education not only reflect internal family conflicts but also mirror the social transformation and changes during the Qing Dynasty. The traditional Confucian educational model reveals its rigidity and limitations during this transformation, especially in the face of the younger generation's pursuit of individuality and freedom. On one hand, this reflects the dilemma of the Jia family's educational system, and on the other, it reveals the adaptation and transformation of family culture amidst historical changes.

In conclusion, although there are similarities in the educational traditions of the two generations of fathers, the traditional patriarchal education gradually reveals its shortcomings in adapting to modern society as it confronts social changes and personal development. The father-child relationship is not only a transmission of education but also a manifestation of cultural conflict and generational differences. In this process, the father's education of his son is not merely the imparting of knowledge but also the shaping of values and identity. However, with the rebellion of later generations such as Baoyu, the tradition of patriarchal education faces unprecedented challenges, and the inheritance of family and traditional education begins to encounter the tests of history.

5. Discussion

The Jia Mansion, as a typical aristocratic household, embodies a deep-rooted traditional culture and historical background. The Jia Mansion's prominent position, prosperity, and its connections to the imperial court all stem from the blessings of their ancestors. This legacy and the notion of ancestral protection profoundly influence the mindset of the family members.

However, despite the family's former glory, their decline gradually becomes apparent as the story unfolds. This sets the foundation for the core theme of the narrative: can Jia Zheng, as the third-generation noble elite, successfully impart knowledge and values to Jia Baoyu, making him a qualified heir and saving the family from its increasingly deteriorating fate? The Jia Mansion's story, deeply rooted in tradition, ultimately ends in decline, reflecting the broader challenges faced by aristocratic families in adapting to societal changes and the inevitable cycles of rise and fall in Chinese history (Wei, 2015).

5.1. The Parenting Model in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*: Tradition, Education, and Decline

In the fifth chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Fairy Jing Huan claims to be guided by the deceased ancestors of the Jia Mansion to set Jia Zheng's son, Baoyu, on the right path. While the re-enactment of the God Realm may be seen as a charade, the central focus is on whether Jia Zheng can steer Baoyu towards a trajectory befitting an elite figure capable of carrying forward the family's legacy. In this aristocratic family, the gods and ancestral spirits symbolize human aspirations and blessings. The entire Jia family fervently anticipates Baoyu's life path, one of scholarly pursuits leading to his becoming a Confucian official—an elite figure capable of reversing the family's fortunes. Their prayers to supernatural beings underscore their collective aspiration, but it is Jia Zheng who holds the mantle of educational responsibility.

Baoyu's introduction in the novel reveals a precocious child, marked by mischievousness and remarkable intellect, evident as early as age seven or eight when he should be starting school. Before he entered the family school, Jia Zheng conveyed specific instructions to the headmaster, emphasizing the primacy of mastering the Four Books (Cao, 1973, p. 204). This marks a watershed moment: under the strict supervision of his father, Baoyu will begin his journey from arrogance to disciplined scholarship.

This was a reflection of the education model at that time. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a pivotal transition occurred in male education at the age of seven or eight. Before this point, education, referred to as Tongmeng, primarily involved literacy, basic ethics, and etiquette imparted by parents or tutors (Cao, 2010). Beyond this age, formal education took precedence, and intensive preparation for the imperial examinations, a path to social distinction, commenced. In early childhood, parents nurtured their children and allowed them to grow freely. In an aristocratic family like the Jia Mansion, Baoyu, as a direct descendant and the center of attention, especially captured Grandmother Jia's affection, who doted on him greatly. When children reached the age of seven or eight, parents, especially fathers, began to consider their future, recognizing that excessive pampering might risk diverting their focus away from scholarly pursuits (Cao, 1973, p. 289). At this stage, the father, as the main instructor, would intervene strictly to guide them onto the so-called right path. This traditional education pattern, commonly practiced by fathers in aristocratic families, was also experienced by the Prince of Beijing

and Jia Zheng himself. Jia Zheng, who initially displayed a penchant for poetry and wine (Cao & Gao, 2012, p. 1102), eventually turned to academics only after enduring numerous beatings from his father (Cao, 1977, p. 391).

Baoyu is not a slacker who dislikes reading. The depictions of his fascination with *Zhuangzi* and *Huizhenji* are beautifully represented in the novel (Cao, 1973). He is also a gifted poet. He organized a poetry club with his sisters, and his poems were well-written; the couplets he penned at the Grand View Garden were commended by literary gentlemen. Jia Zheng himself was later moved by *the Poem of Guihua*, which Baoyu composed in one go (Cao, 1982). These, however, were condemned by Jia Zheng as “worthless nonsense” and “a fine new stock of knavish tricks” (Cao, 1973, p. 130). Jia Zheng asserted that reading poetry and miscellaneous literature did not constitute genuine education; true education centered on *the Four Books* and the Eight-Part Essay. The choice of texts for study was not a trivial matter; it determined one’s life path (Liu & Liu, 2008). *The Four Books*, the core content of imperial examinations, served as a gateway to fame and official positions. As Shils (1983) contends, family education is not solely derived from parental experiences but is shaped by societal beliefs and concepts, which subsequently guide children’s future behaviors. This shared consciousness was evident in the optimistic predictions surrounding Baoyu’s future success (Cao, 1973). In Chinese society, social rank was determined by one’s official position, not wealth, leading scholars to fiercely compete for existing official posts and solidifying Confucianism as the prevailing ideology. Confucian education perpetuated the ideal of officialdom as the noble path, deeply ingrained in the hearts of scholars (Weber, 2008).

The Jia Mansions became prosperous because of the military exploits of their ancestors, who were worshiped by the whole family. Jia Zheng’s father, Jia Daishan, inherited the title and official position and was valued by the emperor. The booming family business gave him confidence in politics, and it is inferred that he also held great expectations for his son. Jia Zheng inherited his father’s faith in these values. Despite the family’s hereditary privileges, he harbored ambitions of passing the imperial examinations and entering the ranks of officials (Cao, 1973). While the Qing Dynasty valued officials with examination backgrounds, the offspring of aristocrats who relied solely on family status and lacked scholarly recognition faced societal disdain (Liu & Liu, 2008). Therefore, Jia Zheng’s aspirations were marked by idealism and fervor, reflecting a desire for self-improvement. However, Jia Zheng’s ideal path was thwarted by the emperor’s appointment of additional bureaucrats, which limited opportunities for advancement, leading him to pin his hopes for family redemption on Baoyu. As Fei (2018) suggests, parents view their children as opportunities for the realization of their own ideals, sculpting their aspirations onto the next generation. This is not mere parental selfishness but rather an reconciliation of personal ideals with societal expectations.

The multi-generational Jia family is in a state of decline by Baoyu’s time. The family’s future prospects hinge on whether Baoyu can succeed in the imperial examinations and restore the family’s glory. Jia Zheng, ever concerned about his family’s fate, holds high expectations and anxieties regarding Baoyu. To ensure adherence to Confucian tradition, seen as the family’s ideal path to renewal, Baoyu’s life is closely controlled.

The parenting model in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is intricately woven with themes of tradition, education, and familial aspirations. It encapsulates the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, with Confucian ideals of officialdom and scholarly success serving as the guiding light. Jia Zheng’s influence and ambitions, rooted

in Confucian values, shape the destiny of his son Baoyu and the future of the Jia family. This narrative exemplifies how the aspirations of parents are intertwined with societal norms, driving their children toward paths that reflect both personal ambitions and collective expectations.

5.2. Paternal Conflict and Tradition in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Conflict between fathers and sons is a prevalent theme in society, often explored through various lenses, such as Freud's Oedipus complex, anthropologist Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski's perspective on patriarchy, and sociologist Fei Xiaotong's insights into the role of the father. In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, this conflict is portrayed within the context of a traditional Chinese family, offering a nuanced view of the challenges faced by several generations.

In the narrative, Jia Zheng, Baoyu's father, assumes a stern and authoritarian demeanor, emphasizing discipline and reproach when interacting with his son. His mannerisms reflect the prevailing belief among intellectuals of the time that maintaining perfect order within the family mirrored the order at the imperial court. Consequently, fathers played a pivotal role in educating their sons and emulated court rituals to reinforce their authority and family structure. This approach to parenting was not merely a method of management but also a means of imparting education (Zhao, 2015). As a son, Jia Zheng is rigid in etiquette and cautious in front of Grandmother Jia, careful not to behave inappropriately or cause her displeasure. It can be inferred that his own upbringing involved harsh discipline, and his parenting model for Baoyu likely emulated the strict methods he experienced from his father.

The separation and estrangement between fathers and sons are recurring themes in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Baoyu's fear of his father is palpable within the family, leading to his cautious behavior in Jia Zheng's presence. This fear-driven compliance is illustrated by his deliberate avoidance of his father's residence, likened to a mouse eluding a cat (Cao, 1973). The strained relationship prompts Grandmother Jia and even servants to encourage Baoyu when he must face his father, highlighting the family's awareness of the tension. Ironically, Jia Zheng himself behaves like a child in front of his mother, cautious to avoid displeasing her. He once bitterly joked to her about why her love for her grandson could not extend to her son.

When a father's hope is dashed, his disappointment can turn him into a tyrant, making severe punishment for his son inevitable. One of the most significant father-son conflicts unfolds in Chapter 33. Baoyu's demeanor and speech in front of Jia Yucun who was praised as a gentleman by Jia Zheng, irk Jia Zheng. Confucianism, deeply ingrained in this society, prioritizes the development of virtuous qualities (Weber, 2008), and Baoyu's perceived lethargy runs counter to this ethos. Moreover, Baoyu's association with actors from Zhongshun's palace raises concerns about family tradition and potential political repercussions, further exacerbating Jia Zheng's anger. The climax of their conflict arises from rumors that Baoyu intended to assault Jin Chuan, his mother's maid, leading Jia Zheng to resort to violence and threats. This harsh response is rooted in Confucian ethics, which equate disrespect for a mother's maid with disrespect for one's mother—an act considered a grave violation of Confucian morality.

Although Jia Zheng's behavior was criticized by many researchers as cruel and harsh, they often overlook the fact that Jia Zheng's father and other fathers in the Jia family beat their

sons more harshly than Jia Zheng, as mentioned by an older lady in the chapter (Cao, 1977, p. 391). Beating as a method of discipline was commonplace in Confucian society, supported by the belief that “*the whip cannot be stopped at home, and punishment cannot be abolished in the country*” (Ban, 2011, p. 245). This tradition of paternal discipline was not unique to the Jia family but was prevalent in society as a whole.

The conflict between an individual’s role responsibilities and their personal nature often remains unexamined in discussions of paternal tradition. Following the severe punishment of his son, Jia Zheng defended his actions by asserting that he did so to instill respect for their ancestors. This reflects a complex interplay between familial responsibility, love for one’s offspring, and the perceived greater importance of upholding ancestral honor. Recognizing the ancestral psychology at play—a struggle between conflicting obligations—is essential.

Despite his father’s strong control, however, Baoyu broke away from the traditional life path and beliefs. He did not aspire to be like Jia Yucun in his pursuit of fame; he found great value in actors his father considered ignoble, and he regarded unfortunate girls like maids as the essence of heaven and earth. This divergence from tradition left the orthodox Jia Zheng not only desperate but also terrified, more so than his failure to meet aspirations of revitalizing the family’s legacy. As a result, Jia Zheng felt compelled to do whatever it took to control and suppress Baoyu’s tendencies, even intending to kill his son in a fit of wrath.

Despite being brutally punished, Baoyu refused to surrender. He prioritized maintaining his self-worth and adhering to his ideals over preserving his life. The conflict between individual personality and societal expectations contributes to the evolution of paternal tradition and the father-son connection. Jia Zheng’s own experiences as an official brought him face-to-face with the disillusioning realities of governance. The idealized Confucian principles of self-cultivation, family governance, and world peace proved illusory in the face of power politics and corruption within officialdom. Consequently, Jia Zheng adjusted his approach toward Baoyu. He not only ceased pressuring Baoyu to pursue imperial examinations but also began to appreciate Baoyu’s poetic talents, viewing him as a potential heir who need not follow the conventional path. This transition reflects Jia Zheng’s capacity for introspection and adaptability, challenging the notion of him as an unwavering authoritarian.

In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, paternal conflict is a multifaceted exploration of tradition, societal expectations, and individual identity. Jia Zheng’s actions, initially perceived as harsh and dogmatic, find justification within the context of Confucian values and his role as a father. However, the evolving dynamics between fathers and sons reveal the complexities of familial relationships and the reshaping of tradition in response to changing realities. Jia Zheng’s transformation from a strict enforcer to a more enlightened and adaptable father illustrates the malleability of paternal tradition in the face of shifting circumstances. This narrative underscores the importance of considering cultural and societal influences when evaluating father-son conflicts in literary works and their broader significance.

5. Conclusion

This study, through an in-depth analysis of the father-son relationships across three generations in the Jia family as depicted in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, explores the

inheritance and evolution of paternal education traditions within the context of Confucian culture. These traditions function not only as crucial tools for transmitting family values but also as key sources of conflict and insight into father-son dynamics. The educational models of Jia Daishan, Jia Zheng, and Jia Baoyu demonstrate how Confucian ideals were practiced, challenged, and redefined within the unique context of a family.

The findings highlight that, despite significant differences in educational philosophies between Jia Zheng and Baoyu, paternal traditions still played a role in linking family members. Jia Zheng inherited the strict Confucian doctrines from his father and sought to use this method to rescue the family from decline. However, Baoyu's rebellious attitude not only highlighted the tension between individual values and traditional educational models but also revealed the limitations of traditional culture in adapting to societal change. Jia Zheng's gradual acceptance of Baoyu's individuality marked a modern transformation in paternal education traditions, acknowledging the inadequacies of rigid adherence to traditional methods when faced with contemporary challenges.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex role and dynamic evolution of paternal education traditions within family culture. These analyses illuminate not only the intricate relationships among characters in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* but also offer new perspectives on the tension between traditional values and individual growth. By exploring the interaction between family education and its broader social context, this paper sheds light on how traditional values are preserved or transformed through individual challenges and adaptations.

Future research could further investigate how other characters navigate Confucian norms and how alternative educational practices within the family influence individual and societal relationships. Additionally, exploring the variations in educational practices across different social strata could provide a more comprehensive understanding of Confucian culture's long-term impact on Chinese society.

In conclusion, the analysis of paternal education traditions offers a valuable framework for understanding the tension between tradition and individuality. It also provides meaningful insights into how modern society can balance preserving cultural heritage and fostering individual development.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

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Conflict of Interest

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