Portraying Class and Power: Master-servant Relationships in *A Dream in Red Mansions* and *Downton Abbey*

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**Abstract**

This paper analyzes master-servant relationships in Chinese and British cultures using the examples of the Chinese novel *A Dream in Red Mansions* and the English series *Downton Abbey*. *A Dream in Red Mansions* offers insights into 18th-century Chinese life and culture, sparking ongoing scholarly interest. Through an exploration of master-servant relationships in the novel, this study uncovers the reasons and cultural characteristics of ancient China. Examining specific relationships as illustrations, the analysis unveils inequality and progressive elements of that era. *Downton Abbey* captures the evolution of British aristocratic life in the early 20th century, influenced by both Victorian and 19th-century customs. The paper dissects Victorian morals' societal influence and highlights distinctive master-servant dynamics, revealing shifts in servant lifestyles. Societal changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution provided servants with more opportunities to change their fates. Despite cultural disparities, significant similarities arise, highlighting historical inevitabilities. Acknowledging differences, this comparison underscores the impact of unique social structures and historical contexts on servant relationships.

**Keywords**


1. **Introduction**

The servant-maid system's historical existence is intricately tied to feudal hierarchies, with China and Britain as prime examples. In China, this system has endured for millennia, showcased vividly in the traditional novel *A Dream in Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763). In Britain, the master-servant relationship evolved over time; initially rooted in personal attachment, it transformed into a capitalist dynamic during the 19th century due to the industrial revolution, solidifying in the 20th century. The portrayal of this evolution is evident in the series *Downton Abbey*, set during the 20th century.

Unlike Western slavery, China's servant system had deep historical roots. Official and private servants emerged, with the latter arising alongside private land ownership after the demise of the Well-Field System. This separation of land and labor led to labor being bought and sold (Zhao, 1988). This system was characterized by ownership of labor, where individuals, parents, or husbands could sell themselves, their children, or their spouses. This served as a last resort for survival, championed by feudal rulers.

Cao Xueqin's 18th-century masterpiece, *A Dream in Red Mansions*, unintentionally reflects the Qing Dynasty's master-servant relationships. This mirror-like depiction unveils a world of servants surrounding a few masters, notably focusing on young, remarkable servant girls. The novel underscores diverse servant categories, including red and white...
contracts (Wei & Wu, 1982), with Jiashengzi serving generations under red contracts, and white contracts allowing for potential redemption to freedom.

In Britain, the servant system coexisted with aristocracy for over a millennium. The nature of master-servant relations transformed over time. In the nobility era, servants formed a stable class, gradually shifting toward professionalism by the 17th century. “Such circumstance started to change in the 17th century, the servant began to become a profession, which meant the bond between the servant and the family began to slack” (Porter, 1982). This transformation culminated in the 20th century, evident in Downton Abbey. World War I triggered significant change, altering attitudes, roles, and professions for both servants and masters.

Downton Abbey, a period drama by Julian Fellowes, explores the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants in early 20th-century Britain. Drawing from real-life accounts of Highclere Castle, the series presents a nuanced portrayal of master-servant dynamics, supplemented by Countess of Carnarvon’s (2011) book Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey.

Although A Dream in Red Mansions and Downton Abbey belong to distinct eras, they both narrate aristocratic family transitions, reflecting societal shifts. These works serve as social encyclopedias, detailing clothing, cuisine, architecture, and more. Their focus on servant lives and intricate master-servant relationships provide a unique lens to comprehend the historical and societal nuances within different cultural and economic contexts.

2. Master-servant relationships in A Dream in Red Mansions

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Controlling Fugitive Slaves: Great Qing Legal Code Regulations
During the Qing Dynasty's emergence, oppressed slaves sought escape despite peril. Authorities responded with a system of laws aimed at capturing and imprisoning runaway slaves. The Law of Fugitives, initially introduced, underwent revisions in 1652 and 1656, wherein penalties shifted from execution after four runaways to two, and branding joined corporal punishment for first-time offenders. The scope of punishment extended beyond fugitives to include associates and neighbors, enforced through the Lianzuo practice. Additionally, the Regulation of Supervising Arrest of 1626 was enacted to monitor officials responsible for apprehending runaways, enhancing impartiality. These measures formed an intricate network that effectively curbed the exodus of slaves, consolidating the Manchu rule and solidifying social hierarchies.

2.1.2 Slave Archives: Reinforcing Long-Term Bondage
The Qing Dynasty established specialized institutions like Neiwufu and Baqi Dutong Zuoiling Shiwu to manage slave archives, ensuring perpetual enslavement. Administrative officials in various cities oversaw nationwide slave registration. Notably, the concept of "red contract" symbolized permanent servitude, as exemplified by Hua Xiren's status as a maid. This practice confined her to the family due to her parents' economic needs. Distinct from slaves bound by familial tradition, there emerged those, like Xiren, who were incorporated into the system through signed agreements. The "white contract" allowed private agreements, permitting redemption with sufficient funds. However, the demarcation between the two contracts was porous; white contract slaves could transition to red contract status if redemption was unattainable. The narrative of Lai Da's family illustrates the rarity of escaping contract-bound servitude.

2.1.3 Feudal Ethics and Servant Discrimination
Championing Confucianism and patriarchal ethics, Qing rulers institutionalized a hierarchical paradigm characterized by "upper-lower hierarchy." The three cardinal guides and five constant virtues established masters as superior, bestowing them with undisputed authority. Servants, subordinates in this framework, faced severe consequences for actions or speech-defying masters. With absolute power, masters frequently abused servants, and instances of male masters exploiting young maids were common. The novel vividly depicts harsh punishments such as flogging and branding. Feudal ethics dictated unequal relationships, enabling rampant mistreatment and providing a grim backdrop for servant existence.

2.1.4 Policy Discrimination and Social Mobility
Restrictions on private marriage, especially for maids, were upheld by laws that allowed masters to dictate unions. Intermarriage between the upper and lower classes was forbidden, emphasizing social stratification. Notably, the Imperial Examination, a potential avenue for upward mobility, was prohibited for those with a lineage of slavery or official
guilt. Lai Shangrong’s exceptional case exemplifies the rarity of breaking the cycle of servitude.

In summary, the Qing Dynasty's governance, informed by legal codes, institutional structures, and ethical paradigms, intricately shaped the dynamics of servitude and social hierarchy. The literary portrayal of these complexities in *A Dream in Red Mansions* offers a lens into the multifaceted realities faced by servants within this societal framework.

### 2.2 Intimate Bonds in *A Dream in Red Mansions*: Examining Characters’ Relationships

#### 2.2.1 Zijuan and Lin Daiyu: Unwavering Companionship

The relationship between Zijuan and Lin Daiyu exemplifies a profound bond transcending traditional roles. Originally old Lady Jia's maid named Yingge, Zijuan became Daiyu's first maid after her arrival at Rongguofu. Zijuan's name, meaning "cuckoo" symbolizing melancholy, aligns with Cao Xueqin's signature of imbuing names with destiny. Despite not grown up together, Zijuan emerged as Daiyu's confidante and a sisterly figure. Acting as both caregiver and empathetic listener, Zijuan offered solace to Daiyu's emotional turmoil, stemming from her traumatic past. Zijuan's diligent care and concern for Daiyu's fragile health and emotional well-being underline the depth of their bond. She further demonstrated loyalty by championing Daiyu's love for Baoyu, even though it conflicted with her servile role. Zijuan's commitment ultimately extended beyond societal hierarchies as she sought Daiyu's happiness, a testament to the remarkable emotional connections present in the novel.

#### 2.2.2 Qingwen and Jia Baoyu: Beyond Social Boundaries

The dynamic between Qingwen and Jia Baoyu transcends traditional expectations, illustrating a unique friendship that defies societal norms. Originally a servant's servant, Qingwen's beauty and intelligence prompted her selection by old Lady Jia and subsequent placement as one of Baoyu's primary maids. Their relationship blossomed into a bond marked by equality and open communication. Qingwen's willingness to challenge Baoyu's views and engage in spirited disagreements underscores the authenticity of their connection. Baoyu's genuine regard for his servants is evident as he seeks reconciliation after their quarrel, demonstrating his inclusive and respectful demeanor. Qingwen's dedicated effort in repairing Baoyu's cherished snowcape, despite her ill health, further highlights the sincerity of their association. Her tragic expulsion by Lady Wang, solely based on her beauty and wit, showcases the value of their unique friendship in the face of adversity.

#### 2.2.3 Jia Baoyu and Mingyan: Unconventional Camaraderie

Mingyan, a valet, shared an exceptional bond with Jia Baoyu, fostering a relationship that defied societal norms. Despite the master-servant dichotomy, Mingyan's devotion to Baoyu transcended convention. In a school incident, Mingyan's protective response to an insult directed at Baoyu highlighted their unwavering connection. Baoyu's defense of Mingyan further underscored their mutual respect. Mingyan's astute protection against the confines of traditional scholarship, by smuggling folk novels to Baoyu, unveiled their camaraderie, which transcended rigid cultural norms. A poignant instance during Wang Xifeng's birthday revealed Mingyan's role in aiding Baoyu's poignant tribute to a deceased servant, defying social expectations with a clandestine ceremony. Mingyan's heartfelt prayer during the ritual showcased his loyalty and emotional depth, epitomizing the intricate emotional ties depicted in the novel.

#### 2.2.4 Wang Xifeng and Pinger: Complex Servitude

The multifaceted relationship between Wang Xifeng and her devoted maid Pinger showcases a nuanced power dynamic. Pinger's unique position as a connotative concubine within the household exemplified her elevated status, often managing affairs in Wang Xifeng's stead. Pinger's insightful handling of matters led other servants to seek her counsel, revealing her significance. The narrative illustrates Pinger's astute protection of Jia Lian from Wang Xifeng's suspicion, highlighting her empowerment and influence. This bond reaches a climax during an altercation stemming from Wang Xifeng's jealousy, resulting in a rare instance of physical reprimand. Wang Xifeng's subsequent remorse and apology showcase the intricate intimacy within their relationship. Pinger's posthumous guardianship of Wang Xifeng's daughter and her role in protecting her from an undesirable marriage further highlight the depth of their connection and Pinger's unanticipated impact.

### 3. Master-servant relationships in *Downton Abbey*

#### 3.1 Background

The British Industrial Revolution brought about a stark divide between the affluent and the impoverished, resulting in
deteriorating conditions for the lower class and an array of social issues. Simultaneously, the French Revolution intensified the lower class's awareness of resistance. Seeking stability, the British ruling class initiated a sweeping moral movement known as the Morality of Victoria, after Queen Victoria, which significantly influenced the 19th-century master-servant relationship, even in the early 20th-century setting of Downton Abbey.

Although Downton Abbey is set in the early 20th century, it draws heavily from late 19th-century prototypes, necessitating an analysis of the Morality of Victoria. At its core, this moral framework emphasizes appearances, advocating for traits like independence, diligence, honesty, thriftiness, caution, and sexual abstinence. Designed to preserve the social order, it discourages behaviors and thoughts that deviate from convention. The adage "One is respected only in his own field and is not as long as he transgresses the bounds (Barzun, 2001, p. 557)" underscores its essence. This morality aimed to instill in lower classes the notion that their destiny was predetermined by birth, yet they could enhance their circumstances through hard work and virtues. Violently challenging the ruling class for wealth and status was deemed disreputable. Servants, thus, were expected to unquestioningly adhere to these moral principles.

Within upper-class households, where servants from lower strata worked, compliance with the Morality of Victoria was anticipated. A respectable servant was meticulous, diligent, and courteous, diligently performing their duties and accumulating savings through thriftiness. Loyalty to the master was paramount for societal respect. An 1837 advice for servants stated: "You'll delay your work if you don't get up early, then even if you try your best, you won't be able to finish your work... Learn to be thrift." This ethos found expression in Downton Abbey, where early mornings and meticulous preparations were the norm.

Mr. Carson, the butler in the series, epitomized these values, exemplifying dignity and deference. The maid Ethel's reception by her peers revealed the importance of reputation among servants. The Morality of Victoria fortified unequal master-servant relationships, persisting even as labor markets evolved in the late 19th century. This distinctive dynamic, informed by Victorian ideals, set these relationships apart from conventional employer-employee associations.

3.2 Interwoven Bonds: Complex Relationships in Downton Abbey

3.2.1 Mary and Anna: Loyalty and Friendship
The relationship between Lady Mary and her maid Anna in Downton Abbey offers a glimpse into the intricate dynamics of class and camaraderie. Anna's pivotal role in shielding Mary from scandal is a testament to their profound connection. When Mary encounters a crisis with the untimely death of a visitor, Anna aids in discreetly handling the situation, safeguarding Mary's reputation and the family's honor. Despite her own fears, Anna's loyalty to Mary prevails.

Anna's personal struggles with fertility deepen their bond. Mary, recognizing Anna's plight, arranges a confidential visit to a London doctor, facilitating Anna's journey to motherhood. The deep trust between them allows Anna to confide her pregnancy concerns. Their relationship transcends traditional roles, evolving into a friendship marked by shared secrets and support.

3.2.2 Robert and Bates: Loyal Camaraderie
The symbiotic relationship between Lord Grantham, Robert, and his valet, Bates, serves as an example of unwavering loyalty in Downton Abbey. Despite Bates' initial challenges due to a war injury, Robert's compassion and understanding grant him the role of valet. Overcoming obstacles like the manipulative schemes of another staff member, Robert asserts Bates' worth and sustains his position.

Robert's commitment to Bates extends beyond professional boundaries. When Bates faces personal turmoil involving blackmail and imprisonment, Robert goes to great lengths to prove his innocence. This steadfast support defies social norms, showcasing the depth of their connection as comrades-in-arms and confidants.

3.2.3 Sybil and Gwen: Empowerment & Feminism
Lady Sybil Crawley's progressive ideals transcend class barriers, fostering a transformative bond with the maid Gwen. Sybil's belief in women's right to aspire beyond societal expectations motivates Gwen to pursue her dream of becoming a secretary. Sybil's encouragement empowers Gwen to navigate obstacles and succeed, culminating in a life outside of domestic service.

Years later, Gwen's transformation into an accomplished secretary reflects the impact of Sybil's guidance. The revelation of Gwen's past as a maid reveals Sybil's role in her evolution. This relationship exemplifies the series' theme of upward mobility, where lower-class individuals attain higher positions through opportunity and determination.
3.2.4 Carson and Mary: Compassionate and Supportive
The relationship between Mary Crawley and Carson the butler in *Downton Abbey* provides a window into the intricate bonds that develop between the upper class and their loyal servants. Carson's connection with Mary Crawley, in particular, is marked by compassion and understanding. As he witnesses Mary's struggles and self-condemnation following a significant event, Carson extends comfort and support, assuring her of the staff's unwavering loyalty. Carson's role as a confidant underscores his unique relationship with the family, one that spans decades and encompasses their personal growth and challenges.

The fifth season brings Carson's own personal journey to the forefront, as he prepares to marry Mrs. Hughes. The Crawley family's willingness to host the wedding in their hall, especially at Mary's insistence, underscores the respect and gratitude they hold for Carson's dedicated service. However, Mrs. Hughes' desire for an intimate celebration, devoid of servitude, illustrates her longing for a moment where her identity transcends her role as a servant.

Ultimately, the bond between Carson and the Crawley family exemplifies the complex and multifaceted relationships that characterize *Downton Abbey*. While Carson's loyalty and protective instincts are rooted in his role as the butler, his interactions with Mary reflect a connection that goes beyond his professional obligations. The Crawley family's willingness to accommodate Carson's personal milestones underscores the symbiotic ties that unite masters and servants in this evolving societal landscape.

4. Conclusion
The master-servant relationships in *A Dream in Red Mansions* and *Downton Abbey* share some striking similarities, yet also exhibit distinct differences. These two works, set in different times and cultures, shed light on the dynamics of servitude, hierarchy, and personal connections between servants and their masters.

4.1 Similarities
Servant Ranks: Both works feature a structured hierarchy among the servants, with clear distinctions in ranks and roles. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, maids and male servants have leaders like Momo and Zong Guan, equivalent to housekeepers and butlers in *Downton Abbey*. Ranks determined duties, responsibilities, and even access to certain areas, mirroring the class divisions of their respective societies.

First Felony - Theft: Both works emphasize the severity of theft within the servant community. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, when Baoyu's maid Zhuier stole, she is promptly expelled. In *Downton Abbey*, footman Thomas framed Mr. Bates for theft. This shared emphasis on theft as the first grave offense underscores the importance of trust and honesty in the master-servant relationship.

4.2 Differences
Sexual Relationships: A significant contrast lies in the acceptance and portrayal of sexual relationships between masters and servants. In *Downton Abbey*, the conservative British society of the early 20th century prevents Lord Grantham's relationship with maid Jane. The characters grapple with moral dilemmas, and relationships are ultimately discouraged. In contrast, *A Dream in Red Mansions* features sexual relationships between masters and servants, often leading to concubinage. The lack of legal protection for servants in 18th-century China plays a role in this disparity.

Difficulty of Changing Identity: The two works diverge in illustrating the challenges faced by servants seeking to change their identities. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, servants' status is deeply ingrained, making upward mobility nearly impossible due to societal norms and laws. In *Downton Abbey*, societal changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution provided servants with more opportunities to change their fates. Characters like Gwen and Alfred manage to break free from their servant roles to pursue new careers, highlighting the evolving nature of class dynamics.

In conclusion, while *A Dream in Red Mansions* and *Downton Abbey* share certain commonalities in the hierarchical structure of servant life and the gravity of theft, they differ significantly in their portrayal of sexual relationships and the potential for servant mobility. These works offer insights into the complexities of power, tradition, and personal agency within the master-servant dynamic across different historical and cultural contexts.

References


