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Unveiling Stratified Mimesis: A Study of Wang Huaiyi's *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions*

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Abstract: Wang Huaiyi places *A Dream of Red Mansions* (《红楼梦》) within the framework of classical Chinese mimetic theory, and comprehensively investigates the interactions between text and image, interiority and exteriority by anchoring the novel's unique artistic space to the spirit of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Through meticulous analysis, the author reveals consistent, formulaic, and recursive archetypal models within the novel, including the intertextual dialogue between Qiu Ying's *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (《清明上河图》) and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (《金瓶梅》), the spiritual affinity linking *The Collected Works of Tang Yin* (《唐寅集》) to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the imagistic resonance between *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* (《汉宫春晓图》) and Daguanyuan (大观园), as well as the profound textual influence of Leng Mei's *A Dream of Red Mansions Paintings* on the text of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The mimetic practices in *A Dream of Red Mansions* emerge as stratified and recreative. By reconstructing the novel's original cultural matrix, Wang illuminates its poetic essence while foregrounding the continuity and regenerative capacity of Chinese civilization. *A Dream of Red Mansions* stands as the intersection of genius and mimesis, and Wang's *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions* (《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》) serves as a scholarly representation of this genius mimesis.

Keywords: Mimesis; *A Dream of Red Mansions*; Literary Iconology; Visual-Textual Narratives

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标题：让层层叠起的摹仿现于目前——读王怀义《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》

摘要：王怀义《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》一书将《红楼梦》置于中国古代摹仿说的视域中，全面探究了文本与图像、内部与外部的互动关系，使《红楼梦》的独特艺术空间与中国古典美学精神紧密相连。在作者细致的考论之下，《红楼梦》中出现了诸多具有一致性的、程式化的、反复出现的“范型”：如仇英《清明上河图》与《金瓶梅》的互文关系、《唐寅集》与《红楼梦》的精神联结、《汉宫春晓图》与大观园的意象呼应、《红楼梦》文本对冷枚《红楼梦图》的深刻影响。《红楼梦》中的摹仿是层层叠起且不断复生的。王怀义在一定程度上还原着《红楼梦》曾经所属的文化母体，从而使它的诗意精神真正显现，也使中华文明的连续性与再生产性得以彰显。《红楼梦》是天才与摹仿的交点，《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》是对天才之摹仿过程的再现。

关键词：摹仿；《红楼梦》；文学图像学；可视性文本

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Regarded as the pinnacle of Chinese classical fiction, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (《红楼梦》) has long been hailed as an unparalleled work of genius. This acclaimed assertion, however, makes it difficult to “find an effective theory or methodology to give a new and effective answer to the question of why the artistry of *A Dream of Red Mansions* was formed (王怀义, 2022, p.1)”. Wang Huaiyi’s groundbreaking study recontextualizes this literary masterpiece within the framework of classical Chinese mimetic theory, systematically investigating the dynamic interplay between text and image, interiority and exteriority. Through this approach, he intricately connects the novel’s unique artistic cosmos with the essence of traditional Chinese aesthetics. In his preface, Gao Jianping astutely characterizes Wang’s work as “meticulous scholarship demystifying fictional creation,” illuminating the monograph’s core contribution: revealing the inevitable emergence underlying this “work of genius” through rigorous intermedial analysis.

The enduring debate between genius and mimesis extends beyond Redology, constituting a fundamental dialectic in aesthetic theory. When Kant conceptually opposed genius to mimesis, western aesthetics began to take a paradigm shift to privilege the genius theory, manifesting the discipline’s progression from concrete particularity to abstract universality, from heteronomy to autonomy. However, such genius-centric frameworks tend to overemphasize the contingent and fragmentary nature of artistic masterpieces, hence severing their organic connections to broader cultural contexts. Contemporary scholarship witnesses a resurgent interest in classical traditions as generative forces for aesthetic theorization, with Wang’s work epitomizing this intellectual trajectory. By tracing continuous artistic lineages through practices of “Shi (师)” “Fang (仿)” “Lin (临)” “Ni (拟)”, this book demonstrates how *A Dream of Red Mansions* identifies both as Cao Xueqin’s individual genius and the apex of traditional artistry. Thus, the monograph achieves dual breakthroughs: advancing *A Dream of Red Mansions* scholarship and contributing

to the development of indigenous Chinese aesthetic theories. In summary, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the dialectical synthesis of genius and mimesis, while *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions* (《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》中华书局 2022 年版) is a scholarly re-enactment of this creative mimesis process.

Through the author's detailed investigation, it appears that there are numerous archetypal models characterized by their stylistic consistency, formulaic structures, and recursive manifestations in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Notable examples include the intertextual dialogue between Qiu Ying (仇英)'s *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (《清明上河图》) and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (《金瓶梅》), the spiritual affinity between *The Collected Works of Tang Yin* (《唐寅集》) and the philosophical underpinnings of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the imagistic resonance between *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* (《汉宫春晓图》) and the architectural symbolism of Daguanyuan (大观园), as well as the profound textual influence exerted by Leng Mei (冷枚)'s *A Dream of Red Mansions Paintings* (《红楼梦图》) on the novel's original. This examination of text-image dynamics in *A Dream of Red Mansions* in fact "recontextualizes the novel within its original cultural matrix" (王怀义, 2022, p.62). As a result, it further unveils its authentic poetic essence, as well as manifesting the continuity and regenerative capacity of Chinese civilization. The following provides a concise analysis of the author's four investigative clusters.

Firstly, in terms of the theory of text-image interplay, the structural progression and aesthetic sensibilities of the Ming dynasty novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* exhibit striking parallels with Qiu Ying's panoramic scroll *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. The integration of pictorial elements into literary narration, as exemplified in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, established a precedent for the visually oriented textual strategies later perfected in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Wang Huaiyi critically re-examines Wu Han (吴晗)'s study of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* through the conscious use of graphic-textual methodology to analyze the relationship between Qiu Ying's scroll and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Through multifaceted analysis, including textually and visually, Wang demonstrates the socio-cultural foundations underlying the mutual permeation of vernacular fiction, scroll painting, and drama during the Ming-Qing period. Drawing from historical records and literati notes, he reconstructs the creative process shared by the two books: "Both works constitute transformative adaptations of earlier narrative traditions, progressively expanding their scope through the incorporation of contemporary elements, ultimately coalescing into innovative artistic wholes (王怀义, 2022, p.450)." Both works are common products of the social and cultural matrix of the late Ming period. *The Plum in the Golden Vase* exemplifies the seamless fusion of text and image—a synthesis that provided theoretical and practical frameworks for *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s own intermedial narratives. The diverse images in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (e.g., Li Pinger's portrait 李瓶儿传真) not only propel plot development but also visualize characters' aesthetic sensibilities and psychological depths, serving as documentary reflections of contemporary

social life and concepts. Similarly, *A Dream of Red Mansions* abounds with painterly textual techniques and narratively charged artifacts, both of which are intentionally borrowed and used, but can also be viewed as fortuitous coincidences. These intertextual engagements result from Cao Xueqin's deliberate stratigraphic mimesis of earlier traditions and the work's shared connection with its socio-cultural matrix behind these serendipities.

Secondly, in terms of the inheritance of specific texts, the poetic corpus in *The Collected Works of Tang Yin* resonates profoundly with the imagery, plot structures, and philosophical motifs in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Wang Huaiyi documents five direct references to Tang Yin in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and thirty comparative analyses between Tang's verses and Cao's text, revealing pervasive "Tang Yin elements" in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. While pure textual philology is not the monograph's primary focus, Wang establishes robust correlations through empirical rigor. Yu Pingbo (俞平伯) previously posited that Daiyu's iconic "Burial of Fallen Blossoms" (黛玉葬花) episode derives from Tang Yin's floral elegies: "Tang Bohu (唐伯虎) dwelled at Peach Blossom Cottage. Before his hall lay half an acre planted with peonies. In bloom, he invited Wen Zhengming (文徵明) and Zhu Zhishan (祝枝山) to compose verses beneath them, reveling day and night, occasionally wailing in anguish. As petals fell, he commanded servants to gather each meticulously into brocade sacks, burying them east of the herb garden, penning 'Fallen Blossom Poems' as requiem (俞平伯, 2010, p.206)" Daiyu's *Ode to Peach Blossoms* (《桃花行》) further demonstrates direct lineage to Tang's *Ode to the Peach Blossom Hermitage* (《桃花庵歌》). Wang expands this connection, arguing that Tang Yin's life experience and spiritual interests permeates the lifeworld of *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s characters—Tang's sorrow resonates with Daiyu's, while the illusory quality of his paintings mirrors the Taixu Illusory Realm (太虚幻境)'s ontological ambiguities. Crucially, Wang distinguishes between Tang's and Cao's mimetic practices: "In Tang Yin's works, certain images and scenarios merely replicate earlier poetic conventions without adding substantive innovation. In contrast, *A Dream of Red Mansions* transforms almost all the images and motifs through creative reinvention, integrating them as organic components of its artistic totality (王怀义, 2022, p.308)" Thus, Cao Xueqin transcends mere imitation, performing a genius reconfiguration—breathing new life into established literary conventions through visionary adaptation.

Thirdly, in terms of the visualization of specific artworks, Tang Yin's *HaiTang ChunShui Tu* (《海棠春睡图》, *Spring Slumber Under Crabapple Blossoms*) and Qiu Ying's *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* serve as direct visual-textual anchors for *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s descriptive passages. Wang points out that while *HaiTang ChunShui Tu*'s attribution to Tang Yin remains contested, historical records confirm his creation of *HaiTang Meiren Tu* (《海棠美人图》, Crabapple Beauty), and inscribed it with the verse: "Faded are the spring winds that once adorned her face, Pitable the butterfly powder and bee frenzy; To whom might she now confide her thoughts? A heart brimming with spring entrusted to crabapple blossoms (褪尽东风满面妆, 可怜蝶粉与蜂狂; 自今意思和谁说? 一片春心付海棠。周道振, 2013, p.158)"

Significantly, Cao Yin (曹寅) owned a Beauty Painting (美人图) of Tang Yin's, which quite resembled *HaiTang ChunShui Tu*, suggesting Cao Xueqin's conscious inheritance from Tang Yin of this poetic-pictorial tradition. The painting's thematic essence visually resonates with scenes like "Daiyu's Spring Languor in Bamboo Lodge (潇湘馆春困发幽情)" and "Drunken Xiangyun Lying on a Peony Cushion (湘云醉卧芍药裯)", creating a graphic and textual intermedial dialogue that provides nutrients for the visibility and sensibility of the text in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The graphical structure of Qiu Ying's *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* further provides architectural prototypes for the Daguan Yuan—*A Dream of Red Mansions*'s symbolic "Han Palace". Wang delineates the narrative's cosmic-temporal framework: "From the primordial chaos of the Great Wasteland Mountain where Nüwa mended the heavens with smelted stones, the narrative unfolds through the bustling mortal realm of Changmen in Suzhou, to the cloistered world of Daguan Yuan where its heroines enact their tragic destinies—though to outsiders, they seemed to dwell in a gilded paradise—until beauty fades into twilight and souls return to the mirage of origins. Readers immersed in the novel's luxurious descriptions may overlook its cyclical structure: beginning and ending in primordial chaos, where painted realms and poetic transcendence achieve their ultimate synthesis (王怀义, 2022, p.372)" Wang Huaiyi emphasizes that, akin to the "Han Palace", the Daguan Yuan—a secluded enclave of young women—embodies a dual nature of enclosure and poeticism. This poetic essence arises from the protective seclusion, yet is fated to perish under the very constraints of its isolation.

Fourthly, on the textual recreation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*: one version of *A Dream of Red Mansions Paintings*, which has Leng Mei's seal on it, represents a pivotal visual reimagining of the novel's early manuscript traditions. Wang Huaiyi substantiates plausible social connections among Leng Mei, Cao Xuan (曹宣), and Cao Yin, noting their shared artistic engagements under the cultural patronage of the Kangxi Emperor (康熙)'s aesthetic regime. This historical nexus, Wang argues, renders Leng Mei's creative reinterpretations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* manuscripts possible. As Wang asserts: "Beyond *A Dream of Red Mansions Paintings*, I have identified eight additional works by Leng Mei explicitly engaging with *A Dream of Red Mansions* narratives. This demonstrates that Leng Mei not only possessed a profound familiarity with *A Dream of Red Mansions*, but also skillfully transmuted its narrative plots and iconic scenes into painted scrolls(王怀义, 2022, p.418)." The artistic recreation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* through works like Leng Mei's paintings, Sun Wen's *A Dream of Red Mansions Paintings* (孙温《红楼梦图》), Gai Qi's *Illustrated Odes to A Dream of Red Mansions* (改琦《红楼梦图咏》), and Wang Tizhai's *Preliminary Sketches for A Dream of Red Mansions* (汪惕斋《红楼梦粉本》) transcends mere textual illustration. These visual reinterpretations constitute acts of creative mimesis wherein painters' subjective consciousness transforms imitation into innovation. Through layered engagements with the source text—ranging from faithful scenographic reconstructions to symbolic reconfigurations—these artists reanimate Cao Xueqin's literary universe while imprinting their own aesthetic philosophies onto the

regenerative body of *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s cultural legacy.

The preceding four dimensions reveal that the mimesis in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a multilayered palimpsest that constantly rebirth through cultures. As Wang Huaiyi elucidates: “The novel’s creation drew inspiration—or more precisely, structural paradigms—from numerous pre-existing texts (including visual artifacts). These paradigms provided foundational templates for narrative events and scenographic development. When contextualized within broader art-historical trajectories, such scenes demonstrate intrinsic connections to analogous images, events, atmospheres, and their embedded emotional-intellectual complexes across Chinese art history (王怀义, 2022, p.54).” Yet modern readers, distanced from the novel’s original socio-cultural milieu, often misinterpret Ming-Qing literati conventions as either obscure technicalities or unprecedented innovations. Without generations of rigorous philological scholarship, *A Dream of Red Mansions*’s poetic essence risks becoming inaccessible to contemporary audiences, leading to the diminish of a cultural legacy. Wang’s binary approach—excavating the novel’s cultural matrix while affirming Cao Xueqin’s genius in synthesizing this organic mimesis—echoes Jiang Kongyang’s aesthetic principle: “The creation of beauty constitutes a cumulative emergence through layered stratifications.” *A Dream of Red Mansions* epitomizes this process, with its artistic creation emerging from layered mimetic practices. Wang conceptualizes the mimesis-creation dialectic through the paradox of “si shi er fei” (似是而非, semblance yet difference): “The ‘semblance’ (shi) resides in adherence to conventions; the ‘difference’ (fei) manifests as originality. Their dynamic tension embodies the complex interplay between tradition and innovation. Great artists simultaneously pay homage to tradition through patterned mimesis and transcend it through creative reinvention to realize themselves (王怀义, 2022, p.54)”

Wang’s *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions* unveils this stratified mimetic architecture from the perspective of text-image interaction analysis. In artistic creation, multi-sourced, multi-layered imitations weave a reticulate, stratified structure, whose nodal connections—gradually absorbed into historical currents—can no longer be fully retained or reconstructed. Ordinary individuals maintain only a fragile connection to the overall civilization of mankind, their contributions sifted through time’s sieve. Exceptional artists, by contrast, occupy more nodes and broader room within this “stratified network,” struggling to survive through repeated historical folding—and this is how classics are born. For contemporary receivers, “we can get a whole liberal education simply by picking up one conventional poem and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature (Northrop Frye, 1971, p.100).” As the summit of Chinese classical aesthetics, *A Dream of Red Mansions* contains infinite entry points for reconstructing China’s artistic genealogies. Modern criticism tends to isolate artistic “iceberg tips” while neglecting submerged mimetic networks. When critics focus solely on surface-level masterpieces, residual mimesis is then mythologized as divine genius, and the even more distant mimetic remnants become mere symbols. Our scholarly imperative

lies in reactivating lost connections across this network—restoring marginalized voices like Qiu Ying and Leng Mei while strengthening synchronic-diachronic linkages. *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions* reclaims the previously silenced painters such as Qiu Ying and Leng Mei, as well as restoring both the socio-cultural background and the various mimetic sources of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Through an empiricist approach, the book catalyzes the revival of the Chinese artistic spirit. In doing so, it fulfills the highest calling of humanistic scholarship: transforming stratified cultural memories into living, regenerative forces.

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