

Dream of the Red Chamber and the Emergence and Evolution of Narrative Modernity in Chinese Literature

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Abstract:

Discussions on the inception of modernity have been ongoing since the last century, with some scholars attributing it to the late Qing or late Ming periods, and most still place it within the May Fourth Movement. Nevertheless, *Dream of the Red Chamber* already harbors factors of modernity's inception and growth. Starting from the narratological perspective of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, this paper takes root in the cultural context of China's native culture. It explores the book's manifestation of the initial pattern of Chinese narrative modernity and its significance to the literary history of the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China and the later generations through its transcendence of Chinese classical novels when comparing its difference with western narratology. Through the dimensions of Layout of Discursive Traps, Motive Power Component, and The Aesthetic Construction of Time, borrowing from indigenous narrative theories of China, it is discovered that at the birth of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, China's indigenous narrative modernity had already emerged and continued to evolve and spread, which merged with Western modernity during the late Qing period, constructing a fusion of Chinese and Western literary discourse fields.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Chamber*; Chinese Narratology; Modernity of Chinese Literature.

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, definitions of modernity have increased, with modernity's demand for new linguistic forms precipitating the formation of novel language paradigms. Concurrently, emerging thematic concepts in novels have been instrumental in transforming historical value systems, becoming a focal point in the historiography of literature. *Dream of the Red Chamber*, representing the pinnacle of development in ancient Chinese vernacular novels, embodies a humanistic modernity that "enlightens the people." Within its narrative scope, encompassing themes of human destiny, female consciousness, tragic implications, and Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideologies, the novel serves as a vessel for the author's profound interrogation and reflection upon feudal ethics and power structures. It reveals aspirations for romantic relationships and love and freedom, epitomizing an awakening of individual consciousness intrinsic to the soil of China, devoid of feudal contexts, representing literature's awareness and response to the trajectory of the times and societal change. The innovative significance of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has become a consensus in academic circles.

In China, Redology's emergence, development, and flourishing have shifted interpretations of the book's narrative

from politically oriented to literary, ultimately culminating in the historical proposition of humanistic awakening and humanism^[1]. In the West, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been categorized as a narrative evolving along the path of realism, serving as an indispensable component in the construction and transformation of Chinese modernity discourse, revealing the "metafictional consciousness."^[2] However, contemporary discussions surrounding the modernity of Chinese literature often pivot around the May Fourth Movement, suggesting an indebtedness to and compensatory narrative constructed from Western cultural and symbolic capital. Despite the clamor of the subsequent surge of "late Qing modernity," which emphasizes themes of decadence in desire, values, justice, and knowledge, modernity is implicitly characterized as a culturally oriented phenomenon focused on the aesthetic realm, subtly reflecting Western modern literary filters such as romanticism, the lost generation, and disillusionment^[3]. Scholars like Li Oufan(1996) have also posited the idea of "late Ming modernity" in Chinese literature, yet scrutiny and moral regulation persisted within works like *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, indicating that the burgeoning romanticism remained subject to examination and critique under Confucianism^[4]. Hence, though it is impossible

and absurd to pinpoint a specific work as the genesis of „narrative modernity,“ many narrative factors in *Dream of the Red Chamber* have already indicated the occurrence of „modernity.“ Hence, this paper aims to explore the modernity factors of narrative embedded in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and their influence on the subsequent evolution of modern narrative discourse, specifically from a narrative perspective.

2. Exploring the Modernity of Narrative in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Brian Henderson once remarked, “The operation of a myth—both its construction from actual conflicts and its impact on audience has to do with the time in which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of.”^[5] The scholarly investigation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a discourse rooted in the backdrop of China’s cultural and political transformations. The “atmosphere of modernity” surrounding the *Dream of the Red Chamber* precisely corresponds to the era of its inception. The narrative era and spatiotemporal setting of *Dream of the Red Chamber*—the Ming and Qing dynasties—marked the transition from classical narrative dominated by poetry and prose to the maturity of novelistic narrative. It also encapsulates the innovative endeavors of its author, leading to the modern narrative qualities inherent in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. With the flourishing emergence of Western literary theory and its dissemination and reception in China, previous scholars often looked to Western narrative theory as a yardstick for evaluating the narrative characteristics of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. However, they tended to overlook the distinct “narrative traps,” “motivating elements,” and “temporal structures” within the novel, which have already surpassed old narrative paradigms, presenting new openings and temporal dimensions.

2.1 The Narrative of the Stone: Layout of Discursive Traps

In the narrative tradition of classical Chinese novels before *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the foundation was undoubtedly rooted in the real world. As Andrew H. Plaks(1996) wrote in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, „In both the historical and the fictional branches of the tradition, the sense that what is recorded is ultimately true either true to fact or true to life remains a fundamental underpinning of narrative transmission, despite the obvious untruths of hyperbole, supernatural detail, or ideological distortion.“^[6] The style of classical vernacular Chinese novels generally employed fictitious narrators to mend the gap between reality and fiction, still confining the stories within the constraints of real-time

and space, thus framing reality beneath surface appearances. For example, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was a re-creation by the author based on various folk tales, intending to depict the historical patterns of “the rise and fall of empires.” As Chen Pingyuan(1997) put it, “Generally speaking, the narration of ancient Chinese novels mostly adopts the tone of an omniscient storyteller.”^[7] However, while still possessing certain storytelling qualities, *Dream of the Red Chamber* questioned and corrected this mode of narration through the “narrative of the stone,” undoubtedly exemplifying the modernity of its narrative beyond previous works.

Wang Bin once introduced the concept of “narrative groups” to provide a new perspective for understanding the narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, where the main narrator shares different levels of narrative content, forming an organized narrative “hierarchy system” where higher-level narrators “provide” lower-level narrators or lower-level narrators “derive” higher-level narrators, but always maintaining the ambiguity of the main narrator’s identity, thus delaying the logic of discourse^[8]. In the narrative group of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, there are six narrators, including the stone, with the stone serving as the main narrator. This new type of discourse does not merely follow Bakhtin’s “polyphony,” where the author manipulates the thoughts of others (agreement or refutation) to expound their views. Instead, it expands the plot through layers of causality links in the repeated changes of the main narrator, creating a graspable mysterious meaning^[9]. This is undoubtedly the indigenous uniqueness of *Dream of the Red Chamber* compared to Western modern narrative theory.

The concept of “stones being able to speak” first appeared in *Zuo Zhuan · Eighth Year of Duke Zhao*, where it metaphorically refers to the people’s grievances reaching a point where they can no longer remain silent under authoritarian rule or oppressive oppression. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, as the subject of speech, the stone traces the past and present, telling the story and reflecting the dissolution of real motives by this kind of discursive trap. It goes beyond the traditional cliché of “revealing the various darkness and contradictions in the later period of feudal society and its insurmountable internal contradictions”^[1]. It highlights the background of “proving emptiness” and “proving emotion” through the stone. The stone, originating from the servant of the God of Jade, lived a life repaying tears with Jangju grass obtained through irrigation. Yet, it “unfits to mend the azure sky” and, after receiving magical powers from two masters, disappears into the mortal world. The stone’s narration exists both within “reality” and beyond the “mundane,” with natural chrono-

logical order, the time changes of things, and specific temporal and spatial orders in dreams or illusions, starting from the illusion and ending with awakening, blurring the boundary between reality and virtuality.

The importance of the “stone narrative” is acknowledged in the commentary of the Chin-yen Chai of the Jiaxu edition: „Brother Stone must record all emotional cases throughout the book.“^[10] The stone serves as an omniscient narrator and a limited participant, narrating his observations in a calm and cruel tone. Sometimes, the stone narrates in the first person, creating a sense of intimacy, such as, “Let the stupid creatures speak in detail.” Other times, it narrates in the third person, reminding the readers, as in, “At this time, he recalled when he was in the Great Wilderness Mountains, under the Green Ridge Peak, how desolate and lonely it was, if not for the arrival of the two mendicants, how could he have seen such a world?” However, its narrative mixes the first-person and third-person, born within the world but transcending all phenomena. It is precisely the diversification of novelistic narrative tendencies exhibited in the stone narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the breaking of the dominance of the storyteller’s narration, and the mutual supplementation, comparison, and mutual confirmation of the “narrative group” that dismantles the virtual strategy of storytelling in classical vernacular Chinese novels and seeks the motive for truth, thereby constructing an indistinguishable maze inside and outside the “narrative trap.” When Bao Yu’s experiences become the central narrative, they are supplemented by the stone’s witness and reminiscence. When the stone narrates its own life, it is confirmed by the omniscient and omnipotent narrator.

2.2 Motive Power Component: Characteristics of Multiple and Co-existing Elements

The motive power component refers to the factors that gradually unfold and vary the novel’s characters, plots, thoughts, emotions, environments, and atmospheres under the reader’s gaze. It serves as a causal relationship, constructing a continuous process from motive to outcome, achieving the occurrence and resolution of suspense. Motive power can come from the narrator, characters, sentences, phrases, and words in the text, including narrator and character motive elements: the former resides in external imagination. In contrast, the latter resides in internal illusions. Surrounding the motive power, secondary motive elements, auxiliary motive elements, and non-motive elements can be derived. Wang Bin (2017) believes that secondary motive elements are non-primary motive elements; auxiliary motive elements are motive elements that modify the actions of primary and secondary motive elements; non-motive elements are static motive elements

^[11].

The modern narrative feature highlighted by *Dream of the Red Chamber* lies precisely in its use of multiple and co-existing motive elements to construct the text and plot, proficiently employing both narrator motive elements and character motive elements, as well as secondary motive elements, auxiliary motive elements, and non-motive elements. It differs not only from Western novels, where character motive elements dominate but also from classical Chinese novels before *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which had larger plot variations and faster pacing mainly driven by narrator motive elements. Because of this, Lu Xun evaluated previous novels as superior in legendary “plot novels” while *Dream of the Red Chamber* excels in realistically depicting “human novels.”^[12]

Firstly, *Dream of the Red Chamber* excels in active motive element narration. Taking the narrator’s motive element as an example, in ancient Chinese vernacular novels, the narrator adopts an overt posture, assuming the identity of a storyteller and referring to oneself as „I“ while addressing the readers as “gentlemen.” For example, when explaining the manuscript’s origin, *Dream of the Red Chamber* includes the following passage: „Gentlemen, where do you think this book came from? Speaking of the reasons, although it sounds absurd, it is quite interesting upon closer examination. Allow me to explain the origin of this book so that the readers may understand it clearly.“ At the same time, the narrator brings out the motive through three stages: the narrator introduces the characters, the characters drive the plot, and the plot undergoes variations. In the first chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the story is introduced through the creation myth of Nüwa mending the heavens. Then the plot is elaborated through the dialogue between the stone, a monk, and a Taoist, transitioning from the external to the internal story.

Secondly, Cao Xueqin is adept at using secondary motive elements, auxiliary motive elements, and non-motive elements. He uses minor characters as motive elements to create major plots but never overuses them; once used, they are discarded. For example, Jia Rui, who is greedy and lustful, falls in love with his sister-in-law Wang Xifeng but ultimately dies in the “lovers’ trap” set by Wang Xifeng. His short life is a reflection of the theme of “treasure of wind and moon,” “prove emptiness,” and “prove color.” He uses characters within the text to bring out characters outside and within the text to dissolve characters outside the text. For example, in Chapter 104 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a monk’s remark, “The jewel in the casket bides till one shall come to buy, the jade pin the drawer hides, waiting its time to fly.” strikes at Jia Yuanchun’s poetry competition in the past, where Jia Yuan-

chun was afraid of delaying his crossing the river and thus abandoned his rescue of his lifesaver, Zhen Shiyin, thereby revealing Zhen Shiyin's true identity in the following forty chapters. *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses estrangement and imbalance to create motive elements and then continues to let motive elements take effect, such as using the "narration by others" estrangement, that is, telling the story and experiences of characters through the mouths of others. To emphasize the "first time" and create a sense of estrangement, the author usually selects "strangers." For example, in Chapter Three, when Lin Daiyu enters the Jia Mansion, the author, through Lin Daiyu's perspective, introduces the scenery and etiquette of the Jia Mansion from the inside out. Later, through the perspective of Liu Laolao, the author provides a negative description of the Jia Mansion and Grand View Garden. Compared to Lin Daiyu, Liu Laolao is not only a stranger for the first time but also from a different class and world. Therefore, when Liu Laolao describes everything, it gives us a completely different feeling and understanding: estrangement.

But in early Chinese classical vernacular novels, where the emphasis was on plots (especially in cases and dramas), the causality was close, the motive elements were numerous, and those below secondary motive elements were few, making the narration tight and swift. For example, in some excerpts from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Lord Guan's actions are driven by the motive of bravery and loyalty, leading to a swift and action-packed narration. However, these narratives rely heavily on plot twists, parallels, and gradual constructions, emphasizing plot rather than emotions.

2.3 Circular Recurrence: The Aesthetic Construction of Time

Bakhtin analyzed the temporal and spatial forms of the novel, distinguishing between "legendary time" and "secular time."^[13] Legendary time involves a series of brief episodes corresponding to various adventures, creating a super-temporal blank space between the starting and ending points of the plot, organized by special moments of "suddenness" and "inevitability." Secular time, on the other hand, is closely intertwined with legendary time in the novel's plot. The protagonist's life path replaces the blank space beyond legendary time. However, this secular life path is determined by chance, characterized by crises and transformations, becoming the temporal form of this genre.

Expanding on Bakhtin's theory of time, modern time should encompass both "individual experiential time" and "collective memory time." From the perspective of "individual experiential time," classical Chinese novels often exhibit a "non-personalized" characteristic, excluding in-

dividual psychological interventions in the length of time. For example, in *Journey to the West*, the unchanging nature of the master and disciples without aging represents a form of "legendary time." However, *Dream of the Red Chamber* transcends Bakhtin's view of time by introducing a broader scale—"reincarnation," which endows individual secular time with a greater sense of eternity. Viewing from the perspective of "collective memory time," narrative time is a carrier of collective memory. Before *Dream of the Red Chamber*, classical Chinese novels often reflected the core philosophy of Chinese "ontology of life," lamenting human life's limitations and the world's infinity based on the "public memory of time."

Unlike previous works, *Dream of the Red Chamber* employs the metaphor of time characterized by macroscopic fuzziness and microscopic clarity, symbolizing the entire Chinese view of time and life. It simultaneously considers both the "individual experiential time" and "collective memory time," surpassing Bakhtin's view of time.

In the first chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the blind Taoist and the leprous monk convey the concept of "reincarnation" through *Song of Goodness and Regrets*, initiating a cycle of process and endpoint, metaphorically representing the cyclical nature of time. Firstly, there is the blurring of mythological and religious times. The entire process of Stone's transformation, reincarnation, and return in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is difficult to express in chronological form. Secondly, the mundane world's living background is also blurred. *Dream of the Red Chamber* never explicitly states the specific dynasty and era but ambiguously says, "Why bother to be concerned about the age?" Although the novel contains markers with dynastic connotations, it cannot be conclusively attributed to the Qing Dynasty. This macroscopic temporal narrative creates a sense of absurdity, remoteness, and ambiguity, separating the characters from the material world and reuniting them with the "cycle" view of life and death.

In contrast to the ambiguity of macroscopic time, the "nodes" of microscopic time are clear and embedded in the "macroscopic" framework. The meticulous depiction of scales such as days, hours, and minutes throughout the novel ensures a seamless integration of "narrative time" and "storytime." The clear delineation of micro-temporal details such as birthdays, deaths, Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and seasons highlights the integration with the grander time.

The coexistence of macroscopic and microscopic time in *Dream of the Red Chamber* emphasizes a unique temporal construction distinct from previous works, manifesting a modern aesthetic of narrative by combining individual experiential tragedies with the collective "cycle," resolv-

ing the dichotomy of life and death, and highlighting the modernity of narrative aesthetics.

3. The Influence of the Narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on Later Generations

The narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber* served as a vanguard of modernity, exerting a broad and profound influence on the later period, especially from the late Qing Dynasty to the May Fourth Movement. The reception of *Dream of the Red Chamber* by late Qing intellectuals was imbued with a Westernized perspective, regarding it as not just a novel but a political, ethical, social, philosophical, and moral narrative. These new classifications indicate the beginning of a new intellectual and conceptual era. This reclassification of the literary style of *Dream of the Red Chamber* brought about a new narrative style. Not only did numerous subsequent novels feature protagonists obsessed with the Red Chamber, but there was also a proliferation of “rewritings” and “imitations” of *Dream of the Red Chamber*: examples include Yu’s “Lin Daiyu’s Notes” (1918)^[14], Li’s “Ballad: Opening of New Daiyu’s Autumn Sorrow (*Dream of the Red Chamber*)” (1935)^[15] etc. Through various literary forms such as novels, dramas, and ballads, the characters and stories of *Dream of the Red Chamber* were reshaped and reconstructed, allowing the novel to be transmitted and read with new narrative interests in the modern context.

Following dismantling the narrative tradition of “literature for moral education” by *Dream of the Red Chamber*, late Qing novelists paid more attention to the symbolic meaning of the text, creating and continuing traditions while demonstrating breakthroughs and resistance to tradition through symbols within and outside the text. Numerous “new terms” appeared in late Qing novels, which no longer simply pointed to a specific meaning but served as symbolic representations, showcasing the modern characteristics of late Qing novels: both resisting tradition and sympathizing with reliance on tradition. In late Qing political narrative novels, the modern individual consciousness of authors and characters often found expression through non-personal discourses (political, historical, collective, national, and ethnic discourses, etc.), demonstrating mutual support and revelation. In other words, an inherent logical connection often exists between modern and non-individual consciousness. As Yang Lianfen(2003) pointed out, “The exploration of the strange and transcendent aesthetic space, on the one hand, realizes the enlightenment ideal of the new novel, and is also an important symbol of the modernity transformation of novels in the late Qing Dynasty.”^[16] Leveraging the critical reversal of

narrative symbolism in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, late Qing novels’ reconstruction of metaphysical public symbols primarily embodies the inheritance of the traditional literary function of moral education and discourse. Still, it imbues metaphysical public symbols with suspicion and deconstruction of tradition through modern individual consciousness. As a result, genres like novels of human emotions and stories of the bizarre gradually transitioned from “public education” to “private mockery,” modernity at the level of symbolic representation often manifested a tendency towards mockery. Through the mimicry and subversion of traditional material and technological symbols, late Qing novels conveyed a unique modern emotional experience, such as in „New Wild Words Exposed,“ where Chinese generals used superhuman intelligence and flying ships to conquer seventy-two European countries. They expressed desires and anxieties for a prosperous and powerful homeland through self-ridicule and self-flagellation, thus revealing a literary modernity that resisted tradition while sympathizing with dependence on tradition at the level of symbolic representation, embodying a knowledge-based theory attached to the imagination under its influence, and then transforming into an imagination of urban culture and modern life.

However, as a “novel of human emotions,” *Dream of the Red Chamber* continued to influence the Republic of China and later generations. The influence of *Dream of the Red Chamber* on early Republican novels can be seen in two aspects: represented by the classical emotional novels such as “The Jade Pear,” the tragic love story of Bao and Daiyu provided a direct reference for the writing of early Republican novelists. In vernacular novels, the early Republican novelist Xu Zhenya commented on Yao Yuanchu’s *The Record of Yan Cu Zhenxian: Dream of the Red Chamber* is the ancestor of eternal love stories. “Yao’s work, fragrant and sad, truly seems to emulate *Dream of the Red Chamber* but also surpasses it profoundly. Simply put, whether Yao intended this book or not, there is no need to have *Dream of the Red Chamber* beforehand, nor is it necessary to be without *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Being able to read *Dream of the Red Chamber* well, and not being confined by it, one’s thoughts can surpass it.”^[17] It can be seen that the modern narrative beneath the “romantic” surface of *Dream of the Red Chamber* was further developed in this context even later in Zhang Ailing’s *Nightmare in the Red Chamber*^[18], Linyutang’s *Moment in Peking*^[19], and Gao Yang’s *Dream of Broken Red Mansions*^[20].

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China and then to the May Fourth Movement, the modern narrative of *the Dream of the Red Chamber* continued to exert

influence after being recognized and evaluated by the socio-political context. Whether it was promoting the inheritance of Chinese literary “modernity” or the reflection and transformation of “modernity” during the May Fourth Movement under Western scrutiny, it is evident that considering *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a starting point is not an exaggeration.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the positioning and examination of modernity in Chinese literature should not be limited to Western influences. To reexamine China’s indigenous and flourishing modernity, it is worthwhile to explore works like *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which originated in a time untouched by Western influence. Therefore, the emergence of modernity in late Qing and May Fourth literature after *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents a convergence and dialogue of two streams of modernity, giving rise to the unique brilliance of Chinese literature. This study explores the modernity embedded in the narrative traps, driving forces, and temporal structures of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, highlighting its profound influence on subsequent generations. However, this essay’s recognition of the narrative of Chinese modernity remains fragmented and isolated, with the narrative theories it relies on unable to fully break away from Western literary theoretical discourse, making it difficult to integrate China’s existing literary theories from pre-Qin times into a coherent system. Additionally, exploring the modernity of *Dream of the Red Chamber* from a symbolic perspective may also prove to be a beneficial approach. Therefore, if we consider historical exploration and theoretical construction of Chinese modernity as part of the process of modernity itself, can we truly say that modernity has been fully realized?

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