

Cultural Memory

—A Dream of Red Mansions

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Abstract: This paper applies the theory of cultural memory, proposed by Jan Assmann, to the study of the Chinese classical novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The first part of this paper introduces the historical development of Cultural Memory theory and its features. In the second part of the paper, it applies Cultural Memory theory to the narrative structure and novel characters research of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Through analysis, the complexity and inherent contradictions in the narrative structure of *A Dream of Red Mansions* provide evidence for the hypothesis that *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a combination of *Mirror for The Romantic* and *The Story of Stone*. *A Dream of Red Mansions* may have more than one author, besides Cao Xueqin, another author is Cao Xueqin's elder, who experienced the rise and fall of the Cao family firsthand. This also explains the contradictions in the character images in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, especially the persona of Jia Baoyu, which consisted of the authors' life experience and ideal personality. The novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* has a dual nature of cultural memory.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu.

1. Introduction

French social psychologist Maurice Halbwachs proposed the theory of Collective Memory in his 1925 book "*The Social Framework of Memory*", stating that memory has a social basis and can only be generated through interactions with others [1]. After the end of World War II, the memories and descriptions of the past by the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany were greatly influenced by their respective ideologies when facing the crimes committed by Germany during World War II. The number of participants and victims of World War II gradually decreased over time, making it increasingly urgent to integrate conflicting memories to build a foundation for the future.

In this context, German Egyptologist Jan Assmann proposed the theory of Cultural Memory based on the Halbwachs Collective Memory theory. He further subdivided collective memory into communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory is a memory that is born in the daily lives and interactions of collective members in a society. Its form is relatively casual and relies on oral transmission to be passed down from generation to generation among individuals. After three or four generations, it gradually disappears due to the disappearance of witnesses; Cultural memory is a set of texts, images, rituals, etc. that are repeatedly used in a society, with a

formal form and maintained by professionals, dating back thousands of years. Through cultural memory, members of society are able to recognize and consolidate their identities, form social consensus, and achieve consistency in collective decision-making in society [2].

The use of cultural memory theory to study *A Dream of Red Mansions* is still almost blank in China. This article attempts to apply it to the study of the narrative structure and character images of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and explores the unique nature of this novel.

2. Narrative Structure: Memory of Stone

The complexity of the narrative structure of *A Dream of Red Mansions* comes from the complexity of its author's problem. Professor Chen Weizhao from the Chinese Department of Fudan University proposed in his paper *Who is the Author of A Dream of Red Mansions?* that in order to solve the problem of the author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it is necessary to clarify the three concepts of the original author, the finalist, and the author [3]. Before its completion, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* underwent a long-term accumulation of folk materials, and storytellers and opera performers who processed historical stories were all original authors. For example, Guan Hanqing, who created *The Single Knife Meeting*, was one of its original authors; and Luo Guanzhong, who summarized the materials of past dynasties and wrote them into a popular novel, is both the finalist and the author.

The finalist of the first 80 chapters of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is Cao Xueqin, therefore Cao Xueqin is the author of the first 80 chapters of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, but the original author may have been someone else. In the annotations, Zhiyanzhai explained the relationship between the novel content and Cao Yin, but the relationship between Cao Yin and Cao Xueqin still cannot be concluded due to a lack of materials:

Writing about Kangxi's southern tour through visiting relatives, expressing nostalgia for the past and feelings for the present in one's heart. Yuan-chun's visit reflects the story of Qianlong's southern tour reception. Who has experienced it before? Sigh, this is the story of Xitang. Xitang is the study of Cao Yin [4].

There are also different opinions about the birth year of Cao Xueqin, but most of them indicate that Cao Xueqin was only a young man when his family was raided [5]. Therefore, it is still doubtful whether he could have had the life experience to create *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and *A Dream of Red Mansions* provides a possibility for the existence of another original author's viewpoint.

The original author of *A Dream of Red Mansions* may have been "Stone", and Cao Xueqin was only the writer. In the first chapter of the Jiaxu edition, the narrator introduces the origin of the book to the readers, which is, it was an account of the Stone's rejection for re-pairing heaven, its transformation and conveyance to the world of men by the Buddhist of Infinite Space and the Taoist of Boundless Time, and the joys and sorrows, partings and encounters, warm and cold treatment from others it had experienced there [6].

Then, the circulation of the novel was introduced. Firstly, the Taoists copied *The Tale of the Stone* created by stone and renamed it "*The Record of the Passionate Monk*". Wu Yu-feng renamed it *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Kung Mei-hsi changed it to *Precious Mirror of Love*, and Cao Xueqin changed it to *Mourning-the-Red*. Zhiyanzhai annotated, if Cao Xueqin were to review, add, delete, who wrote the prologue? In other words, besides writing the opening prologue, Cao Xueqin only made annotations, additions, and deletions to the main text of the novel.

The main text of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is set in the first chapter, just like another title, which is *The Tale of the Stone*. The so-called story is a kind of memory. However, most of the narration in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is from an omniscient perspective, and Shi Tou only occasionally plays the role of narrator in the following chapters, such as Chapter 17-18 of the

Gengchen edition, "at this moment, I recall the desolation and loneliness of being at the foot of Qinggeng Peak in the barren mountains. If it weren't for the crazy monk and the lame Taoist who brought me here, how could I have seen such a world?" This may be the trace left by the original author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. As a witness to the rise and fall of the Cao family, Shi Tou wrote "*Shi Tou*" as the narrator. During the process of Cao Xueqin's writing, most of the traces of the first person narrative of the stone were removed.

Without a doubt, the story content of *A Dream of Red Mansions* or *Stone Records* is closely related to the family history of the Cao family. If the hypothesis that "the original author created the *Stone Chronicles*, and Cao Xueqin wrote the *A Dream of Red Mansions* on this basis" holds, then *A Dream of Red Mansions* can be seen as the intergenerational inheritance of family members' communication memories about the rise and fall of the family. The communication memories about the rise and fall of the family are processed into books by witnesses and non witnesses, and are formally preserved in written form. At the same time, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has a mythological background that runs through the entire book and a huge time span of story experiences in the setting (after no one knows how many generations or aeons), reflecting the characteristics of cultural memory. To this day, the influence and broad audience of *A Dream of Red Mansions* have propelled it from the realm of communicative memory to the realm of cultural memory. As a processed form of communicative memory, the novel form of *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been accompanied by a trend towards cultural memory transformation since its inception.

3. Characters: Mending the Sky

Princeton University professor Martin Kern proposed in *Cultural Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature: The Case of Qu Yuan and the Lisao* that the image of Qu Yuan echoes the political and cultural imagination of the Han Dynasty, and is reflected as a composite character image of Qu Yuan: prophet, ancestor, loyal minister, and poet. The Qu Yuan portrayed by Liu Xiang is the Qu Yuan in Liu Xiang's own image; and Liu Xiang's own voice was established by defining Qu Yuan's voice. The cultural memory of Qu Yuan by Han Dynasty people can be collectively referred to as the "Qu Yuan epic" [7].

Similarly, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the characters' images are also complex, especially the protagonist Jia Baoyu. Jia Baoyu's identity can be said to be a trinity of human, stone, and divine attendants, while also being a mirror image of Zhen Baoyu. It is a transformation of the original author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s personal experience in memory and a recreation of Cao Xueqin. But unlike the perfect image of Qu Yuan created by Han dynasty literati to express themselves, Jia Baoyu's image is more complex, reflecting the author's contradictory attitude towards the past and expectations for an ideal personality. The cultural memory constructed by Jia Baoyu as the core in *A Dream of Red Mansions* can be summarized as the "epic of mending the sky".

By reshaping memories, *A Dream of Red Mansions* imbues "mending the sky" with multiple layers of meaning. The most fundamental is the mission of "mending the sky" that the stone in mythology could not fulfill, and in reality, fulfilling family and social obligations to achieve the revival of the family is also "mending the sky" for Jia Baoyu. The regret of "mending the sky" in the origin myth turned into doubt and resistance after entering the real world, and ultimately Jia Baoyu's liberation can be seen as an inner and spiritual "mending the sky" [8].

Stones have the mission of repairing the sky, but as a piece that cannot be selected without materials, they do not possess the essence of fulfilling the mission of repairing the sky. Jia Baoyu's aversion to fulfilling family expectations in reality is also very evident. This resistance to innate mission reflects the author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*'s reflective attitude towards past life and is a denial of the traditional Confucian ideal personality.

The only mission that Jia Baoyu can achieve is personal liberation, that is, the "mending the sky" of the soul. The novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* ends with Baoyu becoming a monk, but the attachment to real life expressed by the stone, "this is a series of events before and after the body, Qian, who remembers to do a strange story", does not seem to have let go of the past appearance. The author of *A Dream of Red Mansions* still reminisces about the once prosperous scene of the family, but for the author, the most memorable thing is the repeatedly criticized *Affection*. The initial motivation for the original author of *A Dream of Red Mansions* was to reminisce about the past. In the first chapter of the novel, stone uses a lengthy discourse to explain the value of "the Tale of Stone" to Daoist, expressing concern for "the girls I have known myself during my young days".

Through Jia Baoyu's "Heaven Mending Epic", *A Dream of Red Mansions* not only reflects on the past, but also attempts to present a new ideal personality form. As Xia Zhiqing said, what Pao-yu is determined to give up is not only his sensual self but his active sympathy and compassion so that he may be released from his long obsession with suffering [9].

In the third chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu's appearance in *The Moon over the West River* seems to be a criticism but actually a praise. Xia Zhiqing uses the holy love of Christianity to explain Jia Baoyu's sympathy and compassion, demonstrating that the heretical elements in Jia Baoyu's thought are far from being summarized by the Confucian concept of "benevolence" [10]. Jia Baoyu went further on the path of deviation from tradition than his predecessors. For example, Du Shaoqing in "The Scholars" can still be described as a Wei and Jin dynasty playboy and a famous scholar, while Jia Baoyu still maintains respect for some Confucian classics (in the third chapter of the novel, Jia Baoyu said, "apart from the Four Books, there are too many fabrications"). His excessive intimacy with women around him in daily life and his childishness when facing the adult world are both unacceptable to the world. Jia Baoyu's "affection" or "lust" is manifested in his indiscriminate consideration for the girls around him, hoping that they can be born for him. This wish, although unrealistic, is an unprecedented personality form in the context of traditional Chinese culture.

A Dream of Red Mansions cannot be called an enlightenment novel, but the characters represented by Jia Baoyu clearly exhibit an enlightening color. Despite the dual tragedy of family and love as the content of the novel, *A Dream of Red Mansions* did not indulge in sadness and cannot extricate itself, but instead displayed the future through the reconstruction of memories.

4. Conclusion

As a novel with a history of over 200 years, *A Dream of Red Mansions* still surprises us with its seemingly infinite and expansive interpretive space. Starting from personal memories of the rise and fall of a family, to a novel passed down through copying and engraving, and now existing in three-dimensional forms such as drama, film, and games in modern times, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been embedded in the cultural memory of a large audience. Cao Xueqin already needs to reconstruct the life experiences experienced by the original author, and currently, the recipients of *A Dream of Red Mansions* are imagining a fictional experience with a modern perspective based on Cao Xueqin's reconstruction, constantly adding new content to the vast cultural memory.

Cultural memory comes from the past, but always stands in the present. Once, the unique image of Jia Baoyu in *A Dream of Red Mansions* refreshed the minds of Qing Dynasty readers. Nowadays, recipients are constructing the text of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from various perspectives, such as deconstruction, simulation, collage, and mixing, to transcend ancient and modern times. Integration, time travel, imitation, and reconstruction make *A Dream of Red Mansions* newer with time, integrating elite culture and popular culture.

The classic nature of *A Dream of Red Mansions* itself is the intrinsic driving force that attracts the generation of cultural memory, while the vast number of recipients and various media provide the driving force for its continuous creation of new meanings. Continuing in the form of cultural memory, *A Dream of Red Mansions* will continue to serve as a bridge connecting modernity and the past in the foreseeable future, surpassing the initial tragic memories and moving towards infinity in contemporary construction.

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