

Re-Creating Tradition in the Media Age: Adaptations of Dream of the Red Chamber

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Abstract. Dream of the Red Chamber, being one of the Four Great Classical Novels of China, holds a pivotal place within Chinese cultural history. That the text remains unfinished has bred a perennial tradition of continuations and adaptations, transforming it into a living field of cultural negotiation. Focusing on the ways the novel comes into being in the media age and such reconfigurations reconstruct cultural values, the present study employs textual analysis and comparative case studies for examination. The research considers Gao E's eighteenth-century continuation, two prominent television adaptations, and recent online rewriters within participatory digital media. The results show that where older adaptations stressed text fidelity and reduplication of Confucian moral closure, more recent versions evidence a movement toward commodification, aesthetically experimental form, and individuality and affect freedom as core values. User-generated rewritings from the twenty-first century subsequently signal audience intervention, reconfiguring receipt into active cultural production. The study concludes that Dream of the Red Chamber survives not as an immovable text but as an evolving cultural topography, where custom is endlessly reinterpreted and redefined according to shifting historical and media contexts.

Keywords: Dream of the Red Chamber, adaptation, culture industry, participatory culture, cultural values.

1. Introduction

A fascinating look at one of the Four Great Classical Novels of China, Dream of the Red Chamber reveals what life was like during the Qing dynasty, the Manchu dynasty that ruled China from 1644 to 1912. As a text, the novel is itself a masterpiece of Chinese literature, and it is a testament to its enduring legacy that the actual text of the novel has become a deeply culturally embedded work of literature which has played an enormous role in the construction of Chinese traditional culture and Chinese identity. Its status as an incomplete work made possible the tradition of continuations, revisions and adaptations of the novel which stretched on for many generations; from the sequels of the late 18th century through to more recent film and television adaptations made in the 21st century, each generation has sought to recreate the novel in a way that reflects the tastes and sensibilities of their own time and age.

This paper explores the afterlife of the novel Dream of the Red Chamber in contemporary China. With the development of new media such as satellite TV, online literature and social media, the

novel can be presented in a variety of forms of creative works in different media platforms. So it has caused much discussion among scholars on the values of culture, the relation between tradition and modernity. This paper discusses the afterlife of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and explores the influence of media on readers' perception of the novel.

This research focuses on one of the most popular Chinese novels in the world, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is a canonical novel with a huge part missing, and therefore has been widely adapted and interpreted by countless people in the past two centuries. The study of the adaptive afterlives of literary works is significant in terms of understanding how a literary work can sustain, resist or transform the cultural heritage in a changing social context, especially when the work has a long history. This research therefore focuses on the two major aspects in which *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been reinterpreted and reconstructed which are screen adaptations of the novel in the 20th and 21st centuries, and continuations and fan fictions on the Internet. Based on the textual analysis and comparative case studies of literary and audio-visual materials, this research aims at exploring the representations of characters, styles of narration and the audience responses, and combining them with the theories of adaptation studies, culture industry and participatory culture, in order to reveal the cultural dynamics of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as an adaptive cultural field in which cultural values are negotiated and transformed at different times. This research therefore takes screen adaptations and interpretations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* at different times as exemplary cases, and examines the power interaction between tradition, media and audience at different periods of time.

2. Theoretical framework

The first part of this paper is to take two TV adaptations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* published in 1877 and 2010 as the objects of discussion. In line with Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry theory and Hutcheon's adaptation theory, this paper is designed to examine the film adaptations from the perspectives of performance and cast, plot and theme and finally the audiences' feedback as appeared in the media. A comparative study of this nature aims at exploring the degree to which these film adaptations have captured the changing trends of Chinese culture and the diversity of cultural consumption in the Media Age.

In order to reflect on the adaptations of the television version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, we shall employ two theories: the culture industry and the adaptation theory. The culture industry, as presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, focuses on the impact of industrial and market forces upon the production of culture [1]. Under such an approach, cultural production is more than just artistic expression and is conditioned by commodification and standardization patterns as well. Through such an approach, we can scrutinize more critically the production decisions that were taken within the adaptations of the television version of the story and determine whether they reflect more general cultural and economic situations.

At the same time, adaptation theory offers another framework through which to view the re-creation of literary classics. Highlighting that adaptation is not simply a copying process of the source text but instead an interpretative act involved with dialogue both with the source itself and with the target medium, Hutcheon suggests that adaptations are determined both by the historical moment and by the target audiences' expectations [2]. In the example of the Chinese version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the approach facilitates the understanding of the way the divergent versions of the television drama interact both with the novel and with the creation of novel cultural connotations pertinent only to the period of their production.

Taken together, these models facilitate an analysis of adaptations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* both as product and as re-creative work. The culture industry model focuses on the institutional drivers of the media and commodification, and the model of adaptation foregrounds the interpretative and dialogic qualities of re-telling classic literature. Together, the models provide theoretical underpinning for the comparative analysis which follows, and for the particular issues of the question of casting and performance, narrative focus, and audience reaction.

3. Analysis

3.1. Actors and characterization

As the casting decisions for the 1987 and 2010 screen adaptations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* make clear, there exist varying product logic configurations based on both industry-cultural flows and adaptive negotiation with the source text.

In the 1987 version, the director Wang Fulin focused on fidelity to the source novel, and he hoped for uniform emotional depth throughout episodes. He brought professional adult players into the main characters for the entire 36-episode shoot, desiring continuity and psychological finesse in acting [3]. In the ensemble, Chen Xiaoxu's performance of Lin Daiyu gained praise for capturing the fragile poetic soul of the novel and upholding an adaptive form favoring cultural and textual connotation [3].

In the 2010 version, Li Shaohong took dual-casting choices—employing both child and adult actresses for playing characters such as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu at different life stages. This is reflective of the emphasis of the newest strategies of the media on youthfulness and broader market appeals. It is in alignment with the emphasis of the culture industry theory on the commodification of the culture goods produced for variable audiences [3].

Under the framework of adaptation theory, these strategies for casting betray the ways in which both versions interact with the parent text differently. The 1987 version does so through a process of continuity and respect; the 2010 version provides a fractured presentation that reconfigures the chronological and psychological development of known characters. Both disparate frames for a single theory prepare the groundwork for an expanded examination into the process of casting, narrative emphasis, and spectator response.

3.2. Story emphasis

It analyzes the way the 1987 and the 2010 television versions of *Dream of the Red Chamber* adapt their narrative emphases, informed by observations from the field of cultural industry and adaptation studies.

That version of 1987, directed by Wang Fulin, is famously unwavering in fidelity to the source text. In Wang's view, the novel "leaves no room for individual interpretation," and the version therefore adhered devotedly to mirroring every line [3]. That fidelity entails an interpretative approach privileging textual continuity over contemporary stylistic intervention and therefore harmonies with an adaptation understood as a dialogic performance deferring respect to the parent text [2].

In contrast, the 2010 adaptation directed by Li Shaohong reflects a different emphasis. It revisits the story through a visual and thematic lens that foregrounds the contrast between illusion and reality. As stated by the head writer Gu, the novel itself is deeply concerned with youth and the indistinct boundary between truth and fantasy, likening its philosophy to *The Matrix* [4]. Production

choices—along with decisions to involve youthful protagonists in the reimagining—indicate a thematic reorientation toward psychological development and modern resonance.

In light of the cultural industry paradigm, we could interpret such divergences as reactions toward variable market necessities. The narrative fidelity of the 1987 version sees it as a literary product for tradition and literary status. The 2010 version seems to refine the narrative for mainstream consumption, where sensory interaction and immediacy of themes become prominent elements—symptoms of commodification and entertainment-oriented thinking [1].

In adaptation theory, the two versions are different modes of dealing with the source text: the one seeks to preserve its moral and narrative integrity, and the other reorganizes narrative interest for the parameters of contemporary culture. This double contextualization of the text within the considerations of adaptation theory provides the basis for more nuanced comparative analysis in the subsequent sections, for example, audience reception.

3.3. Audience reception

The reactions toward the two versions of the television adaptation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* mark quite disparate viewer reactions with respect to the expectations of culture and media environment.

When it was released, the 1987 version was received enthusiastically throughout China. Scholarly comments and press reports credited its success with the contemporary re-creation of the novel's visual and affective beauty. The version kindled universal public interest, and it was remembered decades afterward with commemorative events—demonstrating its prolonged impact upon culture [5]. Such lasting fame would seem to reflect an alignment with the tradition-maintaining qualities of the version.

In contrast, the 2010 version generated considerable controversy immediately upon its debut. Media commentary criticized elements such as stylized costumes, unique hairstyle designs inspired by Kunqu opera, and a darker visual palette—many viewers found these departures from traditional expectations jarring [3]. Critics likened the series to modern pop dramas, suggesting that it diverged substantially from the source's cultural tone. These reactions highlight the tension between artistic reinterpretation and audience expectations.

This study explores how the divided audience in Hong Kong responded to two versions of the movie *Journey to the West* produced in the cultural industry within the media commodity approach. The media commodity approach studies the relationships between cultural products, audiences and media organizations. This study aims to investigate the relationship between media commodification and cultural familiarity, and how the audience responds and interprets the cultural products. For example, the general public in Hong Kong accepted the 1987 version of *Journey to the West* very much because it preserved the traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, the *Journey to the West* 2010 film is a modernized movie which has aroused a great deal of criticism from the audience, because the audience was unable to accept the change of original script and hence the values and beliefs of the Chinese culture were offended. The controversial film has demonstrated clearly that in order to make the film more popular to the audience, it may inevitably offend the audience because the modified part of the film will violate one of the values or beliefs that is highly cherished by the audience.

Through the analysis of audience responses, this study illustrates how different screen adaptations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* reflect shifts in cultural values and reveal the extent to which audiences accommodate diversity in cultural interpretation.

Considered together, the themes of casting and characterization and narrative focus and audience reception are deeply interwoven. And thus, we see two completely different modes of creativity at work in each of the two versions of the novel based on *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Whatever their differences, both are deeply connected to particular aspects of Chinese culture, society and economy. On the one hand, the uniform adult cast and its close adherence to the novel's structure as it is presented in the text in the 1987 TV serial adaptation confirm a view of culture that is totally in line with the themes of the whole script, with its assertion of continuity between past and present, and between high and popular culture. On the other hand, the multiple cast and visual emphasis on dynamic scenes in the movie version are far more in keeping with the fractured nature of our visual field in today's media-saturated urban environment. Beyond these obvious points, our comparative study has highlighted the considerable degree of audience variability and plasticity in audience reception to differing representations of cultural visions, and thus to differing screen versions of films like *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

4. Discussion

The continuing re-creations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* from the eighteenth century to the digital era illustrate its role as a site of participatory culture. As Jenkins has argued, participatory culture emerges when audiences move beyond passive consumption to actively engage in the production of new meanings [6]. This pattern is evident in the long history of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, beginning with Gao E's continuation of the unfinished novel in the late Qing dynasty. Gao's intervention was not merely an act of completion but an interpretive reconfiguration that reshaped the cultural and moral messages of the narrative. In this sense, the unfinished nature of the original text created fertile ground for readers to assume an active role in extending and redefining the story.

Bruns' idea of "produsage" shed additional light on the way the consumers and viewers of *Dream of the Red Chamber* turn into producers and consumers [7]. In the past centuries, such dynamic presented itself through sequels, commentaries, and stage adaptations freely circulating among the literati and the masses of viewers. In the present-day media culture, the same dynamic can be seen through online forums where the enthusiasts upload continuations, rewrites, and fan adaptations. Such processes dissolve the line between production and reception because the audiences participate in the text's cultural life and simultaneously consume and transform it.

In this process, not only are cultural values passed down but redefined. As Hall proposes, the culture texts themselves become locations where meaning is negotiated and not established [8]. The repeated adaptations and rewrites of *Dream of the Red Chamber* demonstrate the ways that successive historical eras highlight different values—from the moralized conclusion of the story by Gao E to the latest digital rewrites that emphasize individual sentiment or alternative social visions. In engaging with these re-creative acts, the users articulate their understandings of tradition, morality, and identity and thus make *Dream of the Red Chamber* a living cultural arena where the values are continually challenged and redefined.

An example of the intense life of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a participatory culture can be gleaned from comparing Gao E's official sequeling of the novel with more recent online rewrites available on user-created websites. Gao E's sequel, which ends with Lin Daiyu's early death and Jia Baoyu's shift toward religious renunciation, has been commonly understood as affirming classical moral codes compatible with late imperial Confucian morality [9].

Comparably, websites such as Jinjiang Literature City—China's largest woman-centered web fiction platform—feature immense fan rewritings of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. As of May 2025, the platform claimed roughly 72.4 million registered users reading millions of tales across the

gamut of genres, ranging from Denis-themes and fan re-tellings of classics [10]. Out of its top 100 most-read pieces back in 2022, 79 were listed under danmei (male–male romance), reflecting the very active state of user reimagining and reinterpretation [10]. Though actual statistics for the Dream of the Red Chamber adaptations are not publicly specified, the overall size of the platform very strongly suggests that its literary material—including classical text re-writings—has an enormous and actively involved reading population.

The revised versions of the novel either contradict or modify Gao E's original views and are sometimes even different from the original ending of the novel, in which Lin Daiyu dies and Jia Baoyu is confined by the social constraints of his time. The revised versions advocated for emotional autonomy and individual freedom, which is a concept highly relevant to today's society that values autonomy and individualism.

Because the interactive nature of the web site has obviously generated an enormous quantity of activity, we can take as evidence such matters as the enormous number of people who are registered with the site and the huge quantity of literature in the form of stories which have been produced using the interactive resources provided by the web site. This also suggests to our minds that the novel can still be seen as a living part of the culture of readers. One of the themes of this course has been that of the reader moving beyond the position of the passive consumer of a predetermined narrative and starting to see themselves as active creators of cultural meaning. What this then suggests is that this meaning is no longer inscribed within the fixed, or closed, structure of a text such as the Dream of the Red Chamber or indeed within the bounds of the novel or novelistic forms.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the literary and cultural politics of the numerous adaptations and reinterpretations of the most important novel in Chinese literature, Dream of the Red Chamber, in various time periods and media platforms. It examines the different approaches employed by the two most popular TV adaptations of the novel, the 1987 version and the 2010 version, with the former emphasizing the literary and aesthetic values that are distinctive to Chinese literature, while the latter adopting a modernist style and themes in order to reinterpret the novel. The paper also juxtaposes Gao E's late Qing continuation of the novel with more recent Internet-based adaptations and fictions. In terms of the ending of the novel, whether one follows the literary continuity of the novel or the discontinuity of its numerous adaptations, they all lead to the same destination, namely a change from a didactic ending reflecting Confucian moral values to a new ending which focuses on the pursuit of individualistic aspirations for the protagonist, including love, self-actualization and liberation.

This study aims to investigate the changing media practices in contemporary China and the impact thereof from the perspectives of adaptation theory, cultural industry theory, theories of participatory culture and produsage. The study focuses on how audiences interpret media contents and re-produce, re-adapt and re-transform media products in the course of the social interaction dialogue through the lens of an audience's reception and interpretation of the television adaptation of the Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber. The findings show that audiences' interpretations of media products could be regarded as acts of adaptations through the dialogue form and activity. The media product, Dream of the Red Chamber, became a "living cultural space" for the audience to engage in value contestations.

Although this study focused on selected cases, future research could extend to other media such as cinema, theater, and digital platforms, and integrate empirical analysis of online audience data. Overall, the analysis suggests that the vitality of Dream of the Red Chamber lies in its openness to

re-creation, and that its afterlife demonstrates both the resilience of tradition and the adaptability of cultural values in the media age.

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