

Viewing Early Globalization Through Imported Goods in Dream of the Red Chamber

Yijing Wang

*School of Business, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China
yijing_wang03@outlook.com*

Abstract. This paper employs textual analysis and case study methods to examine imported goods in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, systematically analyzing their categorization, origins, and cultural metaphors. Furthermore, it explores the impact of the flourishing trade between the 16th and 18th centuries on the material life and identity construction of the upper classes in the Ming and Qing dynasties, aiming to elucidate China's role and cognitive limitations during the early stages of globalization. The study reveals that the consumption practices of the Jia family—ranging from textiles and handicrafts to medicines and food—not only reflect the luxurious lifestyle and aesthetic tastes of the aristocracy at the time but also illustrate China's relationship with the outside world. Additionally, the research finds that the upper society depicted in *Dream of the Red Chamber* was materially interconnected yet intellectually conservative. This dichotomy between openness and isolation foreshadowed the eventual trajectory of the vast empire.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Imported Goods, Early Globalization

1. Introduction

As one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* serves as a microcosm of the upper-class society during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Scholars regard it as an encyclopedia of feudal Chinese society [1]. The work depicts the lifestyle of the feudal aristocracy, providing valuable textual material for the study of Ming and Qing culture. Representative foreign objects in the novel, such as the "peacock gold cape" and Siamese tea tributes not only enrich the narrative but also signify China's participation in global trade between the 16th and 18th centuries, highlighting its role as an integral part of early globalization.

From a globalization perspective, this paper aims to systematically examine the origins and usage of imported goods in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, exploring their cultural connotations, the global trade trends they reflect, and the perceptions of the elite class in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The significance of this study is threefold. First, from a literary standpoint, it employs material culture to analyze the classic text, revealing the functional mechanisms of imported goods in character portrayal and narrative construction. Second, it investigates the symbolic meaning of these foreign items in upper-class society, discussing their association with power, status, and their influence on consumption patterns and aesthetic preferences. Third, this paper seeks to reflect on the attitudes of

the elite class toward imported goods as depicted in the novel, shedding light on China's role and historical trajectory in the context of early globalization.

2. Literature review

As a representative work of Chinese classical literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides a detailed portrayal of feudal aristocratic life, playing a significant role in historical research. Numerous academic studies on foreign objects in *Dream of the Red Chamber* have laid a rich theoretical foundation for this paper. For instance, the plaster "Yifuna" used by Qingwen during her illness not only reflects Baoyu's thoughtfulness but also subtly hints at Xifeng's health crisis through the narrative that "Xifeng had been accustomed to using it" [2]. However, existing literature predominantly focuses on the analysis of individual objects, lacking a comprehensive collation and analysis of imported goods as a whole.

Secondly, research on Ming and Qing foreign trade from a global history perspective provides a theoretical basis for this study. For example, Zhang Xiruo's research offers an important theoretical framework for interpreting *Dream of the Red Chamber* from the perspective of global material culture flow [3]. In her study of Western objects, Luo Juan points out that items such as woolen fabric, glassware, and Western mechanical devices appearing in *Dream of the Red Chamber* reflect the influence of maritime trade on aristocratic life during the Qing Dynasty, offering insights into the routes and scale of overseas goods entering the capital at that time [4]. Additionally, Gu Zhengrong, in his review of Western object studies in *Dream of the Red Chamber* over the past century of "New Redology", further emphasizes that imported goods in the novel serve important narrative functions, acting as symbols of status and mediums for cultural collision and power dynamics [5]. Nevertheless, existing research lacks a systematic analysis of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a case study to explore its imported goods from the perspective of early globalization.

3. Trade routes and driving forces of imported goods

3.1. Maritime Silk Road and overland trade

The imported goods in *Dream of the Red Chamber* primarily entered China through two trade routes: maritime and overland. The Maritime Silk Road, a broad historical concept that refers to the pre-modern system of oceanic trade and cultural exchange connecting China with the rest of the world, serving as the main channel for the trade of such goods [6]. Western items used by the Jia family, such as the self-propelled Western boat, glass kangping screen, Wangqia foreign tobacco, and Ifna plaster, were imported by merchants from Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain via key ports like Guangzhou.

Simultaneously, overland trade played a crucial role. For instance, the Kyakhta trade market with Russia supplied many of the rare furs mentioned in the novel. Kyakhta was a significant official trade center established on the northern border between China and Russia during the Qing Dynasty [7]. These two trade routes collectively formed the network through which luxury goods circulated in the book.

3.2. Driving forces: silver and demand

Following the Italian Renaissance, Western technological advancements, industrial expansion, and products improvements, coupled with the pursuit of capital profits and the strengthening of state-sponsored mercantilist ideologies, drove the accumulation of gold and silver, which in turn fueled

global expansion and colonial policies. In China, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the coastal Jiangnan region experienced agricultural prosperity, while feudal rulers coveted scarce imported goods and sought to accumulate silver through trade. This multifaceted interaction laid the foundation for global trade in the 16th to 18th centuries, promoting the operation of the Silk Road, particularly the Maritime Silk Road, and the globalization of goods.

In global trade, vast quantities of American silver flowed into China via European merchants to purchase goods such as porcelain, tea, and silk, resulting in enabling China to maintain a substantial trade surplus for an extended period. Meanwhile, domestic economic prosperity fueled strong demand for Western luxury goods among the upper class. The Jia family in *Dream of the Red Chamber* epitomizes the feudal upper class, and the prevalence of imported goods in their daily lives reflects the close integration of China's economy with global trade at the time.

4. Research on imported goods in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

4.1. Typical imported goods

4.1.1. Textiles and apparel

Western textiles in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are represented by items such as the “peacock gold cape” (“quejinqiu”) and woolen fabric “duoluoni”. These imported textiles not only reflect the prosperity of global trade at the time but also reveal the Ming and Qing upper class's pursuit of exotic luxury goods.

The “peacock gold cape”, one of the most impressive Western textiles in the novel, is closely tied to the fate of Qingwen, Baoyu's chief maid, and carries significant narrative weight. It was a tribute from Russia, woven with peacock feather threads and gold threads using a specialized “boundary” needle technique. The original text describes it as “Resplendent with gold and emerald, shimmering with brilliant colors” [8]. Given to Baoyu by his grandmother, Lady Jia, during cold weather, this item not only demonstrates the Jia family's wealth but also highlights the importance of Sino-Russian trade relations during the Qing Dynasty. The craftsmanship of the “peacock gold cape” indicates that Russia had mastered advanced textile techniques by the 18th century, and its entry into China as a tribute reflects the dual nature of the tributary system and commercial trade at the time.

“Duoluoni” was a common Western fabric in the novel. The term “uoluoni” was a Qing Dynasty transliteration for a type of high-quality imported woolen fabric. Specifically, it refers to a fine woolen material that is dense, smooth, glossy, thick, soft, and warm. During the Ming and Qing periods, such fabrics were primarily imported from Europe (especially the Netherlands and Britain) via maritime trade and were considered Western goods, symbolizing luxury consumption. Feng and Li, in their *Comprehensive Dictionary of Dream of the Red Chamber*, note that “duoluoni” is one of the key material evidences of the Jia family's extravagant lifestyle [9]. In Chapter 49, during a snow-viewing poetry gathering, Li Wan wears a blue “duoluoni” jacket, while Baoyu dons a purple “duoluoni” fox-fur coat. This indicates that such imported fabrics had become part of the aristocracy's daily attire, serving as a distinct feature of their social status.

4.1.2. Crafts and decorative items

The self-propelled Western boat, a typical imported Western craft item, is displayed in Baoyu's room on a ten-compartment shelf, serving as an exquisite decorative piece.

The glass “Kangping” refers to a small glass screen placed on a “kang” (a heated brick bed). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, large flat glass panels had to be imported from Europe via overseas trade, making them as valuable as gold. In the novel, the glass “kangping” is part of Wang Xifeng’s dowry, and in Chapter 6, Jia Rong seeks to borrow it.

4.1.3. Food and medicine

Snuff appears in the novel when Qingwen catches a cold. During the Ming and Qing periods, snuff was introduced to China primarily through European missionaries and merchants, becoming a popular luxury and social item among the upper class [10]. The text mentions “Wangqia foreign snuff”, referring to one of the finest Western snuff brands of the time.

“Ifna” appears in Chapter 52 as a treatment for Qingwen’s illness. It is a Western imported plaster used for headaches. Introduced to China through maritime trade or missionaries, it became a “Western medicine” used in aristocratic households like the Jia family.

4.2. Consumption and cultural metaphors of imported goods

Imported goods in *Dream of the Red Chamber* not only possess material attributes but also bear rich social functions and cultural metaphors. They enter the aristocratic space of the Jia family through maritime and overland trade, serving multiple roles within it.

4.2.1. Social symbolic function

Imported goods from around the world, arriving via maritime and overland routes, serve as crucial media for signaling power, wealth, and social hierarchy within the domestic space of the Jia household. First, these foreign items symbolize aristocratic identity and status. Their rarity and high cost reflect the Jia family’s extraordinary influence, abundant wealth, and refined taste. For instance, in Chapter 6, Jia Rong borrows the glass “kangping” from Wang Xifeng to entertain guests, using this exquisite and rare imported object to showcase the family’s exceptional status and affluence. Additionally, the fact that the glass ‘kangping’ was part of Xifeng’s dowry subtly underscores the Wang family’s comparable prestige and power as one of the four great clans. Furthermore, the appreciation of Western goods by characters like Baoyu (the male protagonist) and Daiyu (the female protagonist) hints at their cultural superiority as scions of the nobility, albeit confined to the realm of luxury consumption.

4.2.2. Medium for interpersonal interactions

Second, imported goods also function as media for gift-giving and emotional expression. For example, the scene where Baoyu presents Daiyu with Western toys not only reveals his affection but also mirrors the emotional dynamics between characters through these foreign objects. Choosing imported items as gifts, rather than locally crafted delicacies, highlights the unique value of such goods while reflecting the deep emotional bond between Baoyu and Daiyu. This detail underscores the intricate connection between material culture and emotional expression in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Moreover, Lady Jia, the matriarch of the household, gifts the precious “peacock gold cape” to Baoyu, demonstrating both her doting on her grandson, the family’s recognition of his status and expectations for his future. Repeated acts of gifting in the novel, which leveraging the value and symbolism of imported goods, become tangible manifestations of emotional bonds and social

relationships. Thus, these items transcend mere material symbolism, deepening interpersonal connections and enriching the novel's layered narrative.

4.2.3. Literary narrative and symbolism

Cao skillfully integrates imported goods with the fates of characters, endowing them with symbolic and foreshadowing functions that enhance the literary and aesthetic depth of the novel. For instance, the self-propelled Western boat foreshadows the tragic separation of Baoyu and Daiyu. The "boat" symbolizes journey and parting, hinting at their inevitable farewell and paving the way for their love tragedy. Meanwhile, the "Western" origin of the boat implies external forces, suggesting that their relationship would ultimately be swayed by outside influences beyond their control, thus laying the groundwork for later plot developments.

Similarly, the beauty yet fragility of the glass 'kangping' foreshadows the Jia family's eventual downfall — "Bright clouds scatter easily, and mighty mansions totter" — hinting at the inevitable decline of great households. Throughout the novel, imported goods continuously participate in the construction and maintenance of identity and power within and beyond the Jia family. Their eventual destruction or loss profoundly predicts the unavoidable collapse of the entire social structure and its symbolic order.

5. The Jia family as a microcosm: China's role and cognitive limitations in early globalization

China played a dual role in early globalization: an active consumer and a passive observer. While the Jia family demonstrated adeptness in consuming global goods, they lacked a deeper understanding of the civilizations and trade systems behind these products. This stark contrast serves as a subtle reflection of China's relationship with the global world at the time. The decline of the Jia family not only signifies the fate of a single household but also foreshadows the historical trajectory of the once-flourishing Qing Empire toward eventual collapse.

During this period, feudal rulers and the upper scholar-official class failed to fully recognize that Western societies had entered the capitalist era. They remained complacent, indulging in the illusion of a 'celestial empire', as exemplified by the Qianlong Emperor's declaration that 'The celestial dynasty possesses abundant resources and lacks nothing' [11]. Mentally, they still regarded China as the center of civilization, viewing foreign relations through a hierarchical lens of ruler and subjects. Driven by arrogance and a desire to maintain political stability, they resisted opening fully trade and engaging deeply with the West, adhering instead to the isolationist policies. Domestically, they opposed all forms of innovation and progress. These factors became critical internal reasons for China's eventual rupture with globalization and the Qing government's devastating failures.

Meanwhile, Western nations, seeking to reverse trade deficits and pursue profits, adopted a series of military measures that shattered China's isolation. The globalization of goods accelerated during this period. While globalization injected vitality into China's economy, it also accelerated the decline of feudal society. Furthermore, it catalyzed changes in production relations, paving the way for China's arduous exploration of modernization and sowing the seeds of later anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolutionary waves, ultimately exerting profound historical impacts.

6. Conclusion

This study uses *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a case study to explore its typical imported goods and their symbolic significance. The research indicates that the Jia family's residence, though physically

an enclosed garden, was materially interconnected with the world. Items such as the self-propelled Western boat, 'duoluoni' fabric, and Ifna plaster exemplified the luxurious lifestyle of the aristocracy while serving multiple narrative roles, including foreshadowing the family's eventual decline. The study further argues that the decline of the Jia family reflects the upper class's intellectual conservatism during the Ming and Qing dynasties—their resistance to external influences and advanced ideas. This ultimately led to China's contradictory stance in early globalization: an active consumer yet a passive and self-limiting observer.

This study has certain limitations. First, the analysis of imported goods relies primarily on explicit textual references, lacking comprehensive coverage of material culture archives and physical evidence. Future research could incorporate trade records, cultural relic images, and other materials for cross-verification. Secondly, this paper focuses on a single case study, emphasizing cultural analysis, but it does not fully explore economic mechanisms or trade data support.

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