A "Typological" Perspective Returning to the Cultural Matrix: A Review of Wang Huaiyi's *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions*

Li Zhangyi

Abstract: Wang Huaiyi's *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions* （《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》） examines the relationship between *Dream of the Red Mansions* （《红楼梦》） and painting from a "typological" perspective. It places the novel back into its cultural matrix, revealing how this matrix nurtured the work and how the work reflects it. The author analyzes three different levels of typological relationships, including the typology between scenes in the work and corresponding theme paintings, the typology between the work's visual grammar and the *aotu* （凹凸，concave-convex） technique of Western painting, and the typology between paintings mentioned in the work and other textual elements. These three typologies progressively deepen, uncovering a stable and intrinsic homologous and interpenetrating relationship between the text of *Dream of the Red Mansions* and images. Classifying the novel's plots, scenes, events, and imagery as typological patterns not only facilitates its return to the cultural matrix to achieve its own integrity but also helps its unique qualities to be highlighted through interconnection with other art forms. This approach prompts fresh contemplation and assessment of the novel's aesthetic implications, visual grammar, and internal structure.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Mansions*; Typological; Pattern; Visual Grammar; Cultural Matrix

Author Biography: Li Zhangyi, Ph.D. candidate, School of Chinese Language and Literature,

Wuhan University, Research interests: Chinese aesthetics. E-mail: smshcngg@163.com.

标题： 回归文化母体的"类型化"视角——评王怀义的《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》

摘要：《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》一书以"类型化"视角考察《红楼梦》与绘画艺术之间的渊源关系，将《红楼梦》放回至它所诞生的文化母体中，呈现文化母体对它的熏陶以及它对文化母体的反映。作者剖析了三种不同层次的类型化关系，包括《红楼梦》中场景与相应题材画作的类型化、《红楼梦》视觉语法与西洋画凹凸技法的类型化、《红楼梦》中画作与文本中其他要件的类型化，这三种类型化逐层递进，揭示出《红楼梦》文本与图像间稳定且固有的同源互渗关系。将《红楼梦》中的情节、场景、事件、意象等归为类型化模式，不仅有助于它向文化母体回归以获得自身完整性，也有助于它的独特品质在与其他艺术形式的互联互通中得到彰显，促使人们对其审美意蕴、视觉语法、内在结构等进行新的思考与衡量。

关键词：《红楼梦》；类型化；范型；视觉语法；文化母体

作者简介： 李张怡，武汉大学文学院博士研究生，研究方向：中国美学。电邮：smshcngg@163.com。

Dream of the Red Mansions（《红楼梦》）is a monumental masterpiece born from the Chinese cultural matrix. It is not only nourished by this matrix but also inextricably connected to other products within it. These connections manifest the novel in "typological" patterns. In other words, *Dream of the Red Mansions* links itself to prior art forms through "certain typological images, events, scenes, and their variations"（王怀义，2022，p.7），thereby returning to the matrix formed by all arts. In the book *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），Professor Wang Huaiyi investigates the typological elements within the novel, primarily focusing on the connections between text and images, or specifically between *Dream of the Red Mansions* and the art of painting. He emphasizes the relevance between the novel and other art forms as well as Ming-Qing socio-cultural contexts, placing it back into the entire cultural matrix to further realize the derivation and enrichment of its meaning. Wang argues that "there is no art isolated from other arts. Objects, paintings, sculptures, music, architecture, etc., have extensive interpenetration through the regeneration and repetition of archetypal images, thereby enabling all arts to exist as a whole." He adds, "the reading and understanding of *Dream of the Red Mansions* is the same." Through the discovery of typologies, "the boundaries between history and reality, historical texts and current texts, art forms, and even linear time are dissolved."（王怀义，2022，p.7）This demonstrates that Wang's research is both a concentrated examination of the text itself and a wide-angle investigation into its historical background, social culture, and even the entire art history. Given the integrity of art and the originally existing interpenetration between *Dream of the Red Mansions* and historical culture, historical texts, and other art forms, these two investigations do not conflict or obscure each other but are naturally consistent. The discovery of the typological patterns in *Dream of the Red Mansions* does not diminish its unique value; instead, it further illuminates its charm against the background of tradition.

According to Wang, "typological" refers to the process that elements in a work can find corresponding

patterns in the cultural matrix, and the representation of these patterns across different art forms converges into a type, so that different works become interrelated based on the same type of elements. Analyzing a work from a typological perspective means restoring individual elements to their place within a type and individual works to their place within a category of works, so as to reveal the generative matrix of the work. Typology gives works two key characteristics: homology and interpenetration. Firstly, based on shared patterns, the characters, plots, events, and situations in *Dream of the Red Mansions* form an organic whole with seemingly unrelated art forms. This implies that the works containing these elements share a common origin, born from the same cultural matrix （王怀义，2022，p.62）. Wang analyzes the relationship between the novel and contemporaneous paintings, such as the comparison between poetic and painting realm, or visual grammar and painting techniques, confirming the homology of different art forms by their typological features, thereby grasping the "source" itself, that is, the cultural matrix. Secondly, typology is based on the regeneration and repetition of archetypal images, which is also the mechanism for interpenetration among different arts. Consequently, different works can interpenetrate through shared typological elements, allowing the observation of one work to be mediated by another. More precisely, the understanding of both can be deepened through mutual reference. Wang's analysis and interpretation of Tang Yin （唐寅）'s paintings and the imagery of crabapple flowers in *Dream of the Red Mansions* exemplify the interpenetrative nature of typology, and serve as a model for examining the latter's meaning through the interpenetration between painting and novel. The crabapple flower, as a typological image, connects Tang Yin's preference for depicting lonely beauties with ill-fated lives to *The Dream of Red Mansions*' portrayal of the tragic destinies of its female characters. The portrayal of the latter by crabapple images is highlighted through its symbolic relationship with the former. These two characteristics signify that examining *Dream of the Red Mansions* from a typological perspective involves comparison with other art forms and inevitably leads to a consideration of thier cultural matrix.

In *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions*, Wang mainly analyzes three forms of typology: (1) the typology between scenes in *Dream of the Red Mansions* and corresponding thematic paintings; (2) the typology between the novel's visual grammar and the "*aotu*"（凹凸，concave-convex） technique of painting; (3) the typology between the paintings in the novel and other textual elements. These three typologies reveal homologous and interpenetrating relationships between different art forms in the same cultural matrix, progressing from surface correspondence of individual elements to a fundamental unity of techniques, and finally to the integration of images within the novel's fabric, influencing and constraining its narrative. This progressive typological perspective fully unfolds the relationship between text and image in *Dream of the Red Mansions*, corroborating the view that "'literati painting'（文人画） and 'literati novel' （文人小说） can be seen as sisters born together from the cultural matrix in the mid-to-late Ming dynasty." （王怀义，2022，p.549） That is, *Dream of the Red Mansions* and contemporaneous paintings belong to the same "*lei*"（类，category）, which refers to a dynamic relationship of mutual attraction, interpenetration, and mutual illumination between different art forms, not a static classification. As stated in *Liji Yueji* （《礼记·乐记》，1989, p.1003）: "The principle of all things is that they move according to their categories （万

物之理各以类相动也）." This reveals two key meanings of lei: one is "principle" （理）, signifying that judging an object's category relates to grasping its essence; the other is "movement" （动）, signifying that an object's dynamic processes, such as generation, development, and transformation, are based on category. The relationship between *Dream of the Red Mansions* and contemporaneous painting is also like this, which is not a simple classification based on superficial resemblance but a profound exploration involving the internal principles and generative mechanisms of different art forms. Therefore, analyzing this categorical relationship is the key to probing "the deeper and more permanent structural elements" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.3) within the novel.

By comparing the pictorial scenes in *Dream of the Red Mansions* with corresponding thematic paintings, Wang reveals the possible inspirations for these scenes and plots through their typology, offering new interpretations of their aesthetic implications in light of the paintings. He finds that Cao Xueqin （曹雪芹） himself and commentators like Zhi Yanzhai （脂砚斋） often name scenes in the novel after paintings. For instance, the Jimao version （己卯本） calls the diverse postures of the characters at the crab feast （螃蟹宴） in Chapter 38 by *Hundred Beauties Painting* （《百美图》）, evoking the resonance with Qiu Ying （仇英）'s painting *Hundred Beauties Painting*. In Chapter 52, Baoyu （宝玉） calls the scene of Daiyu （黛玉）, Baochai （宝钗）, and others sitting together by *Winter Boudoir Gathering of Beauties Painting* （《冬闺集艳图》）, echoing common subjects of beauty paintings （仕女画） of that period. This suggests Cao may have seen similar paintings and transformed them into corresponding plots or scenes （王怀义，2022, pp.119-26）. These typological scenes are not only evidence of the categorical relationship between the novel and painting, but also crucial routes for the interpenetration of meaning between the novel's text and the corresponding paintings. That is, when the writer transforms the formal elements of a painting into scene descriptions, he also incorporates the former's aesthetic implications into the text. The most typical example is "Daiyu Burying Flowers" （黛玉葬花）. Zhi Yanzhai named this scene *Picking Mushrooms Painting* （《采芝图》） instead of *Burying Flowers Painting* （《葬花图》）, placing it in the same category with Qiu Ying and others' *Picking Mushrooms Painting*. The act of "picking mushrooms" carries connotations of elegance and refined taste, differing from the general feeling brought to readers by "burying flowers." The interpenetration of these two imparts a unique flavor to "Daiyu Burying Flowers". Without a typological perspective, this scene would be firmly shrouded in a sad and mournful emotional atmosphere with the accompaniment of *Burying Flowers Chant* （《葬花吟》）, making it difficult to convey a richer aesthetic level. Once it is regarded as the same type as "picking mushrooms", the scene can present "another kind of pure and elegant aesthetic" （王怀义，2022，p.133）, so that Daiyu's other two flower-burying acts—unaccompanied by the chant—come into the reader's view, serving as clues to her leisure and aesthetical life in the boudoir. Through the comparison with *Picking Mushrooms Painting*, previously overlooked aesthetic dimensions of "Daiyu Burying Flowers" emerge. Daiyu's multiple flower-burying acts are grouped into one type, thereby the novel's repeated plots and scenes form an interconnection with the external world, and the elegant taste inherent in this type of scene becomes the aesthetic keynote running through the plots.

Wang's parallel view of paintings and typologically similar scenes in the novel places painting and poetic

realm on a common ground, clearly highlighting the transcendence of the latter over the former in their overlap. The connection and distinction between poetry and painting have been long debated. For the performance of the same type of theme in different art forms—especially when a clear chronological relationship exists, such as poetry imitating painting or vice versa—painting is often given more affirmative evaluations. This is because images, not bound by the principle of linguistic reference, maintain their independence, while language, constrained by this principle, risks losing its self-determination in the process of repeating images （王怀义，2022，p.139）. This implies that when both poetry and painting adhere to the same compositional pattern, poetry is more likely to become transparent, merely signifying the pattern—thus causing readers to perceive only the pattern but not the poem itself. To resolve this dilemma, the content depicted by the poetry must exceed what the pattern prescribes to some extent. The relationship between the scene of "Baoqin Standing in Snow" （宝琴立雪） in Chapter 50 of the novel and the popular *Plum Blossom Seeking Painting* （《探梅图》） in the Ming and Qing dynasties exemplifies how poetry may not only equal but even surpass the painting it imitates. Wang attributes the transcendence of "Baoqin Standing in Snow" to three points: First, it evokes readers' associations with similar historical and cultural event with the vivid pictorial quality; Second, it adjusts the subject's gender and clothing style to the new historical context, infusing new connotations beyond the established pattern; Third, it imbues the scene with the vital energy of life itself, making it a "living life reality" superior to the painting （王怀义，2022，pp.141-43）. These points all point to the vividness and sense of reality of the scene of "Baoqin Standing in Snow", which constitutes the essence of the poetic realm's transcendence over the painting. The pattern can prescribe the theme and constituent elements of a scene, but cannot dictate its vividness and sense of reality, which is the aspect where the poetic realm exceeds the pattern and the key to the typological scene maintaining its independence. Placing "Baoqin Standing in Snow" under the typological perspective, returning it to the cultural matrix characterized by the popularity of *Plum Blossom Seeking Paintings*, serves to highlight the unique vitality Cao infused into this scene through its repitition across different art forms, thereby illuminating its distinct aesthetic conception.

The typology between novel's visual grammar and painting techniques is deeper into the essence of the work and less perceptible than the typology of novel scenes and painting themes. According to Wang, the recurring discussions and descriptions concerning "*ao*" （凹，concave） and "*tu*" （凸，convex） in *Dream of the Red Mansions* are not merely using these terms as simple visual vocabulary. Instead, they serve as symbols for the novel's core thematic ideas: "Cao Xueqin integrated the characteristics of European painting techniques into his creation, set up related plots, scenes, and imagery to highlight his thematic concerns."（王怀义，2022, p.160） During the era when *Dream of the Red Mansions* was born, the *aotu* techniques of Western painting was spread in China, particularly favored in the Qing court. From the painting perspective, *aotu* tachnique includes perspective, shading, and modeling techniques, pursuing strong contrasts of light/dark, colors, and a realistic, three-dimensional effect （王怀义，2022, p.153）. Cao did not simply transplant this technique into literary creation to narrate and describe in the way of Western painting but extracted the typological essence from this technique—namely, the principle of aotu—and used it to form the

novel's unique visual grammar. The interplay of ao and tu shows the depth of space, transforming the flat into the three-dimensional. This integrates the artistic world into the real space or allows people to "enter" the artistic world, thereby constructing a realistic aesthetic space. In narrative literature, due to the lack of direct contrast of color and light/dark, this sense of depth must be achieved through linguistic description. However, merely depicting the light/dark details and color settings of a painting cannot truly convey a realistic artistic space, but only the painter's working process. As Lessing (1836, p.198) said, Homer's delineation of Achilles' shield "brings before our eyes, not so much the shield itself, as the divine artist who is employed in making it". Therefore, the contrast of colors and light/dark must be transformed into contrasts of characters, plots, scenes, and imagery, which is the source of feeling of depth in the novel. Wang analyzes elements with *aotu* properties in the novel, including the contrast in scholarly attainments between Daiyu and Xiangyun （湘云） prompted by the settings of "Ao Jing Guan" （凹晶馆） and "Tu Bi Tang" （凸碧堂）, the concave temple of Grandmother Jia （贾母） versus the convex top of the God of Longevity, the convex, realistic portrait of beauty hanging in the small study of Ningguo Mansion （宁国府） and Green Delights （怡红院）, the statue of Miss Mingyu （茗玉小姐） versus the statue of the Plague God, the illusory world represented by Fengyue Baojian （风月宝鉴， Mirror of Passion and Illusion）, and the boundary between poetry and painting symbolized by Daiyu and Baochai. These analyses demonstrate the comprehensive integration of *aotu* as a typological factor into the novel. These plots or imagery internalize the *aotu* technique into the narrative rhythm, creat the unique visual depth of the novel, and classify it together with contemporaneous Qing court paintings into a specific cultural matrix, as a portrayal of the profound influence of European painting techniques on Chinese narrative literature.

Meanwhile, Wang also distinguishes the different effects caused by this feeling of depth in novel versus painting, emphasizing "the world-awakening function of the unique 'meaning of *aotu*' （凹凸二义） of visual images in *Dream of the Red Mansions*" （王怀义，2022，p.170）. Painting achieves verisimilitude by creating feeling of depth, and its highest goal is to connect with reality. This can lead to two diametrically opposed effects: Firstly, the painting's verisimilitude may cause a previously sober viewer to lose judgment and become immersed in the illusory world constructed by the artwork. Secondly, the painting's verisimilar presentation of the real space may pull a viewer previously lost in fantasy back to reality, freeing them from immersion. In other words, a painting acts as a passageway between reality and illusion, and the viewer's movement between the real and illusory depends on their initial state and the intuitive feeling brought by the painting, containing less reflective components. *Dream of the Red Mansions* is different. Its feeling of depth does not arise from the direct application of painting techniques but from integrating *aotu* as a type of visual grammar into textual creation, manifesting reflection on the *aotu* technique. This reflection transforms the feeling of depth inherent in the painting into a deep experience of the viewer reaching into the world inside and outside the artwork through the painting. Simultaneously, *aotu* shifts from being the three-dimensional spatial feeling presented by the painting to becoming the strewn at random but well-arranged of the novel's characters, plots, scenes, and imagery, which can trigger reflection within the characters, thus acquiring the world-awakening function. Wang noticed this, using typological *aotu* technique as a hub of interconnection,

intercommunication and interpenetration between painting and novel. By combining the symbolic meaning of *aotu* in poetry and painting, he offers a new interpretation of the issue of "painting awakening poetry" （画可醒诗） within *Dream of the Red Mansions*.

The *Grand View Garden Pleasure Painting* （《大观园行乐图》） abbreviated as the *Grand View Garden Painting* （《大观园图》）, is an extremely important painting in *Dream of the Red Mansions*, which transforms other textual elements into parts of its image. Based on this, Wang analyzes the *Grand View Garden Painting* and the series of plots and events around it, revealing the typological relationship between the novel itself as a "scroll painting" and other scroll paintings. Wang points out: "*Dream of the Red Mansions* existing in the form of a scroll painting is another way for us to enter its text. This is the *Grand View Garden Pleasure Painting* created by Xichun （惜春）."（王怀义，2022，p.170） Thus, the *Grand View Garden Painting* is essentially the result of rendering the novel's plots and stories onto a scroll, meaning there is another "Dream of the Red Mansions" within *Dream of the Red Mansions*, and another "Grand View Garden" within the Grand View Garden. This viewpoint reflects the deep integration of image and text. In the novel, the *Grand View Garden Painting* is commissioned by Grandmother Jia, executed by Xichun, and involves contributions from others, including Li Wan （李纨）, which is an immense undertaking. This painting relates to the novel's text on two levels: one is the superficial connecton, including scenes like Grandmother Jia proposing the painting in Chapter 40, the group discussing its execution in Chapter 42, Grandmother Jia inquiring about its progress in Chapter 50, and scattered scenes of viewing the painting, all echoing the *Grand View Garden Painting*; the other is the essential connection, and it can be known from Grandmother Jia's proposal to include "Baoqin Standing in Snow" in the painting that the *Grand View Garden Painting* absorbs and represents events occurring before and after its appearance. The painting is a story scroll advancing and unfolding synchronously with the *Dream of the Red Mansions* text. Wang suggests that the painting might represent the novel's complex space-time in two possible ways: one similar to Qiu Ying's Beauties in *Four Seasons Painting* （《四季美人图》）, depicting events and scenes from different seasons separately; the other similar to Qiu Ying's *Spring Morning in the Han Palace Painting* （《汉宫春晓图》）, condensing all events into a single spatio-temporal frame （王怀义，2022，p.275）. This indicates that although the *Grand View Garden Painting* is only a fictional painting in the novel, its typological relationship with long scrolls like *Beauties in Four Seasons Painting* is real. Simultaneously, since the *Grand View Garden Painting* is "*Dream of the Red Mansions* existing in the form of a scroll painting". this typological relationship is transferred to the novel's text itself, making the full-length novel and the long scroll painting belong to the same "category" as a whole. By calling the *Grand View Garden Painting* the *Dream of the Red Mansions* on a scroll, Wang implies that the novel can conversely be seen as the painting in text. This mutual transformation demonstrates the organizing and governing role of images over textual narrative, serving as powerful evidence for the intercommunication and interpenetration of literature and painting.

In summary, through the analysis of the above three typological relationships, the originative connection between the text and images of *Dream of the Red Mansions* is clearly revealed. More importantly, with the homology and interpenetration between the novel and painting art as an anchor, Wang returns the former to

the cultural matrix from which it was generated, allowing *Dream of the Red Mansions* to resonate with other cultural achievements throughout history, and to function both as an independent work generating meaning and as a pinnacle work emerging from tradition, highlighting its value. Wang points out: "Different texts converse with and illuminate each other across the limitations of historical space-time through the similarity of images. They integrate certain implicit ideas and themes in literary works from different eras into a fixed tradition, thereby embedding the contemporary text into history to gain integrity."（王怀义， 2022, p.527）

This means that without recognizing the typological patterns of text and image within *Dream of the Red Mansions*, it would be difficult to discover its trans-temporal and trans-spatial connections with different artworks, leaving it isolated from tradition. While such isolation might amplify the novel's originality, it would also, to some extent, impair its integrity, turning its plots, scenes, and imagery into rootless driftwood. Furthermore, images also maintain the internal structural unity of *Dream of the Red Mansions*. Both the visual grammar embodying the "meaning of *aotu*" and the *Grand View Garden Painting* as the connecting point between full-length novel and the long scroll painting are crucial clues for grasping the novel's internal coherence. Therefore, images are not only related art forms born from the same cultural matrix for *Dream of the Red Mansions*, but also a part of the very root system through which the cultural matrix nurtured the novel, internally determining its generation. Wang's consideration of the typological relationship between *Dream of the Red Mansions* and painting art is a key way to integrate the novel into tradition and return it to its cultural matrix, which holds profound significance and value for exploring its generative foundation and endowing it with integrity.

ORCID

Li Zhangyi [ID] https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2101-9333

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans. & Ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Lessing, G. E. (1836). *Laocoon; or the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (W. Ross, Trans.). J.Ridgway & Sons.

孙希旦（1989）：《礼记集解》，沈啸宸、王星贤点校。中华书局。

[Sun Xidan (1989). *Collected Interpretations of The Book of Rites*, Shen Xiaochen & Wang Xingxian, Annotated. Zhonghua Book Company.]

王怀义（2022）：《〈红楼梦〉文本图像渊源考论》。中华书局。

[Wang Huaiyi (2022). *The Iconic Origin of the Text of A Dream of Red Mansions*. Zhonghua Book Company.]