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The Metaphor from an Evil to a Lover: Changes in Ancient Chinese Society through the Image of Cui Yingying in The Romance of the West Chamber (9th to 17th Century AD)

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the evolution of Cui Yingying's image in The Romance of the Western Chamber to analyze the construction of female identity amid China's sociocultural transformations from the 9th to 17th century. Through comparative textual analysis and gender theory, the paper traces Yingying's transformation from a negatively portrayed figure in the Tang Dynasty—often labeled as a seductress, Youwu (尤物), abandoned woman, or prostitute—to the Yuan Dynasty's reimagined heroine in Wang Shifu's adaptation: a bold, intelligent, and emotionally complex woman who challenges societal norms. By the Ming Dynasty, the story's widespread adaptation into prints and vernacular literature solidified its status as a cultural icon, epitomizing the idealized narrative of "lovers finally getting married."The findings reveal that Yingying's shifting image reflects the interplay of Confucian ethics, patriarchal values, and economic shifts within Chinese Society. The rise of citizen culture in the Ming Dynasty further reshaped female subjectivity through operatic adaptations. This process offers a significant case study for understanding the evolution of gender ideology in pre-modern China.

Keywords: cui Yingying, the romance of the west chamber, female image, social transformation, evil, love.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Romance of the West Chamber is derived from the legendary novel The Story of Yingying, authored by Yuan Zhen (元稹) during the Tang Dynasty. The narrative recounts the tragic love story of Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying set in the Zhenyuan period (785-805 AD). Since its publication, the story has been reinterpreted by scholars in various forms, including guzi ci (鼓子词, or drum lyrics), zhu gong diao (诸宫调, or palace tune), and dramas, leading to significant alterations in the plot. The Romance of the West Chamber holds a pivotal place in the history of Chinese literature and opera. Chen Yinke (陈寅恪) noted that this novel "later evolved and spread into a great masterpiece in opera" [1]. Lu Xun (鲁迅) remarked on the profound influence of Tang Dynasty legends, stating, "Only this and Li Chaowei's The Story of Liu Yi," highlighting its significance [2].

This paper examines the transformation of Cui Yingying (崔莺莺), the heroine of The Romance of the West Chamber (西厢记Xixiang Ji, here-after referred to as The Romance of the West Chamber), across the Tang, Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. This paper examines the evolving image of Cui Yingying, the heroine in The Romance of the West Chamber, across the Tang, Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. This study is motivated by the author's interest in female representation in Chinese literature, art, and visual culture, as well as a sustained focus on gender studies. Since the Eastern Han Dynasty, when Ban Gu compiled the "Art Records" section of the "Book of Han", over 4,000 women have been involved in literary creation, and countless popular female characters have emerged [3].

However, due to the influence of nearly two millennia of feudal patriarchy and Confucianism, these women were often relegated to a subordinate position to male power, becoming objects of the male gaze. Cui Yingying, in The Romance of the West Chamber, is a product of this unique social structure. When studying ancient Chinese women through the lens of opera and popular literature, The Romance of the West Chamber demands attention. Against the backdrop of strict Confucian ethics and the burgeoning trend toward female liberation since the Ming Dynasty, the female narratives within The Romance of the West Chamber symbolize the awakening of female consciousness during that era.

Over the 800-year evolution of her image, Cui Yingying is portrayed as humble and compromising, caught in contradiction and entanglement, or boldly pursuing her own desires. These portrayals reflect not only the inner world of ancient Chinese women but also the broader societal imagination, serving as interpretations of collective cultural narrative [4]. Therefore, this study primarily investigates the varying depictions of Cui Yingying in The Romance of the West Chamber across different dynasties, utilizing visual theory, cultural criticism, and gender theory to discuss these images' power and influence. It also employs comparative text analysis and discourse analysis to examine how the female image of "Yingying" became a metaphor for the shifts in China's social, cultural, and economic systems from the 9th to the 17th century [5].

This paper examines various versions of The West Chamber circulating from the mid- and late-Tang Dynasty through the Song, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties, and into the mid- and late-Ming Dynasty. During these periods, Yingying's character transformed from a negative figure a seductress, beauty, abandoned woman, or prostitute in the mid-Tang Dynasty to a more positive representation of a woman pursuing true love in the Song and Jin Dynasties. Wang Shifu's Yuan Dynasty adaptation of The West Chamber further shaped her into an exceptional female character, daring to love and hate, resourceful, beautiful, and intelligent. Notably, the flourishing commodity economy and civic culture of the mid- and late-Ming Dynasty spurred significant changes in the social roles of women. The illustrated versions of The West Chamber from this era presented a prosperity and popularity unseen before. Ultimately, both The West Chamber and Cui Yingying became a celebrated opera and iconic female character in Chinese history, embodying the theme of "lovers finally getting married."

This study addresses the following key questions: (1) How does the metaphor of Cui Yingying's image, shifting from "witch" to "lover," reflect the structural changes in Chinese society from the 9th to the 17th centuries? (2) How do Confucianism, patriarchy, and economic shifts contribute to the control and regulation of female bodies through literary adaptation and artistic creation? (3) How does the visual representation of Cui Yingying in Ming Dynasty illustrated editions participate in the production of gender ideology within citizen culture? This paper employs a cross-cultural, gender-focused research method. Grounded in social constructionism, it posits that gender differences are shaped by cultural symbols and practices rather than being solely determined by physiology. The analysis utilizes the following structural methods:

- Comparative Textual Analysis: By comparing texts from different periods, this method explores variations in creative backgrounds, storylines, character development, artistic techniques, and aesthetic values. It also analyzes the social factors driving these changes.
- Discourse Analysis: From a narratological perspective, the "narrative" structure within various vernacular novels, short stories, and operas is analyzed to explore the meaning and value of literary narratives. Examining characters' identities, language, clothing, and actions reveals gender concepts and hierarchical orders embedded in the text, thereby uncovering the cultural background and social ideology reflected within.
- Historical Context Analysis: This study uses historical methods to clarify two research topics: first, the literary and artistic expression and evolution of Cui Yingying's diverse images since the Tang Dynasty; and second, the profound humanistic connotations within the literary works of each period. Given that the research objects are historical literary and artistic works, this study relies heavily on empirical research methods in history, using historical materials as the basis for arguments and determining historical facts through their examination.

By investigating these questions, this study aims to address two gaps in existing research: First, prior scholarship lacks a systematic, diachronic analysis of the metaphorical evolution of Cui Yingying's image from "witch" to "love girl," particularly neglecting the profound influence of Ming Dynasty illustrated

versions on the visual construction of her character. Second, existing studies often examine changes in literary images in isolation. This study, however, emphasizes the interaction between Confucian ethics, patriarchy, and economic changes, integrating gender politics theory and visual examples to understand the reconstruction of Cui Yingying's image.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE IMAGE OF YINGYING

1. THE STORY OF YINGYING" BY YUAN ZHEN IN THE MIDDLE TANG DYNASTY

"The Story of Yingying," also known as "Meeting the True (会真记, or Huizhen Ji)," written by Yuan Zhen during the Tang Dynasty, is included in Volume 488 of "Taiping Guangji." (太平广记) The narrative describes how, during the Zhenyuan period (785-805 AD), Zhang Sheng, residing in Pudu Temple, fortuitously encounters his distant aunt Cui amidst a military rebellion. Zhang Sheng rescues Cui and her daughter Yingying from the chaos, leading to their acquaintance. However, Zhang Sheng abandons this relationship to pursue his imperial examination in Chang'an, resulting in a tragic love story.

Despite its brevity of over 3,000 words, "The Story of Yingying" vividly portrays the characters of Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng. Yingying is primarily described from a third-person perspective. Yuan Zhen characterizes Cui Yingying as a "Youwu", stating, "Generally speaking, the most beautiful things are always lingering in my heart" [6]. In the context of Chinese literature, "Youwu" typically refers to an exceptionally beautiful woman. Yuan Zhen presents Cui Yingying as a "Youwu" both in appearance "she bedecked in simple garb, no lavish jewels or gems to enhance but her beauty lies. Her tresses trailing, a rosy blush graces her countenance. Her visage is bright, exuding a captivating and radiant grace." [6]—and in talent—"Cui excels in writing and poetry," "Her srtistry must have been remarkable, yet she seemed to know nothing about them; she was quick and argumentative when she spoke, but was taciturn when it came to social interactions." and "at times, she plays the zither alone at night, producing melancholic music" [6]. Thus, Yingying emerges as a woman of beauty, literary talent, musical skill, and eloquence [7].

However, the term "Youwu" has historically carried derogatory connotations for women in the context of ancient China. The earliest reference to "Youwu" appears in "Zuo Zhuan" (左传, or the Commentary of Zuo) which states, "A women with captivating beauty can transform a man's nature., but if she is not virtuous, there will be disaster" [8]. This implies that a woman's beauty, if capable of captivating a man, may lead to calamity. In "The Story of Yingying," Zhang Sheng, driven by ambition, travels to Chang'an for the imperial examination but ultimately abandons Yingying, blaming her for his failure. "Generally speaking, a beauty destined by heaven, if she does not bewitch herself, she will bewitch others" [6]. Yingying is compared to Daji (妲己) of the Shang Dynasty and Baosi (褒姒) of the Zhou Dynasty, indicating a significant degradation and stigmatization of her image in Yuan Zhen's narrative. However, a review of contemporary literary works reveals that the perception of women as sources of trouble was prevalent among scholar-officials. Bai Juyi's (白居易) poem "Eight Horses" states, "It is not the size of a 'Youwu' that is harmful, but it can disturb the emperor's heart" [9]. Chen Hong notes in "The Story of Everlasting Sorrow" (长恨歌) that "Le Tian was not only moved by the 'Song of Everlasting Sorrow,' but also sought to punish beauty, halt chaos, and pass it on to future generations" [10], all cautioning against the dangers of beauty.

The tendency among scholar-officials in the mid- and late-Tang Dynasty to denigrate beautiful women as "femme fatales" stemmed, in part, from the profound impact of the An-Shi Rebellion (755-763) on Tang society. This rebellion was widely perceived as a military uprising that triggered the Tang Dynasty's decline, with blame disproportionately directed at Yang Yuhuan, a woman renowned for her captivating beauty. Later scholar-officials and popular literature generally attributed the rebellion to Yang Guifei's alleged seduction of Emperor Xuanzong during the Tang Dynasty's zenith. The historical reality reveals that, during the suppression of the A Lushan and Shi Siming rebel factions, Emperor Xuanzong's own officers and soldiers forced him to execute his beloved concubine, Yang Yuhuan, at Mawei Slope. They believed that only after this "witch" was eliminated would they be willing to fight the rebels. Subsequently, the mid-Tang Dynasty was plagued by persistent social instability, fueled by separatist regimes and the pervasive influence of powerful eunuchs. During the mid-Tang Dynasty, societal turmoil due to separatist regimes and eunuch

rule, coupled with the lingering effects of the An-Shi Rebellion, entrenched the image of Yang Yuhuan as a “youwu” who brought disaster, making it understandable that Yingying was portrayed as a "youwu" in Zhang Sheng's eyes.

However, examining the circumstances of the male protagonist, Zhang Sheng, reveals that his behavior of "seducing and abandoning Yingying," while superficially a personal moral failing of infidelity, is fundamentally a reflection of the scholar-official class, represented by Zhang Sheng, diverting its pervasive social anxieties through gendered narratives. Although "The Story of Yingying" does not explicitly define Zhang Sheng's identity and status, the text portrays him as a "scholar in plain clothes" – one who has not yet achieved fame or fortune, travels extensively, and aspires to enter officialdom through the imperial examinations. This closely mirrors his prototype, Yuan Zhen, the author of "The Story of Yingying."

According to Chen Yinke's "Yuan Bai Shi Jian Zheng Gao," Yuan Zhen's family descended from the Tuoba tribe of the Xianbei clan, which was part of the Northern Wei Dynasty's royal family. The surname Yuan was considered a "barbarian surname" at the time, and despite its noble origins, it was often looked down upon by mainstream Tang Dynasty families. Furthermore, Yuan Zhen lost his father at a young age, leading to his family's decline, making him a typical example of a child from a poor family. In reality, Yuan Zhen's path to success through the imperial examinations was as arduous and unsuccessful as Zhang Sheng's.

During the Tang Dynasty, the emphasis on family background was profound, with society venerating "high-ranking families" and the "way of etiquette and law," while aristocratic families largely maintained the tradition of not intermarrying with commoners. When the Tang Dynasty's royal family selected princesses and sons-in-law, they consistently chose candidates from noble and prominent families of the era. Generally, aristocratic families also "married according to family lineage" and held an exclusionary attitude towards "humble families" who were seen as "disregarding etiquette and behaving frivolously”. Chen Yinke also commented on the relationship between "officialdom and marriage," stating, "The society of the Tang Dynasty inherited the old customs of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, using these two aspects to evaluate individuals. Marriage and officialdom were the two criteria; anyone who married outside a prominent family or did not hold a reputable official position was scorned by society" [1]. During the Tang Dynasty, scholars primarily achieved social advancement through two avenues: marriage to a prominent family and success in the imperial examinations. These two pathways together defined the core of their social value. For those from poorer or commoner backgrounds, the imperial examination system offered the sole means of upward mobility. By passing the imperial examinations and becoming a Jinshi (a successful candidate), they could join the ranks of the gentry. Li Yifu, a prime minister in the early Tang Dynasty, provides an example; he rose to prominence after passing the imperial examinations, despite his obscure family origins. Consequently, striving to alter one's destiny through the imperial examinations became the paramount ambition for many aspiring scholars from less privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, Tang Dynasty scholars possessed an exceptionally strong desire for fame, unmatched by scholars in other dynasties. Although Yuan Zhen described Yingying in "The Story of Yingying" as a member of the wealthy Cui family, with numerous slaves, some scholars argue that Yingying's character was based on Yuan Zhen's own experiences with singing girls in brothels [11]. This interpretation, that Yingying was originally a prostitute, is also widely accepted within academic circles. Some research even suggests that Cui Yingying was a "winemaker" from the Sogdian ethnic group in Central Asia (present-day Uzbekistan) who came to China [12]. In this context, as Zhang Sheng realized that Yingying's family no longer possessed the wealth and status he desired, he grew disillusioned with her. To achieve his ambitions, he remained in the capital, seeking a wealthy and influential marriage partner. Unable to ascend the social ladder, Zhang Sheng, a struggling scholar, felt ashamed to accept Yingying's perceived "humble" origins. Consequently, he resorted to stigmatizing her as a form of psychological compensation.

Yuan Zhen, through the perspectives of others, painted Yingying as a "seductive and dangerous woman," essentially attributing his own professional failures to the trope of "women's beauty ruining the country." This became a form of escapism and comfort for middle and lower-level scholars. Simultaneously, by criticizing and labeling her, he reinforced the gender dominance of the scholar-official class and male-dominated society over the role of women. This was not an isolated incident, but rather a reflection of the collective anxiety among the scholar-official class during the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty concerning upward

mobility. This mentality directly contributed to the tragic love story of Zhang Sheng's "seduction and subsequent abandonment" of Yingying.

The image of abandoned women is a recurring theme in ancient Chinese literature [13]. It is important to note that Yingying's fate as an "abandoned woman" differs fundamentally from the woman abandoned due to "fading beauty" in "The Book of Songs· Rogue." In the traditional narrative of "Mulberry leaves fall, yellow and fall" [14], the woman at least holds the status of "wife." Zhang Sheng's abandonment of Yingying, however, essentially denies the instrumental value of women. When she could no longer provide the resources needed for a politically advantageous marriage, she became a scapegoat for his failure in the imperial examinations. This tendency towards "utilitarian marriage" was an inevitable outcome of the Tang Dynasty's aristocratic society, which used "marriage" and "official position" as the primary criteria for evaluation. Although the An-Shi Rebellion in the mid-Tang Dynasty fundamentally weakened the Tang Dynasty's aristocratic political system, it was not until the Five Dynasties period that a new paradigm emerged, one in which family background was no longer a primary consideration in selecting officials or arranging marriages.

2. TRANSFORMATIONS OF "ROMANCE OF THE WEST CHAMBER" IN THE SONG, JIN, AND YUAN DYNASTIES

During the Song and Jin Dynasties, the emergence of an urban citizen class gave rise to citizen literature, with "Romance of the West Chamber" gaining widespread popularity in brothels and taverns. The narrative and image of Yingying transitioned from a tale appreciated solely by the literati for its aesthetic qualities to one embraced by both the literati and the general populace. This was particularly evident in the reimagining of Cui Yingying's character; she was no longer depicted as simply a "youwu" or an evil, as originally portrayed by Yuan Zhen, but rather as a figure imbued with the noble pursuit of true love, eliciting greater empathy from audiences [15]. For example, Mao Pang's (毛滂) work "Diaoxiao Zhuanta", "This night, the souls have been connected secretly, Yuhuan is filled with resentment for where her love resides, is still unsure", "Young and loveless, like catkins on the breeze"sympathetically narrates Yingying's plight while criticizing the indifferent Zhang Sheng [16]. Similarly, Zhao Lingzhi's (赵令畤) "Meeting the True Love" alters the original narrative by omitting Zhang Sheng's derogatory remarks towards Yingying. In Zhao Lingzhi's work, "Yuan Weizhi Cui Yingying Shangdiao Die Lianhua," (元微之崔莺莺商调蝶恋花) it is stated: "Zhang's affections for Cui cannot be justified through reason nor aligned with righteousness. Their initial encounter was marked by deep devotion, yet their eventual separation was abrupt." Zhao's words, "Most of them are talented but too shallow in love, and they don't care about the separation" [17], highlight his resentment towards Zhang Sheng, as he no longer views him as "a person who is good at making up for his mistakes." This perspective on Yingying was prevalent during the Song and Jin Dynasties.

In the Jin Dynasty, Dong Jieyuan's "Dong Xixiang"(董西厢) emerged as a seminal work. Dong's version expanded the original legend from under 3,000 words to a robust 50,000-word rhymed narrative. It features a composition of various palace tunes, with lines inserted to align with the lyrics, thereby narrating an elaborate story with well-defined characters and plots. Dong Jieyuan transformed the original legend of fewer than 3,000 words into a storytelling piece exceeding 50,000 words. This is the sole complete version from the Song and Jin Dynasties that survives today, and it stands as one of the longest rhymed narratives in Chinese literature.

This adaptation profoundly altered Yingying's character from a seduced and abandoned woman to a rebellious figure willing to defy feudal norms in pursuit of romantic freedom [18]. Dong's narrative enriched the storyline with detailed characterization and adventurous episodes, establishing its status as a pivotal work in Chinese literature. As Hu Yinglin noted, it showcased exceptional craftsmanship, serving as a benchmark for other literary legends [19]. In Dong Jieyuan's writing, Yingying is portrayed as the daughter of Prime Minister Cui, who has a distinguished family background. She is beautiful, with "brow arches greener like distant mountains, and eyes brighter like autumn water," and she adheres strictly to etiquette. "When the beautiful woman sees Zhang Sheng, she shyly approaches him."[20] In contrast to the timid portrayal in Yuan Zhen's "The Story of Yingying," this version of Yingying boldly contemplates suicide with

Zhang Sheng to assert her freedom in love: "Yingying untied her skirt and threw it on the beam. 'For example, if I were to suffer from lovesickness in the past, it would be better to hang myself on the beam now than to die of haggardness at other times.'" [20] "Dong's West Chamber" transforms the tragic narrative of seduction and abandonment into a happy ending, challenging feudal notions of "youwu" and "the ability to atone for one's mistakes." It introduces various enriching plot elements, such as encounters in a Buddhist temple, poetry recitations under the moon, and Zhang Sheng's lovesickness, which enhance the character's depth.

The creation of Cui Yingying's character in "Dong Xixiang" reflects the sociopolitical context of the Jin Dynasty, where the ruling Jurchens were relatively indifferent to Confucian etiquette and ethics. With the arrival of the Jurchens, a significant migration of people began north of the Huai River. These ethnic minorities held a relatively less rigid view of Confucian ethics and moral principles, and the ruling Jurchens had a more liberal approach to marriage. Unlike the clan system of the Tang Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty not only permitted marriages between different ethnic groups but also between individuals of different social classes. The Jin Dynasty government generally avoided excessive interference in marriages between nobles and those of lower status.

Consequently, the cultural customs of these northern ethnic minorities had a considerable impact on the Han Chinese in the Central Plains. For example, compared to "The Story of Yingying," Cui Yingying in "Dong Xixiang" demonstrates a greater sense of female agency from the outset. In contrast to the singular male perspective of "The Story of Yingying," men in love also began to appear as objects of female admiration. Phrases like "Sima's talent and Pan Lang's appearance" and "Not only is he a romantic and good-looking man, but he also has such a beautiful heart. Why do people look down on him?" [21] reflect Cui Yingying's appreciation of Zhang Sheng from her own perspective. In the pursuit of love, Yingying also transitions from passive adherence to etiquette to more active engagement. In "Dong Xixiang," when Yingying unexpectedly encounters Zhang Sheng, "she kept stealing glances at people" and "looked at everyone, twisting the flowers with her hands." Instead of "staring with resentment" as described in "The Story of Yingying," she takes the initiative to peek, and her actions are directed towards Zhang Sheng, "lifting her sleeves with her hands, and striding to the roots"—a bold and daring image vividly portrayed.

Furthermore, the marriage customs of ethnic minorities like the Jurchens did not place excessive emphasis on female chastity. This contrasts sharply with the traditional Confucian concepts of chaste women and heroic women. For instance, the Jurchens had a custom of "letting steal on the day" (偷日), where, on the 16th day of the first lunar month each year, stealing was permitted for a day as a form of jest. Wives, daughters, treasures, and carriages could be stolen without punishment. On this day, women, whether married or unmarried, were permitted to have sexual relations with men outside of marriage. This bold custom is also reflected in "Dong Xixiang." The Yingying of "Dong Xixiang" viewed pre-marital chastity as merely "taking care of minor conduct and observing minor virtues" when meeting Zhang Sheng, rationally rejecting the concept of blind adherence to chastity for women. She even wrote a bold and passionate poem to Zhang Sheng: "Stop reciting poems in Gaotang, rain clouds are coming tonight. (Which means a clandestine love affair will be carried on.)

The Jurchen ruling class also held a more liberal view of marriage. Additionally, the Jin Dynasty's imperial examination system was more accessible, allowing scholars from various ethnic backgrounds to participate, albeit primarily those from non-aristocratic families. This social environment significantly influenced the adaptation and themes of "Dong Xixiang."

During the Yuan Dynasty, following a period of significant ethnic integration, cultural policies became increasingly open. The imperial examination system was not established for nearly 80 years, from the 9th year of Emperor Taizong of the Yuan Dynasty (1237) to the 2nd year of Emperor Renzong of the Yuan Dynasty (1315). This period saw more scholars and literati engaging with the citizen class and integrating into urban culture, leading to the popularity of brothels, Sanqu (散曲), and Zaju (杂剧). It is within this context that Wang Shifu's "Romance of the West Chamber" emerged.

Cui Yingying Daiyue Xixiang (崔莺莺待月西厢, or Waiting for the Moon in the West Chamber), written by Wang Shifu during the Yuanzhen and Dadu periods (1295-1307), this work is derived from "The Story of Yingying" by Yuan Zhen of the Tang Dynasty and "The West Chamber in Various Tunes" by Dong Jieyuan from the Jin Dynasty. Wang Shifu's "The Story of the West Chamber" takes the narrative further by

consolidating thematic elements from prior versions and infusing them with a stronger resistance to feudal ethics. Wang distinctly portrayed Yingying as a courageous figure advocating for marriage freedom and true love, transforming her character into one that defies traditional constraints.

Contrasting with Dong's subtle implication of Yingying's noble status, Wang explicitly defined her aristocratic lineage, which empowered her autonomy in romantic pursuits [22]. Due to her status as a noble lady from an aristocratic family, Yingying possesses the initiative in matters of love. Upon their first encounter, it is noted that "everyone flirted with her shoulders, but she merely picked up the flower with a smile" and "looked back to see if it was down," which vividly illustrates the scene of her holding the flower [23]. Wang Shifu employs the terms "smiled" and "looked back" to convey her boldness. According to feudal ethics, women were expected to avoid interactions with unfamiliar men; however, Yingying frequently gazed at Zhang Sheng and found it difficult to part from him. The phrase "keep stealing eyes" from "Dong Xixiang" presents a contrast, suggesting a timider and more reserved demeanor.

Moreover, Wang Shifu's "The West Chamber" alters the narrative perspective of Yingying's story, shifting from a male-dominated viewpoint that often belittles women to one that acknowledges their equality. This shift is evident in the text. For instance, during their subsequent meeting, Zhang Sheng expresses "Wenjun's intention" by composing a love poem on the wall, to which Yingying responds warmly with, "I guess those who wander around should pity those who sigh" [23, 24] Later, when the old lady coerces Yingying into becoming sworn siblings with Zhang Sheng to terminate their engagement, Yingying retorts: "Who would have thought that this old woman, who has been here for generations, would make Yingying a sister and worship her brother? The white water of Lanqiao overflows, and the fire in the temple is lit. The clear water splashes and splits the flounder; why are you in such a hurry, you frown and close your eyes?" [23]. Jin Shengtan (金圣叹) comments, "A torrent of venomous anger erupted from her throat and neck, while a flow of slander spewed forth from between her lips and teeth." [25]. This lyric reflects Yingying's resolute rebellious spirit and her yearning for love, as well as her bitterness towards her mother for breaking off the engagement. Her actions foreshadow her willingness to defy feudal ethics in the future. Through a series of seemingly contradictory yet meaningful actions—such as "delivering letters, causing trouble, refusing letters, and sending letters" Yingying, as a noblewoman, takes the initiative in her pursuit of love, unafraid of the pressures from feudal forces, thereby presenting a vivid female image and highlighting a distinct female consciousness.

Thus far, in Wang Shifu's "The Story of the West Chamber," Cui Yingying has fully developed and reshaped her character. Wang Shifu dispels the tragic elements in literature, expressing his belief that "I wish all lovers in the world can become couples," which also reflects the thematic shift of "The West Chamber" from the official culture of the literati to folk and citizen culture.

3. *CIRCULATION OF DIVERSE EDITIONS OF 'THE ROMANCE OF THE WEST CHAMBER' IN THE MING DYNASTY*

Since the Ming Dynasty, the rise of the urban middle class which was mainly composed of merchants, craftsmen, and urban civilians and the commercial economy facilitated the widespread popularity of the "Romance of the West Chamber." The emergence of various illustrated versions during this period reflects a vibrant cultural landscape. Printmaking reached its zenith in the Ming Dynasty, with reports indicating that "almost all operas in the Ming Dynasty scripts are illustrated," and "no book is without illustrations, and no picture is without exquisite detail." The illustrations accompanying the operas circulated alongside published versions, establishing the "Romance of the West Chamber" as a cornerstone in the history of opera development. Numerous annotated, commentary, illustrated, copied, and selected versions emerged, with notable editions such as the Hongzhi edition (弘治刊本), Li Zhi's commentary series (李贽评点本), and Xu Wei's commentary series (徐渭评点本). A total of 49 existing Ming editions are documented, including 42 illustrated versions, excluding reprints [26].

Table 1. List of ming dynasty editions of the romance of the western chamber.

Type of Edition	Number of Editions	Representative Works	Year
Manuscript 钞本	2 existing copies	Qiu & Wen's Harmonious Complete Romance of the West Chamber, (仇文合璧西厢会真记) calligraphy by Wen Zhengming, painting by Qiu Ying, (Wuxi Wang Family Collection)	Jiajing (嘉靖) 38th Year (1559)
		Wang Yayi's Hand-copied Text of the Ballad of the West Chamber,(王雅宜手钞西厢记曲文) compiled by Wang Chong, Chongqing Library Collection	Jiajing era of Ming Dynasty
Draft Manuscript 稿本	1 existing copy	Northern Western Chamber Ordered by Regulations,(北西厢订律) undivided volume, manuscript from Xifang Lou, arranged by Hu Zhoumian, formerly in Fu Xihua's collection	Chongzhen (崇祯)era
Printed Edition 刊本	Total of 49 existing editions from Ming	Newly Compiled and Corrected Western Chamber, fragments (新编校正西厢记)	Printed in late Yuan and early Ming, at the latest not later than Chenghua and Hongzhi [27,28]
		Newly Printed Annotated and Illustrated Western Chamber,(新刊奇妙全相注释西厢记) printed by the Jin Tai Yue family bookstore in Beijing	Hongzhi (弘治)11th Year (1498)
		Newly Corrected Ancient Edition with Large Characters and Illustrated Interpretations Northern Western Chamber,(新刻考正古本大字出像释义北西厢记) 2 volumes, printed by Hu Shaoshan's Shaoshan Hall in Jinling	Wanli 7th Year (1579)
		Reprinted Original Edition with Commentary and Phonetic Explanations of the Western Chamber,(重刻元本题评音释西厢记) 2 volumes (Xu Qufan's printed edition), currently in Beijing and Shanghai	Wanli 8th Year (1580)
		Reprinted Original Edition with Commentary and Phonetic Explanations of the Western Chamber,(重刻元本题评音释西厢记) 2 volumes (Xiong Longfeng's printed edition), currently in Japan	Wanli 20th Year (1592)
		Revised Northern Western Chamber,重校北西厢记) 5 volumes, printed by Jizhi Studio, currently in Japan	Wanli 26th Year (1598)
		Newly Combined Wang Shifu's Western Chamber,(新刊合并王实甫西厢记) 2 volumes, currently in Beijing	Wanli 28th Year(1600)
		Northern Western Chamber,(北西厢) 5 volumes, revised by Mingyange Owner, currently in Shanghai and Beijing	Chongzhen 4th Year (1631)

		Mr. Li Zhuwu's Commented True Edition of the Western Chamber,(李卓吾先生批点西厢记真本) 2 volumes, commented by Li Zhuwu of Ming, currently in Beijing and Hangzhou	Chongzhen 13th Year (1640)
Selected Editions 选本	20 existing editions of Ming	Xinkan Yaomu Guanchang Zhuoqi Fengyue Jinnang Zhengza Liangke Quanji (新刊耀目冠场擢奇风月锦囊正杂两科全集)	Yongle era
		A Sprig from the Grove of Poetry, compiled by Huang Wenhua (词林一枝) compiled by Huang Wenhua	Wanli 1st Year (1573)
		Eight Talents of Music, (八能奏锦) compiled by Huang Wenhua	Wanli 1st Year (1573)
		Selected Beautiful Sounds, (摘锦奇音)by Gong Zhengwo	Wanli 39st Year (1611)

The widespread circulation of the "West Chamber" in the mid to late Ming Dynasty was facilitated by the downward transfer of knowledge, the expansion of the reading population, and the flourishing commodity economy. Increased maritime trade and the influx of silver into the Jiangnan region enhanced the role of printing technology. Popular culture, including novels and operas, thrived as publishing and distribution became more accessible, breaking the cultural monopoly of the upper class. This trend of popularization and secularization allowed broader participation in cultural consumption, with a growing number of individuals specializing in book publishing and sales. The woodblock printing industry flourished in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, leading to a proliferation of bookstores. This rapid development enabled literati to engage more actively in the creation and study of operas, challenging the earlier notion that "scholar officials were ashamed to pay attention to lyrics and music" [29].

During this period, Cui Yingying's image became more secular, gaining acceptance among the urban class and becoming integrated into popular literature. Her attitude towards love varied significantly across different periods.

Table 2. Cui Yingying's attitude towards love across different periods.

Era	Typical expression and behavior	Reflection
Tang Dynasty	"I dare not hate" (passive submission)	Reflecting the consolidation of the literati's gender hegemony
Jin and Yuan Dynasty	"Hanging myself from the beam is better than dying of exhaustion" (resistance with death) –	Indicating limited resistance from the urban class.
Ming Dynasty	I can provid property and gifts to Zhangsheng to secure the marriage and establish a familial relationship. (active bargaining) –	Reflecting the capitalization of the body under the commodity economy.

This shift occurred because the commodity economy's growth in the mid- and late-Ming Dynasty led to a more secularized society. For instance, discussing wealth became prevalent in social customs like weddings and funerals, which became extravagantly lavish, fostering competition. Conservatives adhering to traditional etiquette criticized this phenomenon. Money's influence became undeniable in various relationships within Ming Dynasty society. The concept of money worship, reflected in sayings such as "gold

rules the heavens, and money rules the earth," gained popularity during this period. People commonly judged ability based on their capacity to generate wealth, and this distorted social value system triggered significant changes. Driven by self-interest, individuals "competed fiercely, bullied one another, and were in a state of panic." According to Gu Yanwu in "The Book of the Benefits and Problems of Counties and States in the World," this resulted in "fraud and deceit, slander and disputes, widespread luxury, and complete decadence."

However, while the trend of money worship was detrimental, it was not entirely negative. Traditional Chinese society had long upheld a rigid family system, with aristocratic families primarily preserving their social standing through strategic marriages and official positions. This inflexible and stable social order could endure for centuries without significant disruption. As Zheng Qiao noted in "General History," "Since the Sui and Tang Dynasties, officials have kept records, and families have genealogies. The selection of officials must be based on records; the marriage of families must be based on genealogies." It was not until the Five Dynasties, with the development of a relatively complete imperial examination system, that social classes gained some degree of upward mobility, allowing for a situation where official selection and marriage were not solely dictated by family background.

From this vantage point, money exerted a substantial influence on the hierarchical structure of traditional society during the mid- and late-Ming Dynasty, contributing positively to the erosion of rigid social divisions. Within this environment, the pursuit of innovation and change, selecting a husband based on wealth, and choosing a son-in-law based on talent held a positive and progressive aspect. Such social concepts fostered tolerance and support for the pursuit of genuine and free love between men and women.

This is reflected in the increasingly popular novels and operas of the period, where numerous ladies and daughters from prominent families admired the talent and character of impoverished scholars, secretly becoming engaged in garden settings. "The Romance of the West Chamber" stands as the pinnacle of this secular literature. Its emergence was only possible within a social context where the boundaries separating the four classes – scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants – were becoming increasingly indistinct, and the concept of social hierarchy was correspondingly weakening.

The status and role of women also underwent significant changes. As handicrafts began to separate from agriculture, women found more opportunities to engage in business, broadening their horizons. The Jiangnan region, known for its heavy taxation, saw women from modest families seeking livelihoods on the streets to maintain their consumption levels. Consequently, the presence of female idlers women engaged in gossip, entertainment, and other social activities became prominent during this period. Under the constraints of "boudoir norms," women living in seclusion developed a strong desire to explore the outside world, with female idlers frequently visiting affluent households to earn small profits. This shift in the social division of labor among women reflects increased participation in economic activities, diverse occupations, and evolving social status, alongside the popularization of cultural education and the rise of women's culture. These changes not only highlight the economic development and cultural prosperity of the time but also underscore the significant roles women played in the historical process.

Table 3. Female images in literary works in the middle and late ming dynasty.

Image	Characteristics	Behavior	Source
knightly females 侠女	Highly insightful, intelligent and brave"	Punish evil and eliminate evil, and do justice	"Legend of Strange Women"(奇女子), "A Brief History of Love" (情史类略), Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World"(喻世明言), "Stories to Warn the World" (警世通言), "Stories to Awaken the World" (醒世恒言), and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" (初刻拍案惊奇) and "Second Collection of Strange Stories" (二刻拍案惊).

Talented woman 才女	Hardworking, kind, smart and capable, and actively pursues love"	Actively pursue knowledge and constantly improve herself. Participate in cultural activities, form associations, create, publish poetry collections, etc. to engage in social interaction.	Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories". "Ancient and Modern Books Collection: The Collection of Boudoir Girls" (古今图书集成·闺媛典)
Prostitutes 妓女	Have a strong sense of self, yearn for freedom and beautiful love, have the courage to resist oppression, challenge unfair fate	Playing the zither, the qin, the flute, and the xiao	Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories".
Chaste woman 贞女	Adhere to chastity, loyalty and loyalty	Adhere to and be loyal to love or marriage	Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories".Gao Lian's The Jade Hairpin" (玉簪记), etc.
Stubborn woman 烈女	Strong and resolute personality, value righteousness over life, have the courage to fight, and be unyielding	When faced with coercion or violation, choose to fight to the death to defend your chastity and dignity	Lu Kun's "Gui Fan" (闺范), "Ming History" (明史) Volume 301 "Biographies of Women" (列女传), Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories"
Jealous woman	A woman who is rude, reckless, and aggressive	Does not allow her husband to take a concubine, and defends her rights in the family	Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories", Li Shaowen's "Miscellaneous Notes on Clouds" (云间杂识), "Vinegar Gourd" (醋葫芦) by "Fu Ci Jiaozhu" (signed), Xie Zhaozhe: "Wen Hai Pi Sha" (文海披沙) Volume 8 "Jealous Woman" (妒妇)
Business woman	With a sense of liberation, smart and intelligent, grateful and repaying kindness	Thriftiness, supporting her husband, educating children, and loosening the concept of chastity	Feng Menglong's "Stories to Enlighten the World", "Stories to Warn the World", "Stories to Awaken the World", and Ling Mengchu's "First Collection of Strange Stories" and "Second Collection of Strange Stories", Stories about the Light of the Dawn" (觅灯因话), "New Stories about the Light of the Dawn" (剪灯新话), etc.

Chaste women	Stay chaste and never remarry, stay firm in marriage and family	Self-mutilation, fasting, drowning, hanging	"Biographies of Girls with Virtues" (闺烈传), "Biographies of Women" Volume 301 of "History of Ming Dynasty", etc.

The female characters in literary dramas and artistic works became more nuanced and vivid during this period, embodying more positive values. The development of the commodity economy diversified the consumer groups for dramas and literary works, leading to representations of female characters that resonated with various social classes and customs. In the dissemination of the Ming edition of the "Romance of the West Chamber," two primary directions emerged: adaptation and imitation, where the core content remained unchanged while the artistic form was altered, and remakes and sequels, which reconstructed the original work based on the adapter's aesthetic views. The former emphasizes changes in form, while the latter focuses on content renovation.

Overall, since the Ming Dynasty, the portrayal of Yingying has continued the style of "Wang Xixiang" from the Yuan Dynasty. However, researchers have noted that many remakes and adaptations diverge significantly from Wang Shifu's original blueprint, often reflecting dissatisfaction with "Wang Xixiang." This dissatisfaction may pertain to character development, actor lines, behavior, and the story's ending and ideological implications. Some adaptations replaced the protagonist Zhang Sheng with Zheng Heng to clear his name, as seen in Qin Zhijian's "Fan Xixiang." (**翻西**厢) In sequels, characters were often completely reimagined, with Yingying depicted as a jealous woman and Zhang Sheng as lewd, as in Xujiang Yunke (Huang Cuiwu)'s "Continuation of Xixiang Shengxianji." (续西厢**升仙**记) Other works aimed to portray Yingying as a virtuous lady, adhering to etiquette while attempting to reconcile conflicts between Zhang and Zheng, such as in Zhou Gonglu's "Jin Xixiang." (锦西厢)

In summary, the adaptations of "Xixiang" fundamentally challenge the theme that "all lovers in the world become couples." They either defend Yingying as a chaste and heroic figure, glorify Zheng Heng as a passionate and talented man, or depict Yingying as a jealous woman, advocating for moral restraint. Some portray her as a noblewoman, attempting to overturn the unplanned regrets of lust between Cui and Zhang, while others label her as a "youwu" or "evil," attributing her fate to her own actions. The common goal of these adaptations is to discredit "Xixiang" and mitigate its perceived negative influence on society.

The adaptations of "Xixiang" by Ming Dynasty literati represent a re-creation practice reflecting personal ideological and artistic inclinations. Authors clearly articulated their positions and attitudes through their adaptations, driven by complex motivations. They often sought to diminish the influence of Wang Xixiang due to their negative perceptions, employing various means to suppress its dissemination. Feudal rulers and moralists labeled it as an "obscene book," attempting to tarnish its reputation through public opinion, administrative bans, and even archaeological claims to discredit the authenticity of the love story between Cui and Zhang. In the eighth year of Wanli, Cheng Juyuan (**程巨源**) noted in the "Preface to Cui's Spring and Autumn Annals" (**崔氏春秋序**) that some viewed it as a book of lust, prompting the creation of an "Anti-Xixiang." Qin Zhijian's "Reversing the West Chamber" not only reversed the narrative of "Wang Xixiang" but also addressed other related works, effectively achieving multiple objectives.

Ultimately, whether through remakes or sequels, the emergence of these adaptations depended on a sufficient audience to support the consumption of operatic literature. They either became part of the vulgar market culture or sought to fulfill the author's personal ambitions through unconventional and appealing narratives. This reflects the development of the commodity economy and citizen culture in the mid to late Ming Dynasty. Regardless of the adaptations, the image of Cui Yingying in the "West Chamber" continues to embody the spiritual core of "Wang Xixiang," representing the enduring theme of lovers ultimately uniting, resonating with both the general public and the scholarly elite.

III. CONCLUSION

In summary, this article examines Yuan Zhen's various versions of the Yingying Biography from the mid-Tang Dynasty, the different versions of The Romance of the Western Chamber by Dong Jieyuan and Wang

Shifu from the Song, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties, and the illustrated versions circulating in the mid- to late-Ming Dynasty. By analyzing the evolution of Cui Yingying's image from the Tang to the Ming Dynasty, this study reveals the intricate social mechanisms underlying the formation of ancient Chinese literary classics. The study finds that the transformation of Yingying's image is not merely artistic innovation, but a gendered projection of shifting social power structures. This article focuses on the distinct social structural transformations from the Tang to the Ming Dynasty, combining feminist gender analysis to project social power institutions from various historical stages onto the evolving image of Cui Yingying. Through the classic image in The Romance of the Western Chamber, we gain insight into the complex changes within Chinese society.

Moreover, we reaffirm the logic behind the formation of literary classics: their essence lies in the struggle for cultural discourse power among different classes. When this struggle is embodied by women, we see how successive dynasties oppressed, reconstructed, and distorted them through the vast apparatus of power. Only with the development of the commodity economy and substantial social structural transformations could women slowly liberate themselves. However, even by the Ming Dynasty, this liberation remained limited, often viewed from a male perspective. Fortunately, we also witness Yingying, a resilient flower emerging from the soil of Confucian culture over two millennia, miraculously transform from a figure of evil to one of beauty, and from incompleteness to healing, due to the unique resilience and tenacity of women.

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