

Mutual Learning Between Elegance and Vulgarly: A Study of the Elegance and Vulgarly of the Illustrations in the Late Ming Dynasty *The Romance of West Chamber* Opera Edition

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ABSTRACT

The illustrations in *The Romance of West Chamber* edition in the Ming Dynasty were traced back to the novel *The Biography of Ying Ying* written by Yuan Zhen in the Tang Dynasty. After the *Dong Xixiang* in the Jin Dynasty, Wang Shifu, a dramatist of the Yuan Dynasty, adapted it into a drama and sung it, and finally it was widely carved into popular reading materials in the Ming Dynasty. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the number of printed copies of it was too large to enumerate. This paper starts with the creative subject and content of the illustrations of *The Romance of West Chamber* edition in the late Ming Dynasty, and analyzes the mutual learning relationship between elegance and vulgarly in the production process of the illustrations in *The Romance of West Chamber* editions in that period from the outside to the inside.

Keywords: Late Ming Dynasty, *The Romance of West Chamber*, Elegance and vulgarly, Edition illustration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "late Ming Dynasty" in this paper follows the division basis of the literary history of the Ming Dynasty, and regards Jiajing, Longwan and the end of the Ming Dynasty as the definition of late Ming period.[1] Due to the general increase in demand for editions in the Ming Dynasty, official and folk carving copies and transcripts were common, and reached the climax in the late Ming Dynasty. Ye Dehui said: "I mean that the ancients combined the illustration and the edition together. There is a edition, there is the illustration".[2] "No edition without illustrations, no illustration without fine workmanship".[3] The illustrations of *The Romance of West Chamber* opera edition are mainly characterized by "knife, board, and line". The number of versions and styles are different, which are closely related to the development of the era, social class, and carving craftsman. It is not only a masterpiece of opera printmaking, but also leaves a strong mark in the history of Chinese printmaking.

2. "ELEGANCE" IN THE MUTUAL LEARNING BETWEEN ELEGANCE AND VULGARITY

The Romance of West Chamber opera edition illustrations combine the creative subject, content, and dissemination methods to construct an elegant aesthetic taste.

2.1 Creation Subject

In the late Ming Dynasty, the "elegance" of the creation subject of *The Romance of West Chamber* edition benefited from the strong Confucian atmosphere of the Ming Dynasty. In the third year of Hongwu's reign in the early Ming Dynasty, the imperial examination was resumed, and the Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty issued an imperial edict: "Since August this year, the imperial examination has specially been set up to ensure that those who are familiar with the classics, have good moral character, have knowledge of ancient and modern times, and are worthy of the name are

selected. I will personally ask him questions in the court, and nominate him as an official.[4]" So far, the re-establishment of the imperial examination system has led to the gradual increase and vigorous development of literati and scholar-bureaucrats.

In the late Ming Dynasty, the economy was prosperous, the government was rectitudinous and the people were peaceful. On the one hand, as a scholar-bureaucrat literati class, the literati actively devoted to the cultural market, independently opened and operated bookshops, and valued quality to return their wealth. For example, Ling Mengchu, a famous publisher in the late Ming Dynasty, came from a family of scholar-bureaucrats when he was young, took the imperial examination several times in his life, and became the county magistrate of Shanghai in the seventh year of Chongzhen. The carving copy of *Five Dramas of The Romance of West Chamber* was illustrated by artist Wang Wenheng, in which the picture of "Pouring Farewell Wine in Short and Long Pavilion" vividly depicted scenes of desolation and uneasiness.[5] On the other hand, the phenomenon of literati abandoning Confucianism and engaging in business often occurred. Many literati actively participated in market creation after political frustration, and gradually became craftsmen. For example, Tang Yin, a literati painter, made a living by selling article and painting after his career was frustrated. Qiu Ying and others also participated in it, and drawing *The Romance of West Chamber* edition illustrations became a classic. Chen Hongshou retained the elegant style of the literati and added the folk aesthetics. Along with "how can you accomplish no skill in life"[6] and "have one skill and be free to use it"[7], the literati gradually became more and more skillful, did things by themselves and joined in the commercial production of *The Romance of West Chamber* and other editions, in order to achieve the elegance and interest different from ordinary people's aesthetics.

2.2 Creation Content

Literati always pursued noble quality and cultural accomplishment, advocating poetry and literature and extraordinary charm. The profound artistic background is the grounding of the edition creation. Therefore, the "elegance" of the content of the works can be seen in many illustrations in *The Romance of West Chamber* opera edition in the late Ming Dynasty, among which the scenery description is the most representative.



Figure 1 Refined Ci-poem field version of *The Romance of West Chamber*.



Figure 2 Vermilion bounded version of *The Romance of West Chamber*.

Literati were quite fond of pavilions, terraces and open halls, mountains, rocks and trees, boating tours, landscapes, flowers and birds, and other topics. The popular form of "broken branches" in Min's edition of *The Romance of West Chamber* is exquisite in composition. The author conceives the characters and scenery characteristics of the text according to the plot description, and expresses his mood through image imagination. The pattern decoration in *Wang and Li's Commenting on the North West Chamber* of the Qifeng Pavilion is detailed. In addition, it also adopts the style of

literati painting, for example, in the "refined Ci-poem field version of *The Romance of West Chamber*" and "vermilion bounded version of *The Romance of West Chamber*" ("Figure 1" and "Figure 2") in the late Ming Dynasty, most of the whole picture depicts the scenery and environment, reduces the size of the characters, pays attention to "conveying the spirit with the form", absorbs the popular form of Beauty Painting in the late Ming Dynasty, and the lines are graceful and smooth. In addition, the inscription has also changed. The font no longer uses standard characters for signature, but instead, it uses different calligraphic expressions. The composition pays attention to the harmony and flexibility of the pictures, matches the poems and signs them, and integrates them with the illustrations of the prints, bringing out the best in each other. The poems, editions and paintings are integrated, and the artistic conception is far-reaching, forming the unique beauty of the literati. In *The Newly Annotated Ancient Version Romance of West Chamber*, Ying Ying's yearning for Zhang Sheng is incisively and vividly depicted. The characters and scenery are metaphors to each other, and the feelings and scenes blend. In the reign of Emperor Chongzhen of the Ming Dynasty, Li Tingmo's edition, *Mr. Xu Wenchang's Criticism of the North West Chamber* ("Figure 3"), adopted a moon-like layout, placing the plot of the text together with the small scenery, forming a unique style of literati.

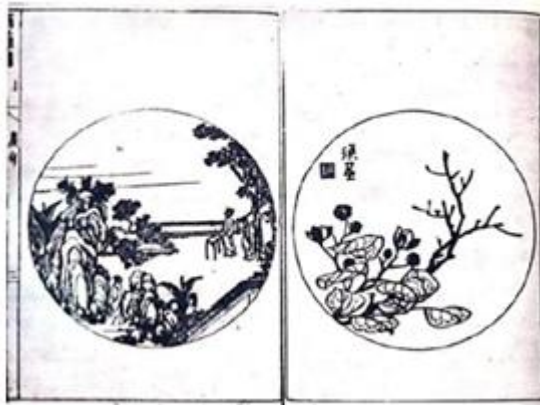


Figure 3 Mr. Xu Wenchang's *Criticism of the North West Chamber*.



Figure 4 Zhang Shenzhi's *True North West Chamber*.

2.3 Mode of Transmission

In the late Ming Dynasty, with the rapid development of the "*The Romance of West Chamber*" opera editions, various regional genres emerged at the historic moment, and mostly gathered in Jian'an, Fujian, Xin'an, Anhui, Jinling, Jiangsu, and other places, with the major cities as the center, and became popular. The illustrations of the Jian'an School were widely spread in the early Ming Dynasty. The overall style was relatively young compared to the later period. Xiong Longfeng of the Zhongzheng Hall and Liu Longtian of the Qiaoshan Hall were the most famous. The style was primitive and boorish, the carving copy was rough, and the number was large. However, its edition style (figure above and text below) played a certain positive role in the development of future prints, and provided reference for other regions. After the Jian'an School, it entered a period dominated by the Jinling School. The Jinling School inherited the Jian'an format, slightly improved, and integrated into the regional tradition, which was more detailed than the Jian'an School, and later spread across a wide area. Its style also affected the generation of the Hui School.

The emergence of the Hui School made the illustration of the late Ming Dynasty print reach its peak. On the one hand, Huizhou was rich in paper and ink, and had a unique geographical advantage. Its printing and collation were beyond the reach of the Jian'an School. On the other hand, there were many carvers in Huizhou, and those who lived in other places spread their regional style to all parts of the country. Later, the market gradually became dominant, and the Jinling illustrations also showed a degradation trend at this time. The literati painters

participated in succession, which provided the basis for the formation of the illustration style of the Ming Dynasty prints, and profoundly displayed the beauty, grace and elegance of the literati artists. In addition to Jian'an, Jinling and Hui, it also spread greatly in Suzhou, Hangzhou and other places. The Wulin (today's Hangzhou) inherited the Hui School, which was handed down in one continuous line and characterized by elegance and refinement. The direct reason was that it was influenced by the carving work from Huizhou, and on this basis, it gave play to regional characteristics and ingenious composition. For example, in *Wang and Li's Commenting on the North West Chamber*, the scenery is exquisite and the characters are vivid. The unique copy *Zhang Shenchi's True North West Chamber* ("Figure 4"), with vivid characters and psychological portrayal, is quite metaphorical. Throughout the late Ming Dynasty's *The Romance of West Chamber* editions, the regional styles influenced each other and fused with each other, contributing to the overall characteristic trend of elegant and exquisite illustrations in the late Ming Dynasty's editions.

3. "VULGARITY" IN THE MUTUAL LEARNING BETWEEN ELEGANCE AND VULGARITY

The vulgarity of the illustrations in the magazine is displayed through the creation subject, creation content and mode of transmission.

3.1 Creation Subject

With the popularity of popular literature such as opera and novels in the late Ming Dynasty, the demand for print illustrations gradually increased, and the improvement of the social status of craftsmen continued to promote the emergence of painters and engravers. In addition to the scholar-bureaucrats who were full of literati feelings, the painters and engravers who were at the middle and bottom level with exquisite skills and participated in the creation of illustrations in the editions emerged in the folk workshops, with a large number of famous craftsmen.

Due to the large number of painters who participated in the creation of edition illustrations in the late Ming Dynasty, this not only added the narrative function of secular plots, but also improved the artistic effect of book illustrations. In addition, all these achievements couldn't be separated from the wide spread of Huizhou

woodcut painters, which had a far-reaching impact on local painters. Compared with the painters, the engravers were also very important. In the late Ming Dynasty, the talents of Huizhou engravers were concentrated and their skills were self-contained, with the Huang family in Qiu village of Xi County being the most famous. The Huang family's engraving technology inherited the engraving technology of the early Ming Dynasty. The composition and knife technique were accumulated for a long time, and gradually formed a delicate, beautiful and elegant style. At that time, the wage of engravers was extremely low. The *Cultural History of the Ming Dynasty* once recorded: "According to the part after the catalog in the *Collected Works of Mr. Luo from Yuzhang* carved by Xie Luanshi from Minsha and Zhang Tai from Lingnan in the 33rd year of the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty (1554), the sentences "carved 83 pieces, 2 volumes, totaling 161 pages, with a total salary of 24 taels" can be used to calculate a salary of 1.5 cents per page, which is very cheap".[8] It can be seen from the low wages that there was great social competition at that time, which also reflected the high demand of the book printing and engraving market. In order to generate higher economic benefits, there were still some cases that relied on drawing and engraving or fake signature of masters on editions. There were so many versions that it was difficult to distinguish the true from the false. Although the authenticity of the version couldn't be guaranteed, in a sense, it was due to many attempts of the craftsmen that the version of *The Romance of West Chamber* was varied, widely spread and deeply loved by all classes.

In the late Ming Dynasty, the painters and engravers of *The Romance of West Chamber* editions promoted each other. Exquisite painters and skilled engravers do not exist in isolation at any stage, and the two are equally important. They cooperate with each other, make each other better, and jointly promote the emergence of a large number of treasures. Zheng Zhenduo once commented that "with the design of a great painter, and with the superb hands, eyes and knife technique of Xin'an engraving, it has two beautiful tools as well as master and guest who are difficult to find, thus forming the golden age of China's print history".[9] Because of the improvement of engraving technology, it is possible to make complex and delicate drawings. With the emergence of the draftsman's manuscript, the engraver will use his own engraving technology

and artistic quality to restore it. The exquisite degree of the engraver is also a key link in the final formation. In *The Romance of West Chamber* version creation cooperation, the more famous ones are *The Yuanbenchuxiang North West Chamber*, painted by Wang Geng and engraved by Huang Yikai and Huang Yibin, *The Newly Annotated Ancient Version Romance of West Chamber* painted by Qian Gu, copied by Ru Wenshu and engraved by Huang Yingguang, and *The Romance of West Chamber* painted by Chen Hongshou and engraved by Huang Zili.[10] There are many excellent and exquisite works.

3.2 Creation Content

In the late Ming Dynasty, the creation theme of the zaju *The Romance of West Chamber* gradually relaxed from the original indoctrination drama of the Ming Dynasty, gradually manifesting its secularity. In the ninth year of Yongle's reign (1411), the Law of Ming Dynasty officially issued a ban on zaju: "All minstrels who copy zaju scripts are not allowed to dress up as emperors, empresses, loyal officials, martyrs, sages, and statues of gods of all dynasties. Violators will be beaten with a stick a hundred times, and those from official families who dress up like above-mentioned will also be punished in this way. Immortals, Taoist priests, people who stick to the principle of righteousness, duteous women, dutiful sons, good grandchildren, and those who persuade others to be good are not within the limits.[11]" This limited the free creation of zaju, and advocated orthodox loyalty and filial piety as well as immortalization indoctrination. Throughout the overall development of opera in the Ming Dynasty, it played an increasingly important role in the society. The way of entertainment enriched the life of the secular people, and until the late Ming Dynasty, a widely circulated opera edition scene was formed.

Based on the way of creation in the early Ming Dynasty, the print illustrations of opera in the late Ming Dynasty developed from this. The early illustrations continued to use the effect of secular opera's "combination of singing and pictures"[12] to express, paid attention to stage performance, had obvious stylization, and laid out with the positioning and action of characters in popular opera. For example, in the section of "Climbing over the Wall Under the Cover of the Night" in *The Comment and Phonetic Transcription of the Re-engraved Yuan Version West Chamber* ("Figure 5"), the distance of the characters is not distinguished

by "being small in the distance and big on the contrary", and the body movements do not conform to the prominent plot, but are presented by the stage effect, reflecting the secular vision, and laying the foundation for the early form of literati elegance in *The Romance of West Chamber* opera illustrations in the late Ming Dynasty. Later, literati and scholar-bureaucrats in the late Ming Dynasty began to break through the traditional restrictions and traditional composition and pay attention to emotional history in order to create.

The secular decoration in the illustrations of *The Romance of West Chamber* in the late Ming Dynasty also fits the people's spiritual life. As the so-called "art originates from technique, and technique carries artistic conception", illustrations are also the material carrier of religious beliefs, concepts, etiquettes, customs and ethics. Through the temples and artifacts in Min's edition of *The Romance of West Chamber*, one can see that religious pattern is significantly secular. Since the Emperor believed in Taoism during the reign of Jiajing, Taoist patterns were common in the picture. In Min's edition of *The Romance of West Chamber*, the swastika pattern on the fence, the pine and bamboo pattern on the official hat chair, and the cloud and crane pattern, dragon pattern, and twining branch pattern which were widely carved in other types of vessels, were all manifestations. At the same time, in the style of the carving of *The Romance of West Chamber*, the folk flavor was also very strong. For example, the Jian'an School's *Comment on Re-engraved Yuan Version West Chamber* of Liu Longtian of the Qiaoshan Hall, highlights the image of the characters, weakens the background treatment, and is unadorned and fresh, and the lifelike theme of the engraving is popular with the public.

3.3 Mode of Transmission

The secularity of transmission is embodied in two aspects. One is that the reception of *The Romance of West Chamber* editions is a form that the general public likes. The illustrations of operas in the early Ming Dynasty focused on the interpretation of pictures and texts, and assisted the public to understand the contents of books through the form of prints. For example, in *The Romance of West Chamber* of Hongzhi's version, whose full name is *Xinkan Dazi Kuiben Quanxiang Canzeng Qimiao Zhushi Xixiangji* ("Figure 6"), the "Quanxiang" means that the whole book is equipped with illustrations, and this edition puts

illustrations above and texts below, which corresponds to one another, with the ability to "visualize the content to be explained, and turn the thought and content into concrete images that can be seen".[13] For those who do not know the words, they can understand the text expression through the visualization of the content, which has the narrative secularity. From Wanli to the end of the Ming Dynasty, the types of editions became more and more diversified, and gradually formed the carving style of different schools in different regions. At this time, even without the support of the text, the image also had independence, and the picture was exquisite, which increased the visual enjoyment of readers. In the late Ming Dynasty, many editions meant "good things", with increasingly frequent exchanges between different regions, a sharp increase in currency, profit-seeking merchants, numerous bookstores, and increasingly obvious popularization and commercialization of literary and artistic activities. At the same time, the aesthetic reserve of the literati was prominent, and they were rich in life and began to pursue different levels of "beauty", changing from the simple aesthetic before to the luxury style. On the whole, the reading materials of the Ming Dynasty were diverse, simple and complex.

Besides, the emergence of various genres of different editions cannot be separated from the commercial market operation. As an active factor in the economy, the cultural commodity market in the late Ming Dynasty made the book selling industry in the south of the Yangtze River more prosperous. The first was the marketing strategy of regional publishers. For a long time, *The Romance of West Chamber* showed the counter-promoting effect of the publication of "spreading so widely that it became over widespread"[14] and many draftsmen in the late Ming Dynasty only served fixed merchants. For example, Wang Wenheng, a Su painter in the late Ming Dynasty, once drew drawings for the Min and Ling families.[15] The second was the book selling channel through waterway transportation. For example, the emergence of "book boats" (boats that sold books to and from the south of the Yangtze River) accelerated the spread of *The Romance of West Chamber* editions. The Kunshan writer Gui Youguang once said: "People in Zhejiang often travel to Wuwu (near Jiangsu) and sell books".[16] The book boat was integrated into life and was indispensable. The commercial market operation not only made the circulation of the edition wide,

but also made the carvers go everywhere to sell more.



Figure 5 *The Comment and Phonetic Transcription of the Re-engraved Yuan Version West Chamber — Climbing over the Wall Under the Cover of the Night.*



Figure 6 Illustrations in Hongzhi's version, 1st question on the 1st side.

4. ELEGANCE AND VULGARITY BLEND WITH EACH OTHER

In the late Ming Dynasty, the economy was booming, and all kinds of books were springing up. The audience of books gradually moved from literati and bureaucrats to the emerging civil class. There were many versions of *The Romance of West Chamber*, from the early Ming Dynasty, when the illustrations were above and texts were below, and the illustrations were matched with the texts, to the late Ming Dynasty, when the illustrations were completely independent, drawing on the strengths of each school, becoming increasingly sophisticated in craftsmanship, and integrating traditional aesthetic and secular senses into a classic.

According to incomplete statistics, there are more than one hundred editions related to the *The Romance of West Chamber* in the Ming Dynasty, and this popular art that enjoyed both elegant and vulgar tastes continued in the Qing Dynasty. The participation of literati made the edition more elegant, and the appeal of opera *The Romance of West Chamber* to the secular masses was also the key factor for its spread. The prosperity of the commodity economy in the late Ming Dynasty made the literati inevitably affected by the secular culture of the citizens, and the creation was gradually penetrated by the folk art. In the whole process of creation, the literati integrated elegance into secular decoration and developed into the folk through painting. With the participation of carvers, the unique aesthetic of elegance infiltrated the civil class and entered the common people's homes, which not only had the style of literati, but also conformed to the fun of the public. From the beginning to the end, the evolution of style was determined by the social environment. The creators continued to spontaneously carry out artistic creation and processing. The edition engraving became more and more refined with the advance of time, and continued to develop in the direction of artistry.

With the expansion of commodity circulation, throughout the civil class, more and more people were economically prosperous and began to pursue spiritual satisfaction. They imitated the elegant art of literati, learned cultural thoughts, improved their own aesthetics, and aspired to be among the gentry. With the gradual nourishment of literati aesthetics, the aesthetic level of citizens was also improved, among which businessmen belonged to the main group. Ordinary citizens who couldn't understand could also read through publications. The class of

people who read books was numerous and varied, including the literati class, the people with lofty ideals who had not achieved fame, businessmen and ordinary citizens. They were all keen on popular reading, thus, publications became the best-selling works in the late Ming Dynasty. Elegance and vulgarity in the illustrations of *The Romance of West Chamber* editions interacted and promoted each other, forming the aesthetic taste and artistic characteristics of "appreciating both elegance and vulgarity". From content to printing, the industry level of cultural goods was continuously improved.

5. CONCLUSION

As a communication medium of the world's common language, image has not only the value of artistic creation and appreciation, but also the characteristics of objectivity, intuition, testimony, realism and ease of understanding.[17] In the Qing Dynasty, *Fanzheng in Jiangsu Provincial Legislation* said, "As for *The Water Margin*, *The Romance of West Chamber* and other books, almost every family has one copy of them and everyone has a suitcase of them".[18] It can be seen that *The Romance of West Chamber* is widespread and influential. As one of the most famous subjects of popular reading in the late Ming Dynasty, *The Romance of West Chamber* reflects the general aesthetic vision and social psychology at that time.

This paper explores the relationship between the creation subject and the creation content of late Ming Dynasty's *The Romance of West Chamber* opera editions in terms of elegance and vulgarity. It can be seen that the print illustrations of opera editions were very skillful in this period, which were not only the visual image expression of ancient literati, but also the highest level of engraving technology, profoundly explaining the technical culture, religious awareness and aesthetic connotation of the Ming Dynasty, and revealing the historical law of the change and development of ancient arts and crafts: traditions and innovations alternate, elegance and vulgarity transform and interact with each other, and images are generated by each other. The participation of the literati in the secular prints and the study and creation of the artisans in the marketplace strongly promoted the blending of each other's cultures, which made the images of *The Romance of West Chamber* editions in the late Ming Dynasty more exquisite and refined, and then flourished.

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