

# On the Mythological Prototype of Bird in a Dream of Red Mansions

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**Abstract**—At present, there are abundant researches and writings on a Dream of Red Mansions. It is also common to study the mythological structure in it. However, the imagists pay little attention to the “bird”, which is rich in connotation, and there are few works to explain it from the perspective of archetypal criticism. This paper aims to enrich the mythological structure of A Dream of Red Mansions, using archetypal criticism and mythological criticism methods, to study the formation mechanism of the god bird worship in ancient China and its influence on the collective unconsciousness of Cao Xueqin, author of A Dream of Red Mansions, and through analyzing characters such as Hsi-feng, Pao-yu, Tai-yu, and Lady Dowager, this paper confirms the existence of the god-bird worship psychology, which believes that a large number of bird images in A Dream of Red Mansions are rooted in the consciousness of Chinese ancestors, and they have unique connotations at the same time.

**Index Terms**—A Dream of Red Mansions, birds’ image, mythology, archetypal criticism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A Dream of Red Mansions is a novel written by Cao Xueqin in the Qing Dynasty. It is one of the four great classical novels in China. This book is a great work in the history of ancient Chinese literature, with the love tragedies of Chia Pao-yu, Lin Tai-yu and Hsueh Pao-chai as the main line, depicting all kinds of life. There are not many domestic works in China that study the connotation of an image in a Dream of Red Mansions from the perspective of archetypal criticism. Most of the works are also around the traditional images of “stones”, “flowers and plants” and “moon”, while birds, endowed with rich symbolic meanings by myths and legends since ancient times in China, are rarely systematically investigated by scholars. What can be proved is that the mythological archetype of birds has been inherited and applied in the writing of a Dream of Red Mansions. Archetypal criticism attaches great importance to the relationship between literary creation and cultural tradition, and it often analyzes the motivation and structure of literary creation with the help of myth and ritual. Mythology is gradually formed in the process of myth generation and spread, and it has a close relationship with primitive religion. Primitive people's totem worship consciousness unconsciously guides the creation of myth, and thus forms the manifestation form of collective unconsciousness in literary

works: primitive image. “Bird” is the object of primitive worship of The Chinese people, and is also an image appearing in Cao Xueqin's works. So, what is the meaning of the frequent bird imagery in a Dream of Red Mansions? This paper aims to study the bird imagery in the book from the perspective of archetypal criticism and mythology, so as to enrich the mythological structure of a Dream of Red Mansions and help readers realize how the author uses birds to enrich the characters and hint the theme.

## II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF TOTEM WORSHIP OF BIRDS

### A. Formation of Cognitive Mechanism of Birdlike Psychology

Jung Carl Gustav, a Swiss psychologist, pointed out in 1922 that collective unconsciousness is the universal spirit of human beings accumulated in the deepest psychological depth by numerous similar experiences retained by heredity. The human unconscious consists of both the individual and the non-individual. The non-individual unconscious consists of the remnants of ancestral memories, the contents of which can be found in all human minds. The human unconscious consists of both the individual and the non-individual. The non-individual unconscious consists of the remnants of ancestral memories, the contents of which can be found in all human minds. For the Chinese, the primitive worship of birds has formed a psychological cognitive mechanism of birdlike, which has been accumulated in the psychological depths of the offspring [1]. The reason is that rice production in China has been very important since ancient times. The ancient people needed rice to eat, and birds also ate rice and brought rice seeds, so that rice can grow year after year. In this way, the bird became a symbol of immortality in the eyes of the ancient people. Therefore, the ancestors began to aspire to become a bird with feathers to fly in the sky and to gain the eternal life. In ancient China, emperor Shun was a hero who endured many hardships but did not die. According to Chinese folklore, Shun avoided disaster just because he had the function of flying bird. Meanwhile, in ancient times, in order to communicate with the gods, human beings had to kill totem animals and eat the meat of totem animals to strengthen themselves [1]. Through research, there were a large number of religious activities of killing birds and chickens in the folk sacrifice in ancient times, and the ancestors also believed that the meat and bones of birds also had divinity [2]. A legend of gaoshan people in Taiwan Province says:” In ancient times, two little swallows each picked up a pebble. The two pebbles shone brightly into the deep forest. There was a loud noise as one swallow loosened its mouth and the ovula rolled down

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the hill, broke in two, and out of it came a beautiful young aunt. The other swallow also loosened its mouth, the stone rolled down the hill and split in two, and out came a handsome young man.” They later became the ancestors of the Gaoshan people [1]. There are similar legends in Tibet. A shepherd woman and a silver bird fell in love and gave birth to a male. In addition, mythological stories such as Yin shang's black bird giving birth to its ancestor, and Manchu's magpie or bird's egg giving birth to its ancestor repeatedly show people their psychological understanding mechanism of the birding of human origin [1]. All these behaviors provide evidence for the existence of birdlike psychological cognition mechanism.

### *B. The Concept of Divine Bird in Ancient China*

The concept of the divine bird has gone through a long process of inheritance and development in Chinese history, during which bird worship has continuously consolidated its position in the collective unconsciousness of mankind. In the Neolithic Age, bird totem worship was prevalent in the Yellow River and the lower reaches of the Huaihe River as well as the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, especially in the southeast coastal area. Most of the pottery patterns unearthed from Dawenkou culture in Shandong province are associated with bird patterns. Hemudu culture bird pattern up to nine pieces [3]. For example, in Shanhaijing, there is a record of the existence of a divine man with a human face and a bird body. It is recorded in the East China Sea: “There is a god in the East China Sea. He has a human face and the body of a bird, and his ears are two yellow snakes.” [3]. This shows that the divine image of man has been closely combined with the bird. There are also written records in Huainanzi, which show that ancient people believed that divine birds caused natural weather changes such as strong winds. The Huainanzi Taizu Chapter has a description of the weather: “When there is a strong wind, the grass and trees do not move, but birds fly” [3]. In this way, the image of birds was also integrated into the image of other gods such as the god of wind and sea. Meanwhile, according to the records in The Book of Songs and Shiji, in ancient times, people believed that totem birds provided eggs, and women gave birth to human beings after eating the eggs [4]. The Records of the Grand Historian said, “When the mother of the ancestors of the Qin Dynasty was weaving, the black bird laid an egg, and the mother ate it, giving birth to the ancestors of the Qin Dynasty” [2]. This reproductive myth of the divine bird and female union shows the worship of birds. In his book The Golden Bough, anthropologist J. G. Fraser proposed the concept of “homeopathy”, that is, humans achieve what they want by imitating behavior. In ancient China, our ancestors actively imitated the image and behavior of birds. So many figures decorated with feathers have been found in the unearthed relics. Later, when Qu Yuan wrote ci of Chu, he specially described the myth of a human being becoming a fairy by changing into a bird and finally flying to a carefree fairyland. Thus, the worship of human bird-reading exists [2]. At the same time, in Shanhaijing, there are some myths that reflect the concept of the circle of life in which people turn into birds after death. For example, in the myth and legend of “Jingwei Fills the Sea”, after a girl drowns in the sea, she turns into a bird named “Jingwei” and carries stones to fill the

sea every day. Thus, in the eyes of our ancestors, people could be transformed into birds after death. Birds and humans are two life forms that can be transformed [5]. In Chinese literature, mandarin duck and wild goose can be used to describe a couple. In Cao Pi's Liyi Zhuan, it is recorded: “The emperor of the Song Dynasty buried a couple. A tree grows in front of their tomb, and a pair of mandarin ducks love each other in the tree day and night, singing touching songs.” The mandarin duck is the couple's soul symbol, the transformation of their lives. At the end of the famous Han Dynasty folk song The Peacock Flies Southeast, it is recorded that the male and female protagonists' graves are luxuriantly wooded: “There are pairs of mandarin ducks among the dense green trees, their heads up and screaming to each other, crying every night until the early hours of the morning. “This mandarin duck is also the transformation of the couple's soul. In many literary works in history, birds are used to hint at characters and plots. It can be said that the divinity and special significance of birds spread very widely in the history of Chinese literature. As this kind of consciousness of writing by birds solidified, it is also very likely to affect Cao Xueqin, who was well-read, on his creation of a Dream of Red Mansions.

## III. INHERITANCE AND TRANSFORMATION OF “BIRD” IN A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS

### *A. Hsi-Feng and Phoenix*

In a Dream of Red Mansions, the image of Hsi-feng is closely related to the image of phoenix. First of all, Hsi-feng has the word “feng” in her name, which means “splendid phoenix”. Secondly, in the third chapter, Cao Xueqin uses a lot of phoenix images to describe Hsi-feng's appearance. For example: “Her hair-clasps, in the form of five phoenixes facing the sun, had pendants of pearls”, “she had the almond-shaped eyes of a phoenix”, “Just call her Fiery Phoenix” [4]. The reason why Hsi-feng's image is closely associated with phoenix may have a lot to do with the worship of phoenix in ancient China. In the book Shangshu, there is a passage devoted to the joyous gathering of all things after the king Yu succeeded in controlling the flood [2]. At this time, the phoenix appeared and joined the animals in the carnival. This kind of appearance is similar to that of Hsi-feng, the incarnation of phoenix, in a Dream of Red Mansions: Everyone is welcoming the arrival of Tai-yu, and when everyone is gathered together, Hsi-feng appears in a very high-profile way. Meanwhile, in traditional Chinese culture, phoenix looks very gorgeous. It often has multicolored feathers, from the vision to bring noble and gorgeous feelings. Cao Xueqin used a lot of ink to depict Hsi-feng's noble dress, which also reflects the dignity of the animal image of phoenix.

Secondly, in Shanhaijing, the image of the phoenix is depicted as a chicken [6]. In ancient China, the chicken was closely associated with the sun. Because chickens crow when the sun rises, ancient Chinese thought it woke the sun. Thus, the chicken bears the symbol of the sun's warmth and brightness so the phoenix becomes a symbol of warmth, life and light [2]. In a Dream of Red Mansions, Hsi-feng contributed greatly to the normal operation of Jia Mansion. She not only managed the Jia Mansion in good order, but also made the atmosphere of the whole Ning Mansion take on a

new look when assisting it. Hsi-feng is still the pillar of many young men and girls in the Grand View Garden, who actually represents the unique safety, warmth and strength of the phoenix.

But this phoenix in a Dream of Red Mansions has its quirks. In the fifth chapter, Hsi-feng's judgment is "this bird appears when the world falls on evil times; None but admires her talents and her still" [4]. Her album is also ominous: "Next came a female phoenix perched on an iceberg, with the verdict" [4]. In ancient Chinese books, phoenix should be a male animal, but Hsi-feng is a female. This gender mismatch in part echoes what is written in the book: "She had been educated like a boy and given the school-room name Hsi-feng" and Ko-Ching's admiration for her: "Even men in official belts and caps are not match for you", which shows Hsi-feng's capable and shrewd male character [4]. However, on the other hand, it also shows the lack of male power and the state of Yin flourishing and Yang declining in a Dream of Red Mansions, and no matter how excellent a woman is, she cannot escape the tragic fate, so the family is bound to ruin. The second point worth noting is that in the description of ancient books, phoenix is a divine bird singing towards the sun standing on a high hill covered with parasol trees. As soon as it takes off, numerous birds will follow it [5]. But Hsi-feng's phoenix is standing on the iceberg, and the iceberg is barren and cold land, inconsistent with the normal phoenix growth environment. Moreover, although Hsi-feng housekeeper tube is good, but she also has been enduring the public criticism and hatred to her. Her ending was very bleak, and she also lost the nobility that should have belonged to phoenix. This proves that the tragedy of Hsi-feng is rooted in the fact that she was born in a declining era and aristocrats. Although she had talent, she did not have a good platform for her to play. Her intelligence and shrewdness had no future and could only be lost with the collapse of her family. In the Tang Dynasty, the poet Li Bai used the image of the phoenix who lost his habitat to express his passion for serving the country but not being used by the emperor. Cao Xueqin also used the loss of the original place and Eden to suggest the external causes of Hsi-feng's tragedy. At the same time, phoenix was often used as a fairy bird symbolizing freedom in ancient China. In ancient Chinese literature, the phoenix was often used by poets to sketch out an imaginary fairyland, and it was often used as a ride for priests and poets on their way to heaven. However, Hsi-feng, a phoenix, is subject to the whole feudal customs of her personal and ideological domination, who cannot be free and this subversion of the traditional phoenix image also constitutes her tragic fate.

#### *B. Pao-yu's "Stork" and Tai-yu's "Parrot"*

In a Dream of Red Mansions, Pao-yu and Tai-yu, the two most important characters, both have the habit of raising birds. Pao-Yu, in particular, had a very close relationship with birds. In chapter 35, the author speaks in the voice of an old woman: "When he sees a swallow he talks to the swallow, when he sees a fish in the stream he talks to the fish" [4]. It can be seen that Pao-yu and birds have the idea of integration at ordinary times. This is permeating a kind of animism, the idea that humans can communicate with birds, animals, fish, insects and other animals, and that these animals have human thoughts and feelings. Pao-yu's pets are two storks. In Chinese culture, storks have a reclusive lifestyle. Pao-yu is just an image of a person who is not willing to be an official

and prefers to indulge in the prosperous life in the Grand View Garden [6]. His rejection of the worldly spirit of Confucianism is consistent with the spirit of his captive storks. At the same time, storks also have the characteristics of like attracts, willing to appear in a group [6]. Pao-yu repeatedly expresses his fear that his sisters will eventually abandon him, as well as his dependence on friends and family, indicating that Pao-yu, like his stork, relies on the nourishment of collective life. In classical Chinese literature, storks often represent imprisoned people. Because once captured, storks leave the sky and clouds and become trapped animals. Pao-yu fell into the world of mortals and left fairyland, which itself was dominated by the seven emotions and six desires of the human world. He could not get rid of his desire, just like those two storks, who were trapped in one heaven and earth even though they lived in a privileged environment.

For Tai-yu, her favorite pet was the parrot that could imitate her speech. In chapter 35, her parrot repeats a poem written by Tai-yu as she buried the flowers: "The day that spring takes wing and beauty fades, who will care for the fallen blossom or dead maid?" [4] This poem is actually a prophecy of the end of women's lives in a Dream of Red Mansions. The author arranges Tai-yu's parrot to say this sentence abruptly, which is suggestive of the tragedy. This reflects the symbolic function that birds were given in primitive bird worship. In the Shanhaijing, the gods who cause misfortune and fortune are often represented in the form of birds, which establishes the literary tradition of using birds as symbols of good or evil, and the parrot in a Dream of Red Mansions follows this tradition.

In addition to parrots, the names of Tai-yu's two most important maids also have a lot to do with birds. One of the maids was named Tzu-chuan, herself the incarnation of a cuckoo. In ancient China, there is a mythological allusion to the cuckoo, a bird that cries day and night until its mouth bleeds. Therefore, the cuckoo is the embodiment of grief. Tai-yu originally came down to earth to repay her tears, and was often haunted by sorrow, which echoes the melancholy and sadness represented by the cuckoo itself. Tai-yu's other servant girl, Hsueh-yen, is also an unlucky symbol. The misery of the wild goose was evident when Tai-yu named her servant girl "Wild goose in the Snow" when it was supposed to fly south for the winter. This is also an application of birds in a Dream of Red Mansions.

#### *C. Lady Dowager: Queen Mother of the West and the Worship of Primitive Mother Goddess*

In a Dream of Red Mansions, the image of Lady Dowager is related to the image of bird worship and queen Mother of the West. As early as in ancient times, our ancestors had the consciousness to pursue their ancestors [1]. They often regard the totem of their tribe as their ancestors, and the totem bird acts as the image of the ancestor, which helps the clan to reproduce and protect its members. In a Dream of Red Mansions, Lady Dowager, as one of the archetypes of the great mother goddess, acts as the head of the whole Jia family. Her love for posterity, especially Pao-yu and Tai-yu, made her conform to the ancient people's psychology of worshiping divine birds for protection. At the same time, in the book of Shanhaijing, there is a kind of bird called "cyan bird", which is especially responsible for carrying food for the goddess Queen Mother of the West [2]. In the evolution of the literature of later generations, the role of cyan bird was

no longer limited to fetching and delivering food, but expanded to travel with the Queen Mother of the West, serving and escorting the Queen mother of the West [2]. In a Dream of Red Mansions, when Tai-yu first entered Jia Mansion, she first saw Lady Dowager's residence: "Cages of brilliantly colored parrots, thrushes and other birds hung under the eaves of the verandahs." Her house was surrounded by birds, and she was like a bird king above all other birds. Moreover, in a Dream of Red Mansions, cyan is also the preferred color of many girls. Many girls usually wear cyan as the main color of their clothes. They surround Lady Dowager, very carefully take care of the family supreme leader's diet and daily life, trying to make the old woman happy, eager to get her recognition and love. All these show that the girl in a Dream of Red Mansions is the incarnation of cyan bird, and Lady Dowager is the incarnation of Queen Mother of the West. Scholars generally believe that Lady Dowager is the earthly incarnation of Nu Wa, but in fact, images of the sun and moon unearthed in a Han tomb in northern Shaanxi, China, have revealed that the divine elements of The Queen Mother of the West and Nu Wa were mixed and combined during the Han Dynasty, and the distinction between the two is not so clear [7]. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that Lady Dowager is also the transformation of Queen Mother of the West.

In a Dream of Red Mansions, the character of "a" female is very obvious. Nu Wa is a female, Jia Mother and Liu Grandma are also as no man to accompany the "a female" existence. This concept of "one" independent of heaven and earth can also find its roots in bird worship in ancient times. The ancients believed that the divine bird was independent of heaven and earth with one foot, and it was this foot that supported the existence of the living body above it, and was the pillar for the living body to exist in the universe without falling down [8]. In ancient Chinese philosophy, "one" itself is a number with great philosophical significance. "As the opposite of 'many' in all things in the universe, it is the symbol of the mysterious state or mysterious existence before creation". It can be said that in ancient China, "one" represents the beginning of all things [8]. In A Dream of Red Mansions, it is this Nu Wa, a lonely Lady Dowager and a widow Granny Liu who support the birth, operation and redemption of the whole family. After Lady Dowager's death, Jia's family declined rapidly. The prophecy of "Tree Falls and the Monkeys scatter" points to the truth that when jia's "foot" disappears, the life of the whole family will inevitably fall. At the same time, in ancient China, there was also the saying "sun bird". As early as in Shanhaijing, the rise and fall of the sun was regarded by our ancestors as being operated by a divine bird. It can be seen that the operation of the whole universe and the renewed order of day and night all need the participation of the divine bird [9]. However, in a Dream of Red Mansions, neither the cyan bird represented by the girl, the bird ancestor represented by Lady Dowager, nor the phoenix represented by Hsi-feng, the housekeeper, can fulfill their mission of maintaining the normal operation of the world, and they can only watch the huge family destroyed once. This is not just the stone "unfit to mend the azure sky" of Pao-yu. Women also have their tragedies that they are destined to fail to complete their mission [10].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the writing of A Dream of Red Mansions, the belief in birds and the worship of birds permeate Cao Xueqin's collective unconsciousness, and are confirmed by the key figures of Hsi-feng, Pao-yu, Tai-yu, and Lady Dowager. However, this paper only puts forward an immature conjecture, and the materials and evidence cited are not sufficient. The author will continue to examine the records of bird beliefs in ancient Chinese classics, read A Dream of Red Mansions in depth, and use archetype criticism and mythology to conduct a more comprehensive investigation of A Dream of Red Mansions in the future.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Borui Liu.

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