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On the Reception and Dissemination of The West Chamber in the Ming Dynasty—A Case Study of Using Wang Tingne’s Legend to Refer to “The Romance of the Western Chamber”

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ABSTRACT

“The Romance of the Western Chamber” exerted a profound influence on the romantic legend creations of Ming dynasty playwright Wang Tingne, manifested in his creative approach through “quotation and imitation” —namely, replicating plotlines, adopting literary expressions, and adapting textual elements. Furthermore, through active transformation of personal literary philosophy, Wang Tingne’s romantic legends enriched the original “Cui-Zhang” love paradigm. His revisions of the plot and illustrations demonstrated new interpretations: he critiqued Zhang Sheng’s accurate interpretation of the poem and criticized his method of jumping over the wall, while crafting character portrayals more aligned with the social context of the Ming dynasty, thereby infusing fresh meaning into the play’s dissemination during that era. Wang Tingne’s practice of “quotation and imitation” also influenced other forms of popular literature, further facilitating the spread of “The Romance of the Western Chamber”.

KEYWORDS

Wang Tingne, love legend, quotations, The Romance of the Western Chamber, reception and dissemination

INTRODUCTION

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese operas were renowned for their prevalence of “love stories with nine out of ten plots focused on romantic sentiment.” As the definitive caizi jiaren (scholar-beauty) masterpiece, The Romance of the Western Chamber established the foundational paradigm for subsequent romantic legends [1]. Works by Wang Tingne, such as the love-themed operas “The Story of the Colorful Boat”, “Planting Jade”, and “Giving Peach”, were profoundly influenced by “The Romance of the Western Chamber”. Although domestic scholars have begun studying Wang’s love-themed plays, there has been limited explo-

ration of how these works collectively referenced “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, along with their underlying motivations and historical significance in opera development. This paper focuses on analyzing the phenomenon of Wang Tingne’s love legends referencing “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, thereby examining how his creative works shaped the reception and dissemination of this masterpiece during the late Ming period.

Few scholars have addressed how Wang Tingne’s legendary works referenced “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, yet such references constitute a pivotal mechanism for the classicization of this play in Ming dynasty theater. The term “reference” here denotes the citation of literary passages or storytelling elements. The references examined in this study are less strictly standardized than those found in classical texts; rather, they represent general textual citations, adaptive details, or plot imitations—actions that reflect active reception within literary creation. Reference practices were ubiquitous in ancient literature, reflecting the gradual canonization of literary heritage [2]. After analyzing how “The Two Collections of West Lake” referenced “The Peony Pavilion”, Cheng Yun concluded that “reference in Ming-Qing literary works played a crucial role in the canonization process of classical theater literature; both reference (citing texts or stories) and commentary (critical analysis) formed a secondary layer of theatrical classics.” Wang Tingne’s selective adaptation and citation of “The Romance of the Western Chamber” within his legendary works also fall within the realm of theatrical literature dissemination. This deliberate choice of classical texts as models within theatrical works mirrors the internal canonization process of theatrical tradition, while the conscious adoption of classics by playwrights serves as a driving force for cultural preservation. Examining how Wang Tingne employed reference techniques toward “The Romance of the Western Chamber” thus enhances our understanding of the distinctive characteristics of theatrical classicization.

THE LEGENDARY TEXT “QUOTATION” IN “THE ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN CHAMBER”

Wang Tingne’s romantic legends can be categorized into three major works. “The Jade Planting Tale” is an adaptation based on historical figures, narrating how Huo Xiwen fulfilled his dream of achieving prosperity, wealth, and longevity. The script first focuses on the romance between Huo Xiwen and Wei Shaorao, employing narrative tropes from “The Romance of the Western Chamber” during their relationship development. “The Story of the Colorful Boat Romance” depicts a young scholar (Jiang Qing) and a maiden (Wu Nu) who fall in love at first sight after a shipwreck, secretly meeting through a maid’s message. After their affair is exposed and numerous twists, they eventually unite [3]. The legendary “The Peach Exchange Tale” tells of Pan

Yongzhong and Huang Shunhua's mutual affection leading to marriage. Despite interference from Xie Guojiu, their clumsy attempts ironically facilitate their union, making it a quintessential scholar-lover drama. In crafting these love stories, Wang Tingne learned from and adapted the "scholar-lover" archetype of "The Romance of the Western Chamber". His works often mimic the Cui Zhang reunion plot, frequently quote passages from "The Romance of the Western Chamber" and its musical texts, and feature characters echoing those from the classic play—characteristics that define Wang Tingne's signature literary style.

Imitative Plot

The play initially adopts the "Cui Zhang" model of love at first sight. Drawing inspiration from "The Romance of the Western Chamber", the script of "The Jade Planting Tale" creates opportunities for young protagonists to fall in love immediately. After meeting in the garden, Huo Xiwen and Wei Shaorao develop mutual affection. In Act 3, "Garden Encounter," a maid from Pingyang Prefecture leads Wei Shaorao to play in the rear garden, where Huo Xiwen catches sight of her and is instantly smitten. This mirrors "The Romance of the Western Chamber" where Lady Zhang sends Hongniang to escort Yingying to the Buddhist temple for relaxation, leaving Zhang Sheng utterly captivated at first sight. In "The Story of the Colorful Boat Tale", Wu Nv is moved by Jiang Qing reading by the lamp by the window. When Jiang Qing notices their interaction, their meaningful glances and lingering glances before parting deepen his longing. Similarly, in "The Peach Offering Tale", after Pan Yongzhong plays the flute, Huang Shunhua peeks out the window, and Pan Yongzhong recognizes her, sparking mutual admiration between them [4].

After falling in love at first sight, male and female leads in traditional Chinese operas inevitably engage in secret poetic exchanges to convey their feelings. In "The Jade Planting Tale", Huo Xiwen devises a scheme to test Wei Shaorui's affection. During Act V, he instructs his servant to deliver a jade cord tied with a knot—a subtle way of testing her emotions. The servant thus becomes a conduit for their communication. While "The Romance of the Western Chamber" features Yingying first sending Hongniang to meet Zhang Sheng, this play employs Huo Xiwen's servant as the initial messenger, prompting the edition's commentary: "The maid in 'The Romance of the Western Chamber' is clever, but this version makes the male character appear naive—different settings require different interpretations." This reveals Wang Tingne's awareness of the play's parody. When the jade cord reaches Wei Shaorui, she interprets Huo's intentions and sends a note through her servant to Wei Zhongru, setting the stage for their rendezvous. Similarly, when Huo Xiwen reads the poem, he assumes Wei plans to climb the wall at night. However, the plot progresses smoothly here: Huo climbs the wall that very

night with Wei's inside assistance, ensuring their secret meeting. In "The Story of the Colorful Boat Tale", Jiang Qing spots Wu's maid washing silk and uses her as a messenger. After Wu returns, Jiang immediately sends love poems. When Wu's attempt to conceal her feelings backfires, they meet on a boat and consummate their romance. "The Peach-Picking Tale" uses walnuts as poetic tokens, but Zhou Po, the innkeeper, accidentally discovers them. She becomes their secret thread, facilitating their clandestine rendezvous. Like the "Cui-Zhang" couple, their secret agreement with elders inevitably leads to exposure. To prevent this, characters must create obstacles to temporarily separate them, generating dramatic tension in the opera [5]. In "The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat", when the elderly couple discovers Jiang Qing hiding in their daughter's cabin, they initially fly into a rage and plan to punish her. However, following the suggestion of their maid Su'e, they ultimately allow the talented couple to be together. Yet constrained by their aristocratic lineage's refusal to accept commoners as sons-in-law, they send Jiang Qing back to Taiyuan to prepare for imperial examinations. In "The Tale of Planting Jade", Wei Qing's discovery of their reunion leads him to dismiss Huo Zhongru due to his humble origins, forcibly sending Huo Xiwen back to his hometown and severing their ties. The plot in "The Peach Offering" takes a more subtle approach, using third-party character Xie Guojiu to expose the illicit relationship between Pan Yongzhong and Huang Shunhua. Nevertheless, Huang's father remains a major obstacle to their romance, adamantly rejecting marriage alliances with the Pan family. After the successful rendezvous, the narrative diverges from the conventional "Romance of the Western Chamber" framework, introducing fresh plotlines to demonstrate Wang Tingne's creative adaptation of the classic work while avoiding plagiarism [6].

Citation Style

If the plot merely follows similar patterns to "The Romance of the Western Chamber", it might be dismissed as a generic convention of the 'scholar-beauty' genre. However, Wang Tingne's engagement goes beyond shared motifs; his works engage in 'hypertextuality' by specifically naming Zhang Junrui and Cui Yingying within the dialogue of his own characters, effectively transforming a generic archetype into a specific, deliberate intertextual dialogue with Wang Shifu's masterpiece, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Textual Evidence of Spatial Elements and Scenography in The Romance of the Western Chamber

	The Romance of the Western Chamber	The Record of Jade Planting	“The Story of The Story of the Colorful Boat”	“The Story of Giving and Receiving”
Directly quote names	Matchmaker; Sheng Zhang ; Cui Yingying		Act IX: “In public, one often puts on a show; within oneself, one conceals one's true nature... Below the western wing, Hongniang spares no effort in her efforts—she can court both the oriole and the swallow. What I fear is that if I reveal my true feelings too soon, others will notice.” Mr. Zhang Junrui fell ill due to spring-time injuries, and Miss Cui, moved by compassion, offered her life in marriage. She personally presented walnuts as evidence, which were more precious than pearls as a dowry.	Act Ten: “Yu Zhi embodies the essence of Wenjun Sima Qin's spirit, crafting a remarkable episode that saves Cui and Zhang.”
Chemical Transformation sentence	The first act of the first act: “The dance movements showcase a graceful and supple waist.” The gate conceals a courtyard adorned with pear blossoms, while the white-washed walls rise as high as the azure sky. In the third book, Act II: “Waiting for the moon in the western chamber, the window half-open to the wind. The flower shadows sway beyond the wall, as if a jade maiden were approaching.”	Act 6: (Dan) “My waist swells with spring breeze's tenderness, yet I fear entering the pear-blossom garden. In deep spring, I tremble before cuckoos' cries, my frail frame barely holding my clothes—so sorrowful and resentful.” Act VIII: “Alas, tonight the moon, the phoenix tree claims its clear light. Do not break the promise made before the flowers, for it leaves one heartbroken in vain.”	Twelfth Scene: 'Beneath the moonlight as clear as water reflecting pavilions, I greet the breeze with half the house open'	
Famous Object Reference	Paeonia frame: In Act 3 of Book 3, it reads: 'Golden lotus tramples peony buds, jade hairpin clings to tea plantarium. Nightly coolness makes moss paths slippery, dewdrops soak through wave-riding socks.' Taihu Lake stones and white-washed walls: In Act 3 of the first act, it reads: 'When Miss Bi Ji arrives, I will wait by the corner of the wall beside the Taihu stone, observing her closely for a while.'	The third line includes “frequently coming and going under the tea-blossom trellis” and “turning westward to observe the tea-blossom trellis” Act 6: “By the wall lie Taihu stones, against which stands a large phoenix tree. If one grasps a branch of the tree from the stones, it becomes very convenient to cross the wall.” Act VIII: “You're holding onto the wutong tree with your hands, stepping on Taihu stones, and scaling this white-washed wall. I'm here to support you from within.”		

The textual analysis reveals Wang Tingne's deliberate incorporation of Cui and Zhang figures into his legendary works, demonstrating seamless adaptation to historical contexts. In "The Peach Offering", Pan employs the central figure's request for the elderly Zhou woman to deliver a message to Huang Shunhua: "Zhang Junrui fell ill from spring sorrow, while Miss Cui shows compassion for others' plight." This self-referential comparison between the two characters achieves both literary elegance and directness. Similarly, references to "The Romance of the Western Chamber" are evident. Zhang Sheng's iconic act of jumping over the eastern wall became a timeless tale, symbolizing love through the Western Chamber and Eastern Wall motifs. Wang Tingne strategically uses the "eastern wall" to arrange romantic rendezvous scenes. In Act 8 of "The Jade Planting", the scene depicts Sheng climbing the wall: "He reached for the door, clasped his robe, and walked toward the moss-covered ground, his shoes trailing lightly, arriving before the phoenix tree pavilion." When Huo Xiwen arrives, the female character remarks: "You held onto the parasol tree, stepped on Taihu stones, and scaled this whitewashed wall. I'll support you inside." The Huancuitang commentary (attributed to Wang Tingne) critiques this scene, noting its "less fluid execution compared to the Western Chamber's spontaneity," as the latter's wall-jumping sequence feels exhilarating, while Huo's assisted descent via ladder lacks the same natural grace. Additionally, in Act 18 of "The Peach Offering", Sheng and Dan's clandestine meeting at the Cuiwei Mountain Temple's meditation chamber conceals their union with elders within the temple grounds—a deliberate echo of "The Romance of the Western Chamber". Choosing this Buddhist sanctuary for intimate encounters demonstrates Wang Tingne's profound understanding and admiration for the classic play's subversive narrative conventions. These meticulous details reveal Wang's deep familiarity with "The Romance of the Western Chamber", underscoring his artistic mastery [7].

Character Image

Firstly, Cui Yingying in "The Romance of the Western Chamber" stands as a pioneer in ancient Chinese opera challenging feudal marriage systems, becoming a paradigm for later scholar-lover dramas. Wang Tingne's love stories similarly portray aristocratic maidens defying parental authority. Whether it's Wu Nu in "The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat" or Huang Shunhua in "The Peach Offering", these women typically obey their elders, avoid public appearances, and adhere to traditional feminine roles. Yet when love strikes, their desires surge uncontrollably, leading them to secretly court their parents. While such behavior is unacceptable in the rigidly moralistic scholar-official families, their youthful vitality conceals an awakened feminine consciousness within them—like the "Yingying" spirit. These characters retain aristocratic propriety, though initially hesitant:

Wu Nu's indecisiveness before maidservants and Huang Shunhua's pretense before Zhou Po reflect feudal upbringing, which explains why Cui Yingying remains a timeless archetype. In contrast, Wei Shaorui from "The Tale of Planting Jade" lacks aristocratic refinement. Though equally talented and passionate, her modern sensibilities evolve Yingying's character—a development we'll explore further [8].

Secondly, "The Romance of the Western Chamber" successfully created the character of Hongniang—a versatile maid who embodies courage and wisdom, highlighting Yingying's reserved demeanor as a refined lady. With her wit and charm, she skillfully navigates between the two protagonists, the Old Lady and Yingying, boldly challenging feudal authority while championing love freedom. Most crucially, she serves as the pivotal intermediary between Cui and Zhang, driving the plot forward as an indispensable figure. Similarly, in Wang Tingne's legends, there are intermediary characters between male and female leads to facilitate romantic developments. For instance, in "The Jade Planting Tale", a book boy acts as a messenger. In "The Peach Offering Tale", Zhou Po functions as a matchmaker for the couple. After helping Pan Yongzhong uncover Huang Shunhua's true feelings, Zhou Po specifically warns her: "Miss, don't speak insincerely. If you lack sincerity, even if Lord Pan dies, he'll hate you." This urging Huang Shunhua to make a decision mirrors Hongniang's attitude toward Yingying.

However, the character most reminiscent of Hongniang is Su 'e in "The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat". In Act 7, Su 'e immediately reveals upon her entrance that she knows Wu's recent unusual behavior stems from springtime melancholy, yet pretends ignorance to save face for her young mistress—a testament to her shrewdness. During the scene "Washing Brocade" featuring Jiang Qing, Su 'e speaks with the same confidence Hongniang displayed when dealing with Zhang Sheng. When relaying messages between her mistress and Jiang Qing, she discerns their mutual affection and compares herself to Hongniang: "In the Western Chamber, Hongniang tirelessly travels—she can court both orioles and swallows. My only fear is being noticed while sharing warmth." Act 12, "Cautious Departure", echoes "The Romance of the Western Chamber". This legend's plot also appears in the novel "Guangyan Yibian: The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat", where after Jiang Qing finishes composing a poem, he sends a maid to wait by the window for Wu. The maiden laughs, calling herself a "lady of the boudoir," asking, "Does your husband lack worthy companions?" Jiang Qing instantly understands, and they meet under the moonlight aboard a boat. While the novel's maid plays a minor role, "The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat" sees her pivotal role in advancing the plot. In "Cautious Departure", maid Su 'e returns with the poem. Wu confesses her hesitation stems from fear of rash actions and concerns

about her elderly husband's sleepiness. Fearing Jiang Qing's reproach, Su'e suggests she go herself. Wu hesitates, proposing a delayed rendezvous with another poem. Still uneasy, Su'e warns, "My lady, don't change your mind again tomorrow night." This scene mirrors Hongniang's anxiety over Yingying's repeated failures to meet Zhang Sheng, urging her to make another attempt. The roles of Hongniang and Su'e are indispensable here, serving as intermediary figures that drive the plot forward and reconcile the contradiction between the reserved demeanor and inner passion of noblewomen. As the narrative progresses, their significance deepens. In Act 18 of "The Story of The Story of the Colorful Boat", when the secret rendezvous between Jiang Qing and Wu Nu is exposed, the elderly lady initially blames her maid Su'e, declaring: "Cui and Zhang hid in the Western Chamber; Hongniang's guilt demands no further investigation." Seizing the opportunity, Su'e advises Wu Nu: "Since the scandal has erupted, regret is futile. How can we endure humiliation before our own kin? Don't stir up trouble—seize the moment to avoid public disgrace." Her astute suggestion mirrors Hongniang's wisdom. Wu Nu adopts her advice, agreeing to take the son-in-law recruitment examination but insisting on his wearing formal attire and returning only after passing the imperial exams. By this point in "The Story of The Story of the Colorful Boat", the romantic storyline between the male lead and female lead reaches its climax. The play not only fully recreates the Cui-Zhang romance but also repeatedly reimagines characters from "The Romance of the Western Chamber" in character development.

Finally, the male characters portrayed by Wang Tingne exhibit Zhang Sheng-like traits during the early stages of romantic development. In every legendary tale, the male protagonists are talented and passionate scholars who first test their romantic intentions with the female leads. Once love is confirmed, they reveal the endearing charm of devoted lovers. In Act 8 of "The Jade Planting Tale", Huo Xiuwen, after reading the poem, anxiously awaits the evening rendezvous, his days feeling agonizingly long, exclaiming, "It's only midday—how can I wait until dusk?" In "The Romance of the Western Chamber", Zhang Sheng, upon receiving the poem, waits impatiently for their evening meeting, lamenting, "Today's sky is exceptionally rare to be so clear. Heaven! You grant all things to mankind—why must you choose this particular day..." Similarly, in "The Peach Blossom Story", Pan Yongzhong misinterprets the rustling leaves as the arrival of his beloved when waiting for her, a sense of urgency mirroring Zhang Sheng's anticipation for his secret rendezvous with Yingying. In "The Story of the Colorful Boat Tale", Jiang Qing's entire night of waiting after Wu Nu's first-night breach of promise vividly captures the charming side of these romantic scholars, closely resembling Zhang Sheng's demeanor.

Furthermore, in “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, the elderly lady serves as the obstacle between Yingying and Zhang Sheng. As a symbol of feudal patriarchal authority, she appears in different roles: in “The Story of Planting Jade”, she represents Wei Qing acting as a father; in “The Story of the Colorful Boat”, she embodies the parents of Wu’s daughter; and in “The Peach-Giving Tale”, she is Huang’s father. All these characters have obstructed the romance between the male and female leads, thereby creating dramatic conflicts. Through textual analysis, it becomes evident that Wang Tingne habitually emulated the plot structure of “The Romance of the Western Chamber” in his romantic narratives, particularly mastering the iconic scene of Cui and Zhang’s “moonlit rendezvous.” In character development, he referenced certain figures from “The Romance of the Western Chamber” while adding his own interpretations. His literary references consistently borrowed dialogues from the classic play, openly expressing admiration for “The Romance of the Western Chamber” and skillfully adapting its language—a testament to his fondness for citing this work. Moreover, Wang Tingne’s recurring “Western Chamber” -inspired love themes permeate all his romantic creations, further supporting the theory that “The Critique of Zhong Yu’s Jade Planting at Yuming Hall” was likely based on his own works.

NEW INTERPRETATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN CHAMBER IN WANG TINGNE’S LEGEND

In his literary works, Wang Tingne integrated his personal interpretations of “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, introducing innovative developments in later imitations of the play and enriching its cultural significance. His understanding of the “Zhang Sheng’s Poem Interpretation” scene proves largely accurate. This is initially corroborated in “The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat”: when Jiang Qing attempts to decipher the poem inviting Wu Nu, the maid Su’e warns him against misinterpretation, clarifying that the verse depicts a moonlit rendezvous. She explains that Wu Nu concealed the truth from Su’e because “he wished to keep his feelings secret from others” —her true emotions being difficult to express publicly. Su’e confronts Wu Nu accordingly, who then confesses that her earlier criticism of the poem was merely out of caution, and that since her elderly husband remained awake, she delayed attending the meeting until the next evening, instructing Su’e to send another invitation for their rendezvous. Given Jiang Qing’s literary prowess in interpreting poetry and Zhang Sheng’s reputation as a master of poetic riddles, Wang Tingne effectively conveys his conclusion: Jiang Qing’s interpretation was accurate; Zhang Sheng’s hesitation stemmed solely from Yingying’s pride as a refined lady who hesitated to admit her mistake.

Regarding the wall-jumping incident, Wang Tingne attributes it to Yingying's inadequate preparation—a interpretation echoed in "The Record of Planting Jade". In this play, Wei Shaorui's invitation to Huo Xiuwen is expressed plainly: "Alas, tonight the moon bathes the phoenix tree in its pure radiance. Let us not break our appointment before the flowers, lest it break your heart." Huo Xiuwen understands immediately but wonders, "Though the Phoenix Hall is close to the outside, how did he manage to enter the inner chamber?" He then reflects, "I suppose he must have a secret passage." This poetic analysis mirrors Wang Tingne's interpretation of Zhang Sheng's wall-jumping scene in "The Romance of the Western Chamber". Subsequently, "The Record of Planting Jade" details Huo Xiuwen's approach through a series of actions: In Act VI, "Yesterday I deliberately moved my bedroom near the Phoenix Hall, separated only by a wall. By the wall stand Taihu stones and a large phoenix tree; one could easily climb over the wall by grasping the branches." In Act VIII ("The Appointment"), Wei Shaorui prepares in advance— "I've positioned a ladder against the whitewashed wall"—and meticulously arranges for a support ladder to assist Huo Xiuwen, providing precise instructions on how to scale the wall. These meticulous preparations prevent any wall-jumping incident in the play.

Wang Tingne argued that walls should be tall, necessitating specially designed ladders for those attempting to scale them. This perspective can be corroborated by examining the title of Act 3 from the Ming Dynasty edition of "The Romance of the Western Chamber". The scene depicts Zhang Sheng and his companion reciting poetry across a wall, with Zhang Sheng's original lines reading: "I'll wait for him at the corner by Taihu Lake's rocks, observing him closely." The text further describes "Sheng standing on tiptoe with rapt attention" and Yingying's remark about "someone reciting poetry at the wall's edge." Thus, the title "Poetry Recitation at the Wall's Corner" is historically accurate. However, Wang Tingne's use of "Recitation Across the Wall" artificially exaggerates the distance through the spatial term "across," while the "corner" description creates an impression of low height and potential eavesdropping. Moreover, this title appears exceptionally rare in early Ming editions, as evidenced by the table 2 :

Table 2. Examples of Titles for Act 3 in Early Ming Editions of "The Romance of the Western Chamber"

edition	printing date	Print Information	Act 3
Newly Published Large-Character Edition of Complete Illustrated and Annotated Xi Xiang Ji with Wonderful Annotations	The eleventh year of the Hongzhi reign	Reprinted by Jintai Yue Family Bookshop in the Imperial Capital	No analysis of zaju

edition	printing date	Print Information	Act 3
Newly Exemplified Correct Ancient Edition with Large Characters and Illustrations: Explanation of the Northern Western Chamber	The seventh year of the Wanli reign	Shao Shan Tang edition	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
Reprinted Yuan Edition with Annotations and Commentary on The Romance of the Western Chamber	The eighth year of the Wanli reign	Xu Shifan's engraved edition	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
Reprinted Yuan Edition with Annotations and Commentary on The Romance of the Western Chamber	The 20th year of the Wanli reign	Corrected by Yu Ludong, published by Xiong Longfeng of Zhongzheng Hall	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
Revisiting the North-West Chamber of the Palace	The twenty-sixth year of the Wanli reign	Moling Jizhizhai Edition of Chen Bangtai's Dalaai Textbook	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
The Yuan Edition of "Northwest Chamber Records"	The 38th year of the Wanli reign	Cao cited the Du Qifeng edition	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
Mr.Li Zhuowu's Critique of The Northern Romance of the Western Chamber	The 38th year of the Wanli reign	Xu Hu Lin Rong and Tang edition.	
A New Collation of the Ancient Edition of The West Chamber by Xie Lingyun	The 42nd year of the Wanli reign in the Ming Dynasty	Wang's Xiangxueju Edition	No analysis of zaju
Mr.Chen Meigong's Critique of The Western Chamber by Ding Chao	The forty-sixth year of the Wanli reign	Shulin Xiao Tenghong Edition	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
Holographic Annotation of The West Chamber	Wanli	Luo Maodeng edition	A collaborative poem recited in the corner of the room
A New Annotation and Re-editing of The Northwest Chamber Record with an All-Inclusive Image			
Mr.Li Zhuowu's Critique of The Romance of the Western Chamber	Wanli	Sanhuaitang edition	Hua Yin singing and responding
"Mr.Yuan Liaofan's Interpretation of The Romance of the Western Chamber"	Wanli	Edited by Wang Tingne, printed by Huancuitang	Wall Joint Chanting

Moreover, the depiction of an extremely tall wall in Wang Tingne's Huan Cui Tang edition is distinct not only in its illustrations but also in its explicit stage directions. Unlike most editions that simplify the 'wall-jumping' as a symbolic stage movement, Wang's text in Act 3 specifically notes the 'impenetrable height of the whitewashed barrier,' a detail that is relatively rare in other contemporary Ming prints. Correspondingly, in *The Record of Planting Jade*, the dialogue in Act VIII emphasizes the 'perilous height' that necessitates a ladder, reinforcing the physical reality of the wall as a narrative constraint rather than a mere trope, making it inherently hazardous for characters to leap directly from within without internal support.

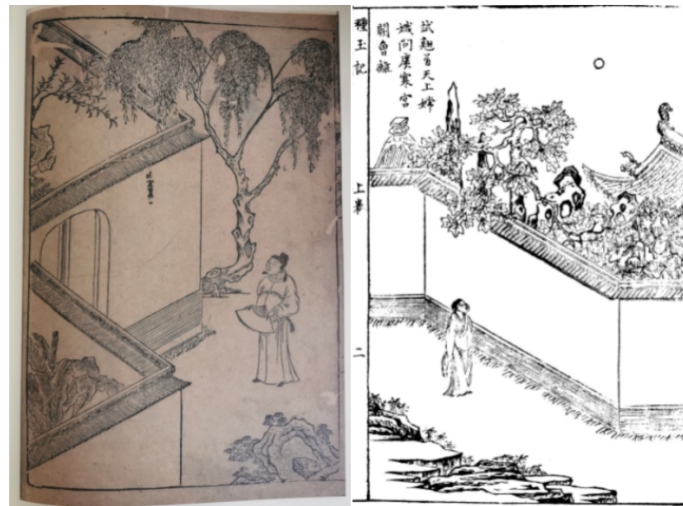


Figure 1. Mr. Yuan Liaofan's Interpretation of The Romance of the Western Chamber and Yuming Hall's Critique of The Record of Planting Jade

The way of naming and painting for the third act of *The West Chamber* by Wang Tingne may refer to earlier unpublished versions or may be his own modification. Whatever the reason, the chosen result undoubtedly reflects his understanding of *The West Chamber*.

Wang Tingne's interpretation of the "poetry guessing and wall-jumping" incident in "*The Romance of the Western Chamber*" leans toward Zhang Sheng's correct guess. Yingying intended to provoke Zhang Sheng into jumping over the wall, but was temporarily unable to admit it due to Hongniang's presence. As a lady of high social standing, Yingying couldn't afford to lose face and ultimately retracted her plan. Moreover, Wang Tingne clearly disagreed with Zhang Sheng's method of jumping over the wall, believing it inappropriate for scholars. Therefore, his adaptation specifically arranged for the female character to assist with a ladder, transforming the "poetry guessing" and "wall-jumping" into a logically coherent sequence. While this 'rationalization' of the plot might seem to diminish the raw dramatic tension of Zhang Sheng's original impulsiveness, it serves a specific characterization goal for Wang Tingne: it elevates the 'scholar' status of his protagonists. By replacing a frantic leap with a planned, assisted entry, Wang aligns the pursuit of love with Ming-era values of 'talent and propriety,' suggesting that even subversion should be executed with intellectual precision. This reflects his affirmation of Zhang Sheng's multifaceted talents as a master of strategy, not just passion.

This indicates that Wang Tingne, as one of the readers of "*The Romance of the Western Chamber*", integrated his own interpretations into the creation. Consequently, when readers engage with "*The Jade Planting Tale*", they are evoked with the imagery of "*The Western Chamber*," thereby influencing their reading experience and reception.

In terms of character development, Wang Tingne's portrayal of female characters demonstrates more remarkable progress compared to those in "The Romance of the Western Chamber". While Yingying in "The Romance of the Western Chamber" recites poems to Lai Jian, Wei Shaorao in "The Story of Planting Jade" acts directly according to poetic inspiration—a difference rooted in their social standings. Yingying, as an official's daughter, is constrained by the propriety of aristocratic women, whereas Wei Shaorao, a servant in the Pingyang Marquis's household, faces fewer restrictions. This disparity fundamentally stems from historical changes. "The Romance of the Western Chamber" was written during the Yuan Dynasty when Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism became the official doctrine. The three cardinal bonds and five moral principles imposed by Neo-Confucian scholars constrained women's thinking, making it impossible for characters like Yingying to transcend societal norms and embody liberated women's ideals. Thus, Yingying embodies dual contradictions. By the late Ming Dynasty, emerging capitalist trends and new intellectual movements challenging Neo-Confucianism liberated literati thinking. Wei Shaorao, as a woman pursuing personal happiness, exhibits greater boldness and decisiveness. While "The Story of Planting Jade" and "The Romance of the Western Chamber" primarily differ in identity-based portrayals, characters like Huang Shunhua in "The Peach Blossom Story" and Wu Nu in "The Story of the Colorful Boat Story"—both aristocratic women who conceal their true identities and protect love—show richer character development than Yingying. In Act 3 of "The Peach Blossom Story", Huang's father, preparing to campaign in Sichuan, instructs his daughter: "Stay diligent in embroidery, don't play on swings amidst flowers. Beware of revealing your peach-blossom face while gathering blossoms, lest rumors spread." Huang Shunhua replies: "I will obey my father's command without hesitation." Yet when interacting with Sheng across the street, she frequently lifted the curtain to peer—let alone later exchanging love poems with Pan Yongzhong or secretly meeting at a Buddhist temple. To protect her romance with Pan Yongzhong, Huang Shunhua even cut her hair to declare her resolve, defied her parents' wishes, boldly rejected marriage, and chose death over compromise—a stark contrast to Yingying's timid response when the old lady demanded a marriage reversal. As for Wu Nu in "The Tale of The Story of the Colorful Boat", her initial conduct mirrored Yingying's, but upon learning of Jiang Qing's tragic drowning, she not only refused the arranged marriage but resolutely chose to die for love. These female characters thus emerge as more compelling figures.

PROMOTING THE DISSEMINATION OF “THE ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN CHAMBER”

Wang Tingne’s adaptation of “The Romance of the Western Chamber” was not uncommon in Ming Dynasty theatrical productions. Since its debut, the play had become a template for “talented scholars and beautiful maidens” narratives. Beyond Wang Tingne, numerous operatic works emulated “The Romance of the Western Chamber”, including Han Shanggui’s “Lingyun Ji” from the Ming era, where Pan Zhiheng noted that “Han Xiaolian of Lingnan adapted”Lingyun” lyrics to “The Romance of the Western Chamber.” The three scenes preserved in “The Story of Gu Sheng Entrusting Letters to Jiang” (“Gu Sheng Tuo Jiang Zhuan Shu”), “Yu Niang Reading the Oriole’s Poem” (“Yu Niang Kan Ying Shi”), and “Gu Sheng and Yu Niang’s Secret Meeting” (“Gu Sheng Yu Niang Si Hui”) in “The Story of the Yellow Oriole” (“Huang Ying Ji”) demonstrate extensive adaptations of “The Romance of the Western Chamber”. Similar examples include Gao Lian’s “The Story of the Jade Hairpin” (“Yu Zan Ji”), Meng Chengshun’s “The Story of the Crimson Flower” (“Jiao Hong Ji”), Zhou Chaojun’s “The Story of the Red Plum” (“Hong Mei Ji”), and Yuan Yuling’s “The Story of the Western Tower” (“Xi Lou Ji”). Against the backdrop of Ming Dynasty’s economic and cultural development, with strong promotion by book merchants and literati, “The Romance of the Western Chamber” achieved widespread dissemination.

Wang Tingne’s act of quoting “The Romance of the Western Chamber” significantly contributed to its dissemination in later literature and influenced subsequent literary interpretations of the work. During the late Ming Dynasty, numerous novel collections emerged, often mechanically adapting or creatively reworking novels and operas for commercial gain. “The Second Collection of West Lake” serves as a prime example, with its twelfth volume “The Lady Playing the Phoenix Flute Lures the East Wall” being adapted from the novel “Pan Yongzhong’s Strange Encounter”. The collection also incorporated elements from popular operas of the time, such as quoting verses from “The Peony Pavilion”: “Day after day, my heart breaks in verses; in this world, only love cannot be expressed” , and lines from “The Lute Player”: “With feet two feet long, her hands barely reach her arms” . From a plot perspective, the legendary tale “The Peach Offering” serves as the more direct source material for “The Lady Playing the Phoenix Flute”.

First, let’s examine the meeting details between protagonists in the plays. In “Blowing the Phoenix Flute,” after Pan Yongzhong finishes playing the flute, he stops when Huang Nu opens the window and recites the poem multiple times: “Who made us meet on this narrow path? Our hearts connect through a single glance. I hate the heartless grassy path where orchids and orchids hide east and west.” Similarly, in “The Peach Offering Tale,” when Huang Nu opens the window, the young man recites this poem aloud to her. In Act 9 of “The

Peach Offering Tale,” upon seeing Huang Nu lower the curtain and leave, Pan Yongzhong seeks marital fortune under the moonlight, saying, “How many bows shall I make today?” Likewise, in “The Strange Encounter of Pan Yongzhong,” the flute is used as a matchmaker, with the couple promising to bow eight times to him if successful. Additionally, the original text of “The Strange Encounter of Pan Yongzhong” contains only brief lines about the matchmaker— “then the innkeeper’s wife urged her earnestly, the woman generously gave gifts, and insisted they not be leaked” —which are consistently expanded in both “The Peach Offering Tale” and “Blowing the Phoenix Flute.” In “The Peach Offering Tale,” when Pan Yongzhong sees Hu Tao picked up by Old Lady Zhou, he negotiates to ask her for help, urging her earnestly. He then arranges a scene where Old Lady Zhou meets Huang Nu, with the young lady pleading again: “Act as a needle guiding the thread.” In “Blowing the Phoenix Flute,” Pan Yongzhong asks Wu Erniang: “How can you arrange a favor? Visit Huang’s residence to meet the young lady and inquire about her whereabouts. Serve as the matchmaker. After success, how about offering marriage gifts as thanks?” Later, Huang Nu also seeks Wu Erniang’s assistance. These plotlines remain largely consistent across both versions.

While “The Second Collection of West Lake” compiles works from earlier authors and may incorporate influences from other versions, the similarities between “Blowing the Phoenix Flute” and “The Peach Blossom Tale” reveal direct references to the latter. In his study “A Comprehensive Examination of Sources for The Second Collection of West Lake”, Li Pengfei notes that “Blowing the Phoenix Flute” narrates Pan Yongzhong’s West Lake excursion during the Lantern Festival, vividly depicting Southern Song Dynasty lantern displays and his moonlit flute performance summoning the Yellow Maiden. This narrative is entirely absent from “The Strange Tales Compilation” (Volume 18) in “Pan Yongzhong’s Extraordinary Encounter”, though “The Ring Story” in “Qingping Mountain Hall Story Collection: Rain Window Collection I” contains comparable details: “It describes Song Dynasty Lantern Festival celebrations in the capital, where Qin and flute enthusiast Ruan San gathered friends for moonlit performances. The prime minister’s daughter Yulan was moved by the music and developed romantic feelings with Ruan San—a plot and detail remarkably similar to the original.” Li Pengfei thus confirms Zhou Qingyuan’s assertion that “Blowing the Phoenix Flute” drew inspiration from “The Ring Story”. While the core themes overlap, subtle differences exist. Both works set their West Lake scenes in March, feature extensive descriptions of Southern Song-era festivities, and depict Pan Yongzhong’s subsequent encounter with the Yellow Maiden. Notably, both scripts include Pan reciting identical verses during the encounter. While it is argued that both could derive from a common source, the specific structural sequence

in “Blowing the Phoenix Flute”—which mirrors Wang’s unique ‘ladder-assisted’ logic and his specific sequence of character interactions—strongly suggests a direct lineage from *The Story of Giving Peach Blossoms* rather than an independent re-adaptation of the original *West Chamber* or other folk precursors. This confirms the play’s role as an intermediate vehicle for the classic’s dissemination.

The original “Pan Yongzhong’s Strange Adventures” showed minimal imitation of “*The West Chamber*” with few textual references. However, after “*The Peach Offering Tale*” began citing elements from “*The West Chamber*,” “*Blowing the Phoenix Flute*” also adopted many adaptations of its content. Beyond the increased role of the elderly woman resembling Hongniang in matchmaking, numerous passages directly quote from “*The West Chamber*.” For instance, when Pan Yongzhong is forced to leave the inn and can no longer see Huang Nu, the text cites Dong Jieyuan’s “*Xian Suo Xi Xiang*”: “Don’t say men’s hearts are as hard as iron, / For you see rivers of red leaves, / All stained with blood from parted lovers!” Similarly, when Huang Nu suffers from love sickness due to Pan’s absence, the passage references Dong Xieyuan’s “*Xian Suo Xi Xiang*”: “Sitting gloomily by the lamp, / Sleeping through the night in tight clothes. / A silent vow forms in my heart: / To see my unfaithful foe in dreams. / Yet my twisted heart cannot be restrained, / My eyes remain fixed on the scene.” Pan Yongzhong’s own love sickness is described as: “There are remedies for miscellaneous ailments, / But no cure for love sickness” —a line from “*The West Chamber’s Zhang Junruiqing’s Garden Party*,” Act 2, Scene 5 [Drunk Spring Breeze]: “They say there are remedies for miscellaneous ailments, / But no cure for love sickness”.

After the Jiajing era of the Ming Dynasty, with social and economic development alongside the accumulation of commercial capital, people’s demand for cultural enjoyment surged dramatically, making opera one of the primary forms of entertainment. Commercial publishing activities aligned with this demand experienced unprecedented growth, particularly in regions with thriving printing industries like Jiangnan and Fujian, where the number of published novels and operas reached astonishing levels. The historical narrative of “*The Romance of the Western Chamber*” consistently garnered attention throughout its development. Following Wang Shifu’s publication of the work, it achieved remarkable popularity akin to the “paper shortage in Luoyang” phenomenon. “Wang Shifu’s” “*The Romance of the Western Chamber*” indeed became a cultural sensation during the Ming Dynasty—not on stage but at people’s desks, manifested through the continuous emergence of various editions and the proliferation of critical analyses, appreciations, and annotations.” From a textual publishing perspective, over sixty editions of “*The Romance of the Western Chamber*” were printed

during the Ming Dynasty, with Jiang Xingyu's research identifying 40 verifiable surviving editions. According to these records, 21 editions were published during the Wanli period. The immense popularity of "The Romance of the Western Chamber" in the Ming Dynasty is evident, with the Wanli era marking its peak period of publication.

During this period, Wang Tingne, as one of the bookshop owners, kept pace with social trends by proofreading "The Romance of the Western Chamber" and publishing the two-volume edition "Mr. Yuan Liaofan's Interpretation of The Romance of the Western Chamber" through Huancuitang. Wang Tingne's Huancuitang series was essentially the product of Huizhou-style engravers, with illustrations mostly commissioned from fellow locals Wang Geng and Qian Gong. The edition of "Mr. Yuan Liaofan's Interpretation of The Romance of the Western Chamber" was engraved by Wang Geng. After comparing it with other Ming dynasty editions, Jiang Xingyu concluded: "Judging from the lyrics and dialogues, Wang Tingne's textual collation work was rigorous and meticulous, thus preserving more of the original form," and described its illustrations as "first-class among Ming editions". Of course, evaluations of illustrations remain subjective among researchers. While Huancuitang's edition incorporated illustrations from other versions, it also integrated its own interpretations through modifications as an early publication. Its artistic value in promoting the dissemination of "The Romance of the Western Chamber" during the Ming dynasty remains undeniable.

Wang Tingne employed "The Romance of the Western Chamber" as a template for romantic legends, selecting relevant episodes for creative adaptation and rewriting. His extensive citations from the original text reinforced the consistency of his romantic philosophy. He also published and annotated "The Romance of the Western Chamber", aligning with the widespread popularity of this literary masterpiece during the late Ming Dynasty. On one hand, Wang infused his creative work with personal insights, infusing new contemporary relevance into the classic's enduring legacy. On the other hand, his actions influenced subsequent adaptations and accelerated the dissemination of "The Romance of the Western Chamber", making him a paradigm case in the history of its reception that merits scholarly attention.

CONCLUSION

This article explores how Ming dynasty playwright Wang Tingne promoted the classicization and dissemination of the classic novel "The Romance of the Western Chamber" through strategic intertextual appropriation and creative modeling. Research has shown that Wang Tingne not only systematically replicated the narrative model, plot structure (such as garden encounters and private romance), and character prototypes (such as

matchmaker style media roles) of “talented scholars and beautiful women” in works such as “The Story of Planting Jade”, “The Story of Colorful Hair”, and “The Story of Giving Peach Blossoms”, but also innovatively evolved them based on the social context of the late Ming Dynasty. He corrected inappropriate scenes such as Zhang Sheng’s “jumping off the wall” to make them more logical, and gave female characters a stronger sense of awakening and action, reflecting the trend of ideological liberation at that time. In addition, Wang Tingne has a dual identity as a playwright and publisher. The “Huan Cui Tang” edition of “The Story of the Western Chamber” and the numerous intertextual texts in his works not only deepen readers’ aesthetic experience, but also directly influence the creation of subsequent popular literature works such as “The Second Collection of West Lake”. The final conclusion is that Wang Tingne’s creative practice is a typical example of the reception history of “The Romance of the Western Chamber” in the Ming Dynasty, demonstrating how imitation of plays became the core driving force for cultural inheritance and literary classicization.

Author Contributions

Zhang Lijuan designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Zhang Lijuan conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be published. Zhang Lijuan participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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