

Supernatural Narratives in the Novels of Gifted Scholars and Beautiful Ladies: A Study Centered on the Works of Tianhuacang Zhuren

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Abstract: Supernatural writing, anchored in a long literary tradition, is a common narrative technique in ancient Chinese novels. Taking the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies by Tianhuacang Zhuren as an example, the supernatural writing phenomena can be categorized into three types: dreams, extraordinary encounters, and visions. Supernatural writing plays a crucial role in plot construction, narrative progression, character development, and spatial expansion in novels. It not only reflects the religious cultural concepts of karma and fate shaped by Buddhism and Taoism but also expresses the strong belief in destiny and a sense of superiority among the literati in traditional Chinese society. Moreover, it mirrors the author's creative psychology.

Keywords: Novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, Supernatural writing, Tianhuacang Zhuren

1. Introduction

The novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, as a branch of the "worldly affairs" genre, focus on narrating realistic stories of young men and women's love and marriage and were an important novel genre in early Qing dynasty. Lu Xun once pointed out that the worldly affairs novels "largely deal with the joys and sorrows of union and separation, and the vicissitudes of fortune, interspersed with karma, while rarely discussing the supernatural" [1]. However, reading the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, one finds that these works commonly include descriptions involving ghosts, spirits, immortals, and dreams. This paper takes the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies by Tianhuacang Zhuren as an example, to thoroughly examine the phenomenon of supernatural writing therein. It summarizes the textual manifestations of supernatural writing and analyzes its significant functions in plot construction, narrative progression, character development, and spatial expansion. Additionally, it explores the origins of supernatural writing within the literary tradition and reveals its underlying cultural connotations.

2. Supernatural Writing in Textual Expression

Supernatural writing is a commonly used technique in ancient Chinese novels and has a long-standing historical tradition that has never been discontinued. Any descriptions involving immortals, ghosts, spirits, monsters, and fantasy can be categorized under this technique. In the late Ming and early Qing

dynasties, a large number of novels about gifted scholars and beautiful ladies emerged, represented by the works of Tianhuacang Zhuren. These novels, inheriting previous narrative traditions, also frequently featured various supernatural plots. A thorough reading of Tianhuacang Zhuren's works reveals that the supernatural writing therein can generally be divided into three categories: dreams, extraordinary encounters, and visions.

2.1. Dreams

Chinese novels have a deep connection with "dreams," and as the saying goes, "legendary tales often rely on dreams for storytelling" [2]. Dreams appear frequently in the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, and their forms of expression are also complex. Li Yang noted that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, twenty-two novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies involved dreams, accounting for 44% of the total [3]. First, the protagonists—either the beautiful ladies or the scholars—often experience prophetic dreams. Such descriptions mostly appear at the beginning of the text or when introducing new characters, aiming to highlight the inherent uniqueness of the characters deliberately crafted by the author. Some prophetic dreams occur at the character's birth, hence their parents named them after these supernatural phenomena. For example, in "Yujiao Li" the character Bai Hongyu, in "Pingshan Lengyan" the character Leng Jiangxue, in "Dingqing Ren" the character Shuang Xing, in "Lin'er Bao" the character Mao Xiaoyan, and in "Huan Zhong Zhen" the character Ji Menglong. Some prophetic dreams occur before the characters are born. In "Dingqing Ren," Jiang Ruizhu's mother conceives after having a dream with a divine message, unlike others who dream of omens just before giving birth. Some prophetic dreams appear in characters' childhoods. For instance, in "Lin'er Bao," before encountering the six-year-old Lian Qing, the local official Xin Shangshu dreamed of a creature "like a dragon but not a dragon, like a snake but not a snake," believing the dream to be fulfilled upon meeting Lian Qing.

Besides these "prophetic dreams," Tianhuacang Zhuren's novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies feature another type of dream depiction, which occupies a larger portion of the text and contains richer content of mythical beings and a more intense supernatural hue. For example, in "Dingqing Ren," the book boy Qingyun and the wild crane dream twice of the river god who instructs them to save Miss Ruizhu, who intends to drown herself. In "Sai Hongsi," the new magistrate dreams of the prison god Gao Tao, which awakens him to save Song Guyu from being wrongfully executed. In the fourth chapter of "Huan Zhong Zhen," Ji Menglong dreams of a divine figure granting him wine to alleviate his punishment. In the eleventh chapter, Bian Xingzu sets out to find his father and encounters the spirit of a celestial warrior at a tea house, who guides him to his parents. Additionally, in the second chapter of "Jin Yunqiao Zhuan," Wang Cuiqiao, who worships at the grave of Liu Danxian during the day, dreams of Liu Danxian at night, who tells her that she is part of the heartbreak gathering and instructs her to write ten verses of heartbreak poetry, promising a future reunion at the Qiantang River. In the fourteenth chapter of "Yu Zhi Ji," Bu Chengren, believing that Miss Guan has died unjustly, has a nightmare where Miss Guan demands his life. In the tenth chapter of "Feihua Yong," Duan Chang dreams of Miss Feng coming to meet him on a moonlit night. These dream narratives, varying in length and impact, collectively enrich the supernatural storytelling in Tianhuacang Zhuren's novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies.

2.2. Extraordinary Encounters

"Extraordinary encounters" represent another category of supernatural writing, referring to instances in novels where characters encounter divine beings or exceptional individuals by chance. These meetings often result in the characters receiving guidance or being granted magical items with special powers, leading to transformative changes in their lives.

For example, "Lin'er Bao" (also known as "Ge Xianweng Quan Zhuan") begins with the story of the Lian family encountering Ge Xianweng, a deity disguised as a beggar, during winter. Moved by compassion and unable to bear seeing him freeze in the snow, the Lian family insists on offering him shelter. This act of kindness earns them great fortune. "Hua Tu Yuan" also starts with a tale of a mysterious elder from Tiantai who is actually the spirit of Ma Yuan from the Han dynasty. He gifts Hua Tianhe a scroll of secrets and tells him, "Study this thoroughly, and both your career and marriage will succeed as you wish," before vanishing. This secret scroll contains two paintings directly related to the protagonist's career and marriage, subtly tying into the novel's title. "Yuanyang Pei" features the supernatural writings about the Fire Dragon Sage and his mount, the Azure Dragon, threading through the novel from start to finish, with main characters like Cui Gong, Yu Ying, Xun Sheng, and Shen Sheng encountering them. Apart from encounters with divine beings, there are also encounters with demons, such as in "Huan Zhong Zhen" where Qiang Liang meets a fox spirit disguised as a mother and daughter in a remote mountainous wilderness. He marries the younger woman and later, with the help of their sorcery, gathers a band of followers to cause unrest.

2.3. Visions

Similar to the "prophetic dreams" discussed earlier, "visions" are another form of supernatural writing used to emphasize the extraordinary origins of the gifted scholars and beautiful ladies. For instance, in "Wan Ru Yue," the author describes a vision at the birth of Zhao Ruzi, where not a single peach or plum tree in the village bloomed that year because "all the charm had been taken by Ruzi" [4]. Specifically in the works of Tianhuacang Zhuren, "Yu Zhi Ji" begins with a mention of the sage Ye Fashan, whose attainment of enlightenment is accompanied by the auspicious sign of blue mushrooms appearing, highlighting the exceptional nature of Qingtian County's landscape and spiritual energy. This is ultimately to emphasize the remarkable origins of Guan Hui and his children. "Huan Zhong Zhen" also contains two instances of visions; one where Ji Menglong is wrongfully accused and a comet as large as a chicken egg appears in the sky, shining as bright as the sun for half a month; and another where Yi Ren, having committed numerous misdeeds, faces retribution with frequent supernatural occurrences in his home.

In summary, discussing just the works of Tianhuacang Zhuren, the content of supernatural writing is quite rich. Except for "Renjian Le" and "Liang Jiao Hun," which contain no supernatural descriptions, the other eleven novels variously involve spiritual and mystical elements. As this genre of novels evolved, the proportion of supernatural writing within these works increased, eventually leading to novels like "Tiehua Xianshi" and "Huan Zhong You," which deeply integrate elements of the supernatural with the gifted scholars and beautiful ladies theme. Understanding the roots of supernatural writing in these novels helps in gaining a clearer insight into their developmental trajectory.

3. Supernatural Writing's Narrative Function

Supernatural writing is commonly found in classical Chinese novels and is a favored technique among writers, largely because of its significant role in narrative development. The previously mentioned dreams, extraordinary encounters, and visions are specific types of supernatural writing. The following sections discuss the narrative functions of supernatural writing in the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, focusing on plot structure, narrative progression, character portrayal, and story space.

3.1. Constructing Plot Structure

In ancient Chinese novel traditions, there were novels about encounters with immortals that emerged alongside the development of thoughts on Daoist magic and alchemy. After evolving through the Han, Wei, Six Dynasties, Sui, and Tang periods, these motifs transformed during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but still retained traces of their origins. In the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, the encounters with immortals continue this lineage, though they are no longer the main content of the stories but are instead diluted into a form. Their function is to organize the structure of the entire book, providing a logical basis for the plot rather than being its backbone.

In "Lin'er Bao," Ge Xianweng is Ge Hong of the Eastern Jin dynasty, a famous Daoist scholar who, according to legend, became an immortal through alchemy. Folklore about him persists to this day. The novel uses such a legendary immortal to dominate the entire narrative, forming a closed-loop structure that begins with Ge Xianweng's descent to the mortal world and ends with his revelation of his true form. The main story revolves around Lian Qing's civil service examination success and his love and marriage story. A similar structural pattern is found in "Hua Tu Yuan," where the Tiantai elder and his secret scroll appear at the beginning, middle, and end of the text, not only linking the entire plot but also supporting the framework of the book. All of Hua Tianhe's later experiences stem from his early encounter with the Tiantai elder and the secret scroll he received. The encounter with immortals as a "meaningful form" deepens the thematic content of the work, ensuring that these two novels are not limited to the tender love of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies. "Lin'er Bao" conveys a strong Taoist ethos, expressing the idea of karmic retribution and imparting a moral and instructive theme to the narrative. It is because Lian Xiaocun acts virtuously that he later receives good fortune. Meanwhile, "Hua Tu Yuan" uses the two paintings as clues to narrate a story of predetermined success and marital fate, reflecting the author's belief in destiny.

3.2. Advancing the Narrative Progress

The tradition of dream-related narratives also has a long history. Scholars have categorized the development of ancient Chinese dream-involved novels into several phases: the Tang prelude with recorded and divined dreams, the Tang dynasty period of inventing "dream visions," the Song-Yuan return to blending empirical and secular interests in dreams, and the fully developed "dream vision" narrative art in the Ming and Qing periods [5]. From the beginning, dreams have been intertwined with the growth and development of the novel as a literary genre. In the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, there are also numerous descriptions of dreams, which play crucial roles in reversing plot developments, hinting at characters' destinies, and driving the narrative forward.

In "Dingqing Ren," divine beings not only enter dreams twice to urge the rescue of characters but also provide specific methods for escaping difficulties—returning to Sichuan—and explicitly state that Miss Ruizhu will later become a "first-rank lady." This not only reverses the narrative of Jiang Ruizhu being selected to go to the capital and separated from Shuangxing but also hints at her future in Sichuan, waiting quietly for Shuangxing's return and enjoying a life of honor, having a significant impact. In "Sai Hongsi," the prison god Gao Tao appears in a dream, directing the new magistrate to save the life of Song Guyu and clear his name, thus altering the course of the plot. Furthermore, the god's declaration that Song Guyu is a "great and noble scholar" lays the groundwork for his future scholarly success. "Jin Yunqiao Zhuan" also closely links dreams with character destinies. The several appearances of the dream figure Liu Danxian foreshadow Wang Cuiqiao's life direction, prompting her character transformation, and informing her of the end of her debts and her eventual expulsion from the heartbreak society. In "Huan Zhong Zhen," Bian Xingzu's dream of a celestial warrior leads him from aimless searching to receiving news of his parents' whereabouts and heading to the Wang family in Huizhou, thus serving to twist the plot and accelerate the narrative pace.

3.3. Shaping Character Portraits

In addition to their role in the plot, dreams in novels also play a crucial role in shaping character portraits and depicting psychological profiles. Concerning prophetic dreams, authors add a supernatural aura to their characters to emphasize that they are born with exceptional talents, presaging destinies that surpass ordinary people. From the beginning of the novel, this sets the stage for the future glory of these favored characters. For instance, in "Lin'er Bao," thanks to the prophetic dreams, Lian Qing shows his extraordinary nature from a young age. Despite minor setbacks as he grows up, he eventually achieves a triple success in the imperial examinations, marries beautifully, and ascends smoothly in his career. All predictions about his fate are fulfilled, and everything seems naturally destined. In "Yu Zhi Ji," Bu Chengren's nightmare doesn't contain many mystical elements, but the author's vivid depiction of the dream adds drama to the plot, making the story more engaging to read and successfully highlighting Bu Chengren's image as an incompetent and superficial aristocrat. In "Feihua Yong," Duan Chang's longing for Miss Feng is expressed in a dream where she comes to meet him on a moonlit night, creating a richly fantastical atmosphere.

A slightly different use of dreams is found in "Jin Yunqiao Zhuan," where the dream character Liu Danxian prompts Wang Cuiqiao to undergo a character transformation. Initially deceived into the Ma family, Cuiqiao fiercely resists and refuses to entertain clients. However, Liu Danxian's words in her dream: "How can you escape when your karmic debts are not yet settled? On the Qiantang River, the sights are not shallow; you must be patient." [6] persuade Cuiqiao to stop struggling and submit to her fate, transforming from a chaste and virtuous woman to a courtesan known to many. This sequence highlights the powerful role of dreams in character development.

3.4. Expanding Story Space

Authors of novels featuring gifted scholars and beautiful ladies often use supernatural writing to alter the protagonist's trajectory, creating new narrative spaces beyond the original settings. A typical example of this is found in "Huan Zhong Zhen." In the fourth chapter, Ji Menglong dreams of a divine figure who informs him that he is destined to spend ten months in prison. After his release, it turns out he was incarcerated exactly for ten months—neither a day more nor less. This dream-like experience awakens him, prompting thoughts of renouncing worldly ties and traveling afar. The narrative thus shifts to another dimension—Ji Menglong transforms from a scholar to a wandering Taoist, the storyline shifts from domestic trivialities to monastic wanderings, and the setting moves from Suzhou's Wu County to Yixing.

In Yixing, the wandering Taoist (Ji Menglong) encounters a mystical monkey in a secluded mountain valley and follows it into a heavenly grotto, where he eats celestial peaches and studies heavenly scriptures. When he emerges from this otherworldly retreat, he finds himself in Shanxi, over three thousand li from Yixing. This leads Ji Menglong to meet Wang Baiwan, and subsequently, he travels to the capital to participate in the imperial examinations, where he succeeds and becomes the top scholar. The story transitions from domestic matters and monastic travels to another stage of the scholar's life as he enters officialdom. The encounter with the celestial monkey in the mountains serves as a crucial turning point for both the protagonist's personal experiences and the overall plot, also acting as a junction for shifts in the story's spatial setting.

Later, Qiang Liang encounters a demon and gathers a band of rebels in Shandong. Ji Menglong then travels to Shandong to suppress the demon-rebels and establish his merits. This segment interweaves various supernatural elements such as summoning gods to exorcise demons, magical duels before battle formations, and practicing sorcery. The protagonist thus completes a journey that spans from Wu County to Yixing, Shanxi, Beijing, and Shandong. In doing so, he not only enriches the narrative but also significantly expands the novel's spatial setting.

4. Cultural Implications of Supernatural Writing

Literature serves as a textual vessel for culture, and novels are no exception. The novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies reflect certain social and cultural psychologies of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Analyzing the cultural implications behind Tianhuacang Zhuren's novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, through the lens of supernatural writing, is significant for exploring the reasons behind the popularity of this genre. It also provides insights into the general creative psychology of the authors.

4.1. Reflection of Religious Thought

Rooted in the narrative traditions of Chinese literature, supernatural writing embodies the concepts of karma and predestined relationships formed by religious cultures such as Buddhism and Taoism. In the thirteenth year of the Shunzhi era, during an active period of Tianhuacang Zhuren's creativity, the emperor decreed to the Ministry of Rites: "The three teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism should coexist, as they all lead people to do good and shun evil, return to righteousness, respect the royal laws, and thus avoid disaster." [7] The rulers' emphasis on the role of Buddhist and Daoist cultures in promoting good and punishing evil naturally influenced the literature and art of the period. While the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies were not meticulously crafted artistically, their ideological content was generally elegant and pure. Incorporating efficacious spirits and stories of karmic retribution was intended to admonish society and highlight the moral education function of the works. Moreover, the formulaic artistic conception employing the narrative thinking of "predestined marital relationships" further ensures the super stability of the narrative structure; no matter how the characters and events change unexpectedly, the ultimate outcome of the story still depends on the arrangement of heavenly fate. This is particularly evident in "Lin'er Bao" and "Hua Tu Yuan." In "Huan Zhong Zhen," Yi Ren's scheming against Yi Suhua quickly leads to retribution, with his household plagued by supernatural occurrences and himself dying miserably due to corporal punishment. In "Jin Yunqiao Zhuan," the reason Wang Cuiqiao's life is so fraught with hardships and displacement is due to unresolved karmic debts from a previous life, necessitating such trials in this one. In "Feihua Yong," Changgu and Ronggu were betrothed from childhood and, despite prolonged separations, ultimately come together, a union that can only be described as predestined by heaven.

4.2. Expression of the Literati Complex

The supernatural writing in novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies expresses the strong belief in destiny and a sense of self-superiority among the literati in traditional Chinese society. Whether it is innate prophetic dreams, divine protection, miraculous encounters with immortals, or extraordinary visions, these elements, similar to those attributed to famous historical figures, serve to highlight the extraordinary endowments of the main characters, thus providing a seemingly rational explanation for their later experiences that are beyond the reach of ordinary people. Authors transplant the auspicious omens and visions granted by heaven to ancient sages onto the young men and women of the secular world, adding a supernatural aura to these characters who carry the authors' life ideals, making their fates governed by some mysterious power. This aligns well with the Confucian concept of "cosmic resonance" (tian ren gan ying). The notion of "mandate of heaven" (tian ming) is deeply ingrained in ancient Chinese culture, with traditional literati often interpreting different life experiences from the perspective of fatalism. Prosperity and rank are not merely the results of personal effort; divine favor may play a more significant role. Moreover, as the literate and privileged class who monopolized knowledge during the feudal era, scholars enjoyed a high social status. The class division of "scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants" inherently endowed them with a sense of superiority. Despite often unsatisfactory real-life circumstances, they were keen on attaching

supernatural phenomena to the protagonists of stories that carried their aspirations, thus satisfying their sense of superiority. The traditional belief in destiny and the literati's self-superiority are cultural characteristics hidden behind the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies. Authors reinforce these through various representative forms of supernatural writing, strengthening these themes from different angles.

4.3. Reflection of Creative Psychology

Novelists of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, represented by Tianhuacang Zhuren, are typically frustrated and lower-class scholars, living in poverty and despair, deeply imbued with sorrow and bitterness. They often felt compelled to "borrow Mr. Nonexistent to vent their frustrations about their unattainable dreams." These authors lamented their ill fortune and perceived injustices of fate, fantasizing about divine intervention to alter their reality. On one hand, through supernatural writing, they allowed their fictional characters to achieve a fulfilling life, projecting their own unattainable ideals. On the other hand, this method also served as a way to absolve themselves of responsibility for their personal misfortunes. Additionally, the primary readership of these novels during that era consisted of mid-to-lower class literati [8], who were also focused on the imperial examinations. Much like the authors, they too dreamed of achieving recognition and a blissful marital life, and they held a great passion and interest in the legendary experiences of the characters in the novels. Both the authors and readers of the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies prided themselves on their talents and perceived uniqueness. They all had strong aspirations for success in the imperial exams and fulfilling marriages, yet faced a vast disparity between their real-life situations and their ambitions. This severe psychological imbalance was ventilated through the supernatural writing in their works.

5. Conclusion

Since the pre-Qin period, it seems customary to imbue prominent figures with supernatural attributes, and for many years, supernatural narratives have continuously influenced people's cultural psychology and literary creation [9]. By examining the novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies by Tianhuacang Zhuren, dissecting the phenomenon of supernatural writing within the text, analyzing its narrative function, and exploring the cultural connotations behind it, this study not only summarizes this particular textual feature of ancient novels but also hopes to draw academic attention and provide a new perspective for the study of novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies. After the mid-Qing Dynasty, pure novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies became rare; they merged extensively with other types of novels—including those featuring gods and demons—and evolved continuously, ultimately undergoing a fundamental transformation. In this sense, approaching the study of the transformations in novels of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies from the perspective of supernatural writing is certainly a viable method.

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