

“Brocade in Ashes” (Jinhuidui) and “Patchwork Garment” (Bainayi): Cultural Memory and Identity Reconstruction through Textile Fragments in Contemporary Literature

Yali Wang

School of Language and Culture, Shangqiu Preschool Education College, Shangqiu 476000, Henan, China

Corresponding author: Yali Wang (e-mail: wylxlzy@126.com)

ABSTRACT This study investigates the dual role of textiles in literary discourse as both material artifacts and symbolic carriers, systematically examining their functions in narrative development, cultural memory preservation, and identity reconstruction. Through comparative textual analysis of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, the research explores how textile representations encode social meanings and aesthetic values while shaping character identity and historical consciousness. Particular attention is devoted to the narrative evolution of the traditional artistic concepts of Jinhuidui (Brocade in Ashes) and Bainayi (Patchwork Garment), whose fragment-based compositional logic provides a distinctive framework for reconstructing cultural memory through textile imagery. The findings demonstrate that literary depictions of textiles and sartorial culture enable writers to articulate complex personalities, social hierarchies, and symbolic identities within multilayered cultural contexts. By establishing a dialectical relationship between textile fragments and their narrative symbolism, the study further reveals how fragmented structures can be reorganized into coherent semantic systems. Beyond literary interpretation, this analytical framework offers methodological insights into hierarchical pattern representation, information encoding, and structured symbolic transmission, providing potential reference for digital cultural modeling and computational approaches to complex pattern organization relevant to intelligent engineering and electromagnetic information representation.

INDEX TERMS textile symbolism, cultural memory, identity reconstruction, information encoding, electromagnetic information representation

I. INTRODUCTION

A. TEXTILES AS A SYMBOLIC SYSTEM

TEXTILES in literature form a comprehensive symbolic imagery system: from macro-scale garments such as headwear, waistbands, and footwear to micro-level details of fabric patterns and cosmetic pigments, these material carriers collectively shape characters' sartorial discourse [1]. In literary studies, the discourse of textile materiality serves various functions: it operates as a visual language that facilitates information exchange between characters and their environment, while also serving as a narrative medium that establishes aesthetic consensus between the author and reader [2].

B. CORE CONCEPTS: “JINHUIDUI” AND “BAINAYI”

“Jinhuidui” (Brocade in Ashes), a unique genre of traditional Chinese painting, centers on the aesthetic reorganization of cultural fragments, such as damaged scrolls and rubbings,

to create a chaotic beauty reminiscent of “an overturned wastepaper basket” [3] (Figure 1). “Bainayi” (Patchwork Garment), originating from Buddhist culture (alternatively termed Gongde Yi or Wuwei Yi), involves stitching collected textile fragment scraps into garments, extending to derived concepts such as “Baina Ben” books and “Baina Qin” [4,5] (Figure 2). These two art forms collectively embody a philosophy of “fragment reassembly”: Jinhuidui elevates the aesthetic value of cultural debris, whereas Bainayi revitalizes material remnants [4]. This artistic technique organically combines textile elements from different periods and styles, producing a unique visual narrative language. In literary creation, this approach can expand a text's creative scope, construct multilayered interpretive spaces, and cultivate a narrative atmosphere rich in historical significance [6,7]. Therefore, transforming the artistic concepts of “Jinhuidui” and “Bainayi” into literary techniques will not only diversify contemporary narrative methods but

also infuse works with unique cultural memory and aesthetic value [8,9].

II. DUAL NATURE OF TEXTILES: MATERIAL AND SPIRIT

A. TEXTILES AS MATERIAL CARRIERS OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Textiles, as a unique material medium, possess dual cultural attributes: they serve as physical entities fulfilling fundamental human existential needs and as vital carriers of cultural significance and spiritual value [10]. From a cultural anthropology perspective, this dual nature is particularly evident in traditional Chinese culture. Cultural memory is a socially determined form of collective memory that accumulates key shared memories, intentionally maintained and transmitted through mythological and symbolic expressions. Textiles play a significant role in this transmission, acting as artifacts that encapsulate stories within their fibers and patterns [11]. Throughout millennia of Chinese civilization, textiles have satisfied basic needs while also becoming crucial expressions of social identity, aesthetic sensibilities, and cultural affiliation [12].

B. TEXTILES AS VEHICLES OF THE SPIRIT

In literary narratives, textiles often transcend their material properties to evolve into rich symbolic systems that embody cultural memory [2]. This is evident in how textiles are woven into storytelling, serving as conduits for cultural identity, historical memory, and social commentary. The sartorial choices of accomplished writers are deliberate cultural symbols—each textile detail may represent a character's social status, psychological state, or historical traits, forming essential components of the text's subtextual framework [2,13].

III. IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH TEXTILE DEPICTIONS

A. EXPRESSING CHARACTER AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

In literary texts, the significance of textiles is evident not merely at the material level, but more importantly, through their symbolic imagery system, which plays a crucial role in the aesthetic formation of character identities [1]. As an essential component of a character's external "form," attire naturally becomes the writer's pivotal medium for characterization—transforming textiles into semiotic vessels that convey psychological depth and cultural codes [14]. This process often follows two core principles of traditional

Chinese aesthetics: "expressing spirit through form" (以形写神, yǐ xíng xiě shén), which uses concrete depiction to reveal inner vitality, and the more advanced "capturing the spirit beyond the form" (离形写神, lí xíng xiě shén), which seeks to transcend external appearances to directly engage with a character's spiritual essence [15].

- Eileen Chang: Weaving Femininity and Temporal Shifts

■ In "A Chronicle of Changing Clothes," Chang meticulously traces the evolution of Chinese textile culture,

recording details from fur coats to the decorative trim on cotton-padded jackets ("triple-tiered appliqué and piping"). These intricate details shaped an era focused on familial lineage and social propriety (Figure 3).

■ Chang delineates character traits through precise textile selection. In *Love in a Fallen City*, Bai Liusu's gossamer cheongsam embodies her delicate fragility (Figure 4).

- Color also carries rich symbolic significance. In *Half a Lifelong Romance*, Manzhen's consistent blue attire symbolizes her gentle disposition. In *The Golden Cangue*, Cao Qiqiao's vibrant silks in shades like "vermillion" and "fresh scallion white" signify the dissonance between her desires and her oppressive reality.

- Qian Zhongshu: Sartorial Irony in *Fortress Besieged*

■ Qian Zhongshu uses an economical approach for sartorial depiction. Although the protagonist Fang Hongjian's attire (such as traditional Chinese robes and Western-style suits) is rarely described, the author deliberately highlights his meticulous dress at pivotal scenes: "clad in a full suit and tie, suspenders, with gleaming leather shoes" (Figure 5). This description uses extreme physical distortion to create a comedic effect and externalize the character's inner turmoil, thereby shaping his absurd persona.

B. SYMBOLIZING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND STATUS

Functioning as symbolic imagery, textile imagery not only reflects a subject's engagement with the world but also constructs a complex symbolic framework. This system records macro-historical transformations, such as regime shifts and class mobility, and articulates micro-level characteristics [16].

- Lu Xun: Textiles as Social Critique

■ "The True Story of Ah Q": Lu Xun uses the symbolic detail of textile fragments to portray survival among society's underclass. A Q's meager possessions—his felt hat, cotton-padded quilt, and tattered cloth shirt—are not merely symbols of deprivation but also witnesses to his fate (Figure 6). The fate of his garments, either pawned or repurposed, reflects the collective exploitation suffered by the populace.

- "Kong Yiji": Lu Xun masterfully uses attire to construct the portrayal of a destitute intellectual. Kong Yiji is the "sole patron who wore a full-length gown while standing at the counter to drink." The "full-length gown" signifies his scholar status, while his posture reveals his socioeconomic decline. The gown's "filthy and tattered" state further signifies his extreme poverty and wretched existence (Figure 7).

■ "The New Year's Sacrifice": Through the repeated yet diverse depiction of Xianglin Sao's sartorial ensemble—"white mourning cord, black skirt, blue cotton jacket, moon-white vest"—Lu Xun constructs her three distinct life trajectories. The initial depiction signifies a young widow's dignity. The second rendition, where the clothes remain unchanged but her spirit is gone, highlights the disintegration of her inner world. In the final transformation, the physical



FIGURE 1. "Jinhuidui" (Brocade in Ashes). Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)



FIGURE 2. "Bainayi" (Patchwork Garment). Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)

deterioration of the garments corresponds to her emaciation, completing her tragic metamorphosis.

IV. DIALECTICS OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

A. INTERPLAY OF MATERIALITY AND SYMBOLISM

A character's attire is a fusion of materiality and symbolism. The material dimension manifests in the tangible details of styles, colors, and textures. The symbolic dimension surpasses this, reflecting a character's social attributes and internal psychological landscape [17]. In distinguished literary works, these two dimensions are organically integrated: material representations reinforce symbolic meaning, and symbolic connotations give material descriptions profound

resonance [18].

B. DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Sartorial depiction serves a twofold purpose: it dismantles established frameworks and reshapes identity. Deconstruction occurs when authors use vestimentary details to reveal the inherent contradictions of characters. Reconfiguration is a creative transformation where writers re-semiotize clothing items, endowing figures with modern spiritual significance and producing a seamless integration of tradition and modernity.



FIGURE 3. Some fragments of Chinese textiles. Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)



FIGURE 4. Cheongsam. Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)

V. CONCLUSION

In contemporary literary practice, textile imagery serves as a material foundation and a narrative medium that conveys multifaceted cultural meanings. Through the deconstruction and reconfiguration of textile fragments, writers disrupt

singular historical narratives and create complex cultural memories. Textile descriptions are integral components of an author's structure, acting as cultural signs that interact with plot, character, and theme to construct the work's semantic depth.



FIGURE 5. Chinese Long Gown and Western Suit. Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)



FIGURE 6. A Q in "The True Story of A Q". Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)



FIGURE 7. Kong Yiji's Iconic Long Gown Character Depiction. Source: Private collection (with permission from the original author for use)

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All work in this study was independently completed by Yali WANG.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not applicable.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Hollander, "Seeing through clothes," Oakland, California, USA: Univ of California Press; 1993.
- [2] C. Hughes, "Dressed in Fiction," Oxford, UK: Berg Oxford; 2006, doi: 10.2752/9781847888693.
- [3] Y. Xu, "Immensity in Trivialness, Integrity in Brokenness—To View the Bapo Painting from The Dimension of Time and Space," *Elivise Academy. Proceedings of the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies (ICIHCS 2022) (Part 1)*; 18 December 2022; Shanghai, China: Department of Cultural Heritage and Museology, Fudan University; 2022: p. 48-55, doi: 10.26914/c.cnkihy.2022.08685.
- [4] S. Gandhi, "The impact of buddhism on chinese material culture," *Material Religion the Journal of Objects Art & Belief*, pp. 124-126, 2015, doi: 10.2752/174322006778053780.
- [5] R. H. Van Gulik, "The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in the Ideology of the Ch'in," (No Title). Tokyo, Japan: Sophia University, doi: 10.2307/2382554.
- [6] J. Kristeva, "Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art," New York, NY, USA: Columbia University Press; 1980, doi: 10.2307/1347112.
- [7] M. M. Bakhtin, "The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays," Austin, TX, USA: University of Texas Press; 1982, doi: 10.2307/405448.
- [8] A. Assmann, "Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives," Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2011, doi: 10.5699/modelangrevi.108.2.0626.
- [9] I. O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality," *Intermedialités*, no. 6, pp. 43-64, 2005, doi: 10.7202/1005505ar.
- [10] J. E. Perez, "Shalu Gillum, Column Editor," *Wiley Online Library. Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries*, no. 2/3, pp. 18, 2021, doi: 10.1080/15424065.2021.1958724.
- [11] J. Assmann, "Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination," Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2011, doi: 10.1017/cbo9780511996306.
- [12] P. Hilt, "Science and Civilisation in China," Volume V: Chemistry and Chemical Technology. Part 9: Textile Technology: Spinning and Reeling Joseph Needham Dieter Kuhn, 1990, doi: 10.1086/355564.
- [13] V. Steele, "Paris Fashion: A Cultural History," London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing; 1988, doi: 10.2307/1358390.
- [14] S. Rimon-Kenan, "Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics," London, UK: routledge; 2003, doi: 10.4324/9780203426111.
- [15] S. Bush and H.-Y. Shih, "Early Chinese Texts on Painting," Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong University Press; 2012, doi: 10.2307/495199.
- [16] H. A. Miskimin, F. Branudel, and P. M. Ranum, "Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism," *American Historical Review*, vol. 83, no. 3, pp. 704, 1978, doi: 10.2307/1861874.
- [17] C. G. Jung, "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Vol., 9, Part 1); The Collected Works of Cg Jung. Princeton, NJ, US: Princeton University Press; 1981.
- [18] J. Hawthorn, "The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000," Oxford, UK: Blackwell; 2006, doi: 10.1007/s10988-007-9013-y.