

# **Philosophical Culture and Cultural Diversity from an Axiological Perspective: A Comparative Philosophical Analysis of Aesthetic Values in the Ming and Qing Dynasties**

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**Abstract:** The Ming and Qing dynasties were period of significant cultural and philosophical thoughts in China. The main objective of this study was to examine the diversity of the philosophical culture and cultural diversity from an axiological perspective to compare the aesthetic values presented in various literati works during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The study employed literature and thematic analyses of four key writings; Feng Menglong (*Stories to Instruct the World, Stories to Awaken the World, Stories to Caution the World*), Cao Xueqin (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), Pu Songling (*Strange stories from a Chinese studio*), and the works of Wu Jingzi (*The Scholars*). The findings showed several themes, social values and aesthetic values that reflected societal realities and individual experiences. The tensions between nature of beauty and pursuit of permanence showcased the influence of Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian philosophy. The use of satire and wit reflects the hypocrisy and corruption and questions societal norms and advocates for social reforms. The emphasis on personal responsibility, filial piety and respect for others reflects the influence of Confucian and Buddhists ethical principles. In conclusion, the study shows different aesthetic and social values that embodied the Ming and Qing dynasties.

**Keywords:** Ming, Qing, Aesthetic Values, Social Values, Beauty and Responsibility

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Ming and Qing dynasties forms the basis of several Chinese literature. Majority of the literati from various spheres expressed their concepts and ideas on reality through literature. Literature on Ming and Qing dynasties constitute significant elements of Chinese history and the world; however, there is limited research on the aesthetic and social values within these dynasties (Meulenbeld, 2012). According to Liu (Y. Liu, 2022), in the Ming and Qing dynasties, there was a widespread of narrative literature with the constant publications of novels, letters and essays about various concepts of philosophy. All literature works were distinct based on literary styles and forms of expressions and captured various aspects of social life sciences, artistic creativity and innovation, and trends in the socio-political ideals. These early writings were a classical representation of

Chinese literature that highlighted problems and gap in the justice systems, social systems and governance structures and institutions. These writings and works of literature inspired thousands of citizens and individuals who used them to criticize the social systems. The authors of these literature works drew inspiration and influence from their families or society to create these novels and essays (Y. Liu, 2022; Xu, Sun, & Ma, 2021). Aesthetic value is associated with sensory pleasures to the reader rather than the teachings about truth and education embraced by social values. The tragedy of characters in literati writings aimed to convey aesthetic values by making readers to think and keep their stories within their minds (Beardsley, 1981; Bonetto, Girandola, & Lo Monaco, 2022; Zou, 2016). There were several pieces of letters, novels, and essays during the Ming and Qing dynasties that were deemed as masterpieces due to their rich and philosophical texts, detailed analysis of characters and portrayal of various artistic expressions. The existence of several literati works symbolised a method of representing their thoughts on societal issues and practices. Jiyong suggested that the constant pursuit of social and aesthetic values led to constant publications on aesthetic values and social principles during the Qing and Ming dynasties (Jiyong, 2023). Previous research on the axiology during Ming and Qing is multifaceted and embraces all perspectives with several publications examining the historical background and information on the Ming and Qing dynasties (Cheng, 2016). Nappi postulated that in the later stages of the Ming dynasty (Nappi, 2018), there was a significant focus and public attention on the uprising of peasants and further the differences in the social classes of citizens and ethnic conflicts experienced in the Manchu. Additionally, Zou showed that the uprising of peasants (Zou, 2016), ethnic conflicts and the struggles among social classes were the basis for the literature writings and novels at that time. Zou found that the audience of literature works and writings formed a crucial factor in the growth (Zou, 2016), development and advancement of several literature writings and works instead of being a literary phenomenon. Thus, the numerous publications were derived from social psychology, public psychology and literacy. There are few studies and published works on the axiological and aesthetic values of the Ming and Qing dynasties despite the existence of several macroscopic publications on Ming and Qing philosophy. Furthermore, there are few researchers who have exclusively interpreted the axiology and aesthetics of the works derived from these novels, essays and letters. Therefore, the rationale of our study is to examine and compare axiology and aesthetics during the Ming and Qing dynasties to fill this gap and encourage an axiological interpretation of these

works.

### 1.1 Ming and Qing dynasties: Rise and Representative Writings

Greene suggested that in the Ming dynasty, the presence of novels, literati work, operas and other forms of artistic works were evident and geared towards the people's way of lives and cultural history (Greene, 2019). After the middle Ming dynasty, several writings emerged and a peak was attained in various artistic works with long masterpieces of letters, operas and novels (Cheng, 2016). In this period, several literati work were heavily diversified and focused on different ideas such as history, good spirits, evil spirits and publicity. Furthermore, towards the end and demise of the Ming dynasty, there were several writings on the uprising of peasants, the struggle across various social classes and ethnic conflicts of the Manchu. These writings and their contents influenced the lives of various individuals and authorities of governance at that time. In the demise of Ming dynasty, the era was faced with disintegration and a passionate expression of social affairs and problems that bedevilled the Ming dynasty (Jianwei, 2023). Moreover, there was a passionate expression among individuals concerning social affairs that had formed a significant part of their lives by explaining how they understood the society and expressed their emotions. After the collapse of the Ming dynasty and transition into the Qing dynasty, social affairs formed a core component of individual's lives. In the early stages of the Qing dynasty, more literati works were published on alterations and changes in sovereignty coupled with cruelty and massacre experienced during the transition from Ming to Qing, particularly in the *Jiangnan* region (Y. Liu, 2022). Literati works are considered a significant achievement of the Qing dynasty including works such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin which was a fundamental pillar of the Chinese art (Xueqin, 2011). The *Scholars* by Wu Jingzi reverberated with the satirical meaning and history of Chinese literature that influenced various writings during the Qing dynasty (Wu, 1992). Several writers and publishers existed during the late Qing dynasty which highlighted the differences and struggles among classes in the society. In the last stages of the Qing dynasty, differences among social classes were a common occurrence and provided writers with numerous sources of information to write. Every writer of literati work, novels and essays had a unique style based on the materials they chose to write about, making the Qing dynasty, an age of significant intellectual growth and advancement of Chinese writings. Several writings of the Qing dynasty were aligned with the events and features that occurred during the times. For example, *Dream*

of the *Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin formed the basis of criticisms of the Chinese feudal culture and systems. In the *Stories to Caution the World* by Feng Menglong, Lady Bai (*Lady Bai Pressed Down the Lei-Feng Tower*) is treated as a demon; however, Feng considers her as a gentlewoman to reflect the tenderness and affection of women and highlighting the bravery of the White Snake in pursuing a happy love (Menglong, Yang, & Yang, 2005, 2009). This was in stark contrast to the feudal systems where traditional thoughts did not permit free love. Hence, the story of Lady Bai was a myth that expressed the people's view and ideas of free life. These themes were consistent with the experiences of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu found in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The Ming and Qing dynasties were encountered with several literati works and operas such as Feng Menglong (*Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Awaken the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*), Cao Xueqin (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), Pu Songling (*Strange stories from a Chinese studio*), and the works of Wu Jingzi (*The Scholars*). All these writings and publications formed a basis of different social classes and backgrounds, hence, distinct axiological and aesthetic values. The writings of Feng Menglong were the most popular and found in various market places and endorsed by several publishers towards the end of the Ming dynasty. Feng Menglong strived towards educating about social values while the writings of Wu Jingzi (*The Scholars*) were geared towards the challenges and problems of the feudal society and highlighted the social values of individual changes through imperial examinations (Wu, 1992). In contrast, Pu Songling (*Strange stories from a Chinese studio*) highlighted aesthetic values since his ideas were considered significant and noteworthy in the growth and development of modern aesthetics in China (Songling, 2013). Moreover, Pu Songling was also a writer about the pursuit of beauty and was only second to the writings of Cao Xueqin (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) in terms of beautiful stories and characters during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The works of Cao Xueqin (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) were focused on the rise and demise of great families and the societal changes during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Also, Cao highlighted aesthetic values embraced by the love between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu. The writings of the Ming and Qing dynasties consists and highlights several social values. Social values are considered the fundamental fabric of the society whose educational significance is beneficial to an individual. Thus, these writings embodied social values by carefully selecting the characters and scenes in their writings to emphasize the truth in the society and the significance of being a good person. The fate of the characters in various writings were used as a warning to the society about rational and progressive social

values.

## 1.2 Feng Menglong

According to Liu, the writings of Feng Menglong (1574-1646) embodied significant contributions to literature due to outstanding works of essays, operas and theories (Y. Liu, 2022). His publications of the Three Yan (*Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Awaken the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*), he illustrates and reflects on the society during the Ming dynasty. In these writings, Feng Menglong highlights the prosperity of Chinese towns and cities, trading activities of merchants and the lives of common citizens. Feng Menglong uses several characters to reflect the true nature of conflicts between the emerging commercial economies and the ancient agricultural economies. The literature works during the Ming and Qing dynasty reflect an open pursuit of desire, influence of politics and the advancement of civilization (Z. Ge, 2018). In the Chinese feudal system embraced with harsh political rules, social life was accompanied by certain moral ethics and political indoctrination. Therefore, literature and writings of the time, consisted of clever narrative tales that focused on minimizing the political influence on literature and writings while highlighting the lives of the common citizens. A study by Menglong et al. observed that high ranking authorities and individuals in the dynasties usually abused their powers and positions to influence the lives of common citizens such as the narrative of *Qiao Taishou Disorderly of the Lovebirds* (Menglong et al., 2005). These masterpieces of literature and writings highlighted evil deeds such as corruption and oppression of the poor and eventually proved to the common people that such negative morals and deeds were finally dealt with in a justified manner. The writings of *Gui Jianwai Repents for Being Poor* highlights that several characters were not righteous and were selfish who expressed greed for money and got their rewards. Gui Qian received help from the Shi family during desperate times; however, he was ungrateful for their actions and still ended up stealing gold and silver from the Shi family (Pi-Ching, 2000). The three Yan by Feng Menglong consists of hundreds of stories with majority of the writings centred around retributions and vengeance. Most of the stories about vengeance were stand-alone stories without intersection with others. Other stories were filled with current rewards and encouraged individuals to embrace and practice good deeds. Feng Menglong made significant strides to cover the entire aspects of social life through extensive works and writings on reducing evil deeds and encouraging individuals to embrace a sense of responsibility. Feng Menglong attained the objective of promoting and persuading individuals

to practice goodness, unity and righteousness. In reality, the existence of good deeds and good people is not instantly rewarded and, in some cases, they end up making more difficult sacrifices.

### 1.3 Wu Jingzi

The writings of Wu Jingzi (1701-1754) embody traditional Chinese satirical fiction stories and the utilisation of fiction to reflect real life values. In his works (*The Scholars*), he highlights the existing conflict between standards of social value and individual values existing in the socio-political level (Wu, 1992). Moreover, during his time, standards of social values were considered to pass the imperial examinations before administration into civil service to obtain wealth and merit. Characters such as Zhou Jin and Fan Jin are observed to adhere to these strict ethical standards in achieving their social values with other individuals and celebrities also being products of these standards (Menglong et al., 2009). However, in the end they lose true feelings and tend to alienate themselves from nature. Thus, Wu Jingzi redesigns and describes the ideal personality based on “true Confucianism”.

### 1.4 Dream of the Red Chamber

In contrast to *The Scholars* who highlight the differences and resistance between traditional life values and true feelings of humanity at the demise of the feudal society. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) demonstrates the true and essential beauty and goodness established by the resistance. In his writings, the character, Jia Baoyu's love for women forms a component of the beauty and goodness of life which is independent of natural lust. However, the pursuit of desire and sympathy is only reflected in the adoration of women (Xueqin, 2011).

### 1.5 Objective

The main objective of the study is to examine the philosophical culture and cultural diversity from an axiological perspective: a comparative philosophical analysis of aesthetic values in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The following specific objectives were formulated;

- i.) To compare and contrast the aesthetic values of the Ming and Qing dynasties
- ii.) To examine aesthetic values based on axiology in shaping the perspective and understanding of the world.
- iii.) To examine cultural diversities of the Ming and Qing dynasties

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

A comparative study design was used to compare and contrast aesthetic values in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Specific art forms were analysed with a focus on paintings, poetry and architecture. Lastly, specific aesthetic values and social values were analysed. Primary sources of information included Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Wu Jingzi's *The Scholars*, Feng Menglong's stories *to instruct the world*, *Stories to Caution the World* and *Stories to Awaken the World*. Also, Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.

### 2.2 Textual Analysis

The study was a textual and literature analysis involving Feng Menglong's *Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*, Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, Wu Jingzi's *The Scholars*, and Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The analysis was focused on thematic analysis, character analysis, stylistic analysis and comparative analysis.

### 2.3 Thematic Analysis

We identified recurrent themes across the literati and published works to create a clear picture of aesthetic and philosophical ideas and concepts. All the published works involving Feng Menglong's *Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*, and Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* were analysed. In the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, beauty was analysed as reflected in the Jia Baoyu's family gardens and the decline of their fortunes. The satire in Wu Jingzi was examined for dominant themes of corruption and hypocrisy. These writings had clear aesthetic values based on social critiques that challenged the Confucian ideals of social hierarchy and propriety.

### 2.4 Character Analysis

Several characters in these novels were examined because they acted as embodiments of aesthetic values, axiology and philosophical thoughts of Ming and Qing dynasties. For instance, Lin Daiyu a character of Cao Xueqin who embraced poetic sense and fragile beauty and was a representation of elegance. Additionally, Wu Jingzi's characters such as Gongzi Zhang who was a representation of wit and sarcasm in expressing

social injustices. Other characters in involving Feng Menglong's *Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*, and Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* were also examined for aesthetic and social values during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

## 2.5 Stylistic Analysis

We examined the author's mastery of languages in expressing their aesthetic and philosophical thoughts. In Cao Xueqin, there was an element of lyrical prose rich in poetic imagery and symbolism. In Wu Jingzi there was a sense of stark and satirical style involving irony and exaggeration. Lastly, all styles in the works of Feng Menglong's *Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*, and Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* were examined.

## 2.6 Comparative Analysis

The aesthetic and philosophical values of these literati works and novels were compared during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, elegance and individual tragedy was compared with the social critique in *The Scholars* by Wu Jingzi. Comparisons were also made between involving Feng Menglong's *Stories to Instruct the World*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*, and Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.

## 2.7 Analysis and Measures

Measures derived from textual analysis involved frequency counts of stylistic features, character traits and themes of related words. The proportions and ratios of the prevalence of themes, balance of characters and stylistic shifts were also determined. Co-occurrence analyses of stylistic and thematic links and themes with various characters were also determined. Lastly, comparative measures involving cross-novels were performed accompanied by temporal comparisons and analysis of aesthetic values.

# 3. RESULTS

In stylist and thematic links, in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* the main stylistic feature was the extensive utilisation of symbols such as falling flowers, while in *The Scholars*, the major stylistic feature was irony and exaggerated characters. In *Stories to Instruct the World*, the main stylistic



feature was simple, plain and direct language. In Table 1, thematic connections in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* involved a fleeting beauty and impermanence of life. *The Scholars* embraced a satirical critique of social corrupt and hypocrisy practices in the society and in the *Stories to Instruct the World*, the thematic focus was on everyday morality and practical lessons.

Table 1: Key Themes and Underlying Philosophical Concepts

Novel	Theme	Philosophical Concepts
Dream of the Red Chamber	Fleeting beauty	Buddhist impermanence, Daoism's harmony with nature, Confucian ideals of refinement and social order
The Scholars	Social critique and satire	Confucian ideals of virtue and social justice, critique of hypocrisy and corruption
Stories to Instruct the World	Moral lessons and everyday ethics	Confucian moral principles, Buddhist notions of karma and compassion
Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio	Supernatural encounters and moral ambiguity	Exploration of human nature, questioning of societal norms, reflections on fate and destiny

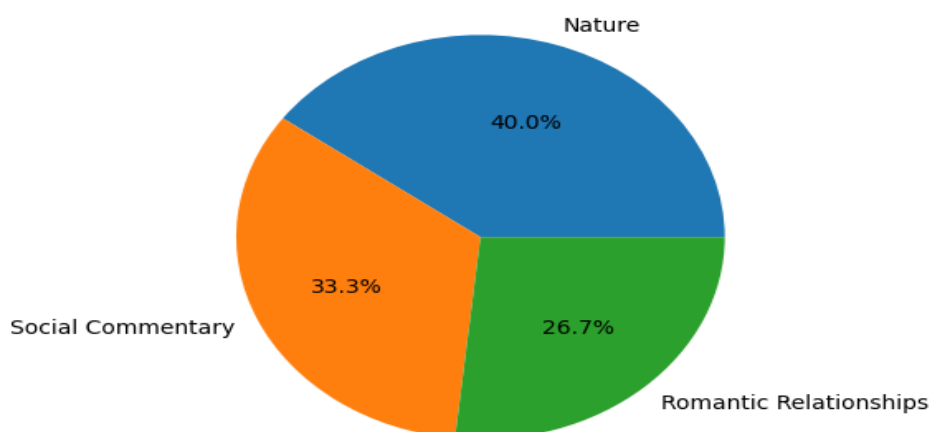
In Table 2, various characters embodied various aesthetic values such as refined elegance, poetic sensibility, tragic beauty, spiritual yearning, cynical wit and passionate love. These aesthetic values were found in various writings and accompanied diverse philosophical thoughts from the pursuit of individual authenticity to assertion of individual desires and challenges with patriarchal traditions.

Table 2: Character Analysis: Embodiment of Aesthetic Values

Character	Novel	Aesthetic Values Embodied	Philosophical Thoughts
Lin Daiyu	Dream of the Red Chamber	Refined elegance, poetic sensibility, tragic beauty	Pursuit of individual authenticity, critique of social constraints, exploration of suffering and loss
Jia Baoyu	Dream of the Red Chamber	Sensitivity to beauty, non-conformist attitudes, spiritual yearning	Quest for transcendence, rejection of worldly values, embrace of emotional authenticity
Gongzi Zhang	The Scholars	Cynical wit, intellectual rebellion, pursuit of truth	Rejection of superficiality, social critique, search for authenticity in a corrupt world
Lady Bai	Stories to Caution the World	Passionate love, defiance of social norms, pursuit of freedom	Assertion of individual desires, challenge to patriarchal traditions, exploration of supernatural realms

In Table 3, stylistic analysis revealed that the expression of aesthetic values. In the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the major aesthetic values were a sense of beauty, nostalgia and melancholy. In *The Scholars*, there was an expression of social critique, intellectualism and humour. In the *Stories to Instruct the World*, there was a sense of promoting clarity, practical wisdom and accessibility. However, in the *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, there was a sense of wonder, suspense and exploration of ethical dilemmas.

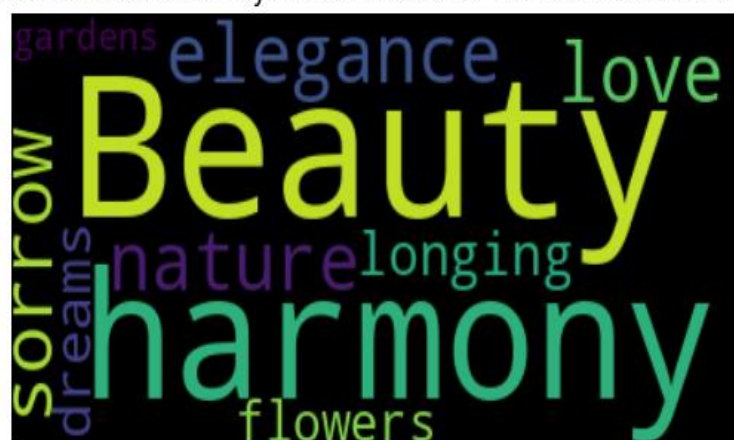
Proportion of Text Devoted to Themes in Dream of the Red Chamber



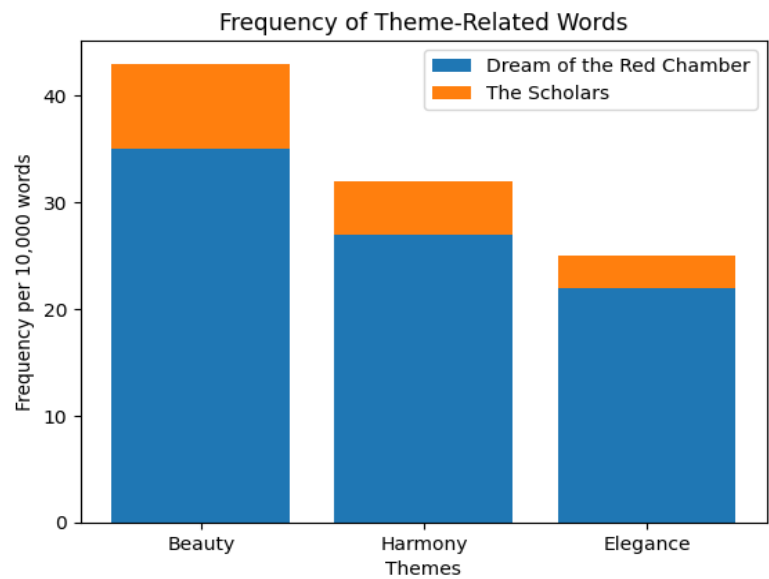
**Figure 1:** The Proportion of Text Devoted to Themes in the Dream of the Red Chamber.

In Figure 1, 40% of the texts were linked with nature while 33.3% were attributed to social commentary and 26.7% attributed to romantic relationships. Similarly, In Figure 2, there is a higher proportion of reference to key themes such as beauty, harmony, love, elegance, nature and longing. In Figure 2, in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* there was a higher frequency of reference to beauty, harmony and elegance per 10,000 words compared to *The Scholars*.

Word Cloud of Aesthetically Related Words in Dream of the Red Chamber



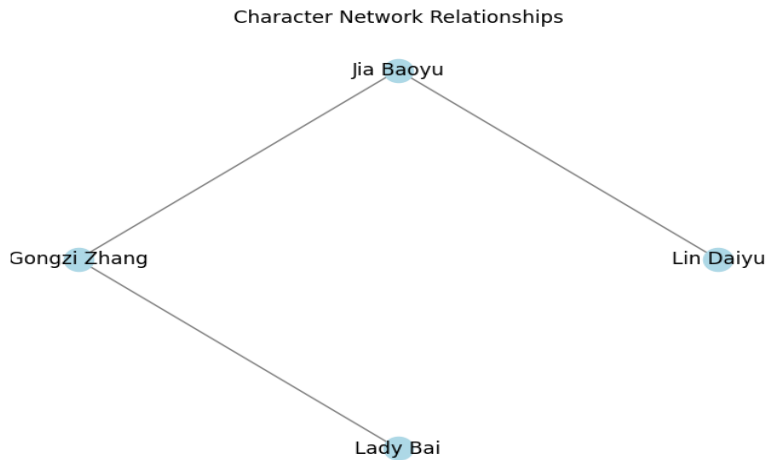
**Figure 2:** Word Cloud of Aesthetically Related Words in Dream of the Red Chamber



**Figure 3:** Frequency of Theme Related Words in *the Scholars* and in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Table 3: Stylistic Analysis: Expression of Aesthetic Values

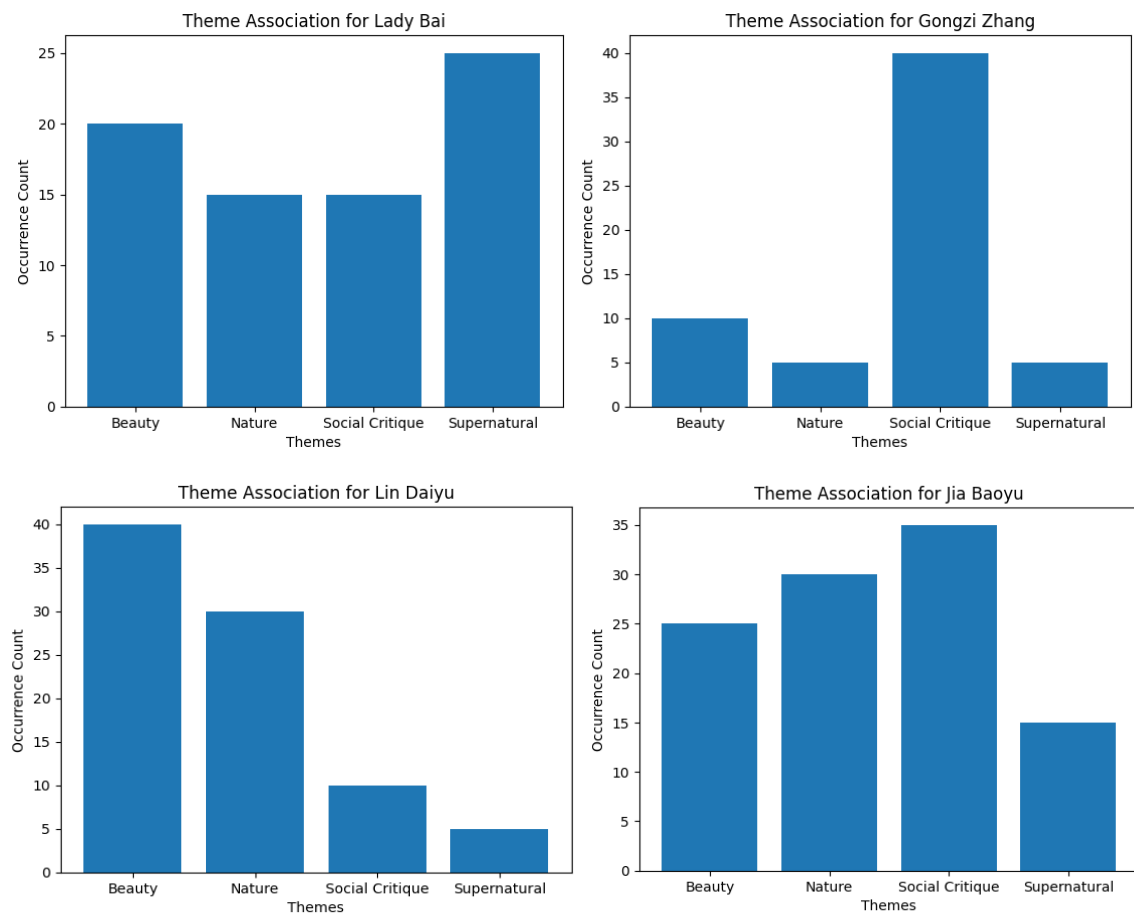
Novel	Stylistic Features	Aesthetic Values
Dream of the Red Chamber	Lyrical prose, rich symbolism, detailed descriptions	Evokes a sense of beauty, melancholy, and nostalgia
The Scholars	Satirical tone, irony, exaggeration	Expresses social critique, humour, and intellectual sharpness
Stories to Instruct the World	Simple language, direct storytelling, moral lessons	Promotes clarity, accessibility, and practical wisdom
Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio	Vivid imagery, supernatural elements, moral ambiguity	Creates a sense of wonder, suspense, and exploration of ethical dilemmas



**Figure 4:** Character Network Relationships in all the Literati Writings

In Figure 4, the roles played by various characters exhibited similar

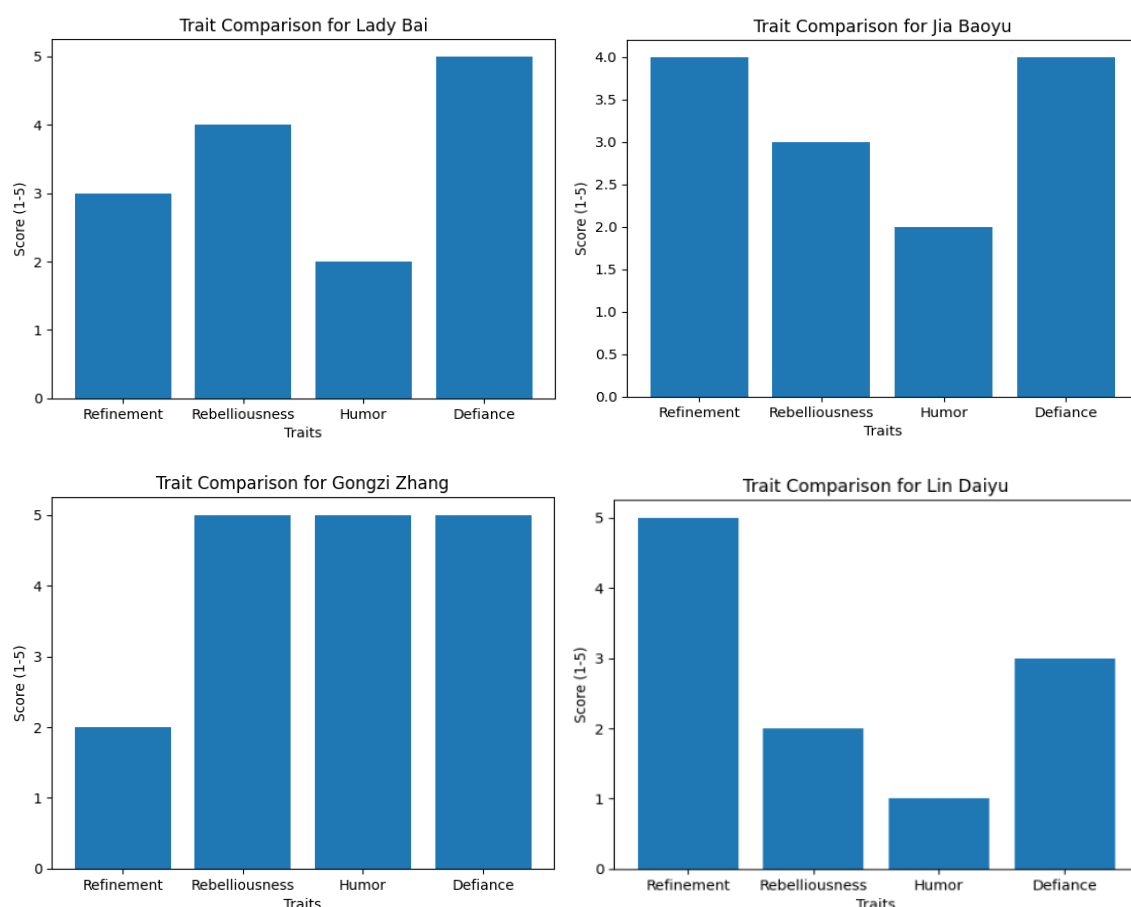
themes in most of them except for the characters of Lin Daiyu and Lady Bai. There were significant correlations between the roles of Gongzi Zhang and Jia Baoyu, Lady Bai and Gongzi Zhang, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. These findings were consistent with Figure 6 of examining trait relationships among these characters. Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu share common romantic positions that highlights their prominence in these narratives and common aesthetic values. Gongzi Zhang shares connections with Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu due to the intellectual and philosophical traditions; however, they hold different aesthetic values and approaches. Lady Bai share connections with Gongzi Zhang based on the shared ideals that reflect a rebellious spirit and social critique.



**Figure 5:** Themes Associated with Various Characters in all Narratives

In Figure 5, the association of themes with different characters is presented. In Lin Daiyu, there is a stronger association with beauty that aligns with her refined delicate and aesthetics. Similarly, there is a connection with nature suggesting sensitivity to the world and its beauty while a lower engagement with social critique and supernatural themes highlights a focus on personal experiences and emotions. In Gongzi Zhang there is a greater emphasis on social critique that is aligned with

challenging societal norms and expressing the common injustices during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The lower focus on beauty and nature is a representation of the priority of intellectual and social issues over aesthetic values. The supernatural reflections show the basis of social realities and the material world. In Lady Bai, there is a balance between beauty, nature and supernatural themes that offers a mix of aesthetic values, natural awareness and interests in the mystical and spiritual world. Social critique is moderate to reflect social issues within the broader context of the world that consists of transcendent and worldly dimensions.



**Figure 6:** Traits Associated with Various Characters in all Narratives

In Figure 6, the trait comparisons showed how different characters represented aesthetic values and their roles within the axiological framework of the authors during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Lin Daiyu reflects higher scores in refinement and is sensitively aligned with elegance. In contrast, Jia Baoyu exhibit higher scores in all aspects indicating a relative balance between refinement, rebelliousness, sensuality, humour and intellectualism reflecting a complex and dynamic character. Gongzi Zhang is used to emphasize rebelliousness, intellectualism and defiance in reflecting a satirical and social critique viewpoint. Lastly, Lin Daiyu's scores

on rebelliousness, sensuality and defiance are aligned with a passionate and non-conforming spirit.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The study observed that different narratives were associated with different themes. In the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, fleeting beauty highlights how the existing Buddhist ideas of impermanence evolved in portraying beauty with the tragic fates of characters such as Lin Daiyu. The emphasis of Daoism was mainly based on harmonious co-existence with nature (*wu wei*) in which individuals found solace in the constant cycle of seasons and renewal of gardens in the novel. Clashes with the fleeting nature of beauty represents challenging the societal expectations and deviations from the established order. The presence and recurrence of flowers is a symbolism of beauty and reminder of impermanence. We found that several studies have analysed the aesthetic and social values of literary works and publications. Bonetto suggested that literature consists of positive energy capable of allowing people to convert this energy into practice by controlling their actions and words while influencing others to transform into the spiritual world of public reality (Bonetto et al., 2022). Similarly, Beardsley showed that aesthetic values provide the readers with an enjoyment of beauty (Beardsley, 1981). Moreover, Beardsley (Beardsley, 1981) argued that the essence and strength of traditional Chinese culture was based on its aesthetics. These views were confirmed by Horn (1989) who suggested that artistic creation and works formed the aesthetic objects and products of the era of a society. Our findings were aligned with previous studies have performed thematic analyses on various novels and literature writings of Feng Menglong. For instance, Hsu proposed that the writings of Hsu consisted of an artistic portrait of social reality existing in the late Ming dynasty coupled with the major influences and reflection of lives of common citizens (Pi-Ching, 2000). The findings of Shang (1998) suggested that there were constant conflicts between standards of social values and individual human values during the Ming dynasty leading to socio-political differences (Shang, 1998). In the literati works of “*Dream of the Red Chamber*”, it emerged that there was consistent pursuit of social values and exalting of individuality (Zhao, 2011). We found that the works of Feng Menglong consisted of stories and narratives that educated citizens to obtain whatever they sow (Cheng, 2016). Additionally, Feng Menglong embraced the talents and ideas of women in his works despite viewing

them in the ancient sense of intersections and championing for male superiority and dominance over females. In the works of *Yang Bailao's Strange Encounter with the state of Yue*, Yang Bailao has a wife at home who embraces the good virtues and deeds and also performs businesses at the market place; however, he still marries again for his own pleasure and benefits and is not blamed for this in his works. The author describes and envisions a happy ending with a reunion of the two wives and sons (Shang, 1998). Therefore, in his publications whatever the nature of a woman, the essential ideals and happiness derived were from her husband's prosperity and wealth. Good people experience challenges and difficulties at the beginning; however, they will always succeed with the ultimate truth emphasized by Feng Menglong to the world and the practice of social values in his writings. Previous accounts and evidences have consistently proved that good deeds are always rewarded, even though not instantly. Therefore, accumulating good deeds and practices is considered wealth that is appreciated and never loses its value and significance compared to material wealth. We found that Co Xueqin's writings describes Jia Baoyu's unworthy pursuit of fame and fortunes which in the face of reality of beauty of the women ends with a deep sadness because the beauty disappears with time. The beautiful hearts and youth are buried with time leading to Jia Baoyu's unresolved doubts and resentment since he wanted to keep all beautiful things in the world forever and remain eternal (Xueqin, 2011). These works of Cao Xueqin represent the peak of the Chinese literature. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* ranks highly on valuing individuality and the essence of social values. Jia Baoyu is a reflection of spurning fames and fortunes and considers fools as those who study to join the ruling government. The social values in these writings reflect the feudal system by turning feudal systems and rituals into love and affection through trivial conflicts to highlight the social values and conflicts (Zhao, 2011). The intention of Cao Xueqin is to represent the start of an end-time to the feudal systems. The findings showed that in *The Scholars*, social critique and satire were the dominant themes. The narrative adopts the Confucian ideals of social justice and virtue as the basis for satirical critique of hypocrisy and corruption in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Exemplary officials such as Fan Jin are highlighted to embody Confucian principles of social justice and integrity in contrast to their corrupt and opportunistic counterparts such as Zhou Chong. Thus, exposing the rampant corruption and hypocrisy that bedevilled the Ming dynasty (Jianwei, 2023). The idea of general Confucianism is based on the premise that pursuing fame and fortunes makes an individual to forget their true nature and become numb in the

process. In contrast, true Confucianism is associated with maintaining an individual's character and true nature without following the masses and losing their good heart (L. Ge, 2011; Menglong et al., 2009). In his writings, characters such as Wang Guan, and Zhuang Shangzhi embodies true Confucianism (Shang, 1998). Wu Jingzi's tendency to affirm an individual with natural deeds and pursuit of liberation can be observed in these characters. In contrast to the historian hermits, they were distinct because the hermits elicited a strong desire of social responsibility and purity of the spirit by embracing ideas associated with agriculture, music and rituals that were against the rulers and authorities of the time (Zou, 2016). Our findings were aligned with Liu who found that in the Ming and Qing societies (Y. Liu, 2022), several literati and authorities examined and analysed the works of Confucianism through the "*Four Books, Five Classics and Eight Stocks*"; however, they failed to practice these ideas and concepts once they started to govern. Characters such as Du Shaoqing and Wang Guan exhibit different roles by serving the society with what they learnt while seeking truthfulness and practicality in all social aspects. In the feudal systems, literati did not assume social responsibility and therefore, true Confucianism was not embraced. Wu Jingzi's social values were not based on official positions and fame but the practical issues that sought benefits to the society and livelihood of various people. Therefore, he reflects human values, decay of the society and loss of humanity due to the political systems and cultural practices of the feudal systems (Wang, 2022). The findings showed that in the *Stories to Instruct the World*, Confucianism formed the basis of guidance and actions. There is a strong emphasis on personal responsibility that is realized through accountability of an individual's choice and actions (Yu, 2023). Therefore, individuals who disregarded their responsibilities and failed to uphold filial piety were subjected to societal and personal consequences. The principle of Karma highlights the interrelationships of cause and effect where an individual's choices, virtues or immoral practices resonate through their lives and those around them while teaching valuable lessons such as reaping what one sows. Furthermore, compassion is regarded as a path to harmony by encouraging forgiveness and highlighting that individuals who have kindness and mercy experience the transformation of compassion in their lives. In the writings of *The Scholars* and Feng Menglong, the focus is mainly on social values because the main objective of the authors was to educate the citizens and make them comprehend of how to be better people and the nation a better place. In contrast, *Dream of the Red Chamber* embraces both social and aesthetic values. Its aesthetic value is derived from the revelations of the



duality of family tragedy, marriage and love. Cao Xueqin asserts that the family tragedy represents an inevitable loss of a corrupt element with several women exhibiting unhappy endings that symbolizes destruction of the ideals. A young woman is the main subject of these writings (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) coupled with family prosperity and the decline of the environment (Zhao, 2011). Therefore, reasonable ideals cannot attain the same status of reasonableness. Our analysis showed that Pu Songling (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*) viewed supernaturalism as a way to reflect humanity. The utilisation of ghosts and demons reflected the inner turmoil where supernatural entities embody suppressive desires, hidden anxieties and moral transgressions. Thus, by confronting these entities, individuals are forced to examine their own darkness evoking a sense of self-reflection and significant atonement. Moreover, challenging societal by encountering these entities allows individuals to subvert the existing social hierarchies and reveal existing injustices. For example, the ghosts that sought revenge against corrupt officials or the foxes that outsmarted cunning scholars allows challenges to the accepted power dynamics and the probing of societal norms during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The aesthetics values in the *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* highlights the tragedy of human ghost love. Pu Songling (1640-1715) main's idea was to express his lonely and angry feelings because his writings does not adhere to the ancient writing techniques of happy endings instead, he carries the tragic experiences to the end through imperfections (Yifeng, 2022; Zeng, 2022). Pu Songling utilises beautiful characters with most women being fairy tales and ghosts with distinct identities and behaviour in the world. However, in the real world, these characters are non-existent and are purported to come from heaven or hell. We found that Pu Songling visualizes a scenario when a beautiful goblin meets a man who is obsessed and infatuated with her; however, they cannot stay together due to the prejudice of the rituals and bonds. Lastly, these kind women have to face the unjust practices (Y. Liu, 2022; Moyer, 2020). The outstanding work of Pu Songling is situated in the construction of tragic aesthetics where he heavily focused on the destruction of the beauty to reveal darkness and horror existing in the real society. His works embodies tragedies to reveal the beauty of humanity that dominates the people's hearts for centuries and strengthening the aesthetic values of tragedy. The works of Pu Songling has more than 500 stories that occur at the marketplace and closer to the realities of life. Most of his characters were common people whose beauty were soft, delicate and trivial. The emotions aligned with Pu Songling does not eliminate the tragedy of his writings, in contrast, the ordinary and normal sadness have

a greater power. Furthermore, Pu challenged the views and ideas that only individuals who have perfectionism are capable of becoming tragic characters and allowed other people with different characters to become aesthetic figures in tragic fiction. Our analysis showed that Pu Songling embraces gentle brushstrokes to convey personal experiences of his characters throughout their tragedy. Therefore, these trivialities experienced by minor characters can happen to any individual by arousing the physical experiences. In terms of receptive aesthetics related to the audience's feelings, Pu Songling uses fantasy and beauty mood to set a deeper emphasis and meaning of the tragedy (F. Liu, 2014; Songling, 2006; Zheng, 2020). The works does not reveal clear lines and distinction between good and evil because supernatural beings were deemed vengeful and malicious, despite being victims of human injustices. The interactions with supernatural beings allow us to question our destinies based on whether we are guided by a preordained fate or our choices have power in an unpredictable world.

## 5. Conclusion

Our study has examined studies such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Scholars*, *Stories to Instruct the World* and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* to reveal the axiological frameworks, philosophy and aesthetic values in the Ming and Qing dynasties. We found that beauty is a representation of impermanence because it fades away like roses in blooms. *The Scholars* represents satire as a weapon for exposing the hypocrisy and corruption that encompassed the Ming and Qing dynasties. *Stories to Instruct the World* emphasizes morality and everyday ethics based on the Confucian ideals and Buddhists views of moral lessons. Lastly, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* reflects the moral ambiguity and interactions with supernatural encounters. The Ming and Qing dynasties are considered a significant period in the development of Chinese fiction with studies embracing the traditional cultures and highlighting the social and aesthetic values of Chinese culture.

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