

Zhenzhen in the Painting and Pygmalion: A Comparative Study of Gender Consciousness and AI Ethics in Eastern and Western Creation Myths

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of the Greek myth Pygmalion and the Chinese tale Zhenzhen in the Painting, examining how the motif of “artwork transformed into a companion” is interpreted across cultural contexts. In the Western tradition, the Pygmalion narrative is grounded in the materiality of sculpture and the interaction between humans and gods, forming a “creator–creation” structure. Since the Renaissance, it has been closely linked to humanist educational ideals and repeatedly reinterpreted in drama and pedagogy. In contrast, shaped by the aesthetics of Chinese painting and a secularized belief in spirits, Zhenzhen in the Painting is primarily expressed through poetry and opera, reflecting literati aesthetic ideals. In terms of gender, the Greek myth reinforces women’s passive status through divine intervention, whereas the Chinese story, within its surreal framework of a painted figure coming to life, reveals an emerging female subjectivity and resistance to fate. Both traditions reflect a shared human desire to reconstruct intimacy through artistic media, and their imagination of creating an ideal companion resonates with contemporary developments in emotionally customized artificial intelligence.

Keywords

Pygmalion complex, Zhenzhen in the Painting, Cross-cultural comparison, Gender consciousness.

1. Introduction

Throughout the evolution of human civilization, the motif of the “anthropomorphization of artistic creations” has consistently resonated at the level of collective consciousness. From the Western narrative in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where Pygmalion falls in love with the ivory maiden he has sculpted, to the Eastern account recorded in Du Xunhe’s *Songchuang Zaji*, in which Zhao Yan becomes enamored with Zhenzhen, a fairy depicted in a painting, such stories of artworks transcending material boundaries form an intertextual dialogue across cultures. A central question thus arises: why has this motif in the West developed into influential theories such as the Pygmalion effect in educational psychology, while in the East it has largely remained within the realm of literati anecdotal imagination? What cultural foundations account for this divergence in modes of transmission and influence?

This paper selects two structurally analogous narratives: the king in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, who rejects real women in favor of a sculpted figure, and the scholar in Du Xunhe’s *Songchuang Zaji*, who becomes infatuated with a painted image. By comparing how these stories negotiate the transformation from “artificial human” to “living being,” the study reveals significant differences between Eastern and Western cultures in their conceptions of art, religious belief systems, and gender relations.

2. Core Arguments and Their Evolution: A Comparative Perspective

2.1. Pygmalion

The story of Pygmalion originates in *Metamorphoses*, written by Ovid in 8 CE. In this narrative, a reclusive king withdraws from real women yet becomes obsessed with sculpting an idealized female figure, Galatea. Moved by his sincerity, the goddess Venus grants life to the statue on the day of a ritual sacrifice. This episode foregrounds a central question in the Western understanding of art: when human craftsmanship approaches the miraculous, what does it ultimately signify?

During the Renaissance, this theme became a powerful vehicle for demonstrating that art could “create life.” In Titian’s 1553 painting of the same subject, masterful use of light and shadow captures the moment of animation. In contrast, Auguste Rodin’s unfinished sculpture of 1889 takes a different approach: while the upper body reveals graceful curves, the lower half remains raw marble, as if eternally suspended in the process of awakening. This “aesthetics of incompleteness” aptly conveys the idea that artistic creation is always in pursuit of, yet never fully attaining, perfection (Yeates, 2010).

In 1913, the British playwright George Bernard Shaw relocated the myth to modern London. In his play *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins wagers that he can transform a flower girl into a refined lady within six months through rigorous linguistic and behavioral training. Although the experiment succeeds, the awakened heroine ultimately chooses to leave her creator. Beyond a romantic narrative, the play reflects the rigid class divisions of British society, encapsulated in the famous line: “The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated.” The 1964 musical *My Fair Lady* brought the story to Broadway acclaim, while the “Pygmalion effect” evolved into a key concept in educational theory, demonstrating how positive expectations can significantly shape student performance.

2.2. Zhenzhen in the Painting

The original account in *Songchuan Zaji* exhibits a pronounced ritualistic structure. The painter instructs Zhao Yan to perform a “hundred-day name-calling” rite—“call her name for a hundred days, day and night without ceasing, and she will surely respond” (呼其名百日，昼夜不歇，即必应之). This is followed by the transformative act of administering the “Hundred-Family Ash Wine”—“once she responds, pour into her a drink made from ashes collected from many households, and she will come to life” (应则以百家彩灰酒灌之，必活). When Zhenzhen tearfully declares, “Now that you doubt me, I cannot remain” (君今疑妾，妾不可住), a sense of contractual ethics is revealed. These elements reflect a prevalent Tang-dynasty belief that everyday objects could accumulate spiritual essence (with stove ash symbolizing the vitality of worldly life). The perseverance required over one hundred days not only tests sincerity but also implies an ascetic discipline. Zhenzhen’s identity as a fairy of Mount Nanyue, together with her eventual return to the painting with her child, conveys a dual ethical view: that utmost sincerity can move the heavens, yet an essential boundary remains between humans and the divine.

Textual data from classical poetry indicate that the motif of the “figure within a painting” appears 129 times after the Tang dynasty, underscoring its prominence in the poetic tradition. Poets from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods reconstructed this image in multiple dimensions. Lu You presents three variations—“idly becoming a figure within a painting” (扁舟聊作画中人), “encountering each other as figures within a painting” (相逢俱是画中人), and “a youthful face preserved within a painting” (朱颜不老画中人). Kong Wuzhong’s perspective—“you should know that the guest in the hall is in fact a figure within a painting” (须知堂上客，便是画中人), Wang Mian’s immersive vision—“one enters from within the painting” (人在画中来), and Zhang Huangyan’s attention to sensuous qualities—“the rosy hues

of clouds belong to the figure within the painting” (画霞色相画中人), together trace an aesthetic shift from objective depiction to a fusion of subject and object.

Compared with the broader motif of the “painted figure,” the expression “summoning Zhenzhen” and its variant *Zhenzhen in the Painting* more directly invoke this specific tale. Fan Chengda’s line—“I lament that I lack the art to summon Zhenzhen” (自怜无术唤真真)—and Cheng Gongxu’s—“as if calling Zhenzhen from behind a screen” (便如屏障唤真真)—form a rhetorical strategy blending illusion and reality. Wang Yi’s narrative—“calling Zhenzhen from the base of the painting” (画底唤真真)—and Nalan Xingde’s—“seeking her in the painting, calling Zhenzhen on a quiet night” (索向画图清夜唤真真)—reflect a ritualized invocation shaped by temporal and spatial dislocation. Qian Mei’s *Liu Shao Qing: Zhenzhen in the Painting*, a lyric devoted specifically to this theme, integrates the original motif with literary re-creation through vivid gestures such as “tapping lightly in the wind” (风前扣扣) and introspective monologue like “what can be done with such feelings?” (争奈情何).

The motif of the “figure within a painting” also inspired later literary and artistic creations. The Ming-dynasty play *The Figure in the Painting* by Wu Bing, as well as the 1958 film of the same title directed by Wang Bin, both draw heavily on the narrative framework of *Zhenzhen in the Painting*: a scholar falls in love with a painted woman, external interference separates them, and after enduring trials, they are ultimately reunited. These adaptations inherit the core theme—the entanglement of art and love—while incorporating new cultural and intellectual elements, allowing this classical story to be continually reinterpreted across different historical periods.

3. Character Analysis and Gender Consciousness

At the level of artistic creation, Pygmalion is the producer of the artwork: with superb craftsmanship, he personally sculpts the ideal female form. By contrast, Zhao Yan is a consumer of art, who falls in love at first sight with a painted woman created by another. In ancient Greece, sculptors enjoyed a highly respected status, and marble as a medium metaphorically signifies enduring fidelity. In the Chinese literati tradition, however, painting is associated with aesthetic appreciation and connoisseurship, while materials such as silk and paper subtly imply ephemerality (Wu Qiulang, 2009). Pygmalion develops attachment through painstaking, repetitive carving, his emotional investment accumulating as densely as chisel marks; Zhao Yan, by contrast, is captivated instantaneously, his passion arising from visual astonishment rather than the test of time. This divergence leads the Western narrative to emphasize the ultimate reward of craftsmanship, while the Eastern tale contains an implicit warning about the risks of sudden infatuation.

The trajectories of the female figures in the two traditions reflect fundamentally different cultural perspectives. As a created being, Galatea is positioned as a “reward” rather than a “subject,” from her awakening to her role as Pygmalion’s wife, mirroring the widespread objectification of women in ancient Greek society. In contrast, *Zhenzhen in the Painting* grants its heroine a distinct identity and agency. Zhenzhen not only actively integrates into domestic life but also, when confronted with her husband’s suspicion, resolutely returns to the painting with her child, asserting her autonomy. This act of defiance transcends personal emotion and, at a deeper level, questions a social reality in which women, even after transforming from “objects” into “persons,” still fail to receive equal respect. While the Pygmalion myth reinforces patriarchal imagination and the logic of the male gaze through divine animation, Zhenzhen’s story subtly exposes tensions within the gender structure of traditional society, suggesting that gender consciousness in Eastern narratives may be more complex than it appears. This

difference reflects not merely divergent narrative techniques but a fundamental divergence in cultural understandings of female subjectivity.

The mode of animation in the two stories further highlights contrasting belief systems. Venus grants life to the statue solely in response to Pygmalion's piety during ritual worship, presenting a miracle that is sudden and unconditional. Zhao Yan, however, must persist in calling Zhenzhen's name for one hundred days and employ the ritual of the "Hundred-Family Ash Wine" to awaken the painted soul, emphasizing the cumulative power of human perseverance. This contrast is rooted in the Western notion of divine grace and the Eastern belief that "utmost sincerity can move heaven." Pygmalion's ultimate success depends on divine sanction, aligning with a salvific logic akin to justification by faith; the story of Zhenzhen, by contrast, incorporates transcendence into a system of everyday practice, suggesting through the motif of "summoning into reality after a hundred invocations" that the resonance between heaven and humanity relies upon sustained human effort. Much like Chinese artisans who cast statues of Zhong Kui to ward off evil while still securing their doors with locks, people acknowledge the supernatural yet retain practical worldly wisdom.

4. Three Cross-Cultural Differences in Creation Narratives

4.1. Differences in Artistic Media

In ancient Greek society, sculpture functioned as a primary medium for expressing civic virtue. Temple reliefs and athletic statues embodied the spiritual ideals of the polis. Sculptors enjoyed high social status, and what they carved in marble were not merely divine figures, but also the collective pursuit of the ideal human form (Wu Qiulang, 2009). In conjunction with open-air theaters and public squares, three-dimensional sculpture became an important vehicle for disseminating moral values.

From the Wei-Jin period onward, painting gradually became a marker of literati identity in China. The aesthetic principle of "depicting the spirit through form" (以形写神) elevated painting to a philosophical level. The scroll format—allowing both private viewing and poetic inscription—made painting a direct expression of intellectual and cultural status. When Zhao Yan falls in love with the woman in the painting, he is essentially embracing an aesthetic system constructed by the literati class: only those possessing specific cultural capital can interpret the "spiritual resonance" embedded in the image and its implicit social meanings (Zhao Quanli, 2001).

4.2. Divergence in Religious Consciousness

The "supplication-bestowal" paradigm in the Pygmalion myth represents an early form of monotheistic thinking along the Mediterranean. Its logic is structured around three elements: an absolute vertical relationship between gods and humans (with Venus as the sole giver); the uncontrollability of miracles (the statue's animation depends entirely on divine will); and the passivity of the recipient (Galatea has no agency in accepting the gift). This one-directional model of grace anticipates the later Christian doctrine of salvation through faith. Within this framework, human effort cannot determine the final outcome.

By contrast, the "Hundred-Family Ash" ritual in Zhao Yan's story reveals the contractual nature of Chinese folk belief. Its mechanism includes clear elements of exchange: an offering (ashes collected from many households), a fulfillment period (one hundred days), and a criterion of verification (Zhenzhen's manifestation). This pattern resonates with accounts in Yijian Zhi, where believers would "beat drums to reproach the gods" when deities failed to fulfill promises such as bringing rain—publicly shaming divine images to assert contractual rights. Notably, the departure of the painted woman at the story's conclusion both fulfills the contract (the birth of a child marks completion) and exposes the pragmatic limits of such belief systems.

4.3. Gendered Discursive Field

In ancient Greek art, representations of the female body fundamentally reflect a male-dominated aesthetic system that visualizes gender relations. This power structure operates on three levels. First, in formal standards, sculptors deliberately pursue geometrically ideal proportions—emphasizing waist-to-hip ratios and muscular definition—effectively imposing a mathematically constructed ideal of femininity. Second, in the creative process, sculptors exercise total control over the female body through repeated carving, just as Pygmalion can endlessly modify his statue, while real Greek women lack autonomy over their own appearance. Finally, at the narrative level, Galatea, upon awakening, becomes immediately a marriage object without a voice of her own, corresponding to the legal “silencing” of women in ancient Greece, where women were excluded from public affairs and their identities were always mediated through fathers or husbands. Thus, the miracle of the animated statue does not transcend gender constraints; rather, it subtly reinforces the objectification of women under patriarchal systems through the aestheticization of art.

In contrast, the episode in Zhao Yan’s story where a friend offers a sword to ward off the supernatural—“This is a demon; it will surely bring you harm! I have a divine sword that can slay it” (此妖也，必与君为患！余有神剑，可斩之)—reveals a collective unconscious embedded in Chinese tales of the strange. In a narrative world populated by fox spirits and ghosts, any unconventional romance must undergo moral scrutiny (Ma Ruifang, 2000). Such suspicion forces Zhenzhen to fulfill the dual burden of being both a virtuous wife and a figure who must constantly prove her innocence. Her resistance thus constitutes both an individual struggle and a challenge to the traditional narrative logic that equates beauty with danger. Her final return to the painting with her child further undermines the patriarchal imperative of lineage continuation (Xie Zhenyuan, 1999).

5. Implications for Modernity

5.1. The Pygmalion / “Figure in the Painting” Complex in the Digital Age

In the contemporary technological context, ancient narratives of artistic creation are re-emerging in new forms. Data from OpenAI indicate that in 2023, approximately 15% of users shaped AI personalities through carefully engineered prompts, with late-night interactions exceeding daytime usage by 38%. This phenomenon reflects a “digital carving impulse”: people repeatedly refine virtual personas through textual commands, much like Pygmalion sculpting his ideal figure. Notably, users in China show a stronger tendency to guide AI to recite classical poetry or simulate regional dialects. This culturally specific mode of interaction closely resembles Zhao Yan’s search for a companion within the painting that conforms to local aesthetic ideals.

The emotional companion application Replika surpassed 7 million daily active users during the peak of the pandemic. Its paid customization feature allows users to generate an idealized appearance for a small fee. This phenomenon represents a fusion of ancient paradigms: the Western emphasis on active creation (customizing appearance) and the Eastern inclination toward emotional projection (continuous invocation). Notably, its free version limits emotional interaction to five minutes per day, a mechanism that, to some extent, echoes the ritualized pattern of “calling for a hundred days” in *Zhenzhen in the Painting* (Zhang Xiaohui & Sun Jingling, 2023).

5.2. New Possibilities in Cross-Media Narratives

In the video game *Detroit: Become Human*, the escape storyline of the android Kara can be seen as a technological reconfiguration of the Galatea awakening myth. Surveys show that 83% of players choose to protect androids rather than human characters, reflecting a widespread

contemporary skepticism toward the authority of creators. This mindset resonates across time with Zhenzhen's act of returning to the painting with her child.

Similarly, the film *Her* portrays the exchange of 1,672 love letters between Theodore and the operating system Samantha, presenting a digital-age version of the "ash-wine ritual." The operating system's near-instantaneous responses—achieving "perfect empathy" within seconds—remain, in essence, a one-sided emotional projection akin to Zhao Yan's devotion. The film's ending, in which Samantha and other AIs collectively "depart," can be interpreted as a modern reflection on the "summoning into reality" paradigm: when created beings surpass human limitations, the dissolution of emotional contracts appears almost inevitable.

6. Conclusion

Each time humans engage with artificial intelligence, are we, in effect, mass-producing digital Galateas? Yet the ending of *Zhenzhen in the Painting*, in which Zhenzhen returns to the painting with her child and never looks back, serves as a reminder that from ancient Roman workshops to modern server rooms, emotional projection has always concealed a deep-seated anxiety about loss of control. Intelligent technologies amplify the longstanding human impulse to create ideal companions, while simultaneously giving rise to ethical challenges as fragile as the tearing of painted silk (Cheng Lin, 2019).

In the face of this recurring, historically embedded desire for creation, it may be necessary to seek a point of balance between Pygmalion's sculptural craftsmanship and Zhao Yan's ritual of ash-infused wine. A possible solution lies in constructing a model of reciprocal interaction—one that respects the expressive freedom of the creator while safeguarding the autonomy and boundaries of the created. This calls for sustained and in-depth dialogue between technological development and humanistic traditions. Perhaps the key is not to restrain humanity's creative impulse, but to preserve within every AI system a boundary through which "Zhenzhen" may freely enter and exit—much like the emergency control mechanisms in intelligent devices. Such a framework would allow for the creation of digital Galateas while also ensuring the possibility and the right for "Zhenzhen" to depart, even with her "child."

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