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## The Narrative Power of Literary Painting Inscriptions: A Semiotic Reconstruction from the “Separation of Text and Image” to the “Integration of Text and Image”

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### Abstract

*This study focuses on the inscriptions on literati paintings from the Song-Yuan to Ming-Qing periods. Drawing on semiotic theory, it delves into the evolution of narrative power inherent in these inscriptions, tracing their development from a state of “separation of text and image” to one of “integration of text and image.” Through a comparative analysis of the visual structures of supplementary inscriptions, such as the complementary poem in Su Shi's *Withered Tree and Strange Rock*, and intrusive inscriptions, exemplified by the extensive colophon in Bada Shanren's *Riverbank with Flowers*, this research reveals how the literati class leveraged a triple mechanism—spatial occupation by text, semantic strategies, and semiotic interaction—to profoundly embed the linguistic system into the generation of meaning in the image. The findings indicate that during the “separate” form of the Song-Yuan period, inscriptions, serving as appendages to the image, reinforced literati discursive power by acting as an “authority of connoisseurship.” In contrast, during the transitional “integrated” practices of the Ming-Qing period, inscriptions ascended to become dominant compositional elements. Through the semiotic substitution of image by text and the reconstruction of narrative temporality, language achieved control over visual narration. The essence of the power wielded by inscriptions lies in the transformation of literati cultural capital into symbolic power, with the “integrated” form marking the establishment of the “text-dominant-over-image” narrative paradigm in Chinese art history. The study concludes that the semiotic reconstruction of inscriptions not only deconstructs the aesthetic facade of the traditional concept of “common origin of calligraphy and painting” but also unveils the hidden disciplinary role of linguistic structures in shaping subjectivity within art-historical writing, thereby offering a paradigmatic case for reflecting on cross-media narrative power.*

**Keywords:** *Literati Painting Inscriptions; Integration of Text and Image; Narrative Power; Semiotic Reconstruction; Construction of Cultural Power*

## 1. Introduction

### (1) Research Background and Significance

As a significant school of traditional Chinese painting, literati painting is distinguished from court academy painting and folk painting by, among other features, the extensive use of inscriptions. Inscriptions serve not only as a vital medium for literati painters to express individuality and convey emotions but also as a key method for artistic exchange and the construction of cultural identity. From the perspective of art historical development, the evolution of inscriptions is closely intertwined with the rise and fall of literati painting. The style and content of inscriptions in different periods reflect the artistic trends and socio-cultural ethos of their time. For instance, with the rise of Yuan dynasty literati painting, inscriptions began to become an integral component of the pictorial composition, documenting the painter's exploration of aesthetic pursuits such as “scholarly spirit” (shiqi) and “untrammelled class” (yipin). During the Ming and Qing periods, inscription forms became more diverse and their integration with the image more intimate, marking a sign of the maturation of literati painting. Therefore, the study of literati painting inscriptions constitutes a crucial pathway for tracing the developmental trajectory of Chinese art history and gaining insight into the evolution of literati aesthetic taste.

The research value of studying the progression from the “separation of text and image” to the “integration of text and image” lies in the fact that this evolution is not merely a formal transition but a necessary product of the internal logic of literati painting's development, rich in cultural implications. In the “separation” phase, language and image fulfilled their respective roles, reflecting the early literati painting's reverence for the intrinsic value of the image and its positioning of language in a supplementary function. In contrast, the “integration” phase embodies the literati's attempt to transcend the limitations of pictorial expression through a deep fusion of language and image, thereby achieving more complex signification. Investigating this progression helps to unveil the shifting relationship between “idea/intent” (yi) and “form/image” (xiang) within literati painting and to understand the concrete pathways through which the traditional Chinese artistic concept of “emphasizing idea over form” (zhong yi qing xing) was practiced. Concurrently, this process also reflects the gradual strengthening of the literati class's discursive power in the artistic realm, providing a paradigmatic case for studying the interactive relationship between socio-culture and artistic development.

The significance of applying semiotic theory to this research lies in semiotics' focus on analyzing the signifier, the signified, and the relationships within and between sign systems. This provides a precise analytical tool for interpreting the complex interactions between language and image in literati painting inscriptions. Traditional studies, often approaching inscriptions from literary or art stylistic perspectives, have struggled to delve deeply into the mechanisms of power operation within their meaning production. Semiotics, however, can assist us in: first, analyzing how the linguistic signs of inscriptions construct specific signifieds (e.g., literati identity, aesthetic taste) through the selection of signifiers (e.g., calligraphic style, diction); second, exploring the referential relationships between image signs and linguistic signs, such as how language anchors the meaning of the image and how the image expands the connotations of language; third, revealing the power dynamics between the two within the sign system—i.e., which type

of sign dominates meaning production and how this dominance is achieved through semiotic interaction. Through a semiotic lens, we can move beyond descriptive accounts of the surface phenomena of inscriptions to probe the core of their meaning generation, thereby offering novel theoretical support for understanding the narrative power of literati painting.

### (2) Literature Review

#### 1. Current Research Status on Inscriptions in Literati Painting

Research on inscriptions in Chinese literati painting boasts a long history and remarkable achievements. In terms of ancient texts, numerous historical records contain scattered yet valuable documentation of inscriptions. These include Notes on *Famous Paintings Through the Ages*<sup>1</sup>, *Xuanhe Painting Catalogue*<sup>2</sup>, *Supplementary Discussions from the Eastern Lodge*<sup>3</sup> and *Record of Famous Paintings of the Tang Dynasty*<sup>4</sup>. Though fragmentary, these materials have laid a solid documentary foundation for scholarly inquiry. In the modern and contemporary periods, scholars such as Fu Baoshi in *An Outline History of the Evolution of Chinese Painting* and Pan Tianshou in *A Study of Inscriptions on Chinese Paintings* undertook in-depth explorations of the artistic value of inscriptions. Their work elevated the study from textual compilation to aesthetic and conceptual analysis, thereby broadening both the depth and scope of the field. In recent times, comprehensive collections compiled by scholars, such as *Selected Writings and Inscriptions on Painting Through Chinese History*, *A Collection of Huang Binhong's Discourses on Painting*, *Essential Discourses on Painting by Shi Hu*, and *A Collection of Rao Zongyi's Inscriptions on Painting and Calligraphy*, have systematically integrated resources, greatly facilitating research. However, existing studies have predominantly focused on textual compilation and interpretive evaluation. There remains a relative lack of meticulous and profound exploration into the evolving logic of inscriptions across different historical contexts and their interactive relationship with the broader ecology of literati painting, indicating an area ripe for further expansion in subsequent research.

Within specialized studies on literati painting inscriptions, scholars have conducted significant and multidimensional investigations. First, from a literary perspective, the analysis of poetic forms and literary within inscriptions represents a prominent focus, as seen in studies of the inscribed poems by Su Shi and Huang Tingjian. For instance, in *A Study of Poetic Imagery in Ancient Landscape Night Scenes*, Zhou Songzhu takes the relationship between ink techniques for night scenes in Song Dynasty painting and poetic imagery as a main thread, exploring the connotations, extensions, and poetic characteristics of constructed nocturnal imagery, extending the inquiry to the influence of dusk and night landscapes in Song Dynasty painting—a novel and insightful perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Yanyuan. (Annotated and translated by Zhu Heping). *Lidai Minghua Ji*[M]. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Jianhua. *Xuanhe Huapu*[M]. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Huang Bosi. *Songben Dongguan Yulun*[M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Xie Wei. *Zhongguo Huaxue Zhuzuo Kaolu · Tangchao Minghua Lu*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 1998.

Similarly, Zhou Yuwen's *A Study of Inscriptions on Landscape Paintings of the Song and Yuan Dynasties* focuses on Song-Yuan landscape inscriptions, examining their compositional features, text-image relationships, and the connection between literati writing and self-identity, offering a multifaceted perspective for understanding inscriptions of that era. Nevertheless, current research in this area tends to concentrate on specific periods or canonical painters. Comparative studies on the literary characteristics of inscriptions across different geographical regions and stylistic schools remain relatively underdeveloped, warranting further expansion and refinement.

Second, research from an art-historical perspective, focusing on the relationship between literati painting inscriptions and the evolution of painting schools and styles, holds considerable value. For example, in *A Study of the Integration of Poetry and Painting in the Wu School*, Wang Di reveals how the integration of poetry and painting in the Wu region led to a convergence in their underlying theory and aesthetics, profoundly influencing the developmental trajectories of both poetry and painting during the Ming and Qing dynasties, thereby highlighting the crucial role of inscriptions in the artistic synthesis within painting schools. Xue Feng, in *On the Integration of Poetry and Painting by the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou*, points out that the *Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* merged their distinctive painting style with socially conscious poetry, opening new avenues for literati painting to reflect contemporary reality, demonstrating the function of inscriptions in conveying social content. However, existing studies often focus on major, well-established schools. Discussion regarding the relationship between inscriptions and style in emerging or less influential schools remains insufficient, suggesting that future research could productively broaden its scope to enrich this domain.

Interpreting literati painting inscriptions from a cultural perspective can deeply excavate the rich connotations they embody. In *A Study of Social Interactions among Song Dynasty Scholar-Officials Through Inscriptions on Painting and Calligraphy*, Chen Zhuoxiao takes the social interactions facilitated by inscriptions among Song Dynasty scholar-officials as a point of departure, revealing that such interactions were not only a significant part of their lives but also reflected the group's spiritual outlook and intellectual characteristics, offering a unique lens into Song Dynasty social history. In *Examining Wang Wenzhi's Calligraphic Thought of "Discussing Calligraphy Through Chan" from the Kuaiyutang Inscriptions*, Xu Liu, against the backdrop of Qing Dynasty culture, notes that Wang Wenzhi championed the "model-book" tradition (tiexue) amidst a prevailing esteem for stele inscriptions, integrating Chan (Zen) principles into calligraphic aesthetics and criticism, with the *Kuaiyutang Inscriptions* centrally embodying his philosophy of "discussing calligraphy through Chan." Currently, however, such research often concentrates on specific eras or individuals. Comprehensive studies examining the cultural phenomena reflected in inscriptions across different regions and diverse cultural contexts remain relatively scarce, indicating a promising direction for future exploration.

International research on literati painting inscriptions, predominantly led by European and American scholars, often situates the subject within cross-cultural contexts for deeper examination. James Cahill, in his collected works and studies such as *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, utilizes statements from inscriptions like Dong Qichang's "brush and ink should follow the times" to

analyze artistic psychology in conjunction with painting styles, establishing a theoretical framework for analyzing inscriptions in cross-cultural contexts. He also pays attention to the "narrative function" of inscriptions, viewing them as key clues to understanding painterly intent. Wen C. Fong, in *Images of the Mind: Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting at The Art Museum*<sup>5</sup>, Princeton University, proposes a "method of structural analysis," revealing the intertextual relationship between inscriptions and images and broadening methodological approaches. Susan Bush, in *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)*<sup>6</sup>, systematically traces the evolution of literati painting theory from the Northern Song to the Ming Dynasty. Taking "identity and style" as a central thread, she analyzes core propositions by figures like Su Shi and Dong Qichang to demonstrate the intertextuality between poetic forms in inscriptions and the paintings, showcasing the significant role of inscriptions in the formation of literati painting's aesthetic principles.

Some scholars have expanded the dimensions of inscription research through cross-cultural comparison. Heike Kotzenberg, in *Pictures and Inscriptions: Chinese Painting in the Ming Dynasty*, uses Ming Dynasty literati painting as a case study to analyze the intertextuality between poetry, allusions, and images in inscriptions. She notes that Western "cartouches" or inscriptions often served religious narratives, whereas Chinese literati painting inscriptions, through the fusion of poetic forms and pictorial, constructed a unique aesthetic system integrating "poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal" (shi shu hua yin), highlighting differences in the relationship between text and image in Eastern and Western traditions. Wen Yin, in *A Comparative Study of Subject Matter in Chinese and Western Traditional Painting*, contrasts the subject matter of Chinese and Western painting, finding Chinese literati painting subjects to be more symbolic and Western subjects more representational. Furthermore, literati painting transforms symbolic meaning into visual language through inscriptions, whereas Western painting relies on color and light to create a sense of realism. Such studies provide a cross-cultural perspective for understanding literati painting inscriptions, yet there remains room for further expansion in the depth and breadth of these comparative analyses.

## 2. Status of Semiotic Applications in Art Research

The application of semiotics in art research began in the mid-20th century. Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image*<sup>7</sup> pioneered the use of semiotics for analyzing visual images. His proposed "three levels of meaning in the image" (informational, symbolic, and cultural) provided a theoretical framework for interpreting image signs. In painting studies, although Erwin Panofsky's iconological theory is not strictly semiotic, its approach to excavating the

<sup>5</sup> Fang Wen. *Images of the Mind: A Study of the Stylistic and Structural Analysis of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy*[M]. Shaanxi: Shaanxi People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Bush. *Chinese Literati on Painting: From Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Chi-chang (1555-1636)*[M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Wen C. Fong. *Images of the Mind: Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting at The Art Museum, Princeton University*[M]. Shaanxi: Shaanxi People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.

“intrinsic meaning” of images shares common ground with semiotic thought.

In recent years, domestic scholars have also begun to apply semiotics to Chinese art research. Its applications can be categorized into several areas: first, analyzing image symbols in traditional painting, such as interpreting the symbolic meanings of elements like “pine,” “rock,” and “cloud” in landscape painting; second, exploring the sign system in calligraphic art, such as analyzing the relationship between the signifier characteristics of Chinese characters and calligraphic styles; and third, attempting to analyze the text-image relationship, for instance, through a semiotic reading of the interplay between text and image in New Year pictures. However, the systematic application of semiotics to the study of literati painting inscriptions remains relatively scarce. Most existing research in this specific area is confined to analyzing individual signs, lacking in-depth exploration into the interactive relationships between linguistic and image signs and the power dynamics operating within them.

### 3. Research Gaps and the Entry Point of This Study

Current research exhibits three primary limitations. First, there is a lack of holistic grasp of the “text-image relationship.” Most studies investigate the linguistic content of inscriptions or their formal characteristics within the image in isolation, neglecting their synergistic interplay and power dynamics in the process of meaning generation. Second, insufficient attention has been paid to the narrative power of inscriptions. The existing literature has not fully revealed how the literati, through inscriptions, achieved control over the meaning of the image and the underlying cultural logic of this control. Third, the application of semiotics has been limited. Current studies predominantly borrow basic semiotic concepts for descriptive purposes, failing to construct a systematic analytical framework to interpret the semiotic reconstruction process underlying the transition from the “separation of text and image” to the “integration of text and image” in inscriptions.

Based on this analysis, the present study adopts semiotic theory as its core analytical tool. It focuses on the evolutionary process of literati painting inscriptions from the Song-Yuan to the Ming-Qing periods, specifically tracing the shift from the “separation of text and image” to their “integration.” By conducting an in-depth analysis of the interactive mechanisms between linguistic and visual signs within this process, this research aims to elucidate the trajectory of the evolving narrative power inherent in inscriptions, thereby addressing the gaps identified in the current scholarly landscape.

#### (3) Research Object and Scope

Regarding the temporal scope, the period from the Song-Yuan to the Ming-Qing dynasties (960-1911) is selected. This era represents the critical phase of the rise, development, and maturation of literati painting. During this time, inscriptions underwent an evolutionary process from initial application to a highly sophisticated state, clearly demonstrating the transition from the “separation of text and image” to their “integration.” The primary object of this study is the inscriptions created by literati painters on their own paintings or added by others during this period. Specific forms include inscribed poems (tishi), inscribed texts (tiwen), and seal impressions with accompanying text (kuanshi). The authors of these inscriptions encompass not only the original creators of the paintings but also later literati, collectors, and connoisseurs who added inscriptions during the work's circulation. These later inscriptions engage in a cross-temporal

dialogue with the original work, collectively constructing a network of meaning for literati painting inscriptions. Excluded from the scope are inscriptions by court academy painters and folk painters, as well as purely documentary ownership records lacking artistic insight or emotional expression.

Selected representative cases include Su Shi's Withered Tree and Strange Rock, Bada Shanren's Riverbank with Flowers, Zhao Mengfu's colophon on Qian Xuan's Eight Flowers, and relevant handscrolls associated with Shi Tao's Kugua Heshang's Remarks on Painting, detailed as follows:

Su Shi's Withered Tree and Strange Rock. This work is a representative piece of Northern Song literati painting, depicting a gnarled withered tree and rugged strange rocks. In the upper left corner, Su Shi's self-inscribed poem reads: “My parched innards, with wine, sprout sharp edges; / My lungs and liver, jagged, give birth to bamboo and stone. “A dense thicket yearning to emerge cannot be restrained. I paint it on the snow - white wall of your home.” The poem is placed in a corner of the composition. It is short in length, representing a typical “supplementary” or “space - filling” inscription. From a semiotic perspective, the linguistic signs of the poem and the visual signs of the image point towards relatively independent signifieds. Their connection is loose, embodying the characteristics of the “separation of text and image.”

Bada Shanren's Riverbank with Flowers. This is a Qing dynasty long handscroll depicting a riverbank scene with blooming lotuses. Interspersed within the image is Bada Shanren's extended inscribed poem, over a hundred characters long, written in semi-cursive script (xingcao). The calligraphy varies in size and is interwoven with the imagery, occupying nearly one-third of the pictorial space, constituting an “intrusive long colophon.” The content of the poem is closely related to the lotus imagery, e.g., “Riverbank flowers, a thousand petals; / The Sixth Lad buys wine without cease.” Here, the linguistic signs and the image signs refer to each other, forming a deeply integrated sign system, making it a classic example of the “integration of text and image.”

Zhao Mengfu's Colophon on Qian Xuan's Eight Flowers. Zhao Mengfu added a colophon to Qian Xuan's Eight Flowers, praising its “elegant style and exquisite brushwork” and expounding on the concept of the “common origin of calligraphy and painting” (shuhua tongyuan). Although this inscription was added by a later individual, it exemplifies the Song-Yuan literati practice of using inscriptions to establish connoisseurial standards. It is a significant case of inscriptions reinforcing literati discursive authority within the “separated” form.

Shi Tao's Handscrolls Related to Kugua Heshang's Remarks on Painting. In his handscroll works, such as Drafting from All the Strange Peaks, Shi Tao often alternated inscribed painting poems with images. The poems not only interpret the image content but also guide the viewer's reading sequence. Through the reconstruction of narrative temporality, they achieve control over visual narration, representing a Ming-Qing example of language manipulating the visual within the “integrated” form.

#### (4) Research Methodology and Approach

##### 1. Application of Semiotic Theory (Figure.1)

Analysis of Signifier and Signified: This involves the deconstruction of signifiers in both the linguistic signs of inscriptions (text, calligraphic style, length) and the visual signs of

the image (line, color, composition), followed by an analysis of their respective signified meanings. For instance, it examines how the signifier form of the term “white eye” (baiyan) in Bada Shanren’s inscription points to its signified, and explores how the lines (signifiers) of the fish and bird imagery in his paintings correspond to the signified of the “white eye” inscribed poem.

Analysis of Interaction within the Sign System. This investigates the interrelationships between linguistic and visual signs within the sign system, specifically encompassing: complementary relationships, conflictual relationships, and dominant relationships. For example, it analyzes the complementary relationship between

the inscribed poem and the image in Su Shi’s Withered Tree and Strange Rock, as well as the dominant relationship of Bada Shanren’s inscription over the image.

Semiotic Analysis of Power: Drawing on Foucault’s theory of power, this approach treats the narrative power of inscriptions as a form of symbolic power. It analyzes how this power achieves the construction and control of meaning through the selection, combination, and dissemination of signs. For instance, it investigates how the literati, through the use of specific inscription language, constructed aesthetic standards, thereby exerting control over the meaning of painting.

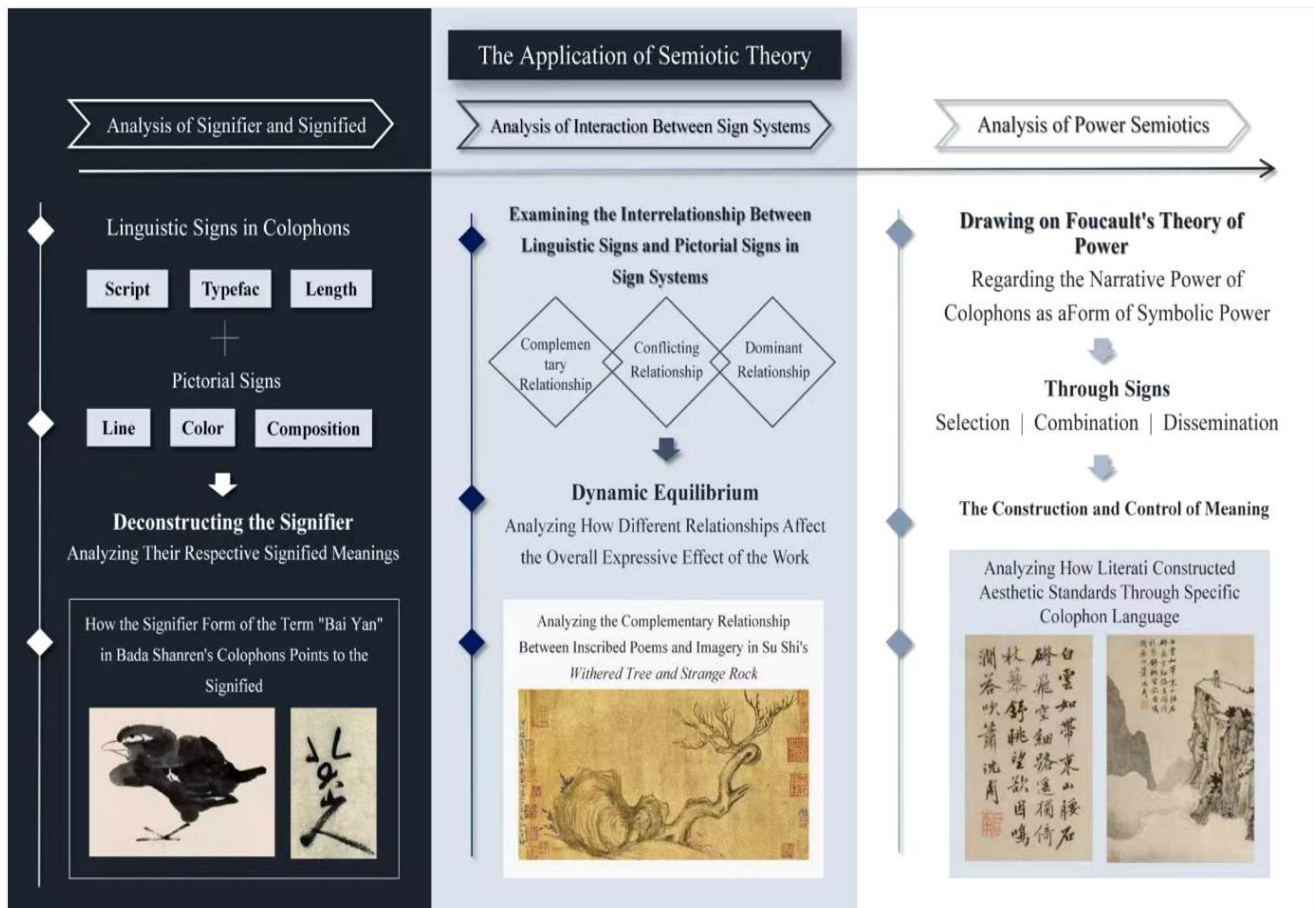


Figure.1 The Application of Semiotic Theory

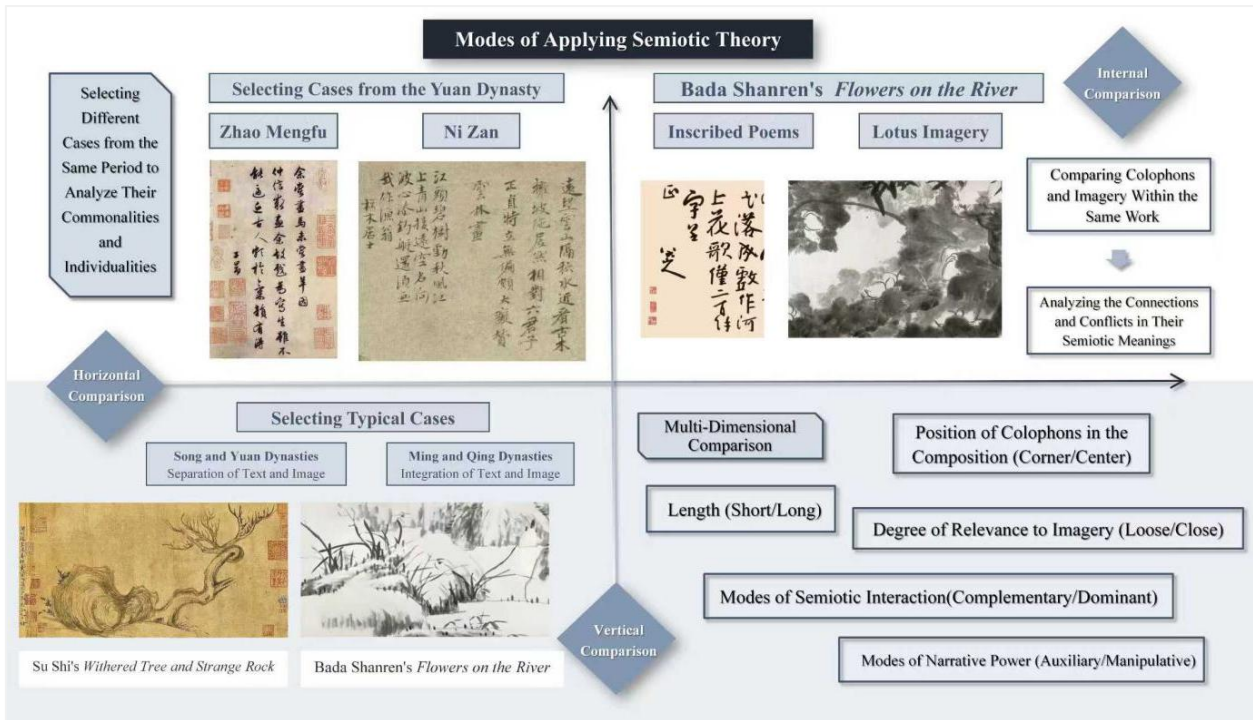
(Source: Created by the author)

## 2. Implementation Approach of Comparative Research Method (Figure.2)

Horizontal Comparison: Select representative cases of the “separation of text and image” from the Song-Yuan periods and the “integration of text and image” from the Ming-Qing periods. Comparisons will be conducted across the following dimensions: the position of the inscription within the composition (peripheral/central); length (brief/extensive); degree of connection to the image (loose/tight); mode of semiotic interaction (complementary/dominant); and manifestation of narrative power (auxiliary/controlling). For example, a horizontal comparison between Su Shi’s Withered Tree and Strange Rock and Bada Shanren’s Riverbank with Flowers will be conducted to reveal differences in the narrative power of inscriptions across the two periods.

Longitudinal Comparison: Within the same period, select inscription cases from different painters to analyze their commonalities and individual characteristics. For instance, within the Yuan dynasty, inscriptions by Zhao Mengfu and Ni Zan can be compared to examine similarities and differences in their methods of reinforcing literati discursive authority. Within the Qing dynasty, inscriptions by Bada Shanren and Shi Tao can be analyzed to discern their distinct approaches (semiotic substitution/temporal restructuring) in practicing the “integration of text and image.”

Internal Case Comparison: Conduct a comparison between the inscription(s) and the image within a single artwork to analyze the correlation and conflict of their semiotic meanings. For example, analyzing the semiotic interaction between a specific segment of the inscribed poem and its corresponding lotus imagery in Bada Shanren’s Riverbank with Flowers can reveal how language guides the interpretation of the image’s meaning.



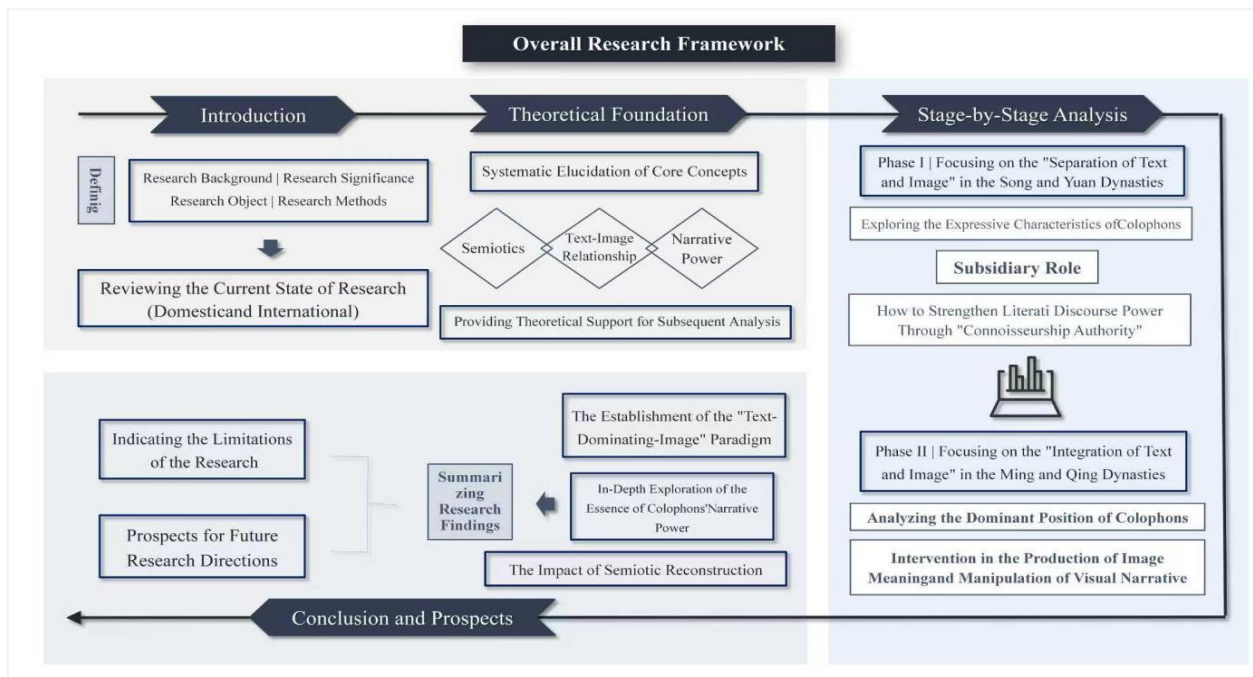
**Figure.2 Implementation Pathways of Comparative Research Method**

(Source: Created by the author)

**3. Overall Research Framework (Figure.3)**

First, the Introduction section will clarify the research background, significance, object, and methodology, review the current status of domestic and international research, and establish the study's entry point. Second, the Theoretical Foundation section will systematically explain the core concepts of semiotic theory, text-image relationship theory, and narrative power theory, providing theoretical support for subsequent analysis. Third, a phased analysis will be conducted: Stage One will focus on the "separation of text and image" during the Song-Yuan periods, exploring the

representational features of inscriptions, their auxiliary role, and how they reinforced literati discursive power by acting as an "authority of connoisseurship." Stage Two will concentrate on the "integration of text and image" during the Ming-Qing periods, analyzing the dominant status of inscriptions, their intervention in the production of the image's meaning, and their control over visual narration. Subsequently, the study will delve into the essence of the narrative power of inscriptions, the establishment of the "text-dominant-over-image" paradigm, and the impact of its semiotic reconstruction. Finally, in the Conclusion and Outlook section, the research findings will be summarized, the study's limitations will be pointed out, and directions for future research will be proposed.



**Figure.3 Overall Research Framework**

(Source: Created by the author)

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### (1) Fundamental Concepts of Semiotics

#### 1. Signifier and Signified

The signifier, as the material carrier of a sign, is the perceivable form. For a linguistic sign, the signifier encompasses elements such as the character's form and pronunciation; for a visual sign, the signifier includes aspects like line, color, shape, and composition. The signified is the concept, meaning, or emotion to which the sign points. It constitutes the sign's ideational or affective content. The depicted image of a plum blossom in the painting serves as the signifier of a visual sign, and its signified also includes the object "plum blossom" and its associated symbolic meanings. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Their association is not natural or necessary but is established by convention within a specific cultural context. This arbitrariness provides space for the construction of meaning. Literati painters precisely achieve the expression of meaning through the selection and utilization of signifiers, thereby endowing signs with specific signifieds.

#### 2. Sign System and Interaction

A sign system is an organic whole constituted by a series of interrelated and interacting signs. Each sign occupies a specific position and function within the system. The meaning of a sign depends not only on its own signifier and signified but also on its relationship with other signs in the system. The linguistic signs

(inscriptions) and visual signs (painting) in literati painting together constitute a complex sign system. Within this system, the interaction between linguistic and visual signs is primarily manifested in the following aspects: Firstly, elucidation and being elucidated: Linguistic signs can explain or interpret the meaning of visual signs; for example, an inscription might state the creative context or thematic idea of the image. Secondly, extension and expansion: Visual signs can transform the abstract meaning of linguistic signs into concrete visual imagery, making the connotation of language more directly perceptible; for instance, an inscription featuring "solitary pine" is extended through the image of a tall, straight pine tree in the painting. Thirdly, complementation and reinforcement: Each expresses meanings difficult for the other to convey, jointly constructing a richer overall meaning; for example, the emotion expressed in an inscribed poem and the artistic conception depicted in the image complement each other, enhancing the painting's evocative power. Fourthly, conflict and tension: When the signifieds of linguistic and visual signs are inconsistent, a conflict of meaning arises, provoking the viewer's contemplation and deepening the work's complexity; for instance, the tension formed between the endearing imagery of fish and birds in Bada Shanren's paintings and the resentment conveyed by the inscribed poem mentioning "white eyes" (Fig.4). This semiotic interaction is the core mechanism for meaning production in literati painting and is also a crucial pathway through which the narrative power of inscriptions is realized.



Figure.4 Overall Research Framework Fish and Bird Imagery with Bai Yan (White Eyes) Inscriptions in Bada Shanren's Paintings

(Source: Created by the author)

#### (2) Text-Image Relationship Theory

##### 1. The Connotation of the Separation of Text and Image

The "separation of text and image" refers to a state where linguistic signs and visual signs exhibit relative independence in meaning expression. Each constructs a relatively self-contained system of meaning, and the connection between the two is loose, lacking a dominant or dependent relationship of one over the other. Within this relationship, the primary function of linguistic signs lies in providing supplementary explanation for visual signs, rather than participating in the core construction of the image's meaning. For

example, in some landscape paintings from the Song and Yuan periods, the painter might inscribe the time, location, or brief impressions in a corner of the composition, such as "Painted in the autumn of a certain year at Such-and-Such Mountain Studio." In such inscriptions, the connection between the signified of the linguistic signs and the signified of the visual signs is weak. Viewers can grasp the primary meaning of the image based on the visual composition itself, even without reading the inscription. The essence of the "separation of text and image" lies in recognizing the independent capacity of visual signs for meaning generation. Linguistic signs function merely as auxiliary tools, without interfering with the image's autonomous expression. This relationship reflects the early literati painting's reverence for the intrinsic value of the image and its initial exploration of "poetry within painting" (hua zhong you shi). At this stage, the "poetry" (language) primarily served as an external supplement to the

“painting” (image), rather than constituting an intrinsic, organic component.

## 2. Characteristics of the Integration of Text and Image

The “integration of text and image” refers to a state where linguistic signs and visual signs are deeply fused and interdependent, jointly participating in the generation and construction of meaning to form an inseparable organic whole. Within this relationship, linguistic signs are no longer merely appendages to visual signs but participate equally, or even dominantly, alongside visual signs in meaning expression. Their signifieds are interwoven and mutually permeating, together constituting a more complex and richer network of meaning. Its characteristics are primarily manifested as follows: First, spatial integration: Inscriptions are no longer confined to the corners of the composition.

### (3) Narrative Power Theory

Narrative power refers to the capacity of the narrator, during the narrative process, to construct and control the meaning of the narrative object through the selection of narrative content, narrative mode, and narrative perspective, thereby influencing the audience's cognition and understanding. Within the realm of art, narrative power manifests as the artist's use of artistic language, form, and signs to shape and convey the meaning of the artwork, guiding the audience's aesthetic experience and interpretation of meaning. Through choices in subject matter, compositional arrangement, and the application of signs, artists express their own thoughts, emotions, and values, thereby realizing their narrative power within the artwork.

## 3. The Narrative Power of Inscriptions under the “Separation of Text and Image” Paradigm in the Song-Yuan Stage

### (1) Characteristics of the “Separation of Text and Image”

In literati paintings of the Song and Yuan periods, inscriptions were typically placed in the corners or blank areas of the composition, locations that did not interfere with the presentation of the main image. They were relatively brief in length, often consisting of one or two poems or short colophons. The position and brevity of these inscriptions indicate their secondary status within the pictorial space, adhering to the principle of not disrupting the integrity of the image. The meaning expressed in the inscription was relatively independent of the image. Its content often consisted of the painter's reflections on the painted subject, their state of mind during creation, or general artistic views, showing a weak connection to the specific content of the image. The image itself conveyed its primary meaning through its own visual elements, allowing viewers to interpret the image independently, without relying on the inscription.

### (2) The Role of Inscriptions as Supplements to the Image

Inscriptions provided supplementary explanations for content that was difficult to express solely through the visual elements of the image, such as the painting's creative background, thematic ideas, and the artist's intent. Through these additions, viewers could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the image's meaning. The style and calligraphy of the inscription typically harmonized with the artistic style of the image, aiming to enhance the overall aesthetic appeal of the painting. The purpose of the inscription was to better complement the image, allowing the artistic value of the image to be more fully realized, rather than to dominate it. From

the perspective of cultural transmission, inscriptions served as a key, unlocking for later generations the stories behind the creation of the painting. Many works of art, weathered by time, risk having the specific circumstances of their creation and the artist's mindset buried by history without the documentation provided by inscriptions. For instance, some painters would mention in their inscriptions the influence of contemporary social customs or artistic trends on their work, which holds significant value for studying the cultural context and artistic development of that period.

### (3) Reinforcing Literati Discursive Power through the “Authority of Connoisseurship”

Su Shi's space-filling poem inscribed on Withered Tree and Strange Rock (Fig. 5), concise in diction yet recondite in meaning, expresses his unique aesthetic appreciation for the withered tree and strange rock. As a leading figure in both literary and artistic circles of his time, Su Shi's inscribed poem carried authority. His judgment and aesthetic inclinations regarding the painting influenced contemporary and later appraisals of the work, thereby reinforcing the discursive power of literati within the realm of art connoisseurship. Zhao Mengfu's colophon on Qian Xuan's Eight Flowers (Fig. 6) not only highly affirmed the artistic value of the painting but also expounded his own painting philosophy. Leveraging his profound artistic attainment and elevated social status, Zhao Mengfu, through his inscription, established the criteria for appreciating this work, further solidifying the authoritative position of literati in painting connoisseurship and enhancing their discursive power. Relying on their deep cultural literacy and artistic knowledge, literati expressed their aesthetic concepts and artistic views in inscriptions. These views gradually coalesced into a relatively stable set of connoisseurship standards. By inscribing important paintings, literati disseminated their standards of appreciation, influencing public aesthetic trends, thereby establishing and reinforcing their discursive power in the artistic domain.



Figure.5 Su Shi's Withered Tree and Strange Rock and Its Complementary Inscribed Poe



Figure.6 Zhao Mengfu's Eight Flowers and Its Colophons

#### **4. The Narrative Power of Inscriptions in the Practice of “Integration of Text and Image” during the Ming-Qing Transitional Period**

##### **(1) Characteristics of the “Integration of Text and Image”**

In literati paintings of the Ming-Qing transitional period, inscriptions broke through their previous confinement to the peripheries of the composition. Instead, they occupied key positions within the pictorial space and even became central elements of the composition. The placement of the inscription and the arrangement of the image responded to each other, jointly constructing the overall structure of the painting, with the inscription's dominant role in the composition becoming increasingly pronounced. The content of the inscription closely correlated with the theme of the image, with linguistic signs and visual signs permeating and mutually elucidating each other. Inscriptions not only interpreted the meaning of the image but could also impart new connotations to it, while the image provided intuitive visual support for understanding the inscription. Together, they formed an organically unified whole.

##### **(2) The Deep Intervention of Inscriptions in the Production of the Image's Meaning**

Inscriptions occupied significant space within the composition. This spatial occupation not only altered the visual structure of the painting but also influenced the viewer's distribution of attention across the image. Through spatial dominance, inscriptions forcibly directed the viewer's gaze towards the textual information, thereby playing a crucial role in the generation of the image's meaning. Inscriptions employed semantic strategies such as metaphor, symbolism, and allegory to expand and deepen the meaning of the image. Through sophisticated semantic expression, inscriptions could imbue the image with entirely new symbolic significance, enriching its connotations and guiding viewers to interpret the image from a more profound dimension. An active interaction occurred between the linguistic signs of the inscription and the visual signs of the image, with each referring to and reinforcing the other. Linguistic signs provided a semantic framework for the visual signs, while visual signs rendered the meaning of the linguistic signs more intuitive. This semiotic interaction jointly propelled the generation and construction of the image's meaning.

##### **(3) Language's Control over Visual Narration**

**The Semiotic Substitution of Image by Text: The Case of Bada Shanren's Substitution of Fish and Bird Imagery with the Poem “White Eyes”**

In his works, Bada Shanren employed the inscribed poem “White Eyes” to perform a semiotic substitution for the imagery of fish and birds. The textual signs within the poem endowed the fish and bird imagery with unique symbolic significance, transforming it from a mere representation of natural objects into a vehicle for expressing Bada Shanren's emotions and thoughts. Through this semiotic substitution, the text controlled the visual narration of the image, compelling its interpretation according to the meaning constructed by the text.

**The Reconstruction of Narrative Temporality: The Case of Shi Tao's Inscribed Poems Guiding the Rhythm of “Handscroll Reading”**

In the inscribed poems accompanying his handscroll works, Shi Tao, through deliberate arrangement of the sequence and content of the verses, guided the viewer's rhythm of “handscroll reading.” The

narrative temporality established by the inscribed poems disrupted the inherent visual sequence of the image, directing the viewer to appreciate the work in the order prescribed by the poems. This process reconstructed the temporality of the visual narrative, thereby realizing language's control over visual narration.

#### **5. The Essence of the Narrative Power of Inscriptions and Its Semiotic Reconstruction**

##### **(1) The Essence of the Power of Inscriptions: The Transformation of Literati Cultural Capital into Symbolic Power**

The cultural capital of the literati encompasses their knowledge, erudition, artistic accomplishment, social prestige, and other elements. This cultural capital was gradually accumulated through long-term processes of study and social interaction, forming the foundation for their standing within the socio-cultural sphere. In inscribing paintings, literati employed this cultural capital—manifested in exquisite poetic composition, profound artistic insights, unique calligraphic style, etc.—thereby transforming the inscription into a sign imbued with symbolic significance. These signs gained widespread recognition and dissemination within the artistic domain, gradually coalescing into a form of symbolic power. Leveraging this symbolic power, literati could influence the evaluation of artworks, the establishment of aesthetic standards, and trends in the art market, accomplishing the transformation of cultural capital into symbolic power.

##### **(2) The “Integration of Text and Image” as Marking the Establishment of the “Text-Dominant-Over-Image” Narrative Paradigm**

The “text-dominant-over-image” paradigm refers to the condition within literati painting where written language occupies the dominant position, with the image subordinated to the conveyance of meaning by the text. Written language, through interpreting, guiding, and controlling the image, achieves the construction of the painting's overall meaning. Under this paradigm, written language becomes the core element in meaning generation, while the image serves as an auxiliary means and carrier for the text. The establishment of the “text-dominant-over-image” paradigm constitutes a significant turning point in the development of Chinese art history. It broke through the traditional concept of the primacy of the image in painting, highlighted the crucial role of written language in artistic creation and meaning expression, and expanded the formal expressions and cultural connotations of Chinese painting. Simultaneously, this paradigm reflected the dominant position of the literati class within the artistic sphere, exerting a profound influence on the subsequent evolution of Chinese painting.

##### **(3) Implications of the Semiotic Reconstruction of Inscriptions**

The traditional theory of the “common origin of calligraphy and painting” emphasized the shared origins and formal expressions of calligraphy and painting. However, the semiotic reconstruction of inscriptions reveals the differences and interactive relationships between linguistic and visual signs in the processes of meaning generation and the operation of power. This reconstruction disrupts the superficial harmony implied by the “common origin” theory, delves into the intricate internal connections between the two, and prompts a more profound understanding of their relationship. The semiotic reconstruction of inscriptions demonstrates that, within the writing of art history, linguistic structures are not neutral tools but exert a hidden disciplinary function on the subjectivity of both

the artist and the audience. Factors such as the selection of language and the determination of narrative modes all influence the interpretation of artworks and the construction of art history, thereby inevitably imparting a degree of subjectivity and power to historical narratives.

## 6. Conclusion and Outlook

### (1) Research Conclusions

Summarizing the evolution of the narrative power of inscriptions from the “separation of text and image” to their “integration”: During the Song-Yuan period of “separation,” inscriptions held a subordinate position, reinforcing literati discursive power by acting as an “authority of connoisseurship.” In the Ming-Qing period of “integration,” inscriptions ascended to become a dominant component of the composition, achieving control over visual narration, with their narrative power continuously strengthening. This evolutionary process reflects a profound transformation in the relationship between linguistic and visual signs within literati painting. Emphasizing the value and significance of semiotic reconstruction: Semiotic reconstruction provides a novel perspective and methodology for analyzing the evolution of the narrative power of inscriptions, revealing the internal mechanisms of linguistic and visual signs in meaning generation and the operation of power. This not only facilitates deeper research on literati painting inscriptions but also offers valuable reference for studies on cross-media narrative.

By deploying their cultural capital within inscriptions, the literati transformed it into symbolic power, influencing the evaluation of artworks, the establishment of aesthetic standards, and trends in the art market. This process contributed to the formation of the literati class's dominant position in the artistic sphere and infused artistic development with cultural depth and value orientation. The establishment of the “text-dominant-over-image” paradigm represents a significant turning point in Chinese art history. It altered the traditional concept of the primacy of the image in painting, enriched the formal expressions and cultural connotations of painting, and simultaneously reflected the increasing discursive power of the literati class in the arts, exerting a lasting and profound influence on the creative philosophies and aesthetic pursuits of later painting developments. The evolution of the text-image relationship from “separation” to “integration” is a crucial manifestation of the continuous development and innovation of literati painting. This evolution enabled a richer and more diverse expression of meaning in literati painting, further enhancing its artistic value, and laid the foundation for literati painting to adapt to the socio-cultural demands and display its unique appeal across different historical periods.

### (2) Research Limitations

This study focuses on literati painting inscriptions from the Song-Yuan to Ming-Qing periods, with relatively insufficient attention paid to inscriptions from other periods and other types of painting. This may result in an incomplete overall understanding of the narrative power of inscriptions. Although semiotic and comparative research methods were employed, the analysis of the complexity of semiotic interactions and the quantitative investigation of narrative power during the specific analytical

process were not sufficiently in-depth. The research methodology requires further refinement.

### (3) Future Prospects

The exploration of the narrative power of literati painting inscriptions in this study provides a paradigmatic case and theoretical reference for research on cross-media narrative power. It contributes to advancing the study of relationships between language and image, text and moving image within the cross-media field, deepening the understanding of the operational mechanisms of cross-media narrative power. Directions for expanding future research are as follows: The scope of inquiry can be broadened to include inscriptions from other historical periods and painting genres. Simultaneously, integrating additional research methods, such as quantitative analysis and empirical research, can facilitate a deeper investigation into the specific manifestations and influencing factors of the narrative power of inscriptions, thereby enriching the content and findings of inscription studies.

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