

Multidimensional Comparative Study on the Symmetry Themes in Chen Chuncheng's Novel Collection *Night-Time Submarine* and Borges' Works

Pengjun Guo

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

pengjun.guo@outlook.com

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Abstract: Whether through Borges' influence on contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature, which then extended to popular literature, or through direct references made by the author, Chen Chuncheng's *Night-Time Submarine* is clearly shaped by Borges' works. The theme of symmetry, evident in both the background settings and narrative structures, draws from and reimagines elements found in Borges' writings. Moreover, both writers were influenced by Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, resulting in a shared narrative structure that transcends diverse cultural backgrounds and literary genres. The concept of symmetry within this fantasy genre holds significant historical and aesthetic value, underscoring the need to trace the origins of this thematic connection.

1. The Origins of Complex Temporal and Spatial Structures and Their Symmetrical Characteristics

1.1 *Night-Time Submarine*

Night-Time Submarine by Chen Chuncheng is regarded as a notable work in recent years in the field of Chinese popular literature. As the famous writer Yu Hua's recommendation suggests, "One remarkable thing about this work is that it is both ethereal and solid, with a rich imagination and a firm grasp of reality. The transitions and connections are seamless, making it a highly mature piece." This blend of reality and fantasy, seeking a hidden magical kingdom behind everyday appearances, has captivated many young readers. On the Douban platform, it is ranked 68th in the category of Chinese novels, reflecting its popularity. Additionally, the work was named one of the top ten novels of the year by *Asia Weekly* in 2020 and won first place in Douban Reading's 2020 China Literature (Fiction) selection [1]. As Chen's debut work, *Night-Time Submarine* has garnered attention not only in popular literary reviews and public reading media but also among researchers. Li Yang, in *Beauty and Times (Aesthetics)*, stated that the appeal of *Night-Time Submarine* lies in three elements: narrative fantasy, the introduction of enclosed spaces, and the presentation of multiple possibilities [2].

Reviewing the various appealing elements highlighted in previous articles, many involve the distortion of time and space. In this novel, the form of time often appears as flashbacks, disorder, and unusually rapid passage. For instance, in *Mass of the Red Chamber*: if we reorganize the plot according to the normal flow of time, we can see that the protagonist first drinks "Zhongshan Wine" and remains unconscious for a millennium, skipping rapidly through the modern world as we know it. Subsequently, after a brief transitional scene, the protagonist becomes absorbed in a fantastical narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber* constructed by Cao Xueqin. As the protagonist's "Redology Society" is pursued, fictional fragments from a thousand years ago intertwine with the novel's reality. In the end, the protagonist, who is imprisoned, forgets all knowledge of his identity and the "modern" and "future" world, immersing himself in the virtual narrative. He even encounters Cao Xueqin, based on the "principle of unity in *Dream of the Red Chamber*" imagined by the characters. The author writes, "If a soul means a certain lingering thought, then after Cao Xueqin's death, his soul would have no reason not to attach itself to all copies of *Dream of the Red*

Chamber. The more copies of *Dream of the Red Chamber* there are, the more diluted his soul is across each one. Now that most of the copies outside have been obliterated, the eighty chapters stored in my body may be the last in the universe, so the entirety of Cao Xueqin's soul resides vividly within me." (This fantastical element, akin to the basic characteristics of probability wave functions in physics, clearly hints at the author's background in the sciences.) As for space, the theme of fantasy expresses itself through repeated segmentation and isolation, introducing a delicate and partially unobservable narrative system (beyond the level of discourse), evoking endless imagination. For example, the buried key in The Bamboo Peak Temple hides an old house and hometown, which for the author, represents a lost past (set in the county town of the 1990s with elements like "roundabouts, abandoned gardens, old houses," which, as the author mentioned, are "hidden anchors" of a protagonist's past life with autobiographical features). Once it is buried behind a stone tablet at the Bamboo Peak Temple, this "collection of anchors" from past times is forever separated from the protagonist's narrative space, unobservable and buried deep within memory. This spatial separation within the narrative layer envelops the reader in a sense of extreme remoteness and nostalgia, while also bringing a sense of relief to the protagonist. Another example is the description of Borges' tossed coin in the short story *Night-Time Submarine*: "His act of throwing the coin added two parallel, continuous series to the history of this planet: his fate and the fate of the coin. From then on, every moment of joy, anger, sorrow, and fear he experienced on land would correspond to the coin's ignorance and oblivion at the bottom of the sea." Subsequently, the protagonist Chen Tuona encounters a submarine seeking this coin within the "*Night-Time Submarine*," a space independent of the outside world and belonging to him and his beloved Pokémon character. After Chen Tuona vividly extracts excess imagination from his mind in a fantastical expression, this segment of time-space becomes independent from everything except his mind. The "submarine" appears sequentially with Borges' coin at the end of the story, and this segment of time-space is briefly provided with a final glimpse into the "real world" of the narrative through Chen Tuo-na's will and a seemingly unrelated narrative, leaving readers deeply moved by a distant and isolated, yet intensely striking fantasy. Chen Chuncheng is a master at constructing complex spatial systems. He deftly conceals parts of them while rediscovering others, allowing readers to experience joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness through boundless fantasy.

The various appealing elements of the novel are closely linked to the author's educational background (as the author himself stated in an interview, he graduated with a degree in civil engineering), and it is evident that many of the intriguing element stem from scientific themes embedded in a distinct Chinese cultural context, combined with the author's remarkable imaginative ability [3]. However, as the author repeatedly stated in his collection, interviews, and postscript, Borges is an inescapable name. In fact, before introducing this theme, this article cannot avoid mentioning "Borges" as a narrative character, demonstrating the profound influence on Chen Chuncheng. In an interview, the author stated: "In the early stories, I emulated his (referring to Borges) esoteric style. For a while, I loved playing with the metaphysical themes he was fascinated with, but what captivated me most was his narrative technique: geometrically concise and precise, yet sometimes wildly unrestrained, a moment of flight, and that immersive tone that draws one into the atmosphere in just a few sentences. I read him quite late, and it was through recommendations on Douban that I started reading his works, and I was immediately hooked. So, I let him make an appearance at the beginning of *Night-Time Submarine*, providing a key item." In the same text, the author did not shy away from expressing his fondness for Borges and openly acknowledged the profound influence he had on him.

1.2 Chen Chuncheng and Borges

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), an esteemed Argentine writer, translator, and poet, is a globally renowned figure in Latin American magical realism, surrealism, and science fiction. His works often delve into themes of infinity and eternity, labyrinths and repetition, mirrors and symmetry, apocrypha and citations, time and fate. As a pioneer of these profound and fantastical temporal-spatial themes, he influenced countless writers and genres, including Chen Chuncheng. In other

words, it was Borges who first tossed a coin into the sea, leading to the many discoveries in *Night-Time Submarine*. It goes without saying that, despite his claim that “time is more important than space,” Borges established complex temporal, spatial, and narrative structures in most of his works [4] [5].

When analyzing the complex temporal-spatial structures in the works of the two authors discussed in this paper, symmetry is one of the primary factors considered. Symmetry means that a structure retains its characteristics when transitioning from one state to another, such as axial symmetry, translational symmetry, and mirror symmetry. Symmetry has long been considered beautiful in human civilization and tends to evoke enduring interest; just as highly symmetrical chemical molecules often attract the attention of researchers [6]. Mirrors, loops, and cycles are recurring themes in many of Borges’ stories, whether it be the garden in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the “repugnant mirrors that multiply things” in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, or the “heresiarchs” in *The Theologians* who see symmetry in events across time. Considering that providing an aesthetic experience is one of the key motivations for writers, it is not hard to imagine that symmetry exists in the narrative temporal-spatial structures of both Borges’ and Chen Chuncheng’s works. Moreover, the symmetrical themes common in Borges’ literary works have influenced several stories in Chen Chuncheng’s *Night-Time Submarine*.

2. Symmetrical Features in the Background Settings of Works

2.1 Symmetry in Borges’ Works

Symmetry is a common characteristic in the settings of Borges’ works. These symmetrical elements sometimes rely on specific objects within the story, such as mirrors or labyrinths, and sometimes exist solely within the characters’ discourse. The symmetry in his works is often trans logical and magical realist, meaning it develops independently of the plot, acting as an a priori property of the narrative universe. This article has compiled the following types of symmetry found in his works: translational symmetry, planar symmetry, axial symmetry, and “reflection,” which involves symmetrical operations such as projection after transformation.

2.2 Translational Symmetry

Translational symmetry emphasizes the repeated occurrence of events at different times and places or simply describes the spatial structure of the world. In *The Theologians*, for example, Borges mentioned a heretical sect influenced by Gnosticism, “the Actors,” whose theological theory could not tolerate the repetition of events at different times. Nevertheless, the author arranged for the fates of the book’s original apologist and heretic, Juan and Aurelianus, to be eerily similar: both initially refuted the heresy (the Actors) and were later burned as heretics. In the end, the author emphasizes this paradox, stating, “The story’s resolution can only be found in metaphor, for the background has shifted to a heaven without a concept of time. Perhaps it suffices to say that Aurelianus conversed with God, who was so indifferent to religious disputes that He mistook him for Juan de Panonia. That incident might hint that the mind of God was somewhat disordered. More precisely, in heaven, Aurelianus understood that, to the inscrutable God, he and Juan de Panonia (orthodox and heretic, hater and hated, informer and victim) constituted a single person.” By removing the distinction of time, the two characters’ fates are indistinguishable to God, clearly illustrating the presence of translational symmetry in time.

Translational symmetry in time and space can also transcend the boundaries between fantasy and reality. For example, in *The Waiting*, the protagonist, while hiding from pursuers, makes every effort to remain unnoticed; yet, in his recurring dreams, he repeatedly witnesses the scene of his enemy breaking in and committing murder. The continually shifting and repetitive scenarios play out in his mind, erasing the boundary between reality and illusion, ultimately leading to his murder in a real chase without him being aware. Spatial translational symmetry also exists. In *The Library of Babel*, mirrors (an extremely important motif that will be discussed in detail in the next section) imply an infinite extension of space; at the novel’s end, the protagonist emphasizes that the universe

(i.e., the Library of Babel) is an infinitely cyclical system. Even though the contents of the books can be exhausted, the massive system of “identical books” continues to repeat at the end of the library’s volumes—a translational symmetry system reminiscent of a hexagonal close-packed structure. In his works, infinity is a significant theme, and infinity itself arises from the repetitive nature of translational symmetry.

2.3 Planar Symmetry

Mirrors are one of the most characteristic motifs in Borges’ works, and they are the most common objects associated with planar symmetry [7]. Mirrors embody the symmetry between fiction and reality. Mirrors appear frequently in Borges’ stories, such as in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, where Borges mentions the words of the founder of the Uqbarian heresy: “To those of the Gnostic sect, the visible universe is an illusion, or more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate the visible universe.” This phrase at the beginning of the story serves as a metaphor for the plot, implying that the universe “multiplies” and “expands” under the creation of the “Tlönists.” Through reflection, mirrors establish a symmetrical reality outside the universe (Tlön), where idealism replaces materialism as the fundamental consensus and operational principle: through imagination, people can unearth non-existent objects from the ground; awareness of imaginary objects can be nested, leaving room for the evaluation of different “levels of fantasy”—because it is common knowledge on “Tlön,” the inhabitants of that world find their reality quite natural. Additionally, the protagonist obtains a revised edition of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* that introduces Tlön’s knowledge into the narrative universe through the spectral Englishman Herbert Ashe, who appears as a phantom emerging from a mirror at the Adroque Hotel. Mirrors are omnipresent, suggesting an omnipresent illusion—there exists a distant universe “Tlön” constructed by human imagination beyond reality—which is permeating into reality. At the story’s conclusion, Tlön gradually begins to replace the original reality: “Contact with Tlön and the acceptance of its customs have disintegrated this world. People are fascinated by its precision, repeatedly forgetting that it is the precision of chess players, not angels.” Through the mirror, fantasy seeps into reality, disrupting the symmetry and adding a touch of the fantastical to the story.

Mirrors can also convey symmetry between one scene and another in a different reality. In *The Aleph*, which serves as both the title and the theme of the text, the fantastical “Aleph” is a “mirrored sphere.” The “Aleph” can be understood as a reflective surface of the universe about 2-3 cm in size. Through the Aleph, an observer can see any object in the universe without any change in size or other properties. In a series of strikingly powerful parallel sentences, “I” mention that through the Aleph, “I” could see dawn and dusk, horses, waves, armies, the remains of lovers, and “I” observing the Aleph, leading to the exclamation that “I” had seen “that which people often borrow the name of but never truly regard—the secret, hypothesized, incomprehensible universe.” At the end, the protagonist points out that the name Aleph comes from the transfinite number \aleph in set theory, the “next higher cardinality” beyond the countable set, but it is “false,” no more genuine than “the mirror that guided Alexander the Great to conquer the East, the mirror found by Tariq ibn Ziyad in a tower (One Thousand and One Nights, Night 272); Lucian of Samosata’s mirror that could see the moon (True History, Book I, Chapter 26); the reflective spear of Jupiter mentioned in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, Book I; Merlin’s all-encompassing mirror; or the object that emitted the bustling sound of the universe from the columns of a mosque.” The protagonist is vague about why he doubts the Aleph’s authenticity, but he emphasizes the essence of its “prototypes”: “mirrors that reflect the entire universe.”

2.4 Axial Symmetry

Axial symmetry is less common but can be found in structures like the hexagonal units of the library halls in *The Library of Babel*.

2.5 Symmetry as a Primal Quality in Borges’ Settings

In Borges’ novels, symmetry is an a priori quality of the world, meaning it holds true for other

possible narratives within the universe of his works. Borges constructs universal laws for his characters, akin to the forces of gravity or electromagnetism in the real world, rather than a series of convenient coincidences used merely to advance the plot. The various apocryphal books, citations, and references to history in Borges' works reflect the universal principles of the characters' worlds. For Borges, characters serve more as tools for creating narratives—ephemeral, ambiguous, mutable, and deeply non-realistic—while the allure lies more in the narrative and the world-building. In this sense, the settings in Borges' stories are governed by inherent laws that resonate with symmetry, making them consistent across different layers of his narratives. The intricacies of these laws allow for deeper exploration of themes like infinity, recursion, and the blending of reality with the surreal [8], adding layers of depth that invite readers to find patterns and symmetry beneath the surface.

3. Exploring the Concept of Symmetry in the Settings of Chen Chuncheng's Works

3.1 Direct Symmetry in the Settings of *Night-Time Submarine*

The work with the most explicit and direct symmetrical setting in *Night-Time Submarine* is *Red Chamber Mass*. This short science fiction story mainly depicts a modern man who, after drinking a hypnotic and preservative “Zhongshan Wine,” hibernates far into the future. In this future world, due to a series of supernatural events, the classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been completely lost. Under a government regime that bans and massively alters research on *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the protagonist joins a cult-like group called the “Redology Society,” which believes that *Dream of the Red Chamber* embodies the meaning of the universe. Using a surreal object called the “Mo Wang Mo Shi Pill,” the protagonist can recall and spread *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but this action provokes a massacre of the society by the former government forces, leading to the protagonist's imprisonment. After the fall of the previous government, the protagonist finally recalls the complete *Dream of the Red Chamber* in his mind and consciously chooses to forget all his memories, immersing himself entirely in the work until his eventual death.

The story directly describes the “Redology Society's” cosmology, with the author explicitly stating in the postscript that the philosophical inspiration behind this setting is a modern reinterpretation of ancient Greek monism. This reinterpretation regards *Dream of the Red Chamber* as the “Hidden Logos,” the essence of the universe, omnipresent and eternal. The “Redology Society” believes that the universe is a mirror-symmetrical structure centered around *Dream of the Red Chamber*, with its completion by Cao Xueqin as the pinnacle. Before the completion of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, all events are seen as preparatory steps towards its creation, gradually adjusting the various elements of existence to bring about its inception. After its completion, the universe falls into an irreversible decline, characterized by the inevitable disappearance of the text and concept of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. During this decline, absurd events like all copies of *Dream of the Red Chamber* “shattering into thousands of strokes with a crisp sound” are seen as natural occurrences. Even if there are individuals like the protagonist who attempt to spread the text, defying the “cosmic law” on a micro level, they are doomed to end with the destruction of the “Redology Society,” losing themselves in the obsession with *Dream of the Red Chamber* until death. Structurally, this fascinating symmetry is based on a series of symmetrical events along the timeline of the universe. The author mentioned that the term “Mass” in *Red Chamber Mass* derives from its etymological meaning of “dispersion,” indicating that *Dream of the Red Chamber* gradually reaches the conditions for its formation over time, then forms, and ultimately disperses and disappears.

Borges' works, centered around monistic philosophy (as a setting rather than a personal belief), bear a striking similarity to *Red Chamber Mass*, especially in *The God's Script*, which shares two central elements: a monistic belief in the narrative, where promoting or suppressing a certain entity representing the highest existence (the fourteen-word incantation on the jaguar skin or the text and derived concepts of *Dream of the Red Chamber*) is seen as part of an unassailable cosmic law; and the profound insignificance of characters' traits and thoughts before this highest existence. For instance, after comprehending “The God's Script,” the protagonist—an Aztec priest named Tzinacán—realizes that individual and national destinies are meaningless before the universe and

chooses to abandon using the fourteen-word incantation to repel invaders, even “forgetting who he is.” Similarly, members of the “Redology Society,” aware that they will be executed, and that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is doomed to disappear, are content with just a glimpse of the text. The protagonist, after fully understanding *Dream of the Red Chamber*, chooses to forget all his memories, much like Tzinacán.

3.2 Symmetry Through Mediums—The Symmetry of Fantasy and Reality

A more prevalent form of symmetry in Chen Chuncheng’s *Night-Time Submarine* is structurally similar to Borges’ “mirror structures.” As mentioned earlier, nearly all of Chen Chuncheng’s works involve isolated, fantastical, and solitary spaces; the most common form of symmetry in his settings is the symmetry between these fantastical realms and the real world. Whenever there is a fantasy space, there must be a certain degree of symmetry between the fantasy and the real world; when this symmetry is disrupted, it signals the end of the fantasy.

Chi Po, one of the stories in *Night-Time Submarine*, tells a tale where the narrator’s grandfather encountered a “ghost” while hunting bandits in the mountains during the 1950s—seeing a “ghost” with a scarred arm by a fire lit through supernatural means. Similarly, the minor character Zhang Huan describes entering a supernatural state on a bus, where he was the only one who could see a television screen. During this experience, Zhang vividly describes a nonexistent film whose background resembles Lu Xun’s *Forging the Sword*. In this film, a king asks a blacksmith to forge a sword from his dream, but unlike Lu Xun’s story, the blacksmith dreams of his “father” and sees him acquiring a black supernatural substance called “Xuanjiang” through the “tempering of the night sky” over thousands of nights. Upon waking, the blacksmith cuts open his arm and uses the flowing “Xuanjiang” as material, asking his son to forge the sword in the real world. The resulting sword, named “Chi Po,” has the power to make anything it penetrates disappear. However, only the blacksmith and the king who dreamt of the sword can touch its blade. The blacksmith later realizes that the so-called “father” was himself, years later, continuously refining “Xuanjiang” in dreams until he handed it to his past self, creating a causal loop. After hearing Zhang Huan’s bizarre description, the author finds traces of the blacksmith in local legends and a Republican-era magazine (*Resting at the Abyss*, a special issue commemorating Lu Xun’s tenth death anniversary, hinting at the influence of Lu Xun’s themes and the motif of “dreams” in the story). The blacksmith’s spectral figure appears in the various aspects of the lives of the characters “Grandfather,” “I,” and Zhang Huan. In the end, Zhang Huan points out the symmetrical structure in the setting: he dreams once more, where at the climax of the film, the king throws “Chi Po” to obliterate the rebel leader, and as soon as “Chi Po” touches the ground, it passes through and continues sinking underground. In the film, the king consults a scholar who explains that on the other side of the earth lies the “dream” of the “real world” in the story, and a thousand years later, “Chi Po” will pierce through the earth, erasing everything in both reality and the dream. Soon, the main characters realize that the seemingly fantastical “Chi Po” in the film is already leading them towards an eerie yet mesmerizing apocalypse in the real world—since the dream sword of their world was forged, the world “Chi Po” is set to obliterate is the real world they inhabit.

In this story, once “Chi Po” erases the “reality-dream duality,” the symmetry breaks, and the fantasy space Chen Chuncheng constructs—the dream—vanishes along with it. In the current state of discourse, this process has not yet occurred—all the characters and narratives exist in a space where the apocalypse (the breaking of symmetry) has yet to arrive, but their fates are already sealed. Here, Borges’ “mirror” becomes the earth, and the addition of “Chi Po” is akin to *The First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, erasing the duality of two worlds, leading to the ghostly and mysterious catastrophe of the “real” world vanishing.

In another work, *Li Yin’s Lake*, the author more directly explains the creation and dissolution of the symmetry between fantasy and reality. The main plot revolves around the protagonist—a geography teacher from a county town—who becomes acquainted with Li Yin, a college student preparing for her postgraduate exams. During their interactions, the protagonist learns that Li Yin, in her childhood, once went on a picnic by a lake with her parents, who have since divorced and

abandoned her. In Li Yin's memories, the lake was vast, with an arched bridge crossing over it, beautifully reflecting the sunset. The protagonist and Li Yin repeatedly search for the lake from her memories but find nothing. Eventually, with the help of an eccentric local named "Uncle Bird" (a photography enthusiast familiar with the areas around the county), they locate Li Yin's lake—small, filled in, and now reduced to a faint outline under the parking lot of the county's Old Cadres Bureau.

In this story of searching, the two characters meet in an isolated, hidden spot within the county park called "Niyuan" (Secret Garden), a secluded space encircled by trees. The setting is imbued with characteristics from the 1990s, such as terrazzo tiles, evoking a sense of nostalgia and loss. Next to the tree pit, surrounded by these traces of a bygone era, the protagonist proposes a theory that "everything is paired through some object," citing examples like "the relationship between Li Yin and me—Niyuan" and "the connection between the tree pit and the stone beside it—marked with the characters 'Chi Shui' (Measure of Water) and 'Cun Tian' (Measure of Sky)." The narrator reflects on how Li Yin's lake is actually just a small pond, with the arched bridge she remembers being quite far from it—leading him to attribute his earlier "sensory duality" theory to a common mistake where people tend to blend their memories. However, the author subtly continues to suggest that this symmetry between fantasy and reality still exists in the world of the novel. The narrator explains that the connection between Li Yin, the dream-like lake, and the afternoons spent together in Niyuan stems from the unique texture of the terrazzo material. At the end of the story, after Li Yin passes away following their farewell, the protagonist can no longer find the entrance to Niyuan in the park—it disappears, as if it never existed, mirroring the irrevocable dissolution of their relationship.

The symmetry between reality (the narrator, Li Yin, her postgraduate studies, and the "real world" elements) and fantasy (Niyuan, Li Yin's lake) does indeed exist, emphasized through various motifs. Unlike the characters in *Chi Po*, who are still waiting for a distant yet impending end, the story of *Li Yin's Lake* has already reached its conclusion because the symmetry between reality and fantasy has been irrevocably broken.

This narrative highlights how the symmetry between the real and the imaginary fades away, leaving behind a sense of finality and loss. The symbolic disappearance of Niyuan underscores the impermanence of connections and the fragility of fantasies once they collide with reality. In the end, the once-seamless link between the ideal and the real dissolves, echoing the idea that some memories and dreams can never be fully recaptured, just as certain connections cannot be restored to their original state.

3.3 Similarities and Differences in Symmetry Settings Between Borges and Chen Chuncheng's Works

Based on the analysis above, it is evident that both Borges and Chen Chuncheng exhibit two main paradigms of symmetrical settings in their short stories: (1) translational or mirror symmetry structures in the occurrence of events over time, and (2) the symmetry between reality and fantasy, facilitated by a medium. Dreams often appear as a form of fantasy in both authors' works. In Borges' "four procedures of fantasy literature," one principle is "the disturbance of reality by dreams," emphasizing the impact of fantasy on reality. Given that any fantasy depicted in literature is inherently constructed from reality, this naturally forms a commonality in their settings, constituting a symmetrical relationship [9]. Both types of symmetrical settings are present in the works of both authors, with the latter being more prevalent.

For the symmetry between reality and fantasy through mediums, Chen Chuncheng employs a more diverse range of mediums to create symmetry between reality and fantasy, including objects like an old house's key, a submarine, or even characters within the story. In contrast, Borges prefers the singular motif of the "mirror," which serves as a recurring symbol representing the theme of symmetry across different works. For other common themes, such as complex spatial structures or human imagination, Borges uses imagery like labyrinths and dreams. Thus, the relationship between motifs and settings in Borges' works is more tightly connected [10], not only because of his unusual personal affinity for certain themes rooted in his childhood and experiences but also

because Borges viewed his creations as belonging to a more serious genre of fantasy literature at the time. In comparison, Chen Chuncheng's *Night-Time Submarine* falls under the category of popular literature and was initially published online before being compiled into a collection. It embodies the flexible and dynamic characteristics of the information age, which explains the varied selection of mediums used to symbolize symmetry.

Borges' works have a diverse cultural background, grounded in Argentine literature but blended with international literary and cultural influences—from Chinese literature in *The Garden of Forking Paths* to German philosophy and Jewish literary themes in *Deutsches Requiem*. In his writing, symmetrical settings do not simply rely on an “otherness” rooted in exotic or Orientalist imaginations but are instead an intrinsic potential across his works. In Borges' perspective, there is a symmetry setting that exists both in a library rooted in a Western cultural context and in a garden with forking paths located in China.

In contrast, *Night-Time Submarine* consistently uses Chinese culture and society as its backdrop for stories involving symmetrical settings. The collection often delves into themes from the 1990s and the early 2000s in China: small county towns, the burgeoning Chinese real estate industry, Han Chinese Buddhist temples, local deities, bureaucratic systems, and the public education system. This choice reflects not only the simultaneous influence of these subjects on the author's upbringing but also resonates with the collection's target audience, mainly readers born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

For the scope and applicability of symmetrical settings, the differences in the scope and applicability of symmetrical settings also relate to the authors' writing styles, such as the use of apocryphal texts, historical adaptation, and the creation of “enclosed spaces.” In Borges' stories, the fantastical often emerges from adaptations of specific historical backgrounds. The influence of symmetrical settings extends beyond the level of discourse, becoming part of the common knowledge within the fictional world. For instance, symmetry in his works is often treated as an inherent principle within the fictional universe, not just a stylistic or narrative device.

On the other hand, Chen Chuncheng's works tend to downplay the colorful diversity of different historical eras, using a first-person perspective that makes the characteristics of the enclosed, fantastical space more pronounced. Typically, aside from the protagonist (who often doubles as the narrator) and a few key characters or organizations, the symmetrical settings of the world remain unknown to others. For example, in *Chuan Cai Bi* (The Magic Brush), after acquiring a supernatural object (the “magic brush”), the protagonist's writings become invisible to others, underscoring a personal and isolated experience of symmetry.

4. A Philological Study on the Symmetrical Features of Narrative Structures in the Works of Borges, Cao Xueqin, and Chen Chuncheng

4.1 *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Borges

Borges' interest in and study of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been extensively discussed in academic circles. Not only did he translate selected chapters of the novel (including Chapter 12 “Wang Xifeng Sets a Love Trap; Jia Tianxiang Looks into the Mirror of the Moon and Wind” and Chapter 56 “TanChuncheng Takes Charge and Reforms the Household; Xue Baochai Saves Money and Promotes the Overall Good” into his *Anthology of Fantasy Literature* [11]), but he also completed literary essays on *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In all his observations and studies of the novel, Borges' focus was not on the characters or love stories but on the elements of fantasy. This emphasis on the fantastical aspects led to an interpretation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* that significantly diverges from modern scholarship, which could be considered a magical realist reinterpretation of Chinese classical fiction [12]. As Borges stated, “Chinese literature does not understand ‘fantasy literature,’ because at a certain time, all their literature was fantastical [13].” What Borges valued was solely the fantastical nature of Chinese classical novels.

Borges extracted elements like mirrors, dreams, labyrinths, and gardens from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, abstracting and blending them into his works. Not only did he directly reference *Dream*

of the Red Chamber in his most famous work, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, but there is also concrete evidence that he interpreted and reimagined the “Grand View Garden” (Daguanyuan) paradigm from *Dream of the Red Chamber* into what he described as the “panoramic garden”—a form that simultaneously reflects multiple possibilities, fantasy, and reality in time and space. Borges saw *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a novel teeming with characters of indeterminate ages, with an unstable and ever-changing narrative structure. He drew inspiration from this when creating a series of works with themes of temporal uncertainty. For instance, the character “Yu Zhun”, originally “Jia Yucun”, is a modified version of a name from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Borges found a kindred spirit in Cao Xueqin [14], seeing in the mirror that Jia Rui looked into a reflection of foreign lands and his own deep understanding of the fascinating yet terrifying aspects of symmetry. However, in a series of analyses, few have pointed out Borges’ broader reference to the narrative structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, specifically the influence of its “Color-Emptiness” structure.

4.2 The Symmetrical Color-Emptiness View in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The “Sixteen-Character Outline” of *Dream of the Red Chamber*—“From Emptiness comes Color, from Color comes Emotion, Emotion is Transmitted into Color, and from Color one Understands Emptiness”—can be interpreted as a process of serenity and stillness, observing appearances, experiencing emotions, tasting the world, and returning to emptiness from appearances. This is a Buddhist ideological framework that also encapsulates the characters’ personalities and the narrative structure of the novel [15]. Based on a comprehensive interpretation of the overall plot, it can be understood as follows [16]: the first five chapters, serving as a “prologue,” can be seen as the primary manifestation of “Emptiness.” This “Emptiness” encompasses not only the direct exposition of the story’s origins and the main plot yet to begin but also the understanding of life’s randomness, the inescapability of fate, and the absurdity expressed through the “Ballad of the Vanity of Things,” reflecting a Buddhist worldview of impermanence. From Chapter 5 onward, Baoyu, originally an “empty” stone, gradually begins to perceive the “Color” of the world. In the Grand View Garden, romantic entanglements, jewelry, and the worries of daily life lead Baoyu through the stages of “from Color comes Emotion, Emotion is Transmitted into Color.” The pinnacle of “Color” is reached with the rise of the Jia family’s fortunes, especially during the imperial concubine’s visit to her family. Following this, the decline of the Jia family represents a gradual shift to “Understanding Emptiness through Color.” According to the version continued by Gao E, Baoyu eventually renounces the world, leaving with the statement, “All is left white and pure on earth,” symbolizing a return from Color to Emptiness. Even though the original last forty chapters have been lost, based on the initial outline and prophecies in the novel, anyone with a basic understanding can recognize the symmetrical narrative structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which follows an “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” pattern.

The “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” symmetrical structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber* can be broadly summarized, from a plot perspective, as “over time, the complexity of the system rises from the lowest point to a peak, then descends back to the original level,” excluding the complexities of discourse, character motives, and other factors. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the emotional entanglements, desires, and interpersonal relationships of Jia Baoyu and the other characters can be seen as interpretations of this “system complexity,” and the overall structure of the novel aligns with this symmetrical plot pattern. The unique “Color-Emptiness” philosophy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* not only reflects the values conveyed by the author and the work itself but also constructs a narrative structure rich in Eastern aesthetics based on Buddhist philosophy.

4.3 The Emergence and Dissolution of Fantastical Time and Space—Manifestations of the “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” Symmetrical Structure in Borges’ Works

The Garden of Forking Paths describes Yu Tsun, a German spy tasked with conveying information about British military positions to Berlin. He decides to murder a sinologist named Dr. Albert, who shares the same name as the key location, to inform his superiors through a newspaper report. With pursuers on his trail, Yu Tsun flees and, through a series of surreal coincidences (the

victim happens to be within reach, he catches the train at the last moment, his pursuer is left behind, and the train stops at an empty platform in the middle of nowhere where a mysterious child guides him), he gradually approaches and visits Dr. Albert's "Garden of Forking Paths," which resembles his childhood memory. During their conversation, Yu Tsun learns about the interpretation of multiple timelines and possibilities in a chaotic novel left behind by his ancestor. For instance, a single chapter can be written in two ways: "In one version, an army climbs over a barren mountain and engages in a battle; the hardships of the mountainous journey make them fight desperately, leading to an easy victory. In the other version, the same army passes through a palace where a feast is taking place; the joyous battle seems to be a continuation of the celebration, and they also achieve victory."

Yu Tsun then feels a sense of unease, describing: "I felt the garden around the house teeming with invisible people. These people were Dr. Albert and me, hidden in other dimensions of time, busy and varied. When I raised my eyes again, the nightmare-like haze had vanished. In the yellow and black garden, there was only one person, but he seemed as solid as a statue, walking down the path—it was Captain Richard Madden (the British intelligence officer pursuing Yu Tsun)." After this, Yu Tsun draws his gun and shoots Dr. Albert, leading to his arrest by Madden and subsequent sentencing to execution. At the end, Yu Tsun expresses his "infinite regret and weariness." As Dr. Albert made clear, all characters in the novel are in a "Garden of Forking Paths": Yu Tsun even personally witnesses the existence of multiple possibilities and, facing his death, feels weariness over his inescapable fate.

It is notable that as the narrative time progresses, Yu Tsun gradually enters the "Garden of Forking Paths," recognizing the existence of multiple possibilities, and ultimately, after the "Garden of Forking Paths" disappears and these possibilities fade away, he accepts his own unique fate. More broadly speaking, the narrative of this story describes the emergence and dissolution of possibilities. At the beginning of the story, Yu Tsun has no doubt about the reality he is in, focusing solely on completing his mission, and the plot complexity remains low. His sense of certainty in a singular reality begins to waver once he reaches the vicinity of Dr. Albert's residence through various surreal means: on the rural paths, as he continually turns left, he recalls his childhood exposure to his ancestor's intricate and maze-like novel, "immersing himself in this fantastical imagination, forgetting his predicament of being pursued." The surreal nature of the coincidences subtly hinted at earlier is magnified here, and from Yu Tsun's perspective, he can no longer distinguish between reality and fantasy. In a state of distraction, he moves along the garden paths and finds himself at Dr. Albert's door.

Upon meeting Dr. Albert and learning about the "panoramic garden" described in his ancestor's novel, Yu Tsun feels an "invisible disturbance," sensing other alternate versions of himself and Dr. Albert in unobservable, alternate realities. At this moment, all the alternate fates of Yu Tsun resemble a quantum superposition state, and this Yu Tsun in the narrative is but one possibility. The vivid revelation of the Garden of Forking Paths immediately introduces significant complexity to Yu Tsun's frame of reference. This complexity diminishes after Dr. Albert's death and the arrival of Madden. The illusions Yu Tsun perceives cannot continue, and all he can do is observe. Dr. Albert, having already foreseen his own death, states, "At some point in the future, I might become your enemy." Recognizing his destiny, Yu Tsun is certain he will kill Dr. Albert, commenting that his future execution is "insignificant" and expressing "infinite weariness and regret." The protagonist (and Dr. Albert) who recognizes the existence of alternate realities displays indifference to their fate in the current narrative, achieving a state akin to "understanding emptiness through color." For Yu Tsun, he grows weary of his fate as merely one of many possibilities, regrets killing the man who unveiled the universe's secret, and calmly accepts his end. Thus, the "Emptiness-Color-Emptiness" symmetrical narrative structure from *Dream of the Red Chamber* becomes clear: the fantastical notion of multiple possibilities, recognized gradually through surreal pursuits, reaches a peak of awareness for Yu Tsun before dissipating, ending with the successive deaths of both characters.

The direct, concrete revelation of the "Garden of Forking Paths" to Yu Tsun introduces immense complexity within his frame of reference. This complexity then dissipates with the death of Dr.

Albert and the arrival of Madden. The illusions Yu Tsun perceives do not continue, and all he can do is observe. Dr. Albert, having foreseen his own death, remarked, “At some point in the future, I may become your enemy.” Upon recognizing his fate, Yu Tsun was certain that he would kill Dr. Albert, acknowledging, “The future is already a fact,” and remarked that his execution was “insignificant,” feeling “infinite weariness and regret.” The protagonist (including Dr. Albert) who becomes aware of the existence of alternative realities shows indifference to their fates in the current narrative, achieving a state akin to “understanding emptiness through color.” For Yu Tsun, he feels weariness towards his fate as just one of many possibilities, regrets killing the man who revealed the secrets of the universe, and calmly accepts his own end. Thus, the “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” symmetrical narrative structure from *Dream of the Red Chamber* becomes clear: the fantasy of multiple possibilities, gradually recognized through surreal pursuits, reaches a peak of awareness for Yu Tsun before fading away, ending with the successive deaths of both characters.

In Borges’ view, Yu Tsun’s ancestor wrote “a novel with more characters than *Dream of the Red Chamber*.” *The Garden of Forking Paths*, whether it refers to the version penned by Peng □ in the novel (one that “not all future generations” received) or the one Borges crafted in our reality (wherein the “Chinese box” structure transforms the apocryphal book into a central motif, also embodying a form of “disturbance of reality by dreams [17]”), is constructed under the unique symmetrical narrative structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Borges’ alternative realities, surreal coincidences, and disordered, parallel time sequences reflect *Dream of the Red Chamber*’s complex characters, fragmented plotlines (as Borges understood them), and the merging of dreams and reality.

Borges’ perspective on “Color-Emptiness” refers to the creation and dissolution of fantasy time and space, a sequence of extraordinary events unfolding and resolving within a surreal time and place. This symmetrical narrative structure is not only evident in *The Garden of Forking Paths* but also in many other works by Borges, such as *The Secret Miracle* and *The God’s Script* (analyzed earlier). In these stories, the emergence of wondrous concepts or events invariably leads to their eventual disappearance, creating a sense of fantastical symmetry.

4.4 The “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” Symmetrical Narrative Structure in *Night-Time Submarine*

Chen Chuncheng was strongly and directly influenced by both Borges’ works and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The former has been discussed earlier, while the latter influence is equally apparent. Whether through the mainland Chinese high school education system, which requires students to read *Dream of the Red Chamber*, or through the direct and repeated references to the book (as seen in the earlier analysis of *Red Chamber Mass*), Chen Chuncheng’s appreciation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*’s symmetrical narrative aesthetics is unmistakable. In *Red Chamber Mass*, Chen Chuncheng writes through the perspective of the head of the “Redology Society”: “The structure of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is Emptiness-Color-Emptiness. The Great Fable Mountains and Boundless Cliffs are emptiness, and ‘white and clean across the earth’ is also emptiness, while everything within the Grand View Garden is a collection of appearances. Without a doubt, the universe is modeled after *Dream of the Red Chamber*, following the same symmetrical pattern: the beginning and end of the universe are both nothingness, and in between lies *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the pinnacle of all appearances. The symmetrical structure implies the inevitable disappearance of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. ‘White and clean across the earth’ not only foreshadows the dispersal of prosperity but also hints at the disappearance of words. *Dream of the Red Chamber* surges forth from within everything and will ultimately dissipate into everything, because a feast must eventually end, he said.”

Chen Chuncheng’s understanding of this narrative structure from *Dream of the Red Chamber* is clear, and he incorporated it into the setting of *Red Chamber Mass*. Here, the “Emptiness-Color-Emptiness” symmetrical narrative structure is clearly a feature of the universe where the story takes place rather than the plot of the novel itself, acting as a backdrop—though the story follows a linear narrative with a few interspersed flashbacks, fantasy permeates throughout without directly

unfolding through a symmetrical narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the creation and dissolution of fantasy time and space is a characteristic of the symmetrical narrative structure in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Combined with Chen Chuncheng’s penchant for partially or entirely isolating fantasy spaces, this structure becomes even more distinctive in his works. Many of the works analyzed above exhibit the “fantasy space first arises, gradually develops, and then disappears or becomes inaccessible” narrative structure. Rather than delve into detailed plot analysis, we can summarize the general storylines within this symmetrical narrative structure, as shown in the following table:

Table 1 Symmetrical Structure of Fantasy Spaces in *Night-Time Submarine*.

Work/Structure	Emergence of Fantasy Space	Peak	Dissolution of Fantasy Space
<i>Night-Time Submarine</i>	Borges tosses a coin, creating an isolated space parallel to reality; the protagonist engages in various forms of fantasy, overwhelmed by excessive imagination.	The protagonist saves the submarine “Aleph” while aboard the <i>Night-Time Submarine</i> , linking imagination and reality.	The protagonist uses supernatural means to remove excessive imagination from his mind; in 2166, Borges’ coin is found by a child and then tossed back into the sea.
The Magic Brush	Ye Shuhua acquires a magic brush in a dream, starting to create great works unrecognizable to others.	The writer begins crafting a poem that encompasses the universe, “encompassing everything within itself.”	Ye Shuhua gives the magic brush to someone else, and the previous works he created turn into blank, unobservable paper; he ceases to read or write.
Chi Po	The protagonist, his grandfather, and Zhang Huan observe the “Swordsmith” or other information related to the sword “Chi Po” at different times and locations.	In Zhang Huan’s dream-like film scene, the king throws Chi Po to destroy rebels, and Chi Po sinks into the ground.	In the distant future, Chi Po pierces through the earth, penetrating the dream’s opposite reality, signaling the destruction of the “reality” in the story.
Bamboo Peak Temple	The protagonist discovers the unique Bamboo Peak along a mountain path connecting his hometown; the old house is demolished, leaving memories and the hometown changed beyond recognition, with only a single key to the old house remaining. He learns about a missing stone tablet at the temple and feels a sense of dissolution while in the mountains at night.	“I” discover that the stone tablet has become part of a small bridge over the river. After reading, the protagonist permanently seals the key to the old house within the moss of the tablet. He believes he has created “something eternal,” preserving the fantasy of his hometown through the key that carries its meaning.	“I” state that the key might be retrieved in the future or completely forgotten in a corner; the meaning of the fantasy and the hometown dissolves in reality.

It is noticeable that many works in *Night-Time Submarine* feature this kind of symmetrical

narrative structure. This can be attributed to the significant influence of Borges on Chen Chuncheng, as well as the direct influence of Cao Xueqin—blending in even more fantastical elements.

5. Conclusion

From the evident direct influence of Borges on Chen Chuncheng to the impact of Cao Xueqin's timeless masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber* on both the Argentine and Chinese authors, the concept of symmetry in fantasy literature—whether in background settings or narrative structures—has continued to evolve across modern society. Spanning vast temporal intervals, geographical distances, and divergent cultural contexts, this concept touches readers' minds, immersing them in the enjoyment brought by the geometric aesthetics of fantasy. A cultural symphony, bridging China and South America, celebrates a shared human appreciation for beauty. For a long time, symmetry has been a crucial element in aesthetic experiences across various media and cultural backgrounds [18][19]. Under the fantastical and genre-spanning interpretations of these three authors, this aesthetic, which originates from humanity's abstraction and understanding of natural laws, will continue to resonate with readers around the world.

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