

# Chinese-Western Narrative Poetics: State of the Art

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Chinese narrative poetics<sup>2</sup> has attracted considerable scholarly enquiry over the past several decades. In the world of literary theory and criticism, this surge in interest might be explained by two major factors. First, the quantity and quality of Chinese narrative literature, both pre-modern and contemporary, have been remarkable enough to make a continuum of Chinese narrative poetics self-justifiable. Many scholars have therefore begun to survey, in the light of contemporary narrative theory, the Chinese narrative repository for “gems”—both lustrous and hidden. Second, Western structural narratology, with all its intricate systematicity, has been questioned from a growing diversity of perspectives amid new theoretic trends. In this sense, it might be said that comparative studies have taken vantage points rightly upon the inadequacies of the structuralist approach, of which Terry Eagleton offered a general critique thirty years ago:

Structuralism and phenomenology, dissimilar though they are in central ways, both spring from the ironic act of shutting out the material world in order the better to illuminate our consciousness of it. For anyone who believes that consciousness is in an important sense *practical*, inseparably bound up with the ways we act in and on reality, any such move is bound to be self-defeating. It is rather like killing a person in order to examine, more conveniently, the circulation of the blood. (Eagleton 1996, 95)

It could be very unfair to compare the structuralist approach to “killing a person to examine blood circulation” in the sense that the foundation of any theory always presupposes and entails a certain form of “anatomy” (Frye 1957). Nevertheless, Eagleton’s critique is still meaningful for an impartial reflection upon the possible limitations of structural narratology. As is widely agreed, the structuralist approach to narrative can become biased by analysing structural elements and principles independently of a larger socio-cultural context. Besides, through the structuralist lens which focalizes exclusively the deep and surface levels of text, certain subtle transactions essential to the processes of narrative creation and interpretation might not have been addressed with due attention or importance. For instance, how do we view the death

and/or return of the author, or even his/her eternity in the Shakespearean sense.<sup>3</sup> How do we think of the author who has “fathered” a piece of work through his choices, design, values and intentions? How do we understand the affective force of a narrative? To what extent can an author, or even the intrusive critic for that matter, make use of his “license” for generic or stylistic experimentation? Can there be permutations that defy, or deviate from, structuralist narrative categorization? How does an author’s “literary genius” determine the “literary and aesthetic attainment” of a work? Could there be a message beyond what is implied in narrative structuralization? The list could go on.

Traditional Chinese narrative poetics, however, has explored in its own right issues of authority, literary mind, narrative craftsmanship, moral and philosophical underpinnings, superstructure and macrostructure, psychological sophistication, unity in miscellaneity, real in unreal, et cetera. In prominent contradistinction to Western structural narrative theory, traditional Chinese narrative poetics is salient in the following three aspects. First, instead of being “apt to beat over matters”,<sup>4</sup> it places particular importance on literary intuition, pleasure from punctilious (sometimes repetitive) critical reading, and fluidity of the aesthetic–appreciative process. It is interesting to note that such features are also common to many other forms of Chinese art. Second, there seems to be a perennial interest in the socio-historical meanings of narratives, which led to the common use of meta-narratives by the author and an assiduous quest for, and construction of, authorial intentions and images by the reader–critic. Needless to say, representative masterpieces of Chinese fiction, for example, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Water Margin*, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, are all structured and narrated around certain Chinese philosophical hypotheses about the social life or the human being,<sup>5</sup> and generations of critics have been obsessed with revealing the personality of the author not only through all the niceties and nuances of what’s been said but also through what might have been unsaid by the author and what is implied by the macrostructure as well as in the style,<sup>6</sup> that is, the inarticulate. Third, instead of establishing a specific set of critical terminology, traditional Chinese narrative poetics shows only a conservative interest in theoretical innovation by enlisting and invigorating pre-existing notions which are essentially trans-generic and mostly metaphorical.

There seems to have been a well-measured, though seemingly paradoxical, scheme to both bring out the generic particularities of narrative fiction and blur its boundaries with the other genres of literature or art. This feature is manifested in narrative discourse as well as in critical discourse. In terms of narrative discourse, Chinese fiction, with its priority on storytelling, also serves as a “melting pot” or “symbiotic site” for the fine features of many other genres such as historiography, mythology, street storytelling, drama, poetry, and *belles-lettres*, which has not only enriched the Chinese literary experience of novel reading, but may also have shaped its taste for “masterwork”<sup>7</sup> or “book of genius”.<sup>8</sup> In terms of critical discourse, one easily finds that the criticism of fiction assimilated the same set of critical vocabulary as that originally intended for drama, poetry, painting and calligraphy, embroidery, or even garden architecture and “wind and water” geomancy. For example, the very word for structure (*jiegou*, 結構),

meaning texture (*jie*, 結) and framework (*gou*, 構), developed from the art of architecture or gadgetry, and the ineffable but strategic notion *zhangfa*, 章法, literally, principles of composition, was borrowed from the art of painting and calligraphy, where it means the configuration of space (on an unfolded scroll of paper) and the regulation of tempo in order to create a work of art with structural integrity and unity.

From these salient features, it may be further summarized that Chinese narrative poetics, with due focus on narrativity and literariness, has prioritized the importance of “heart” or “literary mind”<sup>9</sup> (presumably communicable among the ideal author, critic, and reader). The latter is thought to be capable of mediating and adapting critical notions and appreciation across different artistic genres. In addition, Chinese narrative poetics has developed from and reinforced a reading habit where narratives become something more, that is, the reader–critic is quite naturally split between the enigma of the author and the specific socio-historical situations that his narrative may fit in.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of Chinese narrative poetics is comparable with Western “auteur theory” and the narrative concept of “implied author”—though with big differences. All the above issues will be dealt with in the chapters that follow.

With such unique features, categories and experience, Chinese narrative poetics may shed some new light on today’s narrative research, both structural and post-structural. The potential complementarity between Chinese and Western narrative poetics makes it highly necessary for comparative research to be conducted so that not only a fuller picture of narrative theorisation can be revealed, but also a multiculturally intelligible theory can be constructed to meet a growing global awareness and the evolving landscape in worldwide narrative practice.

It is encouraging to see that, over the past several decades, this impervious domain has been penetrated by a growing cohort of Western scholars (some with Chinese background), who are represented by Andrew H. Plaks, David L. Rolston, James J. Y. Liu, Stephen Owen, Patrick Hanan, Victor H. Mair, Robert E. Hegel, C. T. Hsia, Anthony C. Yu, David Roy, Cyril Birch, John Bishop, Zong-qi Cai, Ming Dong Gu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, among others. Although some of them have had their research area identified as literary theory or comparative literature or even sinology, they have each made a contribution to the introduction and clarification of an alien system of narrative poetics to Western academia. However, as the field remains underexplored (especially so by narratologists) and precludes synchronic comparisons, delineating major research phases or orientations becomes quite a challenge. In pondering a solution, I was inspired by the morphology of the Chinese verb *jiejian*, 借鉴, which pragmatically is equivalent to “learning from” or “drawing on”, comprises the character *jie* 借, meaning either “to borrow” or “to lend”, and *jian* 鉴, meaning “the mirror”. This led me further to an association with Western scholar M. H. Abrams’s well-known metaphors of the “mirror” and the “lamp”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore I thought of building on these two metaphors to bring out three different but interrelated approaches in the field, namely, “borrow a foreign mirror”, “polish its own mirror”, and “light a lamp for interillumination”.

## BORROW A FOREIGN MIRROR AND POLISH CHINA’S OWN

These two approaches are put under one caption because they have taken place in approximately the same period, with the latter emerging as a dynamic response to the former. The need for borrowing a foreign mirror has increased dramatically since the 1980s with the end of the Cultural Revolution. Translation of Western narrative theory has become so active that “by mid-1990s, all the major works of Western classical narratology had Chinese versions”<sup>12</sup> (Zhao 2009, 5). Among these endeavours of translation, two deserve special mention: one is the concentrated translation of French “narratologie” convened by Zhang Yinde,<sup>13</sup> the other a massive twenty-five volume *Collection on European and American Literary Theories*<sup>14</sup> undertaken by the Institute of Foreign Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Since the turn of the century, translation of Western narrative theory has kept abreast of its latest development, one major output being the *New Narrative Theory Translations*<sup>15</sup> series convened by Dan Shen and undertaken by leading Chinese narratologists. Apart from translations, a number of academic works introducing or interpreting Western narrative theory have been published by Chinese scholars. This mainly takes the form of various course books on narrative theory, such as *An Introduction to Narratology*.<sup>16</sup> However, there are also pioneering interdisciplinary studies, such as *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction*,<sup>17</sup> *Studies on Narrative Theories in Anglo-American Novels*,<sup>18</sup> *Metalinguistics: the Principle of Narratology and Understanding*,<sup>19</sup> and *Cyber Narratology*,<sup>20</sup> and comparative studies, such as *When Narrator is Narrated: Introduction to Comparative Narratology*,<sup>21</sup> to name but a few. The past three decades has also produced a huge corpus of Chinese journal publications on narrative theory. Among the 16,281 CNKI-searchable<sup>22</sup> journal articles with titles containing the key word *xushi* (narrative), 690 have the key word *xushixue* (narratology) in their titles, 131 have *xushililun* (narrative theory), and 102 *xushuxue* (an alternative name to *xushixue*, narratology).

On the other hand, it merits attention that such “mirror borrowing” has been bidirectional involving also the West’s reception of Chinese narrative poetics, though on much more a modest scale. Among the elite sinologists who specialized in introducing, interpreting, and translating Chinese poetics, at least two should not be left unmentioned: Stephen Owen and David L. Rolston. Owen is a rare Western scholar well versed, and with significant achievements, in Chinese language and literature. With a focus on Tang poetry, his scholarly reach extends to almost all periods of Chinese literature. In his important work *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, he compiled a rich selection of works on poetics by authors ranging from Confucius (551–479 BCE) to Ye Xie (1627–1703), and provided his own translations and interpretations. Of the selected pieces, some have strong explanatory power for Chinese narrative in general and hold special narratological significance even today, for example, *A Discourse on Literature* by Cao Pi,<sup>23</sup> the emperor–scholar, *The Poetic Exposition on Literature* by Lu Ji,<sup>24</sup> and *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* by Liu Xie.<sup>25</sup> The first two pieces attempted to prescribe the general properties of literature. In *A Discourse on Literature*, for example,

Cao Pi proposed that “In literature, *qi*<sup>26</sup> is the dominant factor”,<sup>27</sup> giving rise to normative forms (*ti*)<sup>28</sup> clear or murky.” This point has greatly shaped the Chinese spiritual pursuit in, and its overall evaluation of, literature, which prioritised the “empty” or “plastic” (such as *qi*) over all formal attributes (or *ti*). The flexible use of *ti*<sup>29</sup> also shows that, in Chinese critical discourse, the potential for “resonance” always holds primacy over the state of “precision”. In another remark, Cao Pi asserted that “literary works are the supreme achievements in the business of state, a splendour that does not decay.” (Owen 1992, 65)<sup>30</sup> This point explains why literature has remained a public instrument for such a long time in Chinese history. In a way, this ancient remark by Cao Pi also scratched the surface of a modern theory on author’s subjectivity.

Different from Owen’s systematic interest and versatile scholarship, Rolston’s contribution in this field is represented by his concentrated research into Chinese fiction of the Ming–Qing Dynasties, particularly through fiction commentary (*pingdian*, 评点), a colourful treasure house of indigenous Chinese narrative thought. Rolston’s representative works in this field include *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary* and *How to Read the Chinese Novel*. He described his approach as an endeavour to avoid “the imposition of foreign frameworks and literary theory onto a tradition alien to them” (Rolston 1990, Preface) in the reality of the universal acceptance of the so-called “new and sharper tools for analysing style, narrative method, and modes of structuring” (Plaks 1977, Foreword by Cyril Birch) derived from Western narratology. Rolston has done a remarkable job delving into the voluminous four Ming novel masterworks<sup>31</sup> in their commentary editions. He revisited a rich corpus of narrative poetics that is highly dialogic to Western narrative theory in terms of techniques, authorship, structuralization, and characterization. For example, Rolston opted to defend “the need for an author” (Plaks 1977, 111) through studying the typical “commentator–narrator” (a term he coined) in Chinese fiction. This he believed not only serves ideological infiltration or some didactic function but more importantly is a justified legacy of “the simulated context of oral storytelling” (Plaks 1977, 284), which, in addition to historiography, was another major source for the inception of Chinese fiction.<sup>32</sup> Rolston highlighted the importance of macrostructure in understanding Chinese fiction, pointing out that not only the four steps of general plotting, namely, beginning (*qi*, 起), development (*cheng*, 承), turn (*zhuan*, 转), and closure (*he*, 合), follow the change of the four seasons in the natural world, but even the specific number of episodes in a novel may agree with rules in *The Book of Changes* (or *I Ching*). Apart from interpretation, Rolston also compiled the translations of six pieces of “reading methodology” (*dufa*, 读法) for the six corresponding novels. Written by the great Ming–Qing critics, these articles are heavily laden with Chinese narrative thought. For example, in *How to Read The Fifth Book of Genius*<sup>33</sup>, Jin Shengtian generalized fifteen types of “literary devices” (*wenfa*, 文法) frequently applied in the narration of *The Water Margin*. Among them, there are those that vividly reflect the trans-generic, aesthetical, and empiricist nature of Chinese narrative poetics. Examples include: “snake in the grass or [discontinuous]

chalk line” (*caoshehuixian fa*, 草蛇灰线法, “heavy strokes of ink” (*daluomo fa*, 大落墨法), “clouds cutting the mountains in half” (*hengyunduanshan fa*, 横山断云法), “needles wrapped in cotton and thorns hidden in the mud” (*mianzhennici fa*, 棉泥针刺法). As well there are those that are potentially comparable with Western narrative theory, such as: “advance insertion” (*daocha fa*, 倒插法) which has comparative value with “foreshadowing” or “prolepsis”, “strokes of direct duplication” (*zhengfan fa*, 正犯法) and “strokes of incomplete duplication” (*lüefan fa*, 略犯法) which are comparable with the concept of “frequency”, and “strokes of extreme frugality” (*jisheng fa*, 极省法) and “strokes of extreme avoidance of frugality” (*jibusheng fa*, 极不省法), which are comparable with “duration”. Such potentials for comparison will be systematically tapped in Chapter Three.

The accumulated effort to “borrow a foreign mirror” has been accompanied with a growing need to “polish the Chinese mirror”. Over the past three decades or so, not only has narratology come to the fore of literary studies in China and been established as a research discipline, but it has also greatly stimulated research interest in China’s indigenous narrative poetics, as well as narratological enquiries into Chinese narrative fiction. Insofar as this newly acquired interest is concerned, three major focuses can be further distinguished.

One focus is on the narratological studies of traditional Chinese fiction, represented by Chen Pingyuan’s *Shifts in the Narrative Mode of Chinese Fiction*,<sup>34</sup> and Wang Ping’s *Traditional Chinese Fiction: A Narratological Perspective*.<sup>35</sup> Chen’s research marked one of the earliest in China to “bridge the internal and external studies of literature and combine a purely formalist narratological study of fiction with a culture-conscious sociological one”. (Chen 1988, 2)<sup>36</sup> While Wang’s research pioneered the study of Chinese fiction with a comprehensive Western narratological paradigm.

Another area of research is into Chinese narrative tradition and traditional narrative poetics, represented by Fu Xiuyan’s *Studies on Pre-Qin Narrative: The Formalization of Chinese Narrative Tradition*<sup>37</sup> and the three-volume series *Narrative Thought in Ancient China*,<sup>38</sup> chief-edited by Zhao Yanqiu. Fu’s work approached Chinese narrative from the broad sense of “narrative”, which subsumes all the regulated forms of narration, and probed into the origination and intellectual foundation of Chinese narrative tradition in the Pre-Qin Period.<sup>39</sup> Fu has fundamentally conditioned the rules and characteristics of Chinese narrative of later eras. Whereas, the works of Zhao et al. marked the first systematic research into traditional Chinese narrative poetics by scholars who are also learned in Western narratology.

The third focus is the more specialized enquiry into traditional Chinese fiction commentary, particularly that of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which is thought to be a splendid treasure house of indigenous Chinese narrative poetics. Representative research in this area includes Lin Gang’s *Studies on Fiction Commentary of the Ming*

and *Qing Dynasties*<sup>40</sup>, and Zhang Shijun's *Narrative Concepts in Ming–Qing Fiction Commentary*<sup>41</sup>.

Although highly necessary, polishing the Chinese mirror is far from being adequate so far as developing narratology as an academic discipline is concerned. For, evidently, research in this direction is all too easily drawn into a vortex which can surely be contradicting, because it intends to show that this Chinese mirror is somewhat exceptional, if not superior, but in doing so it simply cannot resist the temptation of Western narrative concepts, which are so often expropriated to lend expression or validity to their Chinese opposite numbers. This brings into focus another orientation in comparative studies, one that aims for higher degrees of disciplinary openness and dialogic significance.

#### LIGHTALAMPFORINTERILLUMINATION

Apart from the mirrored approaches, we may discern another ambitious effort to make a radiant projector of Chinese narrative poetics. In other words, by systematically foregrounding its heterogeneity and critical strengths against Western narrative theory, scholars of this orientation have sought to establish a distinctive branch of Chinese narratology. The most prominent research work includes: Andrew H. Plaks's *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (ed.), *Chinese Narratology, Archetype and Allegory in Dream of the Red Chamber, Conceptual Models in Chinese Narrative Theory*, Yang Yi's *Chinese Narratology*<sup>42</sup>, and Ming Dong Gu's *Chinese Theories of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative System*. Plaks targeted what he defined as Chinese masterworks and explored deeply some macroscopic but profound aspects of Chinese narrative, such as: archetype and mythology in Chinese narrative tradition, structural modes of masterworks, conceptual models in Chinese narrative thought, rhetorical features, allegory and allegorical reading. Of Plaks's pioneering research, Cyril Birch spoke highly in his Foreword to *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*:

Andrew Plaks makes a gallant proposal for a critical theory of narrative derived from the specific corpus of Chinese fiction and historiography. The future framers of theories of literature that will truly be applicable on a universal scale will find it impossible to ignore the implications of some of his arguments. (Plaks 1977, xi)

Plaks expressed in explicit terms that he would work towards “the delineation of certain fundamental issues of Chinese narrative theory” (Plaks 1977, 309) and “a comprehensive critical theory for dealing with the Chinese narrative corpus.” (Plaks 1977, 309) He probed into Chinese and Western cultural traditions and pointed out that the non-appearance of epic poetry (such as in the standard “epic–romance–novel” sequence in Western literary history) and the predominance of historiography in the Chinese tradition might be factors that have shaped narrativity and fictionality into its unique form. Thus, the demarcation between Chinese and Western traditions in this regard is that

[...] historiography replaces epic among the Chinese narrative genres, providing not only a set of complex techniques of structuralization and

characterization, but also a conceptual model for the perception of significance within the outlines of human events. (Plaks 1977, 314)

While expounding differences arising out of the different traditions, Plaks also believed that the two sides share most of the basic narrative categories essentially because they both “represent human experience in terms of a more or less continuous succession of changing situations in time.” (Plaks 1977, 314) However, despite this shared priority of narrating successions of events, Chinese narrative fiction places considerable emphasis on “the interstitial spaces between events” (Plaks 1977, 315). For example, in traditional Chinese fiction, one always finds a thick matrix of non-events such as static description, set speeches, discursive digressions, and a host of other non-narrative elements. Based on the Chinese philosophical formulation of *yin* and *yang*, Plaks tried to explain Chinese fiction writers' taste for “non-events” by proposing a conceptual pair of narrative *stasis* and *praxis*. From this same theoretical basis, he tried to address Western queries of Chinese fiction being “loosely episodic” or lacking in “a certain degree of manifest artistic unity” (Plaks 1977, 329) by explicating its structural principles of “complementary bipolarity” and “multiple periodicity”, which can be particularly convincing as far as the reading of “masterworks” is concerned. In terms of characterization for example, Plaks defied E. M. Forster's division between “flat character” and “round character” (Forster, 1967) by pointing to a prevalent approach in Chinese fiction of presenting “composite characters”, which prioritizes the depiction of “groups and sets of figures, rather than concentrating on the delineation of the individual hero in isolation.” (Plaks 1977, 345) An ideal example would be *The Water Margin*, where literally 108 heroes each made his/her own way to the water margin as rebels against the central regime. With their journeys, stories, and destinies intertwined, about thirty-six of them are foregrounded through weightier depiction. On one hand, these foregrounded characters differ sharply from one another; on the other hand, as the most prominent in their respective “groups” or “composites”, they, together with the others, form “fields” of characters, within each of which the tension between identity and difference contributes greatly to the literary–aesthetic effect of overall characterization.

Plaks made good use of Chinese mythical tales and philosophy. For example, he re-examined tales centring on the marriage of NüWa<sup>43</sup> and Fu Xi<sup>44</sup> in a way similar to Vladimir Propp's examination of the morphology of Russian folktales. According to him, these tales are archetypal, pregnant with the thought of *yin-yang* and the “five-elements”. From these he derived the Chinese pattern of conceptualization and structuralization, which he termed “complementary bipolarity and multiple periodicity”, and he applied to the structural analysis of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He also pointed out the ritualization or schematization of myth in Chinese life, which, he thought, has predominantly shaped the Chinese approach to narration. In addition to the issue of archetype, Plaks also compared allegory and allegorical interpretation in Chinese and Western literary traditions. He observed that, although there is a high degree of similarity between the two, their difference is one between practical and idealistic, this-worldly” and other-worldly, moving outward and moving upward, just as he tried to describe in

one conclusive remark: “He [The Chinese allegorist] strives for *extension* where his Western counterpart seeks elevation through *intension*.” (Plaks 1977, 125)

Plaks’s contribution to this research field has been tremendous, not only for his trail-blazing approach and an in-depth understanding of Chinese literary tradition, but more importantly for a vision that aspires for transcultural intelligibility through interillumination. Just as Jing Wang put it: “His venture into the Chinese critical canon points to a possible alternative—that of merging the systematic construction of a paradigm into the elusive and sensual experience of the text itself.”<sup>45</sup> However, we may also realize that, while dealing with all such macroscopic comparative issues, Plaks’s research has shelved the agenda for comparisons at the more concrete or systematic level, thus leaving considerable room for further research. Besides, out of the sheer expediency of theorization, some of the use he has made of the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition may still be open to question. Plaks himself was aware of this when he wrote: “we must apologize at the outset for the oversimplification necessarily involved in the enterprise.” (Wang 1989, 268)

On the Chinese side, the construction of a Chinese narratology is represented by Yang Yi, who viewed it from the perspective of cultural strategy. Yang stated his basic thinking as “restoration–reference–assimilation–integration” (Yang 2009, 36),<sup>46</sup> which means “returning to the original status of Chinese culture, referring to contemporary Western theories, bridging literary theories past and now, and integrating all to bring about innovation.” (Yang 2009, 36)<sup>47</sup> What can be felt from this statement, aside from an ambition, is a clear sense of eclecticism, further strengthened by his research principle of “neutralization of the two poles” (Yang 2009, 24–30).<sup>48</sup> Yang attempted to build Chinese narratology from five extensive aspects, namely: structure, time, perspective, idea–image, and critic–commentator<sup>49</sup>. He approached each of the five aspects from the Chinese cultural tradition and compared it at appropriate points with Western narrative theory. For example, in “The Aspect of Structure” (Yang 2009, 37–124), Yang started from the “verbalness” of the Chinese word for “structure” and proposed what he called “the dynamics of structure” (结构动力学) for narrative research. He justified this proposal by relating it to its origin in Liu Xie’s *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*:

[...] but in all cases the normative form (*ti*, 体) is set in accordance with the affective state (*qing*, 情); then according to the normative form, a momentum (*shi*, 势) is given. Momentum is formed by following the path of least resistance. (Owen 1992, 232)<sup>50</sup>

With reference to Western narrative theory, he then generalized five themes in the historical development of structural form, particularly in the Chinese context, namely: formulaic creation, composite structure for works with epic features, the naturalistic turn, movement towards diversity, and the New Form featuring Chinese–Western alignment and integration; and he supported each classification with corresponding narrative works as examples. In “The Aspect of Perspective” (Yang 2009, 37–124), Yang revealed the skilful use of perspective as a narrative strategy in historiographical writings as early as the Spring and Autumn Period. He also examined the Ming critic–commentator

JinShengtan’s vivid analyses of the manipulation of perspectives in *The Water Margin* in relation to the achievement of aesthetic and psychological effect. Yang assimilated a series of Western terms, such as: omniscient, limited perspectives, fluidity of perspective, focalization and blind spot; and hewed out of them a distinction between “focalization on being” (*jujiaoyu you*, 聚焦于有) and “focalization on non-being” (*jujiaoyuwu*, 聚焦于无). He observed that “focalization on non-being” was also prominently used in traditional Chinese fiction. A well-known example is the narration of Liu Bei’s three visits to the thatched cottage of Zhuge Liang’s in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.<sup>51</sup> The chief aim of narration in this part is to portray the unparalleled image and personality of the sagacious Zhuge Liang, which, however, stands out vividly from the pages well before focalization is placed onto him when Liu Bei and he finally meet. The fact here is that focalizations on others are perfectly to the service of the portrayal of Zhuge Liang, the man absent from view, from three recommendations at different circumstances by Liu Bei’s former advisors, to verses in the folk songs of local peasants labouring in the field, to encounters with his close friends and relatives on trips (the company he kept), to descriptions of landscape features and settings around his house, even to the temperament and speech manners of his page, and equally importantly, to Liu Bei’s perseverance and keen anticipation throughout the trips. The recommendations implied Zhuge Liang’s reputation in elite literati even as a hermit; the labouring peasants chanted songs expressing his worldview; the encounters with his close acquaintances formed a reflector or jigsaw of his possible personality; the views of chanting peasants in the field, artistic scenery and architecture in the vicinity of his house, the unworldly people along the way, merely convey one important message, that this man’s spiritual power has permeated the landscape, the air, and the livelihood of the areas around the Resting Dragon’s Ridge.

Yang Yi’s *Chinese Narratology* is highly influential in the field of comparative narrative poetics in China because it marked “a theoretical revelation of a Chinese narratological world quite different from the West and unfamiliar to Western academia, as well as the preliminary establishment of narratological rationales of China’s own making.” (Yang 2009, 455)<sup>52</sup> However, due to space limitations this dissertation shall not examine the other important issues covered by this work. All in all, in a way similar to Andrew Plaks’s research, Yang’s also appears to be strategic, or in other words, foundational. Although he delved deep into the core of Chinese narrative thought and tradition and attempted to uncover certain fundamental “cultural codes” accounting for differences with the West, he nevertheless scratched only the surface of a complex comparative agenda. This, together with what has been discussed above, about the other orientations or theorists, leaves us thinking what could be further done to consolidate and invigorate this growing field, and in a broader sense, what will become of the field of “narratologies”, or put differently, what kind of value needs to be built-in to keep the field healthily and sustainably productive.

So far as future research in comparative Chinese–Western narrative poetics is concerned, I would like to propose three likely growth points.

First, there needs to be a proper degree of “Chineseness” in studies of narratology. By “Chineseness”, what is meant is the focus should purely be cultural and intellectual, rather than anything unnecessarily nationalistic, let alone racist. Traditional Chinese narrative literature was generally created by Confucian literati whose “intent or aspiration” (*zhi*, 志), “literary sentiment” (*qing*, 情), and “intellectual talent” (*cai*, 才) might be incommensurably different from other traditions or civilizations. Take the so-called “cult of *qing*”<sup>53</sup> for example. It is something of a rare cultural subtlety and sophistication that was cumulatively shaped over the exceptionally profound poetical tradition, modified by its “rivers and mountains” landscape under the four distinct seasons, enhanced by the numerous dynastic changes and warfare that often meant death and diaspora of families. Without an adequate understanding of this “cult of *qing*”, the Western reader may face an enormous challenge reading Chinese fiction such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He may feel Daiyu’s burying fallen flower-petals just as absurd as the Chinese pursuit of family reunion at all costs.

Second, there needs to be in-depth comparisons of key narrative concepts, notions and techniques. As discussed above, for all the existing narratological research that falls into the categories of “borrowing a foreign mirror”, “polishing the Chinese mirror”, or “lighting a lamp for interillumination”, few have set about a systematic comparative agenda at the relative microscopic level. There always seems to exist in such research certain lacuna or deficiencies even for scholars like Zhang Shijun who did explore in this fashion, because they may not be equally interested in Western narratology as they might be in Chinese narrative thought.

Third there needs to be more research into the philosophical and cultural underpinnings that have accounted for both the commonality and the incommensurability between Chinese narrative poetics and Western narrative theory. There are already research results of this kind in the broader denomination of comparative poetics, notably Zhang Longxi’s *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, and Yu Hong’s *Chinese Literary Theory and Western Poetics*. Building on the findings of these works, more research still needs to be done that focuses specifically on the philosophical values and cultural codes embedded in narrative between China and the West.

### **FUSION OF HORIZONS, OR CONCORDIA DISCORDS?**

Having closely examined the state of the art, we naturally come to a point of looking into the future, where deliberating on values is hardly avoidable. In fact, still applicable are the research pursuits that Haskell Block once proposed for comparative literature: “rapports de fait” and “rapports de valeur”. (Block 1970, 47). It is fair to say that any comparative studies handle, transmit and reproduce values, which sometimes can be discordant or even conflicting with each other. For a measured envisioning of the comparative enterprise based on an evaluation of the history, reality and trends of theories, I would like to invoke two notions which may be relevant to the present

concern: one is the “fusion of horizons” first articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and the other is the ancient Horatian notion of *concordia discors* (discordant harmony).

After being raised by Gadamer, the idea of “fusion of horizons” has been advocated by numerous comparatists as a guiding principle. In the field of comparative poetics, for example, Zhang Longxi “argue[d] for the fusion of horizons in the study of literature” (Zhang, 1989), which echoed with James J. Y. Liu’s proposed method of “drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, contemporary literary theory, and traditional Chinese poetics” (Liu 1975, 2). Other comparatists, though not using the same terminology, have voiced in different forms their support for the universality of theory. For example, comparative literary theorist James J. Y. Liu declared at the very beginning of his *Chinese Theories of Literature* that “The first and ultimate one [goal] is to contribute to an eventual universal theory of literature ...” (Liu 1975, 2) As if vigilant of risking being too assertive, Liu not only moderated his tone with the determiners of “ultimate” and “eventual”, but also added the eclectic remark that “a comparative study of theories of literature may lead to a better understanding of all literature.” (Liu 1975, 2)

In fact, while dialogue or “interillumination” is definitely possible, “fusion of horizons” may be an ideal too lofty to attain for many cross-cultural undertakings, particularly comparative literature or poetics, which rely so overwhelmingly on traditions. Indiscriminate use of this notion might also abuse the true intention of Gadamer, who invoked it in a sense that is more neutral than artificial to describe the relationship between the past and the present in forming a larger context of meaning for the process of understanding. Just as Gadamer himself explained: “In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for the old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.” (Gadamer 2004, 305) Another problem with “fusion of horizons” in the present context is its huge vagueness, which has left in the dark the actual means to achieve it as well as the cultural–political factors it will necessitate.

Reflections on the future of this field of comparative studies and on the notion of “fusion of horizons” direct me to another value encapsulated in the ancient Horatian notion of *concordia discors*. Originally found in Horace’s twelfth epistle “to describe Empedocles’ philosophy that the world is explained and shaped by a perpetual strife between the four elements, ordered by love into a jarring unity” (Gordon, 2007), the notion has generally been understood as the state of discordant harmony or a pleasing balance of opposites. Samuel Johnson, in a reference to marriage, defined *concordia discors* as “that suitable disagreement which is always necessary to intellectual harmony,” (Johnson, 1801, 43)) which extends its explanatory power specifically to the intellectual sphere. As is mentioned, “fusion of horizons” may necessitate certain cultural–political factors. In other words, its lofty romanticism may have concealed its sense of cultural clashes or ideological violence. Take narratology for example. Its modern development in the West has led to the marginalization or obliteration of other narrative theories and practices. Consequently, fusion of horizons in such a way is more or less illusory and not good for the continued growth of narratology, especially when it is subject to unprecedented challenges. By contrast, the

idea of *concordiadiscors* places emphasis on harmony while recognizing the existence of discord. The word *concordia* has retained the positive elements or the ultimate goal of *fusionofhorizons* but moderated its force, while *discors* substituted diversity for the monotony as implied in *fusion of horizons*. Comparatively, *concordiadiscors* also coincides with the Confucian idea of “harmony in diversity” (*he erbutong*, 和而不同) and “seeking common ground while reserving differences” (*qiutongcunyi*, 求同存异). In a word, given the diversity of, and the tension of opposites between, theories and traditions, the oxymoronic notion of *concordiadiscors* might be more conducive to the consolidation and diversification of narratology as an academic discipline.

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## Notes

1. The author conducted PhD research at the College of Foreign Languages of Beijing Language and Culture University and the Faculty of Arts of Macquarie University under the joint supervision of Professor NingYizhong and Professor Nick Mansfield from September 2010 to June 2014. This article is part of the Introduction to his PhD dissertation.
2. Aware of the fact that there is already a well-developed narrative *theory*, or narratology, in the West, and the fact that there was only a scattered distribution of narrative *thought* over a vast body of critical discourse in pre-modern China, this article has used the word *poetics* in a general sense to accommodate the two objects in comparison.
3. As implied in Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 18*, “Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou growest: So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”
4. In his essay *Of Studies*, Sir Francis Bacon wrote, “If he be not apt to beat over matters, and to call up one thing to prove and illustrate another, let him study the lawyers’ cases.”
5. There are hypotheses about social life and human destiny at different levels. For example, in terms of “power and order”, there is one that believes, “the Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide.”, as in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*; in terms of “ethical codes”, there are those that either advise, “within the Four Seas, all men are brothers.”, as in *The Water Margin*, or warn, “Karmic retribution is swift and certain.” or “the four evils of wine, women, wealth and wrath” (disputable this may be by today’s standards), as in *The Water Margin* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*; in terms of the “ultimate truth or vanity of human life”, there is the epigram in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* that “Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.”.
6. This unique tradition of authoring—and, correspondingly, interpreting—literary and historiographical works is famously known as the “technique of the *Chunqiu*” or the “diction of the *Chunqiu*”. It is generally believed that, when compiling the *Chunqiu*, translated as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Confucius was very deliberate and skilful in

- his marshalling of language as well as its proportions in order to transmit subtly his moral message and historical evaluations.
7. An equivalent for *qishu*, 奇書, in Chinese.
  8. An equivalent for *caizishu*, 才子書, in Chinese.
  9. The notion of “literary mind” (*wenxin*, 文心) was first raised by Chinese literary theorist Liu Xie (465–520) in his 50-chaptered theoretical masterpiece *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxindiaolong*, 文心雕龙).
  10. While bringing the benefits of literary imagination, such bifurcation also risks running wild under special circumstances. Chinese literary history has a series of heavy lessons to offer, from the intellectual disaster in the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) when “books were burnt and Confucian scholars were buried alive” to the height of “literary inquisition” in the Manchurian-ruled Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), to the unchecked literary censorship and persecution during the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976).
  11. M. H. Abrams used the two metaphors for the title of his seminal work *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, alluding to William Butler Yeats’s line “the mirror turn lamp”. In Chinese Buddhism, the “lamp” signifies “a superb wisdom illuminating the life journey of sentient beings.
  12. English translation by myself.
  13. Zhang, Yinde, *Studies in Narratology* (叙述学研究), Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1989.
  14. The collection focused on important works in Western literary theory, poetics, aesthetics, and linguistics and was published by the China Social Sciences Press and the Baihua Art and Literature Publishing House in 1990.
  15. The six-volume series is a component unit of the “Weiming Library of Translations” (未名译库) published by the Peking University Press in 2007. It includes the Chinese versions of *Reading Narrative* by Joseph Hillis Miller, *Narratologies* by David Herman, *A Companion to Narrative Theory* by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Narrative as Rhetoric* by James Phelan, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* by Susan Lanser, and *Postmodern Narrative Theory* by Mark Currie.
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21. Zhao, Yiheng, *When Narrator is Narrated: Introduction to Comparative Narratology* (当说者被说的时候: 比较叙事学导论), Beijing: Renmin University Press, 1998.
22. Accessed on February 22, 2013. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) is a system of academic databases for nationwide knowledge-sharing.
23. Cao Pi (187–226), the elder son of the great statesman and strategist Cao Cao, was a leading man of letters and founding emperor of Wei in the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280). Theselected essay, *Discourse on Literature*, is a chapter from his *Authoritative Discourses* (典论).
24. Lu Ji (261–303) was a celebrity of among the literati of the Western Jin Period (266–316).
25. Liu Xie (465–520) was a renowned literary theorist of the Northern and Southern Dynasties Period (420–589). With *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, the fifty-chapter comprehensive thesis on literature, he is generally considered one of the best-accomplished literary theorists of ancient China.
26. 气, *qi*, sometimes translated into “pneuma”, is a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy and has strongly influenced the traditional Chinese world view.
27. Owen, Stephen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 65. “文以气为主。气之清浊有体。”
28. 体, *ti*, is a very discursive term flexibly used for the reference of “form”, “style”, “genre”, or “structure”, depending on the specific context.
29. See fn 29.
30. Owen, Stephen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 68. “盖文章经国之大业, 不朽之盛事。”
31. Namely, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *The Journey to the West*, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.
32. It is widely believed that different from Western fiction, which evolved from epic and romance stories, Chinese fiction came into being with the influence of historiography on the one hand and “street talk and popular gossip” on the other.
33. The famous Ming critic has designated six books of genius which he would determine to comment on. *The Fifth Book of Genius* refers to *The Water Margin*.
34. Chen, Pingyuan, *Shifts in the Narrative Mode of Chinese Fiction* (中国小说叙事模式的转变), Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1988.
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36. Translation by myself.
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38. The three volumes are: 1. Xiong, Jiangmei, *Narrative Thought of the Pre-Qin Period and the Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties* (先秦两汉叙事思想), Changsha: Hunan Normal University Press, 2010; 2. Li, Zuolin, *Narrative Thought from the Wei and Jin Dynasties to the Song and Yuan Dynasties* (魏晋至宋元叙事思想), Changsha: Hunan Normal University Press, 2011; 3. Zhao, Yanqiu, *Narrative Thought from the Ming and Qing*

*Dynasties to the Modern Era* (明清近代叙事思想), Changsha: Hunan Normal University Press, 2011.

39. The Pre-Qin Period is a general reference for the long period before the First Emperor of Qin unified China in BCE 221. It was a period of rival kingdoms and great thinkers.
40. Lin, Gang, *Studies on Fiction Commentary of the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (明清之际小说评点学之研究), Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999.
41. Zhang, Shijun, *Narrative Concepts in Ming-Qing Fiction Commentary* (明清小说评点叙事概念研究), Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2007.
42. Yang, Yi, *Chinese Narratology* (中国叙事学), Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009.
43. The goddess in Chinese mythology who created mankind with clay and repaired heaven with many-coloured stones.
44. Husband of NüWa, first of the three sovereigns of ancient China, inventor of the *bagua* trigrams from which the hexagrams of the *I Ching* are derived.
45. “还原—参照—贯通—融合”. English translation by myself.
46. “返回中国文化的原点, 参照西方现代理论, 贯通古今文史, 融合以创造新的学理”. English translation by myself.
47. “两极中和”. English translation by myself.
48. “Critic-commentator” is my own translation for the Chinese *pingdianjia*, 评点家. In ancient China, it was typical for an established man of letters to publish his critical commentary as a system of meta-texts symbiotic with the novel itself.
49. The Chinese original is “莫因散体, 即体散也. 著, 乘御辨也”
50. Liu Bei, the later-to-be Emperor of the Kingdom of Shu, was in dire need of a military counselor after a series of defeats. After being recommended with Zhuge Liang, the reclusive scholar and strategist, Liu Bei decided to pay him a visit at the latter's thatched cottage in the Reposing Dragon's Ridge. Accompanied by Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, his sworn brothers and top combat generals, he made light of the difficult trip thrice and finally met Zhuge Liang and persuaded the latter to assist him. This story, narrated across Chapters 36, 37 and 38 of the novel, has since become a popular Chinese idiom: *sangumaolu* (三顾茅庐).
51. Recommendation remark by Qian Zhongwen, renowned Professor and literary theorist in China, prolific author on literature and literary theory, chief editor of the seven-volumed Chinese version of *Complete Works of M. M. Bakhtin*. The original: “从理上示了不同西方于西方学者甚陌生的中国叙事学世界, 初建立了我国自己的叙事学原理”. English translation by myself.
52. Scholars of Chinese literature can duly realize that the Chinese character “qing, 情” defies equivalent in almost all Indo-European languages. It is neither the same as “emotion”, “sentiment”, “feeling”, nor “love”.

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