

A Discipline with Local Characteristics and a Global Perspective:

A Review of Xiuyan Fu's *Zhong Guo Xu Shi Xue* [Chinese Narratology],
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Xiuyan Fu is a famous scholar in narrative studies and a pioneer of the discipline of Chinese Narratology. His *Chinese Narratology*, published by Peking University Press in 2015, shows that great progress has been made towards the construction of this new discipline and testifies to its plurality and complexity. This publication has produced a great impetus both institutionally and intellectually in China in spite of Fu's modest metaphorical claim on the very last page of his book that what he did was to 'build a little hut halfway up the hill' (324).¹ Since the volume offers a refreshing perspective to contemporary Chinese scholars, it ought to resonate with scholars in the West and challenge their interest. Additionally, it could serve as a bridge for any scholar who wishes to get access to Chinese culture and literature. The translation of Fu's book into English is in progress, hopefully to appear in 2020, in this way ensuring the book's reception by an international audience.

The work goes beyond the field of literature and reaches for tools and materials from a broad range of fields such as anthropology, religious studies, mythology, linguistics and sociology. The author makes an archaeological inquiry into many Chinese narrative texts. The purpose of this genealogical survey is to provide a more rational and systematic explanation for the origin and formation of the narrative, 'uncover forgotten interconnections' and let 'obscured or unacknowledged lines of descent'² come back into focus.

The volume is made up of six sections divided into thirteen chapters. In the introductory section, Fu formulates three key questions: What is Chinese narratology? How can Chinese narrative become a discipline for academic study? What is the significance of bringing forward Chinese narratology? Before answering these questions, he makes a brief review of Western narratology and points out that narratology is a flourishing discipline in China. Given the history and the current state of narratology, Fu defines Chinese narratology within the broad context of world literature as a discipline highlighting the characteristics and value of Chinese culture and literature, and integrating Chinese and Western theories and practice. As a discipline, narratology can lay claim to universal validity. If it could analyse solely Western narrative works with the theoretical toolbox it provides, such an approach would go against its original intentionality. Likewise, if it were supposed to explain all narrative works only with Western tools, it

¹ All translations from Fu's book are mine.

² David Herman, 'Histories of Narrative Theory (I): A Genealogy of Early Developments', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 20.

would also be self-contradictory. As Peter Hajdu rightly points out, ‘real narratives necessarily belong to some particular traditions, and therefore some particular traditions have to have an impact on narrative theory’.³ Only by recognizing and consolidating its characteristics can Chinese narratology complement Western narratology and bring about a new balance in its dialogue with the West. As Fu writes, this does not mean ‘competing with Western narratology, but building our own foothold on the rocks of other mountains.’ (17)

As for the innovation of Chinese narratology, Fu elaborates on five approaches from a methodological point of view in the preface. Firstly, the research scope should be expanded especially to those showing Chinese narrative pedigree. Secondly, the research should explore the past more deeply, e.g. to the pre-novel or even the pre-narrative period. Thirdly, the research method should be improved to be more inclusive, without any disciplinary or national boundaries. Fourthly, the existing ideas need to be renewed and modified in order to balance our sensory perspectives. The fifth approach is to blend in especially previously neglected regional knowledge. Former studies on literary works have mostly focused on characterization and plots from a linear perspective of time and causality. Instead, Fu brings our attention to the static description of the character’s appearance, cultural interpretation of bronze wares and Chinese porcelains but also to what he calls the ‘acoustic reading of literature’, a concept he borrows from the Canadian R. M. Schafer’s work on ‘acoustic narrative’ (see 239).

In the second section entitled ‘the Origin of Chinese Narratives’, Fu returns to the past to investigate the initial forms of narration and its influence on later narration. He elaborates with details on the fact that the movement of the sun in the primordial world is the earliest and most important narrative event, which provides a deep structure and basic conflict for narration and inspires the circular mode of thinking. *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, an important ancient book in the Pre-Qin period, full of seemingly absurd stories with wild imagination, is illustrated as the origin of the ecological narration of later ages, reflecting the interdependent and symbiotic relationship among all living things. Through the deep exploration of many ancient books, Fu concludes that the Chinese narrative tradition originated from the Pre-Qin Period. Then he enumerates three ways that Pre-Qin narrative might influence later narrative styles, which are: (1) narrative form: e.g. talking-singing (rap) art in the Pre-Qin period becomes the ancestor of Chinese folk art (69); (2) thought patterns: e.g. at the crucial moment of a major event, the protagonist always summons reinforcements to defeat the opponents (70); (3) tendencies and features: e.g. metaphorical narrative is noteworthy for Chinese words, phrases and sentences which contain meaningful Chinese stories (70). The concepts in this section, meta-narration, meta-ecological narration and Pre-Qin narration have greatly broadened our understanding of Chinese narratology.

The third section, ‘Narratives on Utensils’, charts new directions for a cross-media field of the study of narrative. It answers the question how fictional narrative began with ‘ante-narrative’ on bronze wares. Through a detailed discussion regarding the various categories of ‘lines/ornament’, ‘weave/knit’, ‘empty/full’ and ‘fear/joy’, Fu addresses this question by analysing the inherent link between ante-narrative and later narrative. The ‘arch-writing’ on bronze wares represents the starting point of Chinese writing. As to another typical Chinese utensil, namely porcelain, Fu gives details about the relationship between Chinese porcelain and rice, Yi (*The Book of Changes*), jade, art in general, also

³ Peter Hajdu, ‘Rediscovering Chinese Narrative Tradition: An Introduction’, *Neohelicon* 45 (2018): 171.

explaining why the English word ‘China’ originates from the name of porcelain objects the Chinese produced centuries ago which were so famous abroad. In this way the value, power and mode of existence of things are illustrated cogently. Fu’s observation on bronze wares and Chinese porcelain from narratological and cultural perspectives sheds new light on the ‘genealogy’ of the Chinese narrative tradition.

The fourth section, ‘Narratives in Classical Texts’, consists of three chapters that interpret four classical Chinese novels, four Ancient Chinese folklore love stories and the ancient ode (rhapsody). Fu examines both the surface and the deep narrative structure of the four classical novels by using the ‘contractual function’ of classical narratology.

Relying on intertextual analysis, Fu believes that four Ancient Chinese folklore love stories (*The White Snake*, *Liang shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, *Meng Jiangnv Weeping down the Great Wall*, *The Cowherd and the Girl Weaver*) are actually different variants of the same story. The ode, as an old species of the epic genre, had great influence on later prose in its narrative mode, its question/answer structure, and the allegorical story ending.

In the fifth section, ‘Approach to Narrative through Visual and Auditory Perception’, the author’s interpretation aims at achieving a balance between movement and stasis and between seeing and hearing. Fu extracts many details from Chinese and Western literature to prove that the characters’ spirit is more important than their external appearance, namely the information about the character’s external look is always vague but the information about the character’s inner spirit is clear. He continues to illustrate that the description of appearance often uses metaphor as its main rhetorical device that is part of the cultural conventions of a different time and space. As for the acoustic narrative, Fu not only exemplifies the auditive functions of a narrative, but also puts forward an original methodology using its own critical lexicon (with concepts such as re-hearing, soundscape, auscultation, etc.), thus pointing out how readers’ response to a text often focuses on the writer’s use of visual images in this ‘visual culture age’, which means that readers do not listen to/ hear the text as well.

The final section, ‘Regional Narratives’, presents the local legends and folklore from the Yu Zhang area, near Lake Poyang, where Fu lives. He analyses the legend of Feather Fairy from the point of view of its geographical features and the means of transportation the author uses. This section also investigates the reasons why this story did not spread outside its birth place. Fu’s analysis of the folk story of Xu Xun Taming the Evil Dragon helps us to rememorate events from a lost history and clarify the attitude of the story-teller. The author offers a variety of fresh and fascinating insights into these local classical texts, which aptly demonstrate the view of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz that ‘local knowledge’ is not better or worse than universal knowledge (36).⁴

Fu attaches particular importance to the comparative perspective, which is a major strength of his book. As Peter Hajdu writes, ‘even in this context, in which the ideogram is both ornamentation and text, picture and writing at the same time, Fu makes use of both Chinese and western thinkers (Hobbes, Kant, Barthes) to understand the development of Chinese culture. It [the book] is especially illuminating when in the chapter ‘Fear/Joy’, he applies Hobbes’s concept of the Leviathan to explain Bronze-Age Chinese mentalities.’⁵ If structural linguistics and what Lewin Thomas called ‘physics envy’⁶ are

⁴ See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000).

⁵ Hajdu, ‘Rediscovering Chinese Narrative Tradition’, 176.

⁶ Lewis Thomas, ‘Humanities and Sciences’, in *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler’s Ninth*

the incubators of western classical narratology, historiography is the womb of Chinese narratology. Whereas the Western narrative emphasizes rational and linear thinking, the Chinese narrative puts forward a perceptual and circular structure. Fu also demonstrates that whereas the Western narrative centres more on individual stories, the Chinese narrative focuses more on collective stories. The Western narrative embodies the philosophy of binary oppositions, while Chinese narratives reflect the harmonious spirit of binary symbiosis. Fu's *Chinese Narratology* offers many of such thought-provoking comparisons between China and the West, comparisons that can make the readers understand better the differences between the East and the West.

To decode the myth of the sun's movement from east to west, 'A Semicircle' in the first chapter of the first section, Fu ingeniously combines Edward Burnett Tylor's relevant concepts of psychological background and narrative motivation with Giambattista Vico's conception of the great artistic creativity and poetic wisdom of myth. Fu thinks that 'according to cultural anthropology, there is no point in studying the myth of a nation in isolation. Only by placing it into a world's larger perspective and comparing it with other cultures, its hidden meanings can be read, thus obtaining a more complete and accurate understanding' (11). To support his opinions, Fu comments on the similarities between various stories from around the world about solar magic and ritual sacrifice. Such similarities were pointed out in *The Golden Bough* by the Scottish anthropologist J. G. Frazer whom Fu fully acknowledges.⁷ The relationship between meta-narrative and the myth of the sun is important and, in this context, Fu brings to his readers' attention Max Müller's vivid description of early people's 'confusion of naming'. More specifically, Fu identifies the earliest meta-narrative expression hidden in Chinese mythology by integrating the etymological viewpoints of Ernest Cassirer and Shuxian Ye. Additionally, on 'Narrative Semantics of Appearance Description' in section five, he brings together Jacques Derrida's analysis of 'deforming and naturally magnifying perceptions' of those whom he called 'the small and speechless [*infans*] man'⁸ and Vico's religious perspective in his reading of the description of a strange appearance. In Fu's words, 'the combination of narratology with other theories aims to make the Chinese narrative tradition more understandable' (32).

Although Chinese narratology is still a relatively new discipline, Fu's work significantly influenced its development. With the current policy of 'Chinese Culture Goes Abroad', there is more ground for research in narratology in China. This results in an increasing openness to the outside world that heightens enthusiasm for exchange and communication. Fu's Chinese narratology is an open theoretical system in which he invites scholars to forge narrative theoretical tools with their own national characteristics and encourages more scholarship with regards to Chinese thought as much as to Western thought. His *Chinese Narratology* offers a critical construction of Chinese narrative blending localized characteristics within a globalized perspective.

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⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Intro. Judith Butler (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 278.

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