

## **A Comparative Perspective on Unnaturalness:**

A Review of Biwu Shang's *Unnatural Narrative across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge/ Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2019, 110 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-31130-5 (hbk)/978-0-429-45984-1 (ebk), 130 £

Yuzhen Lin

Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai  
E-mail: lyz5474@sjtu.edu.cn

Biwu Shang's *Unnatural Narrative across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* proposes both a strong theoretical background and detailed textual analyses. The volume achieves all its purposes declared at the beginning – decolonizing and subverting 'the hegemony of European and Anglo-American narrative theory', in such a way as to both pave 'the way for the rise of those marginalized narrative theories' and to draw attention to 'neglected and periphery narratives' (19) through the interpretations of three Chinese texts in Chapters 3 and 4, and one Iraqi text in Chapter 5.

The first chapter ('Introduction: Core Issues and Critical Debates of Unnatural Narratology'), Shang successfully categorizes the unnatural at both discourse and story level and analyses various stories' unnaturalness from the perspective of the unnatural elements they contain. Two reading approaches are proposed in the last section of the chapter – both a naturalizing and an unnaturalizing reading of narrative fiction. Focusing on unnaturalness, Shang tentatively calls the factors that cause different degrees of unnaturalness 'unnatural elements' and considers that they can be 'distributed at a local level (giving rise to a lower degree of unnaturalness) or global level (pertaining to a higher degree of unnaturalness) (6). What Shang terms 'unnatural elements' include 'character, time, space and events' (8), or are concerned with the built-up storyworlds that are 'physically, or logically impossible in the sense that the boundaries of the storyworlds are transgressed' (8). At the same time the book brings a fresh comparative perspective 'as a rejoinder to Susan Stanford Friedman's call for a transnational turn in narrative theory', attempting 'to draw attention to a comparativist turn in current narrative studies' (19). While aiming 'to subvert the hegemony of Western narrative theory' (19), the author echoes the narratological enterprise of well-known narratologists such as Brian Richardson, David Herman, Jan Alber, Monika Fludernik and James Phelan, among others.

Shang devotes the second chapter ('Unnatural Narrative: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives') to a newer, comparative paradigm that he calls 'comparative narratology', using Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa's concept (24). The author remarks that 'a brief survey of contemporary narrative scholarship reveals that the discussions of narratives are largely carried out within the Western hemisphere, leaving the rich narrative resources in the rest of the world almost unexplored, which does not do adequate justice to the ubiquity of narrative.' (23-4) Shang acknowledges the work of François Jost, Susan Stanford Friedman, Monika Fludernik, Greta Olsen, Eyal Segal, Sylvie Patron, John Pier, and Marina Grishakova as comparatists. Concerned with comparisons between literature and film (Jost), narrative poetics across borders and cognitive narratology (Friedman), comparative perspectives on the shared trope of the

‘implied reader’ (Piers and others) and a move towards ‘a comparative narratology’ that Fludernik and Olson identified in the ‘tendency of non-American scholars to reflect on inflections of and influences on “local” narratological developments’ (24-7), Shang agrees that equal emphasis should be given to ‘the narratives and narrative theories of different locations, cultures, nations, histories, and linguistic communities’ (27). Such an opening would have ‘two grand heuristic values’, on the one hand, enriching, expanding, or even revising the current narrative theories and, on the other hand, bringing to light periphery narratives (27). Shang is aware of the ground-breaking work of these scholars, although their comparative perspective remained within the scholars’ own national traditions. However, at the same time, Shang benefits from his own knowledge of Chinese literature and narratology, proposing thus in his construction of comparative narratology ‘a Chinese counterpart of the Western narrative theory, focusing on its traditions and recent innovations’ (27).

The value of the second chapter lies in engaging not only with those Chinese narratologists who wrote in English and are hence known in the West (Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu, Henry Y. H. Zhao, Mingdong Gu and Dan Shen), but also with the ones whose work has been neglected abroad since they wrote in Chinese and they focused on Chinese narrative texts (Yi Yang and Xiuyan Fu in particular, but also Shijun Zhang, Junqiang Tan, Diyong Long and others). Yang’s and Fu’s critical reflections on Chinese narrative fiction differ from the practice of Western narratologists; Yang and Fu focus in different ways on the epistemological enlightenment of the texts they analyse rather than on elements like character, time, space or events. In acknowledging their contributions in ‘not only reveal[ing] the distinctive features of China’s national narratives but also develop[ing] a specific narratological framework to make a descriptive analysis’ yet ‘rely[ing] heavily upon the corpus of traditional Chinese narrative works that have hardly been known to Western narratologists’ (30), Shang stresses that his comparative study intends, on the one hand, to resort to the ‘rich and resourceful’ (31) Chinese narrative tradition, and, on the other hand, examine it in ‘a new narratological light so as to construct a new theory of interpreting Chinese narrative works’ (31). From this tradition, Shang chooses complex narratives, specifically *Strange Tales from the Liao-zhai Studio* written by Pu Songling in the Qing Dynasty, as a typical genre deserving more unnatural narratological attention on grounds of their salient unnaturalness in terms of character, events, space and ontological metalepsis. Shang demonstrates how Chinese classics can be perceived from an angle distinct from the usual Chinese approach, and he pioneers another perspective of analysis of old texts. Chinese narratologists have been unaware, for instance, of the unnatural feature of figures in these short stories.<sup>1</sup> For Western narratologists, this special type of stories would also enlarge the corpus of unnatural narration and, hence, strengthen the significance of conducting unnatural studies. It goes without saying that these classic Chinese narratives must be translated in English and other European languages in the near future.

In Chapter 3 (‘Unnatural Narrative in Contemporary Chinese Time Travel Fiction: Patterns, Values, and Interpretive Options’), Shang begins his exploration into the unnaturalness of Chinese fiction from contemporary time travel fiction because of this genre’s long history in China and the little attention it has earned in the West. Tracing the

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, none of the six chapters of the most recent narrative study on *Liao-zhai* – Jiwu Shang’s *Studies on Liao-zhai Zhiyi’s Narrative Arts* (2018) – mentions unnaturalness. In Chapter 5, which focuses on the displacement of characters, Jiwu Shang attributes such displacement to historical and social circumstances as well as the author’s feelings and emotions.

time travel fiction's history to as early as the Tsin Dynasty when Tao Yuanming's *The Peach Blossom Spring* was written and made known, this chapter focuses on the 21<sup>st</sup>-century's development of this genre, which prominently features 'writing backwards' (38). Listing ways of 'writing backwards' such as counterfactual characters, metalepsis and strange voices, this chapter states that 'these unnatural events reveal their fictional nature and counterfactuality' (40), arousing the audience to realize the ethical values and cultural implications conveyed in contemporary China; for instance, 'women's unfulfilled desires and pursuits in the real world' (47) can be satisfied in an illusional world. Though more could be said about Chinese ethics and values,<sup>2</sup> most importantly, as pointed out by Shang, an unnatural narrative study of Chinese contemporary time travel fiction helps disclose this genre's 'ideological and political value', and enhances its status 'in the broad context of globalization and world literature' (53).

The fourth chapter ('Unnatural Narratology and *Zhiguai* Tales of the Six Dynasties in China') deals with another specific genre of Chinese national literature: *Zhiguai* tales. The Chinese *Zhiguai* means 'records of anomalies' or 'accounts of the strange' in English. *Zhiguai* tales refer to an impossible storyworld encompassing nonhuman characters, physically or logically impossible space, unnatural speed of time, and featuring boundary-crossing between the world of the dead and that of the living, between the world of spirits and that of human beings, and between the world of animals and that of human beings. After giving both naturalizing and unnaturalizing readings of some *Zhiguai* tales, the chapter orients itself 'toward an ethical interpretive option' (64), an option that was otherwise ignored in classical narrative studies. However, in order to read *Zhiguai* stories in the context of Chinese culture and literature, one needs to be aware that they work as moral maxims that illustrate the famous Chinese dictum: 'virtue rewarded and vice punished' (64). Thus, readers naturally accept that if someone commits no sin, yet is wronged to death, he/she can revive, while sinners are punished in hell and even in their next life. Shang's interpretation of these stories' educational role for Chinese common readers can be regarded as a reflection on the continuation and extension of Nie Zhenzhao's effort to steer readers towards ethical literary criticism. Zhenzhao stressed that literature's didactic and instructive function should never be ignored.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Shang has successfully bridged the gap between the western theory of unnatural narratology and the newest development of Chinese ethical studies while at the same time recognizing that *Zhiguai* tales of the Six Dynasties in China 'are just one of the examples demonstrating a different unnatural narrative tradition in East Asia, and more work in this line remains to be done in the future.' (66)

Since Shang's intention is 'to draw readers' attention to periphery and marginalized narratives' (19), he conducts practical research focusing not only on the narrative tradition in China, but also on contemporary Arabic literature. Thus, in Chapter 5 ('Delving into Impossible Story Worlds of Terror'), Shang brings Iraqi literature closer to an international audience, concentrating on Hassan Blasim's short fictions. Shang interprets Blasim's storyworlds of terror ('The Green Zone Rabbit', 'The Corpse Exhibition', 'An Army Newspaper', 'The Iraqi Christ', 'The Nightmare of Carlos Fuentes', etc.) from the perspective of unnaturalness, examining such elements as 'dead narrators, conflicting

<sup>2</sup> Gong Pengcheng, 'What on Earth Should Comparative Cultural Studies Reveal?', *Ifeng Culture* 5 September 2019, Phoenix New Media Limited; available at <http://culture.ifeng.com/c/7phiqTeeBkK> [accessed 20 September 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Nie Zhenzhao, 'Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism', *arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture* 50.1 (2015): 83-101.

events, and ontological metalepsis', 'corporeal impairments' and in particular 'paranoia mind' (68). With all these recurrent features in his short story collections, Blasim has created a world of terror full of biological and psychological abnormalities and declared the core issue within the story to be as follows: 'What matters to you is the horror' (79). As Shang further reflects, such impossibilities are used 'to present the harsh reality of Iraq as a world of terror' (80), which no common people can easily escape and shy away from. In lending his deep sympathy to Blasim's torn characters, Shang shows his own audience how such paranoia can be interpreted and understood: this is the way in which Iraqi people cope with their fear of war – tearing themselves apart while facing unresolvable conflicts (80). Through depicting an 'anti-mimetically impossible and nightmarishly real' world, Blasim fulfils 'his due responsibility as an Iraqi writer' (81); Shang reveals Blasim's efforts of 'deliberately resorting to unnatural narratives' and his 'faith in the power of writing' (81).

Chapter 6 ('Unnatural Emotions in Contemporary Narrative Fiction') speculates on what Shang terms 'unnatural emotions' and analyses such emotions in Ian McEwan's 'Death as They Come', illustrating how a synthetic approach of reading can function effectively for such an unnatural text. While scholars with classical narratological views remarked the sadism, uneasiness and game-playing of the insane narrator, Shang traces the entire progression of the narrator's unnatural emotions. The narrator sees a mannequin and falls in love with 'her', which indicates his 'blurring the distinction between the world of the real and the world of arts' (92); but the mannequin's silence towards the narrator's passion, love, doubt and suspicion arouses an innate conflict between man's reason and his passion. The increasingly severe conflict causes the man to tear the mannequin apart (namely, to cause 'her' death); her death stimulates his awareness of what is real and what is artificial; and, ultimately, this awareness drives him mad and makes him destroy all valuable artistic works he once collected. Following this vein, Shang gives a naturalized reading to the unnatural emotion in this fictional work that aims at revealing the clear-cut distinction between reality and illusion, between life and arts, and between facts and fictionality.

Chapter 7 ('Forward Thinking'), the conclusion of the book, is not a mere recapitulation of the insights of the previous chapters but rather a reflection on what steps can be taken by scholars interested in the field of unnatural narratology. The following four interrelations worthy of consideration may provide some orientation to those researchers and scholars who are interested in unnatural narratology: 'the relation between natural narratology and classical narratology', 'the relation between unnatural narrative and postmodern narrative', 'the relation between unnaturalness and narrativity', and 'the radicalness and weakness of unnatural narratology' (94-5).

Shang's *Unnatural Narrative across Borders* proves to be a valuable reference tool for those readers and scholars with an interest in unnatural narratives (including those peripheral and marginalized texts, irrespective of their origin) as well as in ethical literary criticism. At the same time, due to its broad comparative span, it can be a valuable resource on Chinese and Iraqi literature, and can attract many specialists in Chinese, Iraqi and English as well as comparative literature.

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