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Introduction: From Western Narratology to Chinese Narratology

As two very frequently used terms nowadays, “narrative” and “narration” have been expanded in their usage to the point of becoming everyday words. The nature of narrative is of course the narration of events, or more familiarly, “telling stories”. Narratology, then, is the systematic study of the secret of storytelling.¹ But what is “Chinese Narratology”? How can “Chinese narrative” become a systematic “study”? Why does it matter to propose a “Chinese Narratology”? To answer these questions, it may be helpful to take a quick glance of Western Narratology, which is reasonably the very point of departure for our discussion of Chinese Narratology.

Classical Narratology: From Linguistics Models to “Physics Envy”

As an independent discipline, “Narratology” was born in France in 1960s, and its incubator was structuralist linguistics, which was at the time the dominant theory in the study of language. This indebtedness to linguistics is visible everywhere in Structuralist Narratology, and it is most clearly articulated in the following comment by Roland Barthes:

Linguistics, which only has some three thousand languages to contend with, failed in the attempt; wisely, it turned deductive, and from that day on, incidentally, it found its proper footing and proceeded with giant steps, even managing to anticipate facts which had not yet been discovered. What then are we to expect in the case of the analysis of narrative, faced with millions of narrative acts? … The working out of such a theory may be made much easier if we proceed from a model that can provide the initial terms and principles. In the current state of research, it seems reasonable to elect linguistics itself as a basic model for the structural analysis of narrative.²

¹Fu (1993).
²Barthes (1975), pp. [238–239].
Barthes’ comment very clearly shows the admiration of early narratologists for linguistics, especially for the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who is considered the father figure of structuralism. This admiration led to a strong urge to borrow from the linguistics toolbox. The main reason why linguistics was so admired was that the apparent objectivity and precision of its methodology gave people working in the humanities and social sciences a chance to dispel their anxiety and frustration to achieve the respectability of the “hard” natural sciences. Though labeled Structuralist Narratology or Classical Narratology, early Narratology was not particularly “classical”, if by this term we understand “mature”. It was instead more like an infant toddling behind its big brother of linguistics.

Like any other disciplines, linguistics had built models specific to its own object of study, but in order to transplant these models, which had supposedly provided “initial terms and principles”, into their own field of study, early Narratologists went out of their way to find a common ground between narrative and linguistics. As a result, they regarded narrative as comparable to, or even as simply being a linguistic phenomenon. As a structuralist, Barthes embodied this attitude when he said that narrative and language were similar: Just as any component of language is meaningful only when it is placed in relation to other components or even to the entire language system, any level of narrative can be understood only in relation to other levels and to the whole narrative. Likewise, Tzvetan Todorov regarded narratives as extended sentences, and the various kinds of literary narratives could be generated through the linking and combining of their predicates. Following Todorov, Gerard Genette claimed that all long works are nothing but “the expansion of a verb”, so Homer’s Odyssey and Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past are “in a certain way, an amplification (in the rhetorical sense) of statements such as Ulysses comes home to Ithaca or Marcel becomes a writer”. Arguably the most influential book of its time in its systematic study of narrative, Genette’s Narrative Discourse displays an obvious influence of linguistic models. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that his narratological system was an almost verbatim copy of linguistic models. From the very beginning to the end, his discussion was centered around grammatical categories. The reason why Genette was so enthusiastic about linguistics was that he wished to explore the narrative possibilities at all levels by referencing to linguistic models. The subtitle of Narrative Discourse is “An essay in Method”, showing Genette’s intention of providing an exemplary methodology: Just as linguistics can formulate rules for the wide variety of linguistic phenomena, Narratology can do the same for the infinite number of narratives.

It can be seen that one of the ambitions of Classical Narratology was to formulate, by way of models provided by linguistics, a universal narrative grammar. Just as traditional grammar, with such concepts as subject, predicate, object,

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3Barthes (1975), p. [239].
5Todorov (1980).
attribute, adverb, and so on, is used to describe all kinds of words and sentences, the concepts and categories invented by Genette, Todorov, Barthes, A. J. Greimas, among others, are also aimed at describing the vast number of narrative texts. The reason for the quick rise of Classical Narratology was the exciting and alluring promise made by narrative grammar that there are only a few finite number of basic units and rules operating behind the infinite number of narratives, just as there are only a few scraps of colored paper in a child’s kaleidoscope. But this oversimplification was also the major cause of the quick downfall of Structural Narratology. The endless pursuit of a universal narrative grammar, which treated narrative as language rather than as a type of information, had created ever-increasing categories and concepts, so that many people soon tired of this kind of abstract game with a closed-up system. The narrative grammar project was perceived as a self-centered semiotic game for a small group of narratologists, and it seemed irrelevant to the narrative experience of most people, who had every reason to wonder, “So what?—What’s the use of all the subcategories for the understanding of texts?”

If Classical Narratology is the faithful follower of linguistics, then linguistics has its own object of envy. The value given within the field of linguistics to objectivity and precision can be attributed to the influences of “modern hard sciences, especially physics and computer science”:

Using mathematic tools, contemporary physics has made analysis of the material phenomena in such precise manners that there has appeared the so-called “physics envy” in all natural sciences and even in social sciences and humanities, who take physics as their models...Modern linguistics (especially of formal linguistics), though widely acknowledged as a pilot science, is not left behind at all in its envy for physics in terms of the principles and methodology.8

Though hailed as the “pilot science” for the humanities, linguistics is still part of social sciences, also known as the “soft sciences”, and it shares their strong desire to emulate such “hard sciences” as physics. Seen in this light, we can rather safely conclude that Classical Narratology’ heavy reliance on linguistic models was ultimately motivated by this deep-rooted “physics envy”.9 In other words, though Classical Narratology was trying to learn from linguistics, it was, in the final analysis, aimed at achieving the “depth and precision” of natural sciences.

The physics envy is most evident in the terminologies used in Classical Narratology to categorize narrative vision. One of the first to explore narrative vision, Henry James, used “window” on the wall as a metaphor for the visual landscapes in fiction since people at his time would “see” mainly through their

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7Fludernik (2005).
9The term “physics envy” was first proposed by Lewis Thomas, an American biologist. “People in other fields of endeavor, hankering to turn their disciplines into exact sciences, beset by what has since been called ‘physics envy’, set about converting whatever they knew into numbers and thence into equations with predictive pretensions. We have it with us still, in economics, sociology, psychology, history, even, I fear, in English-literature criticism and linguistics”. Lewis (1984).
In his discussion of narrative perspectives, however, Genette purposefully abandoned such conventional concepts as “vision” and “angle” and replaced them with an unusual “focalization”, a concept he borrowed from physics which originally means “adjusting focal length to focus”. Now “focalization” has become the most popular term in the field of Narratology, by far ahead of “author”, the second most popular. What is more, Seymour Chatman used “camera eye” to indicate the purely objective observation in fiction, and even “filter”, a highly specialized technical term, to refer to a character’s perception. In recent years, with the popularity of the Windows operating system in computer science, such terms as “window” (not Henry Jamesian “window” on the wall, but “window” on the computer screen) and “interface” have gained currency in Narratology. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, proposed a “window narrative” theory, believing that the multiple windows narratives have posed great challenge to the traditional linear narratives. Manfred Jahn, on the other hand, conjured up a complex concept of “windows of focalization” by putting together “windows” and “focalization”, and recategorized “focalization” into “strict focalization”, “ambient focalization”, “weak focalization” and “zero focalization”. All these, needless to say, have been the necessary result of the envy for hard sciences.

It is worth noting that, with the progress of Narratology, the large-scale transplanting of linguistic models into Narratology has fallen out of fashion, yet Jahn’s categories like “strict focalization”, “ambient focalization”, “weak focalization”, and “zero focalization” show that narratologists today are still living under the influence of “physics envy” in their persistent pursuit of “depth and precision”. The burgeoning electronic technologies in the twenty-first century have made our life more convenient and more interesting, but they have also in many ways enslaved us. It is indeed true that the tools we use may exercise great influence on our mind: Those who often post their photos in social media may use the camera’s

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10The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find”. James (2004).

11To avoid the too specifically visual connotations of the terms vision, field, and point of view, I will take up here the slightly more abstract term focalization which corresponds, besides, to Brooks and Warren’s expression, ‘focus of narration.’” Genette (1980), p. 189.

12“Focalization’ still garners considerable attention nearly four decades after its coinage. The entry for the term in the online Living Handbook of Narratology is by far the most popular one, roughly 400 page views ahead of the second most popular, for ‘author’”. Ciccoricco (2012).

13Chatman (1978). Chatman’s book discusses both fiction and film, but the chapter on “camera eye” deals with fiction only.


focalization to communicate their own observation of the outside world through naked eyes, and similarly, those who sit all day long in front of the computer may spontaneously think of their experience of the world as a “window”. However, our eyes are not cameras, and our mind is not a computer, which means that such terms as “focalization” and “window” can only be taken metaphorically. In fact, as Genette himself confessed, what he did was borrowing a “spatial metaphor” in his discussion of “focalization”, and we should not take him too “literally”. Though it is not completely wrong for some narratologists, influenced by today’s dramatic media changes, to call on us to “learn to think with the medium”, we should remember that this kind of tool thinking has limitations, or else humans with eyes and ears may be reduced to focalizers and auscultators. In his “window” metaphor, Henry James rightly emphasized the active role of the artist as “the watcher” at the window:

The pierced aperture, either broad or balconyed or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. This observation of Henry James’s is extremely important for today’s narratologists, for if we fail to remember that humans are not machines, we may easily fall into the mechanistic trap of treating the subtle and endlessly varied human spiritual activities as rigidly determined mechanical movement.

Post-classical Narratology: Cognitive Turn and Interdisciplinary Trend

As mentioned above, it was under the influence of structuralist linguistics that the early Narratology took shape. It had a vigorous start, yet was difficult to carry on after the late 1970s. The quick rise and fall of Narratology could well be attributed to the one and same factor: structuralism. In France, structuralism in the second half of the twentieth century was like a brainstorm that “arrived quickly and left quickly”. Theorists who were singing the praise of structuralism one day became champions of post-structuralism the next day. Though today’s Narratology is no longer a parasite of any “-ism”, it was originally called “Structuralist Narratology”, and it was indeed mainly propelled forward by structuralism, without which it would have certainly not risen so fast. The deeper reason for its slow down, however, resides as we have seen in its overemphasis on narrative grammar and dependency on linguistic models. We might just as well explain this in a different

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way: If we believe that a theory or a discipline is supposed to clarify or provide explanations for its object of study, then what Narratology should do is to help people better understand narrative phenomena, yet some Classical Narratologists boldly claimed that structural analysis is not “a handmaiden to interpretation”, and “The aims of Narratology were, rather, fundamentally taxonomic and descriptive”. This amounted to locking up Narratology into an ivory tower. Though the toolbox (a metaphor favored by Western scholars) of Classical Narratology is not completely useless to narrative interpretation, it is so loaded with overly complex and far-fetched concepts and categories that it would take Herculean theoretical strength to carry it.

It was against this background that Classical Narratology turned to Post-Classical Narratology. Let me haste to point out that this turning did not happen directly, but experienced a pendulum-like “swinging back and forth”, a movement described by Shen Dan as “from one extreme to another”:

In the early 1980s, many Western scholars turned their attention completely to the study of ideology and to the social and historical context outside of the text, regarding literary works as a political phenomenon, and literary criticism as a tool of political expression. They objected to formal or aesthetic study of fiction, believing it would serve to maintain and consolidate the dominant ideology. This “radical” atmosphere had exercised a strong negative impact on Narratology.

Since 1990s, however, more and more Western scholars have realized the limits of political and ideological criticism, and the disastrous consequences to literary study of ignoring literary forms. This realization has brought Narratology back from obsolescence to its original prosperity. Here is how David Herman summarizes in _Narratologies_ this comeback of Narratology in the USA at the end of the twentieth century:

It seems in short that rumors of the death of Narratology have been greatly exaggerated. Recently we have witnessed a small but unmistakable explosion of activities in the field of narrative studies; signs of this minor narratological renaissance include the publication of a spate of articles, special issues, and books that rethink and recontextualize classical models for narratological research; the evident success of the journal _Narrative_ (not founded until 1993); and the establishment in 1994 of the book series to which the present volume belongs. Adapting a host of methodologies and perspectives—feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive, reader-response, psychoanalytic, historicist, rhetorical, film-theoretical, computational, discourse-analytical, and (psycho)linguistics—narrative theory has undergone not a funeral and burial but rather a sustained, sometimes startling metamorphosis since Rimmon-Kenan published her study...narratology has in fact ramified into narratologies.

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21Shen (2001).
The change from Narratology to Narratologies means that Narratology has broken away from the singular linguistic model and gained new momentum by embracing “many methodologies and perspectives”. Structuralist linguistics has indeed breast-fed Narratology, but like any other babies who has to leave its mother when it grows up, Narratology must step out of its linguistic nursery into the vast world as an independent discipline. As Herman notes, “no longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, narratology can not be used to refer to any principled approach to the study of narratively organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other”, and he is using narratology “quite broadly, in a way that makes it more or less interchangeable with narrative studies”. If Narratology is no longer a slave to structuralism, then people will not have to cling to “structure”, “grammar”, or the singular linguistic model. The interchangeability between “Narratology” and “narrative studies” has also transformed Narratology from the formidable ivory tower to the democratic square, into which anything related to “narrative studies” is permitted, be it theories or criticisms. Narratology is thus no longer a specialized domain for theorists to build their systems, but a platform for people from all disciplines to seek narrative interpretations, for if “Narratology” can be “narrative studies”, then what does it matter that it is the “handmaiden to interpretation”? Shouldn’t Narratology, in the last analysis, aid readers in their understanding of the variegated narrative phenomena and the increasingly complex narrative acts?

“Cognitive turn” and “interdisciplinarity” are generally thought of as the two most conspicuous features of the “renaissance” of Narratology in the West. The cognitive approach to narrative lays emphasis on people’s narrative experience and cognitive framework in their daily life, asking them to observe and analyze their narrative perception in a way that is relatively accessible and “natural”. This turn, seen within the evolutionary logic of Narratology itself, marks a transition from narrative grammar to narrative semantics. The difference between narrative grammar and narrative semantics is huge: The former involves such activities as categorizing, ordering, and generalizing all the possibilities and the recurrent features at different levels of narrative so as to prove that there exist some finite set of recognizable possibilities behind the infinite number of apparently haphazard narratives, while the latter concerns the narrative signification, including the sense-making process, the authenticity of the messages told, the building of the fictional characters and fictional worlds and their relationships with the actual people and the actual world in our experience, etc.

The replacement of narrative grammar by narrative semantics suggests that people have largely given up their pursuit of the universal narrative rules. For one thing, as we have seen, narrative rules do not really help us understand narrative texts. For another, this pursuit seems to be quite untimely: It is truly impossible to summarize or generalize narrative rules nowadays as the burgeoning new media

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23Herman (1999), p. 27.
24Culler (2012). This paper introduces six trends in contemporary western literary theory, the first of which is the “comeback” of Narratology.
have presented narratives in kaleidoscopic forms. Comparatively speaking, narrative semantics is something more urgent for our attention. Contemporary fictions and movies, not to speak of the multimedia narratives, with their fancy narrative devices, often leave their audiences, sometimes even the professional ones, confused about what they mean to say. Marie-Laure Ryan, who has done a lot of work on new media narratives, flatly admitted that she was not able to understand the plot of the 2012 Hollywood movie *Cloud Atlas*: “For spectators who see the film without having read the novel, and this was my case, it is very difficult to reconstitute the plot. When I left the theater, I was totally confused, and the first thing I did when I got home was to look up the Wikipedia article to make sense of the film”.\(^{25}\)

Western scholars have realized the urgency of narrative semantics project, as is demonstrated by David Herman in his retrospective overview of the evolution of Narratology, where he mentioned, more than once, “chapter on narrative fiction” in *Literary Theory* by René Wellek and O. Warren, praising the discussion in the book on fictional world “highlighted problems of narrative semantics that would remain undeveloped for some three or four decades”.\(^{26}\) As anyone who has read *Literary Theory* may have noticed, the entire chapter 16 of the book is devoted to narrative semantics, or how to understand “narrative fiction”. Furthermore, Wellek has anticipated the recent interest in “unreliable narration”. The concept has gained currency ever since it was initially proposed by Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961, mainly due to its contribution to narrative semantics: Unreliability creates a kind of distance between what the narrator says and what the author means. When speaking of the popularity of the term, Monika Fludernik, who is the author of Part II of the “History of Narrative Theory”, wrote, “This brings us back to Wayne C. Booth and to the closing of a circle”.\(^{27}\)

“Interdisciplinarity” is another contributor to the renaissance of Narratology. As Narratology becomes “narrative studies”, all imposed restrictions are effectively removed, and everything converges into this polyphonic torrent, or carnival square, including not only the fictional narrative, film narrative, drama narrative, historical narrative, and journalist narrative, but legal narrative, educational narrative, medical narrative, and sociological narrative as well. “Minor narratological renaissance” used by David Herman in the 1990s is no longer appropriate today; “Narrative imperialism”\(^{28}\) used by James Phelan, editor of *Narrative*, though a little surprising, seems more apt. “Interdisciplinarity”, of course, should not be understood simply as the “intrusion” of Narratology into other disciplines. In fact, as Wellek and Warren

\(^{25}\)Ryan (2013).


\(^{28}\)Phelan (2005).
point out, storytelling is a “transgeneric phenomenon”\textsuperscript{29}. Many disciplines are themselves shaped by narrative in nature, and therefore can be narrativized, and it is only a matter of time for them to focus on narrativity. As one fundamental (or even the best) way of understanding the outside world and organizing our own experience, storytelling can link a series of otherwise fragmentary events through temporality and causality into a meaningful whole. It is for this reason that jurists, sociologists, educators, and doctors (even patients) would turn to storytelling, as fictional writers do, since it always works better than cold and boring theories and statistics.

Interdisciplinarity is not just about telling stories, but also about comparing to narrative the object of study in other disciplines. Thus, instrumental music is compared to narrative in that “musical plot” is similar to literary plot, as “To many people, patterns like sonata form resemble a story, in which the concluding section resolves tension and imbalance. The final section largely repeats material from earlier in the piece, and this resembles, in its effect, a denouement in a literary work”\textsuperscript{30}. Others regard the patients’ complaints to their doctors as a special kind of narrative text, arguing that “the reader’s close reading of the text is similar to the doctor’s attention to the details of the patient’s narrative, and the doctor’s interpretation of the patient’s narrative is similar to the reader’s interpretation of the text”.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, there are some who treat memorial sculpture as a silent narrative, which functions as a person’s biography, like “Mount Rushmore, then, is a prosopography in that it presents a group or series of personae, its personae represent a collective history, and it serves as a memorial that ritually reconstitutes the community”\textsuperscript{32}. Still others compare performance art to narrative, with a special emphasis on its distinctive “counter-narrative” elements, as “Pollock’s poured paintings refuse to tell a story, and more, they resist the stories we would like to tell about them”\textsuperscript{33}. The general argument behind all these studies is that storytelling is not exclusive to literature. Some studies even go one step further by arguing that the most wonderful stories are not told by literary writers, nor narrative theorists or critics, but by those eloquent lawyers in the court, as “The differing outcomes in the retellings of the Rusk cases offer a dramatic instance of how narratives take on

\textsuperscript{29}The student of narrative theory would thus do well to look for family resemblances...between Wellek and Warren’s characterization of narrative as a transgeneric phenomenon and the later analogous account outlined by Barthes([1966] 1977)). David Herman, “Histories of Narrative Theory (I): A Genealogy of Early Developments”, in A Companion to Narrative Theory, (eds.) James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Malden: Blackwell, p. 22.


design, intention, and meaning. Narratives do not simply recount happenings; they give them shape, give them a point, argue their import, proclaim their results.”  

The “ubiquity” of narrative also subverts our traditional conception of verbal language as the “orthodox” media of narrative. If we waded through the upstream of the river of narrative, we would actually find that a lot of stories were told through painting, dancing, and acting rather than through spoken or written language. It is, therefore, impossible to predict the impact of fast evolving media on the future storytelling.

The new ideas and paradigms arising from interdisciplinarity have actually resulted in the “back-feeding” effect on Narratology and even the more general literary theory. Here I would like to discuss one example. An auditory approach to narrative creates such seemingly strange terminologies as “soundscape” and “soundmark”, which resort to our auditory perception, in contrast to “landscape” and “landmark”, which resort to our visual perception. These terminologies themselves reveal the inadequacy of storytelling through “looking”. Though the blind could not generally “see” the wonderful pictures depicted in most fiction, those blind readers with sharper ear may well understand, possibly better than readers able to see, Virginia Woolf’s *Kew Gardens* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, for in the two novels the “soundscape” is represented, with the sound from various auditory sources conjuring up a “sound map” only recognizable to ears. The existing literary theories ought to realize their inadequacies, because in the fictional world there are not just physical forms but sounds (and smells) as well. The literary terminologies in currency such as “point of view”, “monitoring”, and “focalization”, to name only a few, bear almost solely on visual perception as if everything could be communicated visually while the truth is that a lot of information is communicated through ears and other bodily organs. The central place of eyes in our sensual perception has resulted in a theoretical generalization disproportionately tilted toward visuality. The inattention to “ear” has been phenomenal with both Chinese and Western literary theory.

Interdisciplinarity has also posed substantial challenges to the current disciplinary classifications. Owing to the trans-generic nature of narrative, Narratology has been from the very beginning resistant to any clear-cut classification. Such categories as “narrative poetics” or “literary Narratology” can at best be tentative, because they cannot really encage any narrative under examination as nobody can draw a clear dividing line between literary narrative and non-literary narrative.


36In one mode of representation, evident in Woolf’s short fiction *‘Kew Gardens’*, sound is emitted from multiple sound sources widely separated in space but auscultized through one stationary perceiver. In the other mode, notably captured in the striking of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*, sound is emitted from a stationary source and broadly diffused to auscultators positioned in diverse and broadly scattered locations”. Melba Cuddy-Keane, “Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative Through Auditory Perception”, in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, (eds.) James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Malden: Blackwell, p. 386.
Furthermore, disciplinary classifications are themselves man-made, just as Barthes noted, “…we set graphic artists on this side, painters on that; novelists on this side, poets on that; whereas writing is one”.37 Precisely because we know nowhere to place narrative as “writing”, we are often confronted with its “unplaceability” even before we know it. Aristotle, for example, famously pointed out that both historians and poets are telling events, “The distinction is this: The one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen”.38 Hayden White goes one step further by claiming that there is no essential difference between “what has happened” and “what would happen” because historians will also have to exploit the same kind of literary strategies in their emplotment of historical events, as “…‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories”.39 “Unplaceable” is thus more accurate than “trans-generic” in speaking of the nature of narrative: “trans-” makes sense only when we accept the imaginary demarcation of various disciplines, without which there were no such thing as “trans”. Holding on to such classifications as “literary” and “non-literary” will only limit our vision and keep us away from each other. Moreover, as narrative communication is now rapidly shifting from print media to electronic media, the traditional literary kingdom is being encroached by the surging tide of new media. Under such circumstances, in order to keep going, we should transform our ways of thinking instead of clinging to the old ones. If, on the other hand, we embraced Narratology as a cross-over bridge, then many disciplines would gain new momentum from it. The interdisciplinary trend in Post-Classical Narratology is now on the rise, and we have all reasons to remain optimistic about its future.

It has been only half a century since Narratology was officially established as a discipline, so strictly speaking, it has not received full-fledged development. The transformation from Classical Narratology to Post-Classical Narratology has indeed happened, but the process is far from completed. As Shen Dan points out, it has been quite a long time since narrative theorists in the USA were unwilling to be recognized as being Classical or Structuralist, yet the work of many Post-Classical Narratologists suggests that Classical Narratology has not yet been “down” or “out”,40 by which statement she means to conclude that there is no clearly defined border between Classical and Post-Classical Narratology. Indeed, the linguistic model of Classical Narratology has lost its dominance, but linguistic approach to narrative is still considered by many as orthodox, and narrative studies at the discourse level are still popular. “Physics envy”, as is suggested above, still has a strong presence in Post-Classical Narratology, for “precision” has always been an on-going pursuit of many scholars in the West.

37Barthes (2002).
40Shen et al. (2005).
Chinese Narratology: Between the Anxiety of Influence and Its Own Tradition

The quick retrospective glance at the trajectory of Western Narratology we have done so far provides a point of departure for our discussion of Chinese Narratology.

I shall start with a description of how narrative studies are going on in China. Like elsewhere globally, a strong wave of narrative studies is being felt in China. “Narrative” appears very frequently in academic journal articles and books in the field of the humanities and social sciences, either as part of titles or keywords; the number of M.A. and Ph.D. theses related to narrative studies keeps increasing each year. Besides, “narrative” has been used in its general sense to such an extent that it is regarded as synonymous to “writing”, “history”, or even “culture”. For better or for worse, “narrative” has undeniably received a great deal of attention in China in recent years.

The prevalence of narrative studies in China is one thing, but Chinese Narratology is quite another. Up to now, narrative studies in China are still by and large undertaken within the framework offered by Western Narratology. If we understand the early attempts at translating and introducing Western Narratology as being natural and even necessary, then we have every reason to doubt the value of the repetitive “studies” that many people do today, who, except for the very few who can engage in equal dialogue with Western scholars, continue to work uncritically with Western theories and approaches, or even worse, to interpret Western narrative works with Western narrative theories. Ever since 2007, China has organized six international conferences on Narratology which have drawn the majority of internationally renowned narratologists. They have come to China not just to spread their own theories, but also in the hope of learning more about narrative studies in China. Indeed, in terms of narrative history, few Western countries can be compared to China. As we often see, some narrative works on which Western scholars build their theories are not really “classical” by our standards. However, these international conferences held in China, which should have been excellent opportunities for us to showcase Chinese “treasures” in narrative studies, have turned out to be occasions on which the great majority of Chinese scholars remained silent listeners, either because of the language barrier or the lack of understanding of our own narrative tradition (which eventually resulted in a lack of confidence in a fruitful dialogue with Western scholars).

This emphasis on the studies of Chinese narrative, I must add, does not necessarily lead to a Chinese Narratology. My view has always been that Narratology is not exclusive to the West; what has been achieved by Classical and Post-Classical Narratology should be embraced by all of the humanities, and in its development Chinese scholars should have a role to play, as exemplified by Profs. Shen Dan and Zhao Yiheng whose excellent work has been widely recognized internationally. That said, we have to admit that, like many other disciplines, Narratology founded by scholars from the West is mainly rooted in the Western narrative works with very few, if any, from outside of Western Europe and North America. If it was
understandable, then it is not supposed to go on, otherwise Narratology would really become a Western Narratology without “universal” value. So it is very necessary for Chinese scholars, in their pursuit of the general narrative theories, to at least “include”, if not emphasize, their own narrative resources, rather than just focus on Western works. Much in alignment with Post-Classical Narratology which advocates an inclusive method, this integration of Chinese narratives into the Western Narratology will make it more universal and closer to a “world literary theory”.

This integration, in theory, should be the task of both Chinese and Western scholars, yet in an environment of “West prevailing over East” in the cultural exchange since there has been, between modern China and the West, huge gaps in terms of their knowledge about each other, gaps characterized by Prof. Xie Tianzhen as “language gap” and “time gap”:

“Language gap” refers to the fact that Chinese speaking people learn and master English and other modern western languages and understand their cultures more easily than people of western countries who speak English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and other modern western languages. This language gap means that China has a large group of experts and scholars who are proficient in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and other western languages and can understand their cultures, while we cannot expect western countries to have the equal number of experts and scholars who are proficient in Chinese and can understand the profound Chinese culture, much less to say that a large number of ordinary people can read Chinese works directly and understand Chinese culture.

“Time gap” refers to the fact that Chinese people have tried to understand the West in an all-round and in-depth way for more than 100 years, while contemporary Westerners did not do the same only until the recent few decades. This time gap means that, with our accumulated knowledge of Western culture, we can rather easily read and understand the literary and academic works translated from the West, while they, not equipped with the knowledge about Chinese culture, cannot find the equal number of people who can read and understand the literary and academic works translated from China.41

That “they know us” much less than “we know them” has something to do with the “Euro-Centrism”, but with the increase of China’s strength, the “language gap” and “time gap” are more responsible for this disparity: It is not that most Western scholars do not want to know more about China, but that they are not prepared enough to overcome the language barrier. Wellek and Genette would have included many materials from China had they been able to read and understand Chinese narrative works. In contrast, most young Chinese scholars here have been well trained in Western languages, and some of them even have had long-time experience of studying and working in Europe or America, all of which will give us a comparative advantage in the academic field.

Obviously, with this comparative advantage, some Chinese scholars, once they turn to their own resources, will go from “including” to “focusing on” Chinese narrative tradition with which they are more familiar. We understand “Chinese Narratology” as a field which takes “Chinese narrative” as its subject matter: Since

41Xie (2014).
for Post-Classical Narratologists, Narratology is synonymous with “narrative studies”, we do not see any need to define “Chinese Narratology” as an independent discipline. Both Yang Yi, a scholar from China, and Andrew H. Plaks, a scholar from the West have written a book titled *Chinese Narratology*, but neither of them has ever treated it as a self-contained discipline. As history has told us again and again, no theory can be constructed without a solid foundation, and the foundation can only be laid with unstopping efforts in concrete research.

Talking about “Chinese Narratology” can easily give one a false impression that this amounts to trying to confront Western Narratology, but the truth is that it means seeking help from outside in order to lay our own foundation. The first and foremost insight Chinese scholars have gained from Western Narratology is that narrative can be systematically studied, the same insight they have gained from Western aesthetics (now aesthetics has become a globally well-recognized discipline, it is perfectly legitimate for us here in China to conduct aesthetic studies!). Before Narratology spread here, most Chinese people, according to their Chinese courses in primary and middle school, understood “narrative” and “lyrical” as a pair of antonyms as if they were two terms completely different from each other. This mindset was so deeply rooted that many people could not help but wonder if there was such a thing as “Lyricology” upon their first encounter with the term “Narratology”. Some people today are still considering the possibility of establishing a lyrical tradition, in parallel with the narrative tradition, of Chinese literature. In contrast, “narrative” in our context is a much more complex sign that involves multiple factors and levels. Besides communicating information about events, “narrating” stories through language or any other media can also implicitly or explicitly reveal viewpoints, make commentaries here and there, and more or less introduce characters and settings. Needless to say, all these activities, besides the deliberate “zero-degree” narration (which is next to impossible to achieve), may involve the expression of feelings in one way or another, so that “lyricity” is to “narration” what wool is to skin. “Narrative” in this book, then, is a term much broader than its middle-school usage, a term that covers the entire storytelling activity and therefore is a “trans-generic phenomenon” in Wellek’s words. This way of looking at “narrative”, freed from the limitation imposed by genre and media, is of particular importance for the comprehensive study of narrative tradition.

Historically speaking, the emergence of Chinese Narratology at this time aligns with the internal logic of the development of Chinese literature as a whole. China has been a country of poetry, with a strong tradition of *Book of Poetry (Shijing)*, *Chu Ci (Poetry of the South)*, Hanfu, Yuefu, Tang Poems, Song Ci, and Yuanqu passing down from generation to generation for thousands of years. By contrast, for most part of China’s history, Chinese narrative (mainly in form of prose fiction), especially those underdeveloped “pseudo-fiction” and “pre-fiction”, had remained, in Lu Xun’s words, “fragmented and trivial ” or “cursory and rough”. Belittled as

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43 Ke and Xiao (2009).
“insignificant” and “unorthodox”, no narrative works comparable to poetry canons had appeared until the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.) and Qing dynasty (1636–1912 A.D.). As the dominance of poetry lasted for way too long a time, the ancient Chinese poetics had always been centered around the discussion of poetry. The Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty saw a moderate rise of fiction and fall of poetry—fiction critics like Jin Shengtan even went so far as to put Water Margin on a par with Li Sao and Du Fu’s Poems, but the literary hierarchy was not essentially changed. However, as literature often changes with times, the status of fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century was lifted from the underground to the sky since fiction was considered as “having incredibly tremendous power” by many, among whom was Liang Qichao, who famously claimed that “to transform a country’s people, we must first transform its fiction”. Retrospectively, we can see something naive in this expectation of fiction to “heal the world and save the people”, but it did indicate that people began to realize that narrative, instead of being the useless and even harmful weeds, actually has tremendous potential power.

Without this newly found conception of narrative, neither the ground-breaking A Brief History of Chinese Fiction by Lu Xun nor the 600,000-word An Examination of Chinese Chapter Fiction by Hu Shi would have been possible. The time and energy the two leading figures in the New Cultural Movement devoted to the study of Chinese fiction showed that they both had understood the need to theorize Chinese narrative experience, which had so far been a missing link in the study of fiction. Narratology was not heard of in China when they wrote their books, but the enlightening and insightful work they and their likes did, though far from systematic or scientific, are guidelines that lead us to the secrets of narrative. Furthermore, the study on the Folktale of Lady Meng Jiang by historian Gu Jiegang showed that the oral tradition of narrative had also attracted the scholars’ attention at that time.

Looking back, we may find that fiction studies always preceded narrative studies. If the Commentology of fiction in the Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty marked the beginning of narrative studies in China, then in the twentieth century it gradually became a trend, which in the last decade has been developed into something like “Narratology” or “studies on narrative tradition”. It is perhaps not completely fortuitous that Yang Yi named his 1997 book Chinese Narratology after he published A History of Modern Chinese Literature in 1993 and A History of Classical Chinese Fiction in 1995, and Dong Naibin named his 2012 book On the Tradition of Chinese Literary Narrative after he published On the Stylistic Independence of Chinese Fiction in 1992. Logically, the study on the history of fiction will sooner or later “go narrative”, because narrative approach can help to

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44 Lu (1981).
45 Tao (1907); Qian (1989).
49 Dong (1992); Dong (2012).
break the generic barriers and present the historical dynamics of fiction in clearer terms. In my book A Study on the Pre-Qin Narrative: the Formation of Chinese Narrative Tradition, my discussion of the different ways of narrative transmission, spoken or written or through camera and screen leads me to the conclusion that, no matter how it is presented, the content is nothing but narrative. So focusing on “narrative”, rather than just one genre or one media, will surely broaden our vision and help us towards a better understanding of our object of study. In this sense, all abovementioned academic efforts have actually helped to usher in a new historical stage where the domination of various kinds of narrative (not just fiction) in the literary market demands a change in our literary theory from one focused solely on the poetry of the past to one which emphasizes both poetry and narrative.

What Chinese Narratology should do at the present stage, then, is to clarify Chinese literary tradition in a way enabled by narrative studies. The reason why clarifying Chinese narrative tradition is so urgent a project now is that, for quite a while, it has been overshadowed by influences outside of China. It has to be acknowledged that the modern transformation of Chinese fiction occurred as a result of the heavy importation of Western fiction. In his “How I Started Writing Fiction”, Lu Xun confessed that it was because he had read “about one hundred foreign works”. Some even went so far as to attribute the form of new literature to the Western fiction translated by foreign missionaries in China. The strong presence of foreign influences in modern Chinese literature is closely associated with the historical situation of “West strong and China weak” that obtained after the Opium War. Exploited by Western powers, China was in bad shape in many ways. Even the traditional Chinese chapter novels had long been past their prime days: The four great novels (namely, Dreams of the Red Mansion, Journey to the West, Water Margin, Romance of the Three Kingdoms) were all written before the nineteenth century. It is precisely in the hundred years from the beginning of the 19th century to the beginning of the twentieth century that Western fiction found its prismatic prosperity. This unbalanced development in China and the West has made Western fiction, to borrow a term from comparative literature, the “sender” of influence, which can also account for what Prof. Xie Tianzhen defines as the “language gap” and “time gap”.

However, if we follow Fernand Braudel, a historian of Annals School, and extend our scope of study from “short time span” to “one less short” or even to “the long view”, we will find that one hundred years is nothing but an infinitesimal moment in the long river of history. China is the only remaining continuous civilization in the world, and its storytelling culture has endured for thousands of years from the first appearance of narrative, which, as I have discussed elsewhere, could be traced back to the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang dynasty (sixteenth–eleventh century B.C.) to the bronze epigraphs whose way of

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50Fu (1999a).
51Lu (1981c).
52Yuan (2007).
53Bernard (1980).
storytelling still resonates today. By contrast, even with such great epics as *Homer* at its origin, Western narrative had fallen into obscurity for as long as one thousand years with the fall of the Western Roman Empire, until in Picaresque Novel—which descended from Middle Ages Romance—appeared in Renaissance Spain and gave birth to the modern Western novel. When we say that Chinese fiction has a rather short history, we understand that it is “short” only compared to the “long” history of Chinese poetry. If we compare the history of Chinese and Western fiction, we will find that, while English writers such as Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were still trying to break through the formal constraints of Picaresque Novel, China had already produced a masterpiece as great as *Dream of the Red Mansion*. Some outstanding Tang fiction (then known as *Chuanqi*) such as “A Tale of Parting Soul”, “Tale of Li Wa”, and “A Story of Lasting Resentment”, to mention only a few, was produced almost one thousand years ahead of *Tom Jones*, arguably the best European novel of the 18th century. It is for this reason that Goethe once reminded his contemporaries that China had already had chapter novels like *Hao Qiu Zhuan* of the Qing dynasty when their own ancestors were still living in the wild forest. To compare Chinese and Western fiction in the “long period” is of course not for the sake of congratulating ourselves, but of distancing us from the myth of Western fiction as “sender” of influence over the past one hundred years by recognizing the greatness of the Chinese tradition. In the replacement of traditional Chinese chapter novel by Western fiction, it is easy for us to regard the Western narrative mode as only best standard. For all his great contribution to the writing of history of Chinese fiction, Lu Xun, probably in influenced by the “about one hundred foreign works” he had read, showed little enthusiasm about the structuring method of *The Scholars*, because “the book does not have an overarching structure, but just makes its characters come and go together with the events, so though it is called a novel, it is actually more like many short stories loosely put together in the form of a collection”. Lu’s judgment is obviously based on an imported narrative standards, since Western narrative inherited from Aristotle has always emphasized the unity of plot. Narrative works from *The Odyssey* to the Middle Ages Romance to Picaresque Novel to many modern novels all revolve around the experience of a single protagonist with one individual character in the focal center, which is quite different from *The Scholars* and many other Chinese novels such as *Water Margin* and *Exposure of the Official World*, which intend to tell stories of a “collective” group of characters. Yet Lu’s conclusion that *The Scholars* “does not have an overarching structure” is rather debatable: The seemingly heterogeneous mini-narratives that depict in episodic manners “characters coming and going together with the events” are actually unified by an overarching structure that either lays bare the failed Li (rite or morality) and corrupted Yue (music or civilization) of the scholars or suggests that the way out of this bad situation is to give up scholars and turn to

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54 Fu (1999).

55 Johann Peter (1906).

56 Lu (2007).
“common folks”. The same structure can be found in Water Margin, whose apparently unconnected mini-narratives are unified by the same structure of “outlaws being forced to riot”. Lu Xun, as we all know, did not think too much of the old traditional Chinese culture like Chinese medicine and Peking Opera, and he embraced a similar attitude towards traditional Chinese narrative, as, in his words, “the ancient Chinese books are all harmful to people, and the newly published books are mostly written by ignorant men and therefore are good for nothing. Perhaps we can read the ancient Chinese books about natural objects but never read story books, because the former are flawed only by their over-simplicity while the latter by their absurdity. We can compensate for extreme simplicity but not for absurdity”. Then, he concluded that we should “read foreign books, and seldom, or never, read Chinese books”. These are strong terms, but we had better understand them with sympathy as a way of expressing Lu’s deep disappointment with China’s situation in his times.

The ideas of “long period” and “distancing” give us an opportunity to realize that there should be more than one standard for narrative: The differences in origin and tradition make Chinese and Western narrative differ from each other in their mode, morphology, and features, but no one enjoys superiority over the other, just like in the case of Chinese painting and Western painting, Chinese medicine and Western medicine, Chinese Kungfu, and Western boxing. Simple as it is, there are always people who suffer from an inferiority complex and think the mountains abroad are higher. Tradition is important in that it operates in the present though formed in the past, which is why T. S. Eliot said that writers should have “a historical sense”, which “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”, “This historical sense…is what makes a writer traditional”. Any attempt, then, to get rid of tradition will not be successful, no matter how hard one may try. Take Lu Xun again. He asserted that “the New Literature has come as a result of the influences of foreign literary trends and it has derived no benefit whatsoever from ancient Chinese literature”, yet his own fiction does “benefit” considerably from ancient Chinese literature, as in his story “The Public Exposure”, he refuses, for satirical purposes, to give names to those muddle-headed onlookers without independent souls, a strategy similar to the traditional “style of the Spring and Autumn Annals” featured with “not giving names to officials”. Furthermore, he is the author of A Brief History of Chinese Fiction and An Outline of Han

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57Fu (1993).
58Lu (1981a).
59Lu (1981b).
60Eliot (1982).
61Lu (1981d).
62In the thirty years of Duke Xiang Lu, there was a fire in the state of Song, and the officials of various countries met to discuss the matter and promised to raise money to make up for it, but they all broke their promises after the meeting. In the Spring and Autumn Annals, Confucius refused to record names of the officials, referring to them as “Jin people”, “Qi people” and “Song people”, so as to condemn them for their dishonesty.
Literary History, and editor of Selected Romances in the Tang and Song Dynasty and of A Collection of Ancient Chinese Fiction, and his minimal style of characterization bears a great deal more affinity to traditional Chinese fiction than to the European fiction of sumptuous style. The same is true of Mo Yan, who was once an imitator of Latino magic realism but the greatest influence he has received is the unique culture of Qi (or Shandong, China). In his masterpieces like Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out and Frog, the influences of “supernatural narration” from Qi Xie (A pre-Qin book of strange tales) and Liao Zhai Zhi Yi (or Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio) are so obvious that Sweden’s Nobel Academy used “hallucinatory realism”, rather than “magic realism”, to describe his narrative style.

It is worth noting that narrative traditions may influence each other, as we can see from how Chinese narrative in the Tang dynasty (618–907 A.D.) and Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.) were influenced by Buddhist culture from India. In Buddhist scriptures, there were long lines in form of prose (Gadya) as well as short lines in form of rhymed verse (Gatha) mixed up for the conveniences of memory as it was then spread orally. After Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese, this style of interlaced prose and verse found its way into Chinese tradition and became an outstanding feature of chapter novels as a strategy of adjusting narrative rhythm. Very interestingly, in their translation of Western novels into Chinese, the missionaries would also add a rhymed verse at the end of each chapter, which shows that “having poems in fiction” had been seen by foreigners as something specific to Chinese fiction. This influence was acknowledged by many scholars. As Zheng Zhenduo noted, “in terms of rhythm, subject matters, and allusions, (Chinese literature) has been influenced more or less by Buddhist literature, and quite a few great new styles have been created by emulating Indian literature”. Xu Dishan, a famous Chinese writer, talked about the indebtedness of Chinese literature to “the structure of Buddhist literature”. Liang Qichao went still further by saying that “both the structure and style of the great novels in recent China such as Water Margin and The Dream of the Red Mansion are all influenced by Hua-yen and Nirvana Buddhism”. Chen Yince, a well-known Chinese scholar, clarified this influence in more specific terms:

Buddhist scriptures interlaced prose (Gadya) with verse (Gatha), which was imitated by romances and writings on Confucian classics and then emerged a style that blended prose and poetry. Many years later, the style evolved into the chapter novel as we know it in which prose dominates with occasional occurrences of poetry. The original form, which combined prose and poetry without any one dominating the other, evolved into today’s Tan Ci (fiddle ballads in Chinese Southern dialects).

63Chen (2002).
64Yuan (2007).
65Zheng (1957).
66Xu (1927).
With the introduction of Buddhism into China came Indian mythology. In Dunhuang scrolls discovered in recent years, we find stories in Vimalakirti Sutra which give us more evidence that the elaborate writings on Confucian classics in the Song dynasty, and more recently, Tan Ci and chapter novels all have the same origin, and that the style of Buddhist scriptures bears directly on the literature that comes after it. This has been, however, ignored by all literary historians in China.\(^69\)

By “literary historians” Chen was obviously referring to, among others, Lu Xun and Hu Shi. As a top-notch expert in Sanskrit language and Buddhist scriptures, Chen’s commentary certainly carries a lot of weight, yet being an external cause, foreign influence can only work through the internal situation. What Chen himself “ignored” is that, long before Buddhism was introduced into China, rhymed verses had already appeared in the prose of philosophers of the pre-Qin period, as “Fu” by Xunzi and many other Fu-styled prose in various dynasties ended in a poem and a hymn,\(^70\) so the style of interlaced prose and verse in Buddhist scriptures was by no means the only origin of the subsequent romances and Tan Ci.

Some narrative modes, of course, were obviously imported from India. A good case in point is “A Tale of an Ancient Mirror” by Wang Du in the Tang dynasty, structured by how an ancient mirror is passed from one man to another. As this structuring method had been extremely rare in China, it should have taken its origin in Jataka telling about Shakyamuni’s numerous reincarnations.\(^71\) Furthermore, after examining the retribution stories at the beginning of Buddhist scriptures, Chen Yinque believed that “(these retribution stories) were originally insignificant to Buddhist classics, but they gradually became the central structure of fiction. Many Chinese novels are called masterpieces, yet close scrutiny of their structure reveals that they are just hybrids of several kinds of such retribution stories”.\(^72\) It is indeed a very true and illuminating observation that such novels as Dream of the Red Mansion, Water Margin, Journey to the West, and Jin Ping Mei (or, The Plum in the Golden Vase) have been designed under the influence of such concepts as retribution and samsara, but when he said that Chinese fiction should elevate and make itself “different from such cheap and popular retribution stories”, he probably missed one important point: Many Chinese fiction take advantage of the retribution stories just to attract the attention of their audiences by catering to their taste, so one ought not to take these stories too seriously, just as a typical reader would not take at face value the irony directed at Jia Baoyu in Chapter three of Dream of the Red Mansion.\(^73\)

Ancient China did not just witness the production of a great many excellent narrative works, it gave birth as well to some rather profound thoughts about narrative. If Western Narratology has been established on the basis of modern

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\(^{69}\) Chen (2001), pp. 192–197.

\(^{70}\) Chapter 8 of this book provides more examples of this style of “interlaced prose and verse” in Chinese narrative tradition.

\(^{71}\) Ji (1996).

\(^{72}\) Chen (2001), p. 257.

\(^{73}\) In this chapter, when Jia Baoyu makes his debut in the novel, the narrator tries to mislead his audience by giving ironically negative comments on him. These comments will be subverted in the reader’s subsequent reading of the novel.
linguistics, then it was historiography that laid the foundation for Chinese narrative thoughts. In ancient China, the official historiographers enjoyed great privileges and as officials whose responsibilities it was to record and compile historic events, they would often exhibit a kind of narrative consciousness. The Spring and Autumn Annals was believed by many to have set up a narrative code that should be followed, observed, and respected forever. This code, also known as “the style of The Spring and Autumn Annals”, includes a whole set of concrete narrative principles, which I have summarized as (1) using verbs as means to appraise, (2) using nouns as means to pass judgments, (3) clearly distinguishing bad from good, and (4) using subtlety in criticism. In other words, the code requires that praising and criticizing should be done in a neutral manners and in accordance with certain ethical principles.

“Narrative ethics” is a key word in contemporary Western Narratology, while more than 2000 years ago Chinese people had already realized the importance of ethical positioning in narrative. Liu Zhiji, a historian in the Tang Dynasty, developed rather systematic thoughts on narrative. In section “Narrative 22” of the sixth volume of his Shi Tong (or Understanding History), he made a lengthy commentary on “narrative”; and in other sections of the book, he also made occasional references to “narrative”, some of which are truly inspirational. The interpretations and elaborations that historians made on narrative, despite the literature-history division, are important theoretical heritages that Chinese Narratology should embrace. Indeed, though literature and history went separate ways in the wake of the Pre-qin period, The Spring and Autumn Annals and its style were still regarded by many as the only touchstone by which to judge all narratives. Comparing a novel to The Spring and Autumn Annals or describing an author as having its style was the highest compliment to the narrative art of the novel or the author. After Shi Ji (or, Historical Records) by Sima Qian and Han Shu (or, History of the Han Dynasty) by Ban Gu had been written, “Qian” and “Ban” then became popular names for those good at telling stories (not just writing histories). For example, “A History of Maoyin” by Han Yu, a famous prose writer in the Tang dynasty, was nothing but a fictional parody, but was praised by Li Zhao as something “as great as Qian” and “which exhibits his history-writing talent equal to Qian”, and by Bai Juyi as “having the style of Ban in terms of diction and significance”. It is worth noting that such terms as “history-writing talent” or “history-writing style” did not necessarily mean the talent or style of writing history per se, but the talent or style of telling stories in general. Here we can also see that Chinese scholars in ancient times did not draw a clear line between fictional and non-fictional narrative: Perhaps they had long been aware of the “trans-generic” nature of narrative.

In short, in the effort to construct a Chinese Narratology, Western Narratology provides a useful point of reference, but by no means a replicable model, since Chinese Narratology ought to be based on its own tradition. While Western Narratology has risen out of the rich theoretical resources of linguistics, Chinese Narratology should be founded on its original source of history writing. So a
linguistic model is not suitable for the construction of Chinese Narratology. Both Lu Xun’s total rejection and Chen Yunque’s belittlement of Chinese narrative tradition could well be understood as an over-reaction to their experience of cultural frustration. Fortunately, despite Lu Xun’s radical statement that “Chinese characters must perish, or China will”, nobody today still harbors the idea that Chinese language is a hindrance to China’s progress. Instead, as I have argued elsewhere, Chinese is an elegant language full of narrative possibilities, for the characters, phrases, and syntax in Chinese can all play a role in storytelling in one way or another. The shape and parts of a Chinese character often involve “something” in it and many Chinese characters are just telling stories. Furthermore, many four-character Chinese idioms are derived from fables, and when they are used, these stories can be recalled. The proposal of a Chinese Narratology, like the elevated status of Chinese language, reflects the changing times and social psychology. Without the revival of China as a whole, and without the recovery from historical trauma and the regained cultural confidence, to talk about Chinese Narratology would be simply out of the question.

Five Approaches to Constructing Chinese Narratology

Just as narrative may assume numerous different forms, we may approach narrative in different ways, and Chinese Narratology cannot and should not repeat Western Narratology. Ever since 1990s when I undertook my research project “Chinese Narratology” granted by the Minister of Education, I have always been thinking about the various possibilities towards constructing a Chinese Narratology. Methodologically speaking, we can consider the following five approaches to a new version of Chinese Narratology.

Approach 1: Expanding the Scope of Studies

Needless to say, fiction is the indispensable part of our studies of Chinese narrative, but it must be pointed out that studies on Chinese fiction after Lu Xun and his peers have been voluminous, and the “Chinese Narratology” project by Yang Yi and Andrew H. Plaks has proved highly influential, so we can hardly avoid repeating them if we keep going along their track. Another reason, perhaps the more important one, why we should find a new path is that narrative is not solely language-dependent. In fact, as the voice against “text centrism” has become increasingly strong in recent years, the normative practice of Narratology focusing on fiction is facing great challenges. As Genette complained, “if words have meaning, then ‘narratology’… ought by rights to concern itself with stories of all kinds, fictional and otherwise. It is evident, however, that the two branches of narratology have until now devoted their attention almost exclusively to the behavior and objects of fictional narrative alone”. In other words, if we examined

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76 Genette (1990).
only the language-based texts and ignored other forms of narrative, our research would not be able to carry on in depths and widths. Narrative, according to Barthes, “is present at all times, in all places, in all societies”:

...as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man’s stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, folktale, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, dramearecti [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies.  

Prof. Zhao Yiheng, in his new book *Towards a General Narratology*, rightly criticized Barthes’s long list of narrative as too limiting, “for in his list are all examples of one variety that we call “literature and art”, but narrative has far more varieties than that”. 

But the scope of Zhao’s general Narratology is too broad. For practical purposes, we can perhaps focus on those that can best represent the genealogy of Chinese narrative. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault placed great emphasis upon Nietzsche’s concept of “genealogy”, a concept summarized by David Herman as follows:

Genealogy is a mode of investigation that seeks to uncover forgotten interconnections; reestablish obscured of unacknowledged lines of descent; expose relationships between institutions, belief-systems, discourses, or modes of analysis that might otherwise be taken to be wholly distinct and unrelated.

At this stage, Chinese Narratology should commit itself to investigation in this genealogical sense, and try to re-discover the “forgotten interconnections” and “the obscured of unacknowledged lines of descent”. Let me illustrate this with our study of the “pre-narrative” on bronze wares. The Bronze Age lasted over one thousand years, and the meta-writing on bronze wares was logically the starting point of storytelling in later generations. If we look closely enough at the meaningful symbols on bronze wares, especially those decorative patterns and figures that preceded Chinese characters, we may find that they share a lot in common with the “writing” as we now know it: They have not only paragraphs, units, and chapters, but themes, structures, and functions as well. In terms of organization, these symbols were no doubt the harbingers for future narrative of various kinds. Students of Narratology are often enamoured by the reticularly recursive structures Barthes and his likes extracted from narrative works, but what they do not know is that ancient Chinese people long time ago knew perfectly how to “weave” reticular patterns on bronze wares. This knowledge was stilled in the depth of Chinese...
classical theory of literature and art and occasionally surfaced, as Liu Xie wrote in his *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, “It’s natural that silk of different colors can be used to embroider a beautiful pattern, different notes to produce melodious music, expressions of different feelings to present a fine work of art”, and as Jin Shengtan expressed in his comment on Chapter 8 of *Water Margin*, “beside the twig is the leaf beside which is buds beside which is flower beside which is petals beside which is stamens”. The study of the pre-narrative on the bronze wares, therefore, can help us to locate the origin of Chinese narrative tradition, just as the vivisection of human bodies can benefit considerably from the vivisection of monkey bodies. Besides bronze wares, Chinese pottery and porcelain is another important carrier of “stories”, which I shall discuss in greater details in Chap. 5.

**Approach 2: Bringing the Studies to the Origin**

The abovementioned “long period” entails, of course, a pushing-back in our studies, but I would like to bring our studies to the very origin of the long river of narrative. As everything must have a start, I think it is necessary to go back to the time before the “pre-fiction”, or even “pre-narrative” and explore the primordial form of narrative and its influences upon the narrative in later generations. In this book, I would refer to the narrative before pre-narrative as “Ur-narrative”, that is, the storytelling related to the solar movement when the universe was being formed. As the precursor of solar mythologies, this ancient phenomenon is only next to impossible to be fully grasped, as Qu Yuan wondered in his “Tian Wen” (or, *Asking the Heaven*), “When the universe had not yet taken shape, how could we grasp it?”, but the sporadic prints left in mythologies, tales, and folklores can still provide us with some useful clues (as long as we are patient and use the right way). But before clarifying the importance of these clues, I shall elaborate a little bit on the concept of “deep structure”.

In Classical Narratology, the surface structure of a given narrative is generated by a deep structure through a transformative process. In other words, all the tensions and conflicts in the story world come from a deep binary opposition. But Western Classical Narratology remains silent about two key issues: From where does the binary opposition as the deep structure come? how is the deep structure transformed into the surface structure? *Yi Jing* (or, *Book of Change*) provides part of the solution to these two issues. If we understand “Taiji” in *Book of Change* as the Sun in an abstract sense, then “Taiji generated two poles” becomes a highly abstract “Ur-narrative” in which the movement of the sun made a divide between “the bright world and the dark world”. This distinction then generated the first-order category of “Yin/Yang”, which then gave birth to a host of other binary oppositions in the universe, including “east/west”, “bright/dark”, “warm/cold”, “up/down”, “male/female”, “day/night”, “white/black”, “wake/sleep”, “living/dead”, “prosper/wither”, “rise/fall”, and so on. These states and actions, and their transformation from one pole to the other, correspond to the solar movement from east to west so closely that it provides the best possible example of how the deep structure could be transformed into the surface conflicts.
Now consider the influence of the “Ur-narrative” on the surface conflicts. Compared with the “observable” diurnal sun moving from east to west, the ancient people’s imagination of the nocturnal sun moving from west to east has even greater potential for conflicts, since the sun sinking in the west has to struggle hard in order to return to the east from the dark underground. Some archaeologists call this conflict between the bright and the dark the “natural drama”, in which “the day is swallowed up by night every day, and later liberated at dawn …These scenes in the great natural drama, the conflict between light and darkness, in general, provide some simple facts. In many countries, for many generations, these facts have become folktales about ‘heroes’ or ‘maidens’ in a mythical way: They are swallowed up by demons, later disgorged by them, or rescued from their bellies”.\(^80\) In the oral narrative across the world, there are many such stories of someone breaking out of a demon’s belly. Here we could see how such stories came into being: The natural phenomenon of the sun being swallowed and then disgorged by the darkness inspired human imagination of heroes escaping from inside the body of demons and bred the mythologies of heroes fighting their adversaries, which gradually found their way into folklores and then into narrative of various kinds and genre.

This understanding leads us to the conclusion that the movement of the sun from east to west during the day and the imagined journey from west to east during the night provides the ultimate cause of transformation from the deep structure to the surface structure in the primordial narrative. Furthermore, the never-ending circle of the solar movement also bred a conception of “circles being valuable” in people who looked up to it on the earth, and this conception, in turn, would affect how people responded to narrative structures aesthetically. In his *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Liu Xie mentioned more than once “coming full circle”, “matching the beginning with the ending” and “the ending echoing the beginning”, showing his strong preference for the structure of circle in which the beginning and ending meet perfectly. Yang Yi also agreed that “at the heart of most of the well-made Chinese narrative works lies this never-ending ‘circle’”.\(^81\) Seen as such, the Yin and Yang fish with their head and tail connected in *Taiji* diagram is precisely the symbol of “Ur-narrative”.

**Approach 3: Shifting the Paradigms**

Shifting the paradigms means breaking the boundaries between Narratology and other disciplines, and working out different approaches to different problems. I have already mentioned that the division of disciplines is a man-made thing, and here I would go one step further and emphasize that the research methodologies are equally indivisible, as we can hardly say a certain theoretical tool is exclusive to one specific discipline. As Chinese Narratology involves many issues that do not belong to literature in its traditional sense, we need to keep investigating and interrogating and borrow extensively from anthropology, studies of religion, mythology, linguistics, semiotics, folklore, and sociology, like archaeologists of

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\(^{80}\)Tylor (2005).

\(^{81}\)Yang (1995b).
knowledge, if we want to find out the genealogy of Chinese narrative and provide a more comprehensive account for the origin and dynamics of Chinese narrative tradition. As we may have realized, narrative studies are not just about “close reading”, but also about “expanded reading” through “long period” and large-scale investigation. As Barthes said in his “S/Z”:

We emphasize the importance of shifting research paradigms because we understand that meaning system is always on the move: In the sky of narrative, the “galaxy of signifiers” keeps flickering, so there is no such thing as the “main entrance” to it, to say less the “only entrance”, and the best way seems to get to know all the entrances so that we can find the right one at the right time. Besides, we all know that it is pointless to treat the mythology of a nation in isolation, so we’d better bring Chinese narrative together into the narrative of other nations. Only in this way can it be possible to achieve what Clifford Geltz called “deep description” effect: The difference between two things may sometime be as subtle as the difference between the normal blinking and conscious winking, and only by multi-dimensional and multi-level “scanning” can we find out the difference.\(^8^2\)

Consider my studies on the four Classical novels in Chap. 6. I think there must be some hidden reason why these four novels are always mentioned as a single “package” though they are four separate novels. We can find out this reason if we approach the four novels from an entrance provided by “contractual” analysis. Heroes in these novels have all signed a “contract” with both the orthodox and the unorthodox, so their action could all be categorized into such function as “signing the contract”, “fulfilling the contract”, “breaking the contract”, “being rewarded”, and “being punished”. This is so because they all assume both orthodox and unorthodox identities: Jia Baoyu in Dream of the Red Mansion is both grandson of the Duke of Rongguo and incarnation of the Deity Shenying pestering for retributions; Monkey Sun in Journey to the West is both Qi Tian Da Sheng (or great celebrity of Heaven) and an alien monkey demon; Song Jiang in Water Margin is both Xing Zhu (or the incarnation of a great star) and the leader of a rebellious army; and Liu Bei in Romance of Three Kingdoms is both Uncle of the emperor and a grassroot big brother. Their conflicting identities put them in a difficult dilemma: Their “big” contract with the orthodox subject them to heavy social responsibilities, while their “small” contract with the unorthodox prompts them towards the natural humanity. However, all of them struggle to fulfill the “big” contract at the expenses of their soul’s freedom. The shared surface structure of the four novels originates

\(^{8^2}\)Barthes (1973).
\(^{8^3}\)Clifford (1973).