

From Literature to Culture: A Review of Yiheng Zhao's *The River Fans out: Literature and its Theories in China**

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The river fans out, forming a delta at the end of its long run through mountains and valleys. The current turns gentle and steady, and its course diverges into the sea. This might be the origin of the name of this book, in which Professor Zhao Yiheng provides us with a unique historical and theoretical approach to understanding the development and characteristics of Chinese literature, carefully analysing the various traditional and modern genres. He does not simply introduce the literature, but rather places it into a more ambitious narrative and semiotic framework to examine its significance. This approach links literature back to the study of meaning and forward to culture, the ocean into which every human creation finally merges.

The study of formalism in China, which began in the 1930s, was interrupted by World War II and China's War of Liberation. For more than 40 years, formalism was considered either decadent or bourgeois in China, while elsewhere the "Linguistic Turn" was hugely influential in nearly all fields in the humanities. Semiotics attracted increasing attention, and the exploration of the nature of meaning was in full swing in

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the West. Meanwhile, literature in China was dominated by Socialist Realism, and consequently the study of literature was obsessed with what literary content revealed about the real world. It should not be said that formalism is superior to realism or vice versa, but the singular focus and monotony of critical discourse in China was quite frustrating. It was not until the end of the Cultural Revolution that the limitations on thought came to an end and formal studies regained prominence.

Zhao Yiheng was one of the first scholars to study formalism, and the first to introduce New Criticism systematically to China after its reform and opening-up. He started his post-graduate studies with Shakespeare in 1978 but soon found himself more interested in the logical form of a text than in interpretations of its content. Encouraged by his mentor Bian Zhilin, one of the most respected literary critics and poets in modern China, Zhao traced the history of formalism from New Criticism all the way to post-structuralism. He found a new route that is “broad and spectacular in views” but noted that “without a beacon, one can still get lost. My coordinate is semiotics” (赵毅衡, 2018, p. 1). As Zhao’s research fields have expanded from formalism to semiotics, narratology and art, the texts he analyses have widened from literature to general narratives, and he has discovered a connection between form, history and culture: “Formal study is the only way out of the impasse of formal study. There is a direct path from form to the social-cultural mechanism of literary production. It is the form, not the content, that is more diachronic.” (赵毅衡, 2013a, p. 247). That is, formal study is not ignorance of content, but another perspective from which to observe culture. Zhao therefore calls his semiotic research the “formal-cultural theory” or “theories of meaning”.

This book is a collection of essays based on this theory. Literature is Zhao’s first conceptual experiment using his theory, a branch of a river whose image may refer to the development of Chinese literature and which may also be a symbol of Zhao’s academic research path. The book contains 19 far-reaching essays and is divided into three parts: an introduction to semiotic narrative theory; research on traditional Chinese literature; and research on contemporary Chinese literature.

I . The Formal-Cultural Perspective of Literature

The first five chapters introduce the most fundamental concepts of the formal-cultural theory, and are full of debate and theoretical innovations. In the first chapter,

Zhao advances his definition of “sign”—the basis of many of his studies—as “a sensory entity to be regarded as carrying meaning” (p. 6), and he further defines semiotics as “the study of meaning” (p. 11). To systematically introduce literature into cultural studies, it is necessary to conduct literary research from the perspective of meaning to avoid the pitfalls of poetic criticism, which indulges in the mystery of literature and conveys only the mystique and sensory pleasure. As a pioneer of Chinese formalism, semiotics and narratology, Zhao also records the bumpy road of Chinese semiotics from its difficult start to its take-off and to today’s achievements. China has splendid classical semiotics resources in its history, extensive cultural practice and, at present, a great passion for semiotic study. As Zhao says, “Postmodern semiotics meeting the world’s longest sustained civilization could provide a great impetus to the advance of both” (p. 21).

The focus on the meaning of signs approaches literature as a form of narrative. In Chapters 2 and 3, Zhao introduces some core issues in his general narratology: definition, classification and frame-person duality. His new definition of the minimal narrative is based on the narrative subject and narrativising interpretation: “A narrating subject places at least one event participated by at least one character into a text so that another (or the same) subject could interpret it as having temporality and significance.” (p. 24) The reason for this definition is that the general narratology is not limited to literature, but takes all possible narrative forms into consideration: drama, cinema, video games, sport competitions, documentaries, history, news, advertisement, prediction, and even illusions and dreams. It encompasses the existing novel-centric paradigm, but enables a broader discussion of some of the most popular narrative forms today.

When the boundaries of narrative broaden to include so many forms, classification becomes quite challenging. Zhao proposes three categories: factual/fictional, media and mood. For the factual/fictional distinction, a reader or recipient could recognize the non-factual frame of fictional narratives, as they are acknowledged lies, but must accept the factuality of the story told by the narrator (different from reliability, factuality is a prerequisite for a narrative to proceed). A factual narrative requires that the narrator and the narratee must communicate in a factual frame, even if the “facts” are not accurate, or are even lies. The factual/fictional dichotomy includes four narrative types: factual narratives, fictional narratives, pseudo-factual narratives and pseudo-fictional narratives (p. 25). In this way, news, advertisement,

fiction and dream belong to different types even though they have the same factual/fictional distinction, and drama, cinema, video games and sport, although they are distinct media, fall into the same category because of their temporal dimension.

Time—the temporal dimension—is the most important element in all of Zhao's narrative classifications. In addition to retrospect-recording and present-performing media, Zhao discusses unfinished ongoing narrative, that is, future-mental media. Narrative is also divided into indicative, interrogatory and imperative types based on mood. These classifications all start from the perspective of the subject of a narrative and eliminate the confusion brought by the development of modern media: no matter how media technology evolves, the time dimension rooted in any narrative is fully presented in this theoretical framework, which provides guidance on how we can view new narrative forms.

Chapter 4, “The Narrator and His/Her/Its Frame-Person Duality”, is an expansion of the idea of the narrator, which is essential given the inclusion of forms such as games and dreams into the narrative category. In this duality, the narrator, as a function and starting point of any narrative, is “individuated” or “framified” to different degrees. When this function becomes exceedingly individuated, the narrator is actually telling the story, yet when framified to the utmost, the narrator becomes a constitutive frame. This “frame-person duality” is also a basis for distinguishing genres. For example, history and journalism both belong to factual recorded narrative and have highly individuated author-narrators who must therefore be accountable to the narratees. In contrast, dreams, which belong to inner fictional performed narrative, have extremely framified frame-narrators. The dreamer can only experience a dream's plot and can never have a dialogue with the “story teller” even if he is, in a way, observable.

“Cultural markedness” presented in Chapter 5 is another of Zhao's important contributions to literature and cultural semiotics. Instead of discussing the traditional dualistic inequality in language, Zhao puts forward a third factor when surveying culture: the middle term, an independent section that reclines on the positive term, thereby marginalising the negative, and marking it. Precisely because of this trichotomous division, cultural markedness is not an immutable pattern, but one that changes along with the reclining of the middle term over time. Therefore, phenomena such as nudity, makeup, tattoos and eating raw foods have changed diachronically from mainstream to non-mainstream with the development of civilisation, but are now

practiced by subcultures and are gradually gaining recognition from the middle term. Similarly, today's stereotypes may be reversed in the future.

In both the cultural markedness discussion and the classification of narration, meaning and temporality are always at the centre of Zhao's theory, which is probably why it is dynamic and very functional. The purpose of examining past experience is not only to summarise a theory or to explain something that exists today, but to connect the past, present and future, cast new light on known issues and consider the unknown to come.

II . Cultural Semiotic Interpretation of Chinese Traditional Literature

The theories presented in the first part have strong explanatory ability when applied to Chinese literature. Chapters 5 to 9 start from traditional Chinese literary texts and explore the characteristics of Chinese culture from the perspectives of semiotics and narratology. The *White Rabbit Play*, one of the four classic Chinese southern plays, has been the subject of numerous cultural studies, yet Zhao's analysis is fresh. In the *White Rabbit Play*, a Chinese Cinderella formula shows the heterogeneity cultural distinction that the Chinese version of the reversal of fortune narrative is ethically encoded. However, Zhao focuses on different versions of this popular story, revealing a paradox in Chinese popular literature. The localised parts of the culturally lower texts form a structural dualism and could lead to moral dualism: "sub-cultural texts have to adhere more closely to the dominant ideology, for no other reason than that they have neither right nor aspiration to participate in the forming or transforming of ideology" yet "sub-cultural texts share the coding system, only part of these texts is sufficiently encoded, leaving a large amount of localized parts relatively under-coded" (p. 70). The ethical logic is thus ambiguous. Zhao discusses this issue further in Chapter 7: popular literature uses trivial details that sever connections with the mainstream ethic to entertain the public. However, it is also under stronger ethical constraints to keep itself under ideological control. This chapter also discusses the paradigm of historiography, preaching and self-expression in the Chinese literary tradition and transformation.

In the subsequent chapters, Zhao conducts a historical examination of Chinese literature from a narrator-centric point of view, searching for the evolution of narrators

□ 符号与传媒 (22)

over the long history of Chinese fiction. According to Zhao, Chinese vernacular fiction takes a form between the oral and written models and is a unique narrative form that creates a unique narrator. In vernacular fiction, narrators always call themselves “the storyteller” (*shuoshude* or *shuohuade*)” and never hesitate to insert themselves into the narration, although they never participate in the story they tell. They are narrators who are “non-participant” and “semi-explicit” (p. 114). This narrative form changes after the May Fourth Movement: “[the narrator’s] manipulation is exaggerated to expose his vulnerability. Thus, May Fourth fiction completely destroys the conventional narratorial frame by removing the narrator from the position of controlling meaning.” (p. 125)

In examining the chronological evolution of the narrator, Zhao proposes a criterion for narrative reliability: “Since unreliability can occur only in the narrator’s transformation [...] reliability could be recovered by turning back the process, i. e. , by erasing the narratorial mediation.” (p. 137) In vernacular fiction, the distances between the narrator and the implied author, the reader and the implied reader are quite short, which forms reliable narration, a symmetry. From the May Fourth Movement, when narrators began to keep a considerable distance from the implied author while distance between the reader and the implied reader remained nearly the same, asymmetry appears, and the narrative becomes unreliable. We can tell from the history of Chinese fiction reviewed in this book that the confrontation between classical and vernacular writing is not merely a matter of language reform, but a tremendous change in meaning construction. Vernacular fiction opposes not only the ideology of the old culture, but also the presentation of it.

Chapter 10 examines the second tide of Chinese influence on American poetry. The first tide of interest in Chinese poetry gradually subsided after the American New Poetry Movement reached its peak. The second tide rose after the late 1950s, when the dominance of the conservative Eliot-New Criticism weakened, and the Beat Generation and other anti-academic poetry movements appeared. As the problems of post-industrial society have become more prominent, Zen and Tao have been interpreted more diversely, and the understanding of Chinese poetry has gone deeper into its aesthetics. Chinese-American poets, who did not appear in the first tide have entered the American poetry world and discovered their identity with the help of Chinese poetry in a foreign land.

The combination of narratology and cultural semiotics is used to identify clues to

cultural and subcultural transformations during the communication of classical Chinese literature, including the tension between and countermeasures of elegance and vulgarity, the cultural status of fiction and historiography, the appearance of the narrator, and even the ebb and flow of Chinese poetry abroad. Zhao's exploration not only focuses on the past but also defends the innovative forms of modern and contemporary literature and ponders the present situation and challenges that literature confronts.

III. Avant-garde in Contemporary Chinese Literature

After the May Fourth Movement, Chinese culture continued what is called the “downward extension of the rites” (赵毅衡, 2013b, p. 16), becoming gradually homogenised, but the complication of the literary text form began to subvert this state. This is one of the reasons for the emergence of vernacular fiction after the May Fourth Movement and the basis for the later introspection related to avant-gardism.

In the third part of the book, Zhao first discusses the rise of metafiction in China. “Meta-” is the form's awareness and expression of itself. Although many narrations show traces of traditional Chinese literature, these traces are often stylised and non-semantic, and thus cannot reveal the narrators' authority. However, meta-sensibility is not a Western import, but a long-standing way of thinking in the Chinese philosophical tradition. This way of thinking, hidden deeply inside, was released in the “methodology fever” of the 1980s. Metafiction involves a rebellion that is different from the rebellion against the old culture during the May Fourth Movement. It is breaking the old while seeking to find a new value, a rebellion against the frame itself that opposes interpreting the literature in a single way. As Zhao says, “What the reader faces is no longer the expected interpretation of experience. He has to form for himself an interpretation which the text neither denies nor encourages, once all meta-lingual systems—historical, ethical, rational, ideological, etc.—are falsified. In other words, every reader has to be a critic able to reach beyond the text.” (p. 186). Because of this complete rebellion, the avant-garde literature writes a glorious page in the history of modern Chinese literature.

The theoretical defence of the avant-garde movement is always a cornerstone of Zhao's literary criticism, which he calls a “lonely career” (赵毅衡, 1993). According to Zhao, elite literature was once the backbone of Chinese culture, but in the face of a

□ 符号与传媒 (22)

modern and commercialised society, intellectuals have gradually lost their standing. “The last groan of Avant-Garde literature, and the appeal of literati become almost inaudible in the toast of economic take-off and political social stability—a major crisis facing Chinese culture today.” (1993). He traces the origin of avant-garde literature to periods of great revolution in Chinese history, pointing out that avant-gardism is not a fashion borrowed from elsewhere, but a corollary of the reorientation of Chinese culture, in which the continuity of rule, truth and letters are not fixed and unchangeable; they continuously absorb foreign culture, self-renewing to maintain the essence of Chinese culture. Avant-gardism is a weathervane of transformation: it has the same characteristics as many literature revolutions in history and will continue to explore the way forward.

Zhao then turns his attention to individual avant-garde writers: Yu Hua, Ma Yuan and Gu Cheng. He points out that Yu Hua’s work always focuses on the interchange between different constructions of meaning, which are not divided by the gap between the old and the new, but by reality and fantasy, with fantasy being weaker yet more “real” than reality (p. 202). In Yu Hua’s works, we can find the values attached to Chinese subculture from the rebellion against realism and the irony of genre. He has the strongest sense of subversiveness in the construction of Chinese modern culture. Ma Yuan, who is probably China’s most famous metafiction writer, challenges the long-term realist tradition of Chinese literature from another angle. In Ma Yuan’s works, the fictional world and the act of fictionalising this world intertwine, creating a new way of construction: “fiction not only could be fabricated but could also be about fabrication itself.” (p. 218) His profound influence continues to the present.

This book, as the title implies, brings together 40 years of Zhao Yiheng’s literary observations and critical thinking. From theory to text, from ancient to contemporary times, these essays each show an aspect of formal-cultural theory in Chinese literature, and together they highlight the interaction between different levels of Chinese culture, forming a significant explanatory framework. This framework provides a distinctive interpretation of Chinese literature and integrates literature and other cultural phenomena into a whole.

Media forms are ever-changing, and the literal text appears old and unappealing compared to audio, video and the various sensory experiences that virtual reality provides. However, literary texts that have endured for thousands of years record a

civilisation's ways of thinking and existing; the narrative structure is deeply hidden, but is active in today's innovations. The study of literary narrative should not be independent of other fields, as it is the most complex form of meaning and holds our deepest emotions and hopes. Through these studies, we can find in the past some images of the narrative changes that are currently taking place, and can identify a suitable path for researching these modern media. However, the culture behind the form is rooted in the depths of our cognition; it has long-term effects on us and restricts the development of narrative. Thus, novel modern technologies are no longer elusive, but are part of the evolution of the narrative form, which began with the birth of classic literature and will continue to flow. Thus, formal studies have never been so closely related to reality. Therefore, literary criticism is by no mean a lonely, self-admiring career, but a defence of the historical and cultural vitality of Chinese literature.

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