

Book Review: Xiuyan Fu. *Chinese Narratologies*. Trans. Weisheng Tang. Springer. ISBN 978-981-15-7506-8.

## A Trailblazer in Chinese Narrative Study: On *Chinese Narratologies*

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What is “Chinese Narratology”? How can “Chinese narrative” become a systematic “study”? Questions of this kind have been raised repeatedly in the field of Chinese narrative research. Many attempts have been made to answer them by various scholars in recent years. Among them, Xiuyan Fu’s *Chinese Narratologies* is a prominent example, originally published in Chinese in 2015 (Peking University Press) with an English translation by Weisheng Tang following in 2020 (Springer). Fu has a well-established expertise in narratology and Chinese literature and *Chinese Narratologies* is the latest of a significant number of influential works in the field.

Despite an abiding belief that Western Narratology possesses universal validity, China has its own long and distinct narrative traditions, which have been consistently addressed by the academic work of Fu. As Péter Hajdu (2018:171) has pointed out: ‘Real narratives necessarily belong to some particular traditions, and therefore some particular traditions have to have an impact on narrative theory’. As Western Narratology fails to describe and analyse all phenomena in Chinese narrative satisfactorily, *Chinese Narratologies* contributes to important work to construct and develop China’s own narratological theories.

Rather than present a defiant resistance to Western narratology, Fu adopts a more moderate stance in this book, taking the view that Chinese Narratology does not necessarily need to confront Western Narratology, or to be isolated and separated from it. Indeed, given that before Western Narratology was introduced to China there was no systematic science or discipline of narrative in China, Chinese Narratology should not be considered in solely inward-looking isolationist terms. In addition, Classical and Post-classical Narratology are not exclusive to the West and should be embraced internationally. Fu acknowledges here that Western Narratology provides an important point of reference for Chinese Narratology but also argues that it is ‘by no means a replicable model, since Chinese Narratology ought to be based on its own tradition’. He states that ‘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’ (p. xxv).

In *Chinese Narratologies*, Fu maps out new Chinese narrative research landscapes whilst also addressing issues of longstanding focus in the field. Given their status in Chinese literature, the Four Great Classical Novels are often the analytical focus of work in Chinese literary research and they are again considered in *Chinese Narratologies*. But what sets his book apart is that it also acknowledges the fact that ancient China did not just witness the production of the Four Great Classical Novels but that it also gave birth to other valuable narrative treasures. This book addresses Chinese Narratology in relation to its very origin, its link to bronze wares and porcelain, its sense of sight and hearing, and its local forms.

In terms of the origins of Chinese Narratology for example, *Chinese Narratologies* consists of an account of “Ur-Narrative” and the “Sun Myth” (Chapter 1), as well as the “Proto-Ecological Narrative” in *Shan Hai Jing* (Chapter 2). Ur-narrative can be briefly defined as the earliest narrative about the movement of the sun, and *Shan Hai Jing*, whose literal meaning is “the Book of Mountain and Seas”, focuses on narratives of place. Fu also conducts, in Chapter 5, an analysis of narratives which are focused on or refer to porcelain, a material developed towards the end of the Later Han Dynasty and which has historical, cultural and commercial resonances for China.

Alongside such innovative analytical focuses, in Chapter 6 Fu offers new analysis of the Four Great Classical Novels. Entitled “The magic of Contract: A new Analysis of Four Classic Chinese Novels”, this chapter

examines the surface narrative structure in the novels by using the concept of contractual function in Classical Narratology. By using the conception of “big contract” and “small contract”, Fu concludes that contradictions between the two contracts prevail in the Four Great Classical Novels. Big contracts in the books are all about orthodoxy (e.g. positive results, authenticity, etc.), while small contracts are more concerned with unorthodoxy (e.g. heterodoxy, heresy, etc.). According to the big contracts, a “hero” should pursue righteous causes and make contributions to his (her) country and people at the expense of other freedoms (through restraint, labor, etc.). The small contracts go to the opposite extreme, of which the characters indulge themselves, pursuing individual feelings. The heroes in these novels all have a dual identities, involving both orthodox and unorthodox characteristics. The big contracts constrain them to respond with a sense of social responsibility while small contracts evoke them to respond to the call of human nature. Monkey King (in *Journey to the west*) serves as a fine example; he is both a rebellious monkey king and a high ranking official (Great Sage Equaling Heaven) in the heaven court. The conflicts between the big contract and small contract contribute significantly to sustaining the trajectory of the narrative and reflect well-known international narrative tropes.

If the Four Great Classical Novels represent the peak of Chinese written narratives, there are also four great folktales which are the pinnacles of oral narrative tradition. Despite ostensibly being four separate tales (*The Folktale of the White Snake*, *Butterfly Lovers*, *Lady Menjiang (Bring down the Great Wall by crying)* and *the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*), these tales have “intrinsic similarities” which might indicate that they are versions of the same narrative. Fu provides a new insight into these four folktales by exploring their intertextuality in Chapter 7. One notable finding is that the main character in each tale is a woman who exhibits considerable female agency in seeking equality with men in status or state. These four tales also share common educational functions in that they address ethical lessons about life, love, value, and power. This analysis reflects Fu’s longstanding interest in acoustic narratives. In Chapter 10, Fu argues that one of the major tasks of acoustic narrative studies is to revisit the Chinese classics through the perspective of acoustic experience. In this vein, important local narratives, myths and legends from the Jiangxi Province, are studied in the last two chapters. Centering on the three elements of “water”, “bird” and “boat”, Chapter 12 explores a crane-fairy tale and in Chapter 13 Fu analyses the legend of Xu Xun, a Jiangxi story about the defeat of an evil dragon.

Undeniably, Chinese Narratology, which is still in an early stage of development compared to Western Narratology, is far from being an independent and established discipline or science. However, through *Chinese Narratologies* Fu demonstrates how new analysis can continue to lay strong foundations for the discipline. The book provides a wealth of insights and innovative investigative methods and suggests practical tools that can be applied to Narrative Studies.

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