



## Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship

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### Recommended Citation

Shang, Biwu. "Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.6 (2014): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2530>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2530)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**Volume 16 Issue 6 (December 2014) Article 11**  
**Biwu Shang,**  
**"Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/11>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.6 (2014)**  
Special Issue **Western Canons in a Changing East Asia**. Ed. Simon C. Estok  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article "Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship" Biwu Shang discusses the field's impact starting in the 1970s to today. Shang's survey includes translations of Western frameworks including introductions published during three waves (the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s respectively). While Shang posits that Chinese narratology owes a debt to English-language Western scholarship, as it stands in the last decades this is counterbalanced with the development of Chinese narratology and Western scholarship started to show interest in Chinese scholarship: indeed, the more exchanges between Chinese scholarship and that of the West develop, the more beneficial the dialogue will prove for both.

**Biwu SHANG**

### **Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship**

In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* Edward W. Said wrote that "like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity" (226). Put differently, critical theories will not be undermined, but enriched and nourished from their travelling to a different culture. I agree with Said when he observes that "there are particularly interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another" (226). Narratology, and classical narratology in particular, is one of those "interesting cases" to be examined given its situation in Chinese scholarship. To uncover "a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement" of classical narratology in China, I refer to the four stages observed by Said and that are "common to the way any theory or idea travels" (226): namely "a point of origin," "a distance transversed," "conditions of acceptance," and "its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" (226-27). Following Said's explanation, I map the reception and variations of classical narratology in Chinese scholarship.

At the end of the 1970s, some Chinese scholars started introducing structuralist narratology. For example, in 1979 Kejian Yuan published an introduction to Vladimir Propp's thirty-one dramatic situations and seven character types, Robert Scholes's elements of fiction, and Yuri Lotman's structuralist poetics. In Yuan's opinion, structuralist critical theory falls into three general categories: grammatical analysis of literature from a linguistic perspective, the investigation of the structure of unconsciousness from a psychoanalytic perspective, and studies of the patterns of a literary genre in a bottom-up analysis. Yuan's study was followed by Yuhe Zhang's articles in which he examined and introduced French structuralist theory. However, narratology, as a specific term, was first introduced in Chinese scholarship by Longxi Zhang in 1983 when he introduced Propp's theory of character functions, Lévi-Strauss's homology underlying myth structures, Greimas's semiotic square, and Todorov's narrative grammar. Importantly, Zhang detected the weakness of structuralist narratology, which had been thought not only to overlook the aesthetic value of the narrative text, but also to disconnect it from its specific cultural-historical context. Zhang's work was followed by studies published by Daiyun Yue, Yamin Hu, Yinde Zhang, Lichuan Chen, Ben Xu, and Pingyuan Chen. Yue applied structuralist narratology to analyze Chinese fiction (on Yue's scholarship see also Zhang and Yue <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1881>>). While Zhang placed emphasis on narrative poetics, Yue stressed narrative practice and thus their studies represent different, but complementary directions for importing narratology into Chinese scholarship.

The 1980s is the first wave when Chinese scholars began to introduce and translate texts of classical Western narratology to Chinese. Interestingly, at the same time of this interest in Chinese scholarship the opposite was occurring in Western scholarship (that is, in Anglophone scholarship). In 1983, when finishing her *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan felt uncertain about whether her book was "an introduction" to narratology as a discipline or "an obituary" to a field of study. From her perspective "both reactions are possible, yet neither seems to me quite adequate. In many circles, including some universities, the poetics of narrative fiction is either ignored or treated with suspicion. For them, this book can serve as an introduction. In other circles, this discipline is already considered dead or at least superseded by deconstruction. From their point of view this book would be an obituary" (Rimmon-Kenan 135). Rimmon-Kenan's uncertainty is based on her observation of the critical climate in the 1980s where with the dominance of poststructuralism, narratology was thought to be dead or out of fashion.

In the first wave of the interest in narratology in Chinese scholarship, prominent examples are the publications of Yamin Hu, Lichuan Chen, Yinde Zhang, and Ben Xu. Hu argued that structuralist narratology attempts to uncover the deep structure of narrative and aspires to build up a universal structure of all narrative texts. Unlike Hu, Zhang not only took a close look at the correlations between narratology and other fields such as poetics, semiotics, and linguistics, but disclosed the major fea-

tures of narratology in terms of its objects of analysis. Further, one of the most important transfers of Western approaches in narratology occurred when Gérard Genette's work was introduced. Genette is considered the author of "what is perhaps the most perennial treatise of the early years of narratology and whose influence is among the most pervasive" and who "produced a narrative theory in a context that rendered that theory unique" (Pier 8). It was Xu and Chen who made Genette known to Chinese scholars: Chen published a detailed introduction to Genette's theory of focalization followed by Xu who examined the core arguments made by Propp, Brémond, Greimas, Barthes, Chatman, and Genette. However, despite Chinese scholars' enthusiasm for narratology, there was no book-length study of narratology published in China in the 1980s and it was not until the 1990s that this situation changed. At the same time, Chinese scholars integrated Western narrative theory with Chinese narrative works among which Pingyuan Chen's 1988 *中国小说叙事模式的转变* (The Paradigm Shifts of Chinese Narrative Fiction) stands out. It is the first attempt made by a Chinese scholar to put narratology into analyzing a corpus of modern Chinese fiction. With reference to narrative time, focalization, and narrative structure, Chen classified modern Chinese fiction into five periods: 1902-1906, 1906-1911, 1912-1916, 1917-1921, and 1921-1927. From Chen's perspective, as far as the narrative paradigm shift is concerned, narrative time was the first element that underwent changes followed by narrative focalization and narrative structure. Chen's work on the combination of narratology and Chinese primary literature is an example for Chinese critics and is accepted and followed by many of his contemporaries including Xiuyan Fu and Yi Yang who produced similar studies in the 1990s and are now considered pioneers of contemporary Chinese narratology.

The reception of narratology in Chinese scholarship in the 1980s is also marked by the publication of translations among which were Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, and Roland Barthes's and other French structuralist's studies in narratology. Interestingly, the year 1987 witnessed two Chinese translations of Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: one translated by Ming Hua, Xiaosu Hu, and Xian Zhou and the other by Lijun Fu. From these translations, Chinese scholars got to know a set of essential narratological concepts and that became popular in Chinese narrative studies. Among these concepts, implied author, unreliable narration, and impersonal narration have been the most controversial and debated. In 1989, Yinde Zhang edited and translated the collection *叙述学研究* (Studies in Narratology), which includes sixteen studies on narratology by French structuralists such as Barthes, Todorov, Greimas, Brémond, and Genette. In the same year, Jinqing Yao translated Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Like its English version, this translation served as a textbook for students and instructors alike and helped popularize narratology in China. Since few Chinese scholars had access to original French and English works on narratology in the 1980s, these translated works satisfied Chinese scholars' interest in Western narrative theory and paved the way for the future development of the field of narratology.

The second wave of the interest in narratology in China occurred in the 1990s and was marked by systematic introductions, in-depth explorations, and large-scale translations. In my opinion, in this period Dan Shen made the most significant contribution. After graduating from the University of Edinburgh with a doctoral degree in stylistics, Shen developed an interest in narratology and tried to find its complementarity with stylistics. In addition to publishing several articles on narratology, Shen published in 1998 the monograph *小说叙述学与文体学研究* (Narratology and Stylistics of Fiction) in which presented a study of the story/discourse distinction, plot, characters, focalization, and the complementarity between narratology and stylistics. Shen not only clarified a few ambiguous narratological concepts, but also modified and improved a number of established narratological models. One example has to do with point-of-view: in contrast to Western narratologists devoted to classifying different types of point-of-view while overlooking the phenomena of boundary-crossing of different points of view, Shen drew a distinction between overt boundary-crossing of different points of view and covert boundary-crossings. In doing so, Shen not only helped Chinese scholars to have a better understanding of narration, but also enriched analytical models of narratology in general.

Apart from a considerable number of articles on narratology, a dozen or so monographs were published during the 1990s. These works fall into two general categories: narrative poetics and narrative criticism. For example, Yamin Hu, Gang Luo, and Dai Xu explored narratology as to theory construction and Yiheng Zhao, Yi Yang, and Xiuyan Fu applied narratology to the analysis of Chinese primary texts. In his 1992 *小说叙事学* (Narratology of Fiction) Dai Xu discussed the deep structure and surface

structure of narrative and its constitutive elements (i.e., themes, characters, stories, media, strategies, and structures), and the rhetoric of narrative. From today's vantage point, Xu's work blurs the distinction between narration and text and between mood and voice. However, Xu offered a panoramic view of structuralist narratology. Xu's work was followed by Gang Luo's 1994 *叙事学导论* (An Introduction to Narratology) in which he presented a systematic introduction to narratology and its major theoretical arguments in terms of narrative text, narrative function, narrative grammar, narrative time, narrative situations, narrative voice, and narrative reception. Compared with Xu's and Luo's work, Yamin Hu's 1998 *叙事学* (Narratology) was more comprehensive: Hu divided narratology into three major categories: narration, story, and reading. Under the category of narration, Hu explored point of view, narrator, narratee, time, discourse, and commentary; under the category of story, Hu discussed plot, character, environment, and narrative grammar; and under the category of reading, Hu analyzed text types, the ideal reader, narrative reading, semiotic reading, and structural reading. Hu's book was widely used as a textbook in Chinese universities and thus helped to popularize the Western classical narratology in China.

Importantly, the dialogue on Western tenets of narratology and Chinese primary texts turned out to be productive as seen in a number of innovative and thought-provoking narratological studies such by Yiheng Zhao, Yi Yang, and Xiuyan Fu. In his 1994 *苦恼的叙述者* (The Uneasy Narrator) Zhao investigated the status of narrator, the relations between narrator and character, and narrative time in Chinese fiction. Zhao argued that narrators of Chinese fiction fall into three broad distinctive categories: self-conceited narrators taking control of the world they create (in traditional Chinese fiction), rebellious narrators fighting against old orders and building new ones (in new Chinese fiction since the "May-Fourth Movement"), and uneasy narrators unhappy with old orders yet unable to build new ones (in fiction of the late Qing Dynasty). Zhao expanded and developed his ideas further in his 1998 *当说者被说的时候: 比较叙述学导论* (When the Narrator is Narrated: An Introduction to Comparative Narratology) in which he elaborates on acts, subjectivity, time, perspective, speech act, plot, and meanings in/of narration. Unlike Zhao, who combined narratology with regard to modern Chinese fiction, Xiuyan Fu integrated narratology with classical Chinese narratives and published three works on narratology in the 1990s: *讲故事的奥秘—文学叙述论* (The Mystery of Storytelling: On Literary Narratives), *先秦叙事研究—关于中国叙事传统的形成* (Studies on Pre-Qin Narrative: The Formalization of Chinese Narrative Tradition), and *叙事: 意义与策略* (Narrative: Meaning and Strategies). Further, in 1994 Yi Yang published a pioneering article "中国叙事学: 逻辑起点和操作程式" ("Chinese Narratology: Points of Departure and Mechanisms") in which he postulated that Chinese literature is marked by its own distinctive mechanisms, models, and standards of evaluation different from its Western counterparts. According to Yang, Chinese narratives are based on conventions of circular reasoning whereby the concepts *ying* (feminine) and *yang* (masculine) are two opposing principles in nature from which the circular structure of Chinese narratives derive. Based on both Western narratological concepts and Chinese narrative traditions, Yang developed his ideas further in his 1997 *中国叙事学* (Chinese Narratology) where we find the bases of Chinese narrative poetics. Yang's Chinese narratology represents one of the most significant developments of Chinese narratology, which yet remains to be introduced to Western scholarship. The reception of narratology in China in the 1990s was propelled further by the publication of translations of Western texts. For example, there were Wallace Martin's *Recent Narrative Theory* translated by Xiaoming Wu and Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* translated by Wenrong Wang.

In the 2000s we can see a continued interest in narrative studies. Within classical narratology, it no longer serves a single paradigm of narrative inquiries as it did in the previous two waves and is instead challenged by the introduction and rise of its postclassical counterpart. However, unlike the situation in the West, classical narratology in China is not weakened by postclassical narratology, but develops parallel with it. Moreover, the importation of Western narratology to China also parallels the export of Chinese narratology to the West. For example, Dan Shen's work can be divided into two broad categories: introductions to Western narratology (classical and postclassical) and the history of the development of Western narratology. Shen edited translations of several Western postclassical narratological works including those by David Herman, Susan Lanser, J. Hillis Miller, James Phelan, and Mark Currie, all of which broadened the minds of Chinese scholars and helped them to learn about postclassical narratology. Shen also introduced several Western postclassical narrative theories such as



feminist narratology, rhetorical narratology, and cognitive narratology and his 2005 co-edited volume—with Jiamin Han and Liya Wang—*英美小说叙事学研究* (Anglo-American Narrative Theories of Fiction) is a good example. Further, in order to stress the complementarity between classical narratology and postclassical narratology and to present a comprehensive view of Western narrative theory, in *西方叙事学：经典与后经典* (Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical), Shen and his co-author Liya Wang parallel classical narratology with postclassical narratology. Relevant here is that Shen not only imports Western theoretical work to Chinese scholarship, but tries to detect the blind spots of Western narratology and to improve Western narratological models by building her own narrative theories. In her 2009 *叙事、文体与潜文本—重读英美经典短篇小说* (Narrative, Style and Subtext: Rereading Classical Anglo-American Short Stories) Shen coined the concept of "overall close-reading" and developed it into the model of "covert progression" both of which have been well received in Western scholarship (see, Shen, "Implied," "Covert"). Similar to Shen, Junqiang Tan and Weisheng Tang explore the correlations between classical narratology and postclassical narratology. Tan argues that in the postclassical context, classical narratology still plays a significant role in narrative studies. In particular, the basic concepts established by classical narratology are irreplaceable when scholars begin to embark upon narrative inquiries, which is particularly the case when we work along the line of postclassical narratology. Tang tries to reveal the different "coexisting" relationships between classical narratology and the various branches of postclassical narratology and posits that while interpretation-oriented postclassical narratologies tend to borrow key concepts and categories from classical narratology, poetics-oriented postclassical narratologies tend to supplement and transform the frameworks of classical narratology.

Unlike Western scholars some of whom no longer consider classical narratology relevant, Chinese scholars emphasize its usefulness and applicability. Today Chinese scholarship on narratology can be classified into two broad categories: those introducing Western narrative theories and those developing their own narrative theories (albeit with reference to Western narratology). Within the first category—in addition to the above discussed—are Xiaoying Dong's 2001 *叙述学* (Narratology), Fei Ge's 2002 *小说叙事研究* (Narrative Studies of Fiction), Yang Wang's 2002 *小说艺术形式分析：叙事学研究* (An Analysis of Fiction's Artistic Forms: Narratological Studies), Guosong Zu's 2003 *叙事的诗学* (Narrative Poetics), and Xiling Cheng's and Xiaolu Wang's 2001 *当代美国小说理论* (Contemporary American Theories of the Novel). Cheng and Wang not only introduced structuralist narratology, but also reviewed classical narrative theories by Chatman, Booth, and Prince. The second category of Chinese work on narratology includes for example Xiuyan Fu who employs Russian formalism in order to analyze traditional Chinese fictions such as porcelain narratives, narratives of solar myths, and ecological narratives. There is also Junqiang Tan with his 2002 *叙事理论与审美文化* (Narrative Theory and Aesthetic Culture) and his 2011 *审美文化叙事学：理论与实践* (Aesthetic-Cultural Narratology: Theory and Practice) in which he integrates narratology with aesthetics and culture. Given the definition offered by Tan, aesthetic-cultural narratology designates a study of cultural and aesthetic products from a narratological perspective. In terms of objects of narrative analysis, Diyong Long is interested in the space of various narrative phenomena such as that of modern fiction about history and memory. In doing so, Long attempts to develop a spatial narratology, which is now popular with many junior Chinese scholars. While Fu, Tan, and Long are interested in aspects or certain types of narrative, Yiheng Zhao attempts to embrace all types and aspects of narrative. In Zhao's opinion, narratology is a sub-branch of semiotics and he calls for a general narratology. In his 2013 book *广义叙述学* (A General Narratology), Zhao proposes a narratological framework that could include all narratives. Further recent monographs in narratology include Biwu Shang's 2013 *当代西方后经典叙事学研究* (Contemporary Western Narratology: Postclassical Perspectives) (see also Shang, "Postmodernist" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2437>>).

As we can see, what is remarkable about the field of narratology in Chinese scholarship today is the interest in and development of Chinese narrative traditions and Chinese narratology and this extends to the publication of studies in English in journals such as *Poetics Today*, *Style*, *Narrative*, *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *English Studies*, etc. For example, Ning Wang edited in 2008 a special issue entitled *Semiotic and Narrative Studies in China* in the journal *Semioica* and Henry Yiheng Zhao published in 2011 "The Problem of Time in a General Narratology" in *Neohelicon: actacomparationislitterarumunversarum*. Further, there is Shen's 2014 book *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions behind Overt Plots*. In Chinese, in addition to a significant

amount of monographs, there are more than 70,000 articles on narratology published between January 2000 and May 2014 (as indexed in the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database) and this shows the importance of the field.

In conclusion, according to Dan Shen and Xiaoyi Zhou, narratological investigations in China fall into five specific categories: "1) the introduction and development of Western narrative theory, with increasing critical reflections and modifications, and with increasing attention paid to postclassical or contextual narratologies; 2) the establishment of a Chinese narrative poetics that focuses on China's 'hidden cultural codes' as factors underlying the creation and formation of Chinese narrative structures, especially classical ones; 3) comparative narratology, which compares Chinese and Western narrative poetics; 4) the application of Western and Chinese narrative theory, whether classical or post-classical, to the analysis of Western and Chinese narratives; and 5) comparative studies between Chinese narratives and Western narratives" (145) and the examples I discuss confirm this view. It is undeniable that the introduction of Western narratology has transformed and will continue to transform the field of narrative studies in China. On the one hand, more introductions and translations of Western narratology are needed. On the other hand, in an age of calling for "a transnational narrative turn in narrative theory" (Friedman 1), there should be more introductions of Chinese narrative tradition and narrative theory in the West and not only in English only. When addressing questions about the future development of narratology in China, Phelan posits in an interview with Biwu Shang that China is a "significant site in the international network of narrative theorists" and suggests that "it would be beneficial if there were more equal exchange of ideas about narrative and narrative theory between China and the West. Chinese narrative theorists typically know much more about the Western tradition of narrative and narrative theory than Western narrative theorists know about the Chinese tradition. The more our exchanges involve a sharing of ideas about the two traditions, the more we can learn from each other and the more productive the relationship is likely to be" (Shang and Phelan 159). Admittedly, Chinese narratology owes a debt to English-language Western scholarship, but as it stands in the last decades this is counterbalanced with the development of Chinese narratology and Western scholarship started to show interest in Chinese scholarship: indeed, the more exchanges between Chinese scholarship and that of the West develop, the more beneficial the dialogue will prove for both.

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