



The Waterfall and the Fountain

Geographically and anthropologically distant cultures inspire awe and fascination: for centuries, Europe and China, the West and the East have fantasized about each other, longed for journeying toward each other, mutually projected onto each other their own alter egos. Modern innovation in the transport of people, goods, and especially cultural contents in digital form has increasingly narrowed the distance between these two geographic and human poles. Today, China is everywhere in the West, and viceversa. Yet, facility of access is not always tantamount to in-depth comprehension. Century-long differences, prejudices, and asymmetries still persist. Comprising the essays of several specialists in cultural theory and analysis, both from Europe and China, the volume seeks to uncover the semiotic formula underpinning the encounter, the dialogue, but also the clash between Western and Eastern aesthetics, especially in the neglected field of popular culture and arts. The title hints at the Chinese fascination for waterfalls and the natural flowing of the elements, compared with the European attraction to fountains as exploitation of technological mastery over nature: each chapter in the volume focuses on many aesthetic dialectics, spanning from literature to painting, from videogames to food.

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ARACNE

THE WATERFALL AND THE FOUNTAIN

COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC ESSAYS
ON CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN CHINA

edited by
Massimo Leone
Bruno Surace
Jun Zeng



I SAGGI DI LEXIA

34

Direttori

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Aprire una collana di libri specializzata in una disciplina che si vuole scientifica, soprattutto se essa appartiene a quella zona intermedia della nostra enciclopedia dei saperi — non radicata in teoremi o esperimenti, ma neppure costruita per opinioni soggettive — che sono le scienze umane, è un gesto ambizioso. Vi potrebbe corrispondere il debito di una definizione della disciplina, del suo oggetto, dei suoi metodi. Ciò in particolar modo per una disciplina come la nostra: essa infatti, fin dal suo nome (semiotica o semiologia) è stata intesa in modi assai diversi se non contrapposti nel secolo della sua esistenza moderna: più vicina alla linguistica o alla filosofia, alla critica culturale o alle diverse scienze sociali (sociologia, antropologia, psicologia). C'è chi, come Greimas sulla traccia di Hjelmslev, ha preteso di definirne in maniera rigorosa e perfino assiomatica (interdefinita) principi e concetti, seguendo requisiti riservati normalmente solo alle discipline logico-matematiche; chi, come in fondo lo stesso Saussure, ne ha intuito la vocazione alla ricerca empirica sulle leggi di funzionamento dei diversi fenomeni di comunicazione e significazione nella vita sociale; chi, come l'ultimo Eco sulla traccia di Peirce, l'ha pensata piuttosto come una ricerca filosofica sul senso e le sue condizioni di possibilità; altri, da Barthes in poi, ne hanno valutato la possibilità di smascheramento dell'ideologia e delle strutture di potere. . . Noi rifiutiamo un passo così ambizioso. Ci riferiremo piuttosto a un concetto espresso da Umberto Eco all'inizio del suo lavoro di ricerca: il "campo semiotico", cioè quel vastissimo ambito culturale, insieme di testi e discorsi, di attività interpretative e di pratiche codificate, di linguaggi e di generi, di fenomeni comunicativi e di effetti di senso, di tecniche espressive e inventari di contenuti, di messaggi, riscritture e deformazioni che insieme costituiscono il mondo sensato (e dunque sempre sociale anche quando è naturale) in cui viviamo, o per dirla nei termini di Lotman, la nostra semiosfera. La semiotica costituisce il tentativo paradossale (perché autoriferito) e sempre parziale, di ritrovare l'ordine (o gli ordini) che rendono leggibile, sensato, facile, quasi "naturale" per chi ci vive dentro, questo coacervo di azioni e oggetti. Di fatto, quando conversiamo, leggiamo un libro, agiamo politicamente, ci

divertiamo a uno spettacolo, noi siamo perfettamente in grado non solo di decodificare quel che accade, ma anche di connetterlo a valori, significati, gusti, altre forme espressive. Insomma siamo competenti e siamo anche capaci di confrontare la nostra competenza con quella altrui, interagendo in modo opportuno. È questa competenza condivisa o confrontabile l'oggetto della semiotica.

I suoi metodi sono di fatto diversi, certamente non riducibili oggi a una sterile assiomatica, ma in parte anche sviluppati grazie ai tentativi di formalizzazione dell'École de Paris. Essi funzionano un po' secondo la metafora wittgensteiniana della cassetta degli attrezzi: è bene che ci siano cacciavite, martello, forbici ecc.: sta alla competenza pragmatica del ricercatore selezionare caso per caso lo strumento opportuno per l'operazione da compiere.

Questa collana presenterà soprattutto ricerche empiriche, analisi di casi, lascerà volentieri spazio al nuovo, sia nelle persone degli autori che degli argomenti di studio. Questo è sempre una condizione dello sviluppo scientifico, che ha come prerequisito il cambiamento e il rinnovamento. Lo è a maggior ragione per una collana legata al mondo universitario, irrigidito da troppo tempo nel nostro Paese da un blocco sostanziale che non dà luogo ai giovani di emergere e di prendere il posto che meritano.

Ugo Volli



Multimedial contents

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The Waterfall and the Fountain

Comparative Semiotic Essays on Contemporary Arts in China

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Contents

- 9 Introduction
Massimo Leone

Part I

Chinese Aesthetics from the Inside

- 33 A Cultural Analysis of Temporal Signs in Twenty-First Century Chinese Literature
Jun Zeng (曾军)
- 53 Mimetic Desire or Productive Work?
Hai-tian Zhou (周海天)
- 73 Art as a Presencing Sign
Kui-ying Zhao (赵奎英)
- 97 On the Semiotic Model of Objecthood Proposed in Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind
Jia Peng (彭佳)
- 111 Narratology for Art History: Narrativizing Western Influence and Chinese Response in the Modern Era
Lian Duan
- 165 A Historical and Semiotic Analysis of *Cina's* calling on/relationship to China in the Cultural Revolution
Lei Han (韩蕾)

8 Contents

179 The Empty Mirror as Metaphor
Yan Gao (高燕)

193 *The Rap of China* and Hip-Hop's Cultural Politics
Jia-jun Wang (王嘉军)

Part II

Chinese Aesthetics from the Outside

223 The Semiotics of the Battle
Massimo Leone

247 The Musical Marco Polo
Gabriele Marino

277 The Aesthetics of Food
Simona Stano

303 Ellipses and Amnesias: Poetics and Figures of Time in Contemporary Chinese Cinema
Bruno Surace

329 Taming Play: A Map of Play Ideologies in the West and in China
Mattia Thibault

345 *Authors*

Introduction

Otherness, Extraneousness, and Unawareness in Inter–Cultural Semiotics

MASSIMO LEONE¹

A veil of wild mist
hides the tall bridge.
By a rock on the west bank,
I ask a fisher boat:
“The peach petals keep floating
with the water the whole day.
On which side of the clear stream
can I find the cave?”²

ABSTRACT: The essay pinpoints the core mission of cultural semiotics as an attempt at problematizing aspects of social life that, appear trivial to most because they have been “naturalized” but that, if read through the lenses of e discipline, che reveal the deep structures that produce meaning in a society and its culture. From this point of view, cultural semiotics is able to perceive otherness and, therefore, meaning, there where common sense would see just banal familiarity. To this purpose, the essay emphasizes the pervasiveness of the experience of otherness (the face of the other, the self as other, but especially otherness that emerges through media from the creativity of artists); it articulates three levels of unfamiliarity: otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. Through examples taken from Chinese literature and China’s everyday life in comparative perspective with the West, the essay suggests that, whereas otherness can be appropriated through a preexistent code, and whereas extraneousness requires the creation of a new code of translation, unawareness implies the incapacity to perceive

1. Shanghai University, University of Turin.

2. 桃花溪: “隱隱飛橋隔野煙 / 石磯西畔問漁船 / 桃花盡日隨流水 / 洞在清溪何處邊”; Zhang Xu (Chinese: 張旭, fl. 8th century), court name Bogao [伯高]; English trans. by Edward C. Chang.

naturalized otherness, until an extraordinary experience (travel, for instance) leads to its epiphany. Whilst otherness and extraneousness are discovered in alien cultures, unawareness is revealed in relation to one's own culture, thanks to the encounter with the alien one.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Semiotics; Chinese Literature; Chinese Culture; China–West Comparison; Semiotic Anthropology.

1. Encountering the Other

Cultural semiotics often problematizes aspects of social life that seem trivial to most and, as a consequence, do not become objects of investigation for more traditional disciplines. Such aspects, however, are not void of interest per se but because they have been interiorized as second nature and common sense by an entire collectivity. They seem as natural as breathing or sleeping but they are actually not. On the contrary, analyzing them often reveals truths about a society that are all the more surprising since they do not explicitly manifest themselves anymore but remain in the exclusive domain of the implicit or even unconscious assumptions of ideology. It is overly difficult to become aware of these assumptions by simply remaining in one's society and observing it, albeit with dispassionate neutrality, acumen, and sophisticated analytical instruments. Indeed, the more such implicit features are general and abstract, the more they will exclusively reveal themselves in very specific circumstances, which usually go under the somewhat rhetorical label of "encounter with the other"³.

One can come across otherness in many ways. It is, actually, quite hard not to have an experience of it even in the most crystallized routines⁴. The bodies of other individuals, and especially their faces (Leone, 2017), continuously provide one with an inexhaustible

3. On the topic of "anthropological translation", see Leone, 2015, *Anthropological*.

4. On the semiotics of routines, see Leone, 2011; on the emergence of significance, Leone, 2017, *On Insignificance*.

source of variety, which seems to be a foundational principle of cultures but also and foremost of the nature itself upon which cultures build their linguistic and semiotic constructions. Moreover, not only the bodies of the others, but also one's own body is the source of a quotidian experience of otherness. Time, in fact, and the changing of things through it, introduces variety in continuity. As soon as media enter the semiotic existence of an individual and its community, then, otherness is encountered beyond natural forms, in the form of the creativity offered by other people through a variety of genres, texts, and styles. Each novel is and must be different from the others; the same goes for most contemporary creative and artistic objects: that which is expected from them is exactly the ability of displacing receivers, albeit for a brief moment, from the domain of the familiar to that of the unknown or even of the disquieting⁵.

On the one hand, such mediated encounters with otherness cannot be a complete shock: poets can sometimes express feelings in a revolutionary way, yet they must somehow coat this revolution within a modicum of ordinary language, if some sort of communication with readers is to take place (Riffaterre, 1978). On the other hand, the extent of this unfamiliarity increases as texts from distant lands, times, and especially from distant cultures, are received. For a present-day Italian reader unfamiliar with the Chinese language, culture, and poetry, for instance, a poem by Wang Wei⁶ might sound exceedingly exotic, to the point that many, if not most of the poet's lyrics will not be understood or will be misunderstood; here follows, for instance, Wang Wei's famous poem *Mount Zhongnan* [終南山]:

The Tai Yi peak
is near the capital of Heaven.
Its range stretches
all the way to the coast.

5. On the semiotics of innovation, see Leone, 2015, *The Semiotics*.

6. In Chinese: 王維; Qi County, Jinzhong, Shanxi, 699 – Xi'an, Shaanxi, 759 (Tang Dynasty).

As I look back,
 the white clouds are close in.
 As I look close up,
 the blue mists suddenly disappear.
 The middle ridge divides into
 two ever-changing sceneries.
 On dark or clear days
 each valley has a different view.
 Wanting to put up
 at some one's place for the night,
 I ask a woodcutter
 on the other side of the stream⁷.

2. A Typology of Unfamiliarity

Unfamiliarity, however, must be arranged along a spectrum that could be conceived as symmetric to the one devised by Franco-Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas so as to investigate the logics of meaning formation (Greimas, 1970).

2.1. *Otherness*

Accordingly, the most superficial level of non-intelligibility would be that of the textual surface or manifestation, that is, the level at which Wang Wei's poetry is expressed in 8th century Chinese. For an Italian reader, however, a good translation will be sufficient to cross this first linguistic barrier⁸, although never without a loss of nuances of meaning, given the complexity of the poetic translation between languages and cultures that are so distant (Eco, 2003, *Dire*;

7. “太乙近天都/連山接海隅/白雲迴望合/青靄入看無/分野中峰變/陰晴眾壑殊/欲投人處宿/隔水問樵夫”; Engl. trans. Edward C. Chang.

8. For instance, through the collection *Poesie del fiume Wang*, translated by the Italian sinologist Martin Benedikter (1980).

2003, *Mouse*). At deeper levels of the textual organization, however, crossing the frontier between unfamiliarity and acquaintance would be more difficult. At the deepest level of texts, for instance, a long acquaintance with Chinese culture and history would be necessary in order to grasp the set of fundamental spiritual values that underpins traditional Chinese poetry and to “translate” it for the western and Italian understanding of it. This operation would be easier for the contemporary Chinese reader but it would not be completely smooth either: a gap of centuries of history separates a classic Chinese poet from his present-day compatriot readers. In both cases, only study, a refined sensibility, and assiduous familiarizing with history and literature, plus a certain personal hermeneutic talent, will bridge the spatial, temporal, and cultural gap, transforming a poem into a controlled experience of otherness, that is, otherness that strikes receivers of the poem enough to alter their perception of reality but not so much as to become unintelligible and, as a consequence, ineffectual.

Experiencing otherness through traditional media and formats like books and literature is sometimes revolutionizing but it is also somehow facilitated by the adoption of textual forms that, despite local peculiarities and varieties, usually are a global phenomenon. Contemporary Italian readers coming across a poem by Li Shang-yin⁹ might be totally unfamiliar with the themes of his texts, yet these readers will recognize their expression as poetry, for they will identify, in them, some formal features (the articulation of discourse into verses, for instance) that are actually more spread out and global than the contents that they express; see, for instance, the classical poem *The Cicada* [蟬]: the western reader will recognize it immediately as a poem but, although helped by the translation, will not understand the cultural reference to the cicada, which is traditionally used as an animal metaphor of incautious squandering in the west, whereas in China it is the clean animal per excellence, as it supposedly feeds only on dew and wind.

9. In Chinese: 李商隱; courtesy name: Yishan (義山); c. 813–c. 858.

To begin with, being clean
 does not free you from hunger.
 Why then keep
 uttering bitterness?
 By the fifth hour,
 your voice becomes weak and husky.
 But the green tree remains
 indifferent and unmoved.
 As a low-ranking official,
 I am but a drifting twig.
 The fields at home
 are wasted with overgrown weeds.
 Thank you for
 alerting me, my friend.
 My family and I too are
 just like you: pure and clean¹⁰.

The evolution of many of these textual forms, indeed, probably went through a process of cultural transmission or, in certain cases, autonomous polygenesis that bridges linguistic, national, and even cultural frontiers. 17th century British literature met the favor of a global audience, but an even wider spatial and temporal area adopted the textual form of the sonnet, which became, as a consequence, a discursive artifact able to manifest a large variety of cultural sensibilities and themes (Kemp, 2013).

2.2. *Extraneousness*

As otherness is experienced not through the lenses of these global textual forms but in everyday life, grasping its relevance and contents becomes much more difficult, for, in this case, pertinence and meaning escape any formal framework and offer themselves, instead, as

10. “本以高難飽/徒勞恨費聲/五更疏欲斷/一樹碧無情/薄宦梗猶汎/故園蕪已平/煩君最相警/我亦舉家清”; English trans. Edward C. Chang.

pure extraneousness. The difference between otherness and extraneousness resides precisely in that: otherness can be “appropriated” — and its essential charge of subversion with it — through translational operations that are already codified into culture and actually facilitated by the global circulation and, therefore, familiarity of textual forms. In extraneousness, instead, that which emerges is not the differential potential of otherness but the disquietude of what cannot be tamed and made familiar, for no conventional operations of translations subsist so as to turn the uncanny into the intelligible.

The experience of otherness might be shocking but it usually is, albeit sometimes painfully, enriching. The experience of extraneousness, on the contrary, is that of a semiotic suffering that is never rewarded, of an anxiety that never leads one from meaninglessness to meaningfulness, and never even promises the possibility of such a passage. The emotional result of the encounter with otherness is curiosity, followed by inquiry, and, in fortunate cases, cultural intercourse. The emotional result of extraneousness is, on the contrary, fear, if not panic. It generates and hands down an imaginary of monstrosity and unbridgeable distance. There is, however, a degree of unfamiliarity that is even deeper than that of extraneousness since this, at least, manages to trigger a feeling of shock and, therefore, an opportunity for self-interrogation, although that does not turn into self-awareness like in the encounter with otherness. Indeed, the highest degree of blind unfamiliarity does not even manifest itself but remains concealed in the dumbness of unawareness.

2.3. From Otherness through Extraneousness to Unawareness: Chinese examples

A. Calisthenics

A simple example will clarify the difference between otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. An Italian present-day (early 21st century) observer walks through a contemporary Chinese park.

There are, of course, different kinds of Italian observers, with different degrees of familiarity with China and its culture, from the sinologist that takes a break from a congress to the ignorant tourist, as there are different kinds of parks, depending on the area of China in which they are situated, the epoch in which they were created, and the peculiar style of the designer. In this sort of example, however, it is not the specific nuances of singular observers and parks that are relevant but ideal types subsuming the most frequent of their characteristics. In this idea-typical situation, then, the Italian observer will experience some elements of the Chinese park as loaded with otherness. Walking early in the morning around the West Lake in Hangzhou, she or he will be struck, for instance, by the large variety of sport or meditation activities that Chinese people of all ages practice therein at such an early hour: from tai chi to calligraphy, from backward running to kung fu.

With regards to this first level of otherness, the semiotician and the lay observer will not be so different from each other, at least up to a certain stage. They will both pay attention to some unfamiliar behaviors in the environment, and they will both compare and contrast them with those that are normally seen in western parks, such as running or volleyball playing. Nevertheless, a fundamental difference will emerge between the profane and the professional observer at the moment of the analysis: lay observers will limit themselves to witnessing and taking mental note of the difference, often smiling at it (a common profane reaction to that which is not fully understood). Semioticians, on the contrary, will not be content with such surface (or, even, superficial) observation but, with a typical epistemological move, will seek to read these remarks as signs of something else, and specifically as expressions of a subjacent cultural grammar that, brought about by specific historic and social processes, produces, in turn, a whole variety of textual manifestations, including those of early morning activities in Chinese parks¹¹.

11. On the semiotics of parks and gardens, see Larsen, 1997; specifically on Chinese gardens, see Shiyuan Yu, 2017.

The semiotician will be tempted to establish a connection, then, between a certain style of physical exercise and the extent to which the community where it appears has come into contact with global modernity. Were the same semiotician to observe physical exercise as it presents itself in present-day Chinese university campuses, for instance, she or he would realize that it does not diverge as much from the usual calisthenics panorama of the west, since ways of training, sport clothes, and even movements and gestures have become more globalized for the recent generations of Chinese youths than for their immediate predecessors¹². The evolution of culture and of the socio-economic structure that underpins it impacts not only on traditional textual artifacts but also on apparently more “natural” social elements such as faces, bodies, gestures, ways of moving in space through different activities, etc. Fashion does not concern only clothes but also visages, and not only the “explicit fashion” of hats, hairstyles, makeup, jewelry, etc., but also the “implicit fashion” that expresses itself as a consequence of the quality of food, the degree of exposure to external agents such as sunlight, the access to quality dentistry, etc.

B. Food

At a deeper lever of unfamiliarity, then, most people, and especially those who are not cognizant with the heuristics of anthropology, will experience an even more severe form of cultural unintelligibility than otherness, that is, extraneousness. The most common and even trivial way of feeling extraneousness is in the domain of food, where habits and comfort (and discomfort) zones crystallize as second nature at a very early stage of life, even earlier than in “natural” languages. One can, of course, learn to “tolerate” the food of others, or even reach the stage of appreciating it, yet some culinary experiences will not be only “different” but deeply extraneous and sensorially disturbing, since they will infringe some deep-seated

12. For a semiotic perspective on the globalization of sport in China, see Wei, 2014.

gastronomic taboos. In the touristy alleys of several Chinese cities, for instance in the area of the Confucius Temple (Fuzi Miao), in Nanjing, the present-day Italian observer will be offered enticing samples of a brownish film, cut into small lozenges. Chinese visitors will eagerly accept and consume these samples, often queuing in front of the various stalls in order to be offered them; to most Italian visitors, however, these fragments of that which reveals itself to be, upon the very first tasting, a kind of jerky made of some sort of sweetened pork meat [*bakkwa* (in Chinese: 肉乾), *rougan* (in Chinese: 肉干), or *roupu* (in Chinese: 肉脯)], will be not appealing at all and, in some circumstances, will prove revolting.

That of course has nothing to do with the food itself, but with the fact that its very existence — which is totally normal and even appreciated in China — violates one of the culinary taboos of Italian food, that is, the “illegitimacy” of preparing sweets with pork meat. Dishes of this sort were — and to a limited, mostly festive and regional extent, still are — present in Italy too (think about the famous “sanguinaccio”, a mostly Neapolitan sweet delicacy consisting in a concoction of pork blood and chocolate); the majority of Italian contemporary eaters, however, will find these archaic preparations as extraneous as the analogous Chinese delicacies, whose charge of difference is further increased by spatial and cultural distance. In this case, the semiotician too will be struck by cultural difference, for she or he will not be able to rely on the same codified mechanisms of translation that are available for the “taming” of cultural otherness¹³. It is quite hard, indeed, to understand through what complex paths of material cultural history Chinese people came to like sweetened pork meat, whereas Italian people do not or do not anymore. In general, indeed, the more a socio-cultural habit is interiorized as second nature (and food habits are among the most embodied of

13. The semiotics of food is a fast expanding field with an increasingly abundant bibliography; Jean-Jacques Boutaud, Gianfranco Marrone, and Simona Stano are among the most prolific authors in this area. On the specific issue of food translation between east and west, see Stano, 2015 and 2016.

them, often enshrined into personal taste since childhood), the less easy it will be to “debunk” it through a meticulous dissection of its cultural genealogy.

Beyond otherness and extraneousness, cultural difference remains in the limbo of unawareness. Individuals exposed to alien patterns of meaning do not simply find them different or monstrous but they remain utterly unaware of them. These unperceived patterns, however, may continue to exert their semiotic agency at a subliminal level, without necessarily passing through the conscious and explicit articulation of the receiver. Italian readers of Can Xue’s¹⁴ novels, for instance, will appreciate the stories, the style, the lexical choices (even though only in the available translations) but they will completely miss a whole series of central socio-aesthetic messages that only deep familiarity with present-day Chinese culture and its codes can disclose. Reading and interpreting the Chinese novelist’s *Love in the New Millennium* (2013) in-depth, then, will require the hermeneutic perspective to exist side by side with the anthropological one, detecting and decoding the hidden cultural presuppositions of the literary text.

C. Fences

Another example — taken, once again, from Chinese parks and everyday life — will clarify the difference between otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness even better. Walking around the West Lake in Hangzhou¹⁵, Italian visitors will most probably be pervaded by a feeling of luminous serenity. They will ascribe the perception of this atmosphere to the elegant shape of the lake, to the delicacy of the vegetation bordering it, to the refinedness of the bridges and gazebos punctuating its shores, and even to the serenity of Chinese passersby. Most of these Italian visitors, however, will not realize

14. Can Xue (in Chinese: 残雪), née Deng Xiaohua (in Chinese: 邓小华) in 1953 in Changsha, Hunan Province, China.

15. See An, 2009.

that a very important architectural element plays a key role in transmitting this sensation: no fence surrounds the lake. No physical and, as a consequence, optical obstacle is interposed between the body and the gaze of the visitor and the water of the lake. It might seem a banal detail but it is not so at all, as regards both its causes and its effects¹⁶. Concerning the latter, this absence of fences increases the visitor's bodily and visual proximity to water, even contributing to a feeling of fusion with the natural landscape; concerning the former, it is evident that a whole socio-aesthetic culture results in this architectural detail. Upon eventually realizing the absence of fences at the lake, indeed, most Italian visitors would worry: «What about children distractedly falling into water?». Asking this question means already passing from the level of unawareness to that of extraneousness. But the following passage, from extraneousness to otherness, calls for the intervention of a semiotician and for the formulation of some explicative hypotheses. The absence of fences around the Chinese lake could be motivated by a different conception of the public space as a dimension not of risk and danger but of tranquility and assurance, in which children are not threatened by the environment but actually “adopted” by an entire community.

This different conception of the public space, which results in either the presence or the absence of fences around a park lake, can be experienced also diachronically: up to a certain stage of Italian 20th century history, in small cities like the present author's hometown, Lecce, it was absolutely normal not to lock the gate or main door of one's house, since the public space outside would be perceived as one of safety; instead, the absence of locks would be unthinkable today, now that the public space is represented and perceived as full of possible threats.

The Italian visitor to the park is mostly unaware of this impact of a certain culture of safety on the public architecture of Hangzhou West Lake; the Chinese visitor, however, will be even more unaware of it; she or he could maybe start realizing the relation between per-

16. On the semiotics of fences in parks, see Kaczmarczyk, Salvoni, 2016.

ception of threats in the public space and public architecture only upon visiting a park lake in Italy, and only after noticing that it is obsessively surrounded by fences. Indeed, in order to realize what cultural features of our own semiosphere we are unaware of we must actually come across some alternatives to them in other semiospheres, so that our extraneousness to the latter might actually reveal our unconscious familiarity with the former.

D. Fountains

Some cultural features, then, might be so profoundly engrained in the deep-seated meshes of a semiosphere as to escape even the most abstract sociological observations. If, on the one hand, reference to a certain social perception of the safety of the public space might justify the presence or absence of some architectural details in a park or in a city, there is no easy sociological explanation for the fact that, for instance, fountains are much rarer in the Chinese parks than in the Italian ones. One might explain this difference by simply ascribing it to a “matter of taste”; this explanation, however, would be highly unsatisfactory and, ultimately, tautological. What is it, indeed, that determines such a discrepancy of taste in the relation between two or more cultures?

As it was suggested earlier, in this case, a simply sociological survey or even assiduous ethnological observation might not suffice anymore. On the one hand, no explicit sources of information would be available to inquire about the rationale of this cultural difference; architects would mostly be unable to explain why they have placed a fountain in a park, or why they have not; similarly, visitors would be mostly incapable of accounting for the reason for which they find either the absence or presence of fountains in a park “normal” or “strange”. In reality, such opposition would not reveal its inner meaning to anthropologists either, for, in order to become significant, it should first be analyzed structurally, in keeping with the customary mindset of structural anthropology and semiotics.

The presence or absence of fountains in parks, then, would be read more abstractly, as the architectural embodiment of a subjacent opposition between, on the one hand, a movement of water from the bottom up (fountains) and, on the other hand, a movement of water from the top down (which is typical of those waterfalls, cascades, and flowing rivers that are omnipresent, instead, in Chinese parks).

Given this structural and plastic analysis of the opposition between fountains and cascades, then, cultural semiotics could propose some interpretative hypotheses about it; it might be surmised, for instance, that fountain civilizations are those in which an idea of the aesthetic agency as competing with nature and even contrasting it prevails over an alternative aesthetics of gently yielding to its “natural” flowing. In a western park, then, a local visitor would be impressed by the engineering force through which water has been actually “obliged” to reverse the natural course of its flowing, whereas in a Chinese park, the local visitor would enjoy the delicacy by which the architect has seconded and accompanied the “natural” direction of the elements, of plants, and even of minerals, showing the human presence in a very subtle, discreet way. Visitors exploring a foreign park, then, would perceive otherness or even extraneousness, but they would be mostly unaware of the deep cultural reasons that underpin such reactions; they could even appreciate “the park of the other” — for instance, being attracted as western visitors by the gentleness of the Chinese parks, or being impressed, as Chinese visitors, by the energy of western parks —¹⁷; yet, this movement of attraction, or the equally possible movement of rejection, would be experienced as spontaneous and, mostly, unmotivated.

17. On the 18th century attraction of the Chinese élite to European parks, gardens, and fountains, see in particular Chayet, 1987 (on the gardens of Old Summer Palace, known in Chinese as Yuanming Yuan [圆明园], in which, starting from 1747, the emperor Qianlong [乾隆帝] had the Jesuit architect Giuseppe Castiglione design the fountains of the “western” palaces).

Conclusions: The Benefits of Intercultural Awareness

The analysis carried out by cultural semiotics transforms the unaware perception of aesthetic differences into an articulated awareness of the underlying patterns of meaning. Such a passage from unawareness to awareness is beneficial both for those who already appreciate otherness, in order for them to better understand and enjoy the reasons for such appreciation, and for those who actually reject it, since a deeper comprehension of extraneousness contributes to turning it into simple otherness. Comprehending that Chinese parks have fewer fountains because they are in line with a different aesthetic conception of the relation between nature and craft will not turn a detractor of this park aesthetics into an appreciator, but will encourage reinterpretation of cultural difference in a frame that is immune to hostility. Deciphering the deep meaning patterns of cultural otherness perhaps does not necessarily lead one to love it and embrace it but at least it prevents one from hating it and antagonizing it.

3. The Present Collection

All the articles in the present collection revolve around the contemporary Chinese aesthetics as it emerges from literature, the arts, and also from the discourse and texts of popular culture. They focus on various media, genres, and styles, but they all share the same thematic slant and methodological perspective. As regards the former, they all bear on the passage of semantic contents and aesthetic sensibility from the east to the west (and vice versa) offering a detailed analysis of as many case studies of cross-cultural fertilization between China and Europe. As regards the method, all the articles offer in-depth textual analyses that are meant to give rise to a structured comparison between different matrixes of cultural production, considering, therefore, texts as signs of more encompassing semiotic configura-

tions (which Lotman's semiotics calls "semiospheres"). Through the adoption of a rich array of semiotic analytical tools, the chapters promote the reader's awareness of contemporary China's cultural specificities in relation to the west, so as to accomplish that passage from extraneousness to comprehension that has been theoretically described above and promoted as socially beneficial.

The first section of the collection, *Chinese Aesthetics from the Inside*, contains articles written by Chinese scholars on Chinese texts, ranging from literature to cinema, from TV series to rap music, and focusing on the transformation and evolution of the Chinese aesthetics in its current crucible, where global trends of cultural production mix with local forms of aesthetic elaboration. All the chapters in this first series look at present-day China through a gaze that connects it with the vast field of popular culture global trends in the beginning of the 21st century.

The article by Zeng Jun, *A Cultural Analysis of Temporal Signs in Twenty-First Century Chinese Literature*, consists in an original reading of the conceptions and symbols of time as they are found in present-day Chinese novels, with specific attention to *Blossoms* [繁花] (2012) by Jin Yucheng¹⁸, *Tiny Times* (4 tomes, 2012–3) [小时代] by Guo Jingming¹⁹, and *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) [三体] by Liu Cixin²⁰. Through a semiotically inspired close reading, the article develops a typology of temporal discourses in the current Chinese culture, whose patterns of semantic chronology can be considered as emerging from the most recent evolution of the Chinese semiosphere.

Zhou Haitian's article *Mimetic Desire or Productive Work?: The Semiotic Analysis of Two Science Fictions in 21st century China* is yet another exploration of the present-day Chinese aesthetics as it finds expression in popular culture, with particular reference to the genre of science fiction and to the two famous works *Folding Beijing* [北京

18. In Chinese: 金宇澄; born in Shanghai on December 18, 1952.

19. In Chinese: 郭敬明; born in Shanghai on June 6, 1985.

20. In Chinese: 刘慈欣; born in Yangquan, Shanxi, China, on June 23, 1963.

折叠] (2012) by Hao Jingfang²¹ and the already mentioned *The Three-Body Problem*. Through a close reading of these novels, the chapter develops an original perspective on the contemporary Chinese understanding of the relation between imitation and invention, realistic and fictional production of literary meaning.

The article by Zhao Kuiying, *Art as a Presenting Sign: A New Exploration of Art Semiotics*, seeks to provide a theoretical framework for the understanding and analysis of the arts in contemporary China with reference to Charles S. Peirce's philosophy of the sign and with particular stress on the idea of "presentification", that is, the capacity of the aesthetic discourse for resulting not only in the representation of a content but also in its presence through the construction of an aesthetic aura that responds to the ontological thirst of the spectator.

The article by Lu Zhenglan and Zhao Yiheng revolves around the main aesthetic trends of the Chinese present-day semiosphere, with specific attention to the relation between mass production of meaning and construction of aesthetic value; the processes and paradoxes of pan-aesthetization are read in relation to both the artistic coating of everyday life and the quotidian reception of contemporary arts, offering an essential survey of the development of artistic and popular culture in current China.

Peng Jia's article *On the Semiotic Model of Objecthood Proposed in Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind* adopts a semiotic framework so as to explore an original thesis of cross-cultural aesthetics, bearing on the relevance of objects as mediators of both artistic and, more generally, cultural sensibility. This approach is crucial both for pinpointing one of the most important elements in the development of Chinese aesthetics, that is, the attention to the symbolical radiance of artifacts, and to contrast this long-term cultural attitude with those that are traditional to the west.

Duan Lian's article *The Problem of Symbolization of the Painting Image* seeks to achieve a detailed understanding of the typical patterns

21. In Chinese: 郝景芳; born in Tinajin, China, on July 27, 1984.

of artistic symbolization in Chinese abstract art within the methodological framework offered by the semiotics of the fine arts and its attempts at facing the challenge of interpreting non-figurative painting; such a challenge is faced in its cross-cultural version, with attention to the possibility of comparing and contrasting plastic visual productions across aesthetic semiospheres.

The article by Han Lei, *A Historical and Semiotic Analysis of Cina's Calling on China in the Cultural Revolution*, deals with one of the most interesting cases of cultural contact between China and the west in the history of cinema, offering both a historical reconstruction and a semiotic analysis of *Cina* — also known in Chinese as *Chung Kuo* —, the ambitious documentary planned and directed by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni so as to offer the European audience a vision of the state of China in the beginning of the 1970s.

Gao Yan's article *Empty Mirror as Metaphor: In The Case of "Nothing in the Mirror"* highlights a cultural trend in the aesthetics of present-day popular culture through the philosophical study of a recent successful TV series, *Nothing in the Mirror* [空镜子], whose close reading reveals the ability to play with some of the traditional contents of Chinese culture and to transform them into key elements of the TV narrative and its new messages to the contemporary Chinese society.

The article by Wang Jia-Jun, *The Rap of China and Hip-Hop's Cultural Politics* considers in the light of cultural comparison and semiotic reading one of the most successful formats of present-day global TV, that is, the "talent show", investigating its particular transformation in the specific socio-cultural panorama of present-day China, and detecting the disempowering effect that the global aesthetics of entertainment exerts over a genre, the Chinese rap, traditionally endowed with critical potentiality.

The second section of the book, *Chinese Aesthetics from the Outside*, focuses on the cross-fertilization between Chinese artistic tradition and western aesthetics, with particular attention to case studies and episodes of cultural exchange and re-writing between the east and

the west. Concentrating on painting (Massimo Leone) music (Gabriele Marino), food (Simona Stano), cinema (Bruno Surace), and videogames (Mattia Thibault), this second section composes a map of subtle cultural influences bridging as well as problematizing the aesthetic confrontation of the European and the Chinese aesthetic sensibilities.

The articles collected in this volume were selected and reviewed as a result of an international symposium on *Contemporary Arts in China: A Comparative Semiotic Overview*, held at Shanghai University on September 25 and 26, 2018 and organized by both Shanghai University and the University of Turin in the framework of SILC, the Semiotic Interdisciplinary Laboratory on Cultures co-managed by Prof. Massimo Leone and Prof. Zeng Jun in the two universities. All those who contributed to the organization of the workshop or participated in it are warmly thanked here.

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PART I

CHINESE AESTHETICS FROM THE INSIDE

A Cultural Analysis of Temporal Signs in Twenty–First Century Chinese Literature

JUN ZENG (曾军)¹

ABSTRACT: Temporality signs have definite narrative value. Through the narrative analysis of temporality signs of three influential Chinese novels, this text presents the different time consciousness and the cultural significance in recent years. These three novels are *Various Flowers* by Yuchen Jin, *Tiny Times* by Jingming Guo, and *The Three–body Problem* by Ciixn Liu.

KEYWORDS: Temporality signs; narrative analysis; chinese novel; time consciousness; cultural significance.

Introduction

A few years ago, drawing on the concept of “stagnation” from traditional Chinese aesthetics, I attempted to describe the “strict adherence, viscosity, immobilization, sluggishness, and ineluctable coalescence” of a certain symptom of twenty–first century Chinese literature and art. I sought, moreover, to distinguish these phenomena from modern aesthetics, with its emphasis on “transition, transience, and accident”, “evolution”, “development”, “alteration”, “circulation”, and “liquidation”, by coining the term “stagnant aesthetics” (Zeng Jun, 2013).

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My aesthetic sensitivity to temporal signs inflects my literary studies more generally. I am always seized with a sudden impulse to pay close attention to themes and tropes of time in literature, film, and television — indeed, such features often serve as analytical entry points. Temporal signs, that is, constitute linguistic notations imbued with distinctively temporal characteristics, such as “hours”, “times”, “periods”, and “centuries”. If a story happens in “the year of our Lord 2018”, the protagonist will be drawn into globalization against the background of a grand historical narrative. If we stress “the Mid–Autumn Festival”, the protagonist will instantly enter into “folk spaces” where one’s state of mind, emotions, and behaviors suffocate in an atmosphere of nostalgia. Thus, temporal signs and themes play significant roles in literary narrative. This paper analyzes “time” as it surfaces in the themes and tropes of several influential twentieth century Chinese works of literature, film, and television to present different types of time consciousness that have recently gained cultural significance.

1. “Micro–History”: Time Consciousness in Jin Yucheng’s *Blossoms*

One of the few novels written in Shanghainese and published via Shanghai media (its digital edition was published in the Wenziyu Forum of “longdang.org”, its periodical edition was published in *Harvest* magazine, and the book edition was published by Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House), Jin Yucheng’s *Blossoms* (2015) mainly traces cultural changes in Shanghainese culture from the 1960s to the 1990s. Since *Blossoms* typifies the narrative of personal history, it attaches great importance to the narrator’s and characters’ sense of time. The standard form of expressing complete and accurate time consciousness in a historical sense typically invokes «a specific year, month, day, hour, and minute». With a more granular standard of time, a novel can present the historical — and time

— consciousness of the narrators and other characters and can reveal the close relationship between the narrative and macro-history more explicitly. Several unspecific temporal signs, such as “one day”, however, pervade this novel. Indeed, one might divide temporal signs and themes in *Blossoms* into the following types:

The first type comprises a completely abstract index of a rough scope of “the times” rather than a specific time, and this type encompasses two sub-types. The first sub-type demonstrates a kind of recurrent state, namely, “iterative narration” as conceptualized by French literary theorist Gérard Genette. The following excerpts from *Blossoms* exemplify this first sub-type: «Every time Abao passes by Cathay Theatre, he remembers this dialogue», «Abao used to buy stamps from Weimin Stamp Collecting Agency at Huaihai Road in those days», «every time Husheng passed by the old apartment during his school days in primary school», «during this period, Abao leaves Nachang Road early in the morning, when Lili generally doesn’t wake up and there are few people in the street». The second sub-type of completely abstract time indicates an event that occurs once at an unspecified time. For example, “the other day”, Beidi’s father brought a rabbit with him. Or “one day” Abao accidentally got a letter from his elder brother who went to Hong Kong. Or his grandpa said that his father «had his mind stuffed with revolutions... *once*» (emphasis added). Similarly, «Xiaomao *once* said both Da Meimei and Lanlan were “lassies (Laisan)” in Shanghai» (emphasis added). Or even, «the other day, when on duty, Abao became aware that there were swellings over the eyelids of the aunt in Room 5», and Huangmao was transferred to a different job.

The second type consists of a partially abstract index of incomplete time, and there are four sub-types: The first sub-type highlights an open-ended sense of “the times”. For example, «in the 1960s, the Shanghai people tended to take no count of birthdays, and Husheng’s parents were born on the same day of the same year». Or, «in the afternoon of the late autumn of 1967», both Husheng and Shuhua went to Zhongshan Park to enjoy the sight

of Chinese parasols. Or even, «in the 1970s», there was sporting on the street «in Shanghai». The second sub-type stresses “seasonal” characteristics. For example, «one night in early spring», Ms. Wang and her husband Hongqing were eating supper. Or «there was a chill in the air in regions south of the Yangtze River one day», when Mr. Kang, Meirui, Hongqing, and Ms. Wang et al. went for a spring outing in Shuanglin Town. And another: «On an autumn night one year, Fangmei and her husband Taotao went to Mr. Meng’s house».

The third sub-type emphasizes a specific time such as «a certain day, a certain month, and a certain year» or «a certain day of the week». For example, «on Sunday afternoon», Husheng came to see Xiaomao. Lili ran Zhizhenyuan Restaurant, «and he invited Abao, Husheng, Ms. Wang, and her husband Hongqing and Mr. Kang and his wife to his restaurant on a Friday». «On the afternoon of the 9th», Husheng went to Zhizhenyuan Restaurant.

The fourth sub-type draws attention to the temporal relationship between two events. For example, «thenceforth, Meirui called Mr. Kang and told the latter that his mother had finally gotten divorced... Three days later, Meirui called Mr. Kang again and told the latter that his mother had decided to go to Hong Kong and would never return to Shanghai». «Several days later», Abao got a letter from Shuhua, and it is said that both Apo and Beidi disappeared. «Ten days later», Abao, Husheng, Xiaomao and Jianguo et al. went to Matou’s house by the Gaolang Bridge in Yangpu District to inquire about Beidi, Apo, and Beidi’s piano. «A few months later, Abao, Xiaozhen, and the aunt in Room 5 went to Sanguantang Paper Mill and waited for Xiaozhen’s father at the gate».

There are thus no standard historical time indicators among all these temporal signs, which reveals something crucial about the nature of time consciousness based on personal history in *Blossoms*: a common person’s life experience is not of great significance in terms of macro-history, and thus the course of a life like that of Husheng does not need to be recorded accurately in terms of standard historical time. All these “incomplete” and “nonspecific” references to time

precisely represent the common people's time consciousness based on personal memories; the significance of the events experienced by the residents of Shanghai in *Blossoms* consists in casually marked features of time, a cursory indication of seasons, or perhaps only a certain relationship to a prior event the character has experienced. Hence, we can uncover the temporality and time consciousness of characters representing common people, like Husheng, by tracing expressions that employ unspecific and abstract tropes of time.

Now that we have figured out that *Blossoms* depends on personal time consciousness and temporality, we might ask how it deals with the relationship between "micro-history" and "macro-history". *Blossoms* comprehends this relationship in two ways.

The first way in which *Blossoms* deals with the relationship between micro- and macro-history is by restricting the narrator to sketchy accounts of outcomes rather than of reasons and processes. Some critics have already taken notice of Jin's "Huaben" style, his skill in writing straightforwardly without indicating his personal opinions. For example, after telling the readers Husheng is dating Meirui in the preface, the author characterizes their relationship with one sentence: «The relationship between the two people is thus brought to a close». In Chapter 1, the author, in most cases, adopts abstract narration in the course of introducing relationships between characters and related backgrounds. Summarizing character development and relationships in an impersonal fashion demonstrates a certain objective historical distance between the narrator and characters in this novel. Despite the fact that macro-history has not yet been introduced at this point in the novel, this kind of expression embodies the presence of "macro-history".

The second way in which the novel comprehends the relationship of macro- and micro-history entails characters' conversations or dialogue. The narrative style of *Blossoms* is characterized by day-to-day discursive dialogue rather than the detailed and complete expositions of events recounted through characters in the novels of both realism and modernism. In other words, serving as the intermediary

of consciousness, a character's narration projects both "macro-history" and "micro-history" onto the screen of their mind. While a character's narrative might only incidentally refer to events of "macro-history", whose value from a historical vantage may equal that of nebulae or galaxies, those great cosmic phenomena have been transformed into mere stars in the night sky after having been projected onto the character's screen of consciousness.

As a result, "macro-history" and "micro-history" have been undifferentiated, homogenized into stars of similar size and seen as nodes of light projected onto a flat surface, without any depth of perception. *Blossoms* focuses on the daily life of common people like Husheng instead of "the restoration of historical scenes" and "epic narration" — in spite of the fact that several significant historical events simultaneously occur, such as the «Socialist Transformation», the campaign to «Destroy the "Four Olds"», the «Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement» policy, the Cultural Revolution borne on the slogan «To Rebel is Justified», and the economic «Reform and Opening-Up», after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, whose far-reaching influence has left its mark on Shanghai and her residents for over a half century.

For example, from the perspective of Husheng, a middle school student, «Destroying the "Four Olds"» is the balance of cruelty and amusement in Chapter IX:

Two schoolmates become aware of Husheng's new military bottoms and come up to him to have a chat with him at the gate of Changle Middle School, when there are hubbubs in Huaihai Road. They run out there and find that students from other districts are «Destroying the "Four Olds"».

Husheng and his schoolmates participate in this major historical event as curious onlookers. Husheng and his two schoolmates follow those students to the intersection of South Shaanxi Road, «and they turn back after watching the scene of bustle. Husheng says that it's very exciting». Consequently, he has been incited to cut Dong

Dangui's trouser legs, which has led to a startling farce. During the Cultural Revolution,

classes were suspended and people carried out revolution in swarms. Falling over themselves for the rebellion waged by teachers and students in air force schools and academies, Husheng's parents often stayed in Beijing for several weeks. Since Shuhua's parents "had been pushed aside", they had to go out early and come back at dusk. Husheng didn't join any mass organization, because he belonged to the "carefree clique". Sometimes, he went out and walked around with Shuhua.

Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic, and essayist, develops a unique set of methodologies in the *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*; 1927–1940), including "Dialectical Images", also known as "Dialectics at a Standstill". Commentators tend to compare and contrast "Dialectics at a Standstill" with Karl Marx's dialectical materialism, Georg Lukács's dialectical totality, and Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics.

However, I find Benjamin's methodologies more compelling for their emphasis on "images" rather than on "dialectic". Replacing "concepts" with "images", his dialectic falls into the category of the graphic instead of the abstract and conceptual. Benjamin stresses in particular the significance of "the now" to understand history, regarding it as an immobile moment. He suggests that the present constitutes "Dialectics at a Standstill", and that it is the now that composes history and indicates the future. He draws a wonderful analogy in: «The historical characteristics of images show not only they belong to a certain moment but also that they can only be understood at a certain moment... Images are a collection of flashing lights from constellations for the moment. In other words, images are immobile dialectic» (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 462–463). There is a great possibility that those flashing lights have already flown for millions of light years in outer space, but only being seen by the people

on Earth for the moment (in “the now”) can they make sense and become “images”.

Obviously, those images are the historical product for the moment in which we can situate ourselves in reality while rethinking history in the process of analyzing them (Zeng Jun, 2013). “Great times” and “macro-history” in *Blossoms* are the projections of the consciousnesses of characters (common people like Husheng) and the narrator (or he can be regarded as the author himself to some extent) by means of “flashing lights from constellations”. The relationship between “great times” and “macro-history” versus “civic consciousness”, therefore, can be comprehended in this manner.

2. “Tiny Times”, or the Revolt of Youths

Temporal signs of personal daily life, similar to those found in *Blossoms*, also abound in *Tiny Times* by Guo Jingming, a Chinese young adult writer, who is also known by the name Edward Guo. Indeed, the novel’s narrative contains only one reference to the Christian era: «Nan Xiang never speaks of Xi Cheng over the next two days. I play my own role well, and Gu Li doesn’t notice anything abnormal. We are steadily heading toward 2008».

By contrast, references to “times” riddle the novel: «Tiny Times»; «We live in an era of indifference like a sharp knife». «In fact, our life flies by, day after day. One hour, one minute, and one second, illusions turn into countless days, which finally accumulate to form the endless flow of time and change into the great times we live in».

«We are living in the grass-green times alive with activity».

«We are only a tiny fragment of the great times».

The recurrence of time-related language, such as «High-School Days», «Childhood», «School Days», «the Renaissance Era», and «Origami Times» reveal Guo’s “tiny” ambition. That is, Guo intends for his protagonists to distill the life history of an entire generation.

However, “the times” are still “tiny” because they belong to a narrative of “micro–history” rather than to a grand historical narrative.

Guo’s greatest contribution in *Tiny Times* consists in his redefinition of the present day in terms of his own perspective and his deliberate alienation of “the great times” of the last generation. Contemporary Chinese research on literature and art frequently invokes the concept of the “great times”, a trope first conceived by Lu Xun, a leading figure in modern Chinese literature. Indeed, it has become a signifier capable of highlighting and amplifying contradictions in the modernization of China. The essential feature of the “great times” trope is a grand narrative of a dominant culture. «New–democratic revolution», «socialist revolution and construction», «Dual Variation of Enlightenment and Nationalism», as advanced by Li Zehou, and the complicated process of «“Westernization” and “Transcendence”» in the modernization of China summarized by Wang Xiaoming — all of these grand events and processes express an inevitability that everyone will get carried away by the powerful current of the “great times” (Xiaoming Wang 2006). In other words, those who choose to swim against the current, become risk–takers, or alienate the “mainstream” will finally be abandoned by the times. Therefore, personal choices hinge on maintaining compatibility with the times: “get on well with others”, “work hand in glove”, and finish the “chorus”, or face exclusion from the “great times”.

After the 1990s, personal narrative began to deconstruct the grand narrative of the “great times”, and a group of authors born in the 1960s and 1970s began to display history, society, and culture through the lens of personal experience, which led to a sense of “privatization” by deliberately alienating the society, nation, and state. The works of authors like Chen Ran and Lin Bai exemplify this type of private writing. However, their efforts carry built–in limitations: despite emphasizing individuals, they confirm the narrative of the “great times” by explicitly criticizing it. Guo, who can be considered representative of the authors born in the 1980s, has defined the term “tiny times” as moments in which each individual involuntarily be-

comes a part of History and experiences a sense of confusion at this, given the lack of war, turmoil, or other disturbance involving the nation and state. It might seem that a business community tolerates a diversity of characters because one can be a member of it as long as he or she is willing to strive.

However, beneath the surface of the ostensible peace, there are sufficient cruelties and conflicts to cause all characters to undergo metamorphoses. Once relationships entail interests, they do not simply go bad, and spoiled relationships are sometimes more complex and compelling (Chen Zhimiao, 2013). In short, “tiny times” in Guo’s mind comprise a relatively peaceful and stable period without major historical events or social instability, in which personal experience alienates the nation–state. Individuals in the present moment do not feel obligated to conform to the powerful current of social reform, as do Wang Meng and Yang Mo, nor do they regard demystifying and subverting grand narratives as their duty, as do Chen Ran and Lin Bai. The “business community” serves as the present–day culture in a general and dominant manner, and Guo also realizes that individuals experience conflicts within business culture that prompt relationships to turn and identities to evolve. For this reason, Guo’s trilogy, *Tiny Times* (which, if it had been published several decades ago, would have been called an “epic” creation), redefines the present era.

However, *Tiny Times* fails to express the emotional structure of contemporary youth culture. Indeed, Guo gets lost in trying to depict “a generation” that was conceived by Wang Meng and Yang Mo. It seems that Guo wishes to distinguish “great times” from “tiny times” while constructing the experience of the “younger generation” within the frame of the latter. As part of his strategy for accomplishing this, Guo “declasses” the characters in *Tiny Times*. For instance, both Gu Yuan and Gu Li’s parents run successful companies and have been born with silver spoons in their mouths; Lin Xiao’s parents are ordinary citizens with a modest Shanghai address; Nan Xiang’s family is living in straitened circumstances; and Tang

Wanru, whose father works as a badminton coach, comes from an ordinary family. But the four girls in this novel are childhood classmates and become close friends. They live together through high school and college. They (excluding Nan Xiang) even live together in the villa that Gu Li rents after graduation. Another expression of “declassing” lies in the fact that these characters, despite coming from families of different economic classes, share the same value system: the exquisite life, extravagant enjoyment, and pursuit of material well-being and success. This depiction begs a controversial question: are the “tiny times” justified in their emphasis on material well-being, material desires, and extravagant lifestyles?

However, in evaluating the “individual youth” of the “tiny times” in this novel, one must still refer to the relational hierarchy that begins with the individual and proceeds through the group to the society and, ultimately, the nation–state. Its extensive focus on individuals determines the significance and depth of *Tiny Times*. The “nation and state” have been blurred in the background, while “Shanghai” is foregrounded. More specifically, the “Shanghai” the novel foregrounds comprises Lin Xiao and her friends’ surroundings, which fall into the category of “society”. Despite this, the “society” in *Tiny Times* is a highly abstract and rigid community filled mostly with shopping centers, high-end office buildings, and foreign-style houses. Moreover, social relationships in this community are extremely uncomplicated. For example, the four girls have been classmates and friends since they were children. Gu Yuan’s mother and father are the only parents to make an appearance in the novel. Further, Zhou Chongguang is the younger stepbrother of Gong Ming. The small “social circle” contributes to “disordered” and “entangled” relationships between characters. For example, Wei Hai has relationships with Nan Xiang and Tang Wanru, consecutively, which directly leads to the “broken” and “empty” disposition of characters such as Jian Xi and Lin Quan. The only time the “social” shows up in *Tiny Times 1.0* is during “traffic jams”, when “others” from outside this small circle appear by accident.

3. Multi-Dimensional Time: Time and Timing Problems in the World of the *The Three-body Problem* Trilogy

Anyone who believes that twentieth century Chinese works of literature, film, and television are filled only with “tiny things”, like “micro-history” and “tiny times”, is mistaken. The rise of Chinese science fiction has been one of the most important achievements of Chinese literature since the turn of the century, and it has given us *The Three-body Problem* by Liu Cixin. Liu’s trilogy uses tropes and themes of time to conceive of a new universe. But there is a great difference between time consciousness established in *The Three-body Problem* and the “micro-history” and “tiny times” of Jin and Guo, and in *Remembrance*, we encounter a powerful set of temporal signs.

The Three-body Problem includes the past in its reference to historical events such as the “Cultural Revolution”, the present in its narrative of Wang Miao who gets involved at the “Frontiers of Science” and Luo Ji who seeks the advice of Ye Wenjie early on, and the future in its reference to ideas such as “the end of temporality”—the two-dimensional solar system, the destruction of the universe, and the disappearance of time. Its time span exceeds that ever achieved in fiction.

The Three-body Problem attempts to construct a time-concept system called “Multi-Dimensional Time”. At the end of *Death’s End*, Sophon explains to Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan why one characteristic greatly increases the probability of survival in a high-dimensional universe: «Out of the many macro dimensions, it was likely that more than one dimension would belong to time». If there is a probability of multi-dimensional time, we can simultaneously make countless choices. If at least one of those choices turns out to be right, we can survive. It is without doubt a major breakthrough in the conceptualization of linear time.

There are four time frames structuring the narration of *The Three-body Problem*. The first time frame comprises the span of an individual’s lifetime on Earth. The life cycle includes birth, adoles-

cence, adulthood, illness, old age, and death; countless individuals' lifetimes join the historical time of human society in three fundamental ways. First, as an example of one-dimensional linear time, a human life has a finite beginning and end. In other words, a human only lives once. Second, its mode of understanding is individual-oriented. For a person, the lifecycle includes the individual's lifetime; for a society, the lifecycle includes the historical stages of social development. Third, the human lifecycle constitutes the premise of preserving civilization, since civilization can only be constructed by "remembrances" and the memories of individual lives.

The second timeframe structuring the novel involves Earth time, the chronological order formed by the Earth's rotation, which not only provides a tempo for civilization on Earth but also supplies a frame of comparison with extraterrestrial civilization. The other component of this timeframe is the "light year", as the standard by which humans measure the distance between Earth and other galaxies. Because light year distances far surpass the limits of an individual's lifetime on Earth, it has become the largest obstacle to interplanetary travel and the precondition for cosmic sociology, namely the dark forest theory. Thus, this timeframe is grounded in three fundamental features. First, time has been spatialized and converted into a form of distance. Second, the individual lifetime's significance becomes dwarfed in the face of light years, which challenges the human-centric mode of thought, and the value of "literature as human science" has been shaken to its core. Third, the proper subject of civilization has been redefined. In cosmic sociology, the subject of civilization is no longer the intelligent human being but rather the planet inhabited by intelligent beings. Therefore, once an individual life comes into conflict with a planetary civilization, the former will be sacrificed to save the latter.

The third timeframe structuring the novel can be called the time of the Three Body world. Because of the extremely unstable relationships between three suns in the world of Three Bodyies, Trisolaran civilization has gone in circles, repeatedly being destroyed and

reborn. Based on the three-body problem, Liu has ingeniously conceived the world of Three Bodies, a planet of the stellar system Alpha Centauri, which is four light years away from Earth. On Earth, humans have developed a system of counting years based on the cycles of destruction and rebirth in the Trisolaran civilization. This system has three fundamental features. First, it is cyclical. In the world of Three Bodies, the “Stable Era” and the “Chaotic Era” alternate. There is a hint of the theory of circularity in passages such as «where there is a road, there are steep slopes; things go and return in following a circle» in *Book of Changes·Six Line Statements*, and «after moving continuously, the thing extends greatly and then returns to its original nature» in *Dao De Jing*. Second, it follows a theory of cyclic evolution. In the world of Three Bodies, civilization does not repeat itself in the same way every time it returns to the beginning; it tries to overcome its doomed situation. According to the game entitled *Three-Body*, the world of Three Body reuses the seed of the preceding civilization contained in the dehydrated bodies of the Trisolarans, from which the next phase of civilization grows. As a result, civilization in the world of Three Body is always evolving. Third, it entails a mindset opposed to fatality. For this reason, the Trisolarans’ basic attitude toward time is permeated by their desire to end the endless recycling of the “Stable Era” and “Chaotic Era”. This attitude even acts as the fundamental driving force for their civilization’s “technology explosion”. From the perspective of the Trisolaran civilization, once the Trisolarans discover that Earth is nearby, it is only logical to try to attempt an expedition of interplanetary migration.

The fourth timeframe structuring the novel is universe time, that is, what we might think of as astronomical time that begins with the Big Bang and ends with the collapse of the universe (or the Big Crunch). The Big Crunch, like the Big Bang, is a hypothesis, but the Big Bang grounds our understanding of universe time. *The Three-body Problem* depicts time forms besides Earth time, thus furnishing various possibilities for an understanding of universe time. There are

three fundamental features of universe time. First, it comprises the life of the universe. Given the Big Bang theory, the universe expanded from a very high-density and high-temperature state. Hence, in an astronomical sense, the universe we now live in is undergoing a one-dimensional development process like that of an individual's life. The universe is expanding and will come to an end in $2 \times 10^{98} - 10^{196}$ years.

Second, universe time assumes the eventual collapse of the universe. However, Liu is not satisfied with depicting the conception of the life of the universe from an astronomical perspective, but asserts that according to "Trisolaran cosmology", the design of the total mass in the universe is precise and perfect, and the total mass of the universe is just enough to allow for the Big Crunch. The universe will, thus, collapse into a dimensionless singularity, and the Big Bang will then occur immediately after the Big Crunch of the preceding universe. However, once the total mass of the universe has decreased to below the critical threshold, the universe will turn from being closed to open and die a slow death in perpetual expansion. Third, universe time encompasses the Returners' movement. In *The Three-body Problem*, intelligent beings take shelter from the Big Crunch in mini-universes where they can establish complete cosmic ecosystems, receive broadcasts from the great universe, and even build connections to other mini-universes. However, those mini-universes are not as simple as "Noah's Ark", and Liu conceives an ethical dilemma: the techniques of constructing mini-universes have been mastered by the Trisolaran civilization, the Trisolarians have already constructed several hundred small universes and several hundred is a tiny number, compared to the total number of the small universes constructed by millions of civilizations in the whole universe. Only through the Big Crunch can the Big Bang occur, and the total mass of the universe shall remain unchanged. Although each of these mini-universes has taken away some matter from the great universe, all of the matter taken will reduce the total mass of the universe. Hence, if the number of mini-universes expands un-

checked, the great universe will be doomed to die. However, if the inhabitants in these mini-universes want the great universe to undergo the Big Bang again, they have to return the matter they have taken away to the great universe, which implies the destruction of the civilization preserved by individual life and mini-universes. In the face of this dilemma, the great universe sends a message by way of the Returners' movement (i.e., «Please return the mass you have taken away and send only memories to the new universe») to these mini-universes, which tests the ethical integrity of each mini-universe.

If there is “Multi-Dimensional Time”, it would help us to think about it by considering the time forms structuring *The Three-body Problem*. In terms of the order of the trilogy, it begins with an individual's lifetime and ends with universe time, and each part features different time forms.

The individual's lifetime dominates *The Three-Body Problem*, which first follows several physicists committing suicide and then the tragic fate of Ye Zhetai and Ye Wenjie during the “Cultural Revolution”. Moreover, the decisive battle of Wang Miao and Da Shi versus the Earth-Trisolaris Organization (ETO) also falls into the category of human history. And besides that, Earthlings come to understand time in the world of Three Body through the game *Three-Body*. In this world, humanity's characteristics and significance are obsolete because the continuation of the “Trisolarans” as a race dominates, which is also the reason why the novel features highly developed science and technology and dictatorship at the same time.

Since Liu chooses Earth time rather than the time of the world of Three Body as the starting point for narration, *The Three-Body Problem*, unlike *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*, is a novel featuring a sense of reality and history. By dint of historical narration colored by critical realism, he unpacks the “anti-human” problem among humans on Earth in a profound manner by introducing the Trisolaran civilization. Liu accomplishes this in three ways. First, he draws

on didacticism to depict the distortion of humanity and the blasphemy of science and democracy in a specific historical period such as the “Cultural Revolution”. Second, he draws on environmentalism to highlight humans’ destruction of their natural ecology and the negation of the value of human life to posit the ideal of “Pan-Species Communism”. Third, Liu creates an ethical dilemma wherein, out of respect for individuals and the glorious social ideal, the Trisolarians give those from Earth an opportunity to survive by choosing between the Trisolaran civilization and the Earth civilization.

The “Crisis Era”: The Time of Civilization on Earth. *The Dark Forest* mainly follows the events occurring in Years 3, 8, 12, 20, 205, and 208 by adding an important timing factor: the “Crisis Era” (in astronomical terms, Year 3 of the Crisis Era represents 4.21 light years from the Trisolaran Fleet to the Solar System, and Year 208 of the Crisis Era represents 2.07 light years from the Trisolaran Fleet to the Solar System).

The appearance of the “Era Style” in *The Three-body Problem* signals that Liu has adopted a time-concept system totally different from the individual’s lifetime and historical time. Naming the year according to the distance from the Trisolaran Fleet to the Solar System, he has created a way of numbering the years distinct from the systems used on Earth centered around individuals, nations, states, or religions. Moreover, the “Crisis Era” shows that all civilizations on Earth face the same fate in the same moment. With the “Crisis Era”, the theme of the trilogy is transformed from the fate of individuals into the fate of Earth’s civilization as a whole. The theme of *The Dark Forest* is one of resistance: can Earth civilization resist the Trisolaran civilization’s invasion? Beginning with *The Dark Forest*, the *The Three-body Problem* Trilogy features some characteristics of panoramic literature.² In *The Dark Forest*, there are nearly a hundred

2. The concept of “panoramic literature” comes from Benjamin’s *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, which is used to describe the critical realism literature of the Balzac era.

characters including the Secretary General of the United Nations, the high officials of different countries, captains and soldiers on The Earth Fleet, and common people. Only in this grand panoramic picture can Luo Ji's Wallfacer Project be filled with mysteries and his Project Snow unexpectedly succeed. Moreover, the "Crisis Era" spans four hundred years, which exceeds an individual's lifetime. Hence, Liu conceives of "hibernation", through which an individual's lifetime can be extended to adapt to such a time scale. In terms of the novel's conceptualization of time, hibernation is a technology of great significance. According to *Death's End*, "hibernation means man walks for the first time through time". Moreover, in terms of literary narration, hibernation ("suspended narration" in narratology) can enable protagonists to directly "travel to" the next time point, thus strengthening continuity of narration. As a result, only a few main characters in this trilogy occupy such a vast space-time scope. Wang Miao, Ye Wenjie, and Shi Qiang, along with a few others, comprise the main characters of *The Three-Body Problem*. In *The Dark Forest*, Luo Ji, Shi Qiang, and Zhang Beihai are three of the few main characters. In *Death's End*, the primary main characters are Cheng Xin, Sophon, and Yu Tianming.

From Planet time to Universe time. *Death's End* is basically an extension of Part III of *The Dark Forest*. To establish a comprehensible relationship with the Christian era, Liu even creates the "Table of Eras", consisting of the "Crisis Era", the "Deterrence Era", the "Post-Deterrence Era", the "Broadcast Era", the "Bunker Era", the "Galaxy Era", the "Black Domain Era for DX3906 System", and the "Timeline for Universe 647", which spans the year of our Lord 201X to 18906416. In *Death's End*, Liu only portrays some important events occurring in previous eras and ensures the continuity of plot through the main characters' use of hibernation. As a result, Liu once again strengthens the significance of time for civilization and the universe. Departing from the tendency of most science fiction, which emphasizes anthropocentrism and geocentrism, *The Three-body Problem* mercilessly portrays the destruction of the Trisolaran civilization and the Earth civilization

(i.e., the solar system) as a two-dimensional painting. Liu even thoroughly negates the “Noah’s ark”, plan for preserving civilization, favoring the saving of the universe over a specific civilization. Furthermore, in *Death’s End*, Liu enables a narrator to tell the story of *A Past Outside of Time*, a memoir written by Cheng Xin in Universe 647. In 21 excerpts from *A Past Outside of Time*, Cheng expresses that she only wants to “furnish a frame for a history or an account of the past”, recording and commenting on the major historical events for humans (as well as recounting strategies) from the Crisis Era to the time when she entered the mini-universe. The significance of *A Past Outside of Time* lies not just in the major historical events occurring in the process of resisting the Trisolaran civilization’s invasion and seeking a new lease on life, but also in the way the story goes beyond the interests of the individual’s life and Earth’s civilization, ascending introspectively to the summit of ethical responsibility: “I am responsible for the fate of the universe”. The Earth Civilization Museum and floating bottles also furnish the reader with a sense of time in the novel. The Earth Civilization Museum is buried under the surface of Pluto, and a large portion of humanity’s precious artifacts are stored there. In fact, this museum represents the last effort of human beings to leave a trace of their civilization after discovering that Earth’s civilization is bound to die out. The museum is part of the Bunker Project and, in effect, becomes the grave of Earth’s civilization. Yet, these precious artifacts cannot be preserved for hundreds of millions of years, and they will finally be erased by time. The floating bottle is, in fact, a miniature computer whose quantum memory holds all the information in the mini-universe’s computer—it stores almost all of the memories of the Trisolaran and Earth civilizations combined. It is bound to drift through high-dimensional space of the new universe until it is found by a sentient being. Ultimately, the material memory (artifacts) and digital memory (messages) from the Museum and the floating bottle constitute the last remains of humans and Earth’s civilization in the universe.

«Time really was the cruelest force of all», is Liu’s most malicious but helpless attitude toward time in the *The Three-body Problem* Trilogy.

As this paper analyzes a limited selection of contemporary Chinese literary works, it is not capable of comprehensively examining all explorations of time consciousness that Chinese writers have embarked on since the turn of the century. What we can say, however, is that we now live in an era in which a diversity of temporal signs shape an individual's life history. We might also claim that cultural analysis of time in works of literature, film, and television can help us understand our discoveries of historical space in the future.

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Mimetic Desire or Productive Work?

The Semiotic Analysis of Two Works of Science Fiction
in 21st Century China¹

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ABSTRACT: In the field of semiotics, the logic of signification is the most fundamental and controversial problem; all kinds of disputes are founded on a core issue, that is, whether sign or meaning has the logical priority in the process of signification. Some semioticians believe that meaning (signified) comes from sign (signifier), while others claim that they are indistinguishable. The announcement of the origin of meaning by hermeneutics provides another angle from which to view the basic problem lingering in semiotics. From the perspective of hermeneutics, “the world of meaning” provides an a priori basis for the relationship between symbols and becomes the most original premise for the construction of symbolic meaning, which guarantees the comprehensibility of the world, including literary texts (linguistic symbols). In literary theory, “the world of meaning” becomes the premise for “writers” (senders), “works” (information) and “readers” (receivers). In the two representative Chinese science fiction novels *Folding of Beijing* and *The Three-Body Problem* in the 21st century, the long-standing controversy between “imitation” and “production”, essentially “symbol” and “meaning”, has been well explained from the perspective of communication of semiotics and hermeneutics.

KEYWORDS: Mimesis; textual production; 21st century chinese science fictions; hermeneutics; semiotics.

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Introduction

The relation between sign and meaning is one of the most significant problems in the field of semiotics, more precisely, it is the very foundation of the legitimacy of semiotics. Basically, there are two opposite approaches to the issue.

One approach implies that meaning comes from the movements of signs themselves within a certain system, in other words, this hypothesis confines meaning within the signs. As Saussure replaced the traditional concept of “meaning” (signification) with the term “value”, indicating the value of a sign relies on its position and relations in the system of signification, which is determined by other signs in a semiotic system.

The other approach states that meaning has the logical priority over signs, which is why Umberto Eco defined semiotics as an interdisciplinary subject, rather than a science. Given the fact that semiotics is a form of social practice, therefore, Umberto Eco concluded: «There is a semiotic phenomenon every time something present can be used in order to lie — to refer one back to something that does not correspond to an actual situation. In other words, there is a semiotic phenomenon every time it is possible to speak of a *possible world*» (Eco, 1978, pp. 76–7). The statement implies that the “real world”, despite the term being unmentioned in the article, preexists before the semiotic cognition process — referring back (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*). Umberto Eco could therefore conclude that what semiotics is capable of is studying a “possible world”.

Which of the opinions above is more reasonable? Does meaning generate sign? Or is it sign that generates meaning? In order to investigate this significant controversy, we have to adopt several strategies. First of all, the article will trace the origins of the dispute. Secondly, two typical kinds of science fiction in 21st century China will be examined as a mirror for investigating the boundary between “imitation” and “production”, which will help illustrate the signifying process. Thirdly, the article will link semiotics with hermeneutics, for both these disciplines focus on the origin of “meaning”.

1. The semiotic problem in the dispute between “mimesis” and “production”

The dispute in semiotics about the priority of “meaning” (signification) and “sign” can be traced back to the period of ancient Greece. Actually, the controversy between the concepts of “mimesis” (imitation) and “productive science” is at the origin of the dispute which appeared at the birth of semiotics. Therefore, it is important to analyze these two opposite concepts in ancient Greece.

Mimesis (imitation) is the concept raised by Plato in the *Republic*. When Plato discussed the topic of the “education function” of poetry which referred especially to the genres of comedy and tragedy, he pointed out that there is a kind of poetry-making that applies the technique called mimesis:

Of poetry and tale-telling, one kind proceeds wholly by imitation — as you say, tragedy and comedy; another, by the poet’s own report — this, of course, you would find especially in dithyrambs; and still another by both — this is found in epic poetry and many other places too. (Bloom, 1991)

Clearly, “imitation” without regulations is the technique that Plato rejected in the making of poetry, for the reason that “imitation” creates subsequent or distorted images of the real world and is a special mental situation of poems, which is not guided by the principle of “education function” in the ideal republic depicted by Plato.

Actually, in the broad sense poetry, as Plato referred to it, belongs to the genre of tragedy and comedy, which approaches the genre of “fiction” or the “novel” in the modern sense. As a modern literature genre, the “novel” established its status and aesthetic paradigm between the 17th and 19th centuries in the western world; novelists and theorists claimed that the aim of the novel was to “create a world” in the text, whose purpose was the development of tragedy and comedy through “functionality” and “narration”. Therefore, it is legiti-

mate to state that Plato's theory about imitation can be applied to the investigation of modern novels.

More importantly, Plato used the term "likeness" to define the essence of imitation. According to Plato, image with the feature of "likeness" is the superficial layer of truth: «Although there wouldn't be any lack of eagerness on my part. But you would no longer be seeing an image of what we are saying, but rather the truth itself, at least as it looks to me» (*ibidem*). Clearly, image and truth are different. For Plato, the aim of the philosopher is to seek the truth rather than wander around in the mist of images in the real world. Meanwhile, for the citizens in the republic, the quest for goodness would inevitably be harmed by imitation without regulations (without education function). Consequently, it is understandable that Plato urged to expel poets who produced works (fiction) with imitation without regulations.

Based on the philosophical assumption made by Plato, the technique of imitation applied vastly in the genre of tragedy and comedy is merely the visualization of an idea, while the world of the idea is comprised of unchanging, eternal, absolute entities. In other words, imitation is just the images and shadows, therefore, from the very beginning, poetry-making with the technology of imitation is only capable of representing the substantial world and a mental situation, rather than the world of the idea.

Plato's statement on imitation indicates that producing literature with the technique of imitation is just a false sign of the absolute idea. Considering the fact that, generally, by common definition from Augustine to Peirce, a sign is «something which stands for something else», the medium or sign is therefore invalid in signifying the world of ideas, which makes literary production a false sign of ideas. It could be further concluded that language also serves as a false sign of a literary text.

Imitation theory is not the whole picture of Plato's theory of literature. Actually, in *Ion*, Plato focused on the inspiration function in the process of "poetry-making": although *Ion* is a rhapsode (inter-

preter) rather than a traditional poetry-maker, in the broad sense interpretation is also a kind of poetry-making; more precisely, Ion is the “second writer” when he performs Homer’s work, for Plato depicted a hierarchy of the transition of meaning: Gods—poet—rhapsode—citizens”. Inspiration” originates from a divine power which plays an important role in the “creation” theory.

The theory about the “passage of inspiration” influenced Aristotle. Unlike his mentor, Aristotle held the opinion that art is a capacity of production. In *Metaphysics*, he pointed out:

There is a science of nature, and evidently it must be different from practical and from productive science. For in the case of productive science the principle of production is in the producer and not in the product, and is either an art or some other capacity. (Ross, 2007)

Therefore, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* are classified as productive sciences in the Aristotelian system by the medieval scholars. Aristotle indicated that the nature of art included literature, which is composed by the producer with a sign which is the “production”. And, production is irrelevant to idea in Plato’s sense.

Aristotle connected imitation with “productive ability”, for instance, in *Poetics*, he mentioned: «The media of mimesis are rhythm, speech, and harmony, either separately or in combination» (Lucas, 1968). It is known that Aristotle related the ability of speaking to the capability of reasoning. In ancient Greece, the original meaning of logos contained speech, nouns and reason. Therefore, “imitation” is a kind of result of humans applying their reasoning (speech) ability. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle stated: «Mimesis is innate in human beings from childhood — indeed we differ from the other animals in being most given to mimesis» (*ibidem*). For Aristotle, “imitation” is nothing else but the proof of the reasoning ability of humans, therefore, we could conclude that the judgment that “poetry is imitation” in the context of Aristotle’s system has a positive meaning. “Imitation” in the process of poetry-making is actually a kind of

“production” or “creation”, in which mankind can manifest its reasoning ability. That is the reason why Aristotle concluded poetry is more worthwhile than history:

Poetry is at once more like philosophy and more worthwhile than history, since poetry tends to make general statements, while those of history are particular. A general statement means one that tells what sort of man would, probably or necessarily, say or do what sort of thing, and this is what poetry aims at. (*ibidem*)

The argument of whether the nature of fiction (literature)–making is a kind of imitation or creation gives rise to a series of questions: If images in fiction were viewed as signs, how would they convey meaning? The answer seems quite obvious: of course by words or sentences or paragraphs which construct discourse in the fictional text.

However, it would be complicated if we asked the question in a more specific way: is it the imitation of objects in the real world that signifies meaning in the fictional text? That means the signifying process follows the logic of “object–sign–meaning”, where the sign is the imitation of objects in the real world, and as the medium, the sign generates meaning; in this way, meaning actually comes from objects or phenomena in the real world. The second pattern is one in which the signs in the fictional text could weave themselves in a web and exchange “value” with one other. In this way, a sign could exist among the relations and positions in the system of semiotics, which is the “sign–sign–meaning” pattern: although the sign is still connected to objects in the real world, the bond does not play a crucial role in the signifying process. The third option postulates meaning as preexistent, deciding the diverse functions of signs. As Plato proposes in a rhetorical way: « Now isn't it also true that if images of writings should appear somewhere, in water or in mirrors, we wouldn't recognize them before we knew the things themselves, but both belong to the same art and discipline? » (Bloom 1991). Ob-

viously, Plato realized that it is possible that the understanding and interpretation of objects (we could call it meaning) regulates signs. In this pattern, we could say that meaning is preexistent.

These three statements seem incompatible, because imitation is based on an object-orientation premise, while the production\creation theory is founded on “sign-to-sign” bases. The third theory is also a kind of imitation of Plato’s point: the idea or meaning as an abstract concept is preexistent, while the sign is just a kind of bad imitation of the idea. Which judgment is closer to the way of meaning conveyed in a literary text? In order to answer this question, the special genre “science fiction” will be discussed as an example in the following section.

2. The boundary between “soft” and “hard” science fiction

After tracing the origins of the “incompatible” opinions on the relation between sign and meaning, three patterns have been presented in the process of signifying in literature-making. In order to identify which pattern is more reasonable, it is necessary to investigate the core question in semiotics, that is, how is meaning generated in a literary text?

As a special genre in literature, science fiction has been chosen to illustrate the above question, for the reason that science fiction is at the center of the debate. Theorists are often discussing which technique is applied to signify in a science fiction, in other words, how a science fiction novel can make readers understand its meaning. Actually, the debate is mainly focused on the two concepts that were discussed above, imitation and production. Unlike other literary genres, the aim of science fiction is to make the meaningless and the unknown world meaningful through signs (words\images). Therefore, two cases of science fictions in contemporary China will be presented as examples to reveal the relationship between sign and meaning.

Basically, Chinese science fiction is classified into two kinds: “soft science fiction” and “hard science fiction”. This classification depends on the “quantity and quality” of science and technology contained in the text. Generally speaking, hard science fiction is a category of science fiction characterized by an emphasis on scientific “accuracy”. The term was first used in print in 1957 by P. Schuyler Miller in a review of *John W. Campbell’s Islands of Space* in the November issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*; while the complementary term soft science fiction, formed by analogy to hard science fiction, first appeared in the late 1970s and can be attributed to Australian literary scholar Peter Nicholls. Soft science fiction is often more concerned with character and speculative societies, rather than speculative science or engineering. The distinction between the “hard” and “soft” sciences is actually the distinction between the “natural” and “social” tendency that fiction puts emphasis on.

I would like to take two representative science fiction novels, *Folding of Beijing* and *The Three-Body Problem*, to analyze how signs work to signify the meaning in an imaginary narration. Being positioned as soft science fiction, most of the scenarios in the text of *Folding of Beijing* by Hao Jingfang are designed by imitating the real world, which makes readers enter the world of fiction quickly and easily. However, there is still one “creative image” as a sociological metaphor, that is the “shifting spaces”. Hao depicts three spaces of habitable areas in Beijing corresponding to three classes: grass-roots, the middle class and the ruling class. Every day, these layers shift geographically in order to ensure the best experiences for the ruling class inhabitants. This is the background and basic setting of the novel.

The shifting spaces eliminate the possibility of communication between the three classes; the isolation and hereditary system regulating the three spaces have lasted from generation to generation. In this world, only by smuggling a love letter from the second space (middle class) to the first space (ruling class) for his adopted daughter’s kindergarten tuition can Mr Dao, a garbage collector, lead us

through the three spaces and see the life of the three classes. Therefore, an ironic contrast appears, on the one hand, the tough living conditions of the grass-roots class are suffocating, for instance, Mr Dao has to risk his freedom to earn money, and the girl in the grass-roots class who is his neighbor sacrifices dignity and grace to fight for survival; on the other hand, the affair [is this the right word?] between middle and ruling class is “sentimental”, but quite “light”, as they do not have to worry about “survival”, but only to consider how to improve their quality of “life”.

Obviously, the three “shifting spaces” is a sociological metaphor, indicating the relation between geographical distribution pattern and social class. According to the general identification of “metaphor”, it could provide clarity or identify hidden similarities between two ideas. In the case of *Folding of Beijing*, “shifting spaces” is a metaphor which presents the similarity between class solidification and shifting spaces. In other words, the design in this fiction is just the imitation of social problems in the 21st century China. By imitation, rather than “creation”, the meaning of *Folding of Beijing* presents itself as clearly as in a realistic novel. In sum, without the metaphor, *Folding of Beijing* would become a sociological report or a realistic novel, rather than science fiction.

In this way, *Folding of Beijing* only shows signifier function in the first layer of words\images\metaphors which signify by way of imitating objects or phenomena in the real world while, as we all know, the word also serves as the second signifier, that is words appear in the absence of objects, and the second signifier in the text elucidates meaning by exchanging value rather than imitating objects. It is the Saussurean way of understanding signifier and signified. However, how do we explain the abstract ideas that signs could convey, such as morality, conscience and beauty mentioned in *Folding of Beijing*? To be more precise, in the text of *Folding of Beijing*, which is decisive: words or meaning? Sign or signified?

Let’s consider the other kind of science fiction, that is, so-called “hard science fiction”. The representative work is *The Three-Body*

Problem written by Liu Xinci³, a famous writer of science fiction in contemporary China. Liu depicts a human world under the threat of alien invasion. It is during the time of Culture Revolution, among the darkest 10 years in the history of China, when scientists and intellectuals were stigmatized and became victims of the political movement. At this time, Ye Wenjie, a physical scientist, who has suffered the pain of witnessing the death of her father in a political persecution, loses faith in humans and tries to bring new salvation to the human world. When she accidentally discovers the way to communicate with civilizations beyond our universe, she sends a message and the location of earth to unknown civilizations, completely changing the course of human history.

Earth is spotted by an alien civilization called the Trisolarans who fear the rapid advancement of science and technology on earth, thus sending atomic AI surveillance devices named sophons. According to the “dark forest rule”, the Trisolarans will invade Earth in 400 years, so they send sophons to “lock” the development of science and technology and reduce the possibility of people on earth to fight back. Since the human mind is the only place the Trisolarans cannot see, the UN selects four men to be “Wallfacers”, keepers of plans known only to themselves, who are granted full access to the resources of the UN.

In the book of *The Dark Forest*, Liu “creates” some new terms of science and technology to help construct a “real” alien civilization which is actually “not real” at all. For instance, the AI surveillance sophons created from nothing, because there is nothing functioning like sophons on earth; although AI is a kind of high-technology that we may sometimes see and use in daily life, devices like sophons acting like an omnipotent divinity that can literally control every aspect of human life are totally non-realistic. For example, they can

3. The Remembrance of Earth’s Past trilogy consists of three books: *The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*, *Death’s End*. Chinese readers generally refer to the whole series by the title of this first novel. Therefore, we will use *The Three-Body Problem* to refer to the whole series.

show writing in front of the scientists' eyes. Another example is the "droplet" — a metaphor which refers to a kind of mysterious alien technology that is the destroyer of the earth fleets. According to the description in *The Dark Forest*, when the earth fleets meet the Trisolaran probe in a massive formation of nearly all the earth's starships, the probe appears like «a solid mirror-like "droplet" of metal, with round head and sharp tail, every angle is perfect, it is rounder than a circle, no artist on earth could produce the perfect shape» (Liu, 2008). It is the droplet that arrives and attacks the earth's spacecraft fleets and eventually destroys the defensive forces of the earth.

In the book, the author creates an imaginary alien civilization that encounters with the earth's civilization. To make the story more "realistic", the author produces some concepts, such as sophons and the "droplet". Unlike *Folding of Beijing*, *The Three-Body Problem* shows the productive tendency in narration. In other words, Liu depicts an entire alien world and technology with signs, including language, image and concept; despite the fact that this science, technology and world are all non-existent, we can still understand the meaning. How is this possible? In this case, we can not conclude that signs are the imitation of objects or phenomena in the real world. Does the sign have its own subjectivity which can construct its own world and meaning? Or it is just a variation of imitation?

As regards the first interpretation, some semioticians, for example Émile Benveniste have posited the theory of "interpreting systems". Benveniste classifies the relation among different semiotic systems into three types: interpreted system, generative relationship, relationship of homology. According to Benveniste, language occupies a dominant position in the university of sign systems, such as the musical system, symbolic rites, military signals, and so on, because language is the interpreting system, while other sign systems are interpreted by language. Benveniste concludes: «Language is therefore the interpreting system of society» (Benveniste, 1985). In other words, society is also interpreted by language, which is able to interpret every sign in any system, including itself. This opinion is

later developed in the *Problems in General Linguistics*, with the claim that “language is the subject”: «Now we hold that that “subjectivity”, whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence of a fundamental property of language. “Ego” is he who says “ego”» (Benveniste, 1971). Benveniste tries to explain the place of language among the systems of sign and concludes that language has a similar position to ontology. Based on the assumption that language can construct everything, language is a dominant sign that interprets itself and generates meaning at the same time.

The second view implies that hard science fiction is also a kind of imitation since it, too, imitates the objects and phenomena in the real world. The most convincing proof is the rhetoric technique, metaphor, that authors use frequently in science fiction texts. By definition, metaphor depends on “similarity” and “likeness”, so only through pointing readers to something familiar can *The Three-body Problem* make itself understood through the signs of language in the text. However, due to the tenuous line between imitation and creation, the boundary between soft and hard science fiction is still hard to draw.

3. The encounter of hermeneutics and semiotics: The origin of sign

Now rather than jumping to such a harsh conclusion, let’s go back to the more basic question, that is, how do people comprehend meaning in the real world? The question seems self-evident in the field of semiotics, for sign as indicator is the basic assumption that constructs the very foundation of semiotics. It is not difficult to understand the assumption, for in the empirical world, signs are everywhere. There are various kinds of signs: for instance, visual signs, such as traffic lights, buildings, paintings, clothes; acoustic signs, like the ringing of a phone, songs, animal sound; taste is also a kind of

sign, the perception of spiciness, the taste of ice cream, the feeling of the temperature of food are also signs in the broad sense. Basically, everything we perceive could be called signs which convey meaning. Therefore, it is safe to say people comprehend meaning through various signs in everyday life.

However, there is a potential problem within the above premise. In the real world, signs do not explain themselves from time to time, in other words, people do not see a certain kind of sign, for instance, a table, and then recognize it and conclude: «It is a table, I could eat on it». Instead, we use the table to eat on, to play cards or to study at naturally without the cognition process. Actually, we can not even “feel” the process of “cognition”, it is natural to “use” objects before “thinking” them. Similarly, we deal with things like bicycles, cookers, clothes in the sameway we use the sign “table”. The only exception is when there is something wrong with the object we are going to use, which is the very moment that we start to use our cognitive ability. Actually, this is the basic way people usually deal with things in the surrounding world.

In this way, it seems that the everyday life experience contradicts the theory of “referring back” in semiotics. As for the referring back theory, some semioticians consider signs as containing a particular signification; the signification of a sign depends on its position in the real world. In short, it is the interplay of signs in a certain system that generates meaning. This view is similar to the typical statement made by Saussure, who asserted that «language is a form and not a substance» (Saussure, 1959). Only in a certain system, can signs send the “right” meaning. Therefore, Saussure compared language with an integrated architecture:

From the associative and syntagmatic viewpoint a linguistic unit is like a fixed part of a building, e.g. a column. On the one hand, the column has a certain relation to the architrave that it supports; the arrangement of the two units in space suggests the syntagmatic relation. On the other hand, if the column is Doric, it suggests a mental comparison of this style with

others (Ionic, Corinthian, etc.) although none of these elements is present in space: the relation is associative. (*Ibidem*)

Saussure used a metaphor of architecture to illustrate how sign, especially language, functions in a particular system. However, is it really compatible with the opinion that sign signifies due to its position in the real world?

Actually, Benveniste applied the assumption raised by Saussure to the interplay of signs on the experiential level by extracting two principles which pertain to the relations between semiotic systems:

The first principle can be stated as the principle of nonredundancy between systems. Semiotics systems are not “synonymous”; we are not able to say “the same thing” with spoken words that we can with music, as they are systems with different bases. In other words, two semiotic systems of different types cannot be mutually interchangeable. (Benveniste, 1985)

For Benveniste, the basic underlying assumption is that there are several systems in the real world, each of which generates meaning with signs of different kinds. However, he has not illustrated where the meaning (which is generated by language) as an entirety that can rule signs in all systems comes from; actually, although three separate kinds of relationships (interpreted system, generative relationship, relationship of homology) are mentioned, there is no leading system that can unite the three types.

According to the philosophical argument about the relation between part and whole made by Friedrich Schleiermacher: «Complete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa» (Schleiermacher, 1998). We could infer from the statement that without the certain understanding of the general, the meaning of a particular sign is also unclear. Therefore, the assumption that “sign generates meaning” is quite suspicious, for the reason that it has validity only in the area of the empirical world. Thus, semiotics

based on that foundation of the changing world is only an inadequate tool to dissect the phenomena in the empirical world.

In order to deal with this confusing situation, some views presented by hermeneutics could enlighten us. In *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger pointed out: «Das existenzial-ontologische Fundament der Sprache ist die Rede» [«The existential ontological foundation of language is discourse or talk»] (Heidegger, 1967). *Rede* and *Sprache* can be compared to the *langue* (language in general) and *parole* (individual language) postulated by Saussure; however, the biggest difference between the two sets of concepts is the «existenzial-ontologische Fundament» raised by Heidegger, in other words, *Rede* is the manifestation and presentation of *Sein*, which is the origin of the meaning, therefore, according to Heidegger, the understanding and interpreting of signs is the very foundation of signs: «The intelligibility of Being-in-the-world — an intelligibility which goes with a state-of-mind — expresses itself as discourse. The totality-of-significations of intelligibility is put into words. To significations, words accrue. But word-Things do not get supplied with significations» (Heidegger, 1962).

What Heidegger means is that language in the empirical world is meaningful, only because it absorbs meaning in advance and becomes a structural part of *Sein*, rather than language being a pure object in the first place, with meaning following.

Hence, Heidegger points out:

The way in which discourse gets expressed is language. Language is a totality of words — a totality in which discourse has a “worldly”. Being of its own; and as an entity within-the-world, this totality thus becomes something which we may come across as ready-to-hand. Language can be broken up into word-Things which are present-at-hand. Discourse is existentially language, because that entity whose disclosedness it articulates according to significations, has, as its kind of Being, Being-in-the world — a Being which has been thrown and submitted to the “world”. (*Ibidem*)

In the statement, Heidegger raises several critical concepts: «ready-to-hand», «within-the-world» and «Being-in-the world». These concepts illustrate the everyday experience whereby people “use” the object in the same way as they “use” language, thus, Dasein is the very foundation of the use of language which has been permeated by “meaning” (Sein). Hans-Georg Gadamer also expresses a similar opinion: «Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at [qui manca qualcosa, probabilmente la parola “all”]» (Gadamer, 1994). More specifically, the relation between language and world is:

That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language. Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of language. That human experience of the world is verbal does not imply that a world-in-itself is being objectified. (*Ibidem*)

It is how people understand the world with the medium of language, it is also the way in which the world makes signs meaningful.

Nevertheless, In the 20th century, some semioticians or theorists have tried to subvert this theory with the concept of “primary language”, that is, language without the contamination of understanding (misunderstanding) and interpretation (misinterpretation). For example, Roland Barthes depicts a picture of the “primary language”, that is, action (imitation) without the contamination of concept, which originates from «the language of the Image-repertoire»: «The utopia of language, an entirely original paradisiacal language, the language of Adam-natural, free of distortion or illusion, limpid mirror of our senses, a sensual language [...] for this is the language of nature» (Barthes 1979). Barthes assumes there is a kind of primary language at the very beginning with the quality of “purity”. Similarly, In *White Mythology*, Jacques Derrida tries to prove that metaphysics is symbolic and mythical by introducing the concept of “usure” which indicates the dissemination of the mean-

ing of language in history. Derrida asserts that the meaning of a word is like money which would inevitably experience either too much interest or be used up: «A progressive, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted exhausting of the primitive meaning» (Derrida, 1982). This ambition of deconstruction of metaphysics with the tool of linguistics is pervasive in the 20th century, however, this kind of theory is founded on the belief that the world is made of objects rather than meaning. With the perspective of hermeneutics, the world is “constructed” by the various interpretations of meaning, instead of the accumulation of objects. Therefore, the defect of the destruction theory is that it still views Truth as an object.

Can semiotics discover the fundamental way in which humans live, or is it just a critical theory which serves as a tool? The difference between these two options is pointed out by Gadamer:

Modern theory is a tool of construction by means of which we gather experiences together in a unified way and make it possible to dominate them. We are said to “construct” a theory. This already implies that one theory succeeds another, and from the outset each commands only conditional validity, namely insofar as further experience does not make us change our mind. Ancient *theoria* is not a means in the same sense, but the end itself, the highest manner of being human. (Gadamer, 1994)

Now some semiotics theories act in the way Gadamer criticized, namely, they are “constructed” without a solid foundation, while the article reveals a possibility that through the discussion of science fiction in contemporary China, the encounter of hermeneutics and semiotics could eventually leads semiotics to a way of searching for the very foundation on which semiotics can consider the relationship between sign and meaning.

Conclusion

Are science fiction novels in the 21st century mimesis or productive work in the perspective of semiotics and hermeneutics? The question leads us to a more profound path for seeking the origin of meaning. In my opinion, as a kind of literary genre, they are mimesis in the broad sense. In other words, fiction does not imitate objects or phenomena in the real world, but imitates the origin of meaning, or we could use the other term, “manifesting” the law of the world of meaning. Fiction is the medium and manifestation of the origin of meaning; it is the origin of meaning rather than the sign of language that signifies in the real world. With the perspective of communication of semiotics and hermeneutics, it would lead us to consider the foundation of semiotics, which would inevitably push the boundary of semiotics from the territory of physics to metaphysics.

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Art as a Presencing Sign

A New Exploration of in the Semiotics of the Fine Arts¹

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ABSTRACT: In today's researches on semiotics of art, one standpoint insists that art is a representation sign in the sense of Peirce's semiotics. In the view of Peirce's representational semiotics, "sign" is the same as "*representamen*", which means that the thing that stands for the object is absent. And the three parts of Peirce's Semiotics, the sign, the object and the meaning are not to be present at the same time, thus the meaning of the sign always exists outside the sign. The classification of art as a representation sign is not only challenged by both art theory and practice in the contemporary context, but also causes a paradox of semiotics and difficult problems of artistic meaning. In essence, art is not an absent representation sign, but an appearing presencing sign. As a presencing sign, art does not stand for an absent object, but has its own being and relevant meaning. It is a meaningful or significant sign occurring in a certain time and place. Here, the existence and the meaning of the sign are simultaneously presence and an integral generation. Proposing the concept of "presencing sign" can help not only to better understand the nature of the art sign, the ontology of art, but also to better understand the characteristics of the art sign related to the activities of characters, such as thingness, eventness, displayness, embodiment, fieldness, and so on.

KEYWORDS: Artistic signs; presencing signs; representation signs; appearing signs; Charles S.S. Peirce.

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Introduction

Whether art is a sign or not and what kind of sign art is are the basic questions in semiotics of art and theoretical research on art. However, scholars from Chinese and occidental academic circles hold varying opinions as to this issue. Some reckon art is a language, but is not a sign; some believe art is neither a language nor a sign; some other scholars deem that art is an image rather than a sign. In general, art is considered a sign by the vast majority of scholars. The scholars in Chinese academic circles who deny that art is a sign embrace the linguistics and semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and semiotician (Chen Yan, 2012, pp. 180–7), while the ones who insist that art is a sign take the logic semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, logician, mathematician, and scientist, as their pattern. However, both the standpoint that art is not a sign and Saussure's linguistics have been strongly criticized by the latter. Furthermore, they believe that Langer's Dilemma (according to Susanne Langer, although art is a symbol, the meaning of art is different from the ideographic law of general symbols) is attributable to the limitations of Saussure's linguistics. Moreover, they regard art as a kind of representation sign or, to speak more precisely, Iconic Sign, one of the three kinds of signs in Peirce's semiotics (Tang Xiaolin, 2014, pp. 138–44).

The question here is, since Saussure's semiotics has its limitations, are there no limitations to Peirce's semiotics? Is Langer's Problem really caused by Saussure's semiotics? Can the art sign be categorized as a Representation Sign in the sense of Peirce's semiotics? If art is not a representation sign, what kind of sign is it? We will attempt to tackle these questions one by one and to put forward a new concept of art signs.

1. Difficulties with art as a representation sign

We know Peirce's concept of a Sign is composed of a Representamen, an Object and an Interpretant. A Representamen refers to the part of a sign that can be perceived, and Peirce often replaces a Sign with a Representamen because, in his view, a Sign is a Representation and the latter is a substitution. Hence, there is no difference between the representamen and the sign. «A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity», he says (Peirce, 1931–1935, 2.228). From here we see that Peirce's semiotics is, in essence, a kind of representation semiotics and a representation sign, at heart, is “standing for” or “substituting”.

The main reason why a sign can stand for an object is that it is similar to the substituted object, or it has a motivational relationship to the replaced object. Despite the fact that Peirce has divided the sign into these classes, the icon, the index and the symbol, his semiotics, as some scholars have said, is based on a kind of motivation. In Peirce's opinion, the Iconicity between a Representamen and an Object is the reason why the icon features motivations. «An Icon is a sign, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it» (Peirce, 1931–1935, 2.247). According to Peirce, «If a substantive be wanted, an iconic representamen may be termed a hypoicon». Moreover, paintings, images, diagrams, ideographs, hieroglyphics and metaphors may also be classified under the hypoicon (Peirce, 1931–1935, 2.276–280). In accordance with this kind of classification, some scholars have classified art as the Icon, and thought «films, photographs, drawings and sculptures are the most icons» (Tang Xiaolin, 2014, pp. 138–44).

Dividing a sign into three classes is another important contribution made by Peirce's semiotics. However, if art is classified under the icon in line with his semiotics it is, in essence, not conducive to understanding the essence of the art sign in a better manner. In fact, in a contemporary context, if art is understood through classifying

it as the Icon, people will meet further problems. We know that Iconicity is closely related to theories of mimesis and representatio, and, since the 20th century, the theories of mimesis and representation in the sphere of philosophy and aesthetics have become a target for all. Since these theories have been deconstructed and attacked on all sides in practice and theory, an alleged “representation crisis” has come into being. «For contemporary philosophy, representation is a great culprit. Some philosophers even speak of a representative illusion, just as Kant spoke of a transcendental illusion», Paul Ricœur states (Bate, 2000, p. 248). Although the representation theory cannot be equated with the mimetic theory and their criticisms are not always pertinent, these criticisms demonstrate that the two theories have become an object of public denunciation. «Whatever the pictorial turn is, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation», declares W.J.T. Mitchell, who claims that the Pictorial Turn means entering a “post-linguistic” and “post-semiotic” era (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16). In E.H. Gombrich’s book *The Story of Art*, he sketches the development of Representation from the conceptual methods of the primitives and the Egyptians, who relied on “what they knew”, to the achievements of the Impressionists, who relied on “what they saw”. However, he comes to the conclusion that no artist can paint “what he sees” because these artists invariably follow some conventions in the process of painting. «The self-contradictory nature of the impressionist programme contributed to the collapse of representation in twentieth century art» (Gombrich, 1959, p. vii). Moreover, abstract art is designed to destroy representation art, so it is not difficult to imagine how it subverts iconic principles. Hence we can see that double challenges from both practice and theory make it difficult to classify art signs under the sense of Peirce’s representation sign and icon.

The greatest difficulty in classifying art signs under the sense of Peirce’s representation sign is, in fact, not the challenge from the contemporary context but the limitation of the thinking of epis-

temological objectivity in representative semiotics. It seems that Peirce's semiosis is a ternary structure, including a Sign, an Object and an Interpretant, which emphasizes the triadic relations of the sign, the object and the interpretant. However Peirce, in fact, thinks about semiosis in terms of the relationship between the sign and the object. Compared to the relation between the sign and the interpretant, the relation between the sign and the object has a more fundamental role, because the object rather than the interpretant serves as a contributing factor. However, since the coining of the term "interpretant" is a contribution made by Peirce's semiotics and he has expressed some self-contradictory views on it, researchers often pay more attention to the relationship between the sign and the interpretant. Nonetheless his representation semiotics, in fact, can only be advanced on the basis of the relationship between the sign and the object. Furthermore, the typology of signs, the most important thing in his semiotics, is also based on the relationship between the sign and the object. Owing to the broad understanding of the object and the coining of the term "interpretant" in Peirce's semiotics, the relationship between the sign and the object has become more complicated. Despite this, Peirce's representation semiotics is fundamentally related to the traditional representation theory of languages prevailing in western history as well as based on the binary separation between the sign and the object. The object is a precondition for the sign, regardless of whether or not the former is material or abstract. «The Objects may each be a single known existing thing or thing believed formerly to have existed or expected to exist, or a collection of such things, or a known quality or relation or fact», Peirce affirms. «The sign does not affect the object but is affected by it» (Peirce, 1931–1935, 2.232, 1.538). Despite the fact that he mentions the Thinking and Semiotic feature of the subjects, the situation that the objects are the prerequisite to the sign has not changed.

Because the object exists beforehand in the structure of Peirce's semiotics, they are beyond the sign and the sign is determined by them. The coining of the term "interpretant" seems to break this

rule and enable the generation of a sign to be determined by the interpreter. However, for the generation of signs, the determining role of this interpretation is mainly reflected in the conventional symbols. For an icon and an index, there is a motivation link, rather than an interpretation link, between the sign and the object, and this is the reason why they can be regarded as a kind of sign. «An Icon is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own [...] It is true that unless there really is such an Object, the Icon does not act as a sign», states Peirce. «An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object» (Peirce, 1931–1935, 2.247–248). «I define an Index as a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it» (Peirce 1958, 8.335.). From here we can see that the Icon and the Index are determined by the object, and the introduction of the interpretant cannot change this rule in essence. According to Peirce's semiotics, the sign is determined by the object, and the interpretant is finally determined by the sign.

I define a Sign as anything which on the one hand is so determined by an Object and on the other hand so determines an idea in a person's mind, that this latter determination, which I term the Interpretant of the sign, is thereby mediately determined by that Object. A sign, therefore, has a triadic relation to its Object and to its Interpretant. (Peirce 1958, 8.343)

Hence we can see that in Peirce's ternary structure the Sign is determined by the Object, the idea is determined by the Sign, the sign's way of determining the idea is also determined by the Object, and "the way of determining the idea" is the Interpretant. In this way, the Interpretant is also determined by the Object.

An Interpretant is the most creative but incomprehensible thing in Peirce's semiotics. In his mind, the Interpretant is sometimes an idea in the quasi-mind caused by a sign, sometimes a new Sign caused by the original sign and sometimes the mind's Way of determining the idea. However, after making a comprehensive survey of

Peirce's statements on the Interpretant and the previous studies, we find that the changeable Interpretant, in fact, denotes the "Meaning" of a Sign. «Representamen in this definition is the perceptible object functioning as a sign and corresponds to Saussure's signifier. Peirce's object equals the referent of other models while his interpretant denotes the meaning of a sign», Martin and Ringham affirm in *Key Terms in Semiotics* (Martin, Ringham, 2006, p. 241). According to Zhao Yiheng, «an Interpretant is the meaning» (Zhao Yiheng, 2012, p. 104). Peirce at one point divides an Interpretant into an immediate interpretant, a dynamical interpretant and a final interpretant. Based on Peirce's discussion on the Interpretant above and the division here, the "meaning" in Peirce's semiotics can be understood from three aspects. First, it is an idea caused by the Sign. Second, it denotes the efficacy of the Sign. Third, it denotes the Object referred by the Sign. However, it is beyond the Sign, namely the Representamen, regardless of whether the meaning is an idea, efficacy or the object referred by the Sign, and it can be separated from the Representamen. The idea caused by the Sign is in the mind of the interpreter, the efficacy of the Sign is in the action using the Sign, and the representational Object of the Sign is originally prior to the existence of the Sign.

In this way, the meaning in Peirce's semiotics and Saussure's semiotics is in a totally different condition. According to the latter, a Sign cannot be equated with a Signifier. In order to avoid the conventional view that a Word is equated with a Signifier, Saussure introduces the concept of a Sign containing both a Signifier and the Signified. The Signifier here refers to the sound pattern, while the Signified here denotes the concept and the meaning, and the meaning of a sign exists within the sign. Since he lays stress on the arbitrariness and distinctiveness of language signs and thinks that meaning is caused by making distinctions, the meaning of a sign cannot be gotten in an isolated and instant manner within it and it will also be affected by other related signs in the linguistic sign system. Despite this, the generating process of meaning is within the sign system, and it has

no relation with the object and the people's ideas outside the sign. As a result, the meaning of a sign here is within the sign and the sign system from first to last, and the sign is inseparable from the meaning.

However, in Peirce's semiotics, a Sign is equated with a Representamen. If we compare Peirce's Representamen with Saussure's Signifier, the former's Sign only denotes the latter's Signifier rather than the combination of a Signifier and the Signified, because his Sign as a Signifier does not contain the meaning or the Signified or a Sign does not carry meaning by itself and the meaning exists in the Object, the idea or efficacy outside the Sign, namely the Representamen. This suggests that there is only an external relation between the Representamen in Peirce's semiotics, namely the Sign, versus the Object and the Meaning, they are separable from each other and the Sign does not coexist with the Object and the Meaning. Due to this kind of separability and the nature of asynchronous presence, there is a paradox that «the Sign and the Meaning cannot coexist with each other». If the Sign and the Meaning cannot coexist with each other, people will be faced with the dilemma of which one comes first, the Sign or the Meaning. Meanwhile, in Peirce's representative semiotics, since a Sign and an Object can be separated from each other and a Representamen used to stand for or substitute a certain Object may also be substituted by other similar Representamens, the Representamen is not unique. Furthermore, in representative semiotics, a Sign is a carrier or tool and does not possess independent and sustainable existence and value. Hence, once the aim of expressing meaning has been reached or the Meaning of a sign has been explained, "the necessity of" the existence of the Sign is "canceled", just like «get the meaning but forget its presentation, get the fish but forget the bamboo fish trap in *Zhuangzi*» (Zhao Yiheng, 2012, p. 47).

However, these characteristics of Peirce's representation sign cannot be used to interpret the essence of the art sign. We know the art sign, like the material existence of art works, is not a transparent

carrier that only conveys a meaning rather than shaping it or a tool that can be forgotten or forgettable after “getting the Meaning”, because the significance of art work infiltrates the art sign and the former and the latter are inseparable, integrated and coexisting. «The musical signification of the sonata is inseparable from the sounds that carry it, where signification would be secreted by the very structure of signs», Maurice Merleau-Ponty declares (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 188, 333). However, if we strictly adhere to Peirce’s semiotics, we will find the art sign is only a kind of tool or carrier and the significance of the art sign is outside the art sign. If you insist that the significance of art work is within the art sign, you will reach the Art Meaning Problem, namely Langer’s Dilemma, whereby the meaning of the general sign is outside it, while the significance of the art sign is within it.

We know that not long after Susanne Langer pointed out «art is the creation of symbolic forms of human feeling», this standpoint was criticized and questioned by some scholars. Is art a Sign? If it is a sign, it is subject to the basic concept of “sign” which says that a Sign is used to stand for something and its meaning is outside it. However, in Langer’s view, the meaning of art cannot be found beyond the presence of art works, namely the Sign. Since the meaning of art lies in art works, there is no meaning without the art works, which obviously deviates from the usual definition of sign. Therefore, Langer is not consistent with herself, which is Langer’s Dilemma (Tang Xiaolin, 2013, pp. 132–35). We have to say that the coining of the expression “Langer’s Dilemma” is of highly enlightening significance to the understanding of the dilemma of the artistic significance of representation semiotics. However, Langer’s Problem is caused by Peirce’s representation semiotics instead of Saussure’s Dilemma. Regardless of whether Langer herself had realized it or not, the standpoint that a Sign is used to stand for something is exactly the same as Peirce’s representative semiotics. If one adheres to the concept that a Sign is used to stand for something in Peirce’s representative semiotics, one will come to the conclusion that a sign

is just an instrument and the meaning of a sign is beyond its own presence and finally reach Langer's Dilemma. Langer said:

What I mean is that a genuine symbol, such as a word, is only a sign; in appreciating its meaning our interest reaches beyond it to the concept. The word is just an instrument. Its meaning lies elsewhere, and once we have grasped its connotation or identified something as its denotation we do not need the word any more. But a work of art does not point us to a meaning beyond its own presence. What is expressed cannot be grasped apart from the sensuous or poetic form that expresses it. (Langer, 1957, pp. 133-4)

In this way, Langer's Dilemma emerges. Obviously, Langer's Dilemma is caused by the unconformity between her understanding of the significance of art and the concept of general sign (namely her "pure symbol") she refers to, which is extremely close to Peirce's representation view of sign rather than Saussure's concept of sign. In the light of Saussure's semiotics, as noted above, the meaning of a sign is created within the system of the sign and there is no relation to the Object or the Subject outside the Sign. Although the generation of meaning has been transformed to a broader cultural sphere from a closed system after the deconstruction of post-structuralism, meaning is still autonomously generated through the interaction between texts. The most prominent feature of structural linguistics and semiotics is that the meaning of a language sign is generated within the linguistic sign system rather than without it. However, this kind of representation semiotics inevitably leads to the view of external meaning, which makes it impossible for Langer to solve this contradiction without redefining the general symbol. When some scholars criticize her standpoint that art is an emotional symbol, she has no choice but to use the Expressive Form to stand for the Art Sign as a compromise. «I said before that it is a symbol in a somewhat special sense, because it performs some symbolic functions, but not all; especially, it does not stand for something

else, nor refer to anything that exists apart from it. According to the usual definition of “symbol”, a work of art should not be classed as a symbol at all», Langer affirms (Langer, 1957, p. 132). Langer’s standpoint that a Pure Symbol, namely a General Sign, can «stand for something else» follows the same track as Peirce’s representation semiotics. From here we can see that art cannot be categorized as a Representation Sign in the sense of Peirce’s semiotics. If we class art as a Representation Sign, there will be a risk that «Art is not a Sign» in research on Art Semiotics.

However, it should be noted that since Saussure’s semiotics can support the standpoint that the significance of art is generated within a system, it does not mean that it can interpret the nature of the art sign in a better manner. The art sign, in essence, is neither a Representation Sign used to stand for an absent object, nor an arbitrary and empty Distinguishing Sign with no relation to the world or the human. The art sign is a Revealed Presencing Sign.

2. Art as an appearing presencing sign

As a technical term, a presencing sign is not common in current works on semiotics. However, the presencing sign surely exists in the real world in which, as we know, when a leader or an important figure appears on a certain occasion, there is a certain meaning or some significance. Hence, their presence can be regarded as a “sign”. Moreover, in terms of phenomenology, a sign can also be treated as a Phenomenon showing a meaning or significance. «In the phenomenological conception of “phenomenon” what one has in mind as that which shows itself is the Being of entities, its meaning, its modifications and derivatives», declares Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962, p. 60). Accordingly, we can say that the sign that presents its very being and related meaning and significance by virtue of its presence is a “presencing sign”. “Presencing” and “presence” are similar to each other in meaning, but their Chinese counterparts are

strikingly different from each other in meaning, despite the fact that they are closely related to each other. In a general sense, Presence is bound to depend on Presencing, while Presencing means presence at a time. However, Presencing does not mean presence all the time, because the Presence may cease soon after Presencing. Of course, it may continue to be Presence. Hence, Presencing contains Presence. However, compared to Presence, Presencing features timeliness and the nature of “coming into being”. «Heidegger distinguishes, in this sense, between the notion of presence (Anwesenheit) and that of presencing (Anwesen), the latter is related to the interplay of three dimensions of time and to their convergent opening to a fourth dimension» (Rowner, 2015, p. 62). Heidegger also thinks Presencing is always connected to the “occasion”, and stresses the “bringing-forth” of Presencing (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 316–7). Moreover, according to Chinese explanations, Presencing means Appearing on public occasions, which usually refers to performers or athletes appearing on the stage or the sports ground. The presencing of performers or athletes contains the movement of coming onto the stage. Furthermore, in order to give a Performance, the notion of Presencing features eventness and the conscious and purposive performativity the notion of presence does not feature. Therefore, we use a Presencing Sign rather than a Presence Sign to name this kind of sign for the sake of highlighting its timeliness, genesis, eventness, and performativity, etc.

The Presencing Sign is, in essence, different from Peirce’s representation sign and can also not be classified under the three kinds of signs described by him. Since the presencing sign does not substitute any absent object but presents its very being and its meaning or significance it is, by nature, an “appearing sign”. In the representation sign, there is a distance between the sign and the object. «The carrier of a sign must be different from the ideographic object, and the symbolization cannot be equated with the object itself. Otherwise a sign would fail to “represent” and bring about its own destruction» (Zhao Yiheng, 2012, p. 61). Through Peirce’s frame of

the sign and the object, we can clearly find that the sign used to show the being of an object is the object itself in a presencing sign and the appearing body, appearing object and appearing meaning of the presencing sign are the same thing, coexisting and being inseparable. Moreover, the appearing body of the sign used to show the being of the object is unique and cannot be optionally replaced by others, just like the presencing of the spokesperson cannot stand for that of the leader. Only by the presencing of the sign can it present the very being of the object and contain the meaning related to the being of the object. Once the appearing body of the presencing sign has been changed, the being of the object and its meaning will change accordingly. In a manner of speaking, the presencing sign features embodiment. Moreover, since a presencing sign is not the instrument or carrier of the object but its very existence, the presencing sign will not bring about its own cancelling with its appearing meaning. The very being of the object presented by a presencing sign serves as the presencing sign, and its meaning lies in the very being of the object. Hence, if the existence of the presencing sign is canceled, the very being of the object presented by the presencing sign will be canceled and its meaning will no longer be in existence. The meaning of being of this sign can only be presented by the presencing of the object, namely the presencing sign. The sign, being and the meaning here coexist.

Obviously, these characteristics of a presencing sign are appropriate for interpreting the essence of art signs. «Art pictures are (mostly individual) signs that allow the self-referentiality of all pictures to become conspicuous». «What is essential for the existence of pictorial signs is that they show something that is on or present with their surface», Martin Seel says in *Aesthetics of Appearing* (Seel, 2005, pp. 169, 173). Art as a sign aims to make its very being become conspicuous or present its very being. «Not only can the sign represent this in the sense of serving as a substitute for what it indicates, but it can do so in such a way that the sign itself always is what it indicates» (Seel, 2005, pp. 169, 173). Precisely because the art sign is equated

with what it indicates and the sign of art works is unique and cannot be substituted optionally, its material details are meaningful. «If in a lyrical poem we change one of the words, an accent or a rhythm, we are in danger of destroying the specific tone and charm of the poem», writes Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 1994, p. 213). That is to say, the sign of art works cannot be changed casually. The sign of art works participates in the generation of art significance, and the world, existence and meaning of a work of art can just be created by its own material signs. If its art signs can be changed or substituted, the work of art may not be a work of art any more or may become another work of art. Art signs, world, being and meaning coexist with each other. The sign of art works is not just an instrument, carrier or means, but the direct reality of art activities, which is the flesh and blood of art works as well as the manner of material existence of the art works created by artists. Hence, it cannot be forgotten or forgettable after getting meaning. Once the sign of a work of art has been canceled, the significance of art will no longer be in existence. In art signs, “the sign here does not only indicate its signification, but is also inhabited by it; here the sign is, in a sense, what it signifies”. The significance of art inhabits art signs «as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances» (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 333).

Obviously, these characteristics of art signs cannot be interpreted well in representation semiotics. However, when we regard art as a presencing sign, we apprehend the appearing essence of art signs and these signs are interpreted in a clear and ordered pattern. Furthermore, we find that when we put forward the notion of presencing sign and treat art as a presencing sign, the paradox of semiotics derived from Peirce’s semiotics and the Langer Dilemma are smoothly solved and the standpoint that art is not a sign can be changed. Moreover, those who object that art is a sign/to art being a sign could also be persuaded to support the idea that art is a presencing sign. As noted above, both Mitchell and Elkins have a tendency to oppose semiotics of art, because they hold that art is pictures instead of signs. The former has, in fact, found that art is a

phenomenon similar to the presencing of characters, which is the reason why he believes art is pictures. «Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but some–thing like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status», he states (Mitchell, 1984, p. 9). Comparing artistic images to an actor on the historical stage and a presence or character endowed with legendary status can support the standpoint that art is a presencing sign and is conducive to correcting the problem of current research on art semiotics losing “the pictures as pictures” criticized by Elkins, thus further strengthening the understanding of the picture itself rather than its external meaning.

Heidegger, as we know, does not support the standpoint that art is a sign in his later years, because, in his view, a sign is generally regarded as an arbitrary and empty token, while art is a poetic language. Moreover, the poetic language as the “house of being” bears a heavy load in an indicating manner. Language bears the heavy load of “all things on earth”. According to Heidegger, All art and knowledge should gain its primary experience from mountains and seas, the sky and islands, light and each limited “presencing thing” (*Anwesenden*) endowed by light and even the thing that makes brightness and gloominess possible. In the primary experience, there are expansions and regressions of all present things in their entering and exiting (Heidegger, 1983, pp. 212, 145). In other words, in Heidegger’s view, art is a language that bears and presents all things on earth rather than an arbitrary and empty sign. The name of language “calls” something “into presencing”. «Language speaks by pointing, reaching out to every region of presencing, letting what is present in each case appear in such regions or vanish from them» (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 390, 411). For art, we have to regard it as a sort of “presencing thing” in order to gain experience from the origin. Because art is a kind of “presencing thing”, the notion of presencing sign is good for it. Only when we regard art as a presencing sign can we clearly see that the essence of art is the semiotic appearing of being rather than the representation of the object. The significance of

art just exists in the being of artworks presented by the presencing sign.

The being of artworks we mentioned here is employed in the sense of Heidegger's phenomenological ontology. Instead of an arbitrary and empty pure form world composed of art signs or an isolated and closed insulator, it is a whole "involvement world" or a "field of being", which is constituted by the being of the material thing used by the artwork, the being of the presenting thing presented by the artwork, and the being of environment, from which the artwork is generated and in which the artwork exists. Art as a presencing sign is designed to present this "involvement world" or the "field of being". Furthermore, the significance of art just exists in the "involvement world" or the "field of being". According to Heidegger, "involvement" is the nature of the being of the beings. "Involvement" indicates that the being of a being is not isolated, but is affected by many factors. The appearing of a being can bring many factors into presencing at the same time. And as an appearing presencing sign, the art sign not only shows the existence of the sign itself, but also presents the vast field of relevance as a whole through its own showing.

That is to say, art as a presencing sign does not appear in an isolated manner but in the sense of phenomenology based on the scope of the whole world. Hence, it can present the involvement world as a whole. As a result, the art sign not only shows what is present, but also refers to what is absent. When it refers to what is absent, the absent becomes presence. In this sense, art as a presencing sign can both present itself and refer to the world. An art sign shows its very existence in a conspicuous form, lightens the vast world of relevance by virtue of its conspicuous existence and brings the thing it encounters to this field of being. Therefore, the significance of the overall existence of artworks has come into being.

3. The ontology and characteristics of art as a presenting sign

Regarding art as a Presenting Sign can help to understand the appearing essence of art in a better manner as well as enable us to grasp the characteristics of art works in a more in-depth and direct fashion. As noted above, according to the general explanations, Presenting means appearing on some occasions, which usually refers to performers or athletes appearing on the stage or the sports ground. The presenting of performers, athletes, important figures and so on is that of figures in the flesh as well as the appearing of figures at a certain time or place, which enables the presenting sign to become a “behavioral thing”. In other words, the presenting sign, by nature, features thingness, eventness, eventfulness genesis, and fieldness. Furthermore, since the presenting of characters is to «give a performance», the presenting sign features displayness and performativity at a high level. Moreover, the presenting of characters implies that these characters «give us a performance “in person”», which makes it feature embodiment. Meanwhile, just as a performance directly indicates the presenting of both performers and audiences, the presenting sign predicts the presenting of both the sign itself and the sender and receiver of signs. In other words, it is like a “complete activity of presenting” created by performers, performances and audiences at a certain time and place. Proposing the idea that art is a presenting sign is to utilize the original and associative meanings of the notion of “presenting”, thus further demonstrating the characteristics of art signs that are accompanied by or similar to presenting activities of characters.

In the wake of the development of contemporary art, people tend to pay more attention to art’s thingness, eventness and eventfulness. In a word, people begin to attach great importance to art’s nature of presenting (Peng Feng, 2014, pp. 13–20). However, both Saussure’s construction sign as a distinction token and Peirce’s representation sign as a substitution have failed to better interpret art signs’ thingness, eventness, eventfulness and nature of presenting.

Due to the dilemma of modern semiotics and the development of contemporary art, there is an appeal for a new concept or theory of art signs of presencing. Although the notion of “presencing sign” is rarely seen today, people have paid attention to the nature of the bodily action of art language for a long time. Robin George Collingwood holds «in this wide sense, language is simply bodily expression of emotion» and art is language of the bodily act and system of gestures (Collingwood, 1958, pp. 235, 242–3, 273). However, in his view, art language as a bodily act cannot be abstracted and symbolized. Maurice Merleau-Ponty deals with the bodily eventness of language as well. In his opinion, language is not the representation of thinking, «speech is a genuine gesture and, just like all gestures, speech too contains its own sense» (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 189). Unlike Collingwood, he reckons bodily language is a sign. Art, therefore, is both language and signs. Furthermore, language is not restricted to human bodily acts and the entire world is the body of speech, and «the sense of the gesture unfolds and is displayed» (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 200). People tend to pay more attention to the eventfulness and performativity of literature and art as well as the eventness of art language. In *The event: literature and theory* by Ilai Rowner, there is a section called “Toward a Theory of Literary Events” (Rowner, 2015, p. 161). «We could express the performance theorist’s claim as follows: art-works are token performances whereby a content is articulated through a vehicle on the basis of shared understandings», as David Davis says in *Art as performance* (Davis, 2004, p. 236).

In domestic academic circles, Gao Jianping has clearly proposed that «the nature of art should be viewed from “events”» (Gao Jianping, 2015, pp. 96–101). Furthermore, Gao has put forward the idea that the ontology of art can be interpreted by the notion of «representation of action» featuring «the unity of mind and body», «the unity of mind and matter», spirituality as well as operable mobility based on «events» (Gao Jianping, 2016, pp. 9–12). «The central question for the ontology of art is this: what sort of entities are works of art? Are they physical objects, ideal kinds, imaginary

entities, or something else?». «Under what conditions do works come into existence, survive, or cease to exist?». «It has long been common practice to divide purported entities into mind-independent physical objects on the one hand, and merely imaginary objects, projected properties, or entities that exist “only in the mind” on the other hand». Roman Witold Ingarden, a Polish philosopher, classes the work of art as an intentionality object, which, to the maximum extent, eliminates the dualism of mind and matter. However, owing to the fact that intentional behavior is a kind of conscious behavior instead of material practical activities, the intentionality object still features strong internality. What’s more, the notion of “intentional object” grasps the work of art as static matter, which overlooks art’s eventness. The turn to the ontology of “representation of action” from that of «mind and matter» helps realize not only the unity of the work of art’s psychological and physical nature but also that of its thingness and eventness, which, without doubt, is important progress made in the process of understanding the ontology of art. Following the idea unfolded by the ontology of “representation of action”, we may continue to move forward and reach the concept of “presenting sign”. The notion of “sign” is designed to underline art events rather than common action events. In other words, it is a practical form of meanings or significance occurring at a certain time and place. However, the notion of “presenting” is designed to highlight art signs’ thingness, eventness, displayness, embodiment and fieldness in a more intuitional manner. In this way, we may give a general description of art: the ontology of art is a presenting sign; the essence of art is appearing of being in the form of the sign as well as sign practice/the practical sign of meanings or significance; art, as a presenting sign, features thingness, eventness, displayness, embodiment and fieldness. The notion of “presenting sign” enables an art sign to be a living, movable, genesis and vigorous sign and makes art’s thingness, eventness, displayness, embodiment, fieldness and semioticality coexist.

Arnold Berleant, an American scholar who is active in environmental aesthetics, has put forward the Presencing nature of speech. According to his analysis of a variety of classes of art, traditional performing arts such as dance, music and opera and modern participatory arts such as performance art, happening art and optical art are a kind of presencing activity, and, more importantly, literary arts such as poetry and novels are a sort of “presencing of speech”. «Poetic language epitomizes the vibrant presence of words», he says. Moreover, we can also find the performing factor in fiction. «Thus as the breath of song, as verbal gesture, as narrative voice, poetry, theatre, and the novel, each in its own distinctive way, involve the word as a living moving force in performance». Furthermore, «words, leaving behind the character of means, become ends in themselves». «It is the word embodied, given substance, largely removed from the region of the abstract and filled with the concrete vibrancy of life» (Berleant, 2004, pp. 151, 154, 157). Bob Dylan, an American singer-songwriter, author, and artist, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature «for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition» in 2016, which, in fact, can be regarded as a kind of acknowledgment of the presencing nature of literary speech that had been ignored for a long time. In fact, both literary speech and paintings, sculptures and other art language exhibit their presencing. «In being immediately present, art exhibits its presence», and this compels a direct encounter in its perceptual realm. Owing to the fact that art language exhibits its presencing, each of its material details is displayed. «In the gesture of dance, the line, colour, and mass of painting, the volume of sculpture; the dynamic sound of music, the plot and action of drama, human reality takes on substance and shape» (Berleant, 2004, pp. 94, 100).

Berleant’s analysis of the presencing of art helps to understand the characteristics of art as a presencing sign. Regrettably, he fails to uphold the notion of “presencing sign”. On the contrary, he mutters his disapproval of theories on art signs and is inclined to evade the notion of “sign”, because, in his view, these theories insist on

semiotics of mimesis and representation in epistemology and fail to interpret art as a “presenting activity”. Although his disapproval is without rebuke, he may not have taken notice of “new semiotics” developed by the School of Paris since the 1980s. «This new movement in semiotics was heralded by a seminal paper on “imperfection”, published by Greimas in 1987». «Here he introduces into semiotics the concept of the aesthetic, that is, beauty apprehended as sensory bodily presence. For Greimas, the aesthetic defines the mode of appearing of things, the unique way they reveal themselves to us before any preliminary codification» (Martin, Ringham, 2006, p. 8). Under Greimas’s leadership, the movement in semiotics pays more attention to the image of signs as well as the constitutive role of presenting in meaning. Moreover, the new semiotics can help to understand the characteristics of art as a presenting sign to some extent.

However, in order to better understand the essence, ontology and characteristics of art as a presenting sign, one should not depend on Saussure’s semiotics, Peirce’s semiotics or the “new semiotics”. For the sake of correcting the misunderstanding of pure objective research on early structural semiotics, the new semiotics has attached increasing importance to the role of the subject of perception and led to “the semiotics of passion”. However, if the role of the subject of perception is excessively highlighted, the essence and characteristics of art signs will not be better understood, because the being of a work of art is an involvement world, a field of being as well as an action event that a variety of factors participate in performing and accomplish together. Accordingly, only through semiotics integrating humans into the world on the basis of practice and existence can art research be supported in a more reliable manner. Hence we can see that art semiotics nowadays should be based on practice and existence, rebuilt in the light of phenomenological ontology and further use phenomenology of perception for reference, so as to propose a modified “appearing semiotics”. Only in this way can we better understand the essence, ontology and characteristics of art as

a presencing sign and enable research on art semiotics to keep close to the work of art itself as well as establish a profound and internal link of significance with being, the world and humanity.

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On the Semiotic Model of Objecthood Proposed in Dragon–Carving and the Literary Mind

JIA PENG (彭佳)¹

ABSTRACT: *Dragon–carving and the Literary Mind* is a significant work of Chinese literary criticism. It proposes an important model of the aesthetics of “objecthood”, which argues that people’s feelings are sparked by objects and then expressed/represented in literature and art. *Dragon–carving and the Literary Mind* adopts a paradigm of mind–object dualism and explains how the “Tao” of objects and “Qi” of people become linked; this process evokes emotions, thus equipping objects with the ability to arouse feelings. People’s imaginations, building on the correspondence between emotions and objects and by cultural experiences, play an essential role in converting objects into mental images. Through artistic semiosis, conventions impinge on the transformation of mental images into literary symbols. In this process, an array of interpretants come into being, and inform the imaginations of the sign receivers. This explains how the meanings of signs are created and conveyed.

KEY WORDS: Objecthood, Feelings sparked by objects; *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*; Imagination; Semiotics; Chinese Aesthetics.

Introduction

In the aesthetics of “objecthood” (物感) established by classical Chinese criticism, the model proposed in *Dragon–carving and the Literary*

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Mind (《文心雕龙》 by Xie Liu (hereafter referred to as “Liu’s work”)) is a development of the concept of “feelings sparked by objects” (感物起情) given in *The Book of Rites. Yue Ji* (《礼记·乐记》). Liu’s work expands the idea of objecthood to include the interaction between mind and object and considers how imagination is involved in the transformation of an object into a visual icon, then into a mental image and finally into a literary symbol. This paper explores the process through which the imagination follows the principle of “describing objects truthfully and vividly to improve the significance of literary works by moving people’s rational spirit” (物以貌求, 心以理应), as well as how feelings trigger imagination and generate meaning.

1. Paradigm of Mind–Object Dualism in Dragon–carving and the Literary Mind

The aesthetics of “objecthood” in Liu’s work conform to the principle of mind–object dualism; he proposes that the feelings and emotions sparked by objects originate in the correspondence between the inner structures and generating rules of the mind and the object. In his work, Xie Liu illustrates in detail how mind and object correspond and interact due to their similar inner structures. He traces the development of the mind from “the original *Tao*” (原道), and deduces from this that the origin of “the way of writing” is also the *Tao*. This connection is the basis of the correlation between object, mind and writings.

What is “the original *Tao*”? The *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》) explains the origin of the idea of *Tao* as follows: «The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth; the ways of earth, by those of heaven; the ways of heaven by those of *Tao*; and the ways of *Tao* by the Self-so» (人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然). It has been pointed out that “the ways of *Tao* by the Self-so” implies that *Tao*, the origin and the ultimate purpose of things, is the supreme entity in the whole universe, in a metaphysical sense. In *The Commentary of Tao*

Te Ching («道德真经注»), Cheng Wu (吴澄) says that «the all-encompassing Tao is down to its rule of itself, thus the demonstration [of] “the ways of *Tao* by the Self-so”, not that other things instead[of] *Tao* will rule» (道之所以大, 以其自然, 故曰法自然, 非道之外别有自然也). Accordingly, *Tao* represents the origin of heaven, earth and nature; thus all things — nature, mind and their laws — are subject to the *Tao*. Going forward, Zhongjiang Wang (2010) argues that all things, including human society, are born from *Tao*, which is reflected in objects and society, not vice versa. As the groundwork and logical framework with which all things and all laws are respectively shaped, *Tao* becomes the origin of all things.

Now when the blue colour parted from the yellow, and the round shape from the square, heaven and earth came into being. Like two interfolding jade mirrors, the sun and the moon reflect the images of heaven, while streams and mountains are interwoven into earthly patterns like gorgeous damask. They are manifestations of *Tao*. (Liu, 2005, p. 3)

This opening sentence of Liu's work echoes the story of the origin of earth and heaven given in *The Book of Changes* («易经», a Taoist masterpiece by Chang Ji, Western Zhou Dynasty), in which the author claims that «planets in the sky form patterns of celestial phenomena, geographic features and all things of creation on the earth take different shapes» (在天成象, 在地成形) «the colour of the blood is a mixture of black and yellow, that is, the mixed colour of heaven and earth, for heaven is black and earth is yellow» (夫玄黄者, 天地之杂也. 天玄而地黄). It can be seen that “patterns” and “shapes” originate in the *Tao*; thus «the metaphysical realm is called the way and the physical realm the vessel» (形而上者谓之道, 形而下者谓之器). A basic function of *Tao* is to give birth to all things in the universe.

Humans, who reflect upon and depict nature, are undoubtedly created by *Tao*. According to Liu, «when earthly patterns and heavenly images take shape, inferior and superior places are established, and the two primal powers of heaven and earth are born. Yet, only

when humans join in does the Great Triad form. Endowed with the divine spark of consciousness, humans are the essence of the five elements, the mind of heaven and earth» (仰观吐曜，俯察含章，高卑定位，故两仪既生矣。惟人参之，性灵所鍾，是谓三才。为五行之秀，实天地之心) (p. 3). This is how humans are described in the chapter of Liu's work called *Tracing Origins to the Tao* («文心雕龙·原道»). As their essence is the «five elements» (五行), humans are «the heart of heaven and earth» (天地之心), which means that heaven and earth can only manifest themselves through people's sensibilities and observations in the ways of *Tao*, the rule governing the world, the metalanguage of world-building. The world is constructed and reflected via signs created by humans, mostly verbal signs. In this manner, «the way of writing» (文道) is linked through the *Tao* with the birth of heaven and earth: «When mind is born, speech appears. When speech appears, writing comes forth. This is the way of *Tao*» (心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也) (*ibidem*).

«*Tao* perpetuates writing through the sages, and the sages manifest *Tao* through writing» (道沿圣以垂文，圣因文而明道) (Liu, p. 11) because of the correlation between “the way of writing” and “the way of heaven”. The *Tao* of all things in nature is explained via the “writing” of humans, and these explanations in the form of texts are presented to recipients who make further interpretations. Ultimately, the encoding of writing is governed by *Tao* and corresponds to the way of nature. Changgeng Li (2014) points out in his analysis of the relation between Liu's work and *Tai Ji* (太极, the Absolute Ultimate) that the logical frameworks of the way of writing and the way of nature both come from *Qi* (气, vital energy). *The Book of Changes*, on the other hand, serves as a factual illustration of “the way of writing”. This is consistent with the Taoist notion that all things in the universe, including writing, are produced by *Tao* and *Qi*. It is thus fair to claim that the origin of the way of writing can be traced back to the origin of the universe. It is language that triggers the emergence of “writing”. In other words, the encoding principle of writing is implied in the *Tao* of heaven and earth, which can only be

manifested in writings: «Are not word patterns the mind of heaven and earth!» (言之文也, 天地之心哉) (Liu, p. 7). Similarly, Liu writes that the mind is the only medium for mapping the world, just as the way of verbal signs is the medium for representing and reconstructing earth and heaven; that is, the world. Specifically, such representations/reconstructions are achieved by our “writing”. Without writings, the *Tao* would be only an unrealised possibility in the form of *Qi*, according to the clear-cut classification system in *The Book of Changes*. As Fuzhi Wang (王夫之) says, «*Tao* reflects itself in writing» (道之表见者尽于文), and as writing originates from *Tao*, it is governed by *Tao* and is the manifestation of *Tao*.

In his detailed analysis of “objecthood” theory, Weilun Huang (2012) argues that objects can spark feelings because there is a correspondence between mind and object. This correspondence, according to him, arises from the interaction of *Qi*, which constitutes categories the same as/similar to those into which the mind and object fall. In Liu’s work, the argument that the way of nature corresponds with the way of writing follows a similar principle. This is consistent with *Yueji*. Specifically, the five elements arise from *yin* and *yang*, whose interaction and movement create the basic elements in the universe, including heaven, earth and humans. As a result, there is interplay between all of these things, and kindred things have the same composition and are consonant with each other. Yipin Liao (2000) comments, «when changes happen in the natural world, the human mind stirs in response» (p. 155). For this to happen, links between the mind and things must exist. These links exist because all things are composed of the five elements.

Heaven has four seasons; earth has five elements; man has five moods. These are “three counterparts”, influencing and being influenced by each other. These interlinked relationships are derived from the composition of all things, which also explains the volatility of the mind parallel to changes in things. (Liu, p. 156)

Such a model of correspondence is also put forward in Liu's work. In his opening chapter "The Forms of the Natural World", Liu writes,

as spring and autumn alternate, people's moods change accordingly. When changes happen in the natural world, the heart stirs in response. When the bright energy shows the slightest signs of revival, ants begin to move. As the dark forces of the cold gather, mantises prepare for the winter. If even petty insects like these respond to seasonal changes, the influence of the four seasons must be deep indeed! Can the human being, with a heart more wondrous than jade and a spirit purer than flowers, remain untouched when called upon by the natural world?

(春秋代序, 阴阳惨舒, 物色之动, 心亦摇焉. 盖阳气萌而玄驹步, 阴律凝而丹鸟羞, 微虫犹或入感, 四时之动物深矣. 若夫珪璋挺其惠心, 英华秀其清气, 物色相召, 人谁获安?). (Liu, 2003, p. 649)

This is a description of how *yin* and *yang* stir changes, not only the four seasons, but in all things. As beings are created according to the principle of *yin* and *yang*, humans can sense changes in *Qi*, and it is impossible for them to remain changeless in the face of the shifting natural world, which evokes their emotions. This kind of emotional response parallels the movement of *Qi*. This is reflected in many sayings, such as the following:

When the old year passes into spring, joy fills the heart. As the heat of summer surges on, a sense of heaviness congeals. When autumn comes and the sky clears up and rises high, the grave heart travels far. When winter covers the earth with endless snow, depth is added to serious thoughts. (是以献岁发春, 悦豫之情畅; 滔滔孟夏, 郁陶之心凝. 天高气清, 阴沉之志远; 霰雪无垠, 矜肃之虑深). (*Ibidem*)

«A year encompasses countless alternations, each with its unique form» (岁有其物, 物有其容) (*ibidem*). «Different feelings are evoked by different objects and expressed in different language» (情以物迁, 辞以

情发) (*ibidem*). Furthermore, the changes in objects that can evoke feelings in people can be expressed via writing. How the writing conveys these feelings depends on the Qi of the writers, for Qi may be masculine or feminine, and «in writing, the smooth flow of emotions bespeaks the purity of “wind”» (风冠其首, 斯乃化感之本源) (Liu, 2003, p. 399). In other words, the emotions and vitality of the texts' composers impact the form and style of the text.

Any trivial thing can spark a person's aesthetic feelings. As Liu says, «if a single fallen leaf or an insect's murmur can touch the heart, how profound will be the influence of a refreshing wind on a moon-lit night, of a clear morning in a spring-time wood!» (一叶且或迎意, 虫声有足引心. 况清风与明月同夜, 白日与春林共朝哉) (Liu, 2003, p. 649). Poets possess a comprehensive ability to feel things, to invoke an atmosphere and to express emotion; however, they do not do these things randomly, without observing certain rules. First, a poet should imagine things in an all-encompassing way, travelling from one image to another, being «endlessly imaginative while being stirred by things» (诗人感物, 联类不穷) (Liu, 2003, p. 651). In this way, a poet unfurls his imagination through his emotions. Second, a poet should be capable of refining his imagination, converting the abundant pictures in his mind into written literary symbols. Thus, in Liu's work, literature transforms feelings into imagination and then represents the imagination with signs. The use of signs indicates that the poet has constructed a world that reflects a subjective emotional state and has a corresponding aesthetic significance.

2. Semiosis of “objecthood” in *Dragon-carving and the Literary Mind*

The works of Chinese scholars, Liu's being the representative illustration, are concerned with the relation between the theory of “objecthood” and the semiotic (re)construction of the world. In his book *Modern Aesthetic System*, Lang Ye identifies two dimensions of

feeling: «feelings stirred by things» and «aesthetic feeling». In his work, feelings are produced by «observing objects» (格也), «being touched by objects» (触也) or by people's perceptions of the primary modelling system (Ye, 1999, p. 159). He states that «what can stir people's mind can also engender feelings, because “feeling” has the same meaning as “moving”. People's feelings come from a moved heart» (*ibidem*). It is fair to say that

people's physical sensation, stirred by sensual information, can be converted to psychological reaction. The links between body and mind can be influenced by cultural factors, in addition to natural physical reactions. Being “touched” does not require “understanding”, and it resembles sympathy. When understanding is excluded as an intermediary, “sympathy” will emerge through direct contact with an object's form, colour, sound, temperature and strength. In other words, emotion will arise when these five things touch the heartstrings. (*Ibidem*)

Ye calls the process through which humans are touched by objects — that is, through which their perceptions and feelings are aroused by the form of an object — «the perception via primary modelling system». This system, functioning as a channel of biological semi-osis, also to a large extent determines how a semiotic subject maps the outer world using the original model of being. Although Ye is not a semiotician, he acutely notes that physical senses and emotional reactions are co-produced by humans' multiple modelling systems. Thus, the link between mind and object is influenced by the “natural physical basis” of these things and by cultural systems. It is self-evident that language and culture can create cultural and artistic symbols loaded with aesthetic feelings and emotions. That is to say, the immersion in aesthetics creates emotional reactions that do not require reasonable explanations or analysis. Expanding on this point, he argues that humans «generate an emotional response when an object's form, colour, sound, temperature and strength touch the heartstrings». This is triggered not by explanations or rea-

sons, but by imagination and sensibility. Along with the creation of these symbols, structural links between signs and natural things are thus established.

Gongzheng Wu, who focuses on the structure of Chinese aesthetics, is a proponent of the above idea. According to him, Chinese literary criticism emphasises the model of aesthetic perception, which is characterised by links between the mind and objects:

Emotions correspond with and are represented by certain imaginaries, which develop into symbols in literature and art. This is how the image mechanism of Chinese aesthetics comes into being. For instances, thinking afar is symbolised by the image of a wild goose, homesickness by the moon, farewells by a willow, purity and dignity by bamboo. (Wu, 1992, p. 5)

Images of a wild goose, the moon, a willow or a bamboo plant do not carry the same emotional significance in Western literature and culture. However, in Chinese literature, they are able to elicit these particular emotional and aesthetic responses, due to, first, the recognition and influence of existing literature, i.e. so-called “intertextuality”, and second the correspondence between the structures and components of the emotions and objects, as proposed by Wu. Literary images, in their final form as symbols, are bound to produce stirring emotional and aesthetic effects. The correspondence between symbols and emotions, seemingly natural and integral, is shaped by culture. Bamboo might signify a noble heart of humbleness and integrity, thus sparking people’s admiration of a true gentleman. The connection between culture and aesthetics sways the emotional responses of subjects to objects. As Wu (1992) says, «the structure of common feelings stirred by common images will be consolidated at large since its formation. Such a structure is personal as well as social». (Wu, 1992, p. 209) Similarly, the natural structural correspondence between scenery and objects in Chinese literature is not “born in nature”, but narrowly and strictly formed by culture.

Peircean semiotics can shed light on the effects of symbols that represent objects. In Peirce's trichotomy, interpretants of signs can be divided into three categories, emotional, energetic and logical, and there is a progressive relation between these three interpretants. The emotional interpretant is «the first proper significate effect of a sign». It is «a feeling produced by it [the sign]» (CP, 5.475). As Peirce claims, an emotional interpretant involves «much more than that feeling of recognition». Its most important characteristic is to convey content, such as the musical idea of a composer, by sparking the emotions of an audience (CP, 5.475). Such an explanation coincides with Lang Ye's description of the effects of images of scenery (Ye, 1999, p. 475): «We mourn leaves torn away by the cruel hands of autumn; we honour every tender bud of spring». Liu makes a similar point:

When the old year passes into spring, joy fills the heart. As the heat of summer surges on, a sense of heaviness congeals. When autumn comes and the sky clears up and rises high, the grave heart travels far. When winter covers the earth with endless snow, depth is added to serious thoughts.

Music, high or low in pitch, slow or fast in tempo, gentle or spirited, sorrowful or powerful in tone, touches people's hearts. Likewise, different scenery can stimulate different emotions in people, setting them free to be sentimental and to drift in the vast ocean of emotions.

As signs generate meanings consecutively, imagination does more than represent a "resemblance" between signs and objects. People from a given cultural community will deem signs highly representative of their corresponding objects.

According to *Word and Expression* («说文解字»), «“依” (swaying) means leaning on or against someone or something». In Liu's work, «“依依” (swaying and swaying) is an image of willow twigs» (Liu, 2003, p. 651). «依依» is used to describe the lovely movement of willows fluttering in a soft breeze. The conventional meaning of «依»

contributes to the formation of a visual image, and the reiterative locution has a synergistic phonetic effect, which helps to shape a vivid image. At the same time, imagination and cultural conventions play a role in evoking images, as seen in reiterative locutions such as «灼灼» (bright and bright, describing peach blossoms), «杲杲» (glowing and glowing, portraying the rising sun), «灑灑» (fluttering and fluttering, delineating falling snow), «啾啾» (chirping and chirping, representing the chorus of the golden orioles), and «嚶嚶» (buzzing and buzzing, copying the sound of the insects). Commenting on reiterative locutions, Liu says,

When they say the sun is bright or the stars look small, they capture the spirit in one word. When they say the water plants are tall or short, or the mulberry leaves are fresh and green, they offer examples of two-word descriptions. In each case, they can capture complex situations in a simple vivid phrase, and their descriptions will remain unsurpassed even in a thousand years.

（“皎日”，“曄星”，一言穷理；“参差”，“沃若”，两字连形：并以少总多，情貌无遗矣。虽复思经千载，将何易夺？）。(*Ibidem*)

Reiterative locutions are characterised by a musical sound that is channelled by people's senses. To a large extent, their aesthetic sense is stipulated by cultural conventions and is the fruit of language's general motivation. Language's ability to stimulate the imagination is based on the response of mental images to verbal signs. Yiheng Zhao uses the quotation: «The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower; the endless river rolls its waves hour after hour» (Zhao, 2005, p. 65) to illustrate how language can create mental images, which implies that the motivation of words is to affect sign receivers. The symbolic meanings of these motivations, as they are forged through the repeated use of languages, can endlessly induce images in people's minds. Languages, which are conventional signs, will naturally produce conventional images.

Conclusion

According to Qingbin Tong, the «mind travels with objects» and thus philosophical thoughts become artistic. Artistic patterns arise from knowledge and experience. Tong Qingbin states that the

artistic imagination is not groundless. Accumulated knowledge and experience in literature training will motivate the “mind to travel with objects”. From the perspective of modern Western psychology, objects touch on the aesthetic “psychological schema” of subjects, which requires that the “mind” of the subjects be adequately cultivated, for “seeing is out of knowing”, and “thinking is also out of knowing”. (Tong, 1999)

Therefore, the aesthetic imagination is underpinned by a visual object’s emotional effects, which arise from a natural correspondence between the object and the emotions, and from cultural experiences and conventions. The symbols generated by these processes will then be depicted in words. As literature and art are created, the progressive conversion from visual objects to mental images to literary symbols has a circular and cumulative effect. The text discussed in this paper reveals this progress: objects are the source of the meanings and forms of signs, interacting with people’s imaginations. How people’s imaginations are shaped by the generation of images of nature, art and literature deserves further discussion from a semiotic perspective.

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Narratology for Art History: Narrativizing Western Influence and Chinese Response in the Modern Era

LIAN DUAN¹

ABSTRACT: In this essay the author lays a foundation for constructing a narrative model, which aims at rewriting the development of Chinese art in the first half of the 20th century. Building this model, the author primarily emphasizes the importance of context, which consists of external and internal aspects, with multiple payers within each aspect. With this model, the author examines the fundamental change to Chinese art in the early 20th century, and throughout the century as well, and proposes a reinterpretation as the main thesis: the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response has shaped the development of Chinese art in modern times. As the preliminary result of Chinese response since the early 20th century, a great divergence occurred in modern Chinese art, splitting it into two mainstreams: Chinese-style art and Western-style art, with a sub-split in each. Running two mainstreams forward side by side is the uniqueness of the development of modern Chinese art, and the uniqueness reveals the Chinese anxiety of cultural and national identity, which is the drive behind the Chinese response to Western influence.

KEYWORDS: Narrative model; influence; response; great divergence; context.

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Introduction

At the beginning of this essay² I must make a terminological clarification: in my narrative of Chinese art, the term “modern art” is different from “modernist art” and “Modernist art”. The first is a temporal term referring to Chinese art in the first half of the 20th century, whereas the second is not only temporal, but mainly conceptual and stylistic, referring to, in general, the new art in the 20th century. With the first letter capitalized, the third one refers to the specific art movement in the West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Relevantly, the singular “modern era” refers to the historical period from the early 20th century to 1949, and the plural “modern times” refers to the period extending to the present.

The modern era in Chinese art history has witnessed the rise of new art, namely, Western-style art, both realist and modernist. Why is it new? Firstly, throughout the Qing period (1644–1912), traditional art gradually lost its cultural significance and historical place, as I discussed in my recent book, *Semiotics for Art History* (Newcastle, 2019). Secondly, since the beginning of modern times, due to Western influence, figure painting took over the dominant place that was once occupied by landscape painting in Chinese art history. In the West, compared to landscape painting, figure painting has a much longer history, it is the dominant genre in painting due to its importance in the grand narrative of mythological, biblical, historical, political, religious, and worldly subjects. When Western influence prevailed in China in the early 20th century, Chinese art was changed accordingly and drastically, as a unique historical phenomenon, with two mainstreams running forward side by side, and intermingled as well, in the development of modern Chinese art: the old Chinese-style art and the new Western-style art.

2. This essay is a shortened and revised version of the first chapter of my current writing project *Narratology for Art History: Rewriting the Development of Chinese Art in Modern Times*.

This unique change is a result of not only the influence from the West, but also the Chinese response to this influence, which is an internal adjustment to the external impact. Then, what exactly has happened to the development of Chinese art in the modern era? Certainly, traditional art has survived, but it no longer dominates Chinese art. Although some old-fashioned literati artists tried to restore and revive the old tradition, they were hardly successful, due to the change in historical, social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual, and artistic conditions.

This is to say that the internal response to external influence is related to the importance of context, and the importance of breaking the boundary between intrinsic and extrinsic studies for an art historian. Contextualized in this academic setting, I present the main thesis of this essay: the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response, driven by the anxiety of identity, has caused the great divergence of Chinese art into two, Western-style art and Chinese-style art. This divergence showcases the uniqueness of two parallel and interwoven mainstreams running in the developmental course of Chinese art in modern times. Since the interaction of influence and response is decisive, corresponding to this main thesis, I consider that the process of modernization in Chinese art is a process of Westernization throughout Chinese art history in the 20th century.

Regarding this main thesis, temporally, there is a difference in my historical narrative: the great divergence played a key role in the development of Chinese art in the first half of the 20th century, whereas the confluence of the once divided Chinese art has played a key role in the development of contemporary Chinese art in the recent decades through to the late 2010s. Thus, although the topic of this essay is the great divergence, at a certain point my discussion will go beyond the first half of the 20th century and extend to the second half of the century when it is necessary.

In order to logically present this narrative, in this essay, I will first discuss my narrative model, focusing on the importance of historical and cultural background, which functions as the context to the

“author–text–reader” communication process. Then, I will offer a grand narrative about Western influence and Chinese response, and finally, along with individual case analyses, I will set forth my “tertiary narrativization” as the main thesis, reinterpreting the development of Chinese art in the modern era.

In order to reach the main thesis, I propose that, in my narrative model, the context consists of two aspects, the external context and internal context. The former has two layers, the pre–text and context, and the latter has two layers as well, the textual context and central text; furthermore, the central text consists of three narrative components: first–hand fabula, secondary narration, and tertiary narrativization. My contextual approach in this narratological study moves from the outside in, getting closer layer by layer to the main thesis about art, which is presented as the central text in my narrative model, integrated with my discussion of certain art works as the central image. In this essay, this is how my narrative of art history goes from the outside in, and this layer–by–layer process is my way of breaking the external–internal boundary, as well as crossing the border of extrinsic and intrinsic studies.

1. Narrative Model and the Importance of Context

The narrative model in this essay is developed from my semiotic study of Chinese art history³, in it the “context” frames the entire narrative process, as well as each of the individual components in parentheses, from narrator to artwork and reader:

Context → (Narrator/ Author ↔ Image/Text ↔ Viewer/Reader) ← Context

In this model, the arrows indicate the direction of the narrative perspective, as well as the departure point in reading art from a certain angle. Why do I consider this model “my own”? In this model

3. Concordia University, Montreal.

I stress the importance of context, which differentiates my model from those of other scholars. The importance of this model lies in its function and structure. In terms of its function, on the one hand, the context provides the text with a functioning field, where the text works—within its field, the text is created, coded, read, and interpreted. In addition to the context–text interaction, there is also an inter–textual interaction. In this essay, the intertextuality is found among the secondary narrations which contextualize my tertiary narrativization.

Moreover, the contextual field is both temporal and spatial, and both historical and cultural; ontologically, it is the existential environment of the text, and the two, context and text, echo each other in this environment, with coherence and co–ordinance between them. Furthermore, context is not only the functional field of a text, but also the starting point of my historical narrative of the development of modern Chinese art, it also explains the Chinese anxiety of identity as the drive of historical change in this development.

In terms of its structure, context exists in two aspects, the external and internal; the former is found beyond the page border of a text, demonstrating its non–textual nature, and the latter is found within the page border, demonstrating its textual nature. In this essay, I consider that the external context consists of historical pre–text and cultural con–text, whereas the internal context consists of textual context and the central text which is actually the very centre–piece of the text itself, — there is no clear — cut borderline between each of them, and between the external and internal contexts. In other words, in the process of reaching central text from the outside in, the notion of context in my narrative model is border–crossing.

The importance of context may be common sense, however, since modern narratology (the so–called classical narratology) is developed from formalist structuralism, not all narratologists really pay attention to it, and the attention makes a difference. In the 1960s and 1970s, the French structuralist narratologists started to construct internal systems for narrative models. Based on and de-

veloped from their preliminary works, in the 1980s, American narratologist Gerald Prince (1942–) outlined a foundational model in his book *Narratology: the Form and Functioning of Narrative* (1982) and built a basic model for narratology: «Narrator → narration → naratee». Although Prince did not literally present his model in this format, I summarize it based on his actual discussions in the first chapter on narrating: narration takes the central place in the narrative process, which connects the author and the reader at two opposite ends (Prince, 1982, p. 7).

Then, in the 1990s, Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal (1946–) published the revised edition of her book on the same subject, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997), and constructed a similar, yet different model: «Narrator → narration». It seems that Bal did not give the reader a place in her model, she is in fact a reader-oriented theorist, and the role of reader in her model is found everywhere thus seems nowhere. Nonetheless, just like Prince, Bal also gave the central place to narration. More than ten years later, then, in the third edition of the same book (2009), Bal added a topic on visual narrative, and stressed the importance of focalization between narrator and narration (Bal, 2009, p. 165).

Theory develops and also changes. In the first decade of the new century, another American narratologist, Rick Altman (1945–) developed a new model in his book *A Theory of Narrative* (2008), and gave the central place to narrative focus. He discussed the single-focus, dual-focus, and multi-focus systems in both literary and visual narratives. Although his model is built in the 2000s and his perspective is uniquely different from that of the earlier narratologists, Altman's new theory is still narration centred, and the importance of narration is stressed in his discussion of the multiple spaces and foci in the paintings of Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525–1569) (Altman, 2008, p. 191). In other words, context is somehow less important in his model.

Since the early 2010s, the development of narratology has slowed down, and the study of narrative has faded out from the front line of the social sciences and humanities. Sad or not, this is now a good

time for narratologists to look back, rethink, and put the last brick in the building of narrative theory and complete the theoretical system. In this milieu, British narratologist Paul Copley (1963–) published the second edition of his summative account on this subject, simply titled *Narrative* (2014). In this book, Copley presented his model in the first chapter, which is a descriptive presentation of the internal components of narrative and narratology. The title of the first chapter is thoughtful, “In the Beginning: the End” which begins a loop and confines the discussion of narrative in an intrinsic sphere. Even more interestingly, Copley entitled the second to last chapter “In the End: the Beginning” which seems open-ended, but actually completes the loop from the first chapter, though with a twist: he offered a very brief discussion of reading narrative, involving both reader and author (Copley, 2014, p. 186). Unfortunately, in Copley’s historical narrative of narrative history, the topic of context is simply left out.

Although we can see the theoretical development from the narration centered model of the 1980s to the narrator–narration centered model of the later decades, American narratologist David Herman considered these to be “classical approaches” since these models are somehow intrinsic and formalistic (Herman, 2007, p. 12). Although Herman admitted the efforts made by these scholars in exploring the limits of the intrinsic models, I recognize their efforts to not only explore but also expand the theoretical limit. For instance, Mieke Bal’s cultural analysis of visual narrative is beyond the internal confinement, she pays attention to the cultural background and artistic convention which serve as the historical context for her study of Rembrandt’s paintings (Bal, 2017).

Related to context, a historical narrative of the development of art can do two things to art history. Firstly, it can take art out of its original context, or “aura” in the terminology of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and secondly, it either frames it back to its context, or re-frames it in another context, such as re-placing an art work in a museum space, not in its original church space. Against this scholarly

background, I will not plunge into the postmodern debates over the legitimacy of context in interpretation, but stress the importance of context for its correspondence and coherence with text in respect of thematic thesis. This is to say that, in this essay, I will first stress the match between the fundamental change in modern Chinese art and its historical pre-text as well as cultural con-text, namely, the match between the great divergence of two mainstreams in modern Chinese art and the socio-political modernization process in early 20th century China. Then, I will stress the importance of the context-text match between modern Chinese art and its background that further legitimizes my reinterpretation of the interaction between Western influence and Chinese response, as well as the Chinese anxiety of identity.

Certainly, reinterpretation is a reaction to interpretations, which are referred to in this essay as the secondary narrations of other art historians. Although the aim of this essay is not to summarize or comment on those narrations, for the reason of narrative logic, I will mention them when necessary.

Before the Second World War, generally speaking, historians regarded history and external historical condition as singular, linear, one-dimensional, fixed, stable, and unchanging. However, since postmodern times, New Historians have held an opposing view, seeing historical conditions as forever changing. Benefiting from the two views, I gain/obtain? multiple senses of history in developing my own narrative model, which is not only temporally but also spatially multiple and heterogeneous.

Speaking of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of historical senses, I listed five in the Conclusion chapter of my book, *Semiotics for Art History*:

- 1) the historical moment when the artist/author created the work;
- 2) the historical moment the work refers to;

- 3) the historical moment when the reader reads or interprets the work;
- 4) the implied historical moment of the artist/author, which could be current or future, such as the case of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949);
- 5) the implied historical moment of the reader, which could be the past, present, and/or future (Lian Duan 2019, p. 235).

The first two are relatively easy to understand, while the next three are beyond literal understanding, since I value the current significance of the past. Supporting this trans-historical point of view, I would like to quote a poignant opinion of Paul Mattick Jr, from his entry essay on the issue of context:

Art is valued precisely for its purported transcendence of history. The object collected and displayed as meaningful in the present, and not just as a trace of the past. Yet this present value essentially involves its historical character or reference — even in the case of new art. (Mattick, 1996, pp. 72–3)

However, I acknowledge that the above historical senses are more temporal, and now I wish to develop the sense of history from solely temporal to spatio-temporal, and give four elaborations: The first of my multiple senses is that of the historical condition at the time when an art work is created by an artist, as well as the time when an art movement happens in history. The second is the sense of the historical condition of the time when an event takes place, which is represented, reflected, or referred to in an art work, and also in a narrative of art history. I consider that, in both cases, the historical conditions change less, and what actually change are readers' understandings of the historical conditions due to readers' own temporal locations. Thus, relevantly, the third is the historical sense of the time when we read a certain work of art and art history. In this sense, the historical condition seems fixed, but actually is not. For

an artist and art historian, the historical condition of what the work refers to could be stable, but to readers it is not. A reader is different from an author; the importance of the reader is found in not only a temporal sense of history but also a spatial sense. Thus, the fourth of my multiple senses of history is indeed spatial: to the readers of different cultures, the significance of a work is different in accordance with their geographical, regional, national, cultural, and personal experiences and situations.

A strong historical sense or senses help an art historian contextualize the development of art in his or her narrative discourse. In this essay, this is not only contextualizing the Chinese response to Western influence, in particular, contextualizing my tertiary narrativization, but also elaborating and legitimizing my tertiary narrativization about the anxiety of identity as the drive of the Chinese response in a specific historical period of change in modern Chinese art history.

2. From External to Internal Context

Context is essential for my narrative model. On the one hand, it integrates intrinsic and extrinsic approaches by framing each of the narrative components in the parentheses, and also framing the entire narrative process. On the other hand, the key aspect of context, that is, socio-historical change, is echoed by the key aspect of text, namely, by the changes of art as a result of the interaction between Western influence and Chinese response. The relevance of context to text is found in the main thesis of this essay: it is the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response that has shaped the development of Chinese art in modern times against its historical, social, cultural, and intellectual background.

In my narrative model, context mainly functions at both ends of the narrative process, outside the parentheses. As a general term, context denotes multiple contextual aspects. In a temporal sense,

one of the aspects is historical, I name it pre-text, due to the fact that the historical background events largely occurred prior to the change in art. In this sense, pre-text works as a historical setting, playing the role of historical condition for the great divergence in Chinese art in the early 20th century.

Throughout the modern era, Chinese intellectuals showed a great interest in Western culture. Among them, artists and art students, as well as scholars in art, embraced Western art and art theory enthusiastically. Why is this so? The answer lies in the background of the Westernization movement in the late 19th century and the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century, both intensely politically charged.

If the historical pre-text⁴ is somehow a bit general to the development of modern Chinese art, then the cultural con-text is less general and more specific, closer to the internal artistic milieu. The closer distance of the con-text to the central text reveals the important characteristics of the context: in my narrative model, the change in cultural con-text and the change in art as the text in the process of its development correspond to each other. Namely, Western influence from the outside in and Chinese response from the inside out coincide. In this sense, temporarily, the term “con-text” does not necessarily have to refer to the contextual change before the textual change, it happens largely at the same time.

The process of my contextual approach is gradual: I will discuss historical circumstances first, and then move on to the discussion of the cultural condition which is one step closer to the artistic milieu. In this process, cultural con-text plays a connecting role between historical pre-text and textual context. Such a middle ground and linking position make the cultural con-text unique: it is not really a temporal pre-text, but mainly a spatial con-text, i.e., it is mostly concurrent to what happens to art. The con-text is multiple, not

4. In order to shorten this essay, the discussions of the historical pre-text and the cultural con-text have been dropped.

only cultural, but also social, economic, political, intellectual, and even artistic, at different degrees respectively.

In the early 20th century in China, against the historical background of pre-text, the dominant concurrent cultural con-text is the New Culture Movement, with the May Fourth Movement as a key part of it. However, the New Culture Movement lasted much longer, and demonstrated the after-effect of the May Fourth Movement.

My gradual approach from external pre-text to middle-ground con-text leads me now to reach the internal context, which, as described, consists of two layers, the textual context and central text. The word “textual” here means that the textual context is inside the page-border of a text. Compared to pre-text and con-text, the term “textual context” is internal, referring to the artwork of a certain period in history as a whole, forming an artistic backdrop for individual art works. It also refers to the narratives about art and art history as a whole, featuring intertextual relations among them. In terms of its relevance to the central text, textual context is similar to pre-text and con-text, but it is closer to the central text and more directly works for and conditions the central text.

Since it is close to the central text, then, there is an issue of subjective narrative involved, which is the selection of topic for the discussion of textual context. Although art history is not fictional, narration is still subjective, because narrators select pre-narrated materials in accordance with their own narrative purpose. This is a part of the construction of the narrator’s narrative subjectivity. In order to tell the story of modern Chinese art, I will select, subjectively, the historical notion of “fine art” as a starting point, and frame it in the internal textual context.

Differing from the more general term “art”, “fine art” is an old elitist notion for classical art in the West, namely, the French “*beaux arts*”. This notion was introduced to China in the early 20th century by the forerunners of the Westernization movement, as the name for Western art and as a goal of modernization for Chinese

art. Thus, it is essential for my succeeding discussion of Chinese response to Western influence.

Since there is no grammatical difference between the plural form of “arts” and singular form of “art” in Chinese, Chinese artists use this term in modern times almost exclusively for visual art, particularly painting. Hence, the French notion “*beaux arts*” to the Chinese eye is no different from the English “fine art”.

The notion “fine art” is attractive and fascinating to pro-Western scholars, artists and art students alike, who dreamed of studying art in the West. At the beginning of the 20th century, art students from China, including some established artists, went to the West and Japan to learn Western fine art, namely, *chiaroscuro* drawing and oil painting. The first artist who traveled to the West was, arguably, Li Tiefu (1869–1952); he was later considered the father of Chinese Western-style painting, the painting executed with oil on canvas, of the modern era. In 1885, Li went to North America and Europe, learned art in Canada, the United Kingdom, and then the United States where he was a student, follower, and friend of John Sargent (1856–1924). In a way, Li Tiefu was a Sargent-like realist, interested in the Western realist tradition of fine art.

In terms of media and techniques, as well as the way of depicting objects, Li Tiefu’s Western-style oil painting is completely different from the traditional Chinese-style painting. I take this difference as the first sign of the great divergence of the two kinds of art in Chinese art history under Western influence.

Similar to and also different from Li Tiefu, another forerunner of the Chinese Western-style, painter Li Shutong (1880–1942) was realist first and then non-realist. He went to Japan in 1905, studied art with the most prominent Japanese artist and art educator of that time, Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924), the father of Japanese Western-style painting. Seiki went to Paris in 1884 and started learning realist painting with Louis-Joseph-Raphael Colin (1850–1916) in 1886 at the age of 20. Then, he turned to Impressionist art, and, upon his return to Japan, established the first Western curriculum-based art

school in Tokyo. Under the guidance of Seiki, Li Shutong first practiced realist painting, and then, like his Japanese mentor, turned to Impressionism. Furthermore, Li Shutong was also the first scholar in modern China to write a book on Western art history. Although the book was not published, he used the manuscript as a teaching text for his course on the development of Western art. Unexpectedly, he later converted to Taoism and then Buddhism, and died at the age of 62, a great Buddhist Zen master.

Like what happened in Japan, the Chinese art education system changed in the process of Westernization. In the first two decades of the 20th century, art schools in China followed the Western concept of “fine art” for curriculum setting, and used the very word in Chinese, *meishu*, in school names to promote Western curricula. “Shanghai Meishu Zhuanmen Xuexiao” was one of the earliest art schools in the 1910s; its name means “Shanghai Special Institute of Fine Art”, now commonly translated into English by Western scholars as “Shanghai Painting and Art Institute”. The founder and principal of the school, Liu Haisu (1896–1994), a brave and radical young artist at the tender age of 19 at that time, was possibly the first in China to introduce live models to teach Western-style drawing and painting, which stirred a huge controversy and protest from the conservatives.

In the West, drawing from life is an essential training in fine art. The story of Liu Haisu can be taken as a case of W/westernization in the early development of modern Chinese art and art education. Born in 1896 in Changzhou near Shanghai, Liu started to learn art at a young age. Around 1910, at the age of 14, he entered a private studio school in Shanghai to learn Western-style landscape painting. Two years later, dissatisfied with what was being taught, he quit and set up his own art school with a dozen followers and students. He registered the school in 1915 with the municipality of Shanghai as a formal art institute. In order to strengthen the Western art curriculum in his school, Liu traveled to Japan a few times between 1919 and 1927 to learn how the Japanese did so, even attending the inau-

guration ceremony of the Imperial University of Fine Art in Tokyo in October, 1920. In the meantime, he also wrote books introducing European artists to China, such as French realist Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875) and modernist Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Like many others, Liu Haisu started learning Western art with Realism, and then turned to modernist Expressionism. In 1929, he began traveling in Europe, from France and Italy to Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany. On that grand tour, he met and befriended some Modernist artists, including the great masters Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

In terms of artistic ideal, Liu Haisu was a radical avant-gardist of his time. He advocated Modernist rebellion against the established artistic convention. As said, he was the first art educator and artist in China who introduced live models, both male and female, for teaching in school studios. Traditionally, the Chinese way of teaching and learning art was basically to copy from the masters' works, not really to draw from life, as it was in the West. In the eyes of an average Chinese person of that time, drawing from a live model was a Western way of teaching and learning art, it was too foreign and too morally challenging, thus, too hard to put into practice. In 1914, when Liu hired a male model, the common Chinese were too conservative to accept and appreciate this. In a 1917 exhibition of art works from the school, a drawing of the male nude offended many gallery visitors and the public. Among them, the principal of a local girls' school called Liu Haisu «a traitor of art, a burglar of education». Not surprisingly, the rebellious young art educator enjoyed the labels in his entire life, and used «a traitor of art» as his favorite nickname. As expected, in 1920, Liu hired a female model to pose nude in the school studio. This was even more offensive and outrageous to the general mentality and Confucian morality. As a result, in 1925 some newspapers from the Shanghai media denounced Liu Haisu as being «as low as an animal», and some officials from the city called the French Consulate to arrest him since his school was located in the French Concession in Shanghai. Eventually, one

night, the school was attacked and ransacked by conservative burglars (Rong Hongjun, 2013, p. 37–44).

Aside from the above, in his Western-style painting, Liu Haisu blended Fauvist-like expressionist colour and free-hand Chinese calligraphic brushwork.

If we consider the historical pre-text and cultural con-text as external, the, the great divergence of Western-style art and Chinese-style art in the early 20th century is internal. Liu Haisu is a good case of this divergence which is framed in the external-internal context. In the same context, particularly in the internal textual context, what about the art world of Liu's time? In addition to the Western-educated artists, there are non-Western-educated artists, who continued using traditional Chinese media. No doubt, these artists also encountered Western influence and, in response, they made changes to their art in various aspects to different degrees. In other words, the Chinese-style art is further divided into die-hard traditional and reformatory non-traditional, though the borderline of the two is not absolutely clear. Art historians grouped these artists by locations. In the early 20th century, there were a few cultural and artistic centers across China; among them, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Canton) were the strongholds.

3. Fabula, Narration, and Tertiary Narrativization

The above art historical background plays the role of internal textual context, which conditions the whole central text, and also conditions each of its components individually: the fabula, narration, and tertiary narrativization.

In my study of modern Chinese art, the term “fabula” refers to the first-hand pre-narrated materials that are related to my discussion, such as the art works and documents about these works and their artists, and all kinds of supporting materials. “Secondary narration” refers to the narrated texts on the same or similar topics to

mine, which I use as references, such as the writings on modern Chinese art by other art historians and scholars. “Tertiary narrativization” refers to the main thesis of this essay, it is my reinterpretation of the development of modern Chinese art, which comes from my work on the first-hand fabula and is based on my critical reading of and responding to the secondary narrations.

In the dichotomy of fabula versus narration, the latter is also called *sjuzet* (or *syuzhet*) in Russian formalist literary theory, which was introduced to China in the 1980s along with French structuralist narrative theory. Chinese scholars have enthusiastically embraced French theories of modern narratology since then, and the theories of postmodern narratology since the end of the 20th century. Based on the two, in the early 21st century, Chinese scholars constructed both literary and general narratological theories. Among them, Zhao Yiheng demonstrated a strong sense of the interaction between fabula and narration in his book *A General Narratology* (2013) (Zhao Yiheng, 2013, pp. 140–1), especially with regard to the role of the author in the process of material selection.

Regarding selecting materials, according to Zhao Yiheng, narratologists take the author–reader difference as an issue of layer–division in narration, and generally distinguish two layers, namely, the untold story and the told story, with the latter coming from or being based on the former. Following a dazzling review of Western scholars’ opinions and Chinese scholars’ debates about how to divide the two layers, Zhao points out the insufficiency of two–layer division, and adds a third layer, naming it “secondary narrativization” after fabula and narration (Zhao Yiheng, 2013, pp. 106–8). However, since this narrativization is made by the reader of the narration, I would rather re–name it “tertiary narrativization”.

This re–naming is not a simple issue of naming a narrative component, but an issue of how to understand the narrative process. Firstly, to the author of the secondary narration, or the narrator, the process of his or her reading and selecting the first–hand fabula materials is a process of perceiving, receiving, and responding. Al-

though this is not an active “telling” process, but a passive “listening to” process, it is indeed a process of narrativization. This process of “listening to” is passively narrativized by the secondary narrator, otherwise, he or she would not be able to receive and select the first-hand materials. Therefore, I term this process “primary narrativization”. Then, secondly, based on what the narrator has received, he or she actively narrativizes the selected materials, i.e., “telling” a story about what has been selected as well as utilizing the selected materials to tell the story. I term this story-telling process “secondary narrativization”, it is basically equivalent to the common term “narration”. Finally, listening to, or reading this secondary narration, a reader like me has to passively narrativize what he or she receives, I term this process and the narrative text “tertiary narrativization”. To me, this is a very conscious process of narrativization, because this third narrative of mine is a meta-narrative of art history, which is not only about what to tell in a story of art, but also about how to tell the story. Thus, in this meta-narrative, I keep using the voice of the first person, “I”, for two reasons: one, I am writing a scholarly research book about the narrative of art history, telling how to tell the story of art, and two, in the meantime, this is also a teaching book, with which I tell students the story of Chinese art and how I tell it.

Since the progress from external pre-text to middle-ground context and then to the internal textual context is gradual, there is actually no clear-cut borderline between each of them. Relevantly, the role of the author in relation to the reader is relative too, depending on the different perspectives of the tertiary observer. Suppose, a narrator of the secondary narration should be the reader of the first-hand fabula; in any case, from my viewpoint of the tertiary observer, the reader becomes an author of the secondary narration because he or she makes the selection of first-hand materials for the secondary narration. Likewise, in the above narratives about pre-text and con-text, I was a reader when I selected data from the first-hand materials, and then I became a secondary narrator or author when I utilized those selected data and wrote down those narratives.

The departure point of the tertiary narrativization is the reading of the secondary narrations of other art historians, with critical thinking and narrativized response. Suppose there are many secondary stories about art, i.e., texts of art history, such as the one by Lin Xingyu which I mentioned in the Introduction of this book. In the terminology of Zhao Yiheng, these texts are narrated-texts, or *shuben* in Chinese, which tells how art has changed and developed in the course of history. For instance, Li Xingyu, in his narrative of Chinese art history, considers that it is Mao Zedong's thought that shaped the development of Chinese art in the 20th century. However, there is only one factual development of art which is the actual event (fabula) that ever happened, Zhao terms it pre-narrated text, or *di-ben* in Chinese (Zhao Yiheng, 2013, p. 23). To a story-teller of art, or an art historian, fabula refers to the pre-narrated story materials. In order to gain the first-hand materials for secondary storytelling, an art historian must do sufficient archaeological and archival work, field studies, library research, and internet research. The result of this work is the documented file, or data. Then, based on the data, this storyteller can write or tell a story about art history, hence, the secondary narrative discourse about the development of art.

However, things are not that simple. The complexity in storytelling is that even the same art historian can document his or her field-work and archival work differently with different tools and methods, such as written notes, photographs, videos, audios, and so forth. This is to say that the fabula can be presented and re-presented in various and varied media, and could be distorted in the documentation process. An even more complex problem is beyond media, it is the issue of interpretation, which is related to the perspective of the storyteller.

Who is a storyteller, what is his or her narrative identity, why does he or she apply a certain method in the process of documentation and presentation? In short, from what perspective does the art historian look at fabula and document data? Perspective decides,

largely, how the data is identified, selected, collected, stored, processed, packaged, distributed, utilized, and consumed.

Surely, this complicates the use of fabula in storytelling and further complicates the interpretations of it. Even worse, other storytellers can use the same fabula for data collection, but in completely different ways, and interpret the data differently, of course, for different purposes. In this scenario, a fabula story can be distorted, mutated, and also multiplied in the secondary narrations. Although there might be only one fabula, there are numerous narrations, and no wonder there are many written stories of the same art history. Then, which one tells the true story, and is there a true history of art?

This might be a false question and thus there would be no answer to it. However, the important issue is the relativity of where the storyteller stands. In my opinion, the relativity is found in both the division of fabula and narration, and in the dual identity of the narrator of art history as both author and reader. Importantly, whether or not a narrator is a data user or a data collector, he or she is *a* writer of art history, and not *the* writer of art history. It is crucial for an art historian to be aware of such relativity and to be aware of his or her relative position in practical writing and storytelling. Without knowing this relativity, the handling of data could cause a problem of factuality, and the written text, or narration, could be misleading.

It is at this point that possible misinterpretation in the secondary narration becomes critical, and reinterpretation in a reader's tertiary narrativization becomes necessary. In a way, reinterpretation is a response to the secondary narrator's interpretation.

With regard to the issue of relativity in the relationships of fabula and narration, I emphasize the fluid perspective, or a shifting point of view, that is, moving back and forth between narrator/author and narratee/reader, via narrative text. The fluidity of perspective is relevant to a crucial narratological notion, focalization in the tertiary narrativization. According to Zhao, this narrativization is not the author's or the storyteller's, but mainly the reader's. It is the

reader's reception of the secondary narration that decides his or her re-telling of the story with a re-processing of the first-hand fabula (*ibidem*).

The above discussion of fabula versus narration means to lead the previous pre-textual and con-textual narratives to the discussion of internal contextual narrative, i.e., the narrative of textual context, and further to the narrative of central text, and finally reach the main thesis of this essay. Still, the internal textual context works in accordance with, or directly frames and conditions, the change of Chinese art in the 20th century. With this understanding, I will then zoom in and focus on the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response, which has defined the course of the development of Chinese art in modern times.

4. The Tertiary Narrativization as a Grand Narrative

In my narrative model, context also works on the other end of the parentheses, the reader's end. Referring to the pre-narrated fabula and the narrated story, or narration, I assume the reader's position in reading both the first-hand fabula and the secondary narration (the relevant footnotes indicate the sources of those secondary narrations), and offer my own tertiary narrativization, from a grand narrative of Western influence to individual stories about the Chinese response. Although this essay is about Chinese art in the first half of the 20th century, for the historical sense of continuity, coherence, and entirety, my narrative will occasionally extend to the second half of the century when necessary.

4.1. Three Waves of Western Influence

Chronologically, there were three waves of Western influence on the development of Chinese art in the 20th century, and the first wave reached China before the Second World War. In the late 19th

century and early 20th century, when the Europeans discovered the decline of the Chinese empire (the Qing dynasty), the Chinese also discovered the coming of the Western powers. The mutual discoveries ushered the first wave of Western influence to China directly from Europe and indirectly from Japan. As has been mentioned, Western influence on Chinese art can be seen in two respects: realist and modernist. In the first half of the 20th century, in general, both were new to Chinese artists and art students, and the two became prevailing in China.

However, when the second wave of Western influence reached China, only realism enjoyed its triumph, with sole influence on the government-promoted “red art”. The second wave was an indirect one from the Soviet Union. From a Western point of view, the Soviet Union was not a part of the West, but to the Chinese eye it was. This was not only because of its geographical location in Eurasia, say, w/West of China, but also due to its cultural tradition, namely, the Soviet–Russian culture was rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition, and even Soviet Marxism originated in the West.

After the Second World War and a civil war, when the People’s Republic was established in 1949, Chinese artists embraced realist art, the Soviet version, which was called “red art” or Socialist Realism. From the 1950s through the mid–1980s Socialist Realist theory dominated Chinese culture, and Socialist Realist art dominated Chinese art. Realism was promoted in the Soviet Union, Eastern? Bloc, and Communist countries, as it was realistically and pragmatically used, according to Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), to serve the revolutionary machine. Due to the shared ideology of Marxism, China officially accepted the Soviet version of Socialist Realism as a political doctrine for art, and re-named it “The Integrated Method of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism”. In the meantime, Modernism was severely condemned and banned in China for its unrealistic nature and bourgeois/capitalist taste and ideology, as it was treated in a similar way in the Soviet Union.

Due to the “open policy” after the death of Mao (1893–1976), as discussed already, the third wave reached China in 1978 directly from the West, and the experimental avant-garde became the mainstream of art in the mid–1980s. This time the influence was from two sources, North America and Western Europe, and no longer realism, but modernism. The third wave was complex. Although Chinese culture and Chinese artists embraced modernism in the 1980s, in the West, the 1980s and 1990s were the era of postmodernism, no longer modernism. Although postmodern concept reached China along with the third wave in the mid–1980s, it was comprehended and accepted a decade later, only after Chinese intellectuals and artists completed their digestion of modernism. Then, at the end of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century, the Western concept of contemporary art reached China and conceptual art became the mainstream in the development of contemporary Chinese art today.

4.2. *Four Ways of Western Influence*

Then, how did Western influence find its way to China? Generally speaking, Western influence reached China in four ways. Firstly, Chinese students studied art in the West and then brought home Western ideas about art and W/western methods of art making. In the early 1870s, the Qing government started sending Chinese students to study abroad, mainly studying science and technology, hoping to use the new knowledge to modernize China. Chinese students first went to the United States in 1872, then, also to Europe in 1875, and then to Japan in 1896⁵. Soon after, the 1900 Boxer Rebellion and its defeat made the Qing government pay the Western powers for the damage and losses. However, they overpaid. In 1908 the American Congress decided to return the overpayment to China on condition that the money should be used for education, including bringing Chinese students to the United States to study science

5. For detailed elaboration on this topic, see Mayching Kao, 1998, pp. 146, 155.

and technology. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, more Chinese art students started traveling abroad, studying both Western classical art and modern art, and brought back to China what they acquired. Before the Second World War, most of the Western-trained artists became educators, and some became the pioneers in modernizing the Chinese art education system, such as Xu Beihong (1895–1953) who promoted realist art and art education in China, and Liu Haisu who promoted M/modernism.

Secondly, from the early 20th century, Western art professionals traveled to China and taught art there, mostly in the Yangzi delta region. One important figure of this kind was American abstract painter Mark Tobey (1890–1976) who taught art in the mid-1930s in a newly established art institute in Hangzhou⁶. Although Tobey's teaching career in China was short, his influence remained, since he was a Zen practitioner, and his abstract painting had much to do with the art of Chinese calligraphy, which posed no big difficulty for Chinese students and artists alike to appreciate and accept. In the first half of the 20th century, the new art institutions in China were mostly founded on Western concepts about art and art education, thus, Western art educators, not only from the United States but also from France and other Western European countries, became a part of the main force in teaching, along with Western-trained Japanese and Chinese art teachers.

Thirdly, Western publications on art were translated and published in China, and enjoyed an enthusiastic welcome from Chinese readers. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars and artists also wrote books and essays on Western art history, theory, and techniques, introducing new concepts, forms, and methods of Western art to Chinese artists and students. As for translations, although there is no precise date for the first Chinese translation of Western publications on art, the earliest book review in Chinese on a teaching book translated from English was published in 1902 (Mayching Kao, 1998, p. 148). Among the early Chinese translations on art, a popular teaching

6. For details about Mark Tobey's teaching in China, see Clarke, 2011, p. 85.

book of Western art history is worth mentioning. It is a survey of the development of Western art from its beginning through the 19th century, entitled *Apollo: an Illustrated Manual of the History of Art throughout the Ages* (1907) by French art historian Salomon Reinach (1858–1932). It was translated by Li Puyuan (1901–1956), a Chinese art historian and art professor in Hangzhou, and first published by Shanghai Commercial Press in 1937. This book became an instant classic for scholars and students of art in China. Due to its importance in spreading Western influence and its popularity in the market, the translation was re-printed several times soon after. The latest edition of the same translation was re-printed in Shanghai in 2004, as a token of nostalgia for early Western influence and its historical importance.

Last but not least, exhibitions of Western art also had a direct influence in China more immediately and substantially. In the first half of the 20th century, art exhibitions from the West were relatively rare and the works were not masterpieces. In the second half of the 20th century, before 1978, it was not easy for artists and art scholars in China to see original Western art, except some exhibitions of Soviet and Russian art. Li Yu (1915–2010), a renowned art historian and professor of art history in Shenyang, confessed in the “Postscript” of his teaching book *A Concise History of Western Art* (1980) that he had never stepped foot out of China and never visited any art museums in the West, let alone appreciating original Western art works (Li Yu 1980). After a long ban on Western art in China from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, the first Western art exhibition eventually went to China in 1979. That was the French realist Barbizon School and Impressionist exposition named “Exhibition of Nineteenth Century French Rural Landscape Painting” held in the Chinese National Gallery in Beijing, which brought to China a great number of landscape masterpieces by the 19th century masters, including Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875), Claude Monet (1840–1926), and Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), to name a few. Although that exhibition was not a M/modernist one,

it instantly caused a sensation among Chinese artists and museum goers since it was the first time in the second half of the 20th century that Chinese people finally had a chance to see original Western art, not printed reproductions.

Subsequently, Modernist and p/Postmodernist exhibitions brought the latest developments in Western art to China. One of them was the 1985 exhibition of American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). To Chinese artists, art students, and art scholars, Rauschenberg's art was shocking and inspiring. Whether they understood it or not, whether they felt outraged or encouraged, the Chinese enthusiastically embraced Western art via exhibitions, often with bewilderment and disorientation, frustration and ecstasy. At that time, they were not yet intellectually prepared for the new forms and concepts of radical cutting-edge Western art.

4.3. *Four Generations of Chinese Response*

How has Western influence been received and responded to in China? Chinese artists throughout the past century can be broadly divided into four generations. The first generation artists were Western educated, either in the West, Japan or at home. Whether pro-Realist or pro-Modernist, in the first half of the 20th century the artists of the first generation formed the main force of Westernization in the Chinese art world, and many of them became the founders of modern art education in China, such as Liu Haisu and Xu Beihong.

The second generation artists were those who, in the 1950s and 1960s, received Socialist Realist education and training in the Soviet Union and at home. Due to Communist ideology, those artists regarded art as a mirror to reflect revolutionary history and socialist reality, and a tool to promote revolutionary ideology. Their art was commonly political and illustrative, with bright colours, and thus those artists gained the label “red artists”.

The third generation of artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s were mostly students of the second generation teachers. They car-

ried on the Socialist Realist doctrine from their teachers and in the meantime also embraced the influence of Realist art from the West. However, while their teachers glorified what happened in the history of the revolution with red art, these students told stories with their Realist art about the suffering of the ordinary people and denounced what had happened to them during the past decades. Their art, thus, gained the name “scar art”, which was no longer bright but sentimental with gloomy colours.

The fourth generation from the 1980s and 1990s were mostly home trained Modernist avant-gardists. Although some of them were comrades and friends of the third generation artists, they broke away from the third and the second generations, and did not connect themselves to the first generation either. The artists of the fourth generation spent more than 10 years from 1978 to 1989 experimenting, or imitating actually, what Western Modernist artists had experimented in the past one hundred years, and tried to make art works in similar manners and styles to almost all the Modernist “-isms”. With such experiments, the artists of this generation pushed Chinese art to the Postmodern era in the late 1990s, and to the era of contemporary art in the early 21st century, catching up eventually with the development of art in the West.

4.4. *The Great Divergence and Two Sub-Splits*

Throughout modern times, under Western influence, some artists have carried on the heritage of traditional Chinese art, whereas others have showed no interest in this heritage but followed the way of Western art. As said before, the development of Chinese art in the modern era has run with two parallel mainstreams, the traditional Chinese-style art and Western-style art. This is the great divergence of Chinese art throughout modern times, which happened to almost all the Chinese artists of the four generations, though some of the fourth generation artists intend to integrate the two mainstreams.

Why was there such a great divergence, what was the significance behind this divergence? The life-likeness of Western Realist art demonstrated its scientific nature in the artist's observation and representation of the real world in three dimensions and spatial depth, which was based on the scientific knowledge of perspective and anatomy of the human body. To some young artists of the early 20th century, such a scientific nature was precisely what traditional Chinese art was lacking, the visual sense of three dimensions and spatial depth, as well as the knowledge of perspective and human anatomy. Importantly, the scientific nature is the spirit of Mr. S⁷ in the modernization process of Chinese art. To the young artists, attacking traditional art and advocating Western-style art showcased their attitude towards art in the new era. In the meantime, to some other artists, defending traditional Chinese art also showcased their attitude towards the artistic change. In the West, some scholars today consider that traditional Chinese painting had already lost its vitality in the early 20th century, and became merely a play of skills (Sullivan, 1979, p. 26). Therefore, Western-style art gained a chance to fill the vacuum and occupied half of the art world in China. Indeed, echoing the call for Mr. S in the early 20th century, the majority of Chinese scholars also considered that what Chinese art needed in the new century was science and scientism. This need was practical and pragmatic. As a Chinese art historian in the United States observed, to many of the young artists in the early 20th century, "modern art and Western art were synonymous; and they believed that, by adopting Western forms, China might create an art in keeping with its new domestic and international situation" (Kuiyi Shen, 1998, p. 172). In China, scholars are mostly in agreement with this opinion. An art historian and critic traditionalism and scientism as diametrically opposed, and considered that, in the early 20th century, the advocacy of the scientific nature of art was an ideological issue,

7. In the New Culture Movement in China, the term "Mr. S" stands for new knowledge of science and technology from the West.

in line with the political reform and social change of that time (Lu Peng, 2006, p. 119).

To some artists, the great divergence between traditional Chinese-style art and Western-style art is a big issue, they follow one and ignore the other. To others, this is not a big issue, they learn both, and they are able to work in both ways. In the early 20th century, some young artists first learned traditional Chinese painting at home, and then went abroad to learn Western art. Thus, they were able to take the best from both, and put the two together as a bold experiment.

Following the mainstream of Chinese-style art, the traditional painters continued using old-fashioned media. Some of them can be called fundamentalists, since they strictly followed the old way of painting, such as the methods of using ink and water, and the methods of using calligraphic lines, strokes, and wash. Unlike the conservative fundamentalists, some artists were more open-minded, willing to try new media, new forms, and new ideas in their work, and thus making their art different, for instance through the use of shading. This is a sub-split in the mainstream of Chinese-style painting. In the first half of the 20th century artistic practice, using shades to create the sense of three dimensions and spatial depth was a new experiment in figure painting, landscape painting, and still-life painting. This kind of experiment eventually changed the face of Chinese painting, and made it different from the age-old tradition.

Meanwhile, following the mainstream of Western-style art, the Western-minded artists transplanted Western art into China and started new experiments. The so-called Western-style painting is a rather broad term, referring to oil painting, water colours, gouache, and even prints, chiaroscuro drawings, sketches, cartoons, and the like. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the Western mainstream in Chinese art also experienced a sub-split between the old Realist tradition and the new Modernist fashion. Before the end of the Second World War, some of the Western-style artists followed Realism, and some followed mModernism. For political-

ideological reasons, in the second half of the 20th century, Western Realist tradition prevailed in China, until the 1980s when Modernist art revived. Speaking of the new system of art education in China, whether following the Realist tradition or the Modernist trend, art students were required to receive the same basic training of skills and techniques as in the old times, which came from the Italian Realist tradition of Renaissance craftsmanship in fine art.

Nevertheless, after Modernism, since the Western influence of Postmodernism and then the influence of contemporary art reached China at the turn of the 21st century, all the above divergences and sub-splits have no longer mattered. Since the mainstream of contemporary art is conceptual, any materials and media, any techniques and styles, and any forms and ideas are workable. Thus far, as far as the mainstream is concerned, the once divided Chinese art has reunited in the name of contemporary art, which is now an important part of international art.

4.5. *Reframing the Sub-Split in Chinese-style Art*

The tertiary narrativization is a narrative of the reader, who re-frames the narrative centrepiece, i.e., the central text, for the main thesis. At this point, I must come back to an earlier issue of this essay, the narrative process in the parentheses of my narrative model. Earlier, I approached the central text from the outside in, from the left side of the parentheses. Now, as a reader, I approach the central text still from the outside in, but from the right side of the parentheses, from the reader's point of view. With this approach, I make use of the interpretive notion of Mieke Bal about reading.

In her essay "Reading Art?" Bal takes "frame" as a contextual extension of an image, involving a role-change between the author and the reader who deconstructs the original frame of the picture and places it in another frame. This is relevant to my re-interpretive process of tertiary narrativization. According to Bal, re-framing helps reinterpretation:

[S]imply because without the processing of signs into syntactic chains that resonate against the backdrop of a frame of reference an image cannot yield meaning. But endorsement of this basic principle, that is, awareness of the act of reading and the place of these factors in that act, helps to come to terms with the difficulty of being confronted... with the particular imagery that surrounds us and seems to impose its view — of us, on us. And, similarly, with the pressure that a simplistic view of “history” puts on us to accept “that’s the way things are” in our culture. (Bal, 2004, pp. 298–9)

To Bal, “reframing” is to de-frame a narrative text first, and then re-frame it in another frame for a new interpretation from the reader’s perspective. Reframing is a border-crossing reinterpretation. On the one hand, frame is similar to external backdrop, and on the other, it is also similar to internal “syntactic chains” within a book-page. Such shifting and ambiguous position of the frame strengthens the significance of reframing, and makes it meaningful.

With the act of re-framing in mind, I will now look at the narrated Lingnan School again, and see how it showcases Western influence on traditional Chinese painting. Firstly, as for the way of creating art, the Lingnan School artists promoted the idea of direct observation and life-sketching, just as the plein-air French Impressionists did (though Chinese artists in ancient times did the same), rather than merely copying and imitating the old masters, as the traditional Chinese artists did for centuries. Thus, the art of the Lingnan School was more realistic and even naturalistic. Gao Jianfu’s depiction of a garden scene in the painting *Pumpkin* (1940s, collection unknown) is illustrative in this respect. The artist’s treatment of the pumpkin, along with vines, ivy, leaves and flowers, as well as the garden fence, was based on his personal observation and sketching from life. Thus, he made the garden scene more lifelike, with a feeling of immediacy and intimacy. In particular, his depiction of the roundness of the pumpkin with a gray tonal value ranging from a bright highlight to a dark shade created a visual illusion of three dimensions, just like

a still-life drawing done with the Western method of chiaroscuro. The traditional way of making a Chinese painting usually follows a certain formula in depicting objects, like the way in which an old master painted bamboo or trees. Gao Jianfu did not follow a formula but followed his objective observation, and hence developed his own method of realist depiction. In the West, such a realist method was rooted in Renaissance art, but it was new to Chinese art for its scientific accuracy in observation and depiction.

Secondly, the subject matters in the works of the Lingnan School artists were not only traditional, such as mountains, waters, birds, and flowers, but also modern, such as cars, airplanes, and tanks, which had never been seen before in Chinese art. Thirdly, as previously discussed when speaking of the techniques of colouring and shading, traditional literati painters preferred monotone, or simple colour with no shades.

Of course, one could argue that the early Qing artist Gong Xian (1618–1689) used shading in his treatment of the mountains and valleys for three dimensions and spatial depth, and thus his landscapes looked like Italian chiaroscuro drawings. However, examining Gong Xian's shading, one might feel that the light unnatural, it comes from everywhere and nowhere. Gong Xian seemed to have no sense of the source and direction of lighting which is very crucial to realistic depiction in Western art, although he may have learned something from European monochrome etching, which was brought to the churches in his hometown Nanjing at that time by Western missionaries. However, according to an American scholar of Chinese art history, the church etching is just a speculation with no documents to prove it (Cahill 1982, p. 172). Although Gong Xian developed his technique of "Dark Gong" and "Light Gong", he did not grasp the key of Western realistic representation with regard to lighting and shading.

As aforementioned, there is a sub-split within Chinese-style art, namely, the conservative traditional artists and open-minded reformers, comparable to the sub-split of Realists and Modernists

within Western-style art. However, there is a twist: toward the late 19th century, some Western Realist artists enjoyed Oriental subjects and Far-Eastern methods of flatness in colouring, such as the Neo-Classical and early Modern artists who enjoyed Chinoiserie and Japonisme. Then, in the early 20th century, some Modernists in the West were interested in the spirituality in traditional Chinese art, such as Mark Tobey who admired the art of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy which was spiritually inspiring to his abstract painting.

This twist complicates the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response, particularly making the relation of traditional Chinese-style art and modern Western-style art confusing. Chen Hengque is a case of this kind in figure painting.

As I discussed earlier, Chen Hengque defended traditional literati painting and emphasized its spirituality. Chen is confusingly dual and contradictory: he promoted traditional Chinese literati art, while at the same time seeming to be a Western-style Modernist. According to him, Western Realist art was far from being spiritual, and Modernist art was more spiritual. Chen himself was an artist. In his figure painting, *Viewing Paintings* (1918, Palace Museum, Beijing), he applied ink and light colours on rice paper to depict groups of figures, both Chinese in traditional scholar-official clothes and gentry robes and foreigners in Western coats. The artist purposefully avoided depicting figures with three dimensional tones and avoided creating spatial depth. Instead, his painting is flat, with no lighting and shading, just as the old masters made figure paintings in ancient times. Chen's painting divulged a sarcastic and caricatured "spirit" which, in a way, made this painting look like the work of the early 20th century German Expressionist George Grosz (1893–1955), although Chen's painting was made at least a decade or two before Grosz. In this case, spirituality was related to the artist's critical and satirical attitude towards what he depicted and related to his ideas about art. In Chen's opinion, spirituality was the common nature shared by traditional Chinese literati art and Western Modernist art, which was different from scientific and objective Realist art.

Contrary to Chen's modernist inclination, the embracing of Western Realism in the first half of the 20th century was best demonstrated in Jiang Zhaohe's (1904–1986) figure painting. Jiang was born in Sichuan, and studied Western art in Shanghai in the 1920s while working as a commercial artist for some department stores. He was a self-taught artist and did not graduate from any formal art school with an academic degree. Due to his excellence in making art, he was appreciated and helped by Xu Beihong, upon Xu's return from France. In the late 1920s, on Xu's recommendation, Jiang Zhaohe was hired to teach art at the Central University in Nanjing and art schools in Shanghai. Eventually, he became a professor at Peking University in Beijing, where Xu Beihong headed the art faculty, and then, in the mid-20th century, he became a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Art, where Xu was the first president.

Jiang followed Western Realism in art making. Viewing his *Self-Portrait* (1932, private collection) with charcoal we can see that he understood how to use lighting and shading to produce a portrait with a sense of roundness. Although it was a small portrait, we can also see that he had acquired sufficient knowledge about human anatomy and linear perspective. In short, he mastered the skills and techniques of capturing likeness that were developed by the European masters during the Renaissance. An oil portrait of the same year further demonstrated Jiang's excellent command of Western media, as well as his understanding of how to use colour in a European academic manner along with lighting and shading.

With knowledge of Western art, Jiang Zhaohe turned to traditional Chinese materials and media, using brushes to apply ink, water, and light colour on rice paper. This kind of portraiture was comparable to Western portraiture in a number of ways. Firstly, like mid-19th century French Realists, he painted what he directly saw; his figure paintings were based on close observation and life-sketching. On the contrary, in traditional Chinese painting, particularly in literati painting, the images of subject matters are ideal, partially based on imitating old masters and partially coming from memory

and imagination. Secondly, in a sketchy portrait of a newspaper boy, *Good News* (1936, private collection), Jiang stressed less the lines that drew human contour and shape, but stressed more the mass that rendered the roundness of the figure and face with shades. Thirdly, likeness is the key to his realist portraiture. In a portrait with traditional Chinese media, *Portrait of John Leighton Stuart, President of Peking University* (1938, collection unknown), he went even further to employ the chiaroscuro method for resemblance and facial details of the sitter. Finally, his well-known anti-war painting, the monumental work *Refugees* (1943, Chinese National Gallery of Art, Beijing) in the traditional format of hand scroll with traditional media, was made in the Western way, in terms of human anatomy, perspective, and shading, etc. Nonetheless, in terms of using lines for the contours of human shapes, this painting was also made in the Chinese way.

Jiang Zhaohe's *Refugees* realistically depicted the suffering of ordinary Chinese people, who were forced to be on the run by the Japanese invasion of China during the Second World War. In 1944 this anti-war painting was sent to a show in Japanese occupied Shanghai, and exhibited in the French Concession. The Japanese military heard about Jiang's *Refugees* and sent a representative to the exhibition to "borrow" it. Expectedly or not, the Japanese destroyed half of this borrowed long scroll, and did not return the other half. In 1953, about a decade after going missing, the surviving half was recovered in a warehouse in Shanghai, badly damaged. Today, the destroyed half has survived in a black-and-white photograph, and the damaged half was donated to the Chinese National Gallery of Art in Beijing by Jiang's wife in the late 1990s.

This true story could be metaphorical. The first wave of Western influence on the development of Chinese art came to an end due to the Second World War, as did the process of modernizing China. Indeed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the success of Westernization in Japan greatly inspired Chinese intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary people, and pushed forward modernization in China.

However, it was also Japan that started the Second World War in Asia and thus stopped the Westernization process in China.

Regarding Western influence and Chinese response, in addition to the split and sub-splits, Gao Jianfu employed Chinese media to handle Western forms and ideas, and so did Jiang Zhaohe. However, Jiang went one step further: in order to create a visual illusion for three dimensions and spatial depth on a two-dimensional picture surface, besides Chinese media he also employed both Chinese and Western methods, such as the use of brush lines for contour, and the use of shades for roundness. As a result, when looking at Jiang's work from afar, his painting is Western, and when getting closer, his painting turns out to be Chinese.

Although the fusion of the Chinese and Western methods in making art started before Jiang Zhaohe, he was probably, in this regard, one of the most successful artists in the first half of the 20th century. His success laid the foundation for the Westernization of traditional Chinese painting, and had a great lasting impact on later generations of artists who carried on similar experiments in modernizing traditional Chinese painting.

5. Modernist Painting, Focalizing the Sub-Split of Western-Style Art

Following the above reframing and focused discussion of the sub-split in the mainstream of Chinese-style art, I will now reframe the topic of the sub-split in the mainstream of Western-style art and focalize on an individual artist. This is a continuation of moving in from the internal contextual narrative to the textual narrative, and a continuation of zooming-in from external focalization to internal focalization, as well as going back and forth between the two focalizing positions. When I gave the grand narrative in the above, I was an external focalizer, describing the flow of mainstreams from an outsider's point of view, whereas in the following pages when I

describe my personal experience viewing a specific artwork from an insider's point of view, my narrative identity has changed from an external focalizer to an internal focalizer.

As previously discussed, the central text in my narrative model consists of three parts: the pre-narrated first-hand fabula materials, the narrated secondary texts, or narration, and the tertiary narrativization. From the internal focalizer's point of view, as a reader, I filter out the un-wanted first-hand materials, re-read the secondary narration, and focus on the chosen individual artist for my own story and reinterpretation, i.e., my tertiary narrativization. Why and how to make the choice? This is a subjective issue pertinent to my topic, method, and viewpoint. In other words, my point of view is subjective and my personal opinion could be subjective too. To a certain extent, the main thesis of this essay is somewhat subjective since it comes from my personal study. This study is a process of constructing my narrative subjectivity, along with the process of presenting my tertiary narrativization. Relevantly, on the topic of subjective internal focalization, Mieke Bal remarks:

[W]henver events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain *vision*. A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether "real" historical facts are concerned or fictional events. This slanted, or why not say the word, subjective nature of storytelling is inevitable, and denying it constitutes in my mind a dubious political act. (Bal, 2009, p. 145)

The inevitable subjective choice demonstrates the nature of focalization and its filtering process, not the nature of narration alone, since the subjective nature in the shift of focus is determined by the narrator. As Bal defines afterwards, «[f]ocalization is, then, the relation between the vision and that which is "seen", perceived» (*ibidem*). To me, this is the relation between who sees and what is to be seen, and there is a distance between the two, which is a subjective

space for shifting position from external focalizer to internal focalizer, and vice versa.

In my case, I am indeed the narrator of my tertiary narrativization, — I am an insider–character in this narrativization and also an outsider who reads and re–reads the secondary narration and selects the first–hand fabula materials. Since I will tell the story of my personal experience of seeing Western–style Modernist Chinese art, I must move back and forth between the standpoints of outsider and insider, shift from the perspective of an external focalization to that of an internal focalization. On the one hand, this is the construction of my narrative subjectivity in the focalizing process, and on the other, this is not only about the focalizer and storyteller, but also about what has been focalized and what is being told. In this regard, Bal observes:

Therefore, two possibilities exist: if a narrative begins in external focalization and changes to internal focalization, it is not necessarily the focalizer who changes; the change may equally well be in the focalized, with the character “seen from within” being not the subject but the object of the focalizing. (Bal, 2006, p. 18)

As far as I am concerned, the internal focalizer can be a character in the tertiary story while the external one can be the story teller. Playing the double roles of reader and focalizer, in this essay, I continue focalizing on, and narrowing down to, my personal experience of viewing and interpreting Western–style Modernist Chinese art, and reframe the first–wave Western influence and Chinese response in my tertiary narrativization.

Thus, in the following story, I am an internal focalizer first because I am a character in the story, telling what I saw from my personal perspective of viewing Chinese Modernist art. Then, I become an external focalizer because I am not really the focused one, rather, I will tell what I saw. I consider that this is a crucial difference between

the literary narrative in fiction and the non-fictional narrative of art history.

First, to be a character in my story, I speak in the voice of the first person, “I”. My story took place in New York City on a spring day in 1998 when I was in the Guggenheim Museum of Art, viewing artworks at the exhibition “A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China” in the museum’s SoHo location in lower Manhattan. In the second of the four sections of the exhibition, “The Modernist Generations: 1920–1950”, I was struck by a modest-sized portrait of a little girl by a female artist named Guan Zilan (1903–1986).

“This is Matisse”... I almost jumped up at the artist’s *Portrait of Miss L* (1929, Chinese National Art Gallery, Beijing). I was struck not only because the portrait looked like a work by the French Fauvist artist Henri Matisse, but mainly because it had been painted by a Chinese artist in 1929. Using Roland Barthes’ word, I was struck by two puncta: who (Chinese artist) and when (1929). I had not known Guan Zilan before, because Western-style Modernist Chinese art was forbidden in China from the 1950s through to the 1980s and I had had no chance to see early works of Chinese Modernist art in the 1990s since I left China for Canada and the United States on the very last day of 1990. Therefore, I could not believe what I saw: a Chinese artist painting like Matisse in a time as early as 1929, which was only 25 years after Matisse painted the Fauvist portrait of his wife, *A Portrait of Madam Matisse* (1905) and *Woman in a Hat* (1905). Furthermore, Matisse continued painting Fauvist portraiture in the 1910s through 1920s and even in the 1930s at the same time as Guan Zilan. This is to say that, in viewing Guan Zilan’s painting, I was struck by the fact that the development of Chinese Modernist art in the first half of the 20th century was not too far behind its Western forerunner.

Guan Zilan is not a leading Western-style artist in the early 20th century, and some widely read art history books do not even mention her, including the critically-acclaimed art history book *A Histo-*

ry of *Modern Chinese Art* (1986) by Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan, which was the first one about modern Chinese art published after the Realist dominated forbidden era. In the terminology of narratology, this book is a secondary narration of modern Chinese art, and the authors tell the story of the development of modern Chinese art under the Western influence. In the chapter on the art of the 1920s through 1940s, the authors discuss some leading artists who mostly studied Western Modernist art in Europe or Japan, such as Guan Liang (1900–1986), Ni Yide (1901–1970), Situ Qiao (1902–1958), Lu Sibai (1905–1973), Pang Xunqin (1906–1985), and Wu Zuoren (1908–1997), but no mention of Guan Zilan. In the same chapter, the authors even discuss some female artists in the same line, such as Pan Yuliang (1895–1977), Fang Junbi (1898–1986), and Sun Duoci (1913–1975) (Zhang Shaoxia, Li Xiaoshan, 1986, pp. 122–38), but no Guan Zilan either.

In another well-received art history book of 1240 pages, *A History of Art in Twentieth Century China* (2006), by Lu Peng, and published by Beijing University Press, Guan Zilan is mentioned by name only, without any discussion. In the West, the situation is a little better. In a recent art history book with a 300-page main text, *The Art of Modern China* (2012), by Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, and published by the University of California Press, Guan Zilan is given one page in length in a discussion, though placed on the very last page of the chapter on Chinese art of the 1920s.

Of course, the above secondary narrative art history books were involved with the narratological issues of material selection and focalization filtering. As an internal reader of the first-hand materials, such as the painting by Guan Zilan, and an external reader of the secondary narrations, I value the importance of Guan Zilan for my tertiary narrativization since this artist showcased how the first generation Chinese artists responded to the Western influence, especially the influence of Western Modernist art. For my narrative, I read 20th century Chinese art beyond the above books of secondary narration, and reached the first-hand fabula, i.e., the 1998 New York

exhibition, as well as other materials. In the Guggenheim Museum SoHo gallery, I played the role of an internal focalizer and focused on Guan Zilan, among other artists, and selected relevant first-hand materials for my collection of narrative data.

Born in a wealthy family in the textile business in Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century, Guan received both traditional Chinese education (Confucian teaching) and modern Western education at a young age, and fell in love with Western art when she was a teenager. In her mid-teens she entered a girls' school of art and then enrolled in the Chinese Art Institute (*Zhonghua Yishu Daxue*) in Shanghai, studied painting in the Department of Western-Style Art, and graduated in 1927 with distinction at the age of 24. She hoped to continue her study of art in France, but her teacher Cheng Baoyi (1893–1945), a famous Western-style painter, encouraged her to study Western art in Japan for a certain pragmatic reason.

Guan went to Japan the same year and studied Western art at Tokyo Culture University where she had direct access to some original artworks by European masters and studied Western art history as well. During her three years of learning art in Japan, she followed Modernist instructors. Among them, two were most influential, Arishima Ikuma (1882–1974) and Okaga Kiden (1892–1972), who both studied art in France. The former was interested in the art of Paul Cézanne and the latter studied Fauvist art under the direct guidance of Henri Matisse. Needless to say, Guan Zilan's fascination with Matisse is directly related to her Japanese mentors.

Upon returning to China in 1930, Guan Zilan became an art teacher in a Shanghai art institute, where she continued her Fauvist practice to the end of the 1940s. From the 1950s through to the 1960s, under realist rule, she somehow tried realist painting but gave up soon after. Then, she gradually stopped painting from the mid-1960s for political reasons when the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) started.

Inside the Guggenheim Museum, as I mentioned, I played the role of an internal focalizer; outside the museum, I played the role

of an external focalizer searching archives and selecting first-hand fabula materials in libraries and on the Web. In both internal and external positions, I focused on certain relevant issues with regard to Modernist influence from the West and the Chinese response to it. Selecting and utilizing the selected data for my tertiary narrativization, I am now focalizing on two issues. First, Guan Zilan's Japanese mentors were Western-style Modernists, who studied Modernist art in France; second, she was loyal to her faith in Western Modernist art, and she preferred to give up painting completely rather than convert to being a realist.

Although Guan Zilan did not have direct contact with Matisse, I regard her artistic connection to the French master as direct, not only because one of her closest Japanese mentors was a disciple of the great master, but mainly because of the striking features common to the Fauvist paintings of both Guan Zilan and Matisse: exuberant use of strong colour and bold brushstrokes in capturing human sentiment.

Comparing the two artists at a formal level, they were both very masculine in handling brushwork and giving up superficial subtlety in colouring and shading. Even on the faces of women's portraits, they both applied patches of raw pigments with less blending but stronger contrast, for example, juxtaposing red and blue, with no softness in between. This is a characteristic of Matisse's portraiture when he was in his thirties, which continued into the next two decades in the 1910s and 1920s. Even in the 1930s some of Matisse's figure paintings still featured the same or similar characteristics until he moved towards simplification, abstraction, and flatness in the 1940s. As I observed, the two artists made portraits in a similar way at the same time.

At the aesthetic level, Guan Zilan and Matisse have much more in common. Although Matisse was a mature man in his mid-thirties when he painted the portraits of his wife and other sitters, his art was fairly feminine in a certain way; he captured the subtlety and nuances of women's facial expressions, such as inwardness and vague

melancholia in the portraits *Woman in a Hat* (1905) and *Girl with a Black Cat* (1910). I suspect, though I do not have material proof, that Guan Zilan was inspired by these paintings when she painted her 1927 *Portrait of Miss L.* since this portrait is strikingly similar not only in brushwork and colouring but also in posture and mood to Matisse's.

At a spiritual level, Matisse was rebellious in art making, and so was Guan Zilan. Some readers may have difficulty imagining a well-educated and well-cultivated, elegant young lady like Guan Zilan producing the rough-looking and even coarse-looking portrait paintings. Interestingly, when Guan Zilan held shows and exhibitions in Tokyo, Kobe, Shanghai, and other places in Japan and China, the local media always praised not only her art but also her beauty and elegance. Yes, looking at photographs of Guan Zilan, I must admit that she is a very beautiful young lady with charm and style. However, is her beauty relevant to her art? If it is, then, why and how? At this point, I would leave the possible answers to my readers. A fine, well-mannered, elegant young lady, Guan Zilan was also rebellious in art making, not in the way of Matisse who rebelled against his early education in Realist art, but in her own way: she chose to give up painting completely in order to reject government imposed Realism later in her artistic career. The issue of the restrained feminine rebellious spirit of Guan Zilan actually goes beyond the spiritual level, it reaches the ideological level.

Aside from the age difference, is there a gender difference between female artist Guan Zilan and male artist Matisse with regard to painting portraits? According to Mieke Bal, if there is a difference, it could be relevant to the notion of focalization. In her study of the biblical motif of Susanna and two elders in the paintings by male artist Rembrandt (1606–1669) and female artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c. 1656), Bal takes the different gazes in their paintings as a feminist ideological issue (Bal, 1991, p. 141). According to Bal, playing the role of internal focalizer in Gentileschi's painting, Susanna avoids eye contact with the two elders in the painting and also

avoids eye contact with art viewers outside the painting. However, Bal observes, in Rembrandt's painting, Susanna only avoids eye contact with the elders in the painting, but has a visual communication with art viewers outside the painting. On the same lines, I compared portraits by Guan Zilan and Matisse, and found a similar gender difference: in Matisse's portrait of his wife, the gaze of Madame Matisse is inward and also outward, communicating with her painter/husband and viewers outside the painting, whereas the gaze of the little girl in Guan Zilan's portrait is dubiously inward, with no communication with the viewers outside the painting.

Thinking at the ideological level, I would like to examine the significance of gender difference and similarity in the two portraits. I do not think this is a mere feminist issue in a postmodern sense, nor in the sense of present cultural studies. From a reader's point of view, I consider it an ideological issue about the main thesis of this essay, the ideology in the issue of Western influence and Chinese response: Guan Zilan followed Matisse directly at the above three levels, though with certain revisions, and now at the fourth level of ideology, she, as a female artist with Asian femininity of Confucian restraints, is shy about having direct contact with the influence of and pressure from her precursor. The shyness is represented by the little girl's inwardness. Indeed, sometimes, Western influence is intimidating to a certain extent, which somehow causes anxiety.

In addition to portraiture and figure painting, the similarity at the above four levels between Guan Zilan and Matisse is also found in their landscape and still-life paintings. Did Guan Zilan imitate Matisse? Yes, I believe so. Generally, imitation is an effective way for a student to learn from his or her mentors, and specifically, in the tradition of Chinese art education, this is an old way of how a disciple learns from his or her masters. As previously mentioned, Guan Zilan received traditional Chinese education at a young age before she turned to Western education. As a personal response to Western influence, particularly to the influence of the Western Modernist art of Fauvism, Guan did not stay in line with traditional Chinese-style

painting, but embraced Western-style painting. Meanwhile, she also rebelled against Western Realist art, being in favour of Western Modernist art, just like her Japanese mentors.

Certainly, I am aware that Guan Zilan is not a leading Modernist painter in the first half of the 20th century, but why have I discussed her and her art at length? The reason is precisely because Guan Zilan is not a leading artist but above average, and thus her case could represent more common artists in her line — the line of Western-style art, and the line of Modernist art. Viewing Guan Zilan's Fauvist art, I can play the role of internal focalizer and thus, by discussing her case at length, I can focalize on the central issue of this essay: the great divergence between Chinese-style art and Western-style art, and the sub-split between Western Modernist art and Realist art. Matisse received classical studio training in Realist art when he was in his twenties, and so did Guan Zilan at the same age; both subsequently found Modernism and embraced it forever. Speaking from an art historian's point of view, this is the cross-cultural historicity of Guan Zilan's art, this is the historical value of her case, this is my focalization when I discuss this artist and these are the political as well as artistic issues of the Chinese response to Western influence.

Conclusion: The Main Thesis and the Anxiety of Identity

At the beginning of this essay, in order to initiate my discussion of the importance of context to the development of modern Chinese art and narratology for art history, I presented my narrative model which was previously elaborated in the Introduction. Then, throughout this essay, along with my discussion of the development of Chinese art in the first half of the 20th century, I further developed this narrative model by enriching three components. Firstly, I enriched the contextual details, for instance, discerning between external context and internal context. Secondly, within the domain of external context, I distinguished between historical pre-text and

cultural con-text, and within the internal context, I differentiated the textual context from the central text. Thirdly, within the domain of central text, I described fabula, narration, and tertiary narrativization. Thus, concluding this essay, I now present the enriched and updated narrative model:

External Context (Historical Pre-Text → Cultural Con-Text) → Internal
Context (Textual Context)

→ (Narrator/Author) ↔ Central Text (Fabula-Narration-Tertiary Nar-
rativization) ↔ (Viewer/Reader) ←

(Textual Context) Internal Context ← (Cultural Con-Text ← Historical
Pre-Text) External Context

Centralized on text/image, this updated narrative model places its emphasis on context, which frames the artist/author and viewer/reader within the interactive relation between text/image and its immediate context. Speaking from the contextual point of view, or from the outside in, the interpretation, as well as reinterpretation, of an artwork is conditioned by the text-based interaction of the author/artist and the reader/reviewer, and further conditioned by the connection of the internal context and external context, such as the correspondence of artistic setting and socio-historical background. Then, speaking from the textual point of view, or from the inside out, the interpretation, as well as the reinterpretation, indicates the significance of the artwork as the centerpiece in the communicative process of codification. In both views, text/image is located in the center, and this location is a testimony to the border-crossing dual legitimacy of the autonomy and contextuality of art.

Speaking from a hermeneutic point of view, a text is a part of the internal context, which is conditioned by its external context. Not coincidentally, art history is a part of history, as well as a part of the studies of art; it is a special part of the development of art

in history. The importance of context makes my narrative model different from those of other scholars. For some pre-m/Modern art historians, context is mainly a simple historical and social setting, while for some Modernists, context is separable from text due to the autonomy of the text, whereas for some p/Postmodernists, context is re-constructible, which gives a text different frames. As for myself, I take a contemporary approach, namely, taking the best of the three from a reader's point of view in constructing a tertiary narrativization, breaking the internal and external boundary. To me, no context means no tertiary narrativization, and this is why context is fundamental to my narrative model.

In this narrative model, my reinterpretation of the development of Chinese art in modern times is presented as the tertiary narrativization, which is the main thesis of this essay and this book: the interaction of Western influence, both the influence of old Realist art and new Modernist art, and the Chinese response to this influence have defined and shaped the development of Chinese art in modern times. Generalizing, this interaction caused the split that divided Chinese art into two mainstreams throughout the 20th century, and then brought confluence to the divergent mainstreams in contemporary Chinese art at the turn of the new millennium. The divergence and confluence of the two mainstreams is the uniqueness of Chinese art in modern times. Furthermore, behind this grand narrative, there are some critical twists and implications: why did China respond to Western influence in that unique way, namely, the divergence and confluence?

Facing Western influence, Chinese artists and scholars of art, as well as intellectuals, experienced the crisis of losing their sense of cultural and even national identity. As a main response, the split is a sign of scholarly debate and the political struggle between the pro-Western and pro-traditional factions of 20th century China. In each faction, as discussed, there are sub-splits. Why did the debate and splits last for a century? Is the confluence a final solution, or a reconciliation of the two sides? In my opinion, the answer lies in the Chi-

nese anxiety of identity, which is the drive of the Chinese response to Western influence.

In terms of its theoretical sources, the thesis of “anxiety of identity” is inspired by some great Western thinkers from the 20th century. Among them, three are most prominent: Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975), Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), and Harold Bloom (1930–).

Toynbee was a British historian; his notion of “challenge and response” inspired me in interpreting the Chinese response to Western influence. According to Toynbee, the development of a certain civilization, as well as the progress of a certain culture, is mainly caused by external challenge and effective internal response from the civilization to the challenge, such as making internal changes and proper adjustments. In his monumental work *A Study of History* (1934–1961), Toynbee applied the classical Chinese philosophy of *Yin–Yang* to his partial explanation of the changes caused by the interaction between these two opposite forces: «When Yin is thus complete, it is ready to pass over into Yang. But what is to make it pass? A change in a state which, by definition, is perfect after its kind can only be started by an impulse or motive which comes from outside» (Toynbee, 1987, pp. 62–3). In the case of the development of Chinese art in modern times, Western influence came from outside and posed a challenge to traditional Chinese art. In return, Chinese artists and scholars of art responded with internal changes, such as the great divergence, as well as sub–splits, and confluence, to the external challenge.

In a way, challenge is an aggressive influence whereas response is defensive and can sometimes be offensive, willingly or unwillingly. Pierre Bourdieu is a French sociologist and social critic, who discussed the influence of post–structuralist “French theory” on the American *intelligentsia*, especially on American cultural studies. In his opinion, American “structural misunderstanding” of the French theory is an active response to its influence. According to Bourdieu, the American “reading” of French “writing” is an issue of constructing American cultural and theoretical identity. Why is the construc-

tion possible? His answer is that “a foreign reading is sometimes more free than a national reading of the same text” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 223) because foreign reading is more distant spatially, culturally, and politically, which makes the purposeful misreading more pragmatic and effective.

How to make the response more effective and beneficial? My answer goes with the concept of “purposeful misreading”. Harold Bloom is an American literary historian and critic; his poetic theory of “anxiety of influence”⁸ has proven greatly inspiring. As one of the most influential “Yale School” deconstructionist critics in the 1980s and 1990s, Bloom is still a leading literary scholar today. Since the early 1970s, he has developed a theory about poetic influence in his study of the development of English poetry. According to Bloom, poets from younger generations realized that they were the newcomers in the poetic world, and due to the shadow of the old masters, there was not sufficient space left for them to demonstrate their talents, and the shadow made them anxious. However, some of the young poets were “strong”; they were creative and rebellious. They intended to confront the old masters by purposefully misreading and revising them. In Bloom’s opinion, the anxiety of William Shakespeare was having to fight the shadow of another poet–dramatist of his time (1564–1593). Although Marlowe had a decisive influence on Shakespeare, as a strong poet Shakespeare developed his own style through his purposeful misreading and revising of Marlowe’s work, and finally surpassed him. Interestingly, Bloom’s theory of influence was influenced by the Freudian theory of the Oedipus Complex, which came from Freud’s (1856–1939) study of Western literature, including Greek mythology and Shakespeare, and also from Freud’s battle against the Shakespearean shadow. It seems to me that the Freudian Oedipus Complex shadowed and inspired Bloom, just like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* inspired and shadowed Sigmund Freud.

The theory of “anxiety of influence” was first published in the 1970s. In the next 30 to 40 years, Bloom kept rethinking the influ-

8. Bloom, 1973, 1975, 1994.

ence of his theory on other theorists, and believed that Bourdieu's theory about literary relationships had an affinity with his theory about influence and agon, while acknowledging their difference. As regards the difference, Bloom later proposed the notion of "imaginative death" which threatens young poets and makes them anxious. However, the young poet «seeks not simply to vanquish the rival but to assert the integrity of his or her own writing self». Thus, Bloom re-defined his notion of influence «simply as *literary love, tempered by defense*» (Bloom, 2011, p. 8). Love and defense seem contradictory, but for Bloom, defense «is a dialectic one as well and thus a splendid fit for any theories of influence. We fall in love, and for a time we have no defenses, but after a while we develop an arsenal of apotropaic gesture» (Bloom, 2011, p. 14). Reading Bloom, I take "apotropaic" as a keyword which explains what, why, and how a certain response is necessary. This is because, according to Bloom, an ultimate aspect of his theory was that influence is unavoidable. Why? His answer is succinct: «To be influenced is to be taught, and a young writer reads to seek instruction» (Bloom, 2011, p. 10) for his or her own success.

To my understanding, success is not easy without paying a price. Although Bloom has updated his theory in the 2010s, the central notion of influence and anxiety is allegedly limited to early post-modern thought. Besides, Bloom's influence theory is also confined to the cultural tradition of English literature, whereas mine is cross-cultural between the West and China. Breaking the limit and thinking about the issue of cultural identity and the price from a present critical point of view, I nevertheless see a further relevance of Bloom to my main thesis in this essay: under Western influence, Chinese art may have to pay a price of being possibly colonized as an "other" in the art world, hence the crisis of losing cultural and even national identity. This potential otherness caused deep anxiety, though it may have been hidden, in both the colonial times of the early 20th century and the post-colonial times of the late 20th century and early 21st century. Speaking from a Foucaultian point of view, the issue of

identity is related to the power struggle between the colonizer, who plays the role of Bloom's old master, and the colonized newcomer who plays the role of Bloom's young and rebellious "strong poet".

Keeping all above theories in mind, I can now turn to conclude my discussion in this essay. Behind the great divergence, and sub-splits as well, in modern Chinese art, and behind the confluence in contemporary Chinese art, the intentional misreading of the West was meant to catch up with the development of art in the West, and was largely driven by the Chinese anxiety of losing identity. The Chinese misreading of the West was a crucial way to localize Western influence throughout the 20th century, and it is particularly so in today's globalized cultural setting and against the background of rising anti-globalization sentiment. In other words, the purpose of the Chinese misreading is to construct and reconstruct its own cultural identity in both modern art and contemporary art, which is also a way to search for its own national identity in the Western-dominated world. To be more specific, this is designed to convert Western artistic forms and concepts to Chinese and make them serve the purpose of advancing Chinese art and culture. Meanwhile, in the new millennium, it is also meant to internationalize Chinese art and culture as a governmental agenda to strengthen China's cultural presence in the international arena and to cast a global influence, matching and assisting its economic and political ambition. In this sense, the Chinese misreading is, using Bloom's words, «creative misreading» (Bloom, 2011, p. 5).

Needless to say, I am also influenced by the above 20th century thinkers, not only Toynbee, Bourdieu, and Bloom, but also narratologists like Zhao Yiheng and Mieke Bal. In this sense, my tertiary narrativization of Western influence and Chinese response is my personal response to their influence, and so is the construction and reconstruction of my own narrative model.

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A Historical and Semiotic Analysis of *Cina*'s calling on/ relation to China in the Cultural Revolution

LEI HAN (韩蕾)¹

ABSTRACT: The Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni was notorious both in China and in Europe in the 1970s for his documentary film *Cina* [*Chung Kuo*], which showed no affinity with European left wing political fantasies of China and little debt to the Chinese government's ideological investment in this filming activity, while Antonioni was highly praised by the French thinker Roland Barthes for his critique of universal meaning and motivated the latter's trip to China two years later. The case of *Cina*'s calling on/ relation to China in a specific time reveals the semiotic boundaries that lie between the two basic types of cultural communications that are exercised by cultural texts with different purposes: addresser-oriented cultural communication and addressee-oriented cultural communication. In the light of a complement of the Jakobsonian communication model offered by Han-liang Chang, this paper thus attempts to offer a semiotic diagnosis of this cultural communication phenomenon. It also sets itself the task of reconsidering the problematics of cultural alterity.

KEYWORDS: *Chung Kuo/Cina*; semiotics; Michelangelo Antonioni; Roland Barthes; addresser-oriented cultural communication.

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1. A historical background of the dual calling between *Cina* and China

What is *Cina*? *Cina*, also known as *Chung Kuo*, is a documentary film about modern China in a very special historical moment, that of the Cultural Revolution; on the invitation of the Chinese government, it was directed by the famous Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), whose reputation was ruined in China in the 1970s because of this work. The unacceptability of Antonioni's *Cina* in China reveals to us the untranslatability between two heterogeneous cultures, and it also brings to our notice the huge gap between a piece of free-willed art and a culture which is highly ideologically invested. But let me save the theoretical discussions of this cultural communication for later and start this paper with a historical depiction of the background from which *Cina* was created.

It should be noted that the making of Antonioni's *Cina* and its failure to be accepted by China in the Cultural Revolution were directly related to the Chinese government's diplomatic policies and cultural aura in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the late 1960s, Zhou Enlai, the prime minister of the Chinese government at that time, had tried hard to change China's isolated international image; thus, just six months after the first Italian delegation had visited China in May 1971, the two countries established diplomatic relations,² and when a staff of Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) proposed to the Chinese government to make a film about China, the government was pleased to invite Antonioni, a master of film and a member of the Italian Communist Party, to undertake this task. Clearly the Chinese government had positive expectations with regard to Antonioni's work, believing it could represent China's achievements in many aspects so as to introduce a new China to the western world.

As a matter of fact, since the 1950s the new China had been one of the political foci in the Western intellectual world, especially in

2. In November of 1970, following Canada, Italy became the second Western country to establish diplomatic relations with China in the Cultural Revolution.

France³; in the 1960s, together with the Chinese government's self-propagandizing, Western left-wing disappointment with Stalinism, publications of Chinese books and French journals obviously in favor of Maoism, as well as the spread of low social morale caused by "mai 68" (Che, 2014, pp. 69–72), a political fantasy about China and a subtle tendency towards the lessening of tension with China started taking root in the Western world. When it came to the early 1970s, «frenetic thoughts about epistemology and subjectivity were walking towards the end in Europe» (Chen, 2013), while the political fantasy of China grew strong; a group of French intellectuals, called *Tel Quel*, even released an official manifesto in their journal of the same name in 1971 stating their support for Socialist China.

It can be said that there was a dual attraction between China and Europe, both of them had high expectations of Antonioni's *Cina*, and a longing to be understood by the Other or understand the Other; however, both of them had to face the issue of interpretation, which was termed by Roland Barthes «the end of hermeneutics» (Barthes, 1975, p. 8). In the first place, this problem manifested itself as a massive refusal of the film, exemplified by the chaotic situation on the Saturday when the film was supposed to be released at the Fenice. Umberto Eco described the scene as:

China was protesting the imminent showing of Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo* at the Fenice. The Italian government had done everything possible to prevent the showing, the Venice Biennial Exposition had resisted in the name of right to information and to artistic expression; at the last moment the Venetian prefect, coming to the aid of Peking, discovered that the Fenice was un–usable as a movie hall.

While the director of the film, Antonioni himself,

nervous and troubled, was once again suffering his very personal and paradoxical drama—the anti-Fascist artist who went to China inspired by af-

3. France and China established diplomatic relations in 1964.

fection and respect and who found himself accused of being a Fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons. (Eco, 1977, pp. 8–9)

Eco's view was not exaggerated, as a matter of fact, in China, nationwide attacks against Antonioni and his documentary film had begun at the end of 1973, the year when *Chung Kuo* was released. Many messages had been coming to the Chinese government with negative comments about Antonioni's film ever since it had been released, reporting that it badly damaged China's international image; this triggered the Chinese government's official censorship of the film in November 1973. On 30 January 1974, "China's Daily" published a special commentary entitled *Malicious Intention, Despicable Trick: A critique of Antonioni's Chung Kuo*. Just as the title indicated, the commentator accused Antonioni of being "malicious" and his film of being "despicable". This article initiated a six-year-long critical storm against Antonioni until at the end of 1978, two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, China started to reflect on events, and in 1979 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a paper entitled *Request for instructions on the wiping out of Gang of Four's pernicious influence on the critique of Chung Kuo, Cina and on the following steps of how to set things right*, to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council. Justice was finally restored, but only in 2004, when *Cina* was officially shown in China at the Beijing Film Academy on the occasion of the exhibition "Looking back to Antonioni's films".

2. Antonioni's choice of protagonist and his phenomenological perspective

Antonioni and his film crew arrived in Peiking in May 1972, but the filming work could not get started until the team had finished arguing with the Chinese government about filming plans. The conflict

lasted for over 27 days, longer than the actual shooting itself, as the crew then made over 30,000 meters of film in 22 days. As the title heralds, the film *Chung Kuo* should be a film about the country, China, but it turned out that Antonio chose Chinese people as protagonists.

Antonioni remembered that on the first day of his conversation with his Chinese hosts, he asked what, in their opinion, symbolized most clearly the change which came after the liberation, and the Chinese hosts answered: "Man". Antonioni himself knew very clearly that what they meant was far more than the images that his camera could capture, «they were talking about the conscience of man, his ability to think and to live in justice» (Antonioni, 1996, p. 109), but it was too arrogant of him to approach this multiplicity of China and its people in such a short time (22 days). In his opinion, it was true that «China's contemporary socio-political structure as a model, perhaps inimitable, [was] worthy of the most attentive study» (*ibidem*), but after all, «revolution is a mental, material, and moral thing, but not necessarily visible» (Antonioni, 1996, p. 113).

Antonioni thus found himself facing a dilemma: the camera can only capture what is visible, but a political or cultural revolution is invisible if focused on abstract dialectical problems or class struggle issues; what a camera can capture about a place in a special historical time is the visible daily life of its people and those people's personal relationships. Thus, even though he highly respected and loved China for its political accomplishments or landscapes, the people themselves were what struck him the most and that is why, from the very beginning, he decided to make the Chinese the protagonists of his film: «At the same time, this man also has a look, a face, a way of speaking» (Antonioni, 1996, p. 109).

Something that attracts our attention is that this documentary film has no theme, no plots of narrative, all of the fragments of scenes were arranged without purposeful organization, thus it offers no presupposed meaning. French thinker and critic Roland Barthes attributed Antonioni's strategy of representing China to a "phenom-

enological” way of seeing and recording. He highly praised this approach, saying that with this approach Antonioni was not pursuing a stable meaning, but showing an acute vision to suspend judgement, to avoid or to resist the violence of politic power: «The artist has no power, but he has a relation with truth... his world is indirect to the truth» (Barthes, 2002, p. 903)⁴. In his letter to Antonioni, Barthes commented to Antonioni: «It is your film on China which has given me the desire to make a trip to China» (*ibidem*).

Just one year after *Cina* was released in Europe, Barthes, François Wahl and their friends from Tel Quel, paid their cultural visit to China, also arriving in China in May. As aforementioned, this French intellectual delegation (perhaps among them Barthes is an exception) was not alone among those Western intellectuals, especially the radical leftists, who had formed a collective utopian imaginary about China in the 1960s and in the early years of the 1970s and had transformed their presuppositions about *Cina* into a political pilgrimage, but *Cina* misled them.

In the author’s view, the inconsistencies between *Cina* and the collective fantasies about China in the Western intellectual world heightened the Tel Quel group’s curiosity about China and motivated their visit to China in 1974. Antonioni shared the same view as Barthes, they both felt that, in their time, there already existed an idea about China in the Western world, doxa about China «based on books, on ideology, on political faith» (Antonioni, 1996, p. 108), ideas based on their own intellectual nurture which were everywhere; and paradoxically, this kind of doxa did not need to be verified through Antonioni’s film or Barthes’ writings, all the answers these people wanted were answers they already knew, answers which had fallen from the tree of knowledge of their own intellectual nurturing (Barthes, 1975, p. 7).

Besides these misguided presuppositions about Antonioni’s film, something else those Western “pilgrims” did not know was that something different from the main stream revolutionary voices had also taken root inside China, which Chen Tsuen-shing had generalized as:

4. My translation.

«The political and cultural hurricane had started to fade out since Lin-Biao's death in 1971; the weeds of poetry had started to sprout; non-governmental thoughts spread in the underground» (Chen, 2013).

Antonioni's choice of Chinese people as the protagonists of his film and his phenomenological perspective in making this documentary film are quite appealing from a semiotic point of view. Cultural communication is one of the most important issues in semiotic studies of Culture, *Cina's* relation to China, to be specific, Antonioni's reading of China in his cinematic discourses, or vice versa, China's criticisms of *Cina*, are a typical case of cultural communication with lots of collisions, thus needing further theoretical exploration.

3. Two types of cultural communication in the light of Jakobson and Chang's communication models

Any cultural communication involves two inter-related core problems of semiotics: signification and communication. A modified version of Roman Jakobson's communication model offered by Han-liang Chang would cast some light on this issue. Jakobson proposed a verbal communication model including interactions of six factors, each factor corresponding to a specific verbal function: addresser (emotive), addressee (conative), context (referential), message (poetic), code (metalinguistic) and contact (communicative); the positions of addresser and addressee are flexible, one can be interchanged with the other in interlocutions (language circulation). Han-liang Chang provided perfect complements to this model by distinguishing the process of communication from the process of signification. He explained the speech act of the addresser as the preference for rhetoric, the reading act of the addressee as the influence of hermeneutics. Thus, he said that the communication process was involved in pragmatics and grammar, while the process of signification happened in a semantic field and followed the rules of syntax and semantics. Chang's diagram can be seen below (Chang, 2012, p. 16).

In a message–transmission oriented cultural communication process, the adherence between the addresser’s and the addressee’s semantic fields ensures the accuracy of information transmission, so as to fulfill the addresser’s purpose of convincing the addressee. In this sense, a cultural collision is the failure of information transmission caused by the conflict of the two semantic fields. The addresser and the addressee do not share fundamental signification: either the message sent by the addresser cannot be decoded by the addressee, or the decoded message is not the same as when it was encoded. Barthes used the saying «c’est la fin de l’herméneutique» (it’s the end of hermeneutics) (Barthes, 1975, p. 8) to describe the failure of Tel Quel’s reading of China in a hermeneutic way, attributing this failure to disorders of their understanding of China’s semantic field.

Even though each side of a cultural collision would accept the risk of being treated as “different organization” or “disorganization”, or even as “chaos” in the Tartu School’s terms (Lotman *et al.*, 2013, p. 55), it is still hard to be pressed to take a cultural collision as an absolute failure of communication, because the failure to receive accurate messages can also serve as an evocation of a code–oriented communication, autocommunication. As a code–oriented communication, autocommunication aims to reformulate Self, find self’s cultural identification and experiment self–therapy; but it also helps to reinforce the closedness of the semantic field, and thus impedes

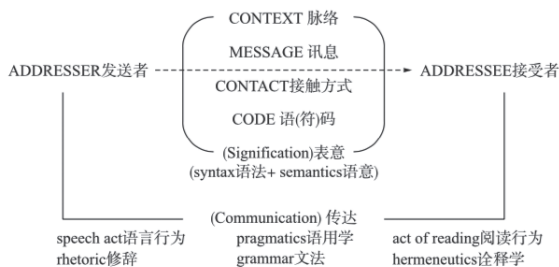


Figure 1.

the proliferation of meaning. Both message-oriented communication and code-oriented communication have a special emphasis on the reading act of the addressee.

Both Antonioni's reading of China in cinematic discourses and China's criticisms of *Cina* in political discourses can be understood in terms of two kinds of cultural communication: addresser-oriented communication and addressee-oriented communication. In the first case, China as sender/addresser is a text read by Antonioni, it has a highly politically invested communicative purpose, because what the Chinese government wanted Antonioni to present was «revolution as the moment of a primary contradiction, within which poles of secondary contradiction open up» (Eco, 1977, p. 9). Driven by this purpose, China as a text is charged with highly condensed political stereotypes, clichés, doxa and so on.

In Antonioni's film, there is a long take about a group of workers from a textile factory who are discussing how to construct socialism, where a female worker says: «We can contribute to the construction of socialism by providing textiles of high quality». In another take, when an old woman is asked to introduce her family, she answers that she is not in a hurry for the birth of a grandchild, because her son and her daughter-in-law should concentrate on the construction of socialism. The discourses of these Chinese people are full of political stereotypes, revealing to us that Cultural communication with strong political purposes is, in most cases, addresser-oriented (or message-oriented) communication.

Within addresser-oriented communication, the addresser needs to ensure a stable semantic field so as to safeguard the accuracy of information, thus it conveys an implied request to the addressee to create repetitive texts or representational texts, while this request is not quite acceptable for artists, for whom the acuity of meaning is crucial, as Barthes said: «Once meaning is fixed or forced to be fixed, i.e. losing it acuity, meaning becomes an instrument, a bet or a gamble» (Barthes, 2002, p. 903)⁵.

5. My translation.

Also, let us consider about the case that Western society was asking Antonioni and Barthes for the answers they had already formulated about China out of their own intellectual nurturing. At first glance, this case can be regarded as a simple autocommunication, but it is indeed a kind of message-oriented communication, because the text that was created was an imitation of what existed already. On the other hand, Antonioni's reading of China in cinematic discourses can be viewed as real addressee-oriented communication. Eco writes in his supportive article for Antonioni,

Antonioni is particularly inclined to plumb the depths of existential problems and to emphasize the representation of personal relationships rather than abstract dialectical problems and the class struggle, speaks to us about the daily life of the Chinese within the revolution rather than showing the revolution as the moment of a primary contradiction, within which poles of secondary contradiction open up. (Eco, 1977, p. 9)

Barthes viewed Antonioni's plumbing the depths of the Chinese people's daily life as confronting the spectrum of ideologies, he used the word "morality" to describe artists' insistence on «paving the way for obscuring meaning in a prudent way» (Barthes, 2002, p. 901).

Why, for artists, is there a need to pursue the obscuring of meaning but not a certain meaning? Let us return to the diagram offered by Chang and focus on the reading act of the addressee. As Chang pointed out, the reading act of the addressee involves hermeneutics, and hermeneutics in its radical sense is concerned with the ultimate meaning, searching for fixed signification. Also, as Peter Haidu noted, a hermeneutic tradition requires that the subject (reader) and the object have adherence in their foundational significations and references (Haidu, 1990, p. 671). Thus, hermeneutics is very capable of dealing with the problem of *ipseity* (e.g., message-oriented cultural communication), but it has difficulties in processing alterity; "the irreducible Other" of Lévinas, for example, is such an alterity problem. Barthes, following in Antonioni's steps, also regarded China as "the irreducible

Other". Not by chance, in treating the same object, the textualized China (as an alterity), both Antonioni and Barthes had tried to avoid reducing the Other to the Same and subordinating the other to the domination that one subject exercises over the other; as mentioned—above, they both valued the instability of meaning.

Cultural communications that deal with alterity, in most cases, are addressee-oriented (code-oriented) communication. Within this communication, the problem the addressee faces is not «what it is permitted to say» or «what has to be said» (*devoir faire*), but «what it is possible to say or not to say». Knowledge (*savoir faire*), ability (*pouvoir faire*) and desire (*vouloir faire*) to say something or not say something model the addressee's reading act of the addresser's message. This kind of communication raises the issue of the pragmatic ethics of the reader (as a hermeneutic subject). Within this kind of communication, the discourses arising from the reader's struggle with his/her adherence to or dis-attachment from the addresser's semantic field are far more poetic, creative, and open than the political discourses of the first kind of communication. In this sense, it can be said that artists are destined to deal with alterity.

4. How can we deal with cultural alterity?

How else can the case of *Cina's* interaction with China enlighten us on the issue of dealing with cultural alterity? Cultural alterity is a cultural object with irreducible heterogeneousness that cannot be fully understood if it succumb to the subject's symbolic systems; this object does not share the same semantic field with the subject and thus challenges the self-sufficiency of the subject's rationality and knowledge system. The invasion of cultural alterity also questions the ipseity and the unity of a given culture. Arts and literature are destined to untangle the fixed significations between signifiers and signifieds by confronting the disorders in the semantic field exposed by the invasion of the alterity. Besides, it seems that the presence of

the irreducible Other also deconstructs the traditional dichotomy Subject/Object, because the so-called “objectivity” is nothing but the value of doxa, and thus there should not be any “subjectivity” but only “intersubjectivity” (in the sense of Émile Benveniste’s linguistics of discourse). In this sense, alterity is rooted in how self is contemplated; for a given culture, it has to constantly invite comparison and juxtaposition, so as to locate the boundary of Self.

Concluding Remarks

Cina’s relation to China is a special case through which we are able to delineate the semiotic boundaries that lie between the two basic types of cultural communication exercised by cultural texts with different purposes: addresser-oriented cultural communication and addressee-oriented cultural communication. Addresser-oriented cultural communication is marked by accuracy, repetition, adherence, ipseity, unity; while addressee-oriented cultural communication is marked by obscurity, creativity, aberrance, alterity, diversity. Any cultural communication is never a unilateral activity, but a bilateral or multilateral activity, thus it has to deal with both patterns. The communication between *Cina* and China has shown that, within cultural communication, each side of the cultural communication assumes the risk of suffering from disorders of its own semantic fields and the trembling of the self’s cultural boundary that bare caused by being exposed to the other side of this cultural communication, no matter whether this communication is a success or not.

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The Empty Mirror as Metaphor

In the Case of *Nothing in the Mirror*

YAN GAO (高燕)¹

ABSTRACT: Using the mirror as a metaphor for state of life and self-construction is a universal phenomenon in human culture. The temporal dimension of the mirror is the present, while its spatial dimension is presence. The mirror is often used as a narrative strategy in contemporary visual culture, especially in cinema and television, in accordance with the characteristics of time-space in postmodernity. The paper proposes an analysis of the TV series *Nothing in the Mirror*, seeking to uncover new meanings of this object as cultural symbol.

KEYWORDS: Empty mirror; *Nothing in the Mirror* TV series; space; self-construction; cultural symbol.

Introduction

What is a mirror? What are the characteristics of mirroring? Furthermore, why do human beings need to look into a mirror? Mirrors are common objects that can be seen everywhere in our lives. The particular distinguishing feature of mirrors is specular reflection: they reflect light in such a way that the reflected light preserves

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many or most of the detailed physical characteristics of the original light, which makes humans believe that what they see in the mirror is the real thing itself in front of the mirror. Therefore, a mirror is not only an object with substantiality but also widely regarded as an excellent means for human beings to recognize themselves. Socrates draws significant attention to the relation of the mirror to self-recognition. In his opinion, the mirror is a moral tool by which people can regulate their behavior and maintain a normal state of mind. Buddhism uses the mirror as an analogy for consciousness. As for modern psychoanalysis, explicitly Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mirror phase is the subjective structure of self-establishment. That is why it is easy to understand that using the mirror as a metaphor of the state of life and self-construction is a common phenomenon of human culture, whether in the West or in the East.

In this paper, I do not want to get into a vague and general discussion about the meanings of the mirror as cultural symbol. But I do want to investigate the relationship between mirror phase and self-recognition. Within this, the primary aims of the paper will be the presentation of the metaphorical meanings of the mirror as a cultural symbol from the perspective of Eastern Buddhism and Western Jacques Lacan, together with an analysis of how these metaphorical implications of mirror are embodied and realized through contemporary visual culture. But why contemporary visual culture? No one can refute the fact that the mirror image is a core theme of contemporary visual culture in, for instance, photography, film and TV series. As Fredric Jameson has stated, we are now in the era of late Capitalism, where all forms of contemporary literature and art including visual culture operate as the cultural logic of late Capitalism, that is, so-called Postmodernity. The most striking feature of the distinction between Modernity and Postmodernity is the sense of time and space. This forces us to rethink the question of new implications of mirror in Postmodern terms, more specifically the temporal and spatial dimensions of mirror and mirror phase.

1. Why is *Nothing in the Mirror*?

The 20-episode Chinese TV series *Nothing in the Mirror* (*Kong Jingzi* in the Chinese language means empty mirror), written by Fang Wan and directed by Yazhou Yang, was broadcast in 2001. Not only is the play named after the mirror, but also the story it tells is closely related to the mirror. The TV series revolves around the emotional journey and life experiences of a pair of sisters who grow up in Beijing, Sun Li and Sun Yan. Sun Li, as the elder sister, is charming, competent, and pursued by men all the time. She loves her first boyfriend, but married another out of realistic considerations who is well educated and has an enviable upper-class job. Her restless nature drives her to go to the USA for further study. There she gets to know a wealthy old American and marries him after divorcing from her first husband in order to stay there. Her struggles end in her return to Beijing empty handed. By contrast, the younger sister Sun Yan is a very ordinary girl. She admires her elder sister and is eager to be like her elder sister all the time. She meets her first boyfriend by way of introduction and breaks up with him because of her elder sister's despising him. She marries a junior high school classmate later and divorces from him due to their different conceptions of life. Then, she falls in love with her elder sister's ex-boyfriend and ex-husband successively. At last, she finds happiness with her first love and marries him.

The play won the 20th China TV Golden Eagle Award, which represents the highest achievement in the television industry, for Excellent Teleplay in 2002, and the 23rd Flying Apsaras Award, which represents the highest recognition from the government, for Long-length Teleplay in 2003. In October 2012, it was selected as one of the 35 classic TV plays in the «30 brilliant years of Beijing TV drama», which largely reflects the recognition of the audience.

By analysing this TV series, we can see mirrors are both important props throughout the play and the core concepts for understanding the characters in the story. In addition, mirrors work as cul-

tural symbols with universal significance for interpreting the theme of the story. To a considerable degree, the TV series is a typical and brilliant example of both mirror as cultural symbol and mirroring recognition. Starting with these three functions of the mirror, I will analyze the relationship between the play and the mirror through close reading of the text, thus revealing the unique cultural symbolic value of the empty mirror as a metaphor in the series.

2. What is the empty mirror?

The empty mirror subtends thoughts of “emptiness” and “mirror” all at once. The expression forces us to pay special attention to “emptiness”, “mirror” and the relation of “emptiness” to “mirror”. China is a country deeply influenced by Buddhism. In the context of the Chinese language, the term “empty mirror” is naturally reminiscent of Buddhist concepts. The core concept of Buddhist metaphysics is *Sunyata* (pronounced *shoonyataa*), translated into English most often as *emptiness* and sometimes *voidness*. It holds that all things including the world itself are empty of intrinsic existence and nature. In Buddhism, everything in the phenomenal world is the change of birth and death in the process of time flow, without certainty or eternity. Both the illusion of time and human perception point to the illusion of the world of external experience. Therefore, the true essence is to transcend the absolute existence of knowledge and experience (Conze, 1983, pp. 59–61; Edelglass, Garfield, 2009, pp. 5–9).

Mirrors have many meanings in Buddhism. There are mainly three aspects related to the topic. First of all, the mirror represents the *Dharmakaya* (法身) or Body of Truth of the Buddha, having the aspects of purity (a mirror is clear of dirt) and wisdom (a mirror reflects all phenomena without distinction). In this sense, the mirror represents right thought. Secondly, some Buddhists assert that consciousness is mirror-like in its nature, reflecting an object without being modified by it: consciousness as a mirror. In Chinese Buddhism

it is called “bright mirror” (“mingjing” 明镜) and means a mirror as a metaphor for something beautiful, bright and flat — such as a lake — or something that provides clarity and insight (McRae, 1986, pp. 144–6). As I have mentioned above in the analysis of emptiness, the phases in the mirror are characterized by illusion and vagueness, and the mirror itself can reflect the phases of the world but has the characteristic of “emptiness” in essence, which results in the mirror as the metaphor of “emptiness” becoming a common Buddhist metaphor. Correspondingly, subtle meanings of “emptiness” are highlighted in the mirror metaphor, and the mirror phase is also loaded with “emptiness”. Both the concept of emptiness expressed by the mirror metaphor and the mirror’s implication of emptiness have metaphysical value at the same time. Besides *Dharmakaya* and consciousness, the statement of “jinghua shuiyue” (镜花水月), which is the third layer of meaning of mirrors and designates the relation of mirror to emptiness, is very widely known in China. It refers to fantasy, illusion and phantoms like flowers in a mirror and the moon reflected in the water, in which we can see something that is visible but has no substance (Watson, 1999, p. 48).

As for the TV series, Sun Li and Sun Yan are both looking for love and dreams in the world. What they do is to leave a temporary phase in the mirror of life. The mirror is empty, and all they have done is finally emptied. As the elder sister, Sun Li’s emotions have gone through the different objects of first love, husband and lover. Her living space has changed from her hometown Beijing to the United States. Her self-awareness has changed from full confidence to confusion and negation. Her life can be expressed as self-confirmation in the field of rational and emotional, spiritual and material contest. Her phase in the mirror of life is constantly changing; no matter how wonderful her life drama is, and how hard she plays, her life ends in nothingness. And Sun Yan, as the younger sister, sticks to her own living space. After many choices, she finally marries her first love and returns to the starting point of her life exploration. In the mirror of life, her story shows the flow of time, the chance

and coincidence of cause and effect in a static way. Their struggles, aspirations of happiness, pursuit of the future, joys, and agonies are like the moon (reflected) in the water, or image in the mirror, gone in the flow of time.

The life experiences of the two sisters in the story are the plot requirements determined by the dramatic structure, and the narrative expression of “empty mirror” as cultural symbol at the same time. The elder sister’s life seems perfect, but she finally has to admit that her life is incomplete and broken. The younger sister hesitates in various choices, and eventually returns to the starting point after making a circular movement. At the end of the novel that the TV series is based on, the meaning of “empty mirror” as a cultural symbol is clearer: «The sunlight in May is very bright, the sky is shining, like a big round mirror, reflecting everything that happens on the ground. It is a magical mirror, in which nothing can be seen except the infinite breadth» (Fang, 2007, p. 98). In the perspective of the empty mirror as the ultimate essence, all concrete lives are different, but all have the same nature of nothingness.

3. The mirror relationship from Lacan’s perspective

Nothing in the Mirror both instantiates the essential meaning of empty mirror in Chinese Buddhism and substantiates the claim for self-establishment based on mirror phase. As far as the TV series is concerned, the mirror phase is not only the key to understanding the whole saga, but also the fundamental driving force for the interactions of the characters. I intend to deal with the problem of the relationship between mirror and individual subject through an elaboration of Jacques Lacan’s theory of mirror. When he analyzed the subjective construction of individual ego, Lacan postulated that the establishment of subjective consciousness needs to rely on an object as the other. In the “imaginary order”, the ego is constituted by identifying with a counterpart or specular image, thus “identification”

is an important aspect of the imaginary. «The different phases of imaginary, narcissistic, specular identification – the three adjectives are equivalent» (Lacan, 1991a, p. 188). The other is the result of the imaginative projection of subjective consciousness. In the “symbolic order”, the other is the result of language norms and other people’s visions. «What must be stressed at the outset is that a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier. The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other» (Lacan, 1991b, p. 207). By means of the recognition of the other, the individual subject completes his/her self-establishment (Lacan, 1991b, p. 107, n. 279–80). The characters in this story correspond, to the greatest extent, to Lacan’s theory of mirror phase.

The TV series shows from the beginning that the two sisters are dual mirror phases by means of the younger sister’s voice-over: the elder sister is born beautiful and loved by everyone, but the younger sister is very ordinary and would like to be her elder sister. The elder sister is beautiful, smart, highly educated (she is a university graduate with a major in English), fashionable (she works in a travel agency), the apple of her parents’ eyes, and always attracts male attention. In stark contrast, the younger sister is a plain-looking female worker without higher education (she sells meal tickets in the factory canteen), unnoticed and unattractive (pursued by no man). In the younger sister’s mind, the elder sister is the perfect idol, the imaginary perfection of her real imperfection. They represent one person’s two sides: ideal perfect phase and realistic imperfect phase.

In the reflection of the perfect phase of her elder sister, the younger sister’s self-constitution has gone through two stages.

The first stage is primitive identification in the “imaginary order”. The elder sister is the self-contained phase in Lacan’s mirror, while the younger sister is just like the infant whose self-cognition is fragmentary in front of the mirror. When the younger sister gazes into her elder sister’s self-perfection in the mirror, she worships and aspires to become the latter phase. In the sense of inner consciousness, she immerses herself in illusion and constantly tries to reshape

her self-image. For example, she often looks at herself in a mirror and imagines herself having a beautiful face like her elder sister. The mirror which often appears in the story, therefore, is not only an important prop as a material entity, but also a symbolic medium for the characters to pursue their self-actualization. In reality, she performs the phase identity through imitation. For instance, she reads love letters from her elder sister's boyfriend, and is moved. Then, she learns to write love letters to her boyfriend. She goes to evening school for a diploma and transfers from the factory to a publishing house as an accountant, hoping to become as knowledgeable as her elder sister. In her emotional life, she completes the self-image constitution through malposition of role-play. For example, she finally breaks up with her boyfriend because her elder sister despises him and falls in love with her elder sister's ex-boyfriend and ex-husband, even wanting to marry the latter ex-husband. In this stage, the younger sister sees and admits her own insufficiency and, correspondingly, also sees and admits her elder sister's perfectness. At the level of imaginary recognition, she has spontaneous inner impulses to converge with her elder sister who is being as anticipation.

The second stage is secondary identification in the "symbolic order". There are other characters in this TV series besides the sisters. These characters, either as authoritative discourse (such as parents), or as heterosexual references (such as boyfriends, husbands, lovers), constitute a mirror in the view of others of Sun Yan's identity. Her mother is the representative of authoritative discourse, she is proud of her elderdaughter Sun Li, and constantly repeats the same conclusion to her second daughter Sun Yan: Look how good your elder sister is, and how can you compare with her? Likewise, Ma Liming, who is Sun Li's boyfriend and long-standing lover, keeps showing off to Sun Yan how enviable it is to have such an outstanding girlfriend. Sun Li's husband also dotes on her, even tolerates her self-indulgence and disloyalty because he appreciates her. These people's admiration and affirmation of Sun Li are constantly strengthening the perfection of Sun Li's phase. At this stage, the younger sister's

identification with her elder sister is imposed on her by others in her life. Because the typical phase in the mirror in others' view coincides with the perfect phase that she spontaneously recognizes, she completes the construction of the subject in the dual identity.

Compared to the role of younger sister, the elder sister is more than a static mirror phase of the former. According to Lacan, the object that individuals use to establish themselves is not the Cartesian *Je pense* (*Ego cogito* in Latin) confined to pure consciousness, nor Hegel's other subjective consciousness in the master–slave dialectic, but an imaginative projection of the subjective consciousness, just like the specular image seen by the child in the mirror. It is an illusory and alienated self. The specular image (ideal ego) overcomes the position of the Real–Ich, and identifies itself as the Real–Ich. The Real–Ich itself is controlled by the alienated self in the process of identifying with the mirror phase². For example, the elder sister despises the younger sister's boyfriend Pan Shulin, taunts him about his bad taste and accuses him of being rude, which results in the younger sister's finally breaking up with him for these reasons. Knowing that the younger sister is also fond of the elder sister's ex-boyfriend Ma Liming, the elder sister shows contempt for her younger sister, seriously hurts her self-esteem, and being slapped by her. Divorce is the inevitable result of this difference when Sun Yan's husband Zhai Zhigang sees her self-image differently from the self-image she has identified and constantly converged.

Whether identity comes from inner impulse or other-identity under external pressure, they are committed to establishing self-subject. In the mirror phase of the sisters, does the younger sister finally complete the establishment of the subject? At the end of the story, when the elder sister says to her younger sister in a tone of deep resignation and envy, «You are really happy», the perfect mirror phase is completely dissolved in front of the imperfect Real–Ich,

2. «The Real–Ich is conceived as supported, not by the organism as a whole, but by the nervous system. It has the character of a planned, objectified subject» (Lacan, 1991b, p. 164).

and the self–subject that the younger sister has established also disappears because of the deconstruction of the identified object. As Lacan defines «the real as the impossible» (Lacan, 1991b, p. 167), the Real–Ich has no origin. Once a person embarks on its pursuit, he/she will go further and further in the process of extreme alienation. The Real–Ich is not only the emptiness in the mirror phase, but also the empty mirror itself. All things are empty. It is here that Lacan and Buddhism can have a dialogue.

Through the analysis above, we can see that although the series is narrated from a female perspective, and is presented as a female identity and gender consciousness construction, it transcends the female topic and manifests itself clearly as a universal identification in the theme of mirror metaphor, namely, the “empty mirror” as a cultural symbol.

4. The immediacy and multiple spaces: Postmodern narration of mirror

In the contemporary context of globalization, time cuts off linear continuity and is reduced to the immediacy, while space is released from the space–time continuum, showing the juxtaposition of multiple spaces. The new space–time form has become an important feature of postmodern identification. As pointed out by Fredric Jameson, «time was the dominant of the modern (or of modernism) and space of the postmodern» (Jameson, 2003, p. 696). The narration of *Nothing in the Mirror* endows the mirror theme with the postmodern characteristics in both temporal and spatial dimensions.

4.1. Temporal characteristics of mirror themes: The immediacy

In the dimension of time, life is a sharp arrow that shoots at the end of death. It can only move forward in the course of time. Every moment that constitutes life is presented in the immediacy form, the

past is the completed immediacy, and the future is the immediacy not yet carried out. As individuals, we can neither retain the past nor grasp the future. Therefore, the temporal characteristic of life is the present and immediacy, which comes from the past and flows to the future uninterruptedly. In the course of the one-dimensional movement of life, Sun Li and Sun Yan have constructed their own outlook of life with one present struggle and pursuit after another. In this play, the strengthening of the present tense is accomplished through three levels.

The first is the medium of visualization. As a typical example of contemporary visual arts, movies and TV series narrate through images. When images belonging to different tenses are vividly presented in front of the audience, their characteristics of immediacy are also displayed. Therefore, the storytelling of movies and TV series is an “eternal present tense”.

The next is the narrative perspective of daily life. This saga abandons the dramatic categories of primary/secondary, relative importance, suspense and conflict. The real details of a scene of life as a plot fragment are linked into a narrative structure by means of “life stream”. As a result, life itself becomes a dramatic scene, which not only exists in the present tense itself, but also presents itself to the audience in the present tense.

Finally, the connotation of metaphor is embedded. If, as the title of the series reveals, life is a mirror, and one’s life experience is a mark reflected in the mirror, then the mirror reflects only the tangible things of the present, and does not leave any trace of the past that has passed away and the future that has not yet arrived, so the specific life experiences unfolded one by one in the course of time are condensed into a mirror of the present. There is neither past nor future, only the present. Thereby, the immediate characteristics of the mirror in this narration are clearly highlighted.

4.2. *Spatial characteristics of the mirror theme: Coexistence of homogeneous and heterogeneous multiple spaces*

Time and space are two reference frames of life construction and self–confirmation. Time provides us with inner life recognition, and space provides us with external identity. In this TV series, space is not just a place where actions happen, nor is it just a homogeneous single scene. In the theme of mirror metaphor, numerous mirrors correspond to different spatial forms: the gender space in which male and female refer to each other, the class space between the elite and the masses, the discourse space between the authority and the audience, the geographical space in which the motherland is compared with alien lands, the cultural space in which tradition and modernity coexist, the symbolic space of the mirror and life, the narrative space between reality and invention. Multiple spatial overlapping and juxtaposition establish the post–modern spatial characteristics of the mirror theme.

To sum up, the TV series *Nothing in the Mirror* is a postmodern expression with cultural universalism made by using the mirror metaphor.

There is nothing in the mirror. Even the mirror itself does not exist. I would like to end this paper with the chant of Huineng (638–713), a Chinese Chan Buddhism master:

Enlightenment is not a tree to begin with,
Nor is the mind a mirror stand,
Since originally there was nothing, whereon would
the dust fall? (Ch'en, 1964, p. 355)

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The Rap of China and Hip–Hop’s Cultural Politics

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ABSTRACT: The success of the reality show *The Rap of China* relies on a certain balance between the “real” and the “show”. The key to achieving this balance is hip–hop’s claim to “keep it real”, which catered to the public’s appeal for “personality”. Hip–hop culture has a long tradition of political resistance, and the “noise” it creates can also be regarded as a subculture’s resistance to mainstream culture. However, *The Rap of China* carried out a subtle depoliticization of hip–hop, making the show without resistance, and everything was presented as entertainment. Firstly, it passed a rigorous political review of the participants and performance; secondly, it especially emphasized the “technical” dimension of Rap and weakened its “expressive” dimension. After excluding the dimension of resistance, the rappers from *The Rap of China* even find it hard to resist the “pan–moralism” in online public opinion. This kind of compromise is the only way for China’s hip–hop to move from “underground” to “mainstream”. However, it is unfair to criticize it only from a dualism of politics–capital, entertainment–personality. There is no fundamental conflict between the materialism of hip–hop and its commercialization. Commercialization is also the important pusher for the politicization of hip–hop, and hip–hop itself has revolutionized the entertainment industry. Hip–hop itself contains plenty of paradoxes, so we need to jump out of the framework of dualism to analyze it. For today’s China, the greatest significance of hip–hop shows is to provide young people in an age of lack of experience

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with the means and enthusiasm to express their experience, which is itself a kind of cultural politics.

KEYWORDS: *The Rap of China*; hip-hop; cultural politics; chinese subcultures; pan-moralism

Introduction

The Rap of China undoubtedly stands out as the most sensational variety show in 2017. Sufficient analyses of this show have been conducted from perspectives of communication or entertainment capital, which primarily ascribe its great success to the following factors: first of all, compared with traditional TV stations, the ability of iQiyi, the program maker and an online streaming media site, to respond to and guide the feedback from audiences in a swifter and more flexible manner; second, the so-called “US-TV-Series-Style Cliffhanging Editing” which has infused the whole show with suspense, conflicts and reversals; third, the delicate design of the competition rules and the highlight of competitiveness; fourth, the integrated design of the show, advertisements and other peripheral programs; and fifth (the most important factor in the author’s opinion), the backing of the entire hip-hop culture which allows *The Rap of China* to become more than a musical reality show, but a representation of some youth subculture. This paper focuses on the perspective of cultural politics to analyze *The Rap of China* and the youth subculture of hip-hop with its increasing popularity all over the globe.

1. The dialectic of the reality show

Based on the technical analysis from various perspectives above, it follows that the guarantee for the success of *The Rap of China* is ca-

tering to the dialectic of “reality” and “show”: the audiences are always willing to see something real in the “reality show”. Such reality may be the representation of a true character or a reflection of the real environment, despite the fact that it is only the reality extracted from shooting and editing; the “show”, however, represents the fact that, besides pursuing reality, people are also eager to see dramatic conflicts or exaggeration. In brief, they expect to see reality while amusing themselves. The “reality show” needs to show “reality” in the form of a “show”. So it turns out to be a prerequisite for every successful “reality show” to contain the right combination.

The previous success of a sensational talent show entitled *The Voice of China* is a case in point. This show first highlights the professional dimension of singing, which is a counter example of those “non-professional” singing competition broadcasts that catch people’s fancies with “sharp tongues” and “weirdos”. Emphasis on a singer’s voice rather than his/her appearance, as well as on his/her previous experience are designed to produce the effects of returning to “the original nature”, which are exactly what give weight to this “show”. For example, the “swivel chair”, which superficially stresses the greater importance of “listening” than “watching” in music, is essentially designed to strengthen visual effects on the stage. If “profession” is the first keyword of this program, “dream” will be the second one, around which the introductory VCR of singers and the Q&A between coaches and contestants revolve. The story behind the singing enhances the empathy of audiences, and unfolds with the theme of “dream and persistence”, be it one concerning a wandering life far from one’s hometown, or the enmity between a father and his son. Although this theme has indeed narrated many touching or even genuine plots, the topic-given programming will inevitably lead to repetitions, not to mention that “dream” resides in between reality and fantasy, and is easily expressed as something hollow and delusive. Due to a lack of follow-up momentum, the session originally set up to augment the “reality” has become hyp-

ocritical. This is a big hitch in such singing shows, as is the scarcity of talent.

In this context, it is reasonable to see *The Rap of China* abruptly rising and even replacing them. For many “netizens”, those hip-hop singers who shout words aloud like «I’m the best and very mighty» and «I just want money and rise to fame» seem much more real than singers who sob out words like «I suffer a lot but I work really hard» or «I just want to sing». «Keep it real», a word on hip-hop singers’ lips, is indeed the key to the success of *The Rap of China*.

The so-called “real” has several meanings in this show. The most fundamental meaning here is “being yourself” or “following your heart”, or briefly, being real in personality or attitude. Admittedly, the success of *The Rap of China* is closely related to the conception of the entire program, the charm of hip-hop culture, the “marvelous” editing, as well as the highlights of competition and confrontation, but all these are essentially built on the personalities of the contestants. If the early talent shows represented by “Super Girls” underline idols more than professionals and personal charm more than musical intelligence, the ensuing shows represented by *The Voice of China* instead attach more importance to professionalism than idolism. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, the public’s attraction to idols or personalities usually exceeds that for professionalism.



Figure 1. A Stage Photo of Season 1 of *The Voice of China*.

This is probably the main reason for the popularity of singers from *The Voice of China*, such as Momo Wu, who are remembered by the audience primarily owing to their highly individualized and distinctive voices and images rather than top-notch professionalism. The unexpected rise of *The Rap of China* has largely achieved a certain balance between idol and singer as well as between personality and professionalism. On the one hand, as a well-developed music style strange to the public, hip-hop has sufficient professional “argots” to quench the audience’s curiosity, like “single-word rhyme”, “double-word rhyme” and “diss” (battle between rappers via songs). On the other hand, almost every rapper who emphasizes “attitude” has a personality striking enough for the audience to remember. They not only wear stylish, individualized costumes, but also have sufficient language proficiency to express something more complicated, interesting, and “real” than a simple word like “I just love music”. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the personality exhibited by these rappers is quite masculine, some even androcentric. Offensiveness, frankness and a sense of loyalty prove to be the commonalities of these singers (both male and female) in personality. Without regard to the angle of gender politics (discrimination against female and homosexual groups embodied in hip-hop culture is also a common interest of study), the audience’s appreciation of this personality-



Figure 2. A screenshot of *The Rap of China*.

type may somewhat be related to their weariness with Camp aesthetics in talent shows or variety shows like *U can U BiBi* and *Jin Xing Show* over the past few years.

The second meaning of “real” is breaking the rules of the program. As the contestant PG One complains, the show always determines the competition rules the day before, which, however, will be broken due to various exceptions (for example, Will Pan asked his mentee to stay, Shin quitted helping to sing and so on). However, it is the arbitrary breaking of rules that has resulted in stronger dramatic conflicts in the program, thereby allowing the audience to feel more real, as if the show is constantly transcending the “routines” designated by itself. This is also conspicuous in *Go fighting!*, another Chinese variety show from the same period, which usually presents the battle-of-wits between stars and directors. The rules established by the show are often broken or modified, and will even evolve into the stars’ “freestyle” (free improvisation).

However, all anti-rules and anti-routines in front of the television camera ultimately constitute the final rules and routines of the show. In front of the “ubiquitous” cameras and televisions, there seems to be nothing that can truly go beyond the routines of entertainment, including “reality”. When something is eventually presented on the screen, be it the personality of contestants or the breaking of rules, it is hard to tell whether they are indeed “real” or just “show”.

2. The politics of hip-hop

This is a question that people often ask when facing topics like “reality show”, mass media and even “The Society of Spectacle”. It is particularly powerful in the face of hip-hop, because “keep it real” can be considered the most fundamental creed of hip-hop culture. But when these rappers on the screen mention “keep real” frequently, does the “real” refer to a belief, an attitude, or just a performance? This “real”

question touches on the core of hip-hop culture, and also directly concerns the issue we are discussing: the politics of hip-hop.

As a street culture born in the ghettos of New York in the 1970s, mainly among African-Americans, Caribbean Americans and Latino youths, hip-hop in itself has a more real political orientation that points straight to politics. Hip-hop was first developed as an entertainment means to support dancing or liven up the atmosphere, but its prominent advantages in expression enabled it to gradually take on more political functions. It has become the optimal weapon for rappers to reflect or criticize reality, covering a wide range of issues such as drug abuse, violent law enforcement, and racial discrimination in the ghettos. In 1982, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, hip-hop pioneers, released a song named *The Message*, which first delivered the "message" of the ghettos to the world outside, and generated a high benchmark for succeeding hip-hop music: «Broken glass everywhere/People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care/I can't take the smell, can't take the noise/Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice». Run-DMC expresses and preaches racial pride (so some say hip-hop has established the confidence of a race) in *Proud to be Black. N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitudes)*, representative band of Gangsta Rap, directly describes the violent law enforcement of police in the ghettos, and calls for *Fuck the police*. Compared with N.W.A. their street rival, "Public Enemy", another milestone band in the history of hip-hop, is more politically ambitious, and displays a distinct black nationalistic tendency and an inclination toward black extremism. Many of their songs are prone to political mobilization, such as *Fight the Power* or *Party for Your Right to Fight*. The relationship between hip-hop and politics is so solid that apart from core issues like racism and the rich-poor gap, hip-hop and issues like anti-semitism, feminism, islamism and anti-homosexualism are also common research topics. Of course, it does not mean that hip-hop is always political. Actually, as hip-hop achieved great commercial success, two major branches came into being within it: the first branch is "hard-core", representing hip-pop with keen «social consciousness and ra-

cial pride backed by driving rhythms»; the second branch is usually branded as “pop”, which rarely involves social content, and mainly reclaims the «common territory between races and classes, usually devoid of social message» (Dyson, 2004, p. 64). Though hip-hop today has already become very mainstream and commercial pop music, its political and critical nature will not vanish. As analyzed by Michael Eric Dyson, hip-hop is essentially a bridge between two important traditions in black culture, namely music and preaching, and the latter is inseparable from religion, history, culture and politics in black tradition (Dyson, 2004, p. 66).

For composers of hip-hop like Public Enemy, «language is a bullet and hip-hop a pistol». Owing to its superiority in rhythm and lyrics as well as its consequential stirring influence, hip-hop in itself contains a powerful political force. Although hip-hop spreads without being fermented in ghettos most of the time all around the world, this political attribute has always been a part of hip-pop. Political hip-hop and conscious rap remain important branches of hip-hop, and even some pop-inclined hip-pop has a lot to do with political issues. The same is the case with China. The origins of Chinese rappers differ significantly from those of their American predecessors. The former are mostly from the middle class and even intellectual or well-off families, but the desire for political expression

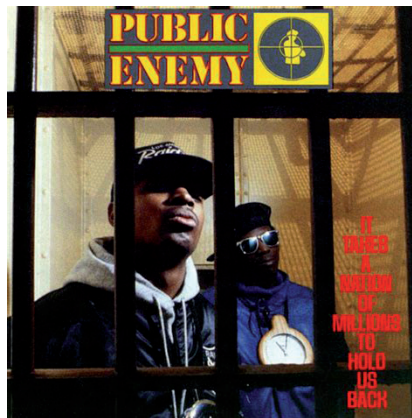


Figure 3. Album cover of Public Enemy.

always accompanies Chinese hip-pop. In a sense, Cui Jian, the founding father of Chinese rock, is also a pioneer of Chinese hip-hop. Since 1985, he has composed hip-hop-featuring songs like *Country Surrounding the City*, and the ensuing *It's Not That I Don't Understand* and *Night of the Times* are also something that can broadly be defined as rap music. Like many of Cui Jian's songs, his hip-hop songs have strong political implications, and Cui is still emphasizing the critical spirit of hip-hop (see Yang, 2017). His rap is more concerned with the charm of rhythmic music, but has not yet joined the entire hip-hop culture. However, it has made hip-hop music attached to a strong political significance since its very birth in the mainland. China's underground hip-hop later also manifests no lack of political reflection and criticism.

As a prevalent youth subculture known for rebellion, hip-hop also harbors great potential in the generalized cultural politics. If *The Voice of China* and *I Am a Singer* have restructured the voice and locked the sentiments and passion inside the ears of aestheticism so that people will consciously choose the romantic or stimulating voices that can activate emotional memory, while unconsciously rejecting the critical voices (Zhou, 2013, p. 5), hip-hop can burst through listeners' eardrums and through their aestheticism, in that compared with the traditional aesthetic taste of the Chinese public, hip-pop, a musical form that highlights rhythm and critical lyrics while playing down the melody, seems something akin to noise, which per se implies politics:

As summarized by Hu Jiangfeng: "First, noise is a confrontation against the mainstream culture (interfering with the reproduction and delivery of ideological information, defiling the divine, challenging the authorities, and conveying prohibited contents)"; Second, the noise reproduces eccentric stylistic codes (overstepping the codes of dressing and conduct, the confusing semantic mechanism, and defying the established codes); Third, noise has altered the relationship between the audience and artists (everyone can be an artist in an anarchy). (Zhou, 2013, pp. 7–8)



Figure 4. Cui Jian.

3. De-politicization of *The Rap of China*

However, in spite of the fact that sessions such as “freestyle”, “battle” (one-to-one or group-to-group contests between rappers, and the default rule is that rappers can attack each other without any restraint on the stage, but off the stage, no one should take this attack seriously), and “diss” have exhibited the hip-hop culture quite completely, *The Rap of China* is largely established upon the de-politicization of hip-hop. Through interviews with staff behind the scenes, we learn that the show is positioned as “youth, sunshine, positive energy”, followed by a strict selection of the participants, which has excluded some singers considered inappropriate on political grounds.

In addition, more subtle de-politicization is realized by emphasizing the professionalism or skills of hip-hop. There is nothing wrong with such emphases for a show designed to popularize hip-hop music. The production team draws on the way in which game graphics are presented, and analyzing professional skills with colored words has not only become a special point, but also serves as a must to highlight the competitiveness of the show. Nevertheless, this maneuver, intentionally or unintentionally, weakens the inner

strength of hip-hop, as if hip-hop is just an oral skill, and *The Rap of China* seems to become a quasi-sports competition.

Through emphases on rapping skills and competitiveness, *The Rap of China* has further spectacularized hip-hop, and largely isolated politics, contents and even originality. A major difference between *The Rap of China* and *The Voice of China* is that songs in the former are primarily original, while those in the latter are cover versions. The “Keep it Real” belief, the pursuits of self-expression, and the distinctive impromptu and “remix” techniques (the revival of original songs by remixing and recomposing them) of hip-hop culture preclude the possibility that rappers can accept a singing competition requiring them to cover others’ works, but the show has intentionally evaded such originality through its programming, which is associated directly with experience and reality. Almost half of the time in the show is spent in examining rappers’ ability and skill via different means like “free style and “teamwork”. Rappers are offered the opportunity to present their original works independently till the Final Six. But such originality is then diluted by sessions like co-singing with the help of guest singers. In this way, *The Rap of China* effectively maintains its competitiveness, performance and entertainment, but at the same time, it also conveys more messages that can be delivered on music. Unlike originality-oriented talent shows such as *Sing my song*, *The Rap of China* has impressed the audience more with the show itself and those contestants with distinctive personality than with the songs therein. Therefore, *The Rap of China* has successfully set off a new star-making movement, but fails to produce heart-touching songs. By emphasizing professionalism and skills, it has also shifted the audience’s attention from language contents to language forms. The skills, musicality and attitude emphasized and exemplified by the show have weakened the power of the hip-hop lyrics themselves, thereby covertly incorporating hip-hop into pop culture. The show has almost wiped out all the political connotations in hip-hop, and finally solely hollow pose for the sake of showing ostensible personality and rebellion are left, other than several singers’ reflection upon certain social phenomena (such as drunk driving and abandoned

children). It must be admitted that these poses are an inherent part of hip-hop culture, but personality and expression can originally co-exist in them. With contents and expressions being removed, personality seems more of a performance.

However, this kind of performance just caters to the trait of “show” in reality shows, which has become an essential guarantee for audience ratings after the editing and reorganization of the show. For example, although PG One’s song: *H.M.E* “disses” many contestants and even criticizes the programming, all this is confined to the “security zone” allowed by the show. The strong smell of gunpowder has turned into a unique selling point of the show. It has defined “diss” or confrontations, which come from the show and finally return to it. The only thing beyond the expectations of the show is the grudges between double champions, namely Gai and PG One, which involve some lingering rancor between the groups to which they belong respectively, and their battle has gone public. As commented when considerable fans intervened in the squabble, the confrontation between them is not so much a “diss” in the hip-pop community as a Chinese-style flame war between fans. And based on this incident, both parties have further determined their fan groups, and consolidated their positions in the Chinese-style groupie system (See li, 2017).



Figure 5. Co-Winners of *The Rap of China*: Gai and PG One.

In this way, *The Rap of China* has almost minimized the political efficacy of hip-hop. It has confrontation but no resistance, battles but no criticism. These confrontations, battles or “beefs” (conflicts or grudges between rappers), whether true or not, in or outside the show, ultimately move towards an entertaining effect. And those unruly hip-hop singers also appear fragile after entering the entertainment battlefield. Regardless of political criticism, they have difficulty even withstanding the public opinion. The author originally expected that the hip-hop culture featuring high ego respect and personalized attitude could strike a blow to the pan-moralism in China’s current online public opinion environment. Regrettably, these hip-hop singers even lack the strength to land a single blow in its presence, which has further restricted the impact of *The Rap of China* on cultural politics.

By “pan-moralism” we mean a doctrine which “raises everything to a higher plane of principle and two-line struggle”, makes moral judgements unreasonably, and imposes some harsh moral standards over others. Nowadays, it frequently happens in cyberspace. “Keyboard warriors” — a group of people who are keen on not only gossiping and amusing themselves but also on acquiring pleasure from judging others by making an entertaining moral distinction between different people — judge everything. The author regards such “pan-moralism” as populist moralism, that is to say, a pseudo-political game spontaneously carried out by the public excluded from real political engagement. By clearly defining the black and the white, distinguishing the good from the bad as well as behaviors like “labeling” and “name calling”, people can experience political passion and moral superiority by muzzling dissidents and uniting the supporters.

Such “pan-moralism” confronts celebrities with the constant risk of being morally abducted, and this risk encourages some sort of hypocrisy, which in turn nurtures the public via the celebrity effect, and further breeds pan-moralism. The author once hoped that hip-hop culture would resist this cheap moral judgement to a cer-

tain extent. On the one hand, the style of “following one’s own course”, which is highly advocated by the hip-hop culture, may dilute the pan-moralistic dimension of the target audience. On the other hand, the hip-hop stars who go from the “underground” to the “ground” may show a more personalized and uncompromising attitude to resisting pan-moralism. Furthermore, the hip-hop culture may also bring more diversified and tolerant values to China, because hip-hop in itself is a diversified, tolerant and constantly developing culture. It combines music from Latin America with European electronic music, Hong Kong Kung Fu movies and other cultural forms from different regions and ethnic groups. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is the reason why it can take root and sprout swiftly across the globe. Its diversified and tolerant values are precisely what the current China lacks. As will be analyzed below, hip-hop, somewhat unrestricted and ambiguous in terms of value stance, can accommodate seemingly contradictory things.

Facts have proved that the author was too optimistic. This confrontation is destined to be asymmetrical and a lost cause from its very beginning. Rappers in *The Rap of China* can participate in the competition only if they acquiesce to some rules and values preset by the show. Accordingly, they must accept the pan-moralistic value arising from these values in their rise to fame. Pan-moralism is



Figure 6. The famous hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan, distinctly affected by Kung Fu films, as its name suggests.

almost the chassis of China's current network ideology, whose dissidents will be overthrown by the ensuing flame of public opinion. Only hip-hop stars, who can conform to this pan-moralistic atmosphere, will be truly accepted by the public, so after being filtered by *The Rap of China*, these stars have to whitewash themselves actively and become mainstream stars with «both virtue and skills». The competition process has offered a glimpse of this. Some comments indicate that Chinese-style fans have tried to “naturalize” these rappers with the idol standard featuring «being attracted by one's appearance, then falling for one's talents, and finally remaining faithful to one's virtues». Other fans are keen to explore these rappers' “dark history”, namely moral stains, so as to gain pleasure from “revealing the truth” or “plot reversal”. Aside from those behaviors that run contrary to laws, regulations, and public ethics, abundant accusations against these rappers derive from the standards set by pan-moralists themselves. Such rigorous moral judgments are not only extreme for ordinary people but even poles apart from the hip-hop culture. Admittedly, we can ask Chinese hip-hop to be clean and pure on the grounds of “hip-hop with Chinese characteristics”, but as a youth subculture originating from streets and ghettos, hip-hop itself contains genes of rebellion, which, to a large extent, result in its political sense. Therefore, hip-hop culture had to move towards a confrontation with pan-moralism if it intended to gain ascendance, or to be comprehensively understood or even accepted by the public. The result of this confrontation was terrible. Despite some ups and downs, no one had anticipated that the notorious PG One affair would smother budding hip-hop by the end of the year. The ground-losing timeline of this affair must be well-known by followers of entertainment news: First of all, PG One and Li Xiaolu were suspected of adultery, and then his songs were removed from online platforms for alleged offence, followed by a spill-over to other rappers. It is still uncertain whether they can continue to appear in the mainstream media. Aside from the infractions or transgressions of individual rappers, this unexpected situation is clearly related to the

conflict between hip-hop and mainstream values, or to the mainstream values' rejection of hip-hop, notwithstanding the fact that those rappers who came to fame from *The Rap of China* have spared no effort to move closer to the mainstream.

In this sense, in respect of the broadly-defined cultural politics, the impact of *The Rap of China* on mainstream culture may not compare to that of Joseeh Punmanlon's *My Skating Shoes*, which has provoked current musical aesthetics and the entertainment industry by virtue of its unprofessional or even lower-than-average musical competence. Moreover, in an era dominated by visual media, *My Skating Shoes* first reached and stirred the audience through the form of pure sound. This kind of impact and novelty seem much like the feelings evoked in people by the emergence of hip-hop bands like N.W.A. However, despite the sincerity of Punmanlon's song, it is simple in content, and lacks cultural, political connotations. And fueled by the production team and the media, it was eventually digested by the carnival-like entertainment dimension.

4. Between politics and capital: the ambiguous hip-hop culture

By removing politics and highlighting entertainment against the charm of hip-hop culture, *The Rap of China* has achieved tremendous commercial success. Prior to the PG One affair, many singers in the show had entered the mainstream media and achieved both fame and wealth, while some almost performed in the Spring Festival Gala. Nonetheless, the mainstreaming process of hip-hop has always been accompanied by criticism, while for fans of some "obstinate" underground rappers or those who consider that the spiritual property of hip-hop outweighs the entertainment, commercial success precisely amounts to abandoning the hip-hop spirit.

However, unlike the rock stars who often plunge into discomfort or even depression when moving to the "ground", these hip-hop singers who enter the mainstream appear quite unperturbed and

contented, as if they have not experienced any value tearing. As a musical form adept in self-expression, hip-hop is also appropriate for advertising for others. Since *The Rap of China* shot to popularity, the advertisement of almost any commodity may feature a hip-hop singer. The various costumes and styles of hip-hop singers have also created new consumption hotspots. This situation is almost the same as that in the United States twenty or thirty years ago. Transformed by genius hip-hop singers and producers such as Dr. Dre and Jay-Z, hip-hop, which was originally born in the ghettos and rejected by mainstream society, quickly captured the pop music market. The entire hip-hop culture, regardless of style or behavior, has been transformed into a new consumer trend, which also includes the core belief of "keep it real". In a sense, the foundation for *The Rap of China* to entertain the public is exactly the belief in "keeping it real", on which the personality of all rappers is based.

This is the complexity of things. There must be some sort of conflict between entertainment and personality, because entertainment has to cater to the preferences of the majority, whereas personality precisely means uniqueness. If entertainment can co-exist with personality, there may be at least two reasons for this. First, this is not a true personality. Any personality seen through the window of entertainment is a produced personality, and this point of view is actually a habitual position taken by critics of mass culture. There may be a second reason, that is, some balance can be achieved between entertainment, business, money and personality. Although entertainment will transform personality to suit the public, the public will ultimately become dissatisfied with such transformations and seek new personality. After all, people have an irresistible urge to pursue personality or "reality", which always seesaws with entertainment: personality keep on breaching entertainment, while entertainment keep on including the personality.

Simmel pointed this out when analyzing fashion, «(fashion) provides a universal rule to turn individual behavior into a templet. And meanwhile, it meets the demand for diversity, variety and individ-

uality» (Simmel, 2001, p. 72). The same is true for entertainment trends that are constantly transforming between “alternative” and “mainstream”.

Therefore, entertainment is not a stagnant pool of water that can engulf everything. Quite the contrary, waves stirred by personality can keep it flowing. The most fascinating trait of hip-hop for the author is its complete assimilation of the binary oppositions between entertainment and personality, money and ego, as well as material and spirit. Most of the singers who participated in *The Rap of China* did not conceal their pursuit of fame and fortune. For example, the previous Weibo name of Gai is «Sir Gai only loves money» Such a naked money-worshipping attitude is so “real”, embedded in the real environment and personal situation, but more importantly, is deeply rooted in the hip-hop culture itself. As a kind of music and culture born in the ghettos, hip-hop has never been separated from the original clamor of the dance music in ghetto ballrooms to the explosiveness of gangsta rap. So money and fame naturally are the dominant themes. Consequently, this kind of mammonism or materialism has always been deeply rooted in hip-hop culture. Both the desire for beautiful things and fancy cars or the exaggerated gold accessories in terms of costumes have embodied naked material desires. For this reason, rappers who walk from the underground to the ground, from being unknown to being rich and famous, do not share a similar psychological burden to some rock singers.

Perhaps a contrast with rock can help us further understand this trait of hip-hop. Of course, our distinction here is mainly in culture rather than musical form. In terms of music, hip-hop and rock can be completely integrated, and both of them stem from black music. In fact, as far back as the early days of hip-hop’s development, there was a fusion of hip-hop and rock. For example, the Beastie Boys in New York tried to fuse punk with hip-hop in the 1980s. They achieved great success, but were also exposed to hostility from black hip-hop, which argued that they were just selling hip-hop. Regardless of these complex entanglements, we can roughly conclude

from the general source of culture that since the birth of hip hop, the mainstream participants of hip-hop have mostly come from black ghettos, whereas those of rock have mostly come from middle-class white families (the Beastie Boys are proof), and this fact has an important impact on the former's materialism and the latter's respect for spiritual expression. Besides, the growth of both hip-hop and rock singers usually derives from underground, in that both can indicate their living or mental state prior to their rise to fame or to going mainstream (such as independence, resistance and non-commercialization), but in hip-hop, "underground" has a more specific referent, that is, its cradle—ghettos or streets. Therefore, in a way, "underground" is more important for hip-hop than rock. "Street" or "underground" is the place where hip-hop singers live and become famous but also strive to escape. It is the source of creation, and a label of culture, hence the half-truth splendor and disorders of streets rendered by "gangsta rap". In brief, "underground" is the home of the "belief" that hip-hop singers want to escape but also cling to. For established hip-hop singers, it is a utopia that can be actualized by escaping. This is another paradox of hip-hop culture. For the audience of *The Rap of China*, the "underground" of rappers seems to be a mysterious parallel world. Those rebellious rappers with distinctive personalities and diverse styles sit together like the valorous man in *Water Margin*, which has satisfied Chinese people's pampered imagination of "the wide world".

In this sense, we can say that "underground" is the root of hip-hop, and the symbol of its self-marketing. These two aspects are not in the relationship of "either-or", but in the relationship of "in-between". The author calls such a relationship «the irony of hip-hop». The identity of hip-hop as a contradictory mixture is closely related to its in-depth spiritual temperament. Hip-hop culture embraces many of these "in between" opposites: attachment and escape to underground, singing and speaking, entertainment and personality, material and spirit, sincerity and self-glorification, originality and copy, brotherhood and enmity. The contradictions therein and the

difficulty in characterizing it are just like the elusive mind state of youth. Such contradictions and variability, coupled with the self-criticism often revealed in hip-hop, altogether make hip-hop more difficult to characterize. Since hip-hop singers can «diss heaven and earth», that is to say, satirize and criticize everything, they can naturally “diss” themselves. The mutual “diss” between rappers can also be regarded as the self-“diss” of hip-hop culture. Hip-hop singers who “diss” each other all think that they are the true rappers, and hip-hop culture is actually their sum, which means that hip-hop itself can contain various seemingly mutually hostile faces. This kind of self-criticism and hubbub have enabled hip-hop to become a culture of continuous growth, expansion and tolerance. «It has the flexibility that other cultures have no equal, and it can adjust itself to adapt to various situations at any time» (Nelson, 2003, p. 90). In the author’s opinion, the contradiction, two-sidedness, self-reflexivity and subsequent unpredictability, inclusiveness and variability constitute the real core of hip-hop. In this sense, though many rappers are not satisfied with the Taiwanese translation of “hip-hop” as “嘻哈”, the author believes that it is a wonderful interpretation of “hip-hop”: hip-hop singers, laughing and joking, can “diss” each other scathingly on the stage, and then conjure up their brotherhood off the stage. Hip-hop can criticize the mainstream with the most extreme language, and transform itself as a part of the mainstream subsequently. It can be reality or performance... In a word, after a fierce critique anything, hip-hop can turn around or make a getaway by means of self-criticism or ironic postures. Due to this irony, its getaway is not hypocritical. This is the craft and wisdom from the streets, or a hip-hop attitude. For this reason, hip-hop singers who draw close to the mainstream culture with a flattering attitude are not astonishing, but in the face of a strong and single mainstream culture, it seems that even this kind of attitude has ceased to have effect.

The relationship between hip-hop, political rebellion and capital logic should also be understood from this perspective. It has been

mentioned above that due to historical reasons and formal characteristics, hip-hop can be described as one of the most politically resistant popular cultures today, but such political resistance does not exclude capital logic. This kind of resistance is also likely to be commercially profitable. In the eyes of some hip-hop researchers, even Public Enemy, the most politically influential band in hip-hop's history, merely «sells politics as a product» (Nelson, 2003, p. 190). However, this judgment is not conclusive. The “selling” does not indicate that its songs are hypocritical or opportunistic, which is a non-reflective conclusion usually inferred by people who believe in the binary opposition between business and resistance. The facts are possibly more complicated. As researchers point out, in terms of the history of hip-hop development, it is precisely the success of capital or business that has made it politicized, «by enlarging the creative terrain of rap production, commodification, ironically, has forged open spaces that now include styles and performances that nourish rather than impoverish resistive discourses» (Watkins, 2004, p. 571). It is the increasing commercial attention gained by hip-hop that advances the emergence of aforementioned “message rap” and bands such as the Public Enemy. Most hip-hop singers from the bottom of society hanker for commercial success, and this is understandable as a part of the “American Dream”. Such commercial successes have also made black youths more confident, for before that, they might always be prejudicially regarded as criminal-minded and lacking industriousness, intelligence, and a commitment to work (Watkins, 2004, p. 570). In other words, for those low-born hip-hop singers, success, fame, and money the pursuits of so-called “materialism” are exactly integral parts of their “spiritual pursuit”, and here there is no elitist distinction between “material” and “spirit”. Moreover, while being transformed by business, hip-hop is actually changing the business or entertainment industry. Thanks to hip-hop, many new record companies, magazines, TV shows and advertising companies have been set up, and more importantly, it has provided new promotion channels for many young cultural workers (Watkins,

2004, p. 572), especially black cultural workers. These channels have expanded into fields like film, television and sports as well as music. All of the above can reflect the transformative power brought by hip-hop to broadly defined “cultural politics” from a certain dimension. Of course, it remains to be seen whether this situation works for China.

5. Hip-hop and the expression of youth experience

For those who believe in an absolute binary opposition between entertainment and politics, business or reality, this ambiguous attitude of hip-hop towards them may still require criticism. The author holds that entertainment itself is a part of political reality. The reform of the entertainment industry or cultural industry will also affect the political reality. Despite some indirect impact, nowadays it may be too idealistic to count on a young subculture to directly, powerfully intervene in real politics. Returning to *The Rap of China* and China’s hip-hop itself, the difference in national conditions makes China’s hip-hop more reliant on capital operations and the entertainment industry than in the United States, and it also lacks public space for free expression. Moreover, the current mainstream media, namely visual television and online video, also essentially



Figure 7. Publicity shot of Public Enemy.

frame the conditions of “pop”: first, works should have not only expressiveness but also performativity; second, most of the time, they relies on the operation of a driving force behind the scenes.

Nonetheless, despite the limited transformation, *The Rap of China* has still brought about some minor opportunities to the development of the current entertainment industry and cultural politics. Although these opportunities seem to stop abruptly with the occurrence of the PG One affair, the effect is still there. In terms of the musical form, hip hop will undoubtedly enrich the Chinese domestic pop music market, and expand the aesthetic taste of Chinese audiences. The musical taste of Chinese people has long favored melody rather than rhythm. It follows that hip-hop will inevitably have to face this contrast between rhythm and melody if it is to truly enter the mainstream market. According to current international mainstream music trends and aesthetic habits of the public, melody will necessarily incorporate rhythm and rap to a certain extent, but what kind of rhythm is to be incorporated? Whether to choose “trap” or “phoenix legend” is also a question. Beyond the music industry, more importantly, the spread of *The Rap of China* and hip-hop has offered young people an effective means of experience communication, which is the greatest contribution of the show to cultural politics, and also provides a possibility for subsequent development. Hip-hop's natural attraction for young people, and non-restraint in voices and singing skills will continue to expand its audience base. It is foreseeable that hip-hop will produce a greater impact on the cultural life of Chinese youth today.

The greatest import of hip-hop for young people is that it allows them to express themselves and becomes a tool for liningk expressions with experience. Experience is the source of expression, while expression can also promote the generation and perception of experience. If mainstream pop music is presently a cultural product based on “experience poverty”, the characteristics of hip-hop itself give it the advantage of conveying more experience and expression. Undoubtedly, this is an era of experience poverty. The high-speed operation of the commodity economy makes experience all the more transient and ho-

mogenized. The extension of virtual space makes it more illusory and rarefied. As increasing people tend to label the younger generation as “Otaku”, “Female Otaku” “Two-Dimensional Space”, and “Buddha-Like Youngsters”, in this era of “visual-first” memes, hip-hop singers seem to let people hear the voice of youngsters intensively for the first time. This is surprising enough, albeit there may be puerility and imitation in these voices. Compared with self-entertainment at home or the spree of “bullet screen”-style cliques in virtual space, this way of voicing is close to “intervention” in a certain sense. It follows that in terms of music, there is no alternative musical form to hip-hop that is closer to experience, self-expression and intervention with the society, and even the promising rock is no exception. Since the youth’s acceptance of rock has become increasingly aesthetic and emotional, the originally lesser-known Post Rock and various types of Indie Rock have turned out to be the mainstream. The beautiful rock songs with enjoyable lyrics or even without lyrics are unlikely to withstand the shouts and anger. They are likely to be replaced by hip-hop’s strong rhythms and complex lyrics.

If we regard the 1960s and 1970s as the golden age of rock and the Woodstock Festival in 1969 as the peak of rock’s intervention with politics, even if rock has been developing as music since then, the youth community once constructed as a political force by rock (of course, this is an imaginary community) has become increasingly incompact with the unceasing differentiation of various rock styles. In contrast, although hip-hop has evolved into different branches to date, this youth community tied together by the hip-hop culture appears to be more cohesive and identity conscious. The connection of this cultural community itself has a political implication: «Hip hop enables its participants to imagine themselves as part of a larger community; thus, it produces a sense of collective identity and agency. To be sure, this particular movement constitutes a distinct mode of intervention in the social world» (Watkins, 2004, p. 566).

In the theme song entitled *Fight for Hip-hop* led by MC Jin and performed by several rappers in the finale of *The Rap of China*, the same

sentence is repeated time and again, «be you mainstream or underground/ if only you respect/this culture/we are in the same family», which describes the hip-hop family or community. This imaginary community can blend hip-hop's many opposites together, such as mainstream and underground. The lyrics begin with "Peace and Love". Indeed, we can take labels like "spirit of rebel", "street culture", "materialism", "offensive and aggressive posture" to generalize hip-hop (Nelson, 2003, p. 190), but in fact, "Peace and Love" is also a deep value of hip-hop. We can say that "Peace and Love" is the greatest common factor of *The Rap of China* that moderates hip-hop and mainstream culture, or that hip-hop culture has re-summed this value through the television platform. In any case, the publicizing of this value can also be seen as a way for the hip-hop community to intervene in the world. Of course, other than "Peace and Love", for the imaginary community of this youth subculture, I think the most meaningful is its belief of "keeping it real". Different people have different understandings of this belief, but anyway, any pursuit of "reality" seems particularly valuable in this era. Feeling, introspecting, expressing, clinging to, and creating reality all contain the childlike heart of youth. To a certain extent, any youth subculture that is truly politically resistant must be based on this belief, because young people tend to look upon the dualism of youths vs. adults as the dualism of truth vs. falsehood. The political resistance of youth subculture aims precisely at the adult, mainstream, hypocritical world. In this sense, "keep it real" naturally becomes the potential belief of any politically resistant youth subculture.

Based on Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalysis, we can even interpret this belief as an endless exploration of "the Real".

Conclusion: The ghost of hip-hop

After the unmasking of the PG One affair, the fate of hip-hop in China is still unknown. It is basically predictable that even if relevant regulations have been attenuated, hip-hop in China is unlikely to cause a

stir like that when *The Rap of China* was broadcast. On the one hand, disturbances arising from “hip-hop” have engendered certain mainstream audience stereotypes of hip-hop; while on the other hand, it is built upon the mass entertainment consumption’s tendency toward «rejecting the old and craving for the new». Besides, the hip-hop that unduly “surrenders to” the mainstream, if any, has essentially become a kind of packaging. However, perhaps for this reason, hip-hop can return to a more authentic state. This incident will eliminate those fans blindly following public opinion, leaving only those who are truly loyal. Accordingly, beyond all vanity outside the screen, there may be some more real expressions. Although such expressions are incomparable to *The Rap of China* in terms of communication effectiveness, the latter has, after all, expanded the audience of hip-hop, so a hip-hop song may boast of the potential to penetrate the monopoly of visual media because of its intensity and reality in expression. Hip-hop in China may return to the underground, but it was originally the place where it came from and its utopia. It still exists like a ghost, which is destined to exist under the ground. In a sense, as a supplement to mainstream culture, any “sub” culture is itself a ghostly existence. This “ghostly” trait may be something we need to pay special attention to when studying a subculture, and is reflected not only in its emerging qualities, but also in its flitting relationship with the mainstream culture. More importantly, a ghost only visualizes itself to those who believe in its existence. For both researchers and fans, the so-called hip-hop spirit or rock spirit is such a ghost, and its existence and effectiveness in changing reality first derive from belief and respect. Based on this, the ghost or spirit will appear, no matter how blurred its shape is.

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PART II

CHINESE AESTHETICS FROM THE OUTSIDE

The Semiotics of the Battle

A Comparative Perspective

MASSIMO LEONE¹

Battle is an orgy of disorder.
G.S. PATTON²

ABSTRACT: The article compares different ways of representing multitudes of peoples in visual media and arts. It focuses, in particular, on the theme of the battle, which is one of the most depicted by human visual cultures across the epochs. Starting from two unachieved Renaissance paintings of battles, the *Battle of Anghiari* by Leonardo and the *Battle of Cascina* by Michelangelo, the article investigates how the two artists wondered philosophically and graphically about the effect of battle violence on the bodies of humans and horses. It, then, focuses on a stereotypical way of representing battles in present-day visual media, which involves the cliché cinematic reference to the *testudo* (turtle formation). Although reference to this typical Roman battle strategy is often anachronistic, it conveys a contemporary imaginary of the battle that, unlike those of Leonardo and Michelangelo — for whom memory of real and gruesome fights was still fresh — manifests an unrealistic, disembodied, and whitewashed imaginary of war, unaware of and inattentive to its disruptive potential.

KEYWORD: Battles; Depiction; Cultural Semiotics; Visual Semiotics; Cross-Cultural Comparison

1. University of Turin and Shanghai University. A first version of this paper was presented at the symposium “Contemporary Arts in China: A Comparative Semiotic Overview”, University of Shanghai, 25–26 September 2018. I thank all the participants, and in particular Prof. Zeng Jun, for the commentaries.

2. M. BLUMENSON (ed.) (1972–4), *The Patton Papers*, 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

1. Two battles in Florence

La battaglia di Anghiari, “the battle of Anghiari”³, is one of Leonardo da Vinci’s most mysterious artworks⁴. Commissioned in October 18, 1503 by Florence’s Gonfalonier Pier Soderini to decorate the “Salone dei Cinquecento” (Van Veen, 1981; Cecchi, 1996), the hall of the great council in Palazzo Vecchio — the main civic building of the city — it was only partially executed with a technique that made its colors extremely perishable⁵. About sixty years later, Giorgio Vasari, the first modern art historian and biographer of Leonardo, redecorated the hall and, between 1558 and 1563, covered Leonardo’s mural painting (Lessing, 1935; Waldman, 2014). It is still intriguingly debated whether some remnants of Leonardo’s original mural painting may still exist behind the current plaster (Hatfield, 2007). According to Vasari, Leonardo’s *Battle* was meant to decorate the right wall of the hall⁶, whereas the left wall was to display another *Battle*, *La battaglia di Cascina*, entrusted to Michelangelo. Unfortunately, the cartoon of this second painting, commissioned in the second half of 1504 and probably completed by November 1506, was never transferred onto the wall, was subsequently fragmented, and eventually lost.

Two of the most important Western artists ever therefore competed in a sort of third, symbolical meta-battle (Listri, 2003): through the two mural paintings, opposing each other in the same Florentine hall, they struggled to best render, within a still image, the turmoil of a battle. Battles are an exceedingly challenging topic for a painter⁷, for three reasons: first, faces and bodies display extreme expressions and postures, which are normally not seen in times of peace and quiet; second, humans, animals, and objects move through the battle in a frantic

3. On the history of the battle, see Capponi, 2011.

4. On this aspect, see Melani, 2012.

5. Among the most relevant bibliography on this artwork, see Suter, 1937; Pedretti, 1968, 1992, 2006; Kemp, 2006 (1981), pp. 226–39; Arasse, 1997, pp. 428–43; Zöllner, 1998; Vecce 2011.

6. On the location of the painting, see Newton, Spencer, 1982.

7. Classics on the topic include Consigli Valente 1986 (in particular, the essay by Federico Zeri); Hale, 1990; Brown, 1998; Boillet, Piéjus, 2002; Cuneo, 2002; Sestieri, 2008; Bonanate, 2016.

way, chaotically superimposing, overlapping, and clashing their bodies; third, and most importantly, this tumult of furiously moving entities does not involve just two or three characters but, typically, an uncountable multitude of them (Leone 2006). The painter, therefore, faces two parallel challenges: rendering through the immobility of the image the extreme mobility of the scene; and recreating through a finite number of characters the impression of the combatants' multiplicity.

Some drawings of Leonardo's *Battle*, some copies of Michelangelo's cartoon, and coeval descriptions of both are instructive about the way in which the two masters approached these challenges (Neufeld, 1949). A list of Leonardo's books compiled around the time of the painting of the *Battle of Anghiari* included «a book of horses sketched for the cartoon» (Hochstetler, 1984). Some of the drawings contained in the book are still extant. One of them, kept in the British Royal Collection, depicts *Expressions of Fury in Horses, a Lion and a Man* (Fig. 1). It was executed with pen and ink with wash and red chalk around 1503–1504.

Several features of the sketch would deserve attention but four of them are particularly relevant: first, Leonardo systematically compares



Figure 1. L. DA VINCI (c. 1503–4), *Expressions of Fury in Horses, a Lion and a Man*. Recto: Pen and ink with wash, and red chalk. Verso: Pen and ink with traces of black chalk, 19.6 x 30.8 cm (sheet of paper), RCIN 912326 (Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

the anatomy and the consequent expressions of fury in horses, lions, and humans, as though in order to pinpoint the main visual features conveying such extreme passion across animal nature. Second, he consistently dissects the expressive movements in their component stages, as though in order to isolate, among them, those that best evoke the peak of passion but also in order to be able to distribute, then, these different stages throughout the pictorial scene. Third, he analytically decomposes the elements that, within each expression, result in its overall composition, as though in order to visually emphasize those that most contribute to the gestalt of fury. Fourth, he graphically explores the combinatorics of these morphologies, chronologies, and mereologies, as though in order to come up with a personal but coherent visual language for the depiction of a battle.

Such a way of proceeding is even more evident in the 1517–18 pen and ink drawing representing *Horses, St George and the Dragon, and a Lion*, also kept in the British Royal Collection (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. L. DA VINCI (c. 1517–18), *Horses, St George and the Dragon, and a Lion*. Pen and ink, 29.8 x 21.0 cm (sheet of paper), RCIN 912331 (Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

Here Leonardo inscribed the following comment: «The serpent-like movement is the principal action in animals» (Clark, 1968; Attenborough, 2007, pp. 64–5). Again, several traits of this drawing are fascinating, yet one of them is strikingly significant: Leonardo tackles the aesthetic and semiotic challenge of representing a battle neither impressionistically nor by adopting a perspective going from the global to the local, from the general to the particular, and from the overview to the detail, but rather analytically. He deconstructs the visual scene of a battle in its components, seeks for their distinctive formal principle, transforms this principle into a formula, and then deploys a combinatorics that must subsequently result in the final syntagmatic of the battle.

As is well attested by other sketches, however, Leonardo seems to be perfectly aware that the visual and, therefore, the pictorial effect of this combinatorics is not linear but subject to a complex effect of scale, whose inner principles the Italian master aims to grasp not formally but through an unceasing both visual and verbal probing of the passage from the individual to the multitude. That is evident, for instance, in the *Study of Battles on Horseback and on Foot for The Battle of Anghiari*, a pen and ink on paper drawing currently kept in the Galleries of the Academy in Venice (Fig. 3).

The figures, elements, and parts that, in the above-mentioned studies, were so clearly articulated in their abstract and isolated depiction, now conflict, conflagrate, and sometimes conflate in the sketches, that is, in the drawings where they are as though animated by the narrative flux of the visual story, used as paradigmatic elements in the pictorial syntax of the battle. Those figures, elements, and parts of humans, animals, objects, and landscape are still visible, yet they are subject to a morphological agency that, exactly because of the energy of their conflicting with each other, renders them inexorably bedimmed, befogged, and beclouded, as if at risk of losing their form in the frenzy of the battle. Leonardo realized that, at the core of each battle, there acts a terrible force that somehow intro-

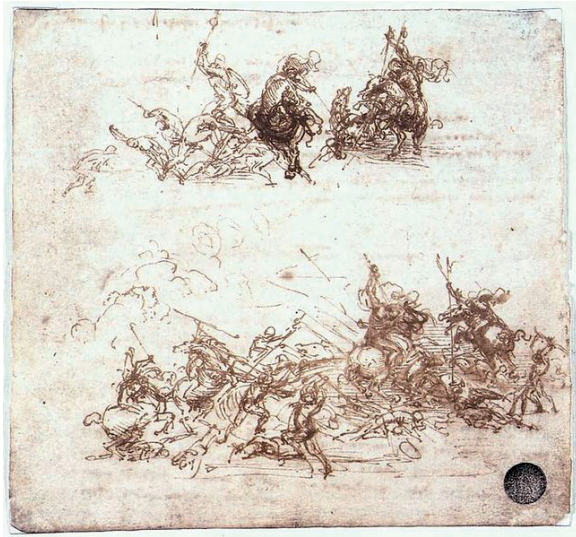


Figure 3. L. DA VINCI (1503–4), *The Battle of Anghiari, Study of Battles on Horseback and on Foot*. Pen and ink on paper. 5.70 x 5.98, Galleries of the Academy, Venice.

duces chaos in the order of nature, distorts its shapes, and brings about indistinctness instead of distinction (Lessing, 1934).

He, indeed, understood, indeed, the challenge of depicting a battle as the oxymoronic intent of representing both the articulation of details that give a battle its distinctive gestalt and their disarticulation in the turmoil resulting from their clash. That is precisely what Paul Valéry, a master of forms and their theory, detected in Leonardo's sketches:

Il adore les batailles, les tempêtes, le déluge. Il s'est élevé à les voir dans leur ensemble mécanique, et à les sentir dans l'indépendance apparente ou la vie de leurs fragments, dans une poignée de sable envolée éperdue, dans l'idée égarée de chaque combattant où se tord une passion et une douleur intime.⁸

[He adores the battles, the storms, the deluges. He has instructed himself to see them in their mechanical ensemble, and to feel them in the appa-

8. P. VALÉRY, *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (1896), Gallimard, Paris 1957, pp. 39–40.

rent independence or life of their fragments, in a handful of fleeting frantic sand, in the stray idea of each combatant where passion and intimate pain undulate]. (trans. mine)

Leonardo's beautiful technical prose also conveys the intent of striking a balance within this dialectics. Folios 111r and 110v of the Ms. A of the Institut de France in Paris contain one of Leonardo's most famous and commented passages (Marinoni 1986–90), known under the title of "Modo di figurare una battaglia", *On the Way of Representing a Battle*⁹. Among the insightful precepts, Leonardo suggests to his ideal interlocutor, an apprentice painter:

Farai molte sorte d'arme infra i piedi de' combattitori, come scudi rotti, lancie, spade rotte e altri simili cose.
[You must scatter arms of all sorts among the feet of the combatants, such as broken shields, lances, broken swords and other such objects].¹⁰

This and similar advice is underpinned by a constant worry (Fargo, 1994): that of instilling an aesthetics of chaotic multitude into the representation of a clash.

As regards Michelangelo's painting of a battle that was supposed to rival that of Leonardo, the central section of the cartoon was accurately copied by Bastiano da Sangallo around 1542 in an oil on wood canvas currently kept at the Holkham Hall, Norfolk, UK (Fig. 4).

Although visibly more preoccupied than Leonardo with the artistic problem of rendering the distortion of naked bodies in the midst of a battle, Michelangelo too seems to devote keen pictorial attention to the aesthetic difficulty of visually transmitting, at the same time, the singularity of the bodies and their multitudinous intertwining. That is even more evident in Michelangelo's preparatory

9. First edited in Richter, Richter, 1939, pp. 301–3, n. 601–2 (Part IX, *The Practice of Painting*; sec. V, *Suggestions for Compositions*).

10. *Come si deve figurare una battaglia*, ch. 47.

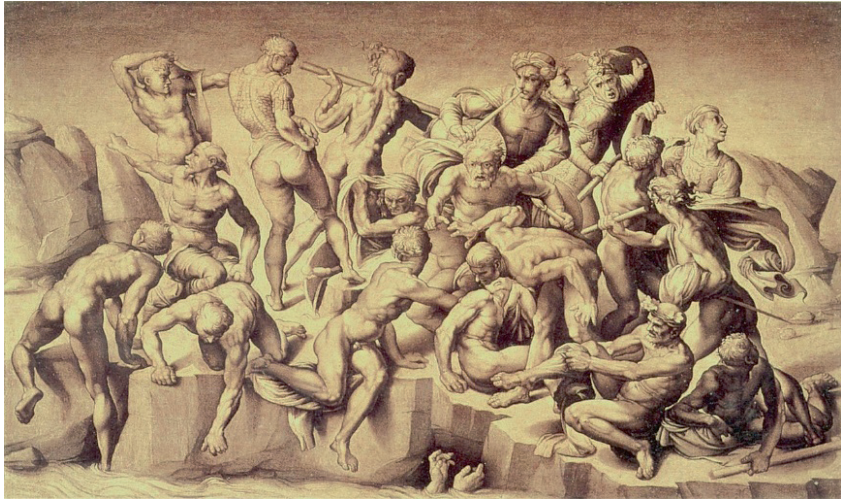


Figure 4. B. DA SANGALLO (c. 1542), *The Battle of Cascina*, 30.3 x 51.1 in. Copy of a section of Michelangelo's cartoon for a mural painting in the Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.



Figure 5. M. BUONARROTI (1505–6), *Study for the Battle of Cascina*. Chalk and silver rod on paper. 9.25 x 14.01. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

sketches, for instance the *Study for the battle of Cascina* currently kept in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence (Fig. 5).

The graphic emphasis here lies on the way the shape of the bodies is distorted by the explosive energy deflagrating in the battlefield; lines are less nervous and fragmented than in Leonardo, yet the idea of the battle as a human experience in which nature as it is known is completely revolutionized appears as powerful as in the studies for the *Battle of Anghiari*.

2. Eight Battles in Beijing

In January 2013 the Getty Research Institute acquired a series of eight Chinese battle prints dating from 1793–99. Known under the title of *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu* [平定廓爾喀戰圖], or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), they visually represent the victory of the Qianlong Emperor (reigned 1736–1795) against Nepalese warriors (Fig. 6; Fuchs, 1939, p. 121).

As the meticulous observation of a detail of one of these prints reveals (Fig. 7), the unknown artist was preoccupied with a different declination of the problem of representing a fighting multitude.



Figure 6. *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu*, or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), China ca. 1793. Copper engraving, 39.76 x 24.60 inches and smaller, the Getty Research Institute.

Whereas in Leonardo, at the core of the visual representation, lay the ambition of rendering the intimate grammar of the battling chaos, and whereas in Michelangelo such ambition was focused almost exclusively on the naked fragility of the human bodies, in these Chinese prints what strikes one the most is the way in which the destructive energy of the battle distorts the whole landscape, mingling humans, animals, and objects in its midst in a vortex that reminds one of the snake–curvilinear dynamic seized by Leonardo as the fundamental vector of battle commotion.

Although these Chinese prints were certainly inspired by previous and coeval European battle prints, brought by the Jesuits to China or sent there as gifts to the Chinese Emperors from the European courts, they nevertheless maintain a certain typically Chinese flavor. Indeed, whereas in 1765 the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, so as to commemorate his victory over Zhungar troops, had sent drawings made by Jesuit court artists, including Giuseppe Castiglione, to be engraved and printed in the royal workshops of Charles–Nicolas Cochin fils, in Paris, the same Emperor subsequently commissioned more celebratory series of engravings to Chinese artists, including



Figure 7. *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu*, or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), detail, China ca. 1793. Copper engraving, the Getty Research Institute.

the abovementioned *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas*, executed almost thirty years later. In these later engravings, at the core of the depiction lies not the representation of battling humans, animals, or objects, like in Leonardo and Michelangelo, but the typical Chinese depiction of a battle landscape.

3. A Battle in Russia

This cursory comparison indicates that depictions of battles are interesting to the semiotics of cultures from several points of view. First, they result from the human and especially artistic struggle to represent multitudes, movement, and the chaos that results from their tumultuous encounter. This challenge bears not only on aesthetics but also on politics: constructing a vivid visual memory of a past battle often serves purposes of identity, ideology, and propaganda. Second, this struggle is not even throughout history and geography. It is influenced and determined by a number of factors. Artists who depict battles must comply with the semiotic framework of their medium. Thus, in the series of lessons on *Cinema and Literariness* that Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein delivered at the State Institute of Cinematography in 1933, he mentioned Leonardo's *Modo di figurare una battaglia* as an example of a pre-cinematic text containing "cinematographisms", that is, ways of conceiving the visual rendering of reality — and especially the frantic moving reality of a battle — that foreran the invention of cinema and montage¹¹.

When, in 1938, the Russian director shot the historical drama *Alexander Nevsky*, he filmed the famous sequence of the battle on ice between Teutonic Knights and Russians, with the equally famous soundtrack of Sergei Prokofiev, following some of Leonardo's suggestions about the depiction of fog, bodily fragments, and especially clashing multitudes (Fig. 8).

11. See Ėjzenštejn, 1993, pp. 354–5; for a commentary, see Marshall, 1990. See also Nanni, Podzemskaia, 2012.

On the one hand, it is evident that Eisenstein's cinematic montage of this battling scene owes a lot to Leonardo's pictorial montage technically described in his *Modo di figurare una battaglia*. On the other hand, though, it is quite uncontroversial that the Russian director could render the aesthetics of a clashing multitude with an efficacy that was precluded to his Italian predecessor, and that was due to the adoption of a different medium.

4. Battling order

The first Chinese movie ever made also represents a battle. In 1905, Ren Qingtai (任庆泰) aka Ren Jingfeng (任景丰) directed *The Battle of Dingjunshan* (Fig. 9).

It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study of “first movies”, in order to reveal that which each culture in the world considered it urgent to represent as content of its first movie. In China, the relation between the cinematic representation of the battle and those offered by previous media immediately stood out. *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, indeed, was nothing but the recording of an opera with the same title staged at the Beijing opera in 1905. The opera, in



Figure 8. S. ĚJZENŠTEJN (1938), *Alexander Nevsky*; “The Battle on Ice”, Mosfilm, Soviet Union.

its turn, was based on 14th century historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, attributed to Luo Guanzhong (Fig. 10). Unfortu-



Figure 9. Ren Qingtai (任庆泰) aka Ren Jingfeng (任景丰) (1905), *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, Fengtai Photography, Beijing.



Figure 10. ANONYMOUS (1591), *Sacrificing to heaven and earth, the oath at the peach garden*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, from a Ming Dynasty edition of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (金陵萬卷樓刊本), Chapter 1, Peking University Library, Beijing.

nately, the only print of the first Chinese movie was lost in a fire, but the story became then the object of countless adaptations in the course of the 20th century.

The latest of them is *Red Cliff* or *Chibi* (Chinese: 赤壁), a 2008–9 two-part epic war movie by internationally acclaimed director John Woo (Fig. 11).

The movie depicts one of the key episodes of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, based on a real historical event otherwise known as the “Battle of Chibi”, which took place on the Yangtze river in the winter of AD 208–9 during the end of the Han dynasty, twelve years before the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. Woo’s movie is full of scenes of battle, each deserving a detailed commentary. One of them, though, is particularly worthy of consideration, that is, the long sequence that represents the allied forces launching an offensive on Cao Cao’s ground army. On the one hand, John Woo’s representation of the battle is clearly anachronistic. At one crucial moment, in particular, Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang’s allied forces form



Figure 11. J. Woo (2008–2009), *Red Cliff* or *Chibi* (chinese: 赤壁), Beijing Film Studio, China Film Group, Lion Rock Productions.

what is explicitly shown as a “testudo” military formation, through a visual reference to the turtle (Fig. 12).

In ancient Roman warfare, the *testudo* or tortoise formation was a type of shield wall formation commonly used by the Legions during battles, and particularly during sieges. *Testudo* is the Latin word for “tortoise”. This formation is mentioned in several ancient Roman sources and visually represented, for instance, in the reliefs of the famous Trajan Column in Rome (Fig. 13).

It is very unlikely, though, that a formation of this kind was actually in use in Chinese warfare at the time of the battle of Red Cliff. Sun Bin’s *Art of War* is a 4th century ancient Chinese classic work on military strategy written by Sun Bin (1996, 2001, and specially 2003), allegedly a descendant of Sun Tzu who served as a military strategist in the Qi state during the Warring States period. Chapter 17 lists ten soldier formations used at the time: the square formation, the circle formation, the spike formation, the goose formation, the hook formation, the loose formation, the numbered formation, the

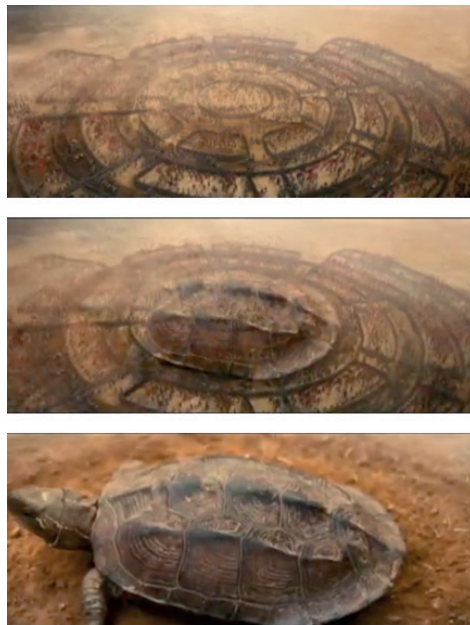


Figure 12. The testudo taking shape during the Battle of Chibi in John Woo’s *Red Cliff* (2008–9).

fire formation, the water formation, and the “Xuanxiang” (玄襄阵) formation. No mention is made, however, of the *testudo* formation.

John Woo’s, however, is not the only anachronistic use of the tortoise military formation in present-day cinematography. *The Last Kingdom* is a British historical fiction television series based on *The Saxon Stories*, a series of novels by Bernard Cornwell (Fig. 14).



Figure 13. *Testudo* military formation as represented in the reliefs of the Trajan column in Rome (113 AD).



Figure 14. *The Last Kingdom*, 2015, BBC 2.

It depicts many fictionalized epical battles between local Anglo-Saxons and Viking invaders. In the first episode, three Northumbrian eldermen lead their troops against the invading Vikings. At the battlefield, the Vikings form a *testudo* and wait in position while the Anglo-Saxons chaotically charge across the field (Fig. 15).

In the case of the Norse too, there is no historical evidence that they might have known what the *testudo* was. Only one medieval source, Abbo of Saint-Germaine, a French monk who was present at the Viking Siege of Paris in 886, describes the Vikings as battling in the formation of a *testudo*. In the *De bellis Parisiacæ urbis* or *Bella Parisiacæ urbis* (“Wars of the City of Paris”), a verse description of the siege, Abbo of Saint-Germaine mentions the soldier formation twice: «Et tanta miraretur testudine picta»; «Arma trucum terris fixa testudine giro» (MPL 132: 732). Most historians, however, agree that this author, for ideological reasons, was attributing to the Vikings a military cohesion and training that they would not actually have possessed.



Figure 15. Testudo formed by the Norse in *The Last Kingdom*.

Conclusion: Battling chaos

The anachronism of *The Last Kingdom* is, therefore, akin to that of *Red Cliff*. In both cases, the necessity of cinematographically imagining a battle resorts to a visual stereotype that is part of the present-day global grammar of the movie, essentially shaped by Hollywood but then adopted and adapted locally. According to this grammar, whenever a contemporary filmmaker has to stage an epic battle set in a remote past, he or she has one of the battling armies fight in the formation of a *testudo*, although this tortoise arrangement was historically confined to a precise military culture in space and time, that is, the Ancient Roman one. The Chinese army of John Woo, the Norse army of *The Last Kingdom*, etc. all move across the battlefield according to the Ancient Roman model.

On the one hand, this is the case because of the major role the ancient Roman and Christian epic, from *Ben Hur* to *The Gladiator*, has played in shaping the Hollywood battle imaginary. On the other hand, the anachronistic adoption of the figure of the *testudo* also entails an ideological value. Whereas Leonardo and Michelangelo were mainly interested in the artistic, phenomenological, and existential exploration of that which Leonardo would call “il groppo”, that is, “the group”¹², or, better, the entanglement of humans, animals, and things resulting from the tremendously disruptive energy exerted by war on human life and history, the *testudo*, on the contrary, conveys an idea of war and battle that has expelled everything chaotic, disorderly, disruptive, or confines it in the enemy camp. Through the adoption of the *testudo*, in line with Jurij M. Lotman’s understanding of how cultures self-define in opposition to what they see as non-culture and chaos, war epics stage the ideology of a civilization that defends itself in the clash against the barbaric hordes of the unruly, the uncivilized, the beast-like.

Michelangelo and, above all, Leonardo, meant to convey a deeply humanistic idea of the war, especially since waging battle, as a con-

12. See Vecce, 2011, p. 27, especially in relation to the classical notion of “symplegma”.

sequence of the systematic adoption of fire weapons — whose destructive power Leonardo knew so well in his quality of military engineer (Marani, 1984; Fara, 1997) — was turning into an increasingly catastrophic human experience. Florentine representatives sitting in the Salone dei Cinquecento were meant to admire Leonardo's and Michelangelo's mural paintings and understand how important it had been to fight for the freedom and democracy of Florence, but also how terrible war was. As Leonardo wrote in one of his manuscripts, «esser cosa nefandissima il torre la vita all'omo» (Windsor, f. 19001r; Keele–Pedretti, f. 136r); «it is a nefarious think to take the life of a human being». This conviction was not only moral but also aesthetic: that magnificent body that Renaissance painters strove to depict in all its beauty was also extremely fragile, and subject to the tremendous disfiguring power of war.

This awareness of how terrible a battle is, is completely lacking in present-day popular fictionalizations of ancient or mythical battles and turns into a spectacle of the military ruse of good against evil, as in the case of *The Last Kingdom*, or, as in the case of *Red Cliff*, absorbs a typically Chinese aesthetics of the multitude in order to transform the battlefield into a gigantic choreography, similar to those that inaugurate the Olympic games. The representation of battling multitudes, indeed, is transformed with the availability of new media, but deeply changes also in relation to how “embedded” the point of view of the storyteller is. Leonardo's point of view on Anghiari or Michelangelo's perspective on Cascina were more similar to those of Spielberg in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, or even Spielberg's *Save Private Ryan* than to those of John Woo in *Red Cliff* or the directors of *The Last Kingdom*. Both Renaissance painters had witnessed the tragedy of wars during their lifetime, and the stories that they were artistically depicting were still fresh historical events in their memories and in those of their fellow citizens. War, indeed, is a terrible chaos in which humanity loses its shape completely; it is only in relation to a mythical and distant past that it can be seen as an orderly testudo, separating bodies and values across the battlefield.

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The Musical Marco Polo

Sketches of “Otherness” from China to the West (and backwards)

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ABSTRACT: The paper aims at addressing the perception of Chinese musical aesthetics and its influence in the West and, therefore, the socio-cultural construction of what we may call “musical chineseness”, conceived as “musical otherness”, according to a wider understanding of Chinese culture as opposed to the European one (as, for instance, in the studies by François Jullien). Thanks to a series of cultural references and musical case studies (ranging from classical music to Modernist avant-garde and contemporary popular music), such notion of “otherness” is articulated into different discursive tropes; otherness may have been portrayed as indecipherability (Giacomo Puccini’s *Turandot*), whimsicality (Renato Carosone’s *This Chinese mushroom*), extraordinariness (so-called “child music prodigies”), blurriness (*shídàiqǔ* or C-pop meant as fusion music), extremeness (John Cage, John Zorn, Giacinto Scelsi, Harry Partch), but also affinity (Frank Zappa). The paper proposes to overcome both the traditional dichotomic view

1. University of Turin. The present paper is an abridged transcript of the talk I was honoured to deliver at the University of Shanghai on 26 September 2018, as both my very first attempt to approach Chinese musical aesthetics — and its relations with the West — and as a homage to the musical culture of the kind hosts of the Italian semi-otic delegation. The talk was illustrated with plenty of pictures, musical examples, and even personal memories. This text has to be seen as nothing more than a map; a point of departure to rely on in order to build up further, more in-depth studies and proper analyses. All the Internet sources were last accessed on 29 October 2018; most URLs are shortened via Bit.ly. I would like to thank Prof. Massimo Leone, Prof. Serena Zuccheri, and Prof. Peng Jia for their suggestions. Any mistakes are mine alone.

(according to which, in order to understand each other, China and the West can meaningfully relate only in terms of oppositions) and the consideration of West's cultural (mis)appropriation of Chinese musical aesthetics (as epitomized by Fatima Al Qadiri's political album *Asiatisch*). The idea would be to give the start to a comparative cultural semiotics based not on the differences but on the affinities; namely, on the features that the two cultural macro-contexts have in common and on the languages, the tools, the strategies they do use to connect each other (as in the case of "musical otherness" itself, employed as the *koiné* — common language — of the so-called alternative, experimental, or underground international artistic community, embodied by figures such as Yan Jun).

KEYWORDS: China; cultural mediation; musical genres; popular music; semiotics.

1. Chinese music in a nutshell (as seen in the West)

As the anthropologists have taught us for decades, the perspective of "the other" may be misleading sometimes. But it may be enlightening too.

1.1. *The traditional conception of music*

According to Confucius (Kǒng Fūzǐ) and Mencius (Mengzi), one could recognize the value of a Prince and his reign by the quality of the music played at his court. Music in China has always been not only a matter of aesthetics, nor something merely functional (ceremonial music, dance music etc.), but also a means to convey education and morality, being consistent with the ancient literary, philosophical, and cosmological traditions of the country.

Traditional Chinese music is based upon a five-note scale (pentatonic scale), strictly linked to Nature in all its different aspects (cardinal points, planets, elements, colours, seasons, animals etc.). The same logic applies to its timbral system (the system of sounds); Na-

ture is supposed to have created eight different original sounds, embodied by as many substances: wood, metal, leather, clay, silk, bamboo, and pumpkin. Thus, Chinese music displays itself as a *mystique of Nature*, as the elegant, organic shapes of most of its musical instruments testify; the traditional mouth organ (*sheng*), for instance, is designed to allude to the shape of a pheasant or a phoenix.

Traditional Chinese music notation developed as a neumatic one, a type of musical notation meant as an auxiliary system within a mainly oral culture, employed as a backup for memory or in didactical contexts, more than as a text to be read during the execution of a tune. Neumatic systems of this kind do not actually indicate the precise note (as a specific pitch position), but rather show the ascending or descending development of the tune, carrying information concerning rhythm and agogicity (accents). If we analyse a typical tablature for the traditional *ch'in* cithara, we can mainly infer information about how the sound has to be materially produced, with a great focus assigned to the timbral dimension. The symbols, called *chien-tzû*, combine different Chinese ideograms; each one of them carries at the same time information about which string has to be pinched, with which finger, and whether from the inside towards the outside, or vice versa, of the musician's body. Aspects — *instructions* — such as these were and are generally ignored by traditional Western forms of notation, which are dominated by parameters such as pitch and harmony. In traditional Chinese music, melody is something that has to be stored mainly in the musician's memory, since it cannot be reconstructed exclusively from notation.

Chinese music sounds *different* to Western listeners, being built upon different basic aesthetic principles; on the one hand, we have a mystic, timbre-driven, and relative conception, on the other, a metaphysical, melodic, and absolute one.

1.2. *The opinion of the Italian reporters (back in the Fifties)*

I have scrutinized the online archive of “Corriere della Sera”, perhaps the main Italian daily newspaper, and I have found some interesting old comments about Chinese music. They seem to confirm the idea that its melodic style has historically been considered difficult to be perceived or understood by Western audiences. At the same time, quite surprisingly, such a discomfort in the listening experience has generally been evaluated positively: Chinese music is strange, but good.

Chinese Music [...] is simpler, purer, and *sketchy*. [Without the semitone intervals] We find just an archaic and luminous framework, a dilated and clear bridge onto which the fantasy draws melodic inventions of surprising amplitude. It is like looking at the horizon of the vast plains. [This is] An ancient and perennial music.²

[These are] long singsongs of a mysterious suavity. [...] Chinese music is a strange kind of music that *has no melodic line*, but that is capable of conveying an enjoyable sensation of sweetness and uneasiness to its listener.³

1.3. *A cross-cultural expert opinion*

Sean White alias Zhang Changxiao (b. 1987) is a musical entrepreneur and the author of *Creuza de Mao* (2015), a book meant to spread the Italian singer-songwriter culture in China; the title is a word-game between Italian singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André’s masterpiece album *Crêuza de mä* (1984) and Mao Zedong, the symbol of China par excellence outside China. White is currently both lecturing across China about Italian musical culture and organizing events in Italy to spread Chinese musical culture.

2. V. BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, “Corriere della Sera”, 12 October 1942.

3. C. VERRATTI, “Corriere della Sera”, 28 September 1956.

According to White — I have had a little chat with him — the main difference between Italian and Chinese musical cultures lies in the way of translating musical inspiration into words.

Chinese musicians [are] more *subtle* in their expression, [while] Italian musicians are somewhat more *direct*. [...] Italian musicians, [...] like de André, often describe [what they talk about] through *stories* and express them in a metaphorical way, without imposing personal emotions. On the contrary, Chinese artists [usually focus on] *personal emotions* [when] they write these songs, so [that] there will be a lot of emotions in the expression of lyrics and melody.⁴

In other words, whereas Italian musicians seem to be more *narrative*, Chinese musicians seem to be more *abstract* and *emotional* as regards the lyrical content.

1.4. *Chineseness as otherness*

Oppositions of this kind are consistent with the understanding of Chinese culture, as opposed to the European one, proposed by French philosopher, Hellenist, and Sinologist François Jullien (b. 1951). Jullien summarized his pluri-decennial work with the 20 semantic oppositions between the Western and the Chinese lexicons and systems of thought in his book *De l'être au vivre* (2015; “From Being to Living”). According to Jullien, in the words of prominent Italian semiotician Gianfranco Marrone (2016):

Chinese people appreciate propensity rather than causality, reliability rather than sincerity, tenacity instead of will, [they prefer] regulation to revelation, allusion to allegory, ambiguity to equivocation, obliquity to frontality. [...] Whereas the Western conflict is generally resolved in the Great Battle, with the armies deployed one *in front of the other*, in Chinese conflicts it is *moving sideways* that matters the most: namely, the transver-

4. Personal Message, via email, 10 August 2018.

sal, indirect incursions. We can find this logic in the field of rhetorical techniques as well: we [Westerners] deal with the arguments *directly*, while in China we find *the art of the indirect*, the art of saying one thing through another. ‘Making noise in the East to attack the West’, as Mao Zedong used to say.

2. Approaching “Chinese otherness”

Let’s start with three images — none of them being specifically musical — which may help us visualize the Western conception of China as the “land of otherness”.

2.1. *The secluded intellectual as the Other*

Elias Canetti (1905–1994) was a German–language Bulgarian–born author and thinker who won the Nobel Prize in 1981; a *persona non grata* to the Nazi regime, he escaped as a political refugee and settled in England. His most famous work of fiction is the novel *Die Blendung* (best known as *Auto-da-Fé*; literally, “public burning of a heretic”), published in 1935. The protagonist, Doktor Peter Kien, refuses to be part of his Time and to interact with the outside world; he lives as a self–secluded scholar, completely uninterested in human interaction, sentiments, and love, surrounded by his books in his lonely apartment in Vienna.

It is no coincidence that Kien (literally, “resinous old piece of wood”), such an extreme figure of opposition and yet a powerless intellectual, a self–destructive and relic–like figure that embodies the harshest refusal of what the West would become (the Nazi catastrophe was just about to happen), is a philologist and a Sinologist in particular. Kien finds relief only in the study of a far and diverse world such as China. In other words, the radical otherness of the protagonist of *Auto-da-Fé* does nothing but mirror itself in the radical otherness of China.

2.2. *The guardian of the forbidden as the Other*

In the blockbuster Hollywood comedy horror movie *Gremlins*, directed by Joe Dante in 1984, the story begins in a sinister antique shop in Chinatown, where a failed inventor, Randall Peltzer, is seeking a unique Christmas gift for his son Billy. In the shop, Peltzer finds a small, furry creature called Mogwai (“Monster” in Cantonese), whistling a mysterious, lunar tune, and wants to buy it. But the owner of the shop, “the Grandfather” (an old man called Mr. Wing, portrayed by Chinese–American actor Keye Luke), gentle but resolute, refuses to sell the creature (Fig. 1).

Mr. Wing stands as the embodiment of the non–understandable for the Western consumer, who is used to thinking of everything in terms of goods and purchases: if it is in the shop, I can buy it. On the contrary, the Mogwai is dangerous, to the extent that it is not meant to be sold, especially to a Westerner. Breaking this simple basic rule will be the start of the story of a sadistic tribe of little monsters invading the pleasant suburbia of the United States.



Figure 1. The mysterious Mr. Wing’s shop in Chinatown as the opening location in *Gremlins* (1984).

SOURCE: bit.ly/mrwingshop.

2.3. *The heavenly singer in danger as the Other*

In the Amazon–produced series *Preacher* (2015–currently running), from the eponymous comic book (1995–2000) by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, at a certain point we are introduced to a new key character: the Saint of Killers, a ruthless gunman who gets recruited by the Heavenly forces to kill the protagonist, Jesse Custer, the Preacher, so as to escape his own personal hell. The Saint is a damned and doomed outcast, featured with the unique contradictory condition of being dead, immortal, and without a soul. The Saint makes his first appearance in a grandguignolesque scene in season 1, episode 9 (entitled “Finish the Song”): a scene of violent and merciless shooting.

In order to convey a feeling of suspension and estrangement, since the shooting establishes a bridge from Hell to our reality, the authors of the series decided to use the song of a Chinese cowboy (portrayed by Adam Wang), singing in Chinese *Non Nobis Domine* (a musical arrangement of the psalm used as a motto by the Templar Knights), as a diegetic soundtrack (the singer is a character in the scene; Fig. 2). The song is heavenly, so that, in juxtaposition with the slaughter occurring during its performance, the final effect is solemn, melodramatic, and surreal, and perfectly conveys the intended disorienting connotation.



Figure 2. The Chinese cowboy singing *Non Nobis Domine* in the series *Preacher*, episode 9, “Finish the Song” (2016).

SOURCE: still from Amazon Prime video.

3. Articulating “Chinese otherness”

“The other”, as “the unknown” or “the new”, can either be “the enemy” and “the monster” or a precious resource for artistic creation: something or someone to draw inspiration from in order to find a personal voice or a whole new identity.

3.1. *Otherness as Indecipherability: Turandot*

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) is generally considered «the greatest composer of Italian opera after Giuseppe Verdi». *Turandot* is his last and unfinished work, premiered in 1926 at the theatre La Scala, in Milan, with an ending written by composer Franco Alfano.

The main character, princess Turandot, is complex and undecodable, as Chinese composer Hao Wei Ya, who has written an alternative ending for the opera, will efficaciously summarize: «She (the princess) pledges to thwart any attempts of suitors because of an ancestor’s abduction by a prince and subsequent death. She is not born cruel and is finally conquered by love»⁵.

Puccini was inspired by a tale included in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, via the eponymous fable for the theatre (1762) by Carlo Gozzi, and became fascinated by Chinese music thanks to a music box, coming from a former Italian diplomat who had served in China, which he received as a gift. Puccini eventually used at least eight themes that seem to be based on traditional Chinese music (and he commissioned a set of 13 Chinese gongs in order to better reproduce Chinese musical sounds); the most memorable among these tunes is definitely the folk melody *Mo Li Hua* (“The Jasmine Flower”), which is employed as a sort of leitmotif for the princess throughout the opera.

Turandot stands as the embodiment of the complexity, ambiguity, and contradictoriness of human inner life. Puccini’s correspondences of the time are filled with statements of powerlessness con-

5. *A Princess Re-Born*, “China Daily”, 19 February 2008.

cerning his inability to musically translate such indecipherability. In a letter to Andrea Adami, the author of the *libretto* of the opera along with Renato Simoni, he confessed:

Nothing good about Turandot. If only I had that little subject I have been — and still am — looking for, I would already be on stage at this time! But *that Chinese world!* In Milan I will decide something; maybe I will give the money back to Ricordi [the publisher] and free myself. (Jamieson, 1997)

3.2. *Otherness as Whimsicality: The mysterious Chinese mushroom*

In Italy, in the mid-Fifties, a strange fad started spreading like wildfire: that of the *fungo cinese* (“Chinese mushroom”). As recorded by a caption from «*La Domenica del Corriere*», a weekly spin-off of the “*Corriere della Sera*” (19 December 1954):

The trend of a new cure that is believed to be good for every disease is also spreading in Italy. It consists of an infusion of black tea in which a vegetable belonging to the mushroom family has been kept immersed for at least twenty-four hours.

The author of the artwork, a stereotypical Western representation of the Chinese merchant (incredibly anticipating the look of *Gremlins*' Mr. Wing), was supplied by master Italian illustrator Walter Molino, who shaped Italian visual imagery from the Forties to the Sixties (Fig. 3).

Renato Carosone (1920–2001) was a master of Italian music, rooted in the tradition of the *canzone napoletana* (Neapolitan song), who created a unique blend of pop music, jazz, and cabaret. In 1955 he published a comedy song addressing the “Chinese mushroom” fad, entitled ‘*Stu fungo cinese* (“This Chinese mushroom”). Musically speaking, the song is a classic Carosone signature tune, with allusive double-meaning inflections and lyrics (the mushroom having notable sexual connotations), capable of playfully putting the sounds and

modes of China and Naples together, especially in the instrumental introduction and hooks. I propose here an abridged and adapted translation of the lyrics:

VERSE: From Beijing has just come, kept inside a jar, a very mysterious thing. “You won’t need medicines any more!”, said the Mandarin who brought it here.

CHORUS: This mushroom grows and grows in the jar, and slowly generates one child a month! When a bride drinks the brew, she feels a thrill and says: “Hey!” [originally, the Neapolitan exclamation *Uè!*]. What is this Chinese mushroom, that grows and grows inside the jar, and slowly gets into the heart, and in the heart grows my love for you? And your love for me in turn: with the Chinese mushroom!

VERSE: Do not take Penicillin, nor Streptomycin, just take the mushroom every morning! But this mushroom is a traitor, just like any woman in love: if you do not know how to handle her, she suddenly goes away!



Figure 3. Cover of «La Domenica del Corriere», 19 December 1954, artwork by W. Molino.

SOURCE: bit.ly/ebayfungo.

3.3. *Otherness as Affinity: The overtone sounds of Tuvan throat singers*

Frank Zappa (1940–1993) was an American composer and musician of Italian origins who earned the reputation of “King of the Freaks”; from the Sixties up to the Nineties, he experimented with genres and musical languages, creating a unique blend of rock, jazz, and avant-garde, more than often with playful or satirical nuances. Always fascinated by “strange music” and by music belonging to non-American traditions, in his late years Zappa became an enthusiast of overtone, harmonic, and throat singing.

A never officially published video dated 8 January 1993 shows a “salad party” at Zappa’s home in Hollywood, featuring many musicians talking and jamming together. Among them: American drummer Terry Bozzio, American blues guitarist Johnny “Guitar” Watson (a true hero for young Zappa), Indian violinist Lakshminarayana Shankar, Irish folk group the Chieftains, and three Tuvan singers (Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Kongar-ol Ondar, Anatoli Kuular).

During the sessions, one can hear the sonic translation of a typical semiotic gesture: that of revealing the *deep affinities* between apparently *different phenomena*. The musicians’ interplay harmonizes all the differences together, leading to a moment of pure musical joy (Fig. 4). The incredible voice-as-an-instrument of the Tuvan singers can also be heard in two posthumous Zappa records: *Civilization Phaze III* (1994) and *Dance Me This* (2015).

3.4. *Otherness as Extraordinariness*

A few years ago, I happened to watch a video that had “gone viral” across the walls of the social media accounts of some friends of mine. It was a stunning video featuring some “Chinese children” playing a guitar concert; they were perfectly synchronized and technically impeccable. The title of the video read: “Very little chinese [sic] children play the guitars like pros! China got the talent” (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. The “Salad Party” at Frank Zappa’s house, Hollywood (US), 8 January 1993. SOURCE: stills from the videos at vimeo.com/5619494 and vimeo.com/5690482.



Figure 5. Still from the video entitled *Very little chinese [sic] children play the guitars like pros! China got the talent*, uploaded on YouTube in 2012 (youtu.be/X3SV-OcBGnE); in fact, a video portraying a Kindergarten concert in North Corea.

In fact, this is a common narrative through which the West has decided to give room to Chinese musicians and performers: an uncommon, incredible *technical capability*, mastered from a very *early age*, the result of *intense training*, of *rigid discipline* applied to the cultivation of musical talent etc. A similar video entitled *4 Year Old Boy Plays Piano Better Than Any Master* has some 31 millions views, being the third most popular video for the query “child piano” on YouTube. 1982–born Chinese pianist Lang Lang began playing at the age of two, entered Beijing Conservatory at the age of eight, and

has won international competitions since the age of 13; Lang Lang is always presented by Western media as a “child prodigy”, more than as an “exceptionally talented musician”. The same applies to another Chinese classical pianist, Yuja Wang (b. 1987). It seems that music coming from such musicians should be appreciated for their *chronological coordinates*, rather than for its *aesthetic qualities*; it is as if “Child music prodigies” were a musical genre of its own (as implicitly suggested by a dedicated Wikipedia entry)⁶.

I recently went back to the “Chinese children” guitar concert video, to enjoy it again. Only to discover that many users claimed that the children were actually Korean. I found out it was true; it was a Kindergarten concert in North Korea. These kinds of mistakes, misattributions, and misunderstandings are pretty common with so-called viral videos. And with the West handling non-Western pieces of media. Not without reason. Which also leads us to the next point.

3.5. *Otherness as Blurriness (and Derivation; and the loops thereof)*

The history of music over different geographical areas and periods is a true jungle of genre and subgenre names, of crossing and revolving flows, of influences, contaminations, and syntheses. It is well known how Chinese culture has deeply influenced the whole of East Asian culture, to the extent that it is possible to talk of a proper Sinosphere, a Chinese cultural sphere of influence. Japanese musical instruments and music, for instance, derived from China; and the Japanese influence emerged, in turn, via so-called J-Pop, in contemporary Chinese popular music or C-Pop. In more recent years, the same goes for Korea and Korean pop or K-Pop; it was influenced by China in the first place, and it ended up influencing it in turn.

What we now call C-pop originated in the 1920s as *shídàiqǔ* (literally, “song of the era, of the epoch, of the present times”), a form of *fusion* between American jazz and Chinese folk. Afro-American

6. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_child_music_prodigies.

jazzman Buck Clayton (1911–1991) settled in Shanghai between the late Twenties and the late Thirties, mainly serving as the resident musical director of the Canidrome (Shanghai’s Cultural Plaza); during this period, he became a close collaborator of composer and songwriter Li Jinhui (1891–1967), who is considered the father of Chinese popular music. Around 1927, Li Jinhui composed *The Drizzle* (毛毛雨), a song sung by his daughter Li Minghui, which is generally regarded as the first modern Chinese pop song; it fuses American jazz and Chinese folk music together, by adapting the traditional pentatonic folk melody in the fashion of American jazz instrumentation and arrangements.

Since that time, C–Pop has faced a rich and complex evolution and diffusion, which includes Western popular music incorporating it among its many “ethnic” contaminations. This is well testified by *The Edge of Heaven* by Gary Lucas (b. 1952), published in 2001, a success in terms of both critical appraisal and sells; the album features 11 covers of classic “mid century Chinese pop”, as the subtitle reads, presented with luxurious arrangements (Fig. 6). Lucas has cyclically returned to his Chinese passion, with concerts, collaborations, and other discographical projects.



Figure 6. Cover artwork of Gary Lucas’ album *The Edge of Heaven* (2001), realized by Jerome Witz.

4. Otherness as Extremeness

Silence or noise, minimalism or maximalism, control or chance, stasis or perennial movement; all these dichotomies being united under the very same umbrella: a radically diverse approach to life and art, to space and time. Eastern — Chinese, Indian, Japanese — music has been a huge source of heuristic–aesthetic inspiration for Western artists, especially for those who ended up shaping the imagery of avant–garde and experimentalism.

4.1. John Cage: *The I Ching and the discovery of Chance*

John Cage is way more than a “musician” or an “avant–garde composer”: he is both the archetype and the epitome of the contemporary experimental artist⁷. Born in Los Angeles in 1912, he is probably best remembered by the wider audience for his peculiar use of so–called prepared piano, a piano modified thanks to the insertion of objects in–between the strings, or for provocative and philosophical pieces such as 4’33” (1952), which consists of four minutes and 33 seconds of musicians *not* playing their instruments. Cage incorporated many aspects of randomness into his work over the years — a form of composition called aleatoric music — and one of these methodologies included the use of *I Ching* (*The Book of Changes*). In 1951, he was given a copy of the book by his pupil Christian Wolff at the New York School; Cage’s interest was immediately caught and the text became the basis of his compositional method for the rest of his life.

The *I Ching* is an ancient Chinese text dating back to around 1,000 BC, used for divination, but which has been a source of inspiration for philosophers, artists, religious figures, and writers both in the East and in the West. Its current sequence is said to have been

7. In order to provide a simple and clear summary of John Cage’s work, as regards his Chinese sources of inspiration, I based this paragraph on the explanation provided by the very well done YouTube video entitled *Inspirational Working Methods: John Cage and the I Ching*, uploaded on the channel “Inspirational Working Methods” on 11 December 2017 (youtu.be/uyjOnqzjqpc).

created by King Wen, king of Zhou, in the late Shang Dynasty. To question the *I Ching*, the user obtains a random number originally from sorting yarrow stalks, and now more commonly from throwing coins or dice. This number corresponds to a line which is either strong or weak, Yang or Yin. When six has been obtained, the user can draw a hexagram. There are 64 different possible hexagrams, which one then looks up in the *I Ching* and reads the interpretation of. If one obtains, for instance, the hexagram “Lin”, the meaning is “approach”; if one has the hexagram “Fēng”, this would mean “abundance”. Further interpretation from these meanings can be drawn to produce a divination. The process is actually more complex than this, but this is the general idea behind the methodology.

Cage would ask the *I Ching* a question and use the hexagram obtained to make a compositional decision. Firstly, he would consult the sound chart to see which note, if any, should be played. Then the duration chart and dynamic chart, to attain the note required. Cage would also use a tempo chart to set the tempo changes for the piece. Works created in this way include *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape N. 4* (both dated 1951 and considered among his masterpieces). Cage wanted to free himself from his own preferences and allow indeterminacy into the process: using randomness meant imitating Nature in his manner of operation. Nothing “Chinese” arises from the actual listening to such works, but Chinese is the philosophy according to which they have been conceived and created.

Cage’s work has influenced many artists and musicians through the years. In 1974, for instance, British musician Brian Eno (b. 1948) and artist Peter Schmidt produced the “oblique strategies” series of cards, a more user-friendly form of Cage’s process with which to help the creative process. Each of the cards, which is drawn at random, has a worthwhile dilemma printed on it to inspire or challenge the artists involved in their creative process. Surprisingly, Eno later employed these cards in the production of some of the best selling popular albums of all time, such as U2’s *Joshua Tree* (1987) and Coldplay’s *Viva la Vida* (2008).

4.2. *John Zorn: Leng Tch'e and the identity of opposites*

John Zorn has also employed different techniques for both improvising compositions and composing improvisations, by means of what he has called “game pieces” (one of them is named after Xu Feng, a Taiwanese actress featured in many martial arts films) and “file cards” (very similar to Eno’s “oblique strategies”). Born in 1953 in New York to a Jewish family, Zorn is a composer and saxophone player who, starting from free jazz and so-called radical or non-idiomatic improvisation, has produced a huge quantity of music, written and performed in the most diverse types and combinations, strongly contributing to the definition of musical Postmodernism. As perfectly exemplified by the work with his supergroup Naked City (1988–1993), Zorn’s music is made of different sources, just like a collage, and lives of radical contrasts, just like flipping through television channels: silence and noise, freedom and rules, pop culture and avant-garde.

Between 1986 and 1990, he recorded the music for an album entitled *New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands* (published in 1997); the track entitled “Hu Die” includes a spoken part narrated in Chinese (by Zhang Jinglin). But Zorn’s connection with the East is deeper. Between the Eighties and the Nineties, he used to live partly in New York and partly in Tokyo, where he regularly performed and also ran a record label, called Avant, and got obsessed with Eastern and Japanese culture in particular, because of its contradictoriness. Zorn was fascinated by such a hypermodern society still permeated by a deep down dark imagery and influences, such as sadomasochism and pornography. Zorn’s obsession with Japan led post-colonial and feminist musicologist Ellie Hisama (1993; 2004) to talk about “asiophilia”; according to Hisama, his way of portraying the East could be seen as a violent and exploiting appropriation, aestheticizing the pain of the other. In fact, rather than perceiving the Japanese as “the other”, Zorn — as he has declared multiple times — always felt himself as “the other”, “the foreigner”, “the minority”, the one who could not be fully accepted. According to him, such a frustration was eventually exorcised thanks

to the discovery of the cathartic power of violence translated into music. This led him to the writings of Bataille.

Georges Bataille (1867–1962) was an influential and controversial French author who systematically explored the darkest side of human artistic expression. His book *Les larmes d'Eros* (1961; “The Tears of Eros”) is a very personal and twisted history of eroticism and sexuality. Bataille concluded the book by displaying and commenting on five images taken circa 1905 in Beijing by a group of French soldiers to document the last public execution utilizing *lingchi* (“death by a thousand cuts”), a form of torture which dates from the Manchu dynasty. The look of ecstasy on the face of the victim, who had been given opium in order to prolong his agony, haunted Bataille, who said:

This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic and intolerable. I wonder what the Marquis de Sade would have thought of this image. [...] What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish — but which at the same time delivered me from it — was the *identity of these perfect contraries*, divine *ecstasy* and its opposite, extreme *horror*.

The quote is included in the liner notes of Zorn’s *Naked City* album *Leng Tch’e*. The cover image of the original 1992 compact disc featured the infamous 1905 Bataille photograph (Fig. 7), which had



Figure 7. A censored version of the most (in)famous among the *lingchi* pictures included by Georges Bataille in his book *Les larmes d'Eros* (1961); the picture is also featured as the artwork of John Zorn’s *Naked City* album *Leng Tch’e* (1992).

inspired the composition and could not but lead to major conflict between Zorn and his record label (Japanese imprint Toys Factory), which objected to its extreme graphic nature. The music in *Leng Tch'e* consists of one single 32-minute piece, a «slow-motion clash of heavy droning guitar, squealing saxophone, and screaming vocals» (Berry, 2006, p. 46), the latter element being provided by Japanese singer Yamatsuka Eye, from the avant-punk band The Boredoms.

In the image of *lingchi*, Zorn probably found the most extreme rendition of his search for the cathartic power of violence. Standing in radical contrast to Zorn's noise explosion is Taiwanese director Chen Chieh-jen's reconstruction of the *lingchi* in his eponymous short movie (2002), which is completely submersed in silence.

4.3. Giacinto Scelsi: Music is the other

Giacinto Scelsi (1905–1988) is the composer who was most influenced by the East, not only as regards his music, or his aesthetics in general, but also his private life. A proper philosopher of music, whose body of works is still little studied (and controversial too, due to philological issues), Scelsi embraced a syncretism made of philosophical traits drawn from China, Japan, and India.

According to Italian orientalist and philosopher Leonardo Vittorio Arena (b. 1953), Scelsi shaped his aesthetics onto the ancient Chinese concept of wisdom of *Wei-Wu-Wei* (为无为, “action without action”), as learned from the philosopher Zhuāngzǐ. He did not look for something: he looked for *not looking at all*. This anti-Aristotelic absence of any cognitive yearning is the cornerstone of the rejection of the West by Scelsi. I quote again Gianfranco Marrone (2016) summarizing François Jullien:

The West has never had such a thing as Wisdom: in the West we have dealt with things like Knowledge, Science, Intelligence, questioning about Truth or Freedom. But not Wisdom. [...] According to ancient Chinese

thought, the wise man is neither the philosopher nor the scientist or the artist and, definitely, he is not the economist or the politician. He is the one capable of being all these things *without being none of them*. With his gaze scrupulously devoted to common experience and everyday life: which is something that seems repetitive only to those who cannot appreciate its transformative nuances, its hidden details of novelty, the *small evolution of signs*. The wise man, the sage, *lives* and lets live, rather than *being*; he does not take initiatives: he lets things happen, encouraging their flow, without either personal demands or ontological obsessions”.

Scelsi chose *living*, instead of *being* and, as a consequence, he composed with “lucid passivity”: he did not write the score of his compositions, but rather directly recorded the music, so that he ended up believing *pure improvisation* was the best way to compose. Like Cage, he was an avid reader of the *I Ching*.

The music and choruses of the Hottentots or of African Pygmies, the songs from China or the Japanese Nō, are certainly neither songs nor music to the ear of an opera composer or performer, or to that of most European musicians, not to mention their audiences. (Scelsi, 2010, p. 5)⁸

Scelsi does not distinguish between sound and music: everything is sound and, more importantly, *sound is everything*. He embraces a mystique of sound, of the *single* sound, just like in Chinese tradition, a single sound full of infinite nuances, and expanding. Just like an atomic structure.

His most extreme outcome in this respect, as well as his best-known work, is *Quattro pezzi per orchestra* or *Quattro pezzi su una nota sola* (1959; “Four Pieces For Orchestra” or “Four Pieces on a Single

8. The contents of the book, which was posthumously published in 2010, were originally recorded on magnetic tape in 1973 (first part) and 1980 (second part). This excerpt of the English translation is taken from: *The Sound of Scelsi*, «Nero Magazine», n. 28, Winter 2012, pp. 78–89.

Note”), whose title is self-explanatory⁹. Here musicality does not lie in the organization of a melody or even of a sequence of notes, but rather in the infinite microtonal forms that the sound assumes, in its harmonics, in the timbre, and in the acoustic dynamics thereof, freed from any chronological conception. Scelsi focuses on the spherical globality of sound, deepening its thickness, working on its very spectrum. In a diary entry of his, Scelsi remembered his first childhood experiments with sound, sitting on a beach and hitting two stones against each other; repeated many times, the sound produced an array of nuances that already contained in itself his entire idea of music.

Sound [...] takes shape and, therefore, is multidimensional. It creates shapes and we can *see* this also in the phenomenal world, but above all in meditation. Just as happens with colours, this can be *heard*, since, definitely, everything is *unity*. (Arena, 2016, p. 13)

Scelsi did not meditate and compose music, but rather *meditated through music*: making music was his own personal form of mystical prayer; he played as if in a state of trance, thus removing any rational supervision, to let the “cosmic sound” come to him without any filters. He lived under the sign of the number eight, as it is understood in traditional Chinese culture, and used a circle upon a line as his personal signature: the perfect synthesis of Eastern cyclicity and Western progression (Fig. 8).

4.4. Harry Partch: A one-of-a-kind approach to tonality

American musical maverick Harry Partch (1901–1974) invented his own musical instruments and composed with scales dividing the

9. In order to provide a simple and clear summary of Giacinto Scelsi’s work, as regards his Chinese sources of inspiration, I have based this paragraph on the explanation provided in the brief unsigned introduction to the aforementioned «Nero Magazine», feature.

octave into 43 unequal tones, derived from the natural harmonic series; these scales allowed for more tones of smaller intervals than in standard Western tuning, which uses twelve equal intervals to the octave.

Partch was deeply influenced by Chinese music, as much as by Ancient Greek Theatre and Japanese culture. His parents were Presbyterian and served as missionaries in China from 1888 to 1893, and again from 1895 to 1900, when they fled the Boxer Rebellion; his mother used to sing to him in Mandarin Chinese. Among his first musical works we can find *Seventeen Lyrics of Li Po* (1931–1933), based on translations of the Chinese poetry of Li Bai. Partch's *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1961), a multimedial opera based on the *The Bacchae* (405 BC) by Greek poet Euripides, generally considered a summa of his work, features a prominent Chinese influence which is both timbral and melodic.

Through a series of moments, images, sketches of music and discourse, we have tried to see how Chinese music has been perceived, employed, appropriated, and misappropriated in the West; Chinese music as the spectrum, the sound image of otherness. From the one hand, it has been mediated via superficial clichés. From the other, it has become a solid influence for musicians and artists who were



Figure 8. Stylized elaboration of Giacinto Scelsi's handwritten signature.
SOURCE: bit.ly/fondazionescelsi.

seeking a different inspiration and became fascinated by an aesthetic ideal which the West could not deliver to them.

5. Do Chinese musicians make Chinese music?

And what about non-Chinese musicians who make Chinese(-like) music?

5.1. *Otherness as a koiné*

In recent years, a few articles have proposed a journey through the contemporary Chinese musical underground scene to the Italian audience (see De Seta, 2015; Ricci, 2018; Benini, 2018). Not to mention the decennial critical work by influential and idiosyncratic music critic and historian Piero Scaruffi (2012) or the pioneering, cult book about Chinese punk published by Sinologist Serena Zuccheri (2004).

Artists like Yan Jun (an electronic musician, improviser, and author born in 1973 in Lanzhou), Bun-Ching Lam (a composer, pianist, and conductor born in 1954 in Macao), Wang Fan (an electronic musician from Beijing), Tzusing (a Malaysian-born and currently Shanghai and Taipei-based techno producer), Howie Lee (Beijing-raised and UK-educated club music producer), Genome 6.66 Mbp (a collective of DJs and producers based in Shanghai) have their own cult following in the West and their sound, their musical and visual aesthetics perfectly represent the idea that a first possible way to understand “the other” is recognizing how *the other is not different from us*; namely, how *the category of otherness* may help build cultural bridges and common identities.

At least since the age of classical-contemporary avant-garde, namely Modernism, on the one hand, China has deeply influenced Western music; on the other hand, Western music has regularly and stably penetrated the aesthetic horizon of Chinese music. Avant-

garde and experimentalism have become a meta-genre ranging from New York to Milan, from Beijing to Tokyo, under the sign of what Ilaria Benini (b. 1984), the Asian editor of the independent Turin publishing imprint Add, has recently defined as a «connected underground» (2018). A typical performance by a Chinese artist like Yan Jun would not sound unlike one by any other conceptual, electronic, and noise musician worldwide; it would include hisses, white noises, pauses, direct manipulation of the employed hardware, etc. In other words, *musical otherness* has become a *koiné*, a common language, a «post-geographical sound [...], deterritorializing and border-crossing, [which] could equally be about any city anyway» (Reynolds, 2012, p. 515). Starting from our common *sense of otherness*, suggests Benini, we may better understand each other.

The size of China, in terms of geographical extension, population, background history and economic power contributes to surround it with the allure of an anonymous and kowtowing mass, often considered undecipherable, like its language. This illegibility provokes more than often a polarization in opinions about China. But is China this indistinct? [...] We need to break the stereotype in every direction: China is stimulating and exciting, walking in the streets of Shanghai is an infusion of energy; China is also scary and disturbing, experiencing the limitation of freedom of expression can support the worst nihilistic view of the human society. (Benini, 2018)

Once we have highlighted the *differences* between the West and the East, we may adopt the perspective of *affinity* and *complexity*, rather than that of *otherness* and binary *oppositions*.

5.2. *Chinesisch?*

Fatima Al Qadiri (b. 1981) is a Senegal-born, Kuwait-raised musician and artist, currently based in Berlin. *Asiatisch* (“Asian” in Ger-



Figure 9. Cover artwork of Fatima Al Qadiri's album *Asiatisch* (2014), realized by Shan-zhai Biennial.

man) is her debut full length album, published in 2014 for the London label Hyperdub (Fig. 9).

The record is about what Qadiri herself called “Imagined China”, an environment of stereotypes about East Asian nations and cultures formed in the media of the West. According to her:

It's like a garbage tapestry: you don't know what the fabric is; it's not something that's easily identifiable or quantifiable; there's a catalogue of films and cartoons and comic books within it, but one that many authors have contributed to. The Asia in *Asiatisch* is a nexus of stereotypes that have been perpetrated, elaborated, embellished and weaved, each time further and further dislocated from the original misrepresentation.¹⁰

As pointed out in the aforementioned interview, *Asiatisch* is meant to be about «nations as mythologies, as fantasies, as erratic aggregations of commerce, junk-media, fabricated fictions». The album indeed presents a contamination between the typical sound of contemporary Western electronic music, and grime in particular (Lon-

10. F. AL QADIRI, *Me and my Sister Played Video Games as Saddam Invaded*, “The Guardian”, 5 May 2014.

don signature dark and minimal hip hop music, epitomized by artists such as Wiley and Dizzee Rascal), and elements designed to “sound Eastern-like”, such as digital renditions of traditional Chinese-styled drum kits (see the track “Shanghai Freeway”), excerpts of ancient Chinese poems (in the tracks “Loading Beijing”, “Wudang”, and “Jade Stairs”), and even nonsensical Chinese phonemes and words.

In this respect, *Asiatisch* should be considered a sonic commentary to cultural *shanzhai*, a Chinese term which refers to counterfeit consumer goods produced in China and which gives to the opening track of the album its name. The song, fully entitled “Shanzhai (For Shanzhai Biennial)”, is actually a twisted cover version of Sinead O’Connor’s classic “Nothing Compares 2 U” (1990), being a “nonsense Mandarin” a cap-pella version sung by Helen Fung, the frontwoman of the band Nova Heart; the song was inspired by and is dedicated to art trio Shanzhai Biennial (Cyril Duval, Avena Gallagher, and Babak Radboy), who also realized the cover artwork of the album. Another interesting track in the collection is “Dragon Tattoo”, which includes a modulated voice saying «speak Chinese, if you please», a polemical response to the line «we are Siamese, if you please» from “The Siamese Cat Song” of the Disney cartoon *Lady and the Tramp* (1955). *Asiatisch* would definitely provide the perfect sound companion to a Chinese-focussed version of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the book which popularized the study of the West’s patronizing representations of The East.

6. Outro

One way or another, in its purest form as well as through its diverse metamorphoses, Chinese music will last: It will go on, and on, and on...

6.1. *From the flowing streams to the stars*

Guan Pinghu (1897–1967) was a leading player of the *guqin* (古琴), a Chinese 7-string bridgeless zither. *Liu Shui* (流水, “The Flowing

Streams”) is a traditional Chinese tune dating back at least to 1425, being the only piece from *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (“The Handbook of Spiritual and Marvelous Mysteries”) to have survived in a recognizable form in the modern repertoire. In 1977, a recording of *Liu Shui* performed by Guan was chosen to be included in the Voyager Golden Record, a gold-plated record containing music from around the world, selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth, intended for any intelligent extraterrestrial life form — or for future humans — who might find it, which was sent into outer space by NASA on the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecrafts. It is the longest excerpt included on the disc, lasting seven minutes and 37 seconds, and the only excerpt of Chinese music. Its elegant simplicity and brightness make it a meta-temporal classic, not only in the realm of music and sound, but of artistic creation and human expression in general.

And while the Voyager spacecraft float through the spaceways, Body Heat, a collective of young Italian disco-funk musicians, led by Rocco Civitelli, is probably organizing some late-night party at the KTV Baolijin, a Chinese karaoke bar in via Paolo Sarpi, the heart of the Chinese block in Milan, Italy (Fig. 10).

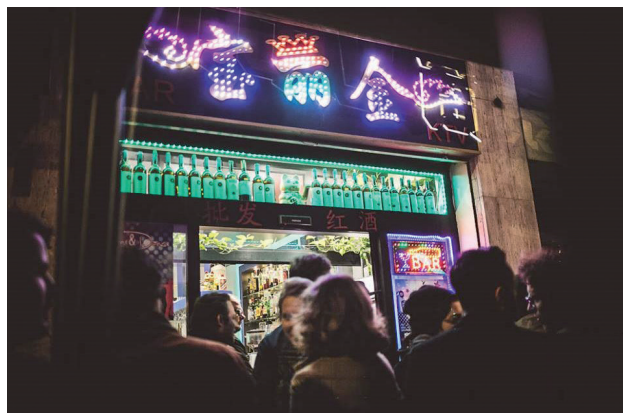


Figure 10. Crowd at a Body Heat concert/party at KTV Baolijin, via Paolo Sarpi, Milan, Italy. SOURCE: bit.ly/zerobodyheat, photo by Meschina, meschina.it.

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The Aesthetics of Food

Chinese Cuisine(s) Between the East and the West

SIMONA STANO¹

ABSTRACT: Chinese cuisine is known and especially praised for the attention it pays to every aspect of food, “from its palatableness to its texture, and from its fragrance to its colourfulness; until, as in other works of art, proportion and balance are instilled in every dish” (Feng, 1966 [1952]). Within its huge variety — including gastronomic traditions originating from various regions of China, as well as from Chinese people living in other countries —, in fact, such a cuisine strongly emphasises the aesthetic dimension of food, in relation to both its preparation and consumption. This acquires further importance if we consider the extensive spread of Chinese food around the world and its consequent hybridisation with other foodspheres, including Western gastronomic traditions. This paper explores the aesthetic values associated with Chinese culinary arts by making reference to existing literature on Chinese food cultures and analysing some relevant case studies, especially in relation to the collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine between the East and the West. In the conclusion, a more general reflection concerning the philosophical and semiotic discussion on taste and its judgement is provided.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics; taste; food; arts; Chinese cuisine(s).

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1. Chinese cuisines and the aesthetic dimension of food

Chinese cuisine is known and especially praised for the attention it pays to every aspect of food, «from its palatableness to its texture, and from its fragrance to its colourfulness; until, *as in other works of art*, proportion and balance are instilled in every dish» (Feng, 1966 [1952], p. 11; our emphasis). Despite the huge variety of gastronomic traditions originating from different regions of China², as well as from Chinese people living in other countries³, in fact, a common feature of all variations of Chinese cuisine has been historically pointed out: the emphasis put on the *aesthetic* dimension of food. This acquires further importance if we consider the extensive spread of Chinese food around the world and its consequent hybridisation with other “foodspheres” (cf. Stano, 2015b), including Western gastronomic traditions.

Building on these considerations, this paper explores the aesthetic values associated with Chinese culinary arts by making reference to existing literature on Chinese food cultures and analysing some relevant case studies, especially in relation to the collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine between the East and the West. In the conclusion, a more general reflection concerning the philosophical and semiotic discussion on taste and its judgement is provided.

2. The diversity of cooking techniques, ingredients and seasoning across the country depends on both material differences (e.g. historical, geographical and climatic background) and sociocultural aspects (e.g. ethnic groups, imperial expansion and trading, etc.). The “Four Major Cuisines” or “Four Cooking Styles” of China are *Lùcài* (魯菜, “Shandong cuisine”), *Chuāncài* (川菜, “Sichuan cuisine”), *Huīcài* (徽菜, “Anhui cuisine”) and *Yuècài* (粵菜, “Guangdong” or “Cantonese cuisine”), representing North, West, East and South China cuisine correspondingly. The common modern classification of the eight best known and most influential cuisines of China, includes the Four Major Cuisines plus *Míncài* (閩菜, “Fujian cuisine”), *Xiāngcài* (湘菜, “Hunan cuisine”), *Sūcài* (蘇菜, “Jiangsu cuisine”), and *Zhècài* (浙菜, “Zhejiang cuisine”). For further details, see in particular Chang, 1977; Anderson, 1988; So, 1992; Roberts, 2002.

3. Mainly due to the so-called “Chinese diaspora” (see in particular Pan 1994), as well as to the historical power of the country, Chinese cuisine has influenced a number of other Asian culinary systems. For further details, see in particular Wu, Tan, 2001; Wu, Cheung, 2002.

2. The collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine(s) between the East and the West

It is interesting, first of all, to refer to the so-called “collective imaginary” — i.e. the socially shared depository of images or figures that encompass part of a cultural encyclopaedia (cf. Eco, 1975; 1979; 1984) directing and regulating its imaginative paths according to the dual dimension of an “internal imaginary”, intended as a «cultural pattern for the production of images and figures» (Volli, 2011, p. 35 [our translation]), and an “external imaginary”, conceived as a «material system of production and storage of [such] images» (*ibidem*) — of Chinese cuisines between the East and the West, also relating to the extremely rich literature on this topic. To this purpose, considering the large number of movies featuring Chinese food, we have decided to focus primarily on cinema, considering both movies characterised by an internal look and some Western representations of Chinese cuisine.

2.1. Chinese cuisines in cinema: Two emblematic case studies

Eat drink man woman by Ang Lee (1994): tradition, variety, balance, omnivorousness, and freshness

An unavoidable reference when dealing with movies featuring Chinese cuisine is certainly *Eat drink man woman* by Ang Lee (Lǐ Ān), which stresses the importance of food even in its title — reporting a quote from the Confucian *Book of Rites*, which describes food and sex as basic human desires. Over 100 different recipes were used in the movie, and a food expert was consulted to ensure their authenticity⁴. This is also evident in the opening scenes of *Eat drink man*

4. The movie is set in Taipei, so the cuisine it features is the Taiwanese one — which, however, has been strongly influenced by Chinese traditional cuisines, and especially by the so-called *Mǐncài* or Fujian cuisine, as Wu and Cheung (2002), Yi-lan Tsui (2001) and a number of other scholars in food history support.

woman, which show Mr. Chu, a former chef, preparing a feast for his family. Although the world surrounding Chu is racing towards modernisation, his meal emphasises traditional dishes, whose preparation takes up the entire day and requires a varied set of competences and tools. In fact, a very strong emphasis is put — mainly through the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups — on the tools used for cooking⁵ and, in particular, cutting⁶ food, which in turn point out the varied set of skills and knowledge required to use them. Such skills and knowledge are visually expressed through extreme close-ups of the man’s hand (Fig. 1), whose actions are very fast and resolute. This makes the entire cooking process resemble a sort of dance, as is underlined by Mr. Chu’s harmonious movements, as well as by the predominance of the instrumental soundtrack, which harmoniously incorporates within itself the noise produced by each tool.



Figure 1. The “Chinese cleaver”, screenshots from ANG LEE (1994), *Eat drink man woman*.

Accordingly, the abundance and diversity of cooking techniques is particularly stressed. In fact, Chinese cuisine encompasses well over

5. I.e. woks, bamboo basket steamers, a number of bowls, ladles, etc., not forgetting the chef’s hands, real incarnation of his *knowing-how-to-do*.

6. More specifically, the camera insists on the so-called “Chinese cleaver”, that is, an all purpose knife generally employed for slicing, shredding, peeling, pounding, crushing, chopping and even transporting cut food from the chopping board or a plate directly to the wok or the pot used for cooking it.

500 different methods of cooking, of which — according to Roberts (2002, p. 21) — five may be described as characteristic (and can all be seen in the opening scenes of the movie, together with a number of other practices such as stewing, deep-frying, etc.): red-cooking, stir-frying, clear-simmering, steaming, and cooking drunken foods. The basic idea emphasised by the long visual prelude of Lee's movie is precisely the need to combine the right foods with the right techniques in order to get to a perfectly *balanced* dish. Such balanced perfection has been traditionally (see in particular Anderson, 1988; So, 1992; Roberts, 2002) described as originating from an adequate blending of *flavours, textures, and colours*.

As regards flavours, the basic ones in Chinese cuisine are traditionally said to be salty (mainly obtained by using soy sauce, soy-bean paste, or salt), sweet (sugar, honey, jam...), sour (vinegar, tomato sauce...), hot or pungent (pepper, ginger, mustard, chilli...) and bitter (almond, orange peel, herb ...). Most commonly, however, chefs opt for particular combinations of these flavours, with some of them used to correct, or rather to further enhance other flavours — such as in the case of the steamed chicken soup prepared by Mr. Chu, who uses an old chicken to make the broth, and then steams the younger chicken using that broth. In this respect, it is very interesting to consider the description provided by Nicole Mones in *The Last Chinese Chef*: when asked about Chinese cuisine by journalist Maggie McElroy, chef Siam Lang says

One of the most important peaks of flavor is *xian*. *Xian* means the sweet, natural flavor—like butter, fresh fish, luscious clear chicken broth. Then we have *xiang*, the fragrant flavor—think of frying onions, roasted meat. *Nong* is the concentrated flavor, the deep, complex taste you get from meat stews or dark sauces or fermented things. Then there is the rich flavor, the flavor of fat. This is called *you er bu ni*, which means to taste of fat without being oily. We love this one. (Lang, 2007, p. 53)

This description, and especially the idea of “fragrant flavour”, in turn highlights the importance of another crucial factor in the aesthetic appreciation of Chinese cuisine: texture. Again, Mones’ pages are a crucial reference in this sense:

There are ideals of texture, too—three main ones. *Cui* is dry and crispy, *nen* is when you take something fibrous like shark’s fin and make it smooth and yielding, and *ruan* is perfect softness—velveted chicken, a soft-boiled egg. I think it’s fair to say we control texture more than any other cuisine does. In fact some dishes we cook have nothing at all to do with flavor. Only texture; that is all they attempt. [...] Anything more would distract. The gourmet is eating for texture. Once you understand the ideal flavors and textures, the idea is to mix and match them. That’s an art in itself, called *tiaowei*. (Lang, 2007, pp. 53–4)

And finally there are colours, which also highlight the need to wisely combine and blend different ingredients in order to obtain the perfect balanced dish. In this sense the table acquires a particular importance, since it is the place where the results of the chef’s work are exhibited — all at the same time, according to the typical Chinese multi-course meal, which highly differs from the Western syntagmatic succession of starters, main plates, etc. The table is also where some cooking operations are finalised, as *Eat drink man woman* shows, and the pleasure of sharing food (symbolised by the typical Chinese round table and the communal plates) finds expression.

Moreover, both the cooking and eating scenes of the movie evidently stress the “omnivorous” characterization of the Chinese meal (whose ingredients range from frogs to ducks, from carps to *bái cài*, etc.), in which conceptual balance still plays a crucial role: dominance is held by *fan* — that is, grain and other starch food, either rice or wheat made into noodles, breads and dumplings — while *cai* is the flavoured food accompanying *fan* — such as seasoned vegetables, and a great variety of meat and fish — for which all the previously mentioned aspects related to flavours and textures apply.

Finally, another crucial element to be highlighted is *freshness*: a perfect meal can only originate from fresh ingredients.

This requires the ability to recognise them, as the close-up of Mr Chu's face (Fig. 2) effectively symbolises, together with the need to sometimes kill living animals — when not eating them still alive, as will be further discussed in the analysis of the following example.



Figure 2. Omnivorosity and freshness, screenshots from ANG LEE (1994), *Eat drink man woman*.

The Chinese feast by Tsui Hark (1995): “*mise en plat*”, extreme omnivorosity, illusion, and synaesthesia

The wonderful sequence-shot opening Tsui Hark (Kè Xú)'s *The Chinese feast* is highly representative of the emphasis put on the aesthetic dimension of eating within the Chinese foodsphere.

It is impossible not to notice the balanced combinations of colours dominating the screen, with the creation of figurative natural sceneries in the final plates (Fig. 3). Towards the end of the sequence, then, the camera passes by a plate where food substances and colours are put together and arranged in order to figuratively recall the yin and yang symbol (Fig. 3, last image), which — according to the Taoist philosophy — describes the interconnection, interdependence and complementarity of contrary forces. In this view, food — exactly like any other thing — has both yin and yang aspects (for instance hot and cold, or dry and wet elements) which should be effectively balanced and harmonised (see in particular Craze, Jay,

1999). This highlights not only the highly philosophical, but also the medical character of Chinese cuisine (see in particular Flaws & Wolfe, 1983; Farquhar, 1994; Tan, 1995), which should be able to heal both the body and the mind by keeping such a balance: refreshing foods (such as water-cress and seaweed), for instance, can be used to treat fever and rashes, while foods which furnish heat (such as fatty meat, chillies, ginger, and high calorie foods like bread) are generally prescribed to counter wasting illnesses, in a perpetual need to maintain balance and harmony. At a more general level, food is regarded as supplying *qi*, that is, vital energy, to the body and mind. To this purpose, according to traditional philosophy, it should be fresh, cooked plainly and served simply with due regard to texture and colour — thus evidently impacting on the aesthetics of Chinese cuisine, as the prelude of Hark's movie effectively shows.



Figure 3. Combination of colours and foods, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

The multiplicity of colours, foods, and eating tools appearing in such an opening sequence finds a correspondence in the subsequent scenes introducing two competing chefs, who are in fact represented by their very varied cooking toolkits. Moreover, the editing of the movie contributes to emphasising how the same food — in Fig. 4 rice, but other foods are also used in the competition — can be cooked in a variety of ways: while the younger chef rinses the rice by using a bamboo basket, the older one opts for shaking it by means of a tool

made of bamboo canes. And while the former cooks it through a multi-layered steaming procedure, the latter wraps it with a lotus leaf and a layer of clay, finally placing it on a hot grill. This stresses the chef's competence, which consists not only in mastering cooking techniques, but also in recognising the right foods for each technique, and viceversa.



Figure 4. Cooking techniques, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

Accordingly, a wide variety of foods is also featured in *The Chinese feast*: adopting such diverse procedures, for instance, the two chefs obviously opt for different types of rice; and they do the same with other food categories, in a set of competitions that strongly emphasise the “omnivorousness” we already pointed out in *Eat drink man woman*, bringing it to its very extremes (with bear paws, exotic animals and other uncommon foods being prepared) and even beyond them, with a sort of condemnation in the end, when a team pretends to serve the jury the brain of a still-living monkey, but in fact decides not to kill the animal and builds up a simulation by using tofu and sound effects.

This in turn stresses the importance of *illusion* in Chinese cuisine, as effectively described by Mones:

Artifice. Illusion. Food should be more than food; it should tease and provoke the mind. We have a lot of dishes that come to the table looking like

one thing and turn out to be something else. The most obvious example would be a duck or fish that is actually vegetarian, created entirely from soy and gluten, but there are many other types of illusion dishes. We strive to fool the diner for a moment. It adds a layer of intellectual play to the meal. When it works, the gourmet is delighted. (Mones, 2007, p. 36)

This is not exactly the case of the monkey, which represents in fact a condemnation of the killing of certain animals for culinary purposes, but applies to various plates prepared in the movie, and also echoes the emphasis put on another crucial competence a good chef should have: being able to shape food, that is, to make it a pleasure not only for taste in the strict sense, but also for the sense of sight. In addition to the “mise en place” — i.e. the common arrangement and organisation of tools and ingredients before cooking — therefore, the Chinese meal requires what we might call, by playing on French words, a “mise en plat” — that is to say, the aesthetic arrangement of foods within the plate. Thus the chef becomes a real sculptor, who is able to manipulate food and shape it in a variety of ways exactly as common artists do with other substances such as wood, clay, etc.

Correspondingly, the scenes showing the jury evaluating the chef’s dishes effectively give expression to the *synaesthetic* nature of the tasting experience, which involves various senses — in particular sight and smell (Fig. 5) — in addition to taste.



Figure 5. Taste and synaesthesia, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

2.2. *The Western representation of Chinese cuisine*

According to John Anthony George Roberts, «the spread of Chinese food throughout the world is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable examples of the globalization of food» (Roberts, 2002, p. 216). In his book *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West*, he describes the Western relation to Chinese food from Marco Polo's *Travels*, based on the explorer's experiences in China between 1275 and 1292, to contemporary days. This leads him first of all to recall and compare the impressions of the first Western travellers⁷ who visited China over the centuries and laid the foundations of the collective representations that then spread all over the US and Western Europe. Apart from a few positive voices, most of their letters and *memoires* mainly condemned Chinese cuisine because of

- a) its omnivorousness;
- b) the poor hygiene standards causing diseases;
- c) the habit of sharing communal plates and eating in crowded places;
- d) even its cheapness (which was considered a sign of the poor quality of the food used).

Things started changing in the 1950s, when the globalisation of Chinese food became evident in the US, and then in Europe (especially Britain and then France), as a result of both its convenience and its character of “internal tourism” allowing people to experience foreignness without having to travel abroad. As Chinese restaurants became common, however, their owners had to choose between emphasising or playing down their exoticism. In most cases the second option pre-

7. Mainly missionaries or adventurers such as the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, the Portuguese adventurer Galeote Pereira, the Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz, the scholarly Augustinian missionary Martin de Rada, the English adventurer Peter Mundy, Father Matteo Ricci, Friar Domingo Navarrete, Jean-Baptiste du Halde, the Chevalier de Jaucourt, Captain Alexander Hamilton, Lord Anson, John Barrow. For a detailed description of their reports, please refer to Roberts, 2002, Chap. 2.

veiled, originating a process of fusion and real domestication of Chinese cuisine resulting in the creation of new Westernized dishes, such as the famous *chop suey* (see in particular Coe, 2009; Roberts, 2012) or the so-called “fortune cookies” — which are in fact American “inventions”⁸ (see in particular Chang, 2003; Lee, 2008).

Building on these premises, the following paragraphs focus on some emblematic case studies in order to point out the main aspects characterising the Western representations of Chinese cuisine, again by referring primarily to cinema.

A Christmas story by Bob Clark (1983): between disgust and mockery

Among the vignettes forming part of *A Christmas story* by Bob Clark, there is an episode referring to Chinese cuisine: on Christmas Day, after the dogs burst into the kitchen and eat the turkey, Ralphie’s father and his family decide to go to a Chinese restaurant for their Christmas dinner. Here the variety characterising the previously analysed examples totally disappears, while the above-described Chinese omnivorousness strongly emerges, causing disgust and derision, and pointing out the crucial role played by sight and cultural factors in the aesthetic appreciation of food. In fact, while Western dishes generally try to remove any reference to the living beings whose meat was used to produce them, animals are instead often cooked and brought entire to the table in China, as happens in this case with the duck (which is also interestingly referred to — we might say “translated”⁹ — as “Chinese turkey”). Hence disgust, and then also mockery (caused by the intervention of the owner of the Chinese restaurant, who cuts the duck’s head in an attempt to solve the problem, but in fact ends up reaffirming the stereotype of Chinese insensitivity toward animals) emerge, echoing the caricaturising effect of the opening scenes of the vignette,

8. The term “invention” is here used to refer to the idea of “invention of tradition” introduced by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) and further analysed in relation to food by Stano (2014).

9. Cf. Stano, 2015, 2016.

showing the Chinese waiters awkwardly trying to entertain the family with some typical Christmas songs.

The Joy Luck Club by Wayne Wang (1993): *unintelligibility, closeness and chagrin*

Another interesting example of the perception of Chinese cuisine — and, more generally culture — in the West can be found in the movie *The Joy Luck Club*, which deals with the relationships between four young American–Chinese women and their Chinese immigrant mothers. One of them, Waverly, wants to marry an American man, Rich, and brings him to a family dinner.



Figure 6. Rich having a Chinese dinner, screenshots from W. WANG (1993), *The Joy Luck Club*.

In this case the emphasis is put on the strict and apparently unintelligible rules of Chinese food etiquette, which makes the American guy's attempt to respect and praise such etiquette and food totally fail, thus paving the way for misunderstanding, closure and humiliation. When he fails to use chopsticks properly, he is reproached for bragging that he is a fast learner; when he tries to praise Lindo (Waverly's mother)'s cooking by taking a big portion of food (which very briefly appears on the screen, leaving the floor to the characters' body, as shown in Fig. 6), he is criticised for not paying attention to others; and when he does not understand that the old woman is insulting her best plate according

to common Chinese etiquette¹⁰, and copiously adds soy sauce to it, he ends up humiliating her in front of the whole family.

Mickey blue eyes by Kelly Makin (1999): misunderstanding and rudeness

Misunderstanding and incompatibility are also central in *Mickey blue eyes*' famous scene taking place at a Chinese restaurant: Michael asks the owner of the restaurant to put his marriage proposal for Gina into a fortune cookie, but she erroneously mixes it up with the one for a couple on another table, also persistently breaking the couple's privacy, and responding rudely to Gina's refusal to eat the biscuit immediately.

This scene recalls Wenying Xu's reflections on the reception of Chinese food in the West, according to which «when it's not representing Asian food as disgusting, the [Western] culture exoticizes [it]» (Xu, 2008, p. 8): the variety characterising traditional Chinese cuisines is here reduced to the presence of a unique, briefly shown, American-born Chinese food. Furthermore, exactly as in Clark's and Wang's movies, Chinese characters are evidently caricatured and stereotyped, with a totally dysphoric connotation based on values such as inaccuracy, impoliteness, intrusiveness, and unintelligibility.

Chinese tradition vs. Western adaptation: Cook up a Storm by Raymond Yip (2017)

In order to move toward the conclusion of the paper, let us consider a final case, which focuses on the comparison between tradi-

10. Waverly (voice-over): «But the worst was when Rich criticized my mother's cooking, and he didn't even know what he had done. As is the Chinese cook's custom, my mother always insults her own cooking, but only with the dishes she serves with special pride.»

Lindo: «This dish not salty enough. No flavor. It's too bad to eat. Please.»

Waverly (voice-over): «That was our cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she'd ever made.»

Rich: «You know, Lindo, all this needs is a little soy sauce» [which he copiously adds to the platter].

Everyone: [Gasps!]

tional Chinese cuisine and its Western reinterpretation. Director Raymond Yip's *Cook up a storm* deals with the story of two young talented chefs, Sky Ko, a southern-style Chinese cook trained by his father's friend Uncle Seven, and Paul Ahn, a Michelin-starred half Chinese-half Korean chef living in France, where he has also been trained in experimental and *haute* cuisine. From the opening scenes of the movie, the differences between them are highly emphasised especially in terms of setting: Sky works at a little traditional restaurant (*Seven*) in the old area of Hong Kong, which struggles to hold up against the surrounding pressing modernity; Paul, himself born from the fusion of two different Eastern cultures and then raised in a third (Western) one, appears on the screen while working in a typical Western aristocratic palace, where he is preparing a special meal for a royal family with a number of assistants. And when Paul decides to leave France and go back to China, becoming the chef of *Stellar* (a restaurant owned by the Li Management Group that is trying to delete any trace of the old city), such a difference is further increased. The screenshots represented in Fig. 7, for instance, chromatically and topologically stress the opposition between the two restaurants, their chefs and staffs.



Figure 7. Seven vs Stellar, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.

The same applies to the cooking techniques that Sky (Fig. 8) and Paul (Fig. 9) use and the food they serve at their restaurants, with

the former basically recalling what we analysed in the case of *Eat drink man woman* and *The Chinese feast* (in terms of tools, ingredients, practices, etc.), and the latter rather experimenting with molecular cuisine, *sous-vide* cooking, and so on and so forth, thus using very different tools (such as specialised machines, pincers, etc.). Again, then, such differences are particularly stressed when the two chefs meet each other and start competing. Paul is presented as a sort of *chemist* using machines and combining substances according to specific rules, as is also remarked in the end, when his assistant Mayo steals his manual and takes advantage of it and his gradual loss of taste to take his place at Stellar. This evidently recalls Lévi-Strauss' (1962) description of the figure of the *engineer*, that is to say a subject that firmly follows a system of strict regulations in order to meet his goals. By contrast, Sky, thanks to a specific competence (i.e. his deep knowledge of traditional Chinese cuisine), rather looks like an *alchemist*, that is, a sort of “magical chemist” that, going beyond pure objectual rules and tools, acts as — in Lévi-Straussian terms — a *bricoleur* who is able to invent new contingent solutions by adjusting and re-adjusting the various means he has at his disposal by using «not only [his] tongue» — as is said in the movie —, «but also [his] eyes, nose and heart to cook».



Figure 8. Paul cooking, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.



Figure 9. Sky cooking, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.

3. Concluding remarks: The aesthetics of (Chinese) food between the East and the West

First of all, it should be remarked that aesthetics represents an intrinsic characteristic of Chinese cuisine, which — as stated above — defines the perfect dish not only on the basis of flavours and textures, but also in relation to colours and their combination and balance, thus combining different senses and sensibilities. According to Stephen H. West, in the Chinese semiosphere «food was elevated at an early period from necessity to *art*, from sustenance to elegance» (West, 1997, p. 68, our emphasis). This has also contributed to establishing and enhancing a particular link between food and the body — which is not conceived as a mere material object, but rather as an immaterial entity made of flows of *qi*, emotions, temperaments, etc. — thus strongly relating cooking and eating to medical, religious and philosophical thinking. In this view, taste can be considered a real gateway to Chinese cognition, as effectively shown by Ye Zhengdao (2007), who draws on the linguistic analysis of some Chinese expressions based on the generic nominal term *wèi*, “taste”,

to discuss the cultural bases for the peculiar Chinese “embodied” way of experiencing. More specifically, Ye points out the important role played by taste in the formation of the Chinese conceptual system, as well as one of the major modes of perceiving the world for Chinese people, also relating to early Chinese philosophy: «His eyes then find greater enjoyment in the five colours, his ear in the five sounds, his mouth in the five tastes, and his mind benefits from processing all that is in the world» (Xunzi, I.14, 340–245 B.C.).

Such a conception is in evident opposition to the Western semiosphere, where food aesthetics has become important only recently, especially as a result of the so-called process of «aestheticisation of taste» (cf. Stano, 2017, 2018). In Plato’s *Phaedo*, for instance, Socrates says: «Do you think it is the part of a philosopher to be concerned with such so-called pleasures as those of food and drink?» (64d2–4)¹¹. Generally speaking, the Western philosophical tradition has regarded personhood as an autonomous and disembodied mind; any philosophical attention to the embodied self has then been often deemed to be ordinary and meaningless. Such a split between body and mind, as Deane Curtin (1992, p. 6) points out, has tended to silence philosophical interest in food.

A key reference in this sense is certainly Immanuel Kant (1790), who subordinates the judgement of taste to a subjective¹² but strictly non-sensuous aesthetics. In his view, the bodily sense of taste does

11. English trans. by D. GALLOP, *Phaedo*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1911.

12. «I shall try the dish on my tongue and palate, and thereby (and not by universal principles) make my judgment. It is a fact that any judgment of taste we make is always a singular judgment about the object. The understanding can, by comparing the object with other people’s judgment about their liking of it, make a universal judgment, e.g.: All tulips are beautiful. But such a judgment is then not a judgment of taste; it is a logical judgment, which turns an object’s reference to taste into a predicate of things of a certain general kind. Only a judgment by which I find a singular given tulip beautiful, i.e., in which I find that my liking for the tulip is universally valid, is a judgment of taste. Its peculiarity, however, consists in the fact that, even though it has merely subjective validity, it yet extends its claim to all subjects, just as it always could if it were an objective judgment that rested on cognitive bases and that [we] could be compelled [to make] by a proof» (Kant, 1790; Engl. trans. 1987, pp. 148–149).

not meet the requirements of a pure aesthetic judgement, thus representing a cognitively and aesthetically empty “sense of pleasure”:

Three of [the five senses: i.e., touch, sight, and hearing] are more objective than subjective, that is, they contribute, as empirical intuition, more to the cognition of the exterior object, than they arouse the consciousness of the affected organ. Two [i.e. smell and taste], however, are more subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object. Consequently, we can easily agree with others in respect to the three objective senses. But with respect to the other two, the manner in which the subject responds can be quite different from whatever the external empirical perception and designation of the object might have been. (Kant, 1798 [1796/97]; Engl. trans. 1978, p. 41)

A similar conception characterises Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy (1790), which categorically excludes taste and food from arts and, therefore, from any kind of aesthetic assessment:

The sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste, and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art. For smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities. ... for this reason these senses cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow no *purely* sensuous relationship. What is agreeable for these senses is not the beauty of art. (Hegel, 1975 [1835], pp. 38–9)

Only recently have Western thinkers started recognising that food can lead not only to immediate aesthetic enjoyment, but also to cognitive significance, thus extending taste beyond simple physical satisfaction and relating the senses to sense¹³.

13. For further details, see in particular Curtin, Heldke, 1992; Telfer, 1996; Korsmeyer, 1999, 2014; Rigotti, 1999, 2015; Kaplan, 2012; Perullo, 2012, 2014.

In accordance with such an opposition, the considered examples of movies featuring Chinese food evidently exalt the aesthetic dimension of food not only in relation to eating and tasting, but — even more interestingly — also to cooking. On the contrary, in the representations of the Western re-semantisations of Chinese food, aesthetics tends to lose its importance: if in *A Christmas story* looking at Chinese food causes disgust or mockery, to the extent that some characters cannot help covering their eyes or laughing at it, in *The Joy Luck Club* the Chinese aesthetics of food even becomes the reason for incommunicability and misunderstanding, thus undergoing an evident negative axiologization. Sometimes, then, the aesthetic dimension of food totally disappears, as in *Mickey blue eyes*, where Chinese food not only takes the form of an American invented tradition, but becomes a mere form that has no meaning but containing and temporarily hiding a meaningful — though mistaken, as we described above — content.

A different case is that of *Cook up a storm*, which, in fact, problematizes the opposition between the Eastern and Western conception of food aesthetics: we already pointed out the interesting opposition between the figure of the Western “chemist-engineer” Paul, on the one hand, and that of the traditional Chinese “alchemist-bricoleur” Sky. But two more important reflections concerning aesthetics arise from this movie, and help us illustrate the main conclusion of this paper also in relation to the other analysed case studies.

The first one concerns the idea of *illusion*, which plays a vital role in both foodspheres, but with a crucial difference: in Chinese cuisine, artifice plays with the natural conformation and modification of substances, requiring a specific competence (in terms of a *knowing-how-to-do*) that in turn allows the individual to recognise which foods permit such a transformation and which do not (as brilliantly remarked, for instance, in the preparation of the beggar’s duck by Sky during his TV competition against Paul). Western cuisine, on the contrary, uses machines allowing anyone (*being-able-to-do*) to subvert the nature of food, by decomposing and recomposing it (as

exemplified by the dishes cooked by Paul). Therefore, if the Chinese illusion can be described as an “intellectual artifice”, as Mones highlights in *The Last Chinese Chef* (2007), the Western illusion rather corresponds to a sort of “unintelligible trick”, as observed on various occasions in Yip’s movie.

This relates to what we previously referred to as the *mise en plat*, that is to say, the arrangement of food within the plate. The use of shots in *Cook up a storm* is highly significant in this regard: when showing Paul’s dishes, that is to say the Western domestication of Chinese food, the typical aesthetic representation of so-called “food porn” seems to be adopted, with extreme close-ups of plates, exceeding the surface of the screen, used to emphasise mainly a *haptic*, or “tactile” look (cf. Marrone, 2015), removing all veils from the dishes. Sky’s traditional Chinese creations, on the contrary, feature a different aesthetics, which also characterises the representation of Chinese food in movies such as *Eat drink man woman* or *The Chinese feast*. We propose to call such an aesthetics “food eroticism”: in contrast with the idea of getting rid of the veils surrounding food, Chinese cuisine rather seems to exalt them, since only such veils can originate a contemplative, rather than a simply tactile, look.

This in turn recalls the tension between *aesthesis* and *aesthetics*, and particularly the idea of “aesthetic grasp” (*saisie esthétique*) described by Greimas in *De l'imperfection* (1987) as the point of contact between a subject and an object that goes beyond the simple *junction* supposed by the canonical narrative schema, producing a real *fusion* through a series of sensory perceptions organised in sometimes very structured and often synesthetic syntagmatic chains. As a way of conclusion, therefore, we here suggest reconsidering food aesthetics in the light of Greimas’ theory: the analysed examples show that, although unintelligible *per se*, the aesthetic grasp presupposed by Chinese cuisine is precisely what allows the move from the senses to sense¹⁴. Such a movement takes place according to a sort of

14. In fact, this does not happen in the considered representations of Western re-semantisations of Chinese food, which on the contrary neglect such an aesthetic grasp and

inner process that highlights the crucial role of food aesthetics not only in relation to sensuous perception and pleasure, but also — and especially — to cognition and semiosis, and which — we think — perfectly conforms to Merleau–Ponty’s reflection on art: «For I do not gaze at it [in our case, food] as one gazes at a thing, I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see *according to*, or *with it*» (Merleau–Ponty, 1964 [1961]; English trans. in Lawlor, Toadvine, 2007, p. 355; our emphasis).

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in some cases even make fun of it.

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Ellipses and Amnesias

Poetics and Figures of Time in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

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ABSTRACT: Seen from a Western perspective, contemporary Chinese cinema seems to be characterized by two interrelated dimensions: a positive tendency to formal experimentation and a stimulating — and maybe symptomatic — obsession with issues related to time. The purpose of my paper is to investigate the relationship between these two features utilizing a comparative approach. Time as an aesthetic object pervades Chinese cinema across genres and atmospheres, from drama to comedy, from thriller to documentary. Despite the differences between these kinds of movies, the theme conceals a sort of common key, which can be used to interpret Chinese culture and tastes. I will attempt to provide the semiotic schemes for comprehending how time is quantitatively and qualitatively created in a corpus of movies, also comparing them to their ideal counterparts in Western cinematography in order to pinpoint the reciprocal formal specificities. *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人, Jia Zhangke, 2015) splits itself in a sort of dialectic between past, present and future, and reflects on the trauma of separation; *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (白日焰火, Diao Yinan, 2014) combines the feel of noir movies with the materiality of time; *A Touch of Sin* (天注定, Jia Zhangke, 2013) juxtaposes four different space-times, uniting them with a violence which is highly metaphorical, as happens, for example, in the postmodern splatter of Quentin Tarantino; *Mrs. Fang* (Wang Bing, 2017) follows in a documentary frame the life of a woman affected by Alzheimer's disease, with a slow rhythm which clashes with the frenzy of modern life, configuring two times that interface by reflecting on the importance of memory. At the end of

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my paper the peculiarity of time in contemporary Chinese cinema will emerge, both from a stylistic and a symbolic point of view.

KEYWORDS: ellipses and amnesias, contemporary chinese cinema, Jia Zhangke, Diao Yanan, Wang Bing.

1. Time and Visual Texts

Chinese cinema is a cinema of great importance, sharing certain features with Western cinema, but characterised by its great attention to form, its themes of strong impact, and its particular management of time, which deserves to be examined. We will therefore proceed through an analysis of certain films in order to demonstrate how, even while they belong to different genres, they are able to delineate a specific aesthetics of time.

We are talking here about two ways of understanding time, which concern all films. Traditionally, in semiotics we can in fact identify a quantitative temporality, which regards the effective duration of an action described in the text, and a qualitative temporality, which has to do with the quality of time. When we speak of quantitative temporality, we think of the fact that films have a certain duration, which we call the time of enunciation, and that they tell stories which unfold in a specific time frame, which we call the time of the story; this time frame is treated by films in certain ways, with cuts or other expedients, which are part of the time of narration. A film classic like Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* from 1941 has an enunciation time of 119 minutes, which is the duration of the film, but has a story time which covers the entire life of the protagonist, and also a particular narration time, based on continuous flashes backwards and forwards, since the film actually begins with the protagonist's death².

The time of narration therefore has to do with the way in which the film is constructed, and marks the passage from purely quanti-

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tative time to qualitative time. It can be dilated or compressed. Furthermore, it can place the emphasis on specific sections of time, and in this case we speak of aspectuality, a category elaborated in linguistics and in semiotics by great names like that of Algirdas Julien Greimas³, which can be inchoative if the accent is placed on the beginning of the action, durative or progressive if the accent is placed on its unfolding, or terminative if the accent is placed on its ending (Greimas, Courtés, 1993).

Paintings can be very useful for helping us to understand this category. Charles-Philippe Larivière's *Bataille de Montgisard près d'Ascalon* (<http://collections.chateauversailles.fr/#69abcab8-ada8-41bf-9650-b1e6152e348c>), for example, depicts a precise historical event, that is, the Battle of Montgisard on 27 November 1117, which saw the reign of Jerusalem win against the Ayyubidi, a Muslim dynasty. The painting semiotically places the accent on the beginning of the action, and crystallises this moment. The warrior faction is placed at the left of the painting, ready for battle, and the archers on the right have already drawn their bows, waiting to shoot their arrows. The painting is therefore formulated, at least in its most salient features, according to an inchoative aspectuality. It stops time at the start of a significant action.

In Hayez's famous painting *Il bacio* (*The Kiss*) (<https://pinacotecabrera.org/collezione-online/opere/il-bacio/>), instead, the moment which is fixed is that of a passionate kiss. The kiss is neither beginning nor ending. It is represented in its happening, an eternal happening, an infinite duration, which art fixes. Here we have the case of a typically durative aspectuality, which manifests itself not only in the narration of the kiss but also in the solidity of the bare background against which the two lovers are seen. If you then look at *La mort de Marat* (<https://www.fine-arts-museum.be/fr/la-collection/jacques-louis-david-marat-assassine>), in this painting everything goes to suggest a time which is about to end. Narratively

3. For a more in-depth semiotic analysis of internal and external time in texts see Volli, 2003.

the protagonist dies, with a letter in his hand, and the painting fixes his eternal dying. Furthermore Marat's body is not outstretched like those of the archers in the first picture or vertical like the protagonists' in *The Kiss*; his muscles are relaxed, depicted with a lighter touch, to signify the snapping of the tension of life. This here is a case of terminative aspectuality.

2. Time and Cinema

It is not by chance that we have used paintings instead of films as examples. Chinese cinema, in fact, is closely connected to the pictorial arts and often tends to treat the image like a real painting.

In addition, we speak of qualitative time also when the passage of time is rendered, as happens a lot in films, through semiotic devices like ellipsis, that is, the "cutting of time" by means of editing and of consequent time jumps, or of dilatations, that is, the "lengthening of time", for instance by means of slow motion, which serves to imbue it with passions and emotions, to emphasise its importance, to give time a specific meaning.

What's more, the cinema works on time through repetition, flashbacks and flashforwards, and many other stylistic devices, as well as through stories which deal directly with problems related to personal and social memory, to time, to remembering. The time of the film's form is directly interwoven with the time of its substance. It involves a constant reflection, whose roots can be found in the works of philosophers like Henri Bergson, who proposed a division between "spatialised time", that is, scientific time measured with scientific instruments, and "lived time", the interior duration we feel in our experiences⁴.

4. The theme of time can be traced in many of Bergson's works, such as *Essai sur le données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), *Matière et mémoire* (1896), *Durée et simultanéité, à propos de la théorie d'Einstein* (1922).

The relationship between time and the cinema has therefore been the object of many studies. These certainly include the Russian formalists (Éjchenbaum, 1927), and also authors like the Hungarian Béla Balázs (1945) or Rudolph Arnheim (1932), who concentrated on the absence of continuity in films, that is, on their capacity to blend different temporalities, a feature which makes them different from real life. Also very interesting are the more recent considerations of the English philosopher Colin McGinn (2017) who compared, probably aptly, the experience of the cinema with that of the dream, precisely because of the film's capacity to manipulate time in a similar fashion to what happens to the narrations that are created in our brains during sleep. Some other important theorists of cinema include: Jean Epstein (1946), André Bazin (1958–62), Albert Laffay (1964).

The semiotics of cinema has also addressed — and addresses — the issue of time. One of the most important semioticians of cinema, Christian Metz, distinguishes between the time of the signified (1968), that is, the time of the narration, and the time of the signifier, that is, the actual duration of the film. And, obviously, a place of honour goes to Gilles Deleuze who devoted much of his work to the problems of time and of movement in the cinema (1985). Time is therefore fundamental for the cinema, it is the key which defines it, since the cinema is “image in movement”, *Art of the Moving Picture* as Vachel Lindsay wrote in 1915 in the first theoretical text in English on the cinema. The cinema is therefore image which is articulated in time.

3. A Grammar for Chinese Cinema?

In contemporary Chinese cinema the issue of time appears extremely important. The problem of time in contemporary cinema begins to emerge at least from the rise of what is called the “Fifth Generation” (Ni, Harootunian, 2002; Cornelius, Haydn Smith, 2002;

Nie, 2003), between the Seventies and Eighties, which became of international importance thanks to authors like Zhang Ymou and Chen Kaige, and which continued in the Nineties with the “Sixth Generation”, set on highly independent registers, with directors like Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, to Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, Wang Bing, Ning Ying and many others, who have often consecrated their fame abroad, through festivals which have permitted them to export many films of outstanding quality. These two generations of filmmakers, who constitute to all effects an important Chinese cultural heritage, were formed prevalently in fertile cultural environments like Shanghai and Beijing, but also thanks to the viewing of Western films, often difficult to find. In their films, time becomes a predominant subject of investigation, because they are collocated between the present breathtaking expansion of China as a major world power, and the past formation of China as the People’s Republic.

In these films the characters always live in some kind of tension, trying to find their place in a complex world where the present attempts to mediate between the well known past and an unknown future. We are dealing here with films that are always extremely experimental, characterised by at times radical stylistic choices, creating a filmic grammar of great interest, which finds some points of contact with “traditional” Chinese cinematographic aesthetics. Bibliographical research, in fact, consents the discovery of certain defining features of a traditional Chinese cinematographic style.

Lin Niantong’s *Chinese Film Aesthetics* (1991) and the anthology edited by Linda Ehrlich and David Desser, *Cinematic Landscapes* (1994) sustain, not wrongly, that in Chinese cinema long takes prevail over editing. Lin Niantong (1991, pp. 7–35) therefore speaks of «montage within the long take». It is also rather common to find indications of a fairly widespread utilization of camera movements. On the contrary, in the contemporary Chinese cinema of the Sixth Generation the movements of the film camera are not necessarily so frequent, even if however present and in some cases fundamental, as in Wang Bing’s utilization of the handheld camera. Lin Ni-

antong (1991, p. 41–9) attributes this tendency to the relationship between Chinese cinema and traditional painting where “multiple perspectives” and “elastic framing” can be noted (Wilkerson, 1994, pp. 39–41). In short, traditional Chinese cinema — the cinema of Cheng Bugao, Wu Yonggang, Sun Yu and many others — conceives the film as constituting part of an organic artistic discourse together with the other traditional arts such as painting and music. Already in this sense great emancipation can be traced, seeing that at the origin of cinema in the West not everyone agreed in defining it an art form.

Another component of the traditional aesthetics of Chinese cinema is the emphasis on flatness over depth, and in general the tendency to avoid chiaroscuro (Hao, 1994, p. 54): *Twin Sisters* (Zheng Zhenggiu, 1933) is often mentioned as the first example of «flatness of composition, horizontal extension, and even lighting» (Ni, 1994, p. 69), so as to «obscure the vanishing point and weaken the sense of depth» (Hao, 1994, p. 47). Lastly, it is a fairly pervasive idea that the shot scale in Chinese cinema is based on a “medium-shot system”, so that the film camera is neither too far from nor too near the object being filmed, always in line with the traditional aesthetics. This is a matter of so-called «distanced framing» and of «the lyrical over the narrative» (Berry, Farquhar, 1994, p. 100; An, 1994, p. 120). It is also said that traditional Chinese cinema is built on the pictorial aesthetic where «boundlessness», «emptiness» and «vast horizontal extension» (Ni, 1994, pp. 67–9) are widespread, so that the figures appear subjected to the environment, «resulting in a large number of “empty shots” that convey the oneness of humanity and nature» (Hao, 1994, p. 50).

The result of these widespread stylistic choices has to do with an idea of cinema that is more poetic and less anthropomorphic, in line with Chinese poetry and art which «stress lyrical evocation over narrative development» (Wilkerson, 1994, p. 42)⁵. While these notions

5. The collection of notions and references in this paragraph has essentially been drawn from the excellent compendium in Udden (2012, pp. 265–6), which maps the issue clearly and thoroughly.

are useful for creating some kind of order in the aesthetics of traditional Chinese cinema, not all are valid for contemporary Chinese cinema, which is based also on the questioning and overturning of certain aesthetic models.

4. Jia Zhangke and the Ellipses

Let us start then from two films by Jia Zhangke, a leading name in the Sixth Generation. The films are *A Touch of Sin* from 2013, which won the *Prix du scénario* at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Mountains May Depart* in 2015, which was presented both in Cannes and at the festival in Toronto. All the films that we will analyze are in fact well-known in the West.

A Touch of Sin is what we would define a film in episodes. Four segments of thirty minutes each alternate with one another as separate blocks, and yet are connected by a *fil rouge*. In all of them the ending is violent and tragic. The treatment of time is fundamental because all four of the stories are presented through the eyes of characters who cannot adjust to the country's rapid change, and who in the end give in to the stress caused by an existence that they cannot control. The explosion of violence is always very fast, as in a *raptus* or outburst. *A Touch of Sin* represents the present which collapses because it is unable to see the future. Thus in the first story the worker Dahai, after having attempted in every way to recover the money the mine boss has unjustly stolen from the workers, even reporting him to the central inspectorate in Beijing, and after having suffered a great deal of injustice, takes justice into his own hands and shoots the man dead. In the second story San Zhou, a young boy from Chongqing, despite having a family that loves him, cannot find anything worth living for, and so becomes a criminal and brutally kills a woman for her handbag. In the third episode a young woman, Xiao Yu, played by Zhao Tao who has a long artistic relationship with Jia Zhangke, works as a receptionist in Hubei, and refuses to

prostitute herself to a client, who begins to humiliate and ill-treat her, until she kills him in a fit of anger. In the last episode Xiao Hui, a boy from Dongguan in the province of Guangdong, earns his living by working very hard, first in a factory, then in a night club, and then again in a factory. His grey life is given some colour by an unexpected love story which, however, ends badly and the boy, alienated by work and by the absence of prospects, commits suicide by throwing himself off a balcony. *A Touch of Sin* is therefore a film of emancipation, where themes like the class struggle, gender violence, and the condition of the young are shown in all their harshness.

All the stories have been inspired by real events, such as the suicides of young workers in the Foxconn plants in Shenzhen, young people who perhaps have migrated to the cities from the countryside and fail to feel integrated in the context of the great metropolis, where time is accelerated and the rhythms of life become at times unsustainable.

There is in the film, first of all, a prevalence of long shots rather than medium ones, and long takes, which are then supplanted instead by the use of more frenetic editing at the moment of the explosion of violence. It is as though the lived time of the characters were reflected by the type of editing. The more frenzied the instants become, the more the editing mirrors them then, when calm re-



Figure 2. JIA ZHANGKE (2013), *A Touch of Sin* (chinese title: 天注定), China, 135 min., Xstream Pictures, Office Kitano, Shanghai Film Group Corporation.

turns, so do the long takes. The long takes and long shots are precisely figures of spatialisation and dilatation of time. The characters, little and dominated by the environment, are thus perceived as in a state of meditation and total absorption with the landscape. Here, furthermore, as in other films that we will see, there is the presence of the snow and of the mines, isotopies, that is, recurring images or themes, which contrast the suavity of nature with the brutality of work. The long shot is a way of showing China as a nation–continent, a paradoxical Sinascape where a logic of “solitude in the multitude” prevails⁶. The snow is nature that is contrasted with the mines, the cultural heritage of hard manual labour which is very deeply felt in China.

As we then see, another indication of the presence of time stretching between past and future, and clashing with the present, is the fact of resorting at the same time to strongly traditional contexts, also through the staging of celebrations and traditional music and the emphasis on the statue of Mao, and contexts of modernity, represented by the metropolis. The present is the meeting point between communism and capitalism, difficult to grasp but tangible.

The aesthetics of slowness is counterposed by that of splatter or of pulp, which occurs right from the first episode with the protagonist Dahai, a bad boy who, after being humiliated, strikes back and takes revenge. His is blind revenge, as if to say that not only is the mine boss guilty of having sold out to an industrialist from Canton and having been corrupted at the workers’ expense, but that everyone, that is, the whole of society, is equally guilty. Madness explodes unexpectedly as a consequence of a feeling of inadequacy.

There are many links here with Western cinema, like that of Quentin Tarantino and the various figures of punishers and anti-heroes who take justice into their own hands. In Tarantino’s films, in fact, there are also characters who are marked by their verbosity, and long scenes where nothing seems to happen except for the characters’ continuously being frustrated, until eventually the pulp vio-

6. The expression “Sinascape” is taken from Xu, 2007.

lence is unleashed, which is a form of revenge, often social in nature, like in the films of Jia Zhangke. This is particularly true in the more recent films directed by Tarantino, for example, *Kill Bill* (2003–4), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Hateful Eight* (2015).

And so, in *A Touch of Sin*, whose title is a clear evocation of *A Touch of Zen* by King Hu in 1971, once the violence has exploded, there is a return to slowness, in the final frame, with the police on one side, the horse on the other, and finally an empty shot. The connection with *A Touch of Zen*, which is a typical example of a *wuxia* film, that is, a film containing a martial hero, is glaringly obvious. In King Hu's film the young girl seeks redress for the tortures suffered at the hands of her father during the Ming epoch; in *A Touch of Sin*, similarly, the characters are postmodern heroes who are also searching for justice, but alone, in a world which refuses to listen to them.

In the second episode the young protagonist has a Chicago Bulls cap, which symbolises his relationship with American capitalist culture, in contradiction with traditional Chinese values. Here, too, the figures of slowness recur, as in the scene where he peels an apple, while another character crochets, both practices that necessarily require time and reflection. The scenes are perfectly inserted in a dialectic between fast and slow, between meditation and instinct. There is also here a recurrence of fireworks, a theme which we will see in another film. The fireworks, like the presence of the image of a tiger, are anticipations of and metaphors for what is going to happen. The firework drifts slowly across the sky and then explodes; the tiger, locked in a cage, moves more or less slowly, desiring revenge for its imprisonment. These are what in semiotics we would call metaphors but also visual prolepsis, that is, rhetorical figures that function as anticipations of time, which make us intuit in advance what is about to happen.

And there are also recurrences of occasions that have the flavour of a turning point in time, events like New Year's. In addition to the long shots we would also point out here scenes in which there is a

relationship between anonymous madness and a solitude that is instead impregnated with meaning. And, as in the preceding episode, animals unwittingly close the scene and put everything to rights again. First it was a horse, now it is the cows.

For the moment we will stop here, as we cannot go in depth into all four episodes. What we want to say is that, as Chris Berry sustains (2009), time in Jia Zhangke's films is Postmodern time. And it is a different Postmodernism compared to the "asynchronic" time, the eternal present, of the West as identified by Fredric Jameson (1984). It is a New Postmodern Realism which also looks towards Hollywood, but cynically. Jia's characters are all marginal and ordinary, the "Chinese everymen and women" who symbolise a China in rapid change. They are characters in movement, but who are not going anywhere, who are part of a temporality in flow. This New Postmodern Realism can be understood as the official aesthetics of contemporary China. And, as we have already been able to appreciate, Jia Zhangke's films therefore use many techniques to express time, both through the production of visual metaphors (the tiger, the fireworks) and with the use of cinematographic techniques (long takes, editing, etc). They are always films that talk about the country and its history, where the characters are to be understood not as single individuals but as representing all Chinese people. The protagonists of Jia's cinema try to move, but in the end they meet failure and death (Berry, 2009).

Mountains May Depart is another film which, just like the previous one, enjoyed wide appeal abroad. Silvio Danese has written:

Three parts of skillfully disturbing and engaging direction [...]. Unforgettable characters, like in a novel by Balzac or Flaubert, updated to the theme of decline and to a different reluctance towards love in our epoch. It is a film about time, what has been, what is, what will be (...). A propos of cinema emotion is always honoured, which yet is fleeting, less important



Figure 5. JIA ZHANGKE (2015), *Mountains May Depart* (chinese title: 山河故人), China, France, Japan, 131 min., Xstream Pictures, Shanghai Film Group, MK2.

or profound than sentiment. Jia leaves us with a true sentiment, to live and to meditate upon.⁷

If in *A Touch of Sin* there are no ellipses, the four episodes following one after the other as if they were all at the same time, in an eternal incomprehensible present, *Mountains May Depart* instead provides us in two hours with two immense ellipses, which divide the film into three closely connected episodes. The story unfolds, in fact, in three periods of time. The first is in Fenyang in 1999, the year in which China was to re-establish its sovereignty even over Macao, where two childhood friends, Liangzi and Zhang, compete for the beautiful Tao, once again played by Zhao Tao. Tao will finally choose to marry the rich Zhang while Liangzi, a humble miner, will go away. This is where the first ellipsis occurs, a temporal leap of a good fifteen years. It is now 2014 and Tao and Zhang have divorced. What's more, Zhang has gone to live in Australia with his son Dollar, who returns to his mother one last time on the death of his grandfather, and at this point speaks only English and does not seem to recognise his mother much. Liangzi meanwhile has fallen ill with cancer. Here comes the second ellipsis, and we are transported to Australia in 2025. Dollar is now a young man who is trying to

7. S. DANESE, *Nazione-Carlino-Giorno*, May 7th, 2016 (author trans.).

learn Chinese, his father has gone bankrupt, and he wishes to meet the mother he can hardly remember again. In addition, he has a love affair with a much older woman, who is also a kind of mother figure to him. The film does not reveal to us whether Tao and Dollar will find each other again, and ends with her dancing under the soft snow to the same music to which she was dancing at the beginning of the film.

It is moreover significant that the song is not Chinese, but rather a Village People hit, here in the Pet Shop Boys' version, called *Go West*. The song, in fact, encapsulates both in its sonority and in its text an entire ideology of the West, and the Pet Shop Boys videoclip is in fact a mix of Western and Communist stereotypes (for example, a red Statue of Liberty) which form the confused world where Jia Zhangke's characters perhaps feel they live today.

The fact that the first and last scenes are built around the same dance and on the same notes, with the protagonist Tao first very young and happy and then old and nostalgic, inserts the film within a sort of circularity. It is once again the signifier, the structure of the film, that works in close connection with the signified: the story told is not one of many stories, but is everybody's story, and everybody is compelled — to use Friedrich Nietzsche's expression — to an eternal return to the present. The fact that Tao dances at the end, even though she is a woman who has been defeated by life, is a sign of acceptance but also of revolt. She dances and the editing shows her with her back to us, against a backdrop of traditional Chinese buildings, with the snow in the background, to signify her awareness of being part of a historical circuit which has echoes in the present.

In addition there are many of the stylistic devices that we talked about in relation to *A Touch of Sin*: the presence of events that are markedly connected to time, like the Chinese New Year, the fireworks which are thus configured as a transtextual isotopy, the coal mines, the snow. And also aspects of novelty, like a "disco aesthetics", with certain elements of that which in the West is called the *vaporwave*, that is, a sort of nostalgia «for a dream that will always

remain out of reach» (Trainer, 2016, p. 421)⁸, which can be seen in the scenes of the first segment set in a discotheque; in the presence of a dog whose time of life is significant because it is related to the events that befall the characters (it is the puppy that Tao gets at the beginning of the film and that is with her in the final scene, despite everything that has happened); in the tiger in the cage that recalls the tiger in the tapestry in *A Touch of Sin*; in the presence of the trains which also appeared in *A Touch of Sin*, heterotopias as Michel Foucault would say, where Tao can spend more time with her son. She, in fact, says: «The slower the train, the more time I can spend with you». Other figures of time include the presence of *deja-vu* and false memories, especially in the third segment, where Dollar is more adult, and also the presence of an inter-generational relationship which means the relating with each other of two different temporalities. In conclusion, many elements in the film contribute to defining it as a reflection on the nature of time.

On the formal plane we can also see, as we did before, many empty shots or very long shots. These should not be regarded as *pillow shots*, that is, as frames useful only to help the viewer comprehend where the scene that he or she is about to see is set. They are, instead, frames that have the function of showing how everything remains the same in spite of the events which befall the protagonists, and how the environment is able to absorb everything. This is a particular way of treating time and place.

5. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* by Diao Yinan

Another film that needs mentioning is *Black Coal, Thin Ice* by Diao Yinan in 2014. This is a noir film, with many links to the Western tradition in

8. The theme of vaporwave rises in the West during the era of the web, characterised by the so-called remix cultures. Often the vaporwave imaginary unifies music codes and visual codes, put together and transformed into memes, mini-games or similar web contents. For a semiotic approach to this panorama cfr Marino, 2014; Thibault, 2017.

contemporary cinema followed, for example, by the Coen brothers, and which also has a flavour, especially in certain frames, of classic Western movies like those of Sergio Leone. Here, too, the story is constructed around an ellipsis. The first rapid part is set in 1999, when a number of corpses are found in some mines in a little town in northern China. During the investigation, Inspector Zhang Zili finds himself involved in a shootout, in which he is wounded and sees his companions die. A time jump takes us to five years later. The inspector has by now healed but is depressed and given to alcohol abuse, yet he decides to return to the case and meets and falls in love with Wu Zhizhen, a woman who seems to be connected to the deaths in the mine. At the end, he discovers that she is actually the murderess. The film therefore once again revolves around time and the way in which it is absorbed by the characters, and has many points of contact with the works of Jia Zhangke.

The part set in 1999 is constructed to a slow rhythm, with the presence of many long takes and measured transitions. Everything is played out in long shots and with a certain depth of image, both characteristics which are less present in traditional Chinese cinema. All these rhetorical figures aim at emphasising a quality of time, a time which never seems to flow, especially after the discovery of the corpses and the deaths of the inspector's policeman friends, events which the families involved try to work through or forget, an impossible operation. The tension in these moments is also rendered by the dialectic between the hot coal in the mines and the coldness of the ice, elements which motivate the film's English title: *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. When the story shifts to 2004, time does not seem to have moved, and there continue to be narrative situations of "dilated time", as during the stakeouts in the car. Here, like in the films of Jia Zhangke, the slowness of time is contrasted with the instances in which violence explodes suddenly and uncontrollably, and is subsequently re-absorbed in pillow-scenes, silences, lingering moments on bridges which unfold extremely slowly. Here again the characters are ordinary and marginal, and live in solitude. And again here there are many empty shots which, as we said before, are not to be seen as pillow shots.



Figure 3. DIAO YINAN (2014), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (chinese title: 白日焰火), China, 110 min., Omnijoi Media, Boneyard Entertainment China, China Film Co.

The whole film is therefore built on the relationship between time and suspense, and emphasises certain issues: the past which returns in the present, personal and collective trauma, the incapacity to forget the horrors which have occurred and which return like ghosts.

When towards the end of the film Zhang Zili discovers that Wu herself is the assassin, he goes to a dancehall where he had already been before and abandons himself to a liberating dance.

Here he reminds us in some way of Tao in *Mountains May Depart*, a demonstration that the directors of the Sixth Generation, even while at times operating with different registers, have many points of contact, both formal and thematic. The dance is a moment of re-appropriation of the self and of release, a catharsis where time once again belongs to the protagonist⁹. A time when in fact nothing materially useful is done, but intentionally so. This scene gives way to the final sequence, where the police take Wu to the scene of the crime to reconstruct what happened. She points out the places where she stabbed someone, and where there was once a bed there is now a wardrobe. The director's emphasis in this scene is once again placed on showing how, simultaneously, time modifies some things, while certain traces of the past remain the same forever. The entire scene is permeated by ironic tones, whereas the rest of the

9. The theme of dance as a ritual process of catharsis is studied in Spencer, 1985.

film has been significantly more sombre. When Wu and the police leave the building, a deluge of fireworks meets them in broad daylight and, although the police do everything they can to stop the thugs who are setting them off, their efforts are in vain. The smoke and noise envelop everything, before the appearance of the end credits. The fireworks and their explosions are incessant, and restore order by creating chaos.

Black Coal, Thin Ice is thus a film built on the subtraction of elements, as foreseen by a certain European aesthetics like that of Robert Bresson (cfr. Schrader, 1972), and is connected to all the stereotypes of classic Western noir, but with a somewhat cynical gaze, almost mockingly. In it are contained the disillusioned detective, the femme fatale, and a particular aesthetics of the weather that affects the characters. This is why we can sense the influence in the film of the Coen brothers' work in *Fargo* (in 1996) or in *No Country for Old Men* (in 2007), with its Western charm but with a certain depressed humour. The image of China which emerges is very similar to that of Jia Zhangke, made up of a multitude of people but also of a huge sense of solitude and a lack of faith in others and in the country.

6. *Mrs. Fang*

A different China, far more human, and with a completely different conception of time from the Western one is finally represented in *Mrs. Fang*, the latest film by Wang Bing, one of the most important directors of the Sixth Generation. He is part of a new movement in Chinese documentary cinema which was born in the Nineties from the need to narrate a country in great economic and social change, and to which belong names like Wu Wenguang, whose film *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* in 1990 is considered the movement's initiator, but also Li Hong, Xu Xin, and Zhao Liang who made a positive impression on the West through his five-hour film *Petition*, presented in Cannes in 2009, and *Behemoth*, presented at the

Festival in Venice in 2015, once again revolving around the infernal working conditions of the miners, this time in Inner Mongolia. This film marks another connection of great interest between Chinese art and Western art, since the entire film is conceived explicitly as Dante's *Divine Comedy* reinterpreted from the perspective of contemporary China. The foundry with its flames is Hell, the hospitals full of people whose work has made them ill are Purgatory, the city of Ordos is a phantom Paradise.

In this documentary panorama of deep social sensibility, which forms part of what Chris Berry has termed New Postmodern Realism, Wang Bing proposes from his very beginnings with *Tiexi Qu* in 2003 a cinema which is extreme in its duration, in the themes represented, in its formal choices, and even in the fact that often the shots are clandestine, taken in secret in places where they were not actually permitted. *Tiexi Qu* is a film that lasts over nine hours, divided into three chapters, entirely focused on the district of Tie Xi which in the Eighties had become the most important industrial centre in the country and then gradually closed down towards the end of the millennium. The film thus documents with a clinical eye the changes, the agonizing condition of the workers in the passage from a socialist-type economy to the new laws of the market, that is, the passage to the China of the present. The duration of the film, the themes treated in it, and the philosophy of cinema that lies behind it, associate Wang Bing with one of the most significant European directors and documentary-makers, Claude Lanzmann, who leapt to fame with *Shoah* in 1985, a monumental nine-and-a-half-hour film on the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War, and whose latest film was *Napalm* in 2017, a film partially shot clandestinely, like Wang Bing's, this time in Kim Jong Un's North Korea, with shots of the past interspersed with interviews from the present, in a temporal interweaving.

Wang Bing is therefore collocated fully among the contemporary directors of the most significant documentaries not only in Chinese cinema but worldwide. His films also include works like *Three Sisters*

in 2012, which won awards in Venice, Nantes and Freiburg, centering on the relationship between three little sisters from Yunnan and their father who goes to look for work in the city, or fiction films, that is, not strictly documentary, like *Goodbye Jiabiangou* in 2010, set in China in the 1950s and which shows the inhuman conditions of political prisoners and others in a work camp in the Gobi desert. In short, all Wang Bing's films revolve around the fundamental theme of the Chinese people's relationship with their present and with their historical memory.

From this perspective *Mrs Fang* amounts to a film that is heartbreaking but of extreme sweetness. Wang Bing once again pushes his work stretched between aesthetics and ethics towards the outer limit. This is the story of Mrs Fang, an Alzheimer sufferer who spends her last days of life at home in bed, surrounded by her family. Wang Bing documents in the real sense of the word, stripping the film of any narrative component, and only emphasising the dimension of time passing.

The beginning is a silent long take of Mrs Fang, in 2015. She is well dressed and erect, looking around her; we do not know whether she is aware of her illness already but we presume so, otherwise there would have been no reason to film her. The only sound is that of the river near her house, in the village of Maihui, near Huzhou in the province of Zhejiang. She then moves away from the frame with a troubled expression, but the frame remains fixed on the silent landscape. We are once again dealing with the "aesthetics of the empty shot". We then see her inside the house, at the centre of the frame again, always standing. Everything has a flavour of anticipation, of predestination. And in fact after three minutes and twenty-five seconds the ellipsis occurs, the time jump, and the second part of the film starts, which will occupy the remaining 82 minutes. What was previously a medium shot, fully in line with the traditional Chinese cinematographic aesthetic, becomes a close-up, very close, on Mrs Fang's face in 2016, a few months later. She now seems very thin, lying on her bed, more or less conscious, her mouth constantly open, unable to move. This terribly drastic passage, which occurs thanks to cinematographic editing, that is, through a form of the signifier, signifies the speed with which the illness has

spread, a speed which has made Mrs Fang's life essentially senseless even before her being reduced to this sad state. The lingering on Mrs Fang's face will be constant throughout the film, and will be alternated only by two other types of scenes: scenes where her family, full of life, are around her and talk in her presence about all kinds of things, including her condition and the choices related to her funeral, and scenes of the family fishing. The close-ups of Mrs Fang are infinite, all the same: it is as if time around her becomes increasingly slow. The camera gaze is objective but also subjective: we see her from only one point of view just as she now can see the world only from one point of view. So the film imitates the very condition of the person it is talking about.

The fact that the relatives who surround her continue to live, involving her in their conversation, talking without stopping, represents a particular sensibility, one not so common in the West. It is as if Chinese bio-ethical philosophy were distancing itself from that of the West, where the ill person is put in places like hospitals and, frequently, surrounded by silence. Here the sick person continues to be part of family life. This is a great demonstration of sensitivity.

The fishing scenes are also functional in relation to the concept of how life goes on and the primary necessities, for example, the need for food, do not cease to exist. Just under halfway through the film, a long scene of nighttime fishing causes a crisis in the filmic image, elaborating a discourse on the difference between the visible and the



Figure 6. Wang Bing (2017) *Mrs Fang* (Chinese title: 方绣英), China, 86 min.

non-visible. Little can be seen of what happens in this night scene, just as little can be understood of Mrs Fang's condition, as we do not know what she is or is not aware of, or what she does or does not feel. And, above all, the duration of the scene is useful because on returning to the house, the long close-ups of the patient resume, as she lies there, always immobile. It is as if two different times, that of life and that of death, intersect, until the end, when Mrs Fang dies. Here Wang Bing once again changes perspective.

Mrs Fang's face is no longer filmed in close-up, and there is a return to a medium-shot where the whole family can be seen around the bed. She can no longer be seen. Wang Bing thus reveals himself able also to make use of some of the ideas of European cinematographic theory like those of André Bazin who in 1949 declares it impossible for the cinema to ethically film death. But the film is not over yet, and in fact there is a further ellipsis, which this time brings us to three months later. In a long shot one of the relatives is silently fishing in the stream. Mrs Fang has gone, dying of Alzheimer's, an illness which first of all provokes the loss of memory, yet everything around her goes on. In this extraordinary way does the film end.

Wang Bing's is an invisible incursion into the lives of Fang and of her family, a presence which becomes an absence. In the West too, obviously, the theme of illness is treated, as in *Still Alice* by Glatzer and Westmoreland in 2014, which also deals with the theme of Alzheimer's but is characterised by typically American excessive romanticization; or in the Spanish film *Mar Adentro* by Almodovar in 2004, which is a dramatic film of strong impact but is strictly narrative in flavour. Wang Bing's elegance is something completely different: his action of subtraction, his delicacy, his rigour which recalls a little also that of Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō Ozu, his continuous operating on a double register through which form becomes substance, signifier becomes signified, his adhering in a modern way to standards which may also be ancient, like respect for the unity of time, place and action elaborated by Aristotle, all these reveal a

way of making cinema that is outstandingly rare. In addition Wang Bing, perhaps more than any other contemporary Chinese director, formalizes a definitive breaking away from the Fifth Generation, even if there is a continuity of intent. The Fifth Generation, in fact, seems to revolve around what Dai Jinhua has called the “Zhang Yimou model”, which «involves mega amounts of investment, international crews, transnational locales, landscape spectacles, exaggerated icons of China plus myth–martial arts, maximally streamlined plots, expensive computer technologies and an unwavering Hollywood strategy» (Dai Jinhua, 2009, p. 40). Wang Bing’s, instead, is a new frontier in independent cinema, made up of small means, concentrating on personal stories which become universal, without any breathtaking views and above all without any references to Hollywood. This is surely true for Wang Bing, but in the end also for the other directors of the Sixth Generation, like Diao Yinan and, obviously, Jia Zhangke. This last, who makes films that are radically different from those of Wang Bing and who often is more markedly connected with Western cinema is, however, the creator of a new aesthetics of great importance, which demonstrates finally that it is impossible to define an aesthetics of Chinese cinema that comprises all its films, both in the case of traditional cinema and in that of contemporary cinema. As James Udden underlines, in fact:

Unfortunately, writers such as Lin Niantong have taken a narrow, singular path, seemingly searching for *one* definitive Chinese style with *one* viable source. This seems misguided. Chinese–language cinema over the decades has produced no monolithic, quintessential Chinese film style, but instead an impressive diversity of cinematic styles and techniques. Moreover, these are not the mere result of a singular cultural front or aping foreign models; rather, they also display inventiveness and experimentation due to greatly varying historical contexts. (Udden, 2012, p. 263)

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Taming Play: A Map of Play Ideologies in the West and in China¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the approaches to the utilitarian use of play and games in the West and in China. In order to do so, starting from examples pertaining to both cultures, it draws a map of the different ideologies of play, ranging from the idea that play is something silly and unimportant, to the more hostile reactions towards games portrayed as dangerous, to the enthusiastic idea — linked to gamification — of using play in every situation in order to boost engagement and participation. These ideologies are then situated around a semi-otic square based on their attitude towards play and it is suggested that a fourth position may exist, less easy to handle but possibly more objective.

KEYWORDS: Gamification; game-based learning; moral panic; mass-shooting; play; video games; ideology

Introduction

Gamification, a buzzword introduced in the context of marketing in 2008, is nowadays a global phenomenon: studied, tested and exploit-

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ed all around the World. Gamification can be defined as the attempt to design experiences or products so that they are more “game-like” to make them more attractive and engaging. To this end several strategies exist, some dealing with the implementation of game elements in non-game systems (Deterding *et al.*, 2011), others focusing on the user-experience (Huotari, Hamari, 2015) or underlining the importance of fun or excitement (Werbach, Hunter, 2012; McGonigal, 2011).

In either case, the concept of gamification is rooted, more or less consciously, in a specific, transcultural, *ideology of play*. In this paper I will attempt to situate gamification in its ideological background by outlining the main ideologies that surround play and its relationship with society. This should allow, on the one hand, a better understanding of the phenomenon of gamification, contextualised as a larger cross-cultural trend and, on the other hand, the postulation of a more objective perspective on the possibility of “taming” and using play for non-playful purposes.

1. From play to gamification: The ludicisation of culture

The relevance of play is not something new. Play is a fundamental aspect of the life and development both of human and non-human animals. The Greek philosopher Plato, in the second book of *Laws*, indicated as the first principle of play the desire of the younglings to leap about and make a noise, even though they were capable of staying still and being silent. More recently, Gregory Bateson (1956) claimed that every species of vertebrate engages in play, and that in fact, this is one of the most sophisticated activities undertaken by several of them. The ability to *metacommunicate* one’s playful intention — to “tell” other animals that their following actions should not be interpreted as a threat, but as playful — is not a trivial matter.

Play, then, finds its fundamental importance also in human culture. Huizinga (1949), the father of modern studies on play, identifies

several areas of culture that make very large use of play principles, mentioning, among others, religion, rituals and warfare. Bakhtin, in his study of Rabelais and of the carnivalesque (1988), underlines the fundamental role of play in appeasing social tensions. Carnivals allow participants, within a specific and rigid frame, to playfully challenge crucial social norms, permitting the members of a society to play out these tensions, without really endangering the social fabric of their society. Roger Caillois (1967), moreover, traces connections between his “forms of play” and phenomena such as drug addiction or the stock market. The list of works pointing out the importance of play in human cultures could very easily go on.

Nevertheless, in the last few decades, something has changed. Play and games — in particular digital games — have acquired a cultural prominence that seems to be unprecedented. If we look at it from a merely economic perspective, we can see that the Game Industry has become the fourth biggest entertainment industry on the planet, surpassing the revenues of the Film Industry³. To give an example, Rockstar’s game *Grand Theft Auto V* has been the fastest-selling entertainment product in history⁴, earning \$800 million in its first day and \$1 billion in its first three days, largely surpassing any blockbuster. This is a global trend: the top nations in terms of estimated video game revenues in 2018 were China (\$37 B), the United States (\$30B) and Japan and the EU (both circa \$19B)⁵.

The economic success of digital games is just a part of a larger cultural shift: that of the ludicisation of culture. This term, introduced by Bonenfant and Genvo (2014), along with others such as “ludification” or “gamification of culture”, indicates the growing importance and prestige of play in contemporary culture. In semiot-

3. The top three most lucrative entertainment industries remain, as of 2015, casinos and online gambling, TV, and books. Source: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/life-style/88472/the-biggest-entertainment-markets-in-the-world/>.

4. Source: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/10/09/gta-5-currently-holds-seven-guinness-world-records>.

5. Source: <https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-100-countries-by-game-revenues/>.

ic terms it can be described as a movement of play towards the centre of the semiosphere (Thibault, 2016). Play is a modelling system that has always been common to all semiospheres, but nowadays, due to several factors, both social and technological (see, e.g., Ortoleva, 2012), is acquiring an unprecedented centrality.

This repositioning of play within the semiosphere entails a higher modelling ability, both in its descriptive and prescriptive dimension. On the one hand, then, play and games become a metalanguage used to describe other portions of the semiosphere. We can think of terms like “winners” and “losers”, that have become mainstream, but also of the discourses around politics or the economy, or ways of self-description (see Idone Cassone, 2017). On the other hand, games also become prescriptive: there is a general idea that things would be “better” if they were more game-like — it is the basis of the idea of gamification.

The fact that play has moved towards the centre of the semiosphere, however, does not mean that we play *more* than in the past, or that play was somewhat less crucial in past eras. Ludicisation has to do with the *prestige* with which play is invested within a certain culture. In other words, play has always been necessary for human life, but today we recognise in it something so prestigious that we tend to understand and shape according to its rules also things that are not playful at all.

In several cultures, the situation has often been radically different. Due to the difficulty of defining play, it has often been defined in opposition to things such as “work” or “seriousness” (Bateson, 1956), despite the fact that play can be extremely serious, and that people can make a living out of it. Play has often been dismissed as something silly and unimportant, innocuous and not worthy of attention. Play has been relegated to the outskirts of the semiosphere, despite its importance, and associated with children, savages, or other groups of “peripheral”⁶ people. This is a *first ideology* of play that,

6. Using, again, Lotman’s terminology.

even though it is slowly being replaced by others, is still well represented across different cultures and environments.

2. Hostility

The fact that games are now at the centre of the semiosphere also accounts for the need for new metalanguages to discuss it. The birth of disciplines such as Game Studies or of branches like the semiotics of games accounts for this need to “talk” about games, to understand them. At the same time, in parallel with its growing economic importance, the Power has also started to develop languages and regulations in regard to games.

Video game content rating systems have started to be created across the world, generally setting age limits for the use of certain products. In Europe, for example, since 2003 there has been the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system. China also has numerous regulations. Yingrong Chen (2018) estimates that there are 94 regulation at national level and 2000 at local level (including also rules regarding lotteries and other forms of play). These regulations cover a variety of topics, including copyright, in-game transactions, the approval of game content — with rules to protect the youth from possibly dangerous content (addiction, porn, violence) — but also regulations regarding the role of games in society — that is, games have to be coherent with the national ideology and not offend the national image. Most of these regulations arise from practical and sensible concerns. Nevertheless, in others it is easy to spot traces of a form of distrust towards play that runs deep in human culture.

And that is because playfulness is scary. It is something powerful and uncontrollable. It questions the social order of everyday life, proposing new and alternative meanings to objects and spaces. For this reason, every culture tries to erect more or less strict boundaries around play. If banishing play is probably impossible, history is full

of attempts to regulate it, to contain its disruptive force within specific boundaries of time or space — let us think, again, of Bakhtin’s work on carnival.

One of the fiercest critics of play in history has often been religion. Play is sometimes perceived as *desecrating*, and its ability to evoke passions and to challenge the traditional meaning of things makes it, in some cases, an enemy of religions. In a paper entitled *La pallavolo sacra* (2016), Leone presented an interesting overview of the attitude of Abrahamic religions — especially Christianity and Islam — towards play, an attitude that often turned into open condemnation. Let us think of the “falò delle vanità” (bonfires of the vanities), which took place in Italy in the 15th century and involved the burning of game sets and playing cards because they were considered sinful.

Distrust and hostility towards games has continued until modern days, and new forms of play are often met with scepticism and fear. This happened, for example, with role-playing games (RPG) in the 1980s. *Dungeon and Dragons* was the first RPG ever created and faced a staggering amount of hostility. Published in 1973, it proposed a set of rules based on fantasy, pen and paper, in which each player impersonates a magical character (an elf wizard, a warrior dwarf and so on) and describes to the other players his or her character’s behaviour. Although it may seem difficult to find a more innocuous form of play than this form of collective story-telling, the game encountered a heated wave of moral panic.

The wave was born in response to the suicide of two 16-year-old Americans, James Dallas Egbert III and Irving Bink Pulling II, who killed themselves respectively in 1980 and 1982. Despite the presence of many psychological and social factors that potentially explained their gesture — chronic depression, drug abuse, bullying — the American media hypothesized that one of the main factors that had led them to suicide was their being D&D players (Waldron, 2005). This convinced Patricia Pulling, Irving’s mother, to denounce the company that produced the game — the TSR (“Tactical Stud-

ies Rules”) — as responsible for the death of her son. She lost the trial in 1984, and subsequently founded, together with psychiatrist Thomas Radecki, an organization named *Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons* (B.A.D.D.) to lobby against the game, finding support especially in the area of Christian fundamentalism. The game was accused of being the result of a demonic influence and connected to other phenomena perceived as threatening and satanic like Heavy Metal music.

The campaigns and lobbying against role-playing games carried out by B.A.D.D. continued for about a decade, with intermittent success, and can be articulated in three successive stages (*ibidem*). Initially the D&D players were accused of using the game to launch real curses on their peers, parents and teachers. This accusation was at the centre of Pulling’s complaint against TSR in which her son’s death was imputed to a curse that was (supposedly) thrown at him during the game. The second phase, begun in the mid-eighties, was characterized by an attempt to move more rational accusations against the game, mainly related to the influence it could have on its players. These allegations were based on the belief still widespread, but never proven, that the game can affect the players in a subtle and harmful way and therefore its contents should be carefully monitored. The third and final phase of the moral panic was centered on the idea that D&D could be a recruitment tool for Satanists and pagans and that therefore it would lead players to perform immoral or violent acts.

At first the arguments brought by the B.A.D.D. found fertile ground within the Christian and Republican communities in America. The game was banned in many schools and by many families, while several members of the clergy discouraged the use of the game. Some films dedicated to the alleged nefarious consequences of the game were produced in those years: the most famous is probably *Mazes and Monsters* (Stern, 1982), where a young Tom Hanks tries to jump off one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center after losing the ability to distinguish between his identity and that of his character.

The panic surrounding the role-playing games, however, soon began to lose its grip. The fact that all legal actions taken or supported by the B.A.D.D. proved to be a failure eroded the image and arguments of opponents of role-playing games. Furthermore, several studies (for example Simón, 1987; DeRenard, Klein, 1990) proved that there are no significant correlations between role-play, alienation and emotional instability. It would seem, on the contrary, that the players were statistically less likely to succumb to violence and depression than non-players (Waldrop, 2005). On Pulling's death in 1992, the B.A.D.D. was discontinued and the moral panic finally ended. Or, more probably, it found a new target and began to concentrate on video games.

Digital games have also been accused of several nefarious effects on the young. The most persistent accusation is that video games might be in some way related to mass shootings. Even if the scientific literature seems to indicate otherwise (Markey *et al.*, 2015), at almost every mass-shooting in the United States the point has been made that the killer was a gamer and that games were probably involved in his actions. This has also happened in Europe: in Germany, for example, after the Winnenden school shooting in March 2009, many accusations were made against violent video games. In that case the German rating system for video games was used to voluntarily restrict sales of certain video games by stores: the German retailer Galeria Kaufhof removed all video games rated 18+ from its shelves.

Some digital games have also been accused of being “addictive” or “poisonous” for the young. This has been the case with *Arena of Valor* (or *Honor of Kings*, in Chinese 傳說對決) a multiplayer online battle arena for smartphones developed and published in 2015 by Chinese tech giant Tencent Games. It is a rather interesting game for several reasons. First of all, with an estimated 200 million monthly players, *Honor of Kings* might well be the biggest game in the World, despite its mild success in the West. Secondly, it is estimated that more

than 50% of its players in China are females⁷, especially thanks to the integration of the game with WeChat, the most widely used instant messaging App in China, also developed by Tencent. Other MOBA games have typically a much lower percentage of female players, a maximum of around 35%. Nevertheless, in 2017 a commentary in the People's Daily newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, described *Arena of Valor* as being "poison" and a "drug" that was harming Chinese teenagers. Its success and ability to engage the youth were portrayed as somewhat unnatural and dangerous. This statement alone cost Tencent 17 billion dollars⁸, 5% of its total value, because of worried investors.

Finally, it is not unusual that games using new technologies are met with strong distrust or hostility. The first AR (augmented reality) game to enjoy real success, Nintac's *Pokémon Go*, was greeted with rather apocalyptic tones and ferocious criticism. In Europe it caused great debates about its possible harmfulness: players were often associated with zombies and every news item of players getting hit by a car while playing the game became immediately viral. In China the game was subjected to an evaluation of potential security and safety risks: the authorities were concerned about possible threats to geographical information security. In other words, they were concerned that the meaning proposed by the game would overshadow that of reality, encouraging players to wander in prohibited places in their Pokémon hunt.

The diffidence towards play, therefore, gives birth to a second ideology, one that sees play as something dangerous, destructive, a menace to the social order and to the integrity of our symbolic universe. Play is criticised as capable of destroying meaning, of making players lose their identities or the sense of their surroundings. The barriers around play are described as fragile, in constant need of

7. Source: <https://www.thestar.com/business/2017/08/05/how-wechat-is-helping-attract-chinas-female-gamers-play-tencents-honour-of-kings.html>.

8. Source: <https://www.scmp.com/business/china-business/article/2101210/tencent-loses-us175-billion-market-value-after-peoples-daily>.

being reinforced, to prevent playfulness from invading reality and bringing with it insanity and confusion.

3. Enthusiasm

Interestingly enough, a radically different attitude towards play runs parallel to that based on distrust: a utilitarian one. Attempts to enthusiastically harness play's might can be found throughout history. From Rome's *panem et circenses*, to the Olympics, to the works of educators and psychologists such as Montessori or Piaget, play has been seen as a tool that can be used for creating social stability and healthy individuals.

In the last decade, this tendency became even stronger, as new concepts arose such as gamification and *game-based learning* — i.e. the creation of educational activities that make use of full-fledged games in order to transfer knowledge. Gamification and game-based learning both have to be understood as an effect of ludicisation: as play has a new centrality in the semiosphere, its modelling ability increases, and its prestige encourages people to try to exploit it.

The use of games or gamified activities for serious purposes has been adopted by various agents, and some of them might seem unexpected. Several national armies, for example, use games or gamified systems. “Propaganda games” financed with public money have been developed in some countries. Already in 2002, for example, the US Army published *America's Army*, a game meant to acquaint US citizens with the Army itself. Similarly, the Communist Party of China is sponsoring the development of a game — not released yet — entitled *Chinese Heroes* which is intended to infuse patriotism in the players.

Several games and gamified applications have also been designed for creating a better society, at least in the intentions of their developers. One rather famous case within gamification studies is Jane McGonigal's *Superbetter*. It is a free-to-use application meant to help

people suffering from traumas, illness and injuries by gamifying their recovery experience. With the help of the application, users can select some “bad guys” (such as the “sticky chair” symbolising sedentariness), use some “power ups” (like drinking a glass of water), complete daily challenges (going out for a walk, taking some time to be grateful about something and similar) and earn points and levels in the meantime. It is a handbook case of gamification, and it is driven by a clear ideological and political objective: that of using games to make the World a better place (McGonigal, 2011).

In China, national hero Lei Feng has been used in several games as an example to follow to be better citizens and improve society. *Learning from Lei Feng*, for example, is the title of a game that finds its place in the Museum of Shanghai (Chen, 2018). Aimed at primary school students, it tasks them with collecting trash and keeping the city clean. In March 2006, furthermore, a Chinese organization released an online game called *Learn From Lei Feng Online* (学雷锋) in which the player has to perform good deeds, fight spies and so on, in order to meet Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

Finally, in the West there has also been a real buzz about the Chinese government’s intention to create a social credit system (社会信用体系) using big data to assess how “good” a citizen is (Botsman, 2017). Most of the accounts have been in some measure incorrect, often confusing the project with *Sesame Credit* (which instead is a private credit scoring application and loyalty program by Alibaba Group) or basing their arguments primarily on speculation about what *might* happen. Nevertheless, while we wait for the implementation of the social credit system in 2020, we can point out that, from the preliminary descriptions, it might indeed seem a way of gamifying loyalty to the State — or to the Government.

Despite the enthusiasm in its implementation, however, the actual effectiveness of gamification is still debated. An interesting study (Hamari *et al.*, 2014) proposes a meta-analysis showing that gamification is not always the most effective choice for creating engagement: in fact, its efficacy depends a great deal on the users and

on the context of its use. Moreover, another criticism comes from a rather funny article entitled *Games against health* (Linehan et alii 2015). The paper is a parody of the “Games for Health” movement and proposes the realization of games having detrimental effects on their players’ health: games that reward them when they eat snacks or sit for hours in front of the screen. The authors, in this way, are trying to make the point that several gamification attempts are in fact highly manipulative, patronizing and top down: the designers *just know* what is best for their players and they try to trick them into doing it. In this way, furthermore, the activities themselves are less and less playful, the gamification consisting merely in adding a superficial game-like layer onto the activity, based on behaviourist theories.

The ideology of play at the basis of gamification, then, appears as narrow as the one that sees play mainly as a danger. Games are presented as a sort of panacea, using their current prestige for claims that are not supported by evidence.

Conclusions: a map of play ideologies

This brings us back to the opening question of this paper: is it really possible to “tame” play, to exploit it in a safe and efficient way? In order to answer this question, let us try to map the different ideas and ideologies of play that we have encountered until now. To do so, let us start from a basic opposition: constructive vs destructive. We have seen that play can be seen both as a way of creating meaning and engagement, and as something that destroys the meaning of everyday life and endangers our symbolic universe.

This opposition can be used as a base to build a semiotic square, as seen in Fig. 1.

The idea of play being at the same time *non destructive* and *non constructive* gives birth to an ideology that sees play as “neutral”. It is the first ideology that we encountered, the one that dismisses play as

something silly or childish, opposed to work and to seriousness. An ideology certainly weakened by the movement of play towards the center of the semiosphere, but still present in contemporary society.

If, on the other hand, play is seen as something *destructive* and *non constructive*, then it is portrayed as something “detrimental”. This is the ideology of distrust and hostility, generating moral panic around different forms of play perceived as endangering the meaning of everyday life, without offering any valuable alternative.

On the opposite side, there is play regarded as something both *constructive* and *non destructive*, a utopian view of play seen as purely “beneficial”. Gamification and game-based learning are rooted in this ideology, that often propounds an uncritical and unjustified, enthusiastic use of games and gamification.

There is, however, a fourth possibility: that of recognizing that play can be, at the same time, *constructive* and *destructive*. In other words, an ideology that accepts the fact that playfulness is “ambiguous”, it is something that can be tamed and controlled but only up to a certain point. Play cannot be seen (only) as a chthonian and destructive force to be contained, while, on the other hand, excessive control will destroy the freedom that lies at the heart of a playful behavior (Thibault, 2016). Play, then, has to be wild, indeterminate, uncontrollable. It can be directed, but never strictly controlled, otherwise we will be left with a mere husk of rules and game elements that will not have anything playful inside it any more.

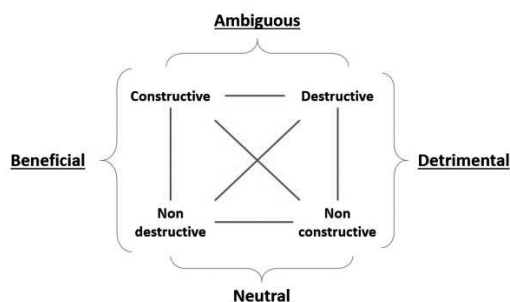


Figure 1.

Interestingly enough, the ambiguity of play is also central in Brian Sutton-Smith's works (1997). Sutton-Smith, in his book dedicated to the topic, describes the seven rhetorics of play: distinct ways in which play has been understood and described. He distinguishes between the rhetorics of play as *fate* (articulated in the various theories of luck and chance, but also in the idea of gods controlling and playing with human life), play as *power* (that usually draws links to warfare, athletics, competitions and contests), play as *identity* (when used to confirm communal identities through rituals and celebrations), play as *frivolity* (that concentrates on the subversive and carnivalesque potentials of play), play as *progress* (that sees in play a path towards growth and evolution, and a key to learning for children and animals), play as the *imaginary* (that relates play to art and insists on its separation from reality) and finally, play as the *self* (focusing on the fun and relaxing features of these activities and on the balance between skills and challenges that they imply). This distinction should not be seen as in competition with our map of the ideologies of play, but as complementary to it. The seven rhetorics can be articulated according to our four ideologies and vice versa. The rhetoric of play as fate, for example, could be used to describe play as a consolation for the disappointed (play as neutral), as an addictive vice (play as detrimental) or as a positive take on life, in a "fortune favours the brave" sort of way (play as beneficial). Similarly play as power could be described as a mere reflection of "real-life struggles" (play as neutral), as a way of provoking heated and mindless competition (play as detrimental) or as a way of challenging players to exit their comfort zone and grow (play as beneficial). This operation could be repeated for every one of the rhetorics highlighted by Sutton-Smith. The result would be a complex net, in which every position consists in a possible idea of play. The aim of this paper, then, is to urge that we should not limit our understanding of play to one of these positions, nor to one of the opposed ideologies of play (detrimental vs beneficial), but to keep in mind that play is something complex, paradoxical and variable enough to contain all of them.

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