

A Milestone in the Field of Chinese Narratology

Fong Keng Seng

Abstract: Professor Yang Yi's *Chinese narratology*, which interprets narratology by searching for unique Chinese characteristics in Chinese narratives, has established an important milestone in the field of Chinese narratology. This article will introduce Yang Yi's academic method of *Chinese narratology* and the theoretical framework of it through the four Chinese narrative terms of "structure," "tense," "perspective" and "idea-image." Yang Yi's narratology research is set in the big framework of Chinese national culture, so his theory is inseparable from Chinese philosophy. In addition, this article also explores how to apply these concepts and terms, namely the process of applying Chinese narratology established by Yang Yi. Finally, this article draws a conclusion that Yang Yi has synthesized the western narratology, the ancient narrative regulations and practices, as well as the contemporary Chinese Narratologies, for giving birth to his own *Chinese Narratology*, which is indeed a great contribution to the narratology of China and the world.

Key words: Chinese Narratology; structure; tense; perspective; idea-image

Author: Fong Keng Seng; is Post-Doctor in Chinese Narratology; Faculty of Arts and Humanities; University of Macau (Email:anabelafong1999@gmail.com).

标题: 中国叙事学领域的里程碑

内容摘要: 杨义教授开创的中国叙事学，即通过在中国叙事中寻找独特的中国特色来解读叙事学，是中国叙事学领域中重要的里程碑。本文将介绍杨义中国叙述学的研究方法与中国叙事学的理论框架，并通过“结构”、“时态”、“视角”与“意象”四个中国化的叙事术语来展开杨义的理论。杨义将叙事学研究设置在中国民族文化的大框架中，因此他的理论与中国哲学密不可分。此外，本文还探讨了如何运用这些概念和术语，即杨义建立的应用中国叙事学的程序。最后得出结论，杨义综合了西方叙事学，古代叙事规则和实践，以及当代中国叙事学，生成了他自己的中国叙事学，这确实是对中国和世界叙事学的巨大贡献。

关键词: 中国叙事学；结构；时态；视角；意象

作者简介: 冯倾城，澳门大学人文学院博士后。

Yang Yi is a real pioneer in narratology among scholars in China. He was once a guest researcher or professor in Harvard University, Yell University, Oxford University and Cambridge University. His research keeps pace with the international frontiers, looking into Chinese literature in multi-dimensional perspectives. Over the years, Yang Yi has established an important milestone in the field of Chinese narratology.

In “Reception and Variations of Classical Narratology in Chinese Scholarship,” Biwu Shang confirms Yang Yi’s contribution to narratology, Chinese or western, as he says: “Yang’s Chinese narratology represents one of the most significant developments of Chinese narratology, which yet remains to be introduced to Western scholarship” (Shang 4). In “A New Perspective on the Scope and Meaning of Chinese Literature,” Yongchul Choe agrees with Biwu Shang, as he says, “Yang Yi wanted to establish a new Chinese form of narratology by finding unique Chinese characteristics in Chinese narratives. He referred to Western literary theory but didn’t depend on it too strongly.” He feels that “this new theory of narratology still has immense influence in academia” (Choe 71). In “Emerging Vectors of Narratology: Toward Consolidation or Diversification? (A Response),” Liya Wang objectively analyzes Yang Yi’s narratology: “Yang’s observations aim at uncovering the structured pattern of life-experience and its representation in Chinese language” (Wang 138).

Like some of the like-minded scholars, Yang Yi has been worried about the contemporary Chinese literary studies. On one hand, some scholars totally reject theories whatsoever, and only focus on textual facts, which make their studies less scientific and systematic, with no philosophical or theoretical depth. On the other hand, most of the scholars only turn to western theories, regardless of whether they are appropriate to the Chinese literature, culture or society.

As said by Yang Yi himself, the academic methods to his study of Chinese Narratology were applied as follows: first, “refocus on the origins of Chinese culture”; second, “refer to modern Western scholarly theory”; third, “examine ancient and modern literature and history”; and fourth, “make a new scholarly system by combining these principles” (“Hope of Making Clear” 15). In this way, Yang Yi hopes to establish a new narratology for the Chinese academy: “I went back to the original Chinese literary ecological system to examine the conditions for the literature to come about, grow and assume its cultural identity” (Ibid).

In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi points out that the difference between the western narrative and Chinese narrative can reveal the hidden cultural codes of the Chinese people, so we must go back to its origin to study Chinese narratology.

Qian Hongwen, chief editor of *Literary Review*, says that “theoretically *Chinese Narratology* reveals a unique Chinese narratology to the western scholars and establishes basically a Chinese system of narratology” (*Chinese Narratology* 455).

When tracing back the origin of Chinese narrative, Yang Yi examines it from all the possible angles, getting to the etymology of narrative in the Chinese context, studying narrative as a literary pattern and a mode of human wisdom, which are quite different from all the other books concerning narratology. What’s more, his *Chinese Narratology* is based on his broad research into the history of Chinese narrative, covering Oracle bone inscriptions to the modern novels, so much so that he pushes the development of narrative from more and more angles, which is a big leap forward for the outlining of Chinese narratology.

In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi constructs a theoretical framework of Chinese narratology. What is the most important is that he comes up with a whole system of Sinicized narrative terms, such as structure, tense, perspective, idea-image and so on, which seem to be the same as those terms in the western narratology, but actually have quite different denotations and connotations. All the terms have been instilled with the vigor of the Chinese culture and philosophy, which makes them quite exceptional, full of energy of life.

When it comes to structure, in *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi defines it as “patterns and institutions communicating writing and its objective” (37). To him, structure is both the beginning and the ending, which makes it crucial to the narrative works. Yang Yi has made his research into structure exceptional in that he has put forward “structure” in the sense of Chinese narratology and given it a connotation quite different from western narratology.

Firstly, Yang Yi makes structure a verb. In the western narratology, structure is also very important, but it seems dead, instead of being a verb, a living being. In *Chinese Narratology*, he points out that structure was originally a verb in Chinese language. In many classical works, structure means the building of a house. Later, structure is considered an evaluation criterion for calligraphy art. The origin of the word structure makes it both spatial and temporal.

Secondly, Yang Yi analyzes the three basic elements of structure. One is the element of order, so that “characters and stories in the works have certain temporal and spatial arrangement, and all kinds of narrative fragments hold their appropriate positions” (65). Structure also functions as a link, both direct and indirect, the former of which works as a transition and the latter of which emphasizes intertextuality and interaction. What’s more, structure presents comparison and contrast, strengthening its “mobility, rhythm and rhyme,” so that the structure is

more elastic, charming and alive like a living being (76).

Finally, Yang Yi examines the potential energy of the structure and the five forms of the development of the structure. Structure is a verb, and its three basic elements interact with each other pushing the structure to move in a certain direction. The ontological potential energy comes from the duality or multiplicity of the character and how they release energy when put in a special circumstance. The positional potential energy comes from the convergence of the history and the reality, the life and fate, and the chance and the destined, which coexist with each other, forming the co-structure potential energy. With the change of the ontological and positional potential energy, there comes a new potential energy, that is, mutated potential energy. With the potential energy, structure will develop and turns into a certain form. As Yang Yi points out, “structure presents a history of development from the simple to the complex, the shallow to the deep, one to many. It is forever an open system that inherits and creates” (90).

In order to develop and modernize structure, Yang Yi puts forward five suggestions: setting patterns and creating, changing from single structure to multiple structure, seeking structure from the seemingly no structure, pushing the development of the structure from the simple to multi-dimensional, and the convergence of the western and Chinese narratology.

What about tense? Yang Yi points out that Chinese academy tend to feel that time and space are holistic. Words like “Universe” in *Huainanzi* or “World” in Buddhism reveal that time and space are holistic, which explains why writers in the ancient times tended to blend their own life experience into their expression of time. As far as tense is concerned, the Chinese expression does not rely on the changing of the verb form, but other words and expressions, which makes any expression of action fresh as new.

What are the characteristics of the time view of the Chinese people? Yang Yi reveals that there is an obvious one which has not been thought deeply for a long time: the Chinese people express time in the sequence of the year, the month and the day, while Western people do so in the sequence of the day, the month and the year (American people have changed the sequence to be the month, the day and the year, of course). Culture is the salt dissolved in water, which is invisible, but can be tasted. Culture is a way of living. Different sequences imply different meanings.

These are differences of cultural code lying in the implications of the two different sequences. People might ask how the issue of the sequence has been generated. If we have read oracle bone inscriptions, we will know that the method of recording time in these inscriptions is in the cycling sequence of the day (*Jiazi*),

the month, and the sacrifice (there was one major sacrifice each year), which was the same as the western method. In *Shang* Dynasty and *Zhou* Dynasty, there was a period when the sequence was the month, the day and the year, according to the inscriptions on the ancient bronze artifacts. This sequence is not different from the one in American English. In the ancient book *Zuo Zhuan*, the sequence became the year, the month and the day, or the year, the “*shi*” (the season: spring, summer, autumn or winter), the month and the day. In the oracle bone inscriptions, the four seasons had not been complete, while in the records in *Zuo Zhuan*, they became so.

The Western narration starts from concrete time and space, such as from a person, an event or a scene. Nevertheless, the Eastern narration begins with integrated time and space, such as from the legend of the creation of the world by Pangu. As an entire process, there is a long continuation of episodes from the beginning to the end of a story. The different starting points consequently lead to a further split. The Western narration is usually in the form of flashback, while the Eastern narration in the form of “flash-forward.” In *Iliad*, Achilles flared up, and the progress of the war was reversed, thus it became necessary to explain the cause of the war, and the time went back to ten years ago, when the story of the “golden apple” and the rare beauty Helen had happened. After the “first narration” appears, the “second narration” becomes the explanation and retracing of the “first narration.” In the Western narration, these two episodes form the relation of “flashback”.

However, in ancient China, since people believed that they were bound to be governed by Gods or fates, and there were many things like death and disasters, chances and forces beyond man’s control or man’s will, the narration typically began with an omniscient perspective of time and space as the world seeing from the eyes of God. The narrator overlooks the secular world, thus has a panoramic view of all characters’ fates. In *The Legend of Deification*, Jiang Ziya had known that the Gods would go to register on his Deification Altar later before he went down from the mountain. Moreover, in the chapter five of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the description of the stone for patching the collapsed sky left by Nvwa and of the poetic evaluation of the twelve beauties in the Illusory Land of the Great Void expressed or implied the fates of these characters. This demonstrates that the Chinese narration consists of the “meta narration + original narration,” which differs from the “flashback + meta narration” of the Western narration. With the advantageous thinking habits, Chinese narration adopts usually the form of prediction or “flash-forward.” A flashback also appeared on the Chinese narration. There is a good source of flashback example in the first chapter of the extremely

influential anthology *Guwen Guanzhi*. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that Yang Yi's concept of tense is full of obvious Chinese characteristic of holistic thinking.

Perspective has always been very significant in the western narratology, which is recognized and confirmed by Yang Yi in *Chinese Narratology*. Meanwhile, he also argues the shortcomings of the western narratology, since it tends to sever narrative perspective from the relationship between the writer and the society, history and culture. In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi analyzes a text from the perspective of the writer, culture and other external factors, endowing it with broader connotation.

Yang Yi describes "Perspective is a special vision and angle for a piece of work or a text to look at this world, as a result of which perspective is selective" (197). His definition comes from his research into Bronze Inscriptions, *Chun Qiu*, *Zuo Zhuan*, and *Outlaws of the Marsh* and other narrative works. In his book, he notes that perspective is not only closely related with the writer, but also permeated with rich life philosophy.

With regard to the relationship between perspective and writer, in the western narratology, the writer is excluded in the analysis, which should be wrong in Yang Yi's eyes. He suggests that "there is a need to know about the writer before the cultural codes in the texts are disclosed" (207). In the Chinese tradition, we put much emphasis on the understanding of the writer before we interpret his works, so that "we can give back life to the works, instead of tearing works into lifeless mechanical parts. We should dig into the relationship between the narrative perspective and the writer, and thus interpret the spiritual codes of the writer hidden deep in his works" (211).

In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi examines perspective, its relationship with the writer, and the relevant concepts, which breaks through the fence built by the western narratology, linking perspective with the writer and the broad society, history and culture and greatly enriching the perspective concept in Chinese narratology, quite in accordance with the Chinese sense of wholeness of everything and that everything has its own life.

The concepts of structure, tense and perspective put forward in *Chinese Narratology* refer to western narratology, but they assume Chinese characteristics when Yang Yi goes back to the Chinese narrative itself. The concept of idea-image narrative is an original one. It is formed after a thorough research into the characteristics of the Chinese narrative literature. Yang Yi points out in his book, "It is a must to consider idea-image (*yixiang*" in Chinese) and the narrative

approaches as one of the basic topics when studying Chinese narrative. With this in mind, we can deeply analyze Chinese narrative so that we can find where the difference from the foreign literature lies and what the important characteristics and charms of the Chinese literature are” (277).

In regard to his review on the “Spiritual thinking” in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, *Xi Ci Zhuan* in *Book of Yi* and *Critique of Poetry*, Yang Yi puts forward his own interpretation of idea-image: it is not a simple combination of meaning and image. The creation of the word “idea-image” by Yang Yi can be more poetically expressive than “image.” In fact, the significance of idea which reflects the artistic mood in the traditional Chinese poetics goes beyond the meaning of image. The above-mentioned interpretation of idea-image is similar to the idea to overhear the understood expressed by Ch’ien Chung-shu. In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi indicates that custom and cultural idea-image are interconnected. As to idea-image of myth, he refers to “the idea-image of myth in the narrative literature is no longer proto myth, but some special symbolization or allusion, with recourse to its sources or myth elements” (317).

Yang Yi insists that idea-image could play a role as the spirit in the narrative works. First of all, it can strengthen narrative by condensation. Moreover, it can adjust the meaning of the works abiding by the mechanism of gathering or scattering, which can help generate thick aesthetic touch and strong aesthetic impact. In addition, idea-image can help smooth the writing lines and link the whole narrative structure. In the long narrative works, sometimes the plot is not linear, where a good idea-image can smooth the narrative line and keep the narrative rhythm. Finally, idea-image can enhance the works’ readability, for idea-image is closely related to history and culture, which can generate “idea-images that are enriched or transformed in the narrative works.” And then they can add to the “elegance or irony” of the narrative works (349).

Besides a set of concepts and terms for Chinese narratology, such as structure, tense, perspective and idea-image, Yang Yi also explores how to apply these concepts and terms, that is, he has established a procedure for the application of sinicized narratology.

Regarding structure, Yang Yi’s emphasizes that “we should respect for utilizing it, and follow it with a breakthrough it in order to get the subtlety of the structures while being free from its rigid forms” (109). In other words, we should learn how to well use structure, and give it life, instead of making it dead. In *Chinese Narratology*, he mentions, “In narrative works, the writer has instilled his own life, so his inspiration represents his unique way of experiencing and feeling

the world, his own aesthetics and creative spirit. To give narrative structure life is to break out of the traditional shackles and instill life, so to a certain extent, the writer transforms his own life into the narrative life” (117).

Yang Yi also has his own understanding of tense. He believes that the intervention of the writer changes the narrative time, so “the narrative speed could be higher for the ancient events, since it has less influence on the present, while the recent events have a greater influence on the present, so the narrative speed should be lower”(148). The narrative speed may influence the focalization of the narrative. When it’s higher, we can know clearly the ups and downs of the human life; when it’s lower, we can feel the delicacy of the communication between human beings and the universe. Besides, Yang Yi also puts forward the fantasizing of time in that “the surreal transformation in the reality will cause strong contrast and mutation of the narrative time”(162).

As per perspective, Yang Yi assumes that the focalization on the “being” and “non-being” is well designed by the writer. In Chinese narratology, this design also displays the focus and the blind spot. More than often, the meaning doesn’t merely lie in the focus, but the blind spot. This called “*Liubai*” (leaving blank space) in poems or paintings. The combination of focus and the blind spots can give the narrative deeper meaning.

Regarding choosing and using the idea-image in the narrative, Yang Yi also indicates a set of regulations. Firstly, the idea-image should be eye-catching and special, “leading to the implied meaning naturally and seamlessly” (293). Secondly, idea-image should be able to link the plot and become the focus of the narrative. Thirdly, idea-image should be able to further push the development of the plot.

Yang Yi’s narratology research is set in the big framework of Chinese national culture, hence his book is brimful of his reading and understanding of Chinese cultural and spiritual codes, which shows that Chinese narrative is internally connected to Chinese culture.

In the process of exploring Chinese narrative rules, Yang Yi discovers a critical Chinese culture code, that is, the attaining of a state of harmony, which is an aesthetic principle and a philosophical state as well. He concludes that ancient Chinese writers tended to consider writings on the paper as their interpretation of the universe, hence “the exploring and understanding of the narrative rules are influenced by the feeling of wholeness, which can reveal the structural rules of the co-structure of the binary opposites like yin and yang” (21). This is also the aesthetic principle and philosophical state of “attaining the state of harmony” which shows that “the narrative process is life experience and communication, so there is

no need, as some western scholars claim, to exclude the writers from the study of narratology” (25).

When it comes to tense, in the Chinese narrative works, Yang Yi explains that the Chinese consider time holistic, and this whole time is related to the heaven and earth. He considers this as a spiritual prototype of the Chinese, so “the rich cultural codes concerning the moving of the sun, the moon and stars, the shifting of seasons, the life and death of everything and ups and downs of human life are weaved in the narratives in accordance with the order of time” (134). As regard the narrative beginning, Yang Yi maintains that “Chinese writers like to consider the beginning of the narrative works as an opportunity to communicate with the cosmic spirit and the history rules, so they can construct a hub for the meeting of human beings and the universe, and the structuring techniques in the spiritual state of great time and space or beyond” (135).

Yang Yi’s concept of perspective is related to life, as he points out in this book, “there is life in perspective, so it can feel and think. With a certain perspective, painters see paintings and the thinkers create new thoughts. Therefore, perspective enters the writing together with feeling and thinking. That is to say, perspective can contain deep life philosophy and history philosophy” (167). What is behind the perspective is the philosophy of being and non-being, and the communication between the human being and the universe.

In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi arranges a special chapter for the literary critics like Li Zhuowu, Jin Shengtan, Mao Zonggang and Zhang Zhupo, for he thinks they “create a colorful world of aesthetic feeling and theoretical thinking, which is their own world as well as the world of Chinese narratology”(354). We should set up a practical evaluation system just for them, that is, “for the research into Chinese literary critics, we should go back to what they really were.” Actually, in their literary interpretations, those critics put their own life and wisdom, since “they experience the rules of the universe and illustrate their own theoretical understanding”(353).

By and large, Yang Yi’s *Chinese Narratology* is intricately imbued with special Chinese cultural and philosophical characteristics, including the co-existence of yin and yang (opposite yet forming one body), attaining a harmony between human and the universe, human-heaven telepathy, everything having its own life and belonging to a whole. He has synthesized the western narratology, the ancient narrative regulations and practices, and the contemporary Chinese Narratologies for giving birth to his own *Chinese Narratology*, which is indeed a great contribution to the narratology of China and the world.

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