

Transmuted *xiaoshuo* in Western Culture: Paradoxes and Contradictions

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Abstract: In *The Novel*, the encyclopedic study coordinated by Franco Moretti, Henry Zhao argues about the origin of the Chinese novel genre that it cannot be fully comprehensible without considering the relationship between the novel and fiction that is specific to Chinese thought. The present study aims to analyze the genealogy and the meanings of the term *xiaoshuo*, both in the Chinese cultural space and its adaptations in the Western space. Translated as fiction, and initially having a rather pejorative meaning, *xiaoshuo* is emerging in Chinese literature as a distinct, minor genre, in contrast to historiographical prose or poetry. In a broad sense, the term is translated as novel, and this paper, drawing on the studies of Lu Xun, the first theorist to rethink the development of Chinese literature from the perspective of Western theoretical mechanisms and systems, aims to highlight the main paradoxes and contradictions of this translation and adaptation of the concept of *novel* in Chinese literature.

Keywords: *xiaoshuo*, *transmutation*, *translation*, *Chinese novel*, *world literature*.

In the present study I do not wish to deconstruct a series of literary-historical assumptions about the Western reception of Chinese literature, but rather to nuance critical perspectives on the relationship between the Chinese novel and the Western novel. In reflecting on this relationship, I have observed several critical directions which oscillate between *hospes* (hospitality) and *hostis* (hostility). Beyond the philosophical cartographies of the problematic of hospitality, the typologies that I have focused on are concerned with the relations of asymmetry and symmetry that are established between otherness and identity, and that oscillate around a praxis of ‘memory exchange’ in the Ricoeurian sense. Transposing the culture of the *other* into the framework of one’s own culture presupposes a prior transfer into the cultural environment directed by the ethical and spiritual categories of the *other*. Therefore, this type of indeterminacy inherent in the concept of hospitality has an ethical circumstance, in the sense of dialogism proposed by Levinas. The relations specific to contact between cultures also presuppose and encourage an implicit relationship between *identity* and *otherness*, not just a center-periphery relationship.

In the discussion on the reception of the Chinese novel in the West, we can observe a series of stereotypes that we propose to dismantle, considering

the model proposed by Umberto Eco, a disambiguation of the context. From the notes of the Christian missionaries to Voltaire's dialogues or Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, in which the concept of heterotopia originated, Chinese culture has been perceived in the West as a space of *otherness* par excellence. A literary space, either ignored or misunderstood precisely because of the distortion or ignorance of the specific context in which it is formed. A wider discussion is needed to verify the complexities related to the process of mutual reception of interferences between Chinese and Western literature. We can point out two different cases of *hostis* and both situations, though different, are similar in attitude and require nuances. Beyond his superlative assessments of Wu Cheng'en's novel and highlighting the novel's ironic character with regard to the hierarchies of the imperial bureaucracy, in *Around the World in 80 books* (2022), David Damrosch equating the relationship between Tripitaka and Sun Wukong with that between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza is problematic, to say the least, in the sense that the picaresque of the two novels is not sufficient to see in *Journey to the West* the similar effect produced by *Don Quixote* and the *Divine Comedy*. The mystic aspect of Wu Cheng'en's novel is secondary, the narrative having other foci of interest. If Damrosch's appropriation may be forced, he does not, however, delve into the relationship he recalls, James J. Y. Liu's *comparatism* is the one that considers the dichotomy between the two literatures. In a social, historical and aesthetic context in which the manifestations of globalization are more than evident, and in which the discussion of literature has not remained isolated in a peripheral, strictly national framework, Liu asserts, while preserving the aphoristic specificity of the culture he comes from:

Actually I am not so naive as to believe that we shall ever arrive at a universally accepted definition of literature, any more than that we shall ever arrive at a universally accepted definition of the meaning of life, but just as the awareness that we cannot hope to find a universally accepted definition of the meaning of life need not lead us to abandon all attempts at finding some meaning of life, so a similar awareness with regard to literature need not prevent us from trying to formulate, heuristically, theories of literature more adequate and more widely applicable than existing ones. (Liu 1975:2-3)

Richard Gregg Irwin, in *Evolution of Chinese fiction novel* (1953), analyses the particularities of the novel *Water margin* (*shuihu zhuan* 水浒传), considering the degree of originality of the fiction in relation to historiography and states, without disambiguating the specific context of the Chinese novel. He claims that in Chinese literature we can identify two general categories of novel fiction: romanticized histories (such as *Three Kingdoms sanguo yanyi* 三国演义) and original creations, concluding that the narrative structure is a precarious one that leaves much to be desired, the novel attributed to Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (ca. 1296-1372) being rather a collection of short stories. Such critical judgments, while beneficial in the context of world literature studies, as they bring to comparative attention the paradigmatic differences between literatures and the beneficial dialogue between them, can be problematic in the sense that they disregard the aesthetic, social, and cultural mechanisms that take shape

within the genre or the way in which that literary genre has articulated and manifested itself within the broader frameworks of the respective culture. Ming Dong-Gu (2006) dismisses Irwin's assertions as hazardous and based on certain idiosyncrasies of his own, pointing out that "before labeling these characteristic limitations, we are obliged to investigate the principles of Chinese thought, and these principles cannot be imposed by a foreign tradition".

Dong Gu, in his study on Chinese fiction, *Chinese theories of fiction* (2006), not only distinguishes the Chinese understanding of fiction from the Western one, thus questioning the universality of the term, but he also offers two theoretical premises for the former. According to Gu, fiction is a Western concept and it has two meanings: literary category and mode of writing. In the first sense, it is a category of literature distinct from poetry and drama, and, as a mode of writing, it involves the plotting of fabulative composition of prose texts. Although the distinction is problematic and restrictive, the meanings it analyzes are closer to the Chinese perspective on fiction. However, the distinction that the Sinologist makes regarding the difference between the classical and the modern understanding of the term is revealing a distinction that will differentiate the two other manifestations of the term: *novel fiction* and *literary genre*. His interest lies in highlighting the paradoxical situations regarding the diachronic perspectives of *xiaoshuo* and in issuing a theory of fiction that is strictly Chinese, and, consequently, also restrictive.

***Xiaoshuo* – novel heterography?**

An analysis of the genesis and development of the concept of *xiaoshuo* reveals precisely the volatility of the term and the difficulty of categorizing it. *Xiaoshuo* 小说, the Chinese equivalent for fiction, is also the adaptation of the modern term for the novel in Chinese literature. Composed of the characters 小xiǎo (small, insignificant) and 说shuō (talk), etymologically, *xiaoshuo* meant "small talk", "gossip", "insignificant talk" and developed therefore as a minor genre, in relation to *wenxue* (literature) or *dayan* (great narratives)

For Victor H. Mair, *xiaoshuo* indicates a fundamental distinction from the Western understanding of fiction:

[The] Chinese term for fiction is *xiaoshuo* (literally "small talks" or "minor talks"). This immediately points to a fundamental contrast with the English word, which is derived ultimately from the past participle of Latin *ingere* ("to form" or "to fashion", "to invent"). Where the Chinese term etymologically implies a kind of gossip or anecdote, the English word indicates something, not of a particularly great moment, that is presumed actually to have happened; "fiction" suggests something an author dreamed up in his mind. By calling his work "fiction", an author expressly disclaims that it directly reflects real events and people; when a literary piece is declared to be *xiaoshuo*, we are given to understand that it is gossip or report. (Mair 1983: 21-22)

Though widely accepted by Sinologists, Mair's view is also restrictive. First, the comparative approach should not be restricted (only) to simple etymological delimitations. Much more important for the present discussion is the disambiguation of the historical and cultural context that determines the subsequent manifestations of *xiaoshuo*, but also the need to define its aesthetic

and ideological meanings from diachronic and synchronic points of view: diachronically, as the successive reception of its different meanings, and synchronically, marking on the one hand the intrinsic relations between works and genres within the literary system, and on the other hand the succession of such systems in order to explain the systematic homogeneity of the Chinese novel. As Ming Dong Gu also notes, the premises of Mair's comparison are based on a misconception, a diachronic mismatch, since it is profoundly erroneous to compare the archaic notion of Chinese fiction with the (more) modern understanding of Western fiction. Furthermore, given only the classical understanding of *xiaoshuo*, ignoring that the negative implications for the genre were imposed by the prejudices of utopian Confucianism, such a definition of the concept seems to be null and void in the context of the modern or contemporary novel.

Such theoretical views neglect the specific historicity of literature and the aesthetic specificity of *xiaoshuo*, making it difficult to compare the two novel systems. The literary work, in general, predisposes its readers "to a certain mode of reception through a play of announcements, of manifest or latent signals, of already familiar characteristics or implicit references". The Chinese novel behaves palimpsestically, evoking events already read or known to readers, placing them in a certain emotional state determined by the direct interaction between the narrative voice and the reader: through direct dialogue, the author immerses himself in the text, going beyond the frameworks of fiction and narrative proper to interact implicitly with readers.

The lack of biographical data on certain authors, or even on some of the texts in question, the fragmentariness specific to this type of minor literature, the sometimes lacunar aspect of the texts in question, due to their orality and, implicitly, to the different prototypes of narrative models, make it difficult to contextualize and conceptualize the term. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted among scholars that the term was first used in Zhuangzi's texts with the meaning of 'to acquire fame through gossip'. Although these 'idle gossip' refers to 'casual talk and petty remarks', as Lu Xun points out the very irrelevance of these mentions for the diachronic contextualization of the concept, the re-examination of Zhuangzi's approach is necessary for (re)understanding, tracing and highlighting some rhizomatic relations that contemporary Chinese novel discourse has with this origin point of the phenomenalization of the term.

Lu Xun's assertion has been perpetuated and historicized, influencing several literati-scholars who, although they have highlighted the relationship between *xiaoshuo* and *Zhuangzi*, this mention remains either a mere allusion or the subsequent analysis is blatantly ignored. To question this relationship again is to rethink, on the one hand, the contingency between the Western novel and the Chinese novel, and, on the other hand, the contingency between the narrative structures of the contemporary Chinese novel and the literary and ideational tradition within which it was formed. Although he will start from the usefulness of the two meanings of the term, Ming Dong Gu remains faithful to Lu Xun's interpretation: "According to Zhuangzi and Xunzi's use of the term *xiaoshuo*, it refers to subjects insignificant in relation to ideas about metaphysical motivations, moral counsels or political convictions" (Gu 2006: 22).

The example of Lu Xun, probably the most important theorist of the Chinese novel, the one who imposes the equivalence between *xiaoshuo* and the novel, confirms Wolfgang Iser's theory of transculturality, understood as a hybrid interconnection between cultures, the rethinking of the family-foreigner difference and the radical decoupling from national and dynastic identity. His approach is political, not just literary, and involves an internalized self-colonialism that has manifested itself in this exacerbated *hospes* that has entailed translating and rethinking Chinese literature in relation to Western literature. Amplified by this cultural *mélange*, the transcultural dialogue proposed by the theorist of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 reorganized the reception of Chinese literature and imposed a new type of literary language, closer to the vernacular.

The assumed style of negation and polemic against tradition is not (only) defined as an aesthetic or artistic doctrine; the legitimization of this discourse is determined by the awareness of a necessary break with the philosophical, ideological, aesthetic, political precepts of the dynastic period, which took shape in a movement of social-political reform. Combating Confucianism, first and foremost, and the central, traditional institutions meant, in addition to the act of justification and cultural foundation (which paradoxically vehemently challenged the consciousness and principles of the continuity of tradition), "opening up" to the West, translating Western literature and philosophy and adapting terminology and concepts. But beyond this temporary period of discontinuity, in relation to the diachrony of the cultural hemisphere, it is erroneous to reduce the whole discussion to the distinction between "le beau idéal moderne" and "le beau idéal antique".

The keen sense of the present and the forward-looking conception of time and the ideology of progress proclaim the uprooting of the old canons, but these general and deterministic views of evolution and the role of the intellectual in society are not strictly modern.

Chinese fiction has constituted itself as an anti-genre, in relation to the institutionally imposed *nomos*, *wenxue*, but also as an anti-discourse that has challenged the hierarchies of the literary canon, and has "always been perceived as a disturbing force for the literary establishment". Axiologically, the ideational structures of Chinese culture are stratified, proposing a rigid hierarchy of discourses. In this context, Confucianist classics and official dynastic historiographies have outlined the general frameworks and principles of the literary system. To highlight this relationship more clearly, it is necessary to reconsider Zhuangzi's text within the diachronic development of *xiaoshuo* as a genre and iconoclastic expression.

The intellectual climate at the end of the fourth century BC and the beginning of the third century BC is changing in the Chinese cultural space. The refinement of literature is due to an emancipation of discursive logic, which materialized in the Warring States Period (476-221 BC). Like ordinary, colloquial language, literary-cultural, discursive-rhetorical language can only be understood in the perspective of an interactive dynamic with history, more precisely, contextualization is the background of any kind of hermeneutic or epistemological discourse, since any kind of language is in a continuous

becoming, responding to the cognitive needs of individuals in a given historical moment. We can also consider that new conceptions of the individual, his or her relation to the universe or the way of relating to the existential have transformed the way of looking at reality and, implicitly, literary discourse.

In this specific cultural context that facilitated the aesthetic emancipation of philosophical and literary discourse, we can identify two directions, both characteristic of an understanding of *xiaoshuo* as a genre and as an iconoclastic, burlesque manifestation. The first direction consists of a movement that develops continuously and linearly according to the cause-and-effect principle, and which relates to stimuli external to the literary system, often political. Such a view is close to that of Boris Tomaşevski's in *The Theory of Literature. Poetics*. The formalist theorist defined genre as a system in the composition of which coexist a variety of "easily combinable procedures", indices of genre that can be related to all aspects of the literary work. The genetic relationship is dynamic (and alluvial), it starts from a prototype and develops metamorphically. At the same time, it is redefined according to the cultural context and the receptors' horizon of expectation. The second direction implies the opposite of the previous approach and is based on unpredictability, rupture with the official ideology, and will be defined as ex-centric and heretical.

The phenomenon of this generic mobility is, as Adrian Marino believes, determined by two factors: firstly, the prestige of the work that has become the norm – which will encourage imitation, thus giving rise to a literary doctrine that will justify and impose a new thematic genre, and secondly, the insurrectional nature of the new work that will propose a change in the aesthetic paradigm.

Zhuangzi did not write *xiaoshuo*, but the aesthetics, the autofictional and iconoclastic character of his parodies in relation to the "hard structures" of Confucianist narratives, will reveal the conventionality of novelistic forms. In his philosophical anecdotes we find the dominant idea of Gérard Genette's theory of parody, namely the recognition of the hypotext within the hypertext, of the parodied discursivity in the palimpsest of the parodying palimpsest. His method recalls the *sokrateion*, the Socratic irony that has its source in the act of questioning the boundaries of his opponents' philosophical limits. The libertine character, in relation to Confucianist rigor and, implicitly, the tendency to modify the officially imposed discourse are in line with the trivialization of the themes of Confucius' disciples. Therefore, the origins of Romance were not eminently oral, but literary.

In *Zhuangzi* is reflected the genesis of *xiaoshuo* (as a bookish, marginal and metafictional manifestation), profiled in terms of a weak thought, whose fluid, non-substantializing (Gianni Vattimo) and constantly evolving subjectivity ridicules the precepts of Confucian dogma. As a discursive potentiality, the general frameworks of Zhuangzi's fiction, on the one hand, deny rigid and clichéd social relations and, on the other hand, at the level of thought patterns, problematize the metaphysics of Confucian utopias and the hard structures of Chinese culture. This type of rhetoric will determine the histrionics of the novel, due to the fictionalization of dialogues based on a

“plausible plot”. Short parables imagining everyday events and aphoristic dialogues aimed at persuasion inaugurated a new literary genre:

Zhuangzi said to Huizi, “Confucius has been going along for sixty years, and he has changed sixty times. What at the beginning he used to call right he has ended up calling wrong. So now there’s no telling whether what he calls right at the moment is not, in fact, what he called wrong during the past fifty-nine years”.

The notions introduced in his text are not new to contemporary recipients of his work, but the style in which they are presented is aimed “at the surprising effect of a deliberate ambiguity”. Zhuangzi employs rhetorical and semantic devices to ridicule the rigor, rationality and vanity of discourse that removes the individual from that primordial state, in which man was closer to the *Dao* 道. The semantic incongruity of the words he uses is meant to ironize the type of language we find in Mengzi 孟子. His discursive particularity is irony, humor is a didactic dimension of his rhetoric, and his fragments imply the essentialization of a dialogue in which the lines intentionally tend towards paradoxical and meaningless anecdotes. Not incidentally, the process will be echoed in the writings of Chan 禪 Buddhism. The diachronic analysis of literary forms that were perpetuated throughout history, reaching maturity during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, will prove that fiction and what would become the classical Chinese novel is closely related to the subjectivity of Buddhist narratives during the Tang dynasty (618-907).

Another manifestation of becoming *xiaoshuo* in Zhuangzi’s stylistics is the transmission of his own ideas through other characters with whom he polemicizes or by fictionalizing himself in the third person, creating textual marks to simulate different pretexts of dialogue to relativize the ideas of his ideological opponents. Within the narrative forms that will evolve into the mature structure of *xiaoshuo* as a literary genre, the performative act of performing a story in front of an audience will develop certain peculiar structures, namely that of the intervention of the auctorial instance directly into the text, in a supposed dialogue with the reader during the epic narrative, with the aim of making the reader continue reading.

The acceptance of this paternity will facilitate the comparison between Chinese and Western novels and reveals a relatively common genealogy between the two systems, namely the philosophical genealogy, if not aesthetic and structural, at least formal. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel is born with philosophy.

Although the similarity between the Socratic dialogues and Zhuangzi’s aphoristic narratives may be only partially equivalent, the popular character that Bakhtin praises in the Platonic texts being non-existent in the latter’s texts, narratives addressed to an intellectual elite of scholars, the later manifestations of the *xiaoshuo* will have been eminently oral in form, in a vernacular language specific to the masses of the people. The parodic manifestations that preceded Zhuangzi’s stylistic attitude (which anticipated and influenced what would become the classic Chinese novel, the *gǔdiǎn xiǎoshuō* 古典小说) developed as a

self-reflexive, eminently oral, vernacular-language, as a self-reflexive literary subgenre that attracted audiences through the performance of the storyteller.

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