Storytelling Context in Chinese Fiction: A Preliminary Examination of It as a Mode of Narrative Discourse*

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For a modern reader one of the most remarkable features of classical Chinese vernacular fiction is probably its persistent use of the simulated rhetoric of the storyteller, in spite of the fact that its authorship, readership, and general level of sophistication mark it as a narrative form far removed from the marketplace raconteur's. Arising from the Sung dynasty's *hua-pen,* or storyteller's prompt book, the rhetoric of storytelling was later imitated by literati writing sophisticated short stories and full-length novels.[1] Although prose fiction written in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties is enriched with amplified narrative details and rhetorical embellishments and thus reveals a considerable advance over the bare story outline one would expect in a genuine prompt book,[2] the situational context of storytelling remains a structural and stylistic norm in almost all vernacular fiction. Moreover, the full-length novel, which first appeared in the late Yüan dynasty, consistently imitates the serial sessions of storytelling by dividing the whole narrative into discrete and labelled sections.

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* This paper regards the simulated context of storytelling as a major narrative mode in Chinese fictional tradition and proposes a tentative analysis of it in terms of voice, mood, and tense – three models borrowed from Gérard Genette's treatment of narrative discourse. Accordingly, the paper discusses the mutual acquiescence of the storyteller and his audience as a point of reference to a given text's discursive intelligibility, the "middle distance" held by the storyteller as a way to modulate writers' private and public sensibilities, and the storyteller's periodical presence as a reminder that the meaningfulness of a story is bracketed with the "present" of storytelling. Meanwhile, in view of the fact that classical Chinese writers persistently used storytelling context, the paper tries to probe into the cultural and historical motivations underlying the perennial appearance of the storyteller. Chinese writers' preference for rendering their written texts in the manner of the "spoken" also serves as an oriental example to expand Derrida's western-metaphysics-oriented concept of logocentrism. The second part of the paper traces the change and continuity of storytelling in three novels of different periods. The emphasis is especially laid on the late-Ch'ing and May-Fourth fiction in which the Voice of traditional Storyteller, as if responding to the breakdown of cultural-social systems, underwent a transformation into a cacophony of voices. But the storytelling context never really disappears in modern Chinese fiction. It is simply "rewritten" by writers to constitute new visions of verisimilitude at both aesthetic and cultural-ideological levels.

Professor Patrick Hanan has termed this perennial imitation of oral storytelling "simulated context," meaning "the context of situation in which a piece of fiction claims to be transmitted."[3] Traditionally critics and literary historians were bent on tracing the origin and development of this rhetorical device: only few of them paid attention to the special typology it brings forth in the narrative of classical Chinese fiction.[4] Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to treat the simulated context of storytelling as a primary discursive law motivating the verisimilitude of classical Chinese fiction. In doing so I shall not only examine the narrative strategies this storytelling context formulates but also try to reach an observation which takes cultural-historical factors into consideration, and, as a result of it, I will propose a new angle to look at late Ch'ing and May-Fourth fiction in terms of the change and continuity of storytelling context. The methodology I shall adopt can be loosely called a structuralist one. But my belief is that no methodology should be either sanctified or discriminated only for the label's sake; its legitimacy must depend on the extent that it helps advance our understanding of a literary phenomenon.

I

Incrusted with the simulated context of storytelling for more than seven hundred years, the narrative of classical Chinese fiction shows a unique stylistic conformity that can hardly be found in any other nation's history of prose fiction. But this does not mean that the corpus of classical Chinese fiction contains numerous inert repetitions of one discursive mode. As Patrick Hanan and Robert Hegel respectively point out, talented writers of each generation did make their own accomodations with it.[5] Given this fact, however, we can still say that the simulated rhetoric of storytelling remains a fundamental index that directs us to see classical Chinese fiction as a whole in order to find its rules of intelligibility.

Highlighting a process of direct communication, this simulacrum of storytelling first undoubtedly functions as the most convenient way to carry out the mimetic effect of a narrative. Since the narrator and narratee assume the roles of storyteller and audience, the context thus evoked calls for a mimesis of direct address and reception in a marketplace. In fact, it actualizes a complete Jakobsonian linguistic situation, with the implied author/storyteller as the addresser and the reader/audience as the addressee.[6] But the storytelling context does not simply provide a story with a lifelike narrational framework; rather its apparent representational trait points to a deeper artistic and cultural motivation. As we shall discuss in a moment, the "storyteller" is not merely an individual persona taking an existential position in *a* text. "He" is instead a narrative convention preexisting the text, one that can be employed by an classical Chinese vernacular fiction writer. Thus, the mimetic effect evoked by the storytelling rhetoric must be regarded as part of a larger verisimilar strategy which aims to fill in the gap between fictional and actual worlds and thereby constitutes the so-called "realistic motivation" of a text.[7] In other words, the storyteller's voice serves to account for the plausibility of a given text. Moreover, derived from and speaking for the intertextual net of sociocultural discourses, the storyteller is more than merely a common artistic convention; "he" is in effect deeply rooted in cultural and historical motivations. The voice uttered by the storyteller is, in Barthes' words, "a collective anonymous voice, whose origin is general human knowledge" conceived by a specific historical period.[8]

Gérard Genette points out that all mimetic illusions in narrative are actually variations of diegesis, since "the truth is that mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words."[9] Accordingly, the storytelling context, though showing a strong mimetic tendency by establishing a linguistic situation in the text, is after all a diegetic form. In view of this fact, it takes only one step further for us to talk about the narrative discourse constructed by the simulated context of storytelling. Seeing that Genette has also developed a neat theory concerning narrative discourse, we may well borrow his models as a tentative format for our own use, while bearing no less an intention to test the validity of that theory.

Genette defines three kinds of interrelated rhetorical elements in a narrative discourse, namely, voice, tense, and mood. In his system, tense refers to the relationship between narrative and story; mood defines modalities (or forms and degrees) of narrative representation; and voice deals with "the narrative and its instance, real or implied."[10] Insofar as it constitutes a mimetic linguistic situation which defines the narrator's and narratee's relationships with the story *per se,* the storytelling context can be readily discussed in terms of Genette's "voice." But owing to its extensive influence on the formation of a narrative perspective and diegetic structure, any study of the storyteller's voice will be incomplete without references to mood and tense.

Our discussion will start with probing into the problem of "voice" implied in the discourse of storytelling context. As a fully imitated linguistic situation, the storytelling context tends to render the illusion of authenticity in a text by externalizing and spatializing the sense of immediacy and plenitude: in the moment of direct speech the addresser's words seem to become transparent signifiers coextensive with his thought. Since meaning and form are supposed to be simultaneously *present* in utterance, the storyteller's voice is privileged as the direct manifestation of perception and conception, in the name of authenticity.

If this thesis sounds familiar to us today, it is due to Jacques Derrida who has argued that the valorization of the spoken word at the expense of the written (*l'écriture*) is a fundamental and recurring phenomenon in the history of western philosophy-metaphysics.[11] Derrida's idea that logocentrism is a property of the west, however, has been criticized by both Gayatri Spivak and Donald Wesling as a geographical fiction resulting from the myth of Orientalism.[12] As Wesling suggests, the Chinese written character has a strong phonetic component "which is forgotten or de-emphasized by Fenollosa, Pound, and Derrida," and the Chinese philosophical and literary tradition is to the same extent as the western tradition subject to the myths of origin and presence.[13] Therefore, if Derrida's assumption about writing vs. speech is valid, it may well apply to the case of writers' persistent fascination with storytelling rhetoric in classical Chinese fiction.

With its implicit plenitude in a limited spatial and temporal context, the spoken word tends to reduce the complexity of the written. Just as perception is supposed to provide a direct link to the reality of the present, so the spoken word is seen to be closer to the real than the written text, despite the fact that it de-emphasizes the process of interpretation and thus sacrifices the plurality of meaning. In constructing a lifelike illusion of a story which might be a pure fantasy, the classical Chinese verisimilar discourse works when it calls our attention to the authenticity of the storyteller's direct speech as a form of communication; the primary level of "reality" is that of the storyteller, not of the story told. Moreover, since the storyteller also serves as an ideologically and psychologically plausible point of reference, the reader, when engaged in the mimetic context of "communication" with him, is supposed to accept the validity not only of the linguistic situation but also of the vision of "reality" in the story, as the storyteller conceives it. The paradox implied here is that, while it is often considered an obsolete formality occupying a marginal position in text or simply a "quaint" characteristic of Chinese fiction, the storytelling context is in fact a central verisimilar motivation of classical Chinese fictional discourse at both aesthetic and cultural levels. It is not a trivial padding needlessly attached to the text *per se;* rather its "presence" assures the meaningfulness of a given story.

This simulated rhetoric, however, is not characteristic only of classical Chinese vernacular fiction. In western narrative tradition we can witness quite a few discursive modes which resemble the Chinese case. For example, due to its obvious connection with the actual oral narrative tradition, the convention of Chinese storytelling bears a superficial resemblance to the oral recitation in the Homeric epic. Both indicate a situation to which the racontuer and his audience happily acquiese so that the story can be communicated as real. But this comparison has to be sharply qualified by the fact that, whereas the western narrative can be traced back to the Homeric oral recitation situation,[14] the simulated context of storytelling cannot be viewed as the pristine form of Chinese narrative art. Even the earliest recorded examples of oral narration – the T'ang *pien-wen* and the actual storytelling in the Sung capitals – appear relatively late in the long narrative tradition, and demonstrate a considerable influence of written narrative forms.[15]

The simulated context of storytelling also brings to mind such western narratives as the *Decameron* by Boccaccio (1313-1375) and the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer (1340-1400), both integrate complete individual texts within a frame story. But the difference between the Chinese storytelling technique and its western counterparts lies in the fact that whereas Boccaccio and Chaucer represent a breakthrough in western "storytelling" narrative by describing their narrational personae as definite personalities with distinct prejudices and styles, the Chinese raconteur is not so much an individual as a general social consciousness. Unlike Chaucer's or Boccaccio's storytelling characters, the Chinese storyteller rarely shows such an ostentatious superiority in either intelligence or social status as to look down upon or even mock the life he is describing. He is designed to motivate what J. P. Stern calls the "middle distance" in narration: an optic which neither brings us too close to the object nor lifts us too far above it but views it in precisely the way we ordinarily do in the daily business of living.[16] In the process of reading, we are supposed to take it for granted that the storyteller is "one of us" and speaking for the publicly endorsed moral and social assumption.

The eighteenth century European novelists exhibit other varieties of simulated context: thus we have Fielding with his magisterial narrator; Laclos, Richardson, and Montesquieu with their epistolary novels in which each letter represents a separate context; and Defoe and Goethe with devices such as diaries and journals. Of recent English-American examples, Melville's Ishmael, Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Conrad's Marlow evoke a (quasi)-linguistic situation of direct speech in narrative. Each of these examples is marked by a context wherein an individual consciousness (or consciousnesses) manifests its narrational stance in terms of a peculiar verbal gesture. More often than not the narration reflects the speaker's emotional and intellectual attributes and thereby constitutes the so-called first person point of view.

Although the narration from the first person point of view can readily achieve effects of immediacy and intimacy, western novelists writing in this form especially since the eighteenth century are aware of the ironical distance it might entail. The first person point of view, for instance, can arouse the implied reader's opposition or confuse him with contradictions. In other words, the narrator's voice may *sound* authentic but it is not always reliable. The "unreliability" of narration obliges the implied reader to make his own judgment, and according to Wolfgang Iser's observation, the increasing semantic indeterminacy actually characterizes the nineteenth century novel with a simulated context.[17]

In contrast to western first person point of view narration, the Chinese storyteller's voice, at least that used in fiction before the *Dream of Red Chamber,* is designed to convey the illusion of semantic plenitude rather than insufficiency in a text. It is not conceived as an unreliable consciousness. Besides, precisely because the *histoire* part of Chinese fiction is full of fantasies, the reader must rely on the storyteller's voice as a decorum of naturalization. In a sense, the storyteller achieves what Genette calls the "vraisemblance artificiel,"[18] since the coherence of diegetic logic presupposes the storyteller's generalizations and comments in terms of cultural and ideological conceptions. What is more, functioning as an intertextual entity oriented to cultural and historical motivations, the storyteller indicates a mimetic trait but is not limited to the nineteenth century European realist concept of narrational persona. As a matter of fact, in view of its perennial appearance in all kinds of vernacular fiction of different ages, we can even argue that the storyteller has been repeatedly used to articulate an *a priori* Voice (which, in post-structuralist terminology, is *already* "written", though) that ensures the intelligibility of all narratives, and therefore should be regarded as a "myth," as Barthes defines it, in classical Chinese literary tradition.

Since the simulated context accomplished by storytelling aims to represent a situation in which the collective consciousness of a community is valorized through direct "communication," it clearly evokes the sense of a narratee. Identifiable with what W. Daniel Wilson terms "characterized" fictive reader, the narratee in classical Chinese fiction is described as the general audience in a public place upon whom the storyteller's rhetorical artifice may be lavished. Different from eighteenth century western fiction like *Tristram Shandy* in which the characterized reader appears as a "negative" model or foil for the intended reader's response, classical Chinese fiction conjures up a narratee who is supposed to be in an implied presence to exemplify the attitudes and judgments demanded of the real reader by the text. That is to say, there is a subtle coalescence between the "characterized" and "intended" or ideal readers' responses in the storytelling context.[19] Therefore, insofar as the storyteller's rhetoric has to do with verisimilitude instead of arguable "truth," the acquiescing narratee can show that the storyteller's efforts to convince, to win acceptance for his version, are worthy of success. This seemingly direct communication between the storyteller and his audience – which includes both the characterized narratee and the intended reader – also helps illustrate Yoshikawa Kojiro's observation that there is always a dialectical process of argument in classical Chinese fiction's narration:[20] the storyteller first proposes his thesis whose plausibility is in question; he then calls his audience's attention to the fact that he is removing the questionable points by means of historical reference, generalization, or moral commentary; and eventually he justifies what he says as a plausible statement.

The function of the storytelling context in classical Chinese fiction is not limited only to defining the narrator's and narratee's stance in relation to the story. Inevitably it also serves to predetermine the modality of narrative presentation which includes such problems as distancing, perspective, and focalization – all are subjects of what Genette calls the "mood" of narrative discourse. As we can find especially in the Ming and Ch'ing full-length novel, the simulated narrative stance is used by a writer for the purpose not so much of convincing readers that a given piece derives directly from oral sources as of establishing a conventient perspective through the adoption of the ready-made persona of the streetside raconteur. This confirms again our idea that the storytelling context is more a verisimilar narrative device than just a mimetic rhetoric. As Andrew Plaks suggests, "in many works the aesthetic effect of the storyteller's pose lies in creating the illusion of a *public* airing of private matters, thus directing the reader's attention away from the linear sequentiality and mimetic specificity of the narrated details, and towards the sort of broader issues of human existence which are usually associated with historical writing."[21]

Plaks's observation is very suggestive at this point because it sketches out how the simulated context was used to modulate the distance between the self-conscious writers of Ming-Ch'ing fiction, who were mostly literati, and their mundane or even vulgar subjects. Through the perspective of storyteller, talented writers tended to juxtapose private and public sensibilities in a text and thus revealed their ironic relationships with the story narrated. In their treatment, the storyteller seems to us a sophisticated spectator who interprets his story, be it a hagiographical romance or a bit of pornography, in terms of codified social morals. Yet precisely from the storyteller's almost "quixotic" efforts to generalize all kinds of stories, we can discern an implicit tension between the author's interest in the multiple possibilities of human conditions and his commitment to moral dogmas institutionalized by society. Accordingly, W. L. Idema is not completely right in saying that "classical Chinese writers focus not on the main characters as individuals that need a distinct historical background to make their individualization possible, but rather on their actions as variations in the embodiment of generally operative moral laws."[22] It is true that classical Chinese fiction writers, unlike European novelists, seldom portray individual heroes and actions in full, but this fact does not have to mean that the Chinese writers are not concerned with individual problems. They simply adopt a very different approach to deal with them.

The storytelling context undoubtedly provides Ming-Ch'ing writers with an "alibi" to describe personal concerns while maintaining a relatively lofy status. By means of the "middle distance" set up by the storyteller's perspective, they seem to transcend, as it were, private experience to reach some broader, more public range of meaning. This tendency can be illustrated in particular by the tradition of eroticism underlying the Ming novels from *Chin P'ing Mei* to Li Yü's *Carnal Prayer Mat* and selected stories in *San-yen* and *Erh-pai.* In these works the authors obviously take a great interest in probing into sensual affairs (which more or less reflects contemporary ethics), but in the meantime they demonstrate no less their scruples about transgressing strict moral norms, though most contemporaries might pay only lip service to them. To solve this dilemma, they use the storyteller's perspective and rhetoric to serve a double purpose: on the one hand, the storyteller's sophisticated, matter-of-fact voice allows them to give a detailed yet detached descriptions of erotic scenes; on the other hand his privileged cognitive tone and *a priori* social/cultural implication set in the text a decorum implying that, even in the most erotic scenes, the storyteller is *there,* directing the reader to accept the story narrated as an example subordinated to further moral explications. Therefore, in a very subtle way the storyteller plays both a voyeur, whose "report" satisfies the reader (and the author's own) curiosity, and a chorus, whose moral comment eventually secures the story's vulnerable subjects within an acceptable semantic enclosure. Thus, as long as the storyteller's context serves as the unifying principle of a text, both the erotic story and its moral/allegorical "teaching" should prove equally intelligible or "real" to the implied author and his ideal reader.

With regard to the time structure in classical Chinese vernacular fiction, the storytelling context's contribution can be seen in its control of narrative "duration" in terms of a continuous present. That is to say, the writer tends to condense the passage of time, no matter how long it might last, into a seeming plenitude of discourse identical with a short session of real storytelling. In fact, the structure of classical narrative has been described as interstitial in contrast to the architectonic mode which characterizes eighteenth and nineteenth century western novels.[23] Although at a very fundamental level, narrative in both China and the west is rendered in a successive order,[24] classical Chinese fiction has constantly avoided foregrounding events as sequential units, preferring instead to place nearly equal emphasis on the overlapping of events and on non-events alongside of events, thereby reflecting the simultaneous existence of all human experience in time.

In his effort to identify the special traits of Chinese narrative, Plaks contends that in classical Chinese narrative, "as in Chinese philosophy, existence is conceived of in terms of overlapping patterns of ceaseless alternation and cyclical recurrence."[25] A hyperbolic thesis as it is, Plaks' philosophical look at Chinese narrative does make a point in saying that, because of the emphasis on the *totalization* of temporal flux, classical Chinese narrative dispenses with a clear sense of direction and creates the impression of motionlessness.[26]

While acknowledging Plaks's observation, we will suggest that classical Chinese narrative owe its "motionless" temporal structure partially to the simulated context of storytelling. As an imitation of a real linguistic situation, the storytelling context shows a strong tendency to synchronize the diachronic sequence of narrative. No matter how broad its time span is, the reader is always supposed to insert himself into the present, to be involved in the moment of storytelling. This is especially clear in the case of Ming-Ch'ing full-length novel, in which each chapter is started with the storyteller's introductory rhetoric and ended in cliff-hanging suspense, patterned after that of real storytelling sessions. As a result, the novel's mimesis of temporal development is always structured in a double way: beneath the narrative we find a line of sequentiality, but its linear flow is periodically broken by the storyteller on the level of narration, so much so that, we are obliged to discern a cyclical order with the storyteller's presence as its central focus. To the extent that storytelling context is a norm of verisimilitude, classical Chinese fiction tends to bracket the meaningfulness of a story with the "present" the storyteller is presiding over. On the other hand, seemingly aware that only through the proliferation of non-events can the time in a story regain a plenitude resembling that of the "present," the storyteller must be responsible for intertwining events with non-events. Thus, all the linguistic gestures, vocal inflections, digressions, comments, "referential illusions," and lyrical descriptions, narrative features which are usually regarded as blocking the flow of a textual temporal development, become functional signifiers pointing to the effect of continuous present achieved by the storytelling context.

II

It is basically safe to regard the simulated context of storytelling as a fundamental discursive law in classical Chinese narrative whose validity was not seriously damaged till the late Ch'ing period. But it is also noteworthy that the storytelling context underwent a significant modulation as early as in the middle eighteenth century at the hand of Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in, the author of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In his treatment, the storytelling rhetoric for the first time calls attention to itself in that it no longer enjoys the position as being uttered by *the* storyteller but represents a piece of words written down and transcribed from somewhere else. As an extremely self-conscious writer, Ts'ao elaborates on the conventional discourse of storytelling yet at the same time questions and eventually undermines the verisimilitude derived from it. The result is that the storytelling context is so intricately presented as to highlight the novel's major theme:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
Real becomes not real where the unreal's real.[27]

Instead of one, Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in introduces a series of storytelling contexts to start his narration of the story. The novel opens with Ts'ao the implied author directly stating his intention to write autobiographical fiction. Then in a moment we meet the traditional storyteller who narrates to us a Stone's mythical adventure in the human world when it was turned into a jade pendant and attached to its human counterpart Pao-yü. We are also told that the story's raw material is "written" by the Stone itself like a memoir, and that it is later read and copied by a Taoist K'ung-K'ung, and finally rewritten by Ts'ao the Editor. By foregrounding the storyteller's ominiscience, Ts'ao the implied author develops a perspective that not only objectifies his personal experience but makes Ts'ao himself an ironic reader of it. The irony entailed by the storytelling context, however, does not end here, because the novel implies a sequence of multiple "storytelling," with the Stone, the Priest K'ung-K'ung, and Ts'ao the Editor assuming alternately the narrator's or the narratee's pose at different narrational levels. Although from the second chapter on these narrating personae overlap and become identified in tonality with the storyteller at the outset, we can still discern from time to time the dispartiy between their perspectives. As the central attraction of the text, Pao-yü's limited consciousness and experience must be supplemented by the Stone as witness momoirist, whereas the Stone's own mythical origin is in turn qualified by a more knowledgeable Storyteller. This Storyteller is nevertheless further manipulated at a distance by Ts'ao the Editor, while from the very beginning of the novel we are informed that the mentality of Ts'ao the Editor is identifiable with that of the older and wiser Pao-yü at the end of the Stone's story. As a result, we may well say that the narrative starts where the story ends, and Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in is attempting to recapitulate and interpret his past experience "objectively" by playing with the storytelling context.

It is by this potentially endless interplay among storytelling contexts that Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in drives home the novel's theme of indistinguishability of illusion and reality. In his study of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* Lucien Miller has identified nine layers of discourse.[28] Although we do not have to agree with his rigid method of counting, Miller is correct in saying that the novel's narrative form is faithful to its content and that "the reader's perennial delight lies in his disorientation."[29] Indeed, dazzled by the quick shift of polysemous narrative contexts, the reader tends to ponder the nature of reality being projected in the novel. Miller considers this problem a fascinating riddle which will tantalize readers forever. But from our study of the storytelling context, we can at least infer the condition on which the riddle is formulated. At one level, the novel seems to be a treatise about the storytelling convention itself: only when we endorse the discursive law of storytelling by accepting the storyteller's privileged voice and his mimetic and mythical interpretations of life, can we grasp the text's overall vision of the "real," as the Priest K'ung-K'ung embodies Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in's ideal reader in his reading of the Stone's memoirs. To this verisimilar norm, however, Ts'ao adds a strong paradoxical stroke. As the storyteller concedes, the novel could be read as a rootless yarn after all.[30] A story *is* a story and should not be taken for the real. But the novel's theme that life is no less an illusory account than story gives its meaning another twist. The distinction between "real" life and storytelling seems to be forever recessive in our attempt to take a grip on it.

After its six-hundred year long dominance over the narrative discourse of Chinese vernacular fiction, the simulated context of storytelling was drastically undermined at the turn of this century, when sociopolitical turmoil revealed the breakdown of cultural and ideological systems. Although literary reformation does not necessarily parallel political revolution, late Ch'ing "fiction of exposure" was politically motivated and thus must be appreciated against its contemporary ideological background.[31] The literati with revolutionary thoughts came to "discover" the affective power and didactic function of vernacular fiction and would employ the genre as a vehicle to express their own indignation and other sentiments about sociopolitical chaos. This subjective inclination, together with the introduction of western narrative modes into China, drove talented writers to review the traditional discourse of storytelling as well as the verisimilar vision underlying it. Consequently, the storyteller's privileged position in the past was transformed or diminished in such a way as to serve the author's personal purpose. In late Ch'ing fiction the superficial context of storytelling might remain intact, but the social-cultural values it used to valorize give way to more idiosyncratic subjects and therefore generate an unprecedented tension in both writing and reading processes. Instead of a single, unified Voice of the Storyteller, the corpus of late Ch'ing fiction seems to present a cacophony of many individualized voices, each articulating a different political/ideological opinion.

One of the examples that illustrate the subjective tendency of the storyteller in late Ch'ing fiction is Liu E's *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* (*Lao Ts'an* *yu-chi,* 1904-1907). At first look the novel seems more like a sketchbook constituting of thematically diverse anecdotes and vignettes. What unifies its plot and subplots, however, is Liu Ê's manipulation of his storyteller's voice in terms of a single subjective mood. Traditionally, a storyteller's appearance tends to interweave personal sensibilities with public mentality, yet in the case of *The Travels* we find that the author is developing a limited third-person point of view which makes the discourse of storytelling subordinate to a private vision. In other words, the storyteller is used to speak for and about a single character's experience.

Liu Ê's modification of the storyteller's voice should not be seen just as a formal strategy; rather it is ideologically motivated to achieve a semantic change in relation to the verisimilitude of the storytelling convention. Seeing that C. T. Hsia calls *The Travels* "China's first political novel,"[32] we too will suggest that Liu Ê's nonconformist ideas are revealed not only by his overt discussions of politics, which have been outlined by Hsia and Harold Shadick,[33] but also by his deliberate rearrangement of the traditional fiction's thematic and narrative modes. The subjectification of the storyteller's voice is certainly one of the most remarkable tactics.

In *The Travels* the storyteller seems to lose his traditional prestige as an invulnerable chorus with a detached attitude towards a certain event. Nor does he identify with the collective consciousness in responding to a given situation. As Lao Ts'an's allegorical dream in the novel's beginning indicates, Liu Ê sees the contemporary society as a sinking ship crowded with stupid people: although Lao Ts'an tries to help them escape from the impending shipwreck, he is first suspected and then hurled into the sea. Therefore, when Liu Ê makes his storyteller take sides with Lao Ts'an, he is implicitly attacking the social majority for which the classical narrative voice used to speak. In a familiar, congenial tone, Liu's storyteller invites his ideal reader, who is supposed to belong to a sober-minded elite, ironically to endorse Lao Ts'an's quixotic confrontations against his society's inertia and stupidity. Since Lao Ts'an's one man struggle to reform society is doomed to be a futile one, the sympathetic storyteller's narration of the lonely hero's gratuitous adventures is suggestive of a melancholy mood, and this toned down, subjective mood injects into the novel a lyrical touch of pathos, which is in sharp contrast to the highly professionalized, sophisticated voice in the classical context of storytelling.

Besides signaling the author's ideological concepts, the storyteller's individualized voice also allows the novel a leeway for its renewal of classical descriptive rhetoric. Giving up the stereotyped descriptions in the earlier novels with their excessive use of ready-made phrases, most of which are borrowed from centuries, a narrative format was developed which seemed to throw away almost all conventional characteristics, including of course the storytelling context. The fact shows, however, that a discursive mode like storytelling never really disappeared but was integrated with those of nineteenth century European realism to constitute a "new" effect of verisimilitude. As Roman Jakobson observes, in the evolution of literary form, "it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, in other words, a shifting dominant."[35]

Among May-Fourth novelists, Lao Shê (Shu Ch'ing-ch'uan, 1899-1966) may be the most successful one in "reviving" the storytelling convention while cultivating in his works a western narrative style. Indeed, Průšek noticed long ago that "the style and complexity of the plots of Lao Shê's novels are reminiscent, on the one hand, of the art of the old Chinese storyteller and, on the other hand, of his favorite model, Dickens."[36] Lao Shê's indebtedness to Dickens is best manifested by his exploring the comic or even farcical possibilities in a world full of miseries and injustices, but his narrative voice (in early novels prior to *Camel Hsiang-tzu*) is a fascinating mixture of Dickensian style and Chinese storytelling rhetoric. It reminds us of the classical storyteller speaking exuberantly on behalf of the public mind; yet from time to time this seemingly complacent, invulnerable voice is interrupted either by the implied author's or by characters' intrusion rendered in free indirect discourse or interior monologue. As a result, the best part of Lao Shê's style develops into a form of intersubjectivity, registering the influx of two or more consciousnesses. By juxtaposing different minds in a "unified" narrative voice, Lao Shê must have followed Dickens, whose narrators, according to J. Hillis Miller, tend to imply an internal tension between opposing perspectives.[37] But it is as well possible that he was inspired by the English writer to rediscover the polysemous and dialectical potentials embedded in the convention of storytelling.

Lao Shê's recapitulation of the storytelling mode of discourse does not mean that he copies the situational context of storytelling at a public teahouse; nor does he identify the narrator with the professional raconteur whose main purpose is to entertain his eternally passive audience. What he directly inherits from the convention is the rhetorical stance and perspective, or in Genette's terminology, the "voice" and "mood." Lao Shê's narrator sounds most like the classical storyteller when he adopts colloquialisms and clichés to establish the linguistic illusion of intimate, direct communication with readers, and when he takes a detached "middle" distance to judge the story narrated. But this narrator is designed not to carry out the aesthetic and cultural verisimilitude as shown by classical fiction but to upset the authority of the traditional storyteller, question the semantic and diegetic coherence the latter is supposed to bring forth, and challenge the reader's sensibility.

The unique narrative voice of Lao Shê is well set up as early as in his first novel, *The Philosophy of Lao Chang* (*Lao Chang tê chê-hsüeh,* 1928). In the first person plural "we," his narrator implies a group of spectators safely placed where they can observe the ongoing chaos in the community. In no danger of finding themselves persecuted, they can make condescending jokes at the expense of those who are suffering. The ornats, "oily" rhetorical style generates in particular an effect of disproportion between the narrator's mocking attitude and the unfortunate situation the narrator nevertheless chooses to describe. Insofar as Lao Shê intends to endow his novel with a Dickensian vision of comedy of grotesques, the narrator is practically blurring social values, dissolving the pain the characters should feel into theatrical gestures, and turning an otherwise sad story into a hilarious extravaganza.

The narrator's questionable stance evokes a similarly complex implied reader. At the outset, the reader has to rely on the narrator for information and, at the familiar storytelling-like rhetoric, tends to establish an intimate relation with the "we" in the light of the conventional simulated context. Seemingly standing for the public, the "we" narrator invites readers to join "them" to laugh together at the "good" characters' suffering and the villains' evil but farcical deeds. There is no doubt that the fun of reading Lao Shê's novel derives from our temporarily suspending the concerns with the pain in reality and letting the narrator open for us a series of truly absurd scenes based on the victory of the evil over the good. But as the story's ultimate crisis is getting closer and closer, a reader will find himself trapped in an embarrassing situation: the narrator has turned the verisimilar conventions of storytelling upside down; we may well be fascinated with the way of his narration, but we are *not* supposed to uphold with him the social values he seems to generalize for "us." Our laughter with the narrator points to our own moral resilience and thus echos ironically Lao Shê's severe social criticism.

Lao Shê is obviously unsure whether his reader will catch the ironic implication beneath his rewriting of the classical storytelling voice. In the second part of *Lao Chang,* for instance, he continuously brings into the narrative his own or characters' comments. While those "sober-minded" intrusions may call our attention to the sullen reality behind the novel's hilarious façade, they nevertheless deflate the storyteller-like narrator's sheer farcical vitality. By the end of the novel, the narrator seems to vacillate between two poles: he is playing the clownish social "chorus" leading the audience to appreciate the victory of Lao Chang while from time to time he must yield way to the author's conscience that reminds us of the protagonists' suffering. Judging by the classical narrational model he imitates, we can say that Lao Shê is writing his narrator in terms of a storyteller speaking against himself.

The convention of storytelling certainly does not stop with the writers of the May-Fourth generation. As literary historians point out, Chinese fiction written especially in the mainland after 1949 rejuvenates the convention in a conspicuous way. In Taiwan, Ssu-ma Chung-yüan can be regarded as one of the most fascinating storytellers in the last thirty years. It is in view of the continuation of the convention in modern Chinese fiction that we are entitled to describe a mode of narrative discourse characteristic of Chinese fictional tradition, and that we should meditate on the cultural and historical motivations ingrained in its change and continuity. For this purpose, what we have discussed above might serve as a preliminary attempt.

Notes:

1. Yüeh Heng-chün 梁蘅軍 , *Sung-tai hua-pen yen-chiu* 宋代話本研究 (A Study on the "Hua-pen" of Sung Dynasty) (Taipei: National Taiwan Univ. Press, 1969), chap. 1; Y. W. Ma, "Chung-kuo Chi-yeh Shuo-shu te Ch'i-yüan" 中國職業說書的起源 (The Origin of Professional Storytelling in China), *Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo-shi chi-kao* (Taipei: Shi-pao Wen-hua, 1980), pp. 183-201; Chuang Yin 莊因 , *Hua-pen hsieh-tzú huei-shuo* 話本楔子彙說 (The Evolution of the Prologue in the "Hua-pen" of the Sung, Yüan, and Ming Dynasties) (Taipei: National Taiwan Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 34-45, 153-69; Cyril Birch, "Some Formal Characteristics of the Hua-pen Story," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* 17:2 (1955), 346-64.
2. See, for example, Patrick Hanan's discussion of four Ming fiction writers in *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), chs. 1-4.
3. Patrick Hanan, "The Nature of Ling Meng-ch'u's fiction," in *Chinese Narrative,* ed. Andrew Plaks (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 87.

4. See, for example, Cyril Birch, "Some Formal Characteristics of the Hua-pen Story;" Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," in *Chinese Narrative,* p. 328 ff.
5. Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story,* esp. chs. 5-9; Robert Hegel, *The Novel in Seventeenth Century China* (N. Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), chs. 4-6.
6. Roam Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," *The Structuralists from Marx to Levi-Strauss,* eds. Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 89.
7. Boris Tomashevski, "Thématique," *Théorie de la littérature,* ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 284.
8. Roland Barthes, *S/Z,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 25.
9. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 164.
10. Ibid. p. 31.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), part 1.
12. See Spivak's introduction to her translation of *Of Grammatology,* p. lxxxii, in which she observes:

    > The relationship between logocentrism and ethnocentrism is indirectly invoked in the very first sentence of the "exergue." Yet paradoxically, and almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is the property of the *West* . . . Although something of the Chinese prejudice of the West is discussed in part I, the *East* is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridian text.

    and Donald Wesling, "Methodological Implication of the Philosophy of Jaques Derrida for Comparative Literature," in *Chinese-West Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy,* ed. John J. Deeney (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 45-49.
13. Wesling, pp. 110-11.
14. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (N. Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 17-56.
15. See Y. W. Ma. pp. 183-93. The tradition of classical Chinese fiction originates from that of historiography which is presented in written forms. So although the storytelling rhetoric represents one of the most important formats constituting the discourse of classical Chinese fictional narrative, it should be regarded as a verisimilar norm rather than as Homeric formulaic code starting the tradition of western narrative. See also Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," p. 327.
16. J. P. Stern, *On Realism* London: Harper, 1973), p. 121.
17. Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," Aspects of Narrative, ed. J. Hillis Miller (N. Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 1-46.
18. Gérard Genette, "Vraisemblance et Motivation," *Communications,* 11 (1968), p. 6.
19. W. Daniel Wilson, "Readers in Texts," *PMLA*, V, 96, 5 (1981), p. 849. In his categorization of different "readers" in a text, Wilson tends to identify the implied reader with what he calls the "intended fictive reader" or ideal reader. In doing so he understates the dynamic quality implied in Iser's original defination of the term. An implied reader, according to Iser, *could* but does not always manage to become the author's ideal reader because he is conditioned by various historical and cultural prerequisites. Also, Iser contends that the reading process is one of "struggling" for

meaning – a dynamic process Wilson seems to neglect. See, Wilson, p. 855; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), final chapter; Seymour Chartman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 253-62.

20. Yoshikawa Kojiro 吉川幸次郎 , "Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo-lun" 中國小說論 (On Chinese Fiction), trans. from Japanese "Chugoku Shosetsu Ron" by Ch'in-mao Cheng, *Ta-lu tsa-chih yü-wen ts'ung-kan,* I, 4, pp. 397-403.
21. Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," p. 328.
22. W. L. Idema, "Storytelling and the Short Story in China," *T'oung Pao,* 59 (1965), p. 54.
23. Andrew Plaks, "The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative," *Tamkang Review,* 6, 2, & 7, 1 (joint edition), p. 434.
24. Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Theory of Chinese Narrative," pp. 312-14.
25. Andrew Plaks, "Full Length Hsiao-shuo and the Western Novel, A Generic Reappraisal," *New Asia Academic Bulletin,* 1 (1978), p. 164.
26. Ibid.
27. Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in, *The Story of the Stone,* trans. David Hawkes, I (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 55.
28. Lucien Miller, *Masks of Fiction in the Dream of the Red Chamber: Myth, Mimesis, and Persona* (Tucson: The Univ. of Arizona Press, 1975), pp. 181-85.
29. Ibid., p. 256.
30. For example, a poem in chapter 1 says:

> Pages full of idle words
> Penned with hot and bitter tears;
> All men call the author fool;
> None his secret message hears.

in Hawkes, p. 51.

31. See C. T. Hsia, "Yen Fu and Liang Ch'i-chao as Advocates of New Fiction," *Chinese Approaches to Literature from Confucius to Liang Ch'i-chao,* ed. Adele Austin Rickett (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 222-23, ff. Also see Yü-sheng Lin's discussion on the "cultural-intellectualistic approach" that characterizes Chinese literati's mentality in the late Ch'ing and May-Fourth periods, in The *Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 26-29.
32. C. T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," appendix I, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), p. 538.
33. Hsia, "Obsession with China," pp. 539-41; Harold Shadick, "introduction" to his translation of *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1952), p. 20.
34. Jaroslav Průšek, "Reality and Art in Chinese Literature," in *Archiv Orientalni,* 32 (1964), p. 617; rpt. in *The Lyrical and the Epic,* ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), p. 99.
35. Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," *Readings in Russian Poetics,* eds. L. Matejka & K. Pomorska (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 85.
36. Průšek, "Basic Problems of the *History of Modern Chinese Literature,"* in Lee, ed. *The Lyrical and the Epic,* p. 222.
37. J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (London: Univ. of Norte Dame Press, 1968), pp. 76-78.