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## 比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature  
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Sichuan University, China



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# Orality in Performance: The Art of Classical *Xiaoshuo*

Timothy C. WONG

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**中文摘要：**从全世界各文化区域来看，中国是对自身古代文字以及文化最为看重的国家，因而对由这种文字构成的作品亦尤其重视。由于从上古以来文字就是重要的支配性工具，所以从秦始皇时代一直到明清，其书写语言，“文言”，并没有大的改变，并且与不断演变的各种口语大都不能互通。口语要等到唐朝佛教传到中国才开始混着文言成为“变文”。因而，一直到晚明的“小说”里才真正见到书写的叙事口语，即我们现在的所谓书写形式的“白话”。本文要指出的一个要点是，小说基本是口头的叙述文学，而用白话讲故事比用文言动听得多。因为，文言的特点是“告”，是陈述思想和传达命令的媒介，而白话则是“演”，是说话人用故事来激发听众，使他们感受兴趣。如果我们将《三国志》（历史）和《三国志演艺》（小说）中的叙述部分加以比较，差别就很会十分明显。

In terms of fundamental respect for the literate word, China can be said to be the ultimate of all ancient civilizations. What was written down, which began long before the invention of paper (in China, as well), became quite naturally authoritarian, because, as Mark Edward Lewis tells us, writing was “derived first from the ritual practices that had created political authority in the Shang and Zhou states and then were supplemented by appeals to religious authority from outside the old state sphere.”<sup>[1]</sup> Known in our day as *wenyan* (文言), the written language long ago separated from the spoken, if only because the latter, in a continental-sized country without modern communication systems, evolved into what should probably be called “languages” rather than “dialects.” As part of bringing China together over two centuries before the Christian era, the Qin (秦) emperor (reigned, 221 – 207 BCE), the country’s original unifier, ignored the many different spoken languages in his realm in favor of standardizing a single written one. No matter how a



reader pronounced its imagistic graphs or fitted its sentences mentally into a syntactic structure, *wenyan* became a functional writing system and hence a cultural and political unifier, even though its unusual distance from the spoken languages increased its general difficulty to learn. Nevertheless, neighboring nations, with spoken languages that were greatly different from those in China—Korea, Japan, Vietnam—came to accept *wenyan* as their own written medium, before inevitably adapting at least partially to invented syllabaries based fundamentally on phonetics rather than on graphics.

But probably the basic difference between spoken and written languages is changeability, which accounts for an evolutionary tendency in the former and permanence, to the point of immortality, of the latter. As the philosopher Mozi (墨子) said over three centuries before the Qin emperor, what is “written on bamboo and silk is the source of our knowledge about the ancients whose voices and countenances we cannot hear and see.”<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, whatever was standardized by the Qin emperor remained essentially unchanged, while the different spoken languages in a country the size of all of Europe continued to evolve. The written language, revered as it was for its preservation of what has passed away, became, in Victor Mair’s words, a kind of “demicryptography largely [though not wholly] divorced from speech”, never coming close “to reflecting any contemporary living variety of Sinitic speech”.<sup>[3]</sup>

We can easily agree with Mair’s conclusion by considering the relative absence of true narratives in the old Chinese classics, all presented (and, of course, preserved) in the written language. Yes, there are narratives in *wenyan*, the original written language; consider the *Zuozhuan* (《左传》)<sup>[4]</sup> and the historical writings of *Sima Qian* (司马迁, 145 – 90 BCE). But it wasn’t until the coming of Buddhist missionaries, who wrote down preachy narratives in *bianwen* (变文) or “transformation texts,” a kind of writing dated between 907 – 960 CE, with a mixture of literate and oral characteristics, that the close connection between speaking and storytelling becomes evident. And it wasn’t until the later Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644) that a form of written Chinese with purely oral characteristics, known now as *baihua* 白话—something Mair calls “Vernacular Sinitic”—became the medium of written and printed stories that were openly and intentionally fictional, and hence labelled as *xiaoshuo* (小说), literally “minor narratives”, similar to what is told by word of mouth and hence not intended to be taken as lasting or worthy to be set down permanently on bamboo and silk.

In China, such narratives became considered more than minor only starting in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, after the large-scale entry of Western culture to a weakened nation brought about an unthinking equation of certain Chinese cultural products with what already existed in the West. From that time forth, *xiaoshuo* was considered China's version of the eighteenth-century European novel, the essence of which, such as what Ian Watt calls "formal realism" in his book on the eighteenth-century rise of the English novel, was simply expected to exist in China, the huge differences of history and culture aside.<sup>[5]</sup> The situation certainly worsened when so much literary criticism in our times isolated texts from their contexts, historical or cultural. It was surely because of this that few seemed to really disagree when the late C. T. Hsia wrote in a highly influential book he called *The Classic Chinese Novel* that, to him, it was "self-evident" that we

cannot accord the Chinese novel full critical justice unless, with all our due awareness of its special characteristics that can only be fully understood in historical terms, we are prepared to examine it against the Western novel.

Such an examination does yield the unsurprising insight that *xiaoshuo* does not fit well into the artistic standards set by "the practice and theory of Flaubert and James", standards which include

a unified impression of life as conceived and planned by a master intelligence, an individual style fully consonant with the author's emotional attitude towards his subject-matter.<sup>[6]</sup>

What old *xiaoshuo* are basically can be better understood if we simply take them as written-down versions of spoken narratives. Just considering the huge number of oral storytellers who were part of the formation of what is now known as the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* (《三国志演义》, a. k. a. , *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), generally accepted as the founding text of all pre-modern Chinese extended narratives, which only began in the Ming (明) dynasty. I say "text" because the many episodes it contains were passed down in written form, even though the writing varied, the changeability clearly reflecting the oral storytelling of the topic over centuries.<sup>[7]</sup> But because the text we have is in very simplified *wenyan*, or what Mair calls "Literary Sinitic", its essential ties to orality are often glossed over by literary historians who pay much more attention to the other founding text of extended Chinese fiction, the *Shuihu Zhuan* (《水浒传》, a. k. a. *Water Margin*), which is more evidently rendered in the written *baihua* vernacular. But the fact that the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* is

an early written form of renderings of many different *oral* storytellers is beyond dispute. It is surely because of its oral origins that the work is of a length far more extended than any narrative rendered in regular *Literary Sinitic*. And its structure is essentially episodic, clearly differing from “a unified impression of life” as conceived by “a master intelligence”. As even Hu Shi (1891 – 1962), surely one of the leaders of equating *xiaoshuo* with the novel, has stated unequivocally, “[...] the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* was not the product of a single person, but is the communal creation of ‘*yanyi*’ experts over five hundred years,” something possible only through oral storytelling. [8] Luo Guanzhong (罗贯中) is of course the person credited with the authorship of the work, with his 120-chapter text dating to 1494. As far as we know, however, his main contribution is to bring together in written form episodes that had been told and retold for centuries. If he was the one who simplified the *wenyan* language, it was undoubtedly to extend the appeal of the episodes and descriptions to readers by going into details which were either exaggerated or made up by oral storytellers over generations to attract a variety of listeners, but which drew attention because the details were tied closely to actual historical persons or events. Luo, or whoever else wrote down and, by that act, unified the stories from that very eventful period, mostly adapted the terse and elliptical *wenyan* writing style to the oral style of storytelling, which is full of imagined details and repetitions to hold the reader’s attention. He did so well over twelve-hundred years after the historian Chen Shou (陈寿, 233 – 297) wrote the *Sanguo Zhi* (《三国志》), *Records of the Three Kingdoms* in standard *wenyan*, thus recording for a different purpose in the history of a period whose heroes were already beginning to stir up the various imaginations of public storytellers. What could this purpose be, in a culture which revered writing precisely because it makes history permanent? What was Luo’s intention in simplifying *and* expanding hugely in writing historical episodes he did not make up by imitating and reproducing—though not verbatim—what was presented in spoken form for centuries by storytellers? Comparing a similar narrated event mentioned in Chen Shou’s standard history immediately gives us insights to what the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* is really all about, as well as to its basic difference from modern novels. Examples are readily available; here is one chosen quite at random.

Even though it was mentioned twice in the historical *Sanguo Zhi*, the *Shu* (蜀) ruler Liu Bei’s (刘备) three visits to his famous advisor Zhuge Liang’s (诸葛亮) thatched-roof dwelling to recruit him are covered in less than two lines altogether. [9] In contrast, the *xiaoshuo* text (in one modern edition) devotes over twenty pages to

the account.<sup>[10]</sup> Other than simply declaring that Liu Bei “went three times, and then encountered him” (凡三往, 乃见), the *xiaoshuo* version dramatizes in great detail each of the visits. Rather than tersely and directly *telling* the reader what happened, as the history text does, the *xiaoshuo* shows the people Liu Bei keeps encountering on each of his first two visits, including Zhuge Liang’s houseboy, his four friends, his younger brother, and even his father-in-law, before finally bringing on the man himself. The account includes poetic descriptions of the mountain scenery around the house, and, with the exception of the houseboy, each person showing up does so reciting a poem, leaving a distinct impression that Zhuge Liang leads a most sophisticated hermitic existence before he takes on the monumental task of serving Liu Bei and helping him establish the third of the three kingdoms.

What is important to note is not the absence of the pure *baihua* medium in this whole account, which shows that a more literate language can indeed be used to provide narrative details. That the *Sanguo* stories became written down does not mean it was done for historical preservation. Rather, it means that a somewhat simplified *wenyan* works better for this kind of narrative, which, for example, includes a lot of direct dialogs. The kind of *wenyan* one finds in the classics mostly follows its ritualistic and authoritarian origins, and is hence far less suited for *showing* than for *telling*. It did not take long after the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* for written *xiaoshuo*, a “showing” kind of narrative, to take up the use of the Vernacular Sinitic.

Precisely because traditional Chinese *xiaoshuo* stresses “show” rather than “tell”, and because it became that way from oral storytelling, it would be far more informative to call them “performance narratives” rather than “novels”. Even though the *Sanguozhi yanyi* was written down, it has a good number (thirty – five by recent count) of existent editions. As Wei An (魏安, Andrew Christopher West), who published a Chinese-language study of the existent printed texts of the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* in Shanghai, wrote in the preface, he began his task expecting to produce a small essay, but soon discovered the actual complexity of his project and wound up doing his doctoral dissertation on it.<sup>[11]</sup> In terms of what he did in putting the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* together, Luo Guanzhong should, in modern terms, be considered much more an editor than an author, and essentially unlike Gustav Flaubert putting together *Madame Bovary*, or Henry James *The Ambassadors*. The *Sanguozhi Yanyi*, as other extended *xiaoshuo* it spawned until the early twentieth century, fits the oral folklorist Richard Bauman’s description of literary performance as something “framed as display: objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual—including

cotextual—surroundings, and opened up to interpretive and evaluative scrutiny by an audience...”<sup>[12]</sup> Much thinking still needs to be done on this issue, but there is no doubt that its performative success is the primary reason old *xiaoshuo* like the *Sanguozhi Yanyi* remains so popular to our own day.

#### Notes:

- [1] *Writing and Authority in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 14.
- [2] Tsuen-Hsün Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. xxi. Since its initial publication in English in 1962, this work has been revised and published a number of times in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, as well as in English. The most recent edition in simplified Chinese: 钱存训, 《书于竹帛》, (上海: 上海书店出版社, 2002).
- [3] “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53. 3 (August 1, 1994): 707–708.
- [4] See John C. Y. Wang, “Early Chinese Narrative: The *Tso-chuan* as Example” in Andrew H. Plaks, ed., *Chinese Narrative, Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 3–20.
- [5] For the beginnings of the English novel, see especially Chapter I in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–34.
- [6] *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 6.
- [7] See 魏安 (Andrew Christopher West), 《三国演义版本考》 (上海: 上海古籍出版社, 1996).
- [8] See Hu Shi’s 《三国志演义序》, rpt. in 易竹贤, 编, 《胡适论中国古典小说》 (武汉: 长江文艺出版社: 1984), 279.
- [9] See 《蜀书》, No. 5. 《三国志》, No. 35, 《诸葛亮传》 No. 5, in 《新校本三国志注》, 杨家骆, 编 (台北: 鼎文书局, 1987), 912 and 930.
- [10] See 罗贯中, 《三国演义》, Chapters 36–38, Vol. I (香港: 广智书局, nd), 467–488.
- [11] 魏安, *op. cit.*, unnumbered opening page.
- [12] “Performance” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2008), 420.

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# The Promises and Challenges of Teaching History through Television

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**中文摘要：**在当今美国，电视作为一种传播媒介和科技产品，具有双重性。一方面，电视是反思考、反智力的，它将复杂的事物进行简单化、娱乐化的处理后再呈现给观众；另一方面，电视的图像化和直观化等特点又使它成为用于历史教学的一种重要方式。对于历史教学来说，电视是挑战，但更应成为机遇。电视提供了一个多媒体平台，通过图像、声音和表格等多元化的表达方式与观众形成互动，从而更加高效地传播历史知识。因此，更多的电视节目需要充分利用电视这一媒介来传播历史知识，历史学者也需要通过电视来传播他们最新的研究成果。

*This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference.*

*We are in the same tent as the clowns and the freaks—that's show business.*

——Edward R. Murrow

Famed American journalist Edward R. Murrow held a complicated view of television, even while the industry was still in its infancy and its scale and potential could only be imagined. It was, on the one hand, a powerful medium that could teach, explore, and enlighten the public. Yet it was, on the other hand, chiefly a form of entertainment. The question was, for Murrow, which would it become? What would the nation want of television, to be educated or to be entertained?

From 2007 until 2013, I worked as one of the hosts for *History Detectives* shown on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). From this experience I have come to

deeply appreciate the power of television to educate. But I have also learned how television's imperative to entertain places very real limitations on how deeply and broadly subjects can be explored. Indeed, this popular show was eventually cancelled not because it lacked new material or ratings, but because a team of new executive producers at PBS wanted to create shows that played to a different and younger audience, like those on cable television.

The essence of the show focused on source analysis and research methods as hosts pursued answers about the historicity of artifacts presented by viewers. This many not seem an exciting topic to some, but *History Detectives* was shot in a way that brought the viewer along on the investigation, and in the process, uncovered little-known information about American history. This one-hour show first aired over the summer months of 2003, and after that it went into reruns until the next summer when a new season of episodes aired. This was the pattern that the show followed every year since then, until 2013.<sup>[1]</sup> Each episode contained between three and four stories, and these stories could run anywhere between twelve to seventeen minutes long. Until the final season, each episode also contained "interstitials" at the end of every story, which were a minute-long side-stories that focused on a historical method, moment, or figure that was related to the main story.

## Origins of the Show

Who came up with the idea for the show was perhaps the greatest mystery that we never solved. Gwen Wright relates how the idea evolved from early discussions with television producers for a show called "American Attic", which eventually became *History Detectives*.<sup>[2]</sup> However, an executive producer at Lion Television<sup>[3]</sup>—one of the production companies that filmed the show—related to me the show was developed from a colleague who was looking through his grandparents' attic one day and he began to wonder what stories these artifacts could tell, and how his grandparents might have intersected with significant historical moments associated with those artifacts. Another story came from Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB)<sup>[4]</sup>—the partner production company with Lion—that the story simply grew out from a creative free-flow of ideas.<sup>[5]</sup> However the show originated, OPB partnered with Lion Television and pitched the show concept to PBS.

The Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, as it is more commonly known, is a non-profit American broadcast television network. It first started out in 1952 as National Educational Television, and was launched as the Public Broadcasting



Service in 1970.<sup>[6]</sup> Its original name illustrates the vision for PBS, that it was to serve as source that, even then, resisted the trend in television to merely entertain. Its shows would not be produced or evaluated on ratings, but on content and quality.<sup>[7]</sup> Presently, the PBS network has 354 member television stations that hold a collective ownership with communities throughout the United States.<sup>[8]</sup> For example, in the Phoenix area, where I teach at Arizona State University (ASU), KAET is operated by ASU and serves as the local PBS affiliate.<sup>[9]</sup> Some of the most well-known television shows from PBS are *Sesame Street*, *Antiques Roadshow*, and *Downtown Abbey*.

## Show Hosts

The show began with four hosts: Wes Cowan, Elyse Luray, Gwen Wright, and Tukufu Zuberi. Wes is an anthropologist by training and served for a time as the curator of Archaeology at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and Science before he opened a very successful antiques dealership in Cincinnati, Cowan's Auctions. He has frequently appeared on another popular show on PBS, *Antiques Roadshow*.<sup>[10]</sup> Elyse graduated from Tulane University with a degree in Art history and was the youngest vice president in Christie's Auction House before she transitioned to full-time television work as an appraiser on *Antiques Roadshow* and *History Detectives*.<sup>[11]</sup> Gwen Wright is an award-winning architectural historian at Columbia University, and Tukufu, a Sociologist by training with a specialty in Africa, is the Lasry Family Professor of Race Relations in the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>[12]</sup>

Over the next four years the show built a steady following, eventually becoming one of the highest-rated shows on PBS. But the producers of the show wanted to continue evolving the show's direction, so in the summer of 2007, I received an email one day from an executive vice president at Oregon Public Broadcasting. It simply asked if I was interested in becoming a guest host for *History Detectives*.

I had watched the show before and liked it, but I was suspicious about this invitation that arrived by email. It is not every day that one receives an invitation from a television show to become part of the cast. I had very limited television experience, and I was so suspicious of the invitation that I almost deleted the email. But before I did that, I decided to see if I could at least verify that the message might be legitimate. So I started my own investigation of who this executive vice president was, and whether he had any credible relationship with the show.